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Bicycle Decoration and Everyday Aesthetics in Northern Nigeria

ELISHA P. RENNE • DAKYES S. USMAN



A good bicycle is a great companion, there is a great charm about it....

Flann O'Brien,
The Third Policeman

The Hausa term *kaya* is described by Neil Skinner as an “invaluable word [that] can be used to mean almost anything” (1958:11), although it may be loosely translated as “load” or as objects related to a certain activity. Thus, just as *kayan doki* refers to articles associated with horses (*doki*), *kayan keke* refers to decorative things associated with bicycles (*keke*).¹

Most people we spoke with in Northern Nigeria did not relate bicycles with horses, even though *dokin k'arfe*, “horse of iron,” has been cited as an alternative Hausa word for bicycle (Abraham 1962:87). Nor did they make a conscious connection between the decoration of this mundane utilitarian vehicle and the horse trappings—called “one of the most spectacular aspects of Hausa art” (Heathcote 1976:65)—that are usually seen in *salla* processions (Perani & Wolff 1992) and turbaning ceremonies.² Yet *kayan keke* and *kayan doki* exhibit a certain similarity of form and style (Figs. 2, 3). Through a consideration of everyday things such as bicycles and their decoration in Northern Nigeria, we examine what John Dewey describes as the “continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings” (Dewey 1934:3).

Traditional Art, Everyday Things

If there is a connection between mundane human experience and the creation and reception of art objects, as Dewey claims, the dichotomy perceived to exist between objects considered to be everyday items and those considered to be traditional artworks is artificial in the Northern Nigerian context. Indeed, as



Opposite page:

1. Facade of a house in Zaria, decorated in the 1940s by Jibrilu Dan Abubakar. Photo: J.C. Moughtin (from Moughtin 1985:141).

In summer 1996 the authors attempted to locate this house, which features a prominent image of a bicycle, but apparently it no longer exists.

This page:

Left: 2. Bicycle painted green and white over a paper base. Sabon Gari, Zaria, Nigeria, June 1995. Photo: E. P. Renne.

There are aesthetic parallels—for example, in color combinations and the use of repeated motifs, as on the bicycle chain guard—between the decoration of this mundane mode of transportation and the horse trappings on view at the ceremonial event in Figure 3.

Right: 3. Hausa horse and rider, dressed predominantly in green and white. Id-el-Fitr festivities, G.R.A., Zaria, March 1995. Photo: E. P. Renne.

Green-and-white is a favored color combination in Northern Nigeria. The tassels, fringe, and eye-catching designs of the equestrian display for Id-el-Fitr, one of the *salla* religious holidays, are also elements of bicycle decoration.

David Heathcote points out: “The arts of the Hausa are predominantly decorative. They have grown out of a continuous need for useful commodities such as houses, clothes, utensils and tools, and an appreciation of simple or elaborate, well-made and well-decorated articles of all kinds” (1976:9–10). This statement suggests that so-called traditional art and the embellishment of everyday objects are informed by a common aesthetic sensibility.

Objects classified as art are often said to convey a feeling of balance, though not necessarily symmetry. Rather, the successful union of materials and ideas achieved by the artist’s technical finesse may create a sense of balance amidst uncertainty. Alfred Gell (1992:49) has

argued that the awe inspired by the unimaginable technological transformation of materials is akin to being charmed or enchanted. An object’s capacity to engage (or even charm) the senses, a critical aspect of its aesthetic quality, may also stem from its creator’s ability to resolve momentarily the tension of precariousness and flux in the world.

This striving for a moment of balance amidst discontinuity and disorder may be what drives the aesthetic impulse, whether it is expressed in the decoration of a soup ladle or in the casting of a ritual bronze figurine. Yet this process, entailed in the interaction between the artist who self-consciously produces an object and viewers who appreciate it, is not static. Rather the object is continually being reassessed as finer gradations of resistance and resolution are made: “There are more opportunities for resistance and tension, more drafts upon experimentation and invention, and therefore more novelty in action, greater range and depth of insight and increase in poignancy in feeling” (Dewey 1934:23). In other words, the aesthetic evaluation of art objects relates to their creators’ success in resolving increasingly difficult problems of resistance, both in materials and in thought.

The urge to achieve a sense of unity, however temporary, among materials, ideas, and practices and in communication between people is part of an aesthetic process that is expressed in many different forms and places. Sarah Brett-Smith (1994) describes what is perhaps a version of this process when discussing the training of Bamana carver-sculptors, who must demonstrate both technical aptitude and visual imagination. The artist’s relationship with a spirit (*djinn*) that provides divine inspiration and pro-

tection is also crucially important. When asked about sculptors who do not have these spirit-mentors, one carver responded, “They can carve wood ten times [he probably means carve the same sculpture over and over again], but it will never be of any use” (Brett-Smith 1994:55). For this Bamana carver, what distinguishes an artwork—a ritual mask—from an everyday thing—a hoe—is that the former, through divine assistance, accrues a sort of spiritual capital, whereas the latter, which is carved without spiritual aid, has none. Yet masks and hoes are part of the same creative process: a carver transforms a refractory material, wood, into an object that was conceived in his mind.

Putting his faith in human creativity rather than otherworldly patronage, Dewey would argue that such conceptions and executions are products of human experience in this world, reflecting a continuity of human practice rather than a discontinuity between the mundane and spiritual; yet he would not deny the overwhelming or awe-inspiring quality of certain objects. Furthermore, Dewey’s perspective may be particularly suited to the study of objects produced in an Islamic society, where human creation is often viewed on a distinctly lower, more earthly, plane than divine creation. While Islamic artists working in Northern Nigeria might perceive their work as being part of Allah’s plan, the idea of actively collaborating with the spiritual, as in the Bamana case, would be considered an example of human hubris, which is the reason for the proscription against representing people in Islamic art (Bravmann 1983:88). For many Hausa-speaking Islamic groups in Northern Nigeria, human creativity is very much grounded in this world, as it was for Dewey, but for very different reasons.



Top: 4. Bicycle designed by Alhaji Ahmed Moses. It is painted blue and salmon over a paper base, and features silver stickers and plastic-covered handles. Dutsen Wai, Nigeria, June 1997. Photo: E. P. Renne.

The two-tone color scheme painted on a cloth or paper covering is typical of the older form of bicycle decoration.

Bottom: 5. Bicycle decorated with stickers, fringe attached to the seat cover, and "bye-bye" hands. Sabon Gari, Zaria, Nigeria, May 1995. Photo: E. P. Renne.

Following the current style, the bicycle has not been covered and painted. Instead, colored labels and decorative stickers, widely available in the market, have been applied to the frame.

All this discussion may seem heavy going for a consideration of everyday utilitarian items such as bicycles and their decoration. Yet it suggests a way of addressing the persistent though often

decried dichotomy between art and craft and of emphasizing the continuity "between artistic and everyday experiences rather than [supporting] conceptual separations of the two domains as is typically

found in the Euro-American elite art world" (Hardin 1993:3). The following study is based on research among Hausa-speakers³ in the Northern Nigerian city of Zaria, and to a lesser extent in Jos. We examine how the decoration of bicycles and the display of other everyday things reflect an aesthetic process whereby the artist's technical mastery of materials and creative innovation evokes a pleasurable response in the viewer. If the motive for the visual pleasure elicited through the attractive display of carrots or, say, medicine tablets is financial, the process nonetheless reflects the same interactive pattern that characterizes the aesthetic quality of other works, such as houses, which are classified as Hausa art (Moughtin 1985). Indeed, as Suzanne Blier suggests (1989:338), it is in the conjunction between aesthetics and practical aims, in the care taken to make objects that are both beautiful and functional, that local moral values such as those regarding sociality may be expressed.

Bicycles in Northern Nigeria

The bicycle itself seemed to have some peculiar quality of shape or personality which gave it distinction and importance far beyond that usually possessed by such machines. It was extremely well-kept with a pleasing lustre on its dark-green bars and oil-bath and a clean sparkle on the rustless spokes and rims.

Flann O'Brien,
The Third Policeman

Bicycles play an important part in many Hausa-speaking societies in Northern Nigeria in their ubiquitous role as vehicles for men (but not women; Miles 1994:222), as markers of upward mobility (Hill 1977:86),⁴ and as mobile merchandise displays. The association with transportation, wealth, and trade make bicycles a particularly appropriate icon for the Hausa, renowned throughout West Africa as long-distance traders. Indeed, the image of the bicycle has been incorporated into house facade decoration

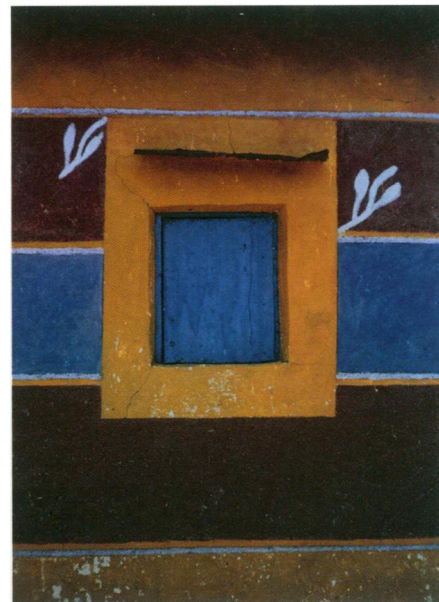




Left: 6. Bicycle designed by Alhaji Ahmed Moses. It is painted blue, white, and yellow over a paper base. Silver stickers embellish the fenders, and tassels hang from the plastic-covered handles. Dutsen Wai, June 1997. Photo: E. P. Renne.

Some decorators of bicycles were inspired by the colors and designs painted on houses.

Right: 7. House painted blue, white, and yellow, owned by Sarki Aliyu Dini. Kwarbai Quarter, Zaria City, Zaria, Nigeria, May 1995. Photo: E. P. Renne.



in Zaria (Fig. 1) and Sokoto (Moughtin 1985:141–142).

Bicycles also appear in ritual contexts where they may be associated with particular social or psychological states. For example, brides may be borne to their husbands' houses on the handlebars (Wall 1988:66); and rural villagers equate reckless bicycle riding with a mild form of madness (*hauka*; Wall 1988:205). The renowned Hausa poet Malam Aliyu na Mangi celebrated the vehicle in *Waak'ar Keekee* (Song of the Bicycle) (in Skinner 1969).

Bicycles may also be used in processions by ordinary people (Wall 1988:96), much in the way that horses are used by nobility during *sallah* displays. In the spring of 1995, for example, striking staff workers at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, having demonstrated at the main gate, proceeded down the double-lane thoroughfare toward the main campus. Some pushed bicycles festooned with branches, a sign of political protest in Nigeria; one sported a single red rose. They preceded their leader, who was followed by a man holding a large umbrella over him.⁵

Considering their pervasiveness and importance in Northern Nigeria, it is not surprising that some men have gone to considerable expense to make their bicycles a pleasure to behold. When asked

why they decorated them, they gave various answers—for beauty, to attract attention (and customers), and “because of desire (*sha'awa*) [so that] after you decorate it, you ride it with happiness (*dad'i*).”

There are two basic styles of bicycle decoration. The first (and more old-fashioned) style involves three steps. Except for the handlebars, pedals, and seat, the entire frame is covered with either cloth (*shafi* or *yadi*) or paper (*takarda*). Cloth covering is more expensive than paper, but it has the advantage of being washable. The covering protects the frame from rust and also provides the ground for the painted decorations, usually in two contrasting colors (Fig. 4), which are applied in the second step. Finally, one adds decorative accessories including handlebar tassels (*geza*) often in colors that match the painted bicycle frame, mudguards (*bante*),⁶ fringed seat covers (*rigan sirdi*; Fig. 5), pedal fringe, plastic flowers, and adhesive stickers.

In painting bicycles, designers usually decide on the color combinations, although owners may make their own suggestions. In some instances the decision will be jointly made by workshop co-workers. Malam Umaro Mango of Bukuru, Jos South LGA, explained (June 1995):

DU: How do you know the best color combinations?

UM: It takes a lot of thinking and sharing of ideas with my colleagues. So we decide, this place we will put blue, this side green, this side yellow, so that after it all, they will have a beautiful decoration.

Other favored color combinations include blue, yellow, and white; green, yellow, and red;⁷ and green and white. Some designers, like Malam Umaro Mango, may sometimes be inspired by

color combinations or designs painted on houses (Figs. 6, 7), but others, like Suleiman Makaniki, said they came up with their own ideas:

DU: I wonder if you've noticed the colors that are used on houses?

SM: Yes, I've noticed, but it doesn't influence my design. But sometimes I like the color combinations.

Colored or metallic adhesive stickers (*adon lik'ewa*; Fig. 4) may be used to complement the painted design.

These stickers figure more prominently in the second type of bicycle decoration, which is more common at present. Instead of cloth or paper, designers are covering the bicycle frame with stickers alone (Fig. 5). Malam Dan Lahadi, who has decorated bicycles for twenty-five years, explained why (Jos, June 1995): “You know yesterday and today are not the same. It is the economy...if you buy something today for ten naira, tomorrow it will go up. So people can no longer afford it. [Furthermore] bicycle decoration [in the old style] is almost out of fashion...Stickers are now taking its place.” There is a functional aspect to this shift as well. Certain types of stickers are chosen because they incorporate day-glo, which makes the bicycles safer for night riding.

If these stickers seem to represent less a technological transformation of materials and more the use of mass-produced materials—adhesive stickers are sold at markets throughout the North—their placement on bike frames still follows certain design preferences, the main one being symmetry:

DU: Sometimes you put one sticker there, and you put the same sticker on the other side. Why do you do that?



SA: So that the two sides will be the same weight. That is why I put them left and right—so that the weight will balance.

According to another designer, identical stickers should be placed on both sides of the bicycle so they do not conflict. Still another said that such symmetry is not necessary, although the ideal of balance seemed to prevail in bicycles decorated with stickers.

One remarkable example, referred to on the Ahmadu Bello University campus as “the one in town,” was decorated by Simon Attah, an Idoma man born in Otukpa, Benue State, and now residing in Zaria (Fig. 8). It combines the paper-covered frame style with the abundant use of stickers of flowers and birds.

The flower motif predominates: the paper covering the frame is printed with flowers, a large pink plastic poppy projects from the main frame, and tulip stickers adorn an accessory box. References to birds include what appears to be the top of a cane depicting a bird's head, stickers of an American eagle, a rooster, some sort of thrush, as well as actual bird feathers adorning the top of the rear mudguard. Other decorative additions emphasize the three main colors of red, green, and yellow, including

the popular spring-mounted metal or plastic hand called the “bye-bye” hand, red-and-yellow seat covers, red plastic handles, a Nigerian flag, a green banner, and a large red taillight. While the bicycle has two mudguards (including the fashionable “Stop Don't Kiss” design⁸), it is noticeably free of fringed decoration.

Mr. Attah explained the reason for decorating his bicycle:

SA: Formerly I had a motorcycle, a machine...then when I bought the bicycle,...I had ideas. I tried to [make] the bicycle as my machine.

ER: What about some of the other things, like the “bye-bye” hand? Where did you get the idea for the hand for decoration?

SA: At times when I left the house, the children used to say, “My daddy, bye-bye!” so that's how I had that idea, that's why I bought that thing....

ER: Where did you get that idea to use the feather behind the *fita* (mudguard)?

SA: Well, a friend of mine, he killed that bird. So the bird is very beautiful. If the man hadn't killed it, I would have put it in a cage.

8. Bicycle designed by Simon Attah. Samaru, Zaria, Nigeria, July 1995. Photo: E. P. Renne.

This bicycle combines the paper covering of the earlier style with a profusion of stickers and other decorative elements: flag, banner, mudguards, feathers, and “bye-bye” hand.

From there I got the feather, because it looked very beautiful. That's why I put it: to remember the bird.

DU: So you like beautiful things?

SA: Yes!

This much admired bicycle (it was taken to the 1995 Kaduna Trade Fair) shares certain formal and stylistic characteristics with other everyday presentations. The juxtaposition of strong primary colors in displays of medicine-tablet packets, for example, conveys a similar attractiveness, as do configurations of bright-orange carrots on beds of dark-green carrot tops. The practice of making appealing presentations of produce or merchandise is not restricted to entrepreneurs: a Hausa wife's arrangement of marriage gifts (*kayan daki*) in her room also exhibits this characteristic careful juxtaposition of color and form (Fig. 10).

The Aesthetics of Carrots and Other Displays

During the months of January through March in Northern Nigeria, carrots are harvested and arranged at market in a variety of attractive patterns. While carrot sellers do not name the different pattern styles, they follow certain conventions of display that suggest the sort of transformative process of materials and the sharing of ideas that Dewey had in mind.

After the carrots are washed and their leafy tops cut off, they are bound together in sets of three. In the circular display style, these sets are arranged on a round metal tray in an ascending spiral (Fig. 9). In the flat display style, the sets are displayed in straight rows on a rectangular bed of green carrot tops. Here the visual interest depends less on the dynamic bristling quality of the form and more on the contrast of bright orange and green.

The impression that these displays leave on viewers is not insignificant. One lecturer at Ahmadu Bello University told of traveling to Lagos and seeing a centerpiece of bird of paradise at one of Ikeja's posh hotels. Even while registering that they were an artistic arrangement of flowers, her initial response was "Carrots!"⁹

Some carrot sellers clearly took more care with their arrangements than did others. The formal regularity of these presentations is echoed in the circular displays of cooked meat (*suya*) arranged on carefully prepared raised beds of ash.

Similarly, the repetition and regular spacing of basic design units, as in the incremental stacking of wedding gifts—often enamelware bowls (formerly, decorated calabashes; see Berns 1986) either in glass-doored cabinets or on tables (Fig. 10)—shows Hausa brides' concern with the beauty of these displays. As Barbara Cooper has noted with respect to Hausa women in Maradi, Niger: "The success of the mother and the nubility of the bride were both suggested by the multiplication of similar objects, which were to be displayed in rows" (1997:95).

Everyday Objects and Aesthetic Processes

In this discussion we have tried to show how local aesthetic ideals of form and color may be seen in the most mundane things: the distinction between everyday and artistic activities is artificial in this Northern Nigerian context. Further, we suggest that the process of creating

objects that evoke pleasure or awe relates to fundamental everyday human experiences. The release from the tension of life's uncertainties conveys, however temporarily, a gratifying sense of unity in the world. Rather than stressing social order as the ideal outcome and the basis of the evaluation of art, as has been described for Fang society (Fernandez 1973), we propose that the on-going process of uncertainty and resolution is the basis of the aesthetic experience, at least for some Northern Nigerians. For them, technical mastery and new conceptions of materials come together to create a shared sense of appreciation between artist and viewer.

Yet it would be difficult to claim that the attraction of bicycle decoration and carrot and medicine-tablet displays stems from the viewer's feelings of inadequacy and awe in the face of technical pyrotechnics as described by Alfred Gell (1992). Instead, their charm lies in the transformations of commonplace materials, even if it is often for pecuniary purposes. The creation of aesthetic objects derives from an impulse that is based on concrete interactions with one's environment—in other words, on both sensory and mental experiences of the pleasures of everyday life. □

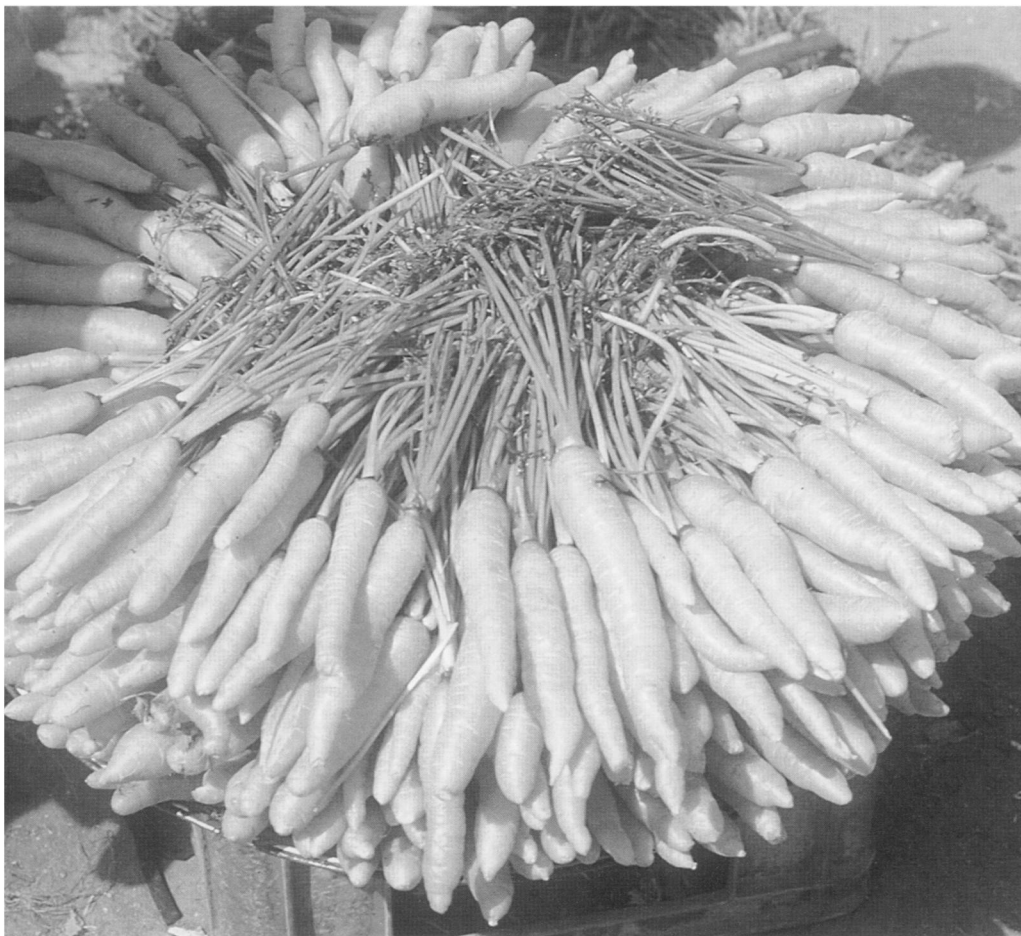
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Left: 9. Carrot display, circular style, Zaria, March 1995. Photo: E. P. Renne.

One could argue that the same basic aesthetic that governs equestrian trappings and bicycle decoration underlies the presentation of carrots in the market. All exhibit a dynamic though symmetrical arrangement and a strong color contrast.

Below: 10. Hausa wife's display of marriage gifts. Zaria City, Zaria, May 1995. Photo: E. P. Renne.

The regular stacking of the enamelware bowls reveals the importance of repetition in the aesthetics of display.



Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought remarks on dual projections which are remarkably similar to Esu's in form, mentioning "the double ax symbol, depicted as breasts." The image as a whole "evokes the power of woman, of Sango, and of the python at one and the same time" (Drewal & Pemberton 1989:151).

5. Ayodele Ogundipe, "Esu Elegbara, the Yoruba God of Chance and Uncertainty: A Study in Yoruba Mythology," 2 vols. (Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University), quoted in Gates (1988:29).

6. In *Yoruba Ritual* (1992), Margaret Drewal discusses another instance in which a woman possessed by Esu wore a carved penis under her wrapper, but since Drewal recounts that this woman went around showing it to other women as a plaything to garner laughs, it clearly functions in a different way than the Esu figures that are my primary concern in this study.

7. Wescott provides a more involved discussion of the relationship between sympathetic and even reciprocal cults in her 1962 explication of *laba Sango* (co-authored with Peter Morton-Williams). Here they identify the figure on the pouch as Esu, whose random violence links him to Sango. In this analysis, the authors contend that both deities wield "phallic" powers and are thus logically represented by "phallic" forms such as hairtails and thunderbolts.

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1. This term probably derives from the Yoruba word *keke* (or from some other southern Nigerian language; P. Newman,

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personal communication). *Keke* also means wheel in Yoruba (Church Missionary Society 1913:139) and is used in this context in a number of compound Hausa words such as *keken dinki* (sewing machine), *keken rubutu* (typewriter), and *keken fitila* (wheel actuating wick of hurricane lamp; Abraham 1962:514.) Bicycles may also be referred to as *basukur*, a term that is now in common use.

2. Cole (1983:7) has also noted the importance of embellished horses and riders in Northern Nigerian cultures:

Everywhere ownership of a horse meant prestige and authority, though in Islam-dominated cultures few, if any, sculptural representations of horsemen exist. The Hausa and Fulani of Nigeria and other parts of West Africa, for example, are famous equestrian warriors; but being Muslims primarily and without traditions of figural sculpture, the theme of the mounted rider does not occur in their art. Notably, however, both horses and their riders are artistically embellished among these people.

Decorated bicycles, however, do not fall within Cole's purview.

3. We are considering works of Hausa-speakers generally and not necessarily limiting the discussion to the Hausa people as an ethnic group.

4. Bicycles were used as surrogate measures of wealth in the Demographic and Health Survey conducted in Nigeria in 1990; 31 percent of households interviewed in northwestern Nigeria reported owning at least one bicycle (Nigeria, Federal Office of Statistics 1992:18).

5. Similarly, in *salla* processions, the Emir of Zaria is accompanied by the Sarkin Laima (Chief of the Umbrella), who holds an umbrella over the Emir, both shading him and marking his high status (Patton 1984).

6. *Bante* refers to a triangular type of men's underwear. Mudguards are also called *fitu* or *modgardi*.

7. The similar color combination of lavender, orange, and green was also considered to be attractive for robes (*babbar riga*) by Zaria City women embroiderers.

8. This design had been updated by 1996 to read "Stop Don't Kiss—Life is Dear."

9. Charmaine Pereira, personal communication, 1995.

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[This article was accepted for publication in September 1998.]

1. For example, the Ife image of an Oni, the striking Mumuye carving that looks like Dath Vader, the Baule figures from the Rockefeller Collection, the nail figure from Detroit, the Kwele mask from Paris.
2. The exhibition opened at the Kestner Gesellschaft in Hanover, one of Germany's most important museums for exhibiting modern art. It then traveled to the MAK (Österreichisches Museum für Angewandte Kunst, or Austrian Museum of Applied Arts) in Vienna (November 1997-January 1998), and to the Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich (April-July 1998). Attendance in Hanover was 25,000; in Vienna 20,000; and in Munich 52,000. The two U.S. venues are the University of Iowa Museum of Art (March 25-May 22, 1999) and the Neuberger Museum at the State University of New York, Purchase (September 26-October 30, 1999).
3. The catalogue that accompanies the exhibition is titled *Kilengi: Afrikanische Kunst aus der Sammlung Bareiss*. An English edition, distributed by the University of Washington Press, has also been published. Each of the objects is printed in color in outstanding photographs by George Meister and superb maps by Charles Meur. My catalogue entries are accompanied by smaller black-and-white thumbnails, so the reader does not have to page back and forth.

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