

The Nigerian Field

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In this issue:

OLUMO ROCK



THE NIGERIAN FIELD

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EDITORIAL

The Nigerian Field Society can claim as members many people whose life and work have left indelible marks on the history of Nigeria. Numbered among these is the late Kenneth Crosthwaite Murray (1909-1972), art-teacher extraordinary and one of the founding fathers of the Antiquities Service of Nigeria, later to become the National Commission for Museums and Monuments. On May 21st 1998 he was honoured by the Second K.C. Murray Memorial Lecture, initiated by the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan and delivered by Dr. Sule Bello, Executive Director of the Council for Arts and Culture, Abuja, who paid tribute to him as a man able to rise above the prejudice of his own time and assert the value of the arts and culture of Nigeria. However, Murray was concerned not only about artefacts but also about the environment. He deplored the pollution of the beach and the Lagos Lagoon and planted trees and shrubs to enhance the grounds of the National Museum, Lagos. We are sure that his spirit was watching with approval the activities of the Young Environmental Scouts of the International School, University of Ibadan, who on September 30th 1998 undertook the planting of the containers in the courtyard of the Institute of African Studies, focus of the activities of the Ibadan Branch of the Society.

Articles by K.C. Murray in *The Nigerian Field*

- 1933. Traps. 1/2 (6), 31-34
- 1936. Women's weaving among the Yorubas at Omu-Aran in Ilorin Province. 5, 182-191
- 1939. The provision of a Nigerian Museum. 8, 169-175.
- 1941. Ogbom. 10, 127-131.
- 1943. Tiv pottery. 11, 147-156.
- 1943. Frobenius and Ile-Ife. 11, 200-203.
- 1947. Ayolugbe. 12, 73-75.
- 1949. Idah masks. 14, 85-92.
- 1950. An exhibition of masks and head-dresses of Nigeria. 15, 26-39.
- 1951. The colonial art exhibition. 17, 41-42.
- 1971. Ogbom. SI, 55-56.
- 1972. Pottery of the Ibo of Ohuhu-Ngwa. 37, 148-175.
- 1938. (with G.I. Jones), The exhibiton of wood-carvings, terracottas and water-colours. 7, 12-15.

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Corrigenda

VOLUME 63, PARTS 1-2

Alhaji Akin Fakeye

The neo-traditional Yoruba carver who displayed his works in the foyer of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, at the Annual Business Meeting of the Society held on April 4th 1998 was ALHAJI AKIN FAKEYE (not Alhaji Gani Fakeye—see line 7 of the Editorial and the caption under the photograph on page 76). The Editor apologises for confusing the identities of these two carvers from the renowned Fakeye family.

Mushrooms, man and nature (pages 3-18)

Page 11. The caption to figure 5 should be tranferred to figure 6 on page 12.

Page 11. The caption for figure 5 should be "Xerophilina sp."

Reviews of books, a journal and a film (pages 59-68)

These were omitted form the Table of Contents on the back cover. The works reviewed were:

African Art,

The Art of African textiles,

Yoruba Ideas (a journal),

Vitellaria paradoxa (a monograph),

Parkia biglobosa (a monograph),

The useful plants of West Tropical Africa, Edition 2, vol. 3, Families J-L

Birds, beasts and bature,

The call of the lightning Lord (a film based on the life of Sango).

ON THE ORIGIN OF TWO BRONZE DWARFS IN THE MUSEUM FÜR VÖLKERKUNDE, VIENNA, AUSTRIA

Ohioma Ifounu Pogoson

Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan¹

Two bronze dwarfs (Plates 1 & 2) that are believed to be from Benin, ancient capital of the Edo of Southwestern Nigeria, now reside in the Museum für Völkerkunde in Vienna. The bronze dwarfs were captured from Benin in 1897 when it fell to the British. Since then, it has always been assumed that all of the works of art that were seized and subsequently removed from the ancient capital by the British army are the works of the famed Benin court artists, in spite of the well-established connections between Benin and her neighbours, especially Ife, Owo, Idah and the Ibo, who are themselves equally accomplished artists. The dwarfs are among the finest examples of metal art from the southwestern part of Nigeria. According to the leading authority on the substantial Vienna collection of Benin art, for £200 the Lichtensteins purchased the three most famous brass figures for the museum's Department of Anthropology and Ethnography. The dwarfs, which were said to be "the only perfect pair that were found in the city", were among them (Duchateau, 1997:108). This appears to be the first hint suggesting that the works could be of Benin manufacture apart from the fact of their being removed from the ancient capital. However, insufficient attention has since been given to finding out the true origin of these bronze masterpieces in the Vienna collection.

That the dwarfs were taken out of Benin seems to have been supported by some scholars in the early period. Olfert Dapper (1668) confirmed the presence of real dwarfs in the court of Benin. According to Duchateau, Dapper even depicted these dwarfs graphically on a copperplate engraving included in his own work (Duchateau, 1997: 73). Ling Roth (1903) who was in Benin during the Punitive Expedition became the first to record sighting the bronze dwarfs among the other spectacular bronze objects in Benin City. Unfortunately since that time, there has been little interest in the dwarfs. But Von Luschan (1919) did point out the high artistic value of the bronze dwarfs, which were then already in the collection of the Museum für Völkerkunde in Vienna. Schweeger-Hefel (1948) also commented on the outstanding quality of the works, noting them as one of the high points of Benin art.

Another leading authority on the ancient arts of Nigeria, Fagg, (1963: 25) regards the dwarfs as the finest of all Benin bronze figures, noting that "they are so naturalistic that it is difficult to find points of style by which to date them, though an early date

¹I wish to express my profound gratitude to the State of Baden Watterberg, Germany and Akademie Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart for providing the funds to enable me travel to Vienna, an opportunity that exposed me to direct contact with these interesting dwarfs.

seems most likely." But he questions the issue of their origin by saying, "It is conceivable that they are Ife works." The most naturalistic art works in Southwestern Nigeria are from Ife and Owo, two towns that have had close historical and cultural links with the Edo. In my opinion, however, Dark (1973: 97) states the most cogent evidence towards an understanding of the dwarfs. To him, the fact that dwarfs are well integrated in Benin culture as palace jesters appears more important than issues of their real origin. He makes the interesting point that not only is one of the dwarfs (dwarf B) more generalized and reminiscent of the Attah of Igala's mask (plate 3), but that it may have even been contemporaneous with it. That, according to him, would place it in Oba Esigie's time—c.15th/16th centuries.

The other dwarf (dwarf A), Dark continues, seems to be the portrait of a particular individual, perhaps earlier than dwarf B. But he also comments on its naturalism, a trait that has been associated with earlier Benin art. Dark then draws attention to a bronze dwarf head in the Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin (Plate 4) that according to him is even more subtly modeled. Paying especial attention to the treatment of the ears of this head, Dark describes it as naturalistic and exceptional which leads him to suggest a possible non-Benin origin. However, instead of pursuing this possibility, he prefers to cling to a Benin source, concluding that if the works were from Benin they would have been cast at a time when Benin arts were under great stimulation.

This paper addresses the issue of the origin of the dwarfs. The question of the origin of the Benin works taken away from Benin City in 1897 will be examined and the possibility that the dwarfs, or at least one of them, could have originated from outside Benin culture. One thing that is clear, is the association of dwarfs or jesters with royalty. Basically, this is something that cuts across many societies so any of the art producing centres in the region with an established monarchy could have produced them. According to Ben-Amos (1980: 29), quoting Dapper, the figure of the dwarf represents a member of the Oba's entourage. In addition, this initiative also considers the question of style as it relates to or departs from the pervading art style in the region, especially as manifested in bronze sculpture. It considers stylistic affinities and uses them in addition to oral historical connections to suggest an alternative place of origin.

Southwestern Nigeria is the heartland of Nigeria's traditional arts. Artistic traditions in various media proliferate throughout the region. In Benin, as in Ife, Owo, the lower Niger area and Igbo-Ukwu, many artifacts of high artistic value and antiquity has been discovered. In his paper titled: "The Missing Millennium? From Nok to Ife and Beyond" Willett (1986) addresses the connections between Nok, the earliest art tradition in Nigeria (dated by thermoluminescence to about 2,500 B/P), and the other art traditions of Southwestern Nigeria. Despite the established chronological gaps, he manages to package all the art traditions of Southwestern Nigeria together and establishes some relationship between them. But this does not make them lose their uniqueness. Each of these art traditions is still recognised on its own merit, with peculiarities of style and form. Style has indeed played a very important role in identifying the arts of

southwestern Nigeria.

The ancient arts of Ife are the oldest in the region. They comprise sculptures in bronze, terracotta and stone in the most naturalistic style ever seen in traditional Africa. Oral historical studies from the town reveal it as a primary Yoruba town of unrivaled antiquity. No wonder therefore that its influence is said to cover a substantial part of the region. East of Ife is the town of Owo where art that shares a close stylistic affinity with the Ife works has been found. The oral traditions collected from there confirm a close relationship with Ife. Indeed this relationship extends to Benin. The art of Benin, Ife and Owo therefore are closely related stylistically and may even be contemporaneous. The art styles from the three centres support this.

Fagg (1963) coined a phrase to designate bronze works, which belonged to neither Ife nor Benin but shared some similarities with them, referring to them as products of the "Lower Niger bronze industry". Noting that Nigeria's reputation in the world of art rests largely on the Ife/Benin tradition, Fagg believed that in years to come the Lower Niger bronzes would be recognized by Nigerians and by the world as a more original and distinctive contribution to the enrichment of human experience.

From the foregoing, it is clear that a solid attempt has been made to ally the major art traditions in Southwestern Nigeria. The aim of this article is to consider the dwarfs in the framework of the other arts of the region with a view to examining possible connections. But it is of importance to take a close look at Benin art before studying the provenance of specific objects.

Although Benin art first gained international popularity shortly before 1897 when through trade links it began to reach Europe, Benin's early interaction with Europe shed light on the people and culture. In Paris, France, then regarded as the art capital of the whole world, an artistic revolution was going on. The revolution, which was taking place at the beginning of the century (Rhodes, 1994: 111), sought to break away from the rigidity into which the conventions of naturalism were straight-jacketing artists. Against this background, contact with African art gave the desired impetus—European avant-garde artists recognized a freedom in the African artist's approach to form which they wished to emulate. They adopted African art in a kind of revolution and thus began the recognition of African art as art in Europe.

The sack and looting of Benin in 1897 assured an abundant supply of Benin art works to Europe. Members of the British army sold them shortly after their return to England. The art objects of the so-called underdeveloped and uncivilised world had become something of more than just curiosity value. They began to be avidly collected. Many of them found their way to central Europe particularly, Germany, Austria and Holland (Pogson, 1997:31). They now adorn countless museums abroad where they are presently ignored and relegated to the background because of poor funding and dwindling interest in African art as investment.

Ironically, there are far fewer Benin works in Nigeria, the environment that created

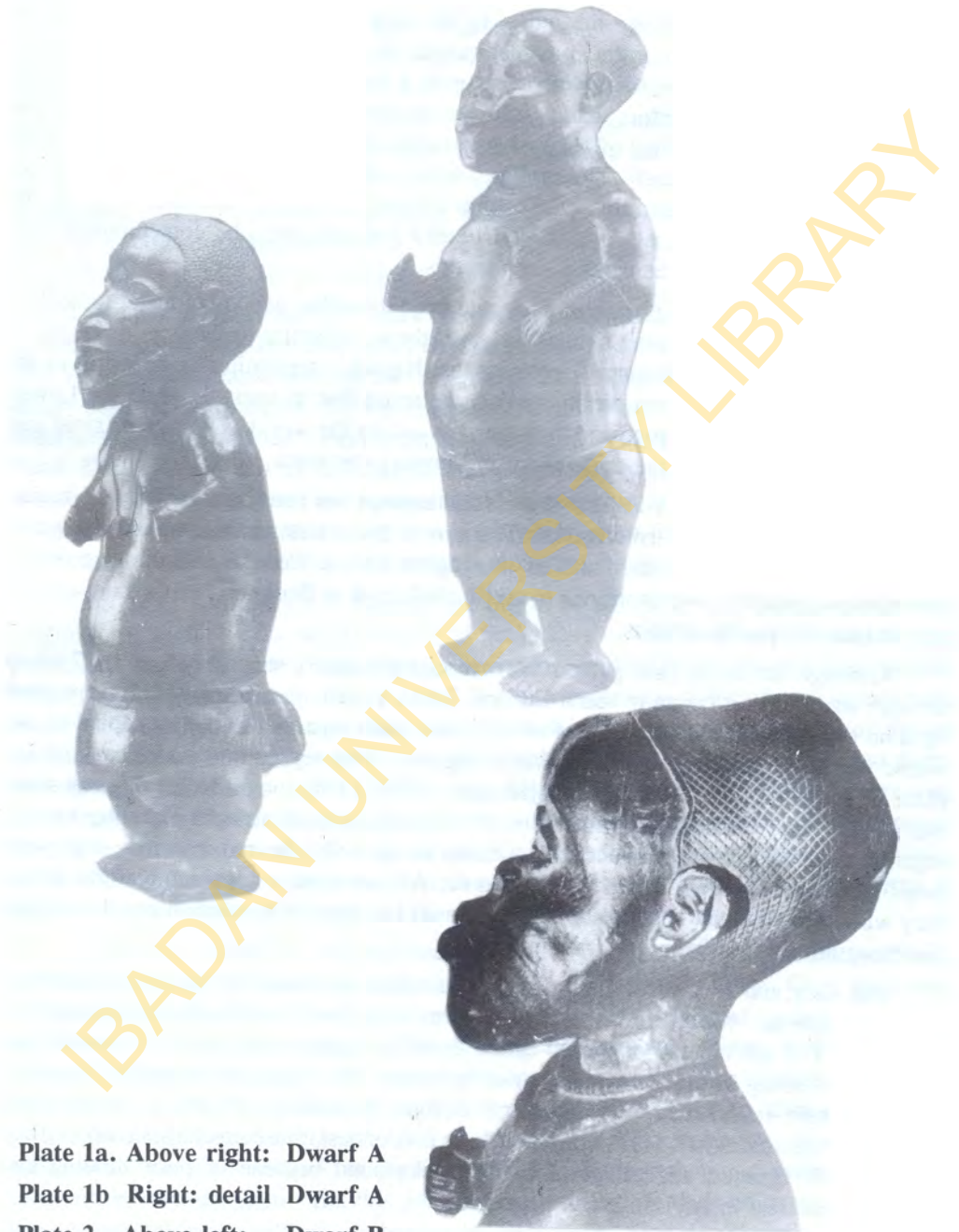


Plate 1a. Above right: Dwarf A
Plate 1b Right: detail Dwarf A
Plate 2. Above left: Dwarf B

them, than in German ethnographic museums. The result of this anomaly is that Nigerian scholars seldom subject the works to rigorous study. Although much work has been carried out on Benin art by early foreign scholars, such works are basic background materials, which even though important, lack depth and fail to show the association with other cultures that will throw desired light on the history and art history of its producer culture. However, with increased access to Benin works of art, there is a desire and need for more in-depth, comparative and analytical studies of the works by scholars equipped with the right combination of tools and sensibilities to handle them not in isolation, but as units or composite parts in the corpus of Nigerian art.

Benin art appears to be bounded by certain conventions, as are the traditional arts of other parts of Nigeria. Adepegba (1995:29) identifies certain characteristics of the Benin bronze artist's representation of human form. He believes that the treatment of the nose and lips is related to a carving tradition. Truly I do not think that Benin art falls into that category of African art which displays implicit and intrinsic artistic freedom in its use of forms. Was Benin art not constrained by styles and techniques learnt through the apprentice method?

Ife art from the southwestern part of Nigeria is perhaps the easiest to describe. It is characterised by a naturalism which prompted Frobenius (1910), an early investigator of Ife and the surrounding environment, to think that the works could not have been the product of the town but rather of a lost ancient Greek colony. The arts of Ife have since then been explained and most appropriately situated by the foremost Ife scholar of our time, Frank Willett. His numerous publications on Ife art are synthesised in his famous book, *Ife in the History of West African Sculpture*. Ife is the oldest of the art traditions in the Southwestern part of Nigeria. However, all of the arts of the region have been linked not only by oral traditions and history, but also by a pervading stylistic affinity (Willett, 1986).

Let us now return to the dwarfs in the context of the styles of Ife and Benin art and other sub-styles from within the vicinity. The two dwarfs that are now in the collection of the Museum für Völkerkunde in Vienna were taken from Benin after the Punitive Expedition. In their present location they are referred to as "court dwarfs" meaning that these bronzes were displayed in the court of the Oba of Benin. I think that they are the representations of real dwarfs that once lived in the palace of the Oba of Benin. As has been noted earlier, people suffering from achondroplasia are common in the palaces and courts of kings in Western as well as in African cultures. Held and Posner (1979:182) in their study of Diego Velazquez, a Spanish painter of the 17th/18th century, noted the representations of the dwarfs and jesters that Phillip of Spain, like many seventeenth-century princes, collected for amusement. A dwarf is still known to reside at the palace of the Alaafin of Oyo, ostensibly for the amusement of the king and because it would be difficult for him to survive with such an obvious disability. But I consider more plausible another point: that they possess extraordinary powers which could be useful for the protection and well being of kings.



Plate 3, above left: Attah of Igala
Plate 4: above right: Dahlem head
Plate 5: right: man from Owo

Dwarf A (plate 1) has an amoeboid shaped head, a true representation of one of the types of deformities associated with achondroplasia. As has been pointed out by Held and Posner (1979), dwarfs were regarded as barely human and their deformities seen as evidence that they had been denied God's grace. The sculptor who created dwarf A, showed keen powers of observation as evidenced in the modeling of the face, which achieves resemblance to the actual. He did not make a caricature of the dwarf's face but endowed it with dignity and composure.

This true-to-life naturalism is more commonly found in the Ife than in Benin. The hair of dwarf A is represented by cross-hatching, another feature which Eyo and Willett (1980:199) have noted in the side burns of the frowning man from Owo (plate 5) which they say combines both Benin and Ife elements. I also see a close resemblance between bronze dwarf A and an Ife terracotta piece with furrowed brow (Plate 6) from Obalara's land in Ife that has been noted by Eyo and Willett (Eyo and Willett, 1980).

The face of dwarf A also shows a suppleness characteristic of Ife naturalism. The nose and mouth are represented in a manner typical of the more naturalistic of the Ife sculptures. An interesting aspect of dwarf A is the fact that he is adorned on the neck and wrists with necklaces and bracelets as is common in the arts of Ife. These point to both a cultural and artistic relationship with Ife art.

In his study of the representation of ears in Benin and Ife art, Willett (1967: 162-163) points out at least eight different types from both cultures. Of the eight types, the first two, which incidentally are from Ife, are the most naturalistic. The other six represent details of ears as they are represented in the various artistic periods of Benin art (Fagg, 1963). It is intriguing to note that the ears of dwarf A share a very close



Terracotta head from Obalara's land, Ife

stylistic affinity with the ear "g" as illustrated by Willett. According to him, this form of ear was taken from a Benin bronze mask of the Oduduwa masquerade. A ceremony associated with this masquerade celebrates the close links between Benin and Ife. The seven dancers in the Oduduwa performance are, according to Ben-Amos (1980: 93), representatives of two great Osun specialists, Uwen and Ora, and their entourage who accompanied Oranmiyan from Ife.

With only half an inch difference in height and about five pounds in weight, dwarf B is clearly less naturalistically rendered. As a result of this departure from naturalism, he seems closer to Benin works than dwarf A. In the representation of the nostrils, eyes and lips, a point that Adepegba has discussed as culminating in the stereotypicality of Benin art, this dwarf is reminiscent of the Benin corpus. But although the ears of both dwarfs are similar, the representation of the hair and beard in dwarf B is rigid and stereotypical of the art of the middle period of Benin. Unlike Dwarf A, who is adorned with neck beads and armllets, dwarf B has just one strand of beads around his neck and a string holding what appears to be a charm. The limbs of both dwarfs are similar, but an outstanding feature worthy of note is the representation of their feet, which includes striking details of the toenails and protruding heels.

The marked difference between the two dwarfs lies in the representation of the head, an indication that the works could have come from different hands. A dwarf head (plate 4) currently in the collection of the Museum für Völkerkunde in Dahlem, Berlin, illustrated as Tafel 65 in von Luschan's influential book, possesses a close stylistic affinity with dwarf A although a substantial part of the head is now broken and lost. The Dahlem head, with its jutting chin also has facial features, eyes, nose and ears, closely related to dwarf A. Even the hair is represented by cross hatching as well and there is also an astonishing resemblance between both faces. Just as in dwarf A, the eyes of the Dahlem dwarf head are deep set and so is the bridge of the nose (Duchateau, 1994:73). His lips are as thick and supple as they are in dwarf A. The ears are no less similar and both works could have come from the hand of the same Ife artist. Ife is the home par excellence of compelling naturalistic art in southwestern Nigeria.

That both dwarf figures and the Dahlem head are found in Benin should not detract us from seeking their origin outside Benin, particularly in Ife. I believe that this even strengthens the case for an outside Benin manufacture for both naturalistic dwarfs, dwarf A and the Dahlem head. Dwarf B rendered in less naturalistic Benin style could have been produced after the other two examples. In my opinion, based on the stylistic presentation of the works and their affinity to the usual Benin and Ife art styles, dwarf A and the Dahlem head are of Ife origin, while dwarf B is undoubtedly of Benin manufacture.

Thermoluminescence dates obtained from dwarf B at the Rothgen Forschungslabor in Berlin place the work at about 1324 (Duchateau, 1994:73). But according to Fagg, it is the naturalism of the works that make such an early date possible (Fagg, 1963: note 25). It was Fagg who propounded a classification of Benin art based on, among other

factors, its proximity to naturalistic representation, and therefore to Ife. According to Fagg, the more naturalistic works of art from Benin can only belong to the early period of Benin art. This is because the art of bronze casting had just been introduced to Benin from Ife and the artists either produced the works after Ife models or they were indeed produced by the Ife master who was sent to teach the art of brass casting in Benin. The full figure of a robed Ooni (Egharevba, 1968) found in the palace of Benin is believed to be the work of Igueghae, the patron deity of the Benin bronze casters whom oral tradition informs us was sent from Ife to Benin to teach the art of bronze casting during the reign of Oba Oguola around 1400 A.D. Fagg doubts that any other full figure sculptures were made during this period. But the two naturalistic dwarfs are, according to him are as naturalistic as any Ife works (especially in one case, that of dwarf A) and so should probably be placed in this period. With the discovery of Ife-type art in the lower Niger area, Benin-type art in Idah and Ife, and Benin/Ife-type art in Owo, it becomes difficult to assume that all the works of art found within a particular culture must be of local manufacture. Therefore, arising from the discussion and with due cognisance of the established fluid interchange of cultural materials between Ife, Benin and elsewhere in Southwestern Nigeria, one can conclude that the more naturalistic of the bronze dwarfs (dwarf A and the Dahlem head) are more confidently of Ife origin, while the stylized dwarf B is of Benin manufacture.

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**UNITED KINGDOM BRANCH
WILDLIFE CONSERVATION IN WEST AFRICA II**

A great deal of water has flowed under the bridges since the last, highly successful seminar with this title was organised by the Nigerian Field Society, United Kingdom Branch, and WWF (UK) at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, in September 1993. The Proceedings were published in that year as *NFS (UK) Occasional Paper, no. 1*.

The intention now is to review the situation and to assess gains and losses since that time. Every effort will be made to contact the original speakers and exhibitors, in an attempt to persuade them to return and give their views on progress—positive or negative—since they delivered their papers. Matters will not be confined to these, however, and reports of new initiatives or areas for concern will also be welcome.

With all due thanks to Dr. Richard Burge and Dr. Nick Lindsay, the Director General of the Zoological Society of London and the Curator of the Whipsnade Wild Animal Park respectively, the Society is most generously making facilities available at Whipsnade for the seminar on:

SATURDAY 9th AND SUNDAY 10th October 1999

Planning for such events needs a considerable lead-in period and details of the programme and administrative arrangements will be issued in good time. In the meantime, all concerned should make a firm note of the date. This notice will be distributed as widely as possible to known interested parties who are kindly requested to advertise the seminar among their contacts. Suggestions for speakers, offers of exhibits, contact addresses and so forth will be more than welcome to:

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Volume 63 Parts: 3-4

OCTOBER 1998

CONTENTS

PAGE

Editorial	89
Corrigenda	90
Olumo Rock History and archaeology <i>James B Odunbaku</i>	91
Olokemeji Forest Reserve history, a postscript <i>Brian Hopkins</i>	114
The origin of two bronze dwarfs <i>O I Pogson</i>	121
Rock-boulder landslide in Isan-Ekiti <i>Bisi Durotoye</i>	131
Forest tree diseases in Nigeria <i>E N Ekpo</i>	139
Planting exercise	148
Malacostracan species inhabiting water hyacinth in Benin River <i>J.K. Ekelemu</i>	149
Built-in orderly organised knowledge	158
Book reviews	159
<i>Hail Orisha!</i>	
<i>The useful plants of West Tropical Africa, ed. 2, vol. 4, Families M-R</i>	
<i>Travels in the white man's grave</i>	
<i>For women and the nation Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti of Nigeria</i>	
Dial-a-sophist	166
Obituaries	167
John H. Elgood	
Charles Bruce Powell	

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