

THE SECRET OF THE PUTCHU GUINADJI

By Henning Christoph

After putting together a fine collection of these miniature horsemen or warriors called „Putchu Guinadji“ made of bronze, silver, copper or brass my curiosity was awakened to find out more about these talismans that were supposedly used by mad people among the Kotoko in Cameroon and Chad near the Lake Chad basin along the Logone and Chari rivers.

There is as good as no literature on the „Putchu Guinadji“ or the Kotoko people. The Kotoko now live where the ancient kingdom of Sao once was. Pierluigi Peroni, a collector in Italy, has done two beautiful art books on his outstanding collection, but has no description of how these Horsemen were activated or used. Hermann Forki writes in his book „Der Einfluß Bornus, Mandaras, Bagirmis, der Kotoko-Staaten und der Jukun-Konföderation auf die Kulturentwicklung ihrer Nachbarn südlich des Tschadsees“, 1985 in the Münchner ethnologische Abhandlungen; Bd.5, and I quote: „Seitdem bei ihnen der Islam eingeführt worden ist, schmieden die Kotoko nicht mehr selbst, sondern überlassen diese Beschäftigung Arabern, Kanuri und Hausa die im Lande eine sozial inferiore Kaste bilden und ähnlich wie Leichen als „unrein“ gelten. Als für sie typisches Tier gilt übrigens der Hund. Die Kotoko sehen das Schmiedehandwerk als dem Islam widersprechend an, was von ihren Nachbarn nirgends so empfunden wird.“

My curiosity was awakened. There exist no photos of these pieces in use, and no texts explaining their spiritual activation or use. On December 7, 2012 I flew to Cameroon with the set goal to unravel the secret of the „Putchu Guinadji“. With my two assistants Ismaila Putuenchi, a bronze caster from Fouban and Aboubakar Sidik Njikam my driver we headed 1.500 Kilometer north after getting a first lead in the Yaounde artisan market.

The dealer came from the village of Guilli 20 kilometer south of Rhumsiki in the Mandara mountain region. In this village live casters who do copies of the Kotoko pieces. According to my information the Kotoko stopped casting with the Islamization of their tribe, and now only the Hausa, Arabs and Kanuri cast. Metal workers were supposedly low caste among the Kotoko. The dealer did say however that the Kotoko are casting deep in the bush, and that we should find a person called „Mahmud“ in Waza. He knows everything.

We arrived in Guilli on Christmas Eve after a 12 hour drive from Ngaoundere on a very bad road. The contacts that we wanted to meet here were not present. We had to continue to Rhumsiki since there was the only hotel in the region. The 20 kilometer road to Rhumsiki was a treacherous mountain pass with rocks and potholes that threatened to destroy our vehicle. After three hours on this road at night we arrived in Rhumsiki. This evening I doubted my plans of discovering the secret of the Kotoko Horsemen.

The next morning the contact we wanted to meet in Guilli came to the hotel. His name is Chowar and he dealt with the „Putchu Guinadji“. He told me proudly that just recently he sold four „Putchu Guinadji“ to a man from Toulouse. He gave me the first valuable information that gave me faith that my endeavor might still work.

He named the six steps in making a „Putchu Guinadji“:

1. A marabout must diagnose the madness.
2. The marabout sends the patient to a caster with the medicine
3. The caster makes the horse and rider.
4. Boil leaves and put the horse in the boiling water with the medicine.
5. Offer the blood of a chicken over the horse.
6. When power lessens offer a new chicken over the horse and rider.

This information was a great help, and underscored what I originally thought that the casting of these pieces is a sacred act accompanied by certain rituals, and that a marabout must perform this act since the Kotoko are Muslim.

Our second contact came by a few hours later. A young man called Kotakoji who travelled all over the extreme north of Cameroon collecting pieces to sell. Kotakoji said that he knew a Kotoko marabout and a Kotoko caster, and that he could take me there. I accepted Kotakoji's offer, and we set off the next morning for Maroua.

After checking into a flea-bitten hotel, Kotakoji set off to find the old marabout in a village not too far from Maroua.. Several hours later Kotakoji came back and said that the marabout agreed that I photograph and film him. The marabout was an old Kotoko man called Bakoura. As we sat down in his treatment hut. The old man was observing me very closely not really knowing what I wanted. He took out an old dirty sack, and poured about 10 „Putchu Guinadji“, with and without leather covering, on the ground. He warned us not to touch them because the madness of the former owners could pass on to us. He said that he had to rub each „Putchu Guinadji“ with the „Gwouabi“ plant to make them harmless. After he was finished I was allowed to inspect them. The „Putchu Guinadji“. Some were covered with leather and on a leather band with many other attachments, and some were without covers. Bakoura said that the ones that are covered with leather and have other attachments are for very serious cases. He also said that the „warriors“ he had in the bag belonged to people who have died. The families return them to the marabout who activated them.

Bakoura sent for a 11-year-old boy who was seriously ill, and had a very complex „Putchu Guinadji“ with many attachments around his neck. I was allowed to make photos of the boy.

The marabout said that a used „Putchu Guinadji“ could be reactivated after it is cleaned with the „Gwouadi“ plant. Bakoura then went on to show me how an uncovered horse is activated. After the horse is cast by a caster the patient brings the horse back to the marabout, and the marabout boils the „Putchu Guinadji“ in water containing the plants „Gwouabi“ and „Tidih Whoume“. The patient must be present during this ritual.

If the „Putchu Guinadji“ is encased in leather and has attachments it is for a very serious case according to Bakoura. The two plants are put under the leather in powder form. Other packets attached can be filled with Koran Suren, with the plants „Gwouabi“ and „Tidih Whoume“, other cast metal pieces or things pertaining to the particular madness affecting the patient. A very good example of this is the „Putchu Guinadji“ with a small vial of water attached.. In this particular case a woman was carrying water from the Logone river at night and went mad. After the woman died the family brought the talisman back to Bakoura the marabout. I was able to purchase this particular „Putchu Guinadji“ and several others from the marabout after he deactivated them.

The next day we set off for a Kotoko village not far from Bogo near the Logone river to find one of the last Kotoko casters who make „Putchu Guinaadji“. It was on a Thursday, and it was market day in Bogo. The village was filled with Kotoko, Arabs, Hausa and numerous other tribes from Cameroon and Chad. Bogo is very close to the Logone River and to the border of Chad. Kotakoji found the caster, and we were invited into his very tiny workshop in his compound on the sandy earth of this Sahel village in the extreme north of Cameroon.

Actually the casting of the „Putchu Guinadji“ is forbidden by Islam, and it is dying out with only a few casters and marabouts left still offering this service to heal madness. Islamic fundamentalism and Christian missions are destroying and have destroyed many of the old beliefs in Africa.

Magana The Kotoko caster said that the horse and rider symbol originally came from the Peul warriors who fought and enslaved many of the animistic tribes in the north. The Kotoko themselves were not a horse society. They were farmers and fishermen living along the Logone and Chari rivers. According to Magana the word „Putchu“ means horse and „Guinadji“ means demon in the Kotoko language. The „Putchu Guinadji“ are the horse and the rider who fight the demons attacking the mad person. The horsemen are usually worn on a string or leather band under the arm and under the clothing concealed from other people.. No one may touch a „Putchu Guinadji“ that is worn and active because the madness can be passed on. The sick person wears the talisman all his life, and by its rubbing against the body the „Putchu Guinadji“ gets the very smooth patina. After the person has died the piece may be sold or given back to the marabout who activated it. Some people are buried with their „Putchu Guinadji“.

Magana the Kotoko caster inherited his spiritual powers from his forefathers who were all casters. He and his brother are the only real Kotoko casters left according to Magana. Magana said others are copying, but don't have the spiritual power to cast horses that will help against madness. Magana said that all mad Kotoko people are brought to him. He said that he cannot count the number of people that he has treated. His speciality is attaching a crocodile for extra power to the „Putchu Guinadji“.

After the person was diagnosed by the marabout as mad they must bring the „Gwouabi“ and „Tidih Whoume“ plants from the marabout to him. They must also bring a chicken, rice and 15,000 CFA (22,90 Euro). The casting of the „Putchu Guinadji“ is a sacred act and takes 15 days to complete. After the „Putchu Guinadji“ is cast the patient must bring the horse and rider back to the marabout who then activates it, and decides whether it must be covered, and maybe what other attachments must be made. Magana said „madness has different colors“ referring to the attachments on the pieces.

Before applying the medicine the blood of a chicken must be offered on the „Putchu Guinadji“, and rice must be cooked. Children sit in a circle around the mad person and eat the rice. One year later the patient must return with 100.000 CFA (152,67 Euro) and a goat or a cow depending on how strong the illness is. Every consecutive year a chicken's blood must be offered over the „Putchu Guinadji“ to give it power.

Magana said „only God knows how long I can still cast and cure“. It won't be long until this old art of curing madness will disappear forever. I am sure that other bronze casters throughout Cameroon will make copies since it is well known that there is a market for these beautiful, powerful pieces in Europe and America.

I asked Magana if people are afraid of him. He answered „only those that are mad.“ He added that „people can copy me but it won't work.“ All the while I was interviewing Magana he was moulding a „Putchu Guinadji“ from bee wax which he gave me when he was finished, but said that he couldn't cast it because this he could only do for a mad person, otherwise it is forbidden to cast.

We left his village in the late afternoon, and went back to Maroua to visit the artisan market. I saw about 20 „Putchu Guinadji“ that were for sale. There were copies and a few very good pieces that I bought. Kotakoji my guide, who knew everything and everyone, returned to his village in the Mandara mountains.

I had a great feeling of relief that I could find out the secret, make photos and film of the Kotoko horsemen before this very old healing system disappears forever. For me it is essential to know the meaning and usage of artifacts displayed in my museum.

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