Artifacts as "Daily Art" in Me'en Culture

2

The Life and Work of Bogine Shala and Gelta Foroshowa

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Introduction

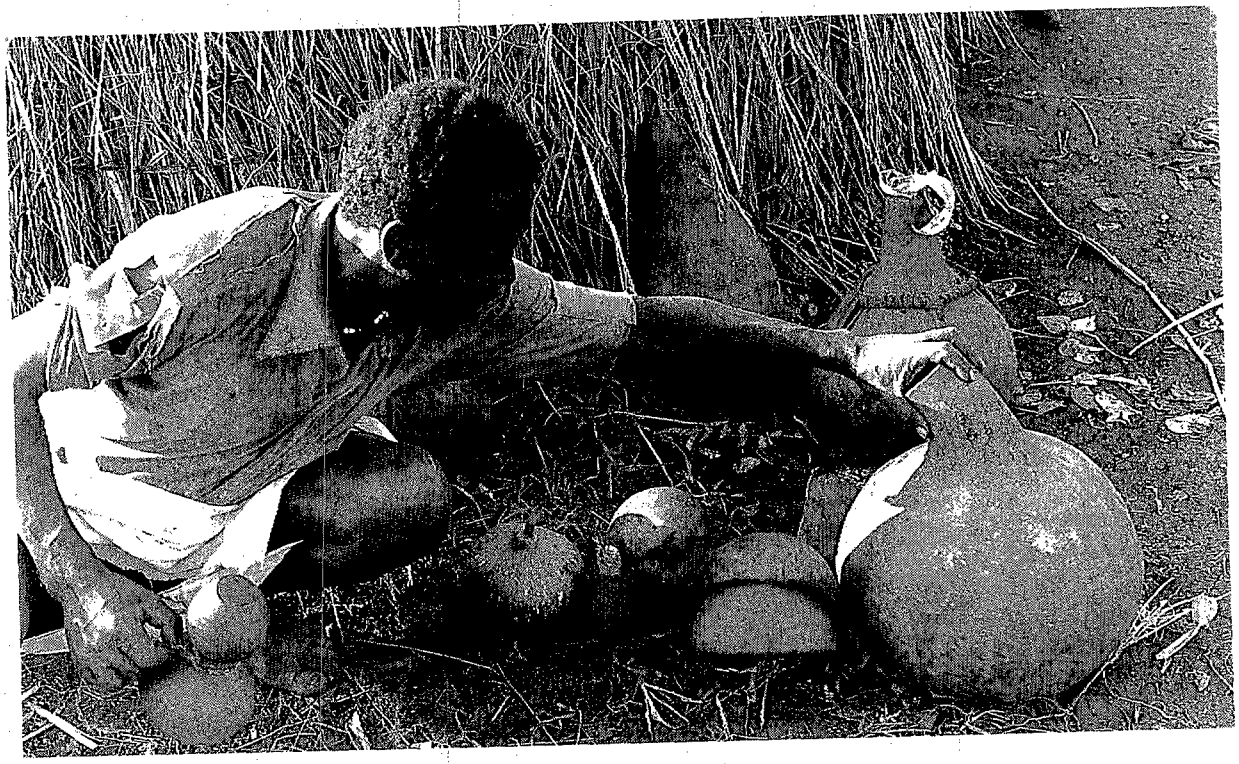
Does every human society have "art," artistry, or at least artisans? In this essay about the Me'en people of southwestern Ethiopia, I will challenge some received ideas about "tribal" arts and crafts and thus provide a kind of counterpoint to many of the other traditions described in this volume.

When I was working with Bogine Shala and Gelta Foroshowa (figs. 2.1–2.2), two Me'en artifact producers, several questions presented themselves in view of the comparatively simple material culture which they, as average Me'en persons, produced and used: (1) Do the Me'en have an "art" tradition? (2) Do they apply ideals and conceptions of "beauty" to the material objects they possess and use? (3) Are those material objects in themselves—be they household utensils, tools, or personal decorative items—carriers of "meaning"? In other words, is their world of artifacts a domain of symbolic culture, of the cultural ascription of value? I pondered these questions while I was in the field conducting research on the artifacts and their wider significance in Me'en culture. It seemed

I wish to acknowledge with deep gratitude the help and openness of Bogine Shala and Gelta Foroshowa, the main subjects of research, as well as the invaluable practical assistance and friendship of Wolıyyu Adem and Gontio Worku in Ch'ebera village. I also thank my friends Berhanu Worku, Arguatchew Teferra, Taddese Yayye, and Basagala Galtach. I dedicate this essay to the memory of Mengesha Kabtimer, a man who is sorely missed: *men-de-buyto, men-de-barıt, Tuma kayn.*

Fig. 2.1 Bogine Shala using a machete to rough out a *gongul*.

Fig. 2.2 Gelta Foroshowa selecting a gourd for carving.



to me that the Me'en, a group of predominantly shifting cultivators living in a remote, hilly bushland area, did not appear to have an elaborate material culture or any acknowledged experts or artisans known all across their land. Neither did they have spectacular pieces of figurative or decorative art (masks, carved images) like we find in West or Central Africa.

We know that people in Africa or elsewhere may not adhere to the same definitions of "art" and "beauty": as a matter of fact, these notions are tied up first and foremost with our own cultural history and our "high" literate arts, which are often detached from everyday life (see Gell 1992: 40–41). The concept of "the arts"—as denoting a class of objects or activities which invite "contemplation" from the viewer—is itself a cultural category (cf. Maquet 1979:14). Ethnologists and specialists in "tribal" and traditional arts have long emphasized that we should look at the entire sociocultural and historical context of material culture traditions. The production, distribution, and use of artifacts have various functional and social aspects and often cannot be considered in isolation, nor should they be measured with our, external, criteria of artistic or aesthetic quality.

But what about things like aesthetic feeling, affect, or artistry? For example, don't objects in societies which are "poor in art forms" have any minimal underlying notions of good form, extraordinary skill, or pleasant visual/aesthetic effect? And aren't some persons recognized as being more capable or skillful than others in producing "good objects" (see DeCarbo 1977: 28–29, 169–70)? Or is an artifact perhaps invested with meaning mainly because of its character acquired over time, its background, the history of its production and circulation (however mundane and common this object may be)?

During research on the relatively simple and nonelaborate material culture of the Me'en, I tried to answer these questions through observation and via interviews with several artifact producers, among them Bogine Shala and Gelta Foroshowa. What they told me and showed me has provided many of the answers presented here. Bogine and Gelta are two typical Me'en men in their forties, married and with children in their teens. Bogine is a member of the Koya lineage of the Gelit clan. Gelta is a member of the Afala clan and a son of a famous (now deceased)

spirit medium. They live in separate homesteads, some two hours' walk from the small, mixed Amhara-Me'en market village of Ch'ebera in the Me'en highlands. Their houses are modest, one-room dwellings made of wood and straw. Some of their fields and gardens (for maize and cabbage) are around their houses and are tended by their wives. Their other cultivation sites (for sorghum and *t'ef*) lie at some distance, in lower areas. Gelta recently moved his home from the lowland area to his present location because he missed his relatives and "could not stand the heat."

Both men are capable of producing various objects such as gourd containers and decorative items and can work in wood and do basketry. They are "average" men: I could have selected many other Me'en men in their stead. Significantly, Bogine and Gelta describe themselves, not as "craftsmen" or "artists," but simply as "cultivators," like virtually all Me'en do. They make hardly any extra income from their craftwork.

Partly on the basis of my experience with these two artifact producers (and, over the past few years, with many others as well), I will develop my discussion of their work and of Me'en artifacts in general from the following assumptions: (1) The term "art" is difficult to handle when considering the artifact traditions of non-Western, preliterate subsistence societies like that of the Me'en. "Art" is often encompassed by "material culture" and should first be considered as technical "artifact production and use," not as an ideal of detached beauty in and for itself. (2) Artifact production and use is a *social process* embedded in the exigencies of daily life and interpersonal relations. (3) Artifacts—even if appearing prosaic or mundane or "only functional-utilitarian"—always have a tacit dimension of visual aesthetic, or of what I would call aptness of form, which emerges out of their grounding in a sociocultural context.

Thus, an ethnological point of view on the matter of the "value" of Me'en artifacts would emphasize that they should be judged on the basis of (1) their sociocultural role in a society in which they gain their meaning and aesthetic value for the *users* and (2) the context of the *relation between available technical means and materials and personal effort and intention*. The simplicity of technical means in working the basic material does not imply that the crafting of artifacts is easy. I am always reminded of Amborn's remark (1990: 53) about his experiences among the Konso

and Burji blacksmith craftsmen. He admits that although he was educated as an engineer, he did not succeed in producing even one acceptable iron object with the "simple" local means available to him!

Viewed in this light, even objects like a wood stool, a knife, a gourd container, or a personal drinking cup can not only appear functionally efficient and aptly formed but also attain a dimension of beauty if we think of "beauty" as the radiance of something *authentic*, true or real, or if we speak "from the inside" of the culture from which the objects emerge, that is, if we know and feel something of the rich context of use of the objects and their sometimes quite individual histories. The primary point I wish to make is that the category of "art" should be broadened into one of technical "artifact production": the making of any object by humans for "aesthetic" and/or "utilitarian" purposes (see Gell 1992: 43). "Art" traditions are only one possible elaboration of this general process of applying mind to matter, or, in other words, of *transforming nature into culture*.

The Me'en People

To appreciate and understand Me'en material culture in general, and Bogine's and Gelta's work in particular, some background knowledge about the people is helpful. The Me'en are a rural population of about 50,000 people, divided into two branches: the Bodi (ca. 3,500) are agropastoralists living with their cattle herds in the savanna plains east of the Omo River, and the Tishana (ca. 46,000) are mostly shifting cultivators in highland areas (fig. 2.3). Both groups descend from a common stock, but the Tishana have incorporated a large number of people from neighboring ethnic groups (Dizi, Bench) (see Abbink 1992a). They also keep cattle, but in much smaller numbers than the Bodi. The Tishana and the Bodi have a fairly dispersed and mobile lifestyle, living in family compounds rather than in villages. Every two to three years at least, they rotate fields and places of residence. Politically, they are partly integrated into Ethiopian political structures like the *qebele* peasant associations, and in early 1993 they formed the ethnically based Me'en Organization. But they also maintain their own traditional leaders (elders, spirit mediums, and ritual leaders called *komorut*). They have a rather egalitarian social structure, with few differences in power or in

Fig. 2.3 View of Tishana Me'en countryside

wealth between adults. Elders and *komoruts* enjoy respect and normative authority, but they have no executive power: they are not chiefs. It is important to keep in mind that the Me'en ancestors were a typical East African pastoral (herding) population, among whom independence and equality were always highly valued (see Abbink 1990) In addition, we know that such pastoral peoples always have a relatively simple material culture, with a limited range of artifacts (see Von Gagern et al. 1974: 38–39), compared to sedentary societies. Indeed, my guess is that the total number of objects used by the Me'en is only about 130, that is, the objects they themselves produce locally. When we count the imported items, like razor blades, cotton cloth, soap, shoes, rifles, etc., the number is higher (see Abbink 1992b).

Today, the Tishana Me'en—to whom both Bogine and Gelta belong—are subsistence cultivators, no longer real pastoralists. They keep some livestock (cattle, goats, sheep, chickens), but most of their labor time is spent in growing crops such as sorghum, corn, beans, and some wheat, barley, and t'ef. There are markets, but most "trade" takes the form of

barter. Men have favorite exchange partners with whom they often have established a ritual friendship bond called *lange*. Women do most of the daily work (food and beer production, planting and weeding the fields, tending the gardens, and petty marketing of foodstuffs they have produced). Significantly, women (including the wives of Bogine and Gelta) do not engage in any production of material objects, except pottery; they make the earthenware cooking plates, called *retech*, and the three kinds of pots (*dole*, diski, and ju) which the Me'en use. As in many other south Ethiopian cultures, it is believed that when men observe the production process of these wares, the end product will be brittle and useless. These pottery items are also the only artifacts which women sell in the market. The reason women do not make more objects is not clear, although observation of Me'en daily activities over a long period suggests to me that women have much less leisure than men in which to sit down and work on an object. They also do not readily use iron tools. Thus, only the vital cooking pots, used daily, are fashioned by them—with their hands, without tools.

The Nature of Me'en Material Culture and Its Valuation

The artifacts that we find in Bogine's and Gelta's homesteads are virtually the same as those found in any Me'en household. There are no great differences in the nature and number of their material possessions. For example, when visiting the houses of Gelta and Bogine, one would not conclude that they are "craftsmen," although Gelta had a larger than usual number of gourd plants growing in his garden, the fruits of which he would make into containers. Also, Me'en do not really differentiate between, for instance, utensils used for food preparation and decorative (or what we would probably identify as more "artful") items like their intricate beaded belts, leather bands, or earrings: all these things are called *a'a*, "goods" or "stuff," things needed in life. The ritual firesticks needed for harvest rituals are as much part of the system as cups and gourd containers used in daily food preparation. There is, however, a differentiation of artifacts according to age and gender. Among the Me'en, the desire to possess or use certain objects depends on one's stage in the life cycle (youngster or elder) and whether one is a wife or husband. For instance, young men absolutely want decorative items like

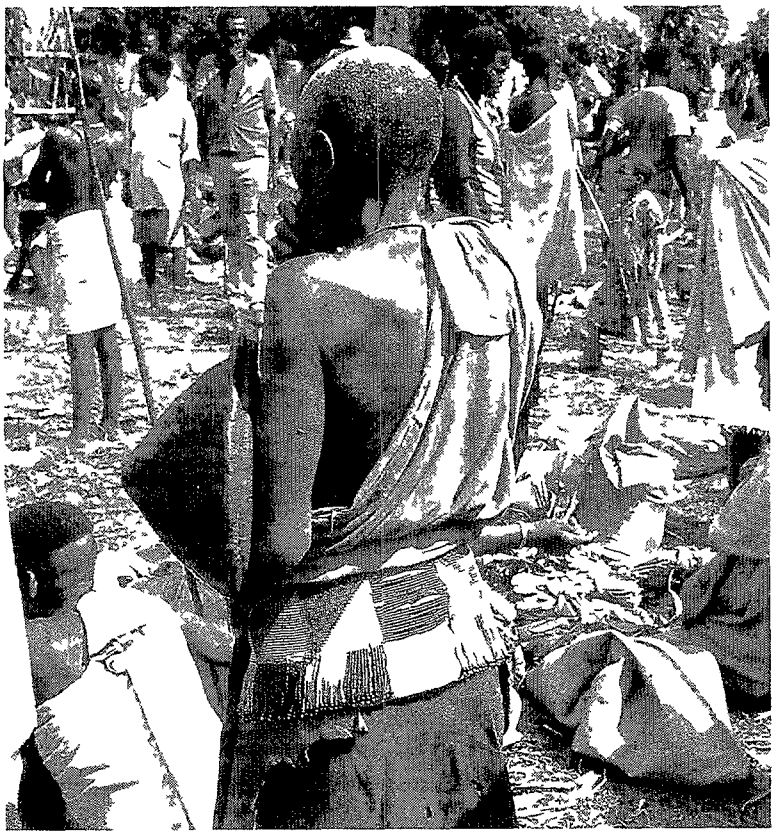


Fig 2 4 The *daafa* (beaded belt) worn by women

bead or leather chains, bracelets, metal earrings, and knives with an ivory and buffalo horn handle Girls want their own wood cups or bowls, brass bracelets, and colorful bead chains for the neck, arms, and ankles Wives want all the household utensils, the full range of gourd containers (the Me'en distinguish at least ten types of gourd container), wooden spoons, strong clay pots and baskets, and also good clothes (which, today, means imported garments), bracelets, chains, and possibly a wide, multicolored beaded belt (called *daafa*), perhaps the most expensive and flamboyant Me'en material object (fig 2 4) Elders want a *chakam* (a small wood stool carved from hardwood), a tobacco container, or a ceremonial spear

It is through these varying preferences according to age group and status that we not only see the communicative function of artifacts but

also discern the basis for the Me'en valuation of objects and the framework for a visual aesthetic. What makes young people want to have these things? Because they want to catch the eye of their age mates of the opposite sex, they want to appear attractive. And why these particular objects rather than others? Because they made them themselves, or because the objects were made of prized material. So there *are* concepts of beauty or "aptness" of material items. In Me'en, these items are related to personal appearance as a whole and not valued primarily in themselves. The "aesthetic of adornment" consists of the complex of coiffure, scarification patterns and skin color ("red" versus "black"), stature, song and dance skills, and also facial and physical traits. Once young people get married and start a family, this aesthetic and its underlying concept lose some of their significance as the demands of functional efficiency of other goods like tools, bowls, baskets, etc.—necessary for sustaining the household—slowly take over. Indeed, one does not see adult married men wear the kind of personal adornments the young men have. But they occasionally carry trophy-like items, like bands made of skin or small bones of animals such as monkey, wild hog, or leopard. Gelta wore a leopard bone on his left upper arm, a reminder of his successful kill some years ago.

In most other categories of artifacts, like tools, weapons, and household items, the functional element predominates, not the "aesthetic." Here the object is valued for its durability, ease of use, size, strength, and shape, apart from its color or aptness of form. Like Bogine said while working on a wooden bowl: "A good one is one which stays, which is strong and can be used for a long time. If you have the right kind of wood, it's possible. The form should be straight, equal." However, like decorative items, these "utilitarian" objects can also acquire a special meaning or importance in the course of time. A nice dark red patina suggests age and durable value. The Me'en attach importance to how an object was acquired, who owned it previously, where it came from, and what was done with it. An object has a life history that is never immediately visible (see Ravenhill 1991: 6). This is a dimension of the object that we as outsiders often do not see but that has significance for the Me'en.

Both decorative items and utensils, tools, and ceremonial items possess a recognizable "Me'en style." This was always pointed out to me

by both the Me'en and their neighbors (Amhara, Bench, and Dizi people) and illustrates the fact that their tradition is indeed a culturally specific one. For example, no Dizi or Bench will carry a *chakam*, nor will one ever wear Me'en buffalo-skin sandals (*chaych*) or leather bracelets (*laka*) on the upper arm. It is also asserted (although incorrectly) that the Dizi and the Bench "cannot make" good gourd containers, woodwork, knives, etc. and have to buy them all from the Me'en. Despite this Me'en style, there are individuals from all ethnic groups who "cross the boundary" and learn from neighbors and assimilate techniques, decorative patterns, or object types. This is an interesting topic for further study: how, why, and by whom are specific artifacts "borrowed" from other people?

Me'en Artifact Production as a Technical Process

The limited range of Me'en objects is in accordance with the relatively low level of material development and environmental control found in Me'en society. We can formally distinguish several classes of objects: household utensils, tools, weapons, decorative items, items of personal status, and ceremonial items. It is very important to realize that the Me'en are self-sufficient in the production of almost all of these material objects. There are no real artisans, and consequently, there is no "caste" of artisans or craft specialists such as, for instance, the Fuga among the Gurage or, formerly, the Felasha among the Amhara of Gonder. In their work of producing "daily art," Bogine and Gelta are matched by virtually all adult Me'en men (although their personal touch, especially Bogine's, in certain things is recognized by relatives and neighbors in their immediate area). Hence, among the Me'en, there is no dependency on other people for material goods. For us, members of an industrial-technological society completely dependent on highly educated technical specialists for all our daily goods, it is hard to imagine what this means. The Me'en still have to deal, almost on a daily basis, with the challenge of transforming nature's raw materials into tools, utensils, and other objects that have to work and are used to solve the problems of making a living—and almost all the Me'en can do it.

The materials used are wood, tree bark, grasses, reeds, clay, gourds, iron, the skins of cattle, sheep, goats, and game animals, and pieces of discarded objects like aluminum tins and empty cartridge shells. The

adoption of "modern," imported goods has been very limited in the Me'en area; for example, they do not use furniture, radios, flashlights, or bicycles. This means that for their basic means of production, household goods, and decorative and ceremonial items they are dependent on no one. Within their own society, the only "specialists" are the ironworkers/blacksmiths (unit), who do not, however, form a special, separate group, let alone a "caste" (as they do among the neighboring Dizi). They fashion knife and spear blades, hoes, and picks and hammer out bracelets from old cartridge shells or metal debris and decorate them with the standard figurative patterns. Bogine and Gelta do not know this work. Apart from this ironwork craft, Me'en material culture is a "democratic art," known by all and observed by children from an early age. The techniques of production are familiar and acquired through imitation and trial and error.

The Artifact Producer and His Work

Bogine Shala is a quiet, unassuming Tishana-Me'en man, about forty-five years old. He is married and has four children. His wife does not engage in craftwork, although, like most Me'en women, she can make clay pots and cooking plates. Bogine describes himself not as a "craftsman" but as a farmer. I came to him because several people told me that he had been producing a fair amount of woodwork, basketry, and gourd containers lately. However, when I asked, he denied that he was making a living with such work: he had sold only a few things. Originally, he did not make objects for sale. Once, when he had made a big wooden beer tray, some people in his area asked him if they could have it. They agreed on a price and after that he made another. From talks with other artifact makers, I have the impression that lack of money as well as problems with crops (i.e., bad harvests) prompt them to take up some handicraft work. Nevertheless, they can never make a living from such work. Even the one Me'en blacksmith I met said he also cultivated his fields and gardens "just like anybody else."

Bogine lives in a small compound in the clan area where his father and some of his paternal uncles used to live. When they used to work on artifacts, he always had plenty of opportunity to observe them. The production of artifacts was a matter-of-fact thing, like building a house

or going to clear or weed the fields. It was not an activity steeped in supernatural or ritual awe. Knowledge to produce an object did not demand any link with gods or spirits or even ancestors: the *technical* aspects always dominated, like it does now. In the limited period during which I was able to observe Bogine work, I had the opportunity to see some of his woodwork and basketry. He is able to make most Me'en wood products, like bowls, cups, spoons, and stools. I will first describe his work on a food bowl: the rough one seen in plate 1.

Wooden Bowls

When I asked Bogine to make a wooden bowl (*gongul*) for me, he told me to come back the next day. In the meantime, he searched for the wood and notified me when he had found it. When I arrived around midday the next day, he was already busy cutting a large branch from a Sudan teak tree (*Cordia africana* Lam.) with an ax (called *bhech*). The other tool he used to fashion the bowl was a machete (*banga*). For a smaller, square type of bowl, he uses a knife also, for the finer work on the rims and the handle. Lowland Me'en use the leaf of a tree called *qaraych* for polishing the wood so that its surface becomes very smooth. But this leaf is not available in the area where Bogine lives. When highland Me'en compare their products with those of the (more isolated) lowlanders, they point to things like the availability of certain natural materials as the reason for the difference in quality and not to differences in skill. Whether their claim that they are "as good as the lowlanders" is true is doubtful: my impression is that apart from using different materials, the lowlanders do produce more attractive objects; that is, they give more time and thought to producing them and are more creative. For instance, the light-colored wooden cup with black lines in plate 1 is an object not often found in the highlands. Instead, one finds dark-colored, undecorated cups (pl. 1). The same holds true for grass baskets: the lowland ones are more popular, for reasons of both durability and form (fig. 2.6). Bogine claimed that he could make any object that the lowlanders make, including the stools (*chakam*), if only he had the right kind of hardwood and the polishing leaves.

After he had cut off the branch (fig. 2.5), Bogine began roughing out the form of the bowl, which this time was to be square. He did this

Fig. 2.5 Bogine Shala cutting a tree branch.

with a machete (fig. 2.1). In less than two hours I could see the form of the bowl and handle. The outer bark was removed and then the small trunk was hollowed out, with both the machete and the ax (Bogine had removed the ax's wooden handle). While carving, Bogine chatted and joked with people who happened to be around, exchanging news and gossip and replying to questions. A few hours later, he took the almost finished product to his house and sat down on the grass to give it the finishing touches and to do some polishing, all the time observed by his children. His wife was present only part of the time and did not seem to be very interested in the work. After being carved, the *gongul* dried for a week or two and was then polished again, especially its interior. The exterior can be rubbed with castor oil. No decorations were made on the wood surface—this may be a personal preference.

When I showed Bogine a wooden bowl (pl. 1, back row, right) with a kind of wave pattern, seemingly simple but difficult to carve, he recognized it as "typical lowland style," which was true (it does not yet have the patina of use). It is indeed a type not readily found among the highland Me'en, but he said he could make one like it. Nevertheless, demand for such specific forms is low, which seems to point to a certain "erosion" of notions of aesthetic form among highlanders, who tend to be more "functionalist" in their production and use of objects.

Baskets

The Me'en have a very limited number of basket products. a beer sieve (*zarzarach*), a plate (*woshi*), and two kinds of food baskets (*garju*). All are simple in design and execution; unlike Oromo and Hararı baskets, there is neither decoration to speak of nor coloring. The bowl-shaped basket called *garju* is a product of the lowland Me'en, because, again, it uses materials only found in the lowlands, such as leaves from the *Hyphaene thebaica* palm. For this reason, Bogine, though he is an all-around artifact maker, only produces the basket plate and the beer sieve, not the *garju*. The example illustrated here (fig. 2.6, left) is a variation on the common basketry plate (*woshi*). Although most highland basketry plates are made using the checker-weave technique, Bogine used the coil technique to produce his plate—the technique used by the lowlanders for their *garjus*. This example is smaller than normal and is made of mate-

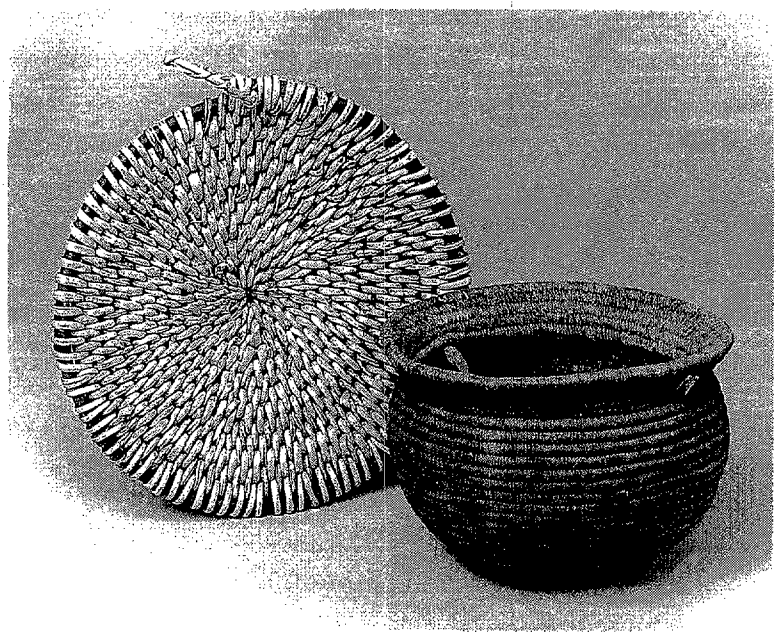


Fig. 2.6 Baskets: (left) a *woshi* made by Bogine Shala, (right) a *garju* made by Goluga.

rials not often used for this object. Bogine produced it in one day, from the flexible branches of the *ket-te-koroy* bush and from the tough, moist bark of the *bans'alach* plant. First, a few suitable branches were cut from the *ket-te-koroy* bush. Second, the coiling of the *bans'alach* bark around the branches was started. Bogine began from the inside, wrapping the bark-strips around the branch toward the outer rim. Care was taken so that the shape would be perfectly round and slightly convex—the shape of a plate. This simple-looking piece is made with resistant, difficult material and is much more complicated than it looks. Other Me'en (as well as some Amhara and Dizi people) admitted that they certainly could not have made such a piece as skillfully as Bogine.

Gourd Containers

In daily life, the Me'en use various types of gourd containers made from the fruit of the gourd plant (*Lagenaria siceraria* or *L. vulgaris*). Indeed, this item seems to be the most widespread material object. There are many types of gourd containers. They are one of the few categories of Me'en artifacts that are decorated (combs, bracelets, knife sheaths, and occa-

Fig. 2.7 Gourd containers (left) a *bhogol*, (right) a *qada* made by Worqu Kabtimer

sionally stools are also decorated) When the freshly cut gourd has dried enough, the maker (invariably a man) incises geometric patterns on the exterior with a small iron pick (*muda*) Then charcoal is rubbed into the incised design to give it its black color The designs consist of a variety of nonfigurative triangles, lines, and circles Although the patterns suggest representations of roads, snakes, rows of houses, or granaries, direct and indirect questioning of producers of these containers, including Gelta Foroshowa (whom I interviewed several times), did not reveal any deeper "meaning" These patterns (which are also found on the *daafa*, the colorful beaded belts worn by women) do not represent houses, roads, or any other concepts or objects They apparently have no culturally standardized meaning The origin of these motifs, which could perhaps tell us more about their significance, is no longer known to the

Me'en producers. Interestingly, they also occur among the Surma, a neighboring agropastoral group, historically related to the Me'en.

Making a gourd container may seem even easier than making a basket or a wooden bowl. Doesn't it involve simply cutting open the full-grown, already shaped gourd and then just carving the decorations on its surface? I put these and other questions on gourd container making to Gelta (fig. 2.2). He is an active, talkative man, about forty years old, who belongs to the old Afala clan. After spending several years in the lowlands, he now lives in a highland zone of the Tishana-Me'en. In his small house, he has a larger than average collection of gourd containers, from small drinking cups to big honey containers, all made by himself. Like Bogine Shala, who sells wooden bowls and baskets, Gelta has started trading and selling some of his products, but he cannot make a living from the proceeds.

Every year, Gelta plants gourds. During the growing period, the gourd fruit can be tied with rope to influence its shape. A type of container called *bhogol*, for instance, usually has a slender waist (fig. 2.7, left). A *qada* is bottle-shaped and made from an untied fruit (fig. 2.7, right). Twice a year, in July and especially in September, Gelta harvests the gourd fruits. Although well-made gourd containers last much longer than one year, with every harvest new gourd containers are produced in every household, especially when the fruits are of good quality.

After having been cut from the plant, the fresh fruit (called *qajach*) has to dry for at least a week. Then the fruit is carefully cut open. Gelta showed me how he can make two coffee bowls by splitting open a small gourd. He drew a line across the fruit, measured it, and started making small holes along it. Then with a machete he slowly split the fruit into two halves. If this is not done carefully, the halves will be damaged and rendered useless. Inside, one finds the whitish, inedible flesh of the fruit, often too fresh and tough to be removed immediately. Gelta loosened it with a pick, then (a week or so later) took it out with a knife (at times he uses a small spear). The seeds are stored and dried, to be planted later in the season. Gelta then cut the edges of the two cups with a knife and put them away to dry, often in a pile of grass or refuse to ensure that the containers dry slowly and evenly so that they don't crack. A few weeks later, he took them out to be polished and finished. The remnants

of the thin outer skin were removed with a knife, and the exterior was rubbed clean with sand and leaves The edges were again cut straight Once again, Gelta put the gourd aside for a few days Finally, the exterior was decorated with the familiar Me'en line patterns If Gelta produces the container for someone else, he does not incise its surface with designs, the new owner will do that for himself or herself In the course of time the gourd container acquires a distinctive patina, changing color from brownish green to an attractive deep yellow or dark red They are not easily thrown away when damaged Several of the gourd containers used in Gelta's household were cracked but had been delicately repaired with plant-fiber threads

Function and Form in Me'en Artifacts

The three types of objects that we have just considered are utensils used in everyday life They are not ascribed any ritual or ceremonial value, nor are they highly prized by the Me'en themselves as "beautiful objects" (in Me'en, *an-de-she'i*) So, if we wish to use the Me'en concept of *shektin* ("beauty" or "goodness" or "aptness"), how do we assess the quality of these objects? For these objects it must simply lie in the equal presence or overlap of functional efficiency and aptness of form Bogine, Gelta, and other Me'en told me about "good" material objects an object is good or beautiful when it does what it is made for and it does it well This implies that it must be made of good and strong material and must be adequately shaped and prepared For us this is a simple, straightforward answer, but we must realize that applying the seemingly simple techniques to natural materials with simple tools requires an original, careful sequence of decisions to achieve an acceptable result in terms of the function(s) an object is destined to serve

Many other objects of the Me'en show a beauty or aptness of form that goes beyond "mere" functional efficiency, or, to put it properly, they enhance their efficiency by their outstanding aptness of form Such objects are the small lowland tobacco containers of horn and leather and the small stools, for which the Me'en justly have a local reputation (fig 2 8) When asked about the beauty of these kinds of objects, the Me'en often say that they should not only be well formed and adequate but also be handled with care and respect "by the right people " These

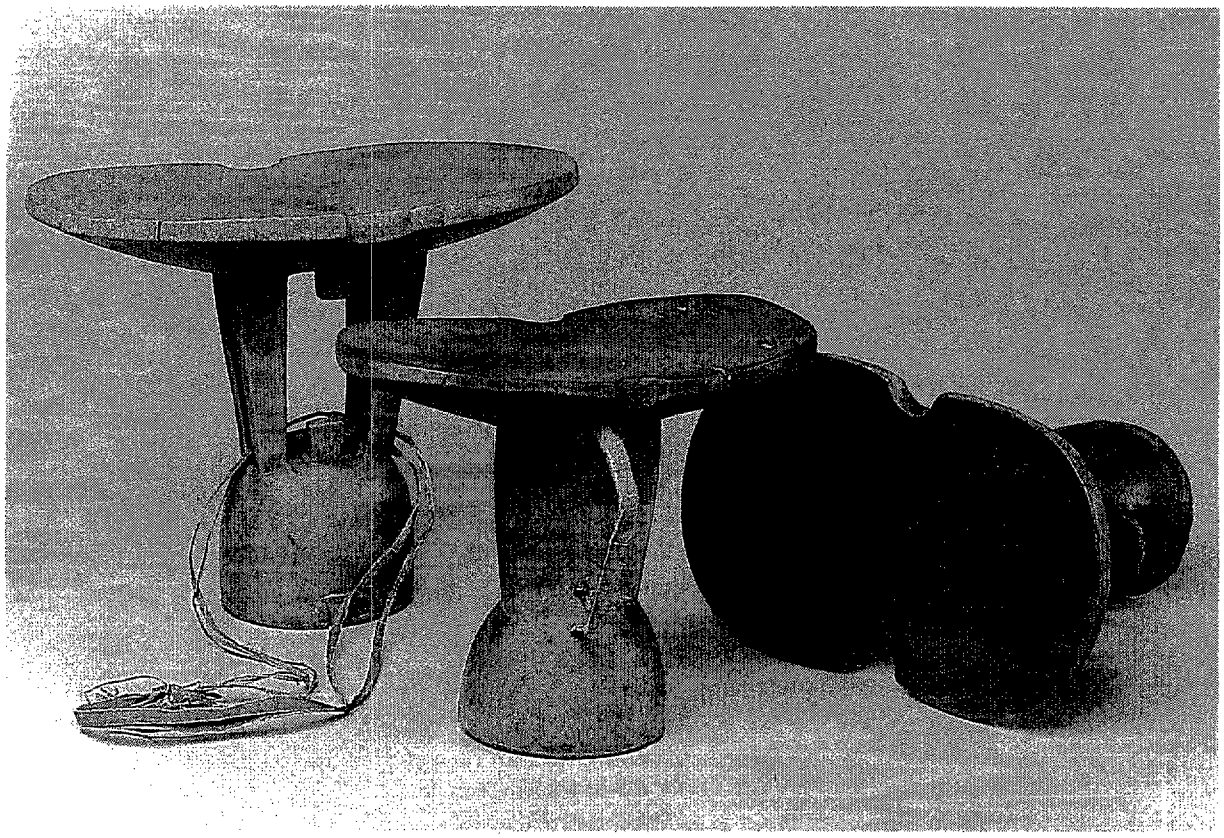


Fig. 2.8 From left to right: a *chakam* made by an anonymous carver, a *chakam* made by Ondai, and a *chakam* formerly owned by Beyene Banja.

very personal objects cannot really be bought with money: they are exchanged with a person who has established a "noncommercial" relationship with the producer or owner. We see here that "value" accrues to an object chiefly because of its life history. For example, the *chakam* (stool) illustrated in figure 2.8 on the far right was formerly owned by the Banja, the foremost *komorut* (hereditary "rain-chief") of the Tishana-Me'en, and was made by his father's brother quite a number of years ago. It is also important to know that the wood used was *jakach*, a lowland tree said to have "power" and reserved for such important persons. Another example that should be mentioned in this context is the wooden cup made of lowland wood and with line decorations that is shown in

plate 1. It was carved by a lowland man, Woyday Dorichali, who always carried it when visiting relatives or friends in remote places. I met him when he was visiting a Me'en highland family. Such a cup, a very fine individual product, is not often seen and was much admired by other Me'en.

Significantly, these latter artifacts are also the type of Me'en objects that most directly appeal to outsiders such as ourselves. Possibly this is because they reveal a certain "panhuman" aesthetic preference for symmetry, clarity, recognizable space, and self-containedness that conveys a sense of visual harmony and balance. In this respect, a simple, nontechnological and nonspecialized culture like that of the Me'en may be seen as possessing the same basic aesthetic sensibility that exists in Western cultures.

Conclusion: The Equality of Affect Engendered by Me'en Material Culture

Me'en material culture is the product of a nonhierarchical, mobile, and relatively self-contained society. The absence of "chiefs," of institutionalized groups of craftsmen, and of an autonomous domain recognized as "art" has stimulated an "equality of affect" in the production and social use of artifacts within this culture. By this I mean that the "force" of artifacts, their mobilization of sensibility or of affect among persons in Me'en society, is fairly uniform, and that evoking that affect by making these artifacts is within the scope of almost everyone. From the life history of a Me'en person (male or female) within his or her culture, it is possible to anticipate the material objects he or she will need and try to acquire in the course of life. Without denying change from within and from without the society (especially in a political and economic sense), the material culture of the Me'en is still largely dominated by "tradition." Challenges and problems of Me'en daily life could, until recently, largely be met on the basis of their present level of technology and craftwork, the norms and forms of which have been handed down by preceding generations. What we see in the "careers" of Bogine and Gelta as artifact makers does not (yet) single them out from the mainstream. However, if they would fully devote their time to making objects and would learn more of the methods and use of materials of lowlanders,

they could quickly become "specialists" and develop a personal style As I have made clear, current Me'en daily aesthetic and social organization mitigate against this Although the Me'en material traditions have remained fairly constant, it can be concluded—not only from what artifact producers like Bogine, Gelta, Woyday, and many others said but also from observing the Me'en objects in their proper context—that there is always an underlying sense of aptness and goodness in the artifacts, a visual aesthetic that unites form and function and that makes the objects satisfactory and pleasing in their simplicity and authenticity