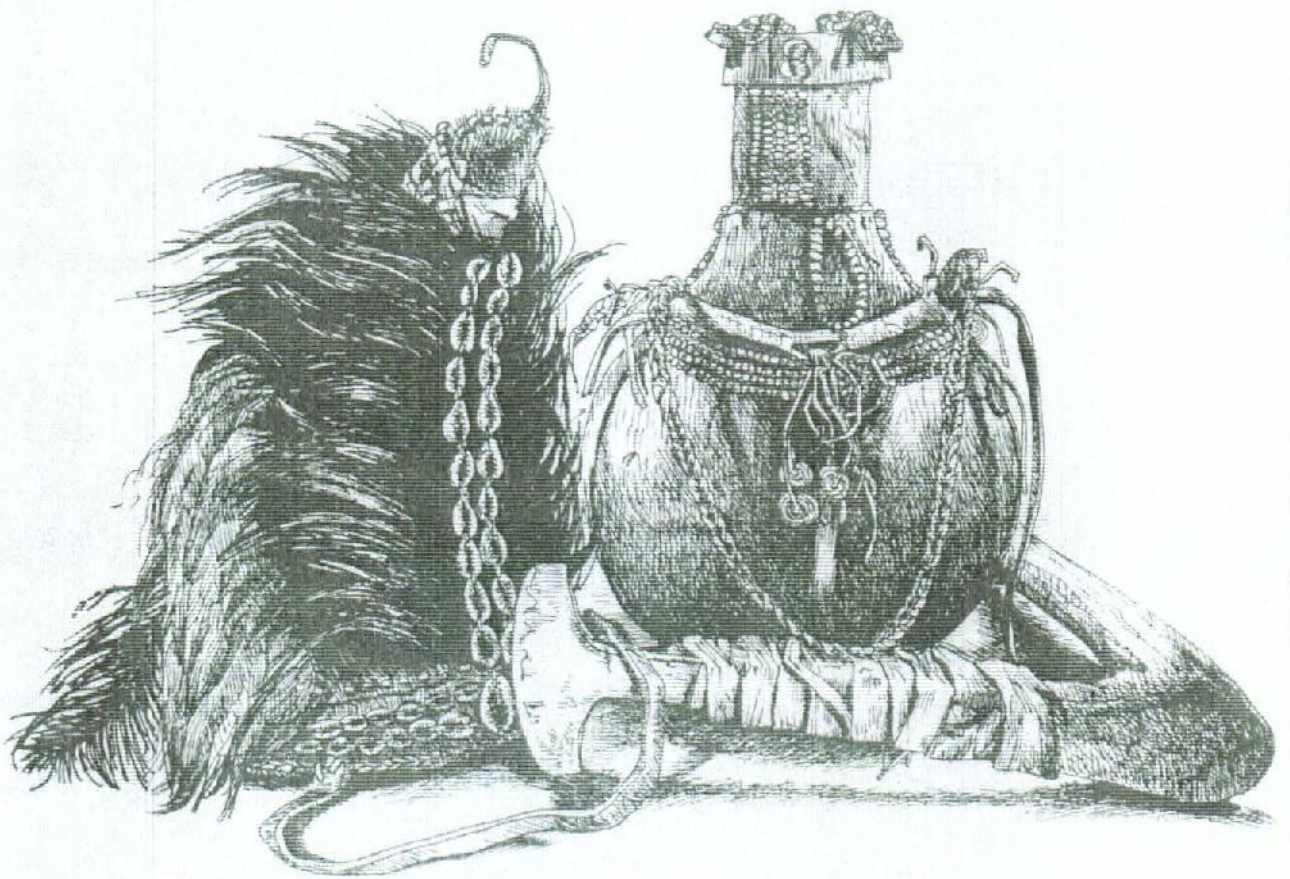


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A SOMALI HEADREST

by

Jim Allen

Wooden headrests from Somalia, especially those of the type here described, are in the writer's opinion among the finest examples of nomadic art to be found in Africa: small, light, functional, and reflecting in their line and ornamentation an aesthetic sensibility which appeals to a wide spectrum of observers.

The specimen here described (plate I) and some fifty more like it were collected over the period 1970-75 in Lamu, on the northern Kenya coast, from Somali merchants passing through on their way from Mogadishu or Kisimayu to Malindi, Mombasa and Nairobi. A few were also obtained in Mombasa curio shops where hundreds more were inspected. Most of the vendors had obtained the headrests, whether from their owners or from other middlemen, purely as articles of commerce and knew little or nothing about them although a few were able to provide information which was valuable and convincing. More information was picked up from Somali nomads in Kenya or from Somali residents in Mombasa; but unfortunately it was not possible to collect such information systematically, and in view of the present unsatisfactory relations between Kenya and Somalia; and conditions within the Somali Republic itself, it seems unlikely that further opportunities for thorough research will be available for some time. This article is therefore presented merely as a preliminary and in some respects tentative study pending further investigation.

The headrest, made from a single piece of wood, stands 18½ cm. high and weighs 105 gms. Two flattish legs spring from within an oval base which is slightly convex on both sides, though rising to a small peak on the upper side between the legs: this is echoed by an even smaller peak or point immediately above it in the centre of the underside of the saddle. The legs

curve outward to meet the saddle, which is also curved, increasingly so at each of the shoulders (the sections of the saddle outside the junction with the legs, which curl around to fit somewhere behind the user's ears). There is not, in fact, a single piece of straight wood in the whole headrest (plate 1 & 2), and the only straight lines are the upper and lower edges of the base, since the edges of the legs and saddle all bow outwards slightly and the sides of the base also curl out and over. Every edge except for the lower edge of the base is delicately bevelled, and there is a light ridge, almost like a vein, running down the inside of each leg and across the underside of the saddle and the upper side of the base to link up the two peaks already mentioned. With such a complicated design, it is a remarkable testimony to the makers of these headrests that I have never seen one whose structure lacked perfect symmetry, although symmetry is - no doubt deliberately - sometimes incomplete in the ornamentation.

According to I.M. Lewis (1969, 83) headrests are used in Somalia exclusively by the Hawiya and Digil groups of tribes who occupy most of the immediate coastal hinterland from just south of Barawa northward to about 7° north of the Equator, including the immediate vicinity of Mogadishu. Several of my informants suggested that they were also characteristic of the Ogaden-Darod group of tribes who live in the hinterland of Kisimayu and along most of the Kenya-Somali border, and I am inclined to accept this since they are also found among many Kenya Somalis, most of whom belong to the Ogaden-Darod group. Further evidence comes from the four Somali Daret headrests in the Museum für Volkerkunde in Vienna: these were reported by Prins (1965, 191) to have been collected in Afmadu, not far inland from Kisimayu, which would be in the territory of the Mohamed Zubeir, one of the Ogaden-Darod group; and rubbings of their decorations which were kindly provided for me by the Director of the Museum suggest that they are, with one possible exception, very similar to the ones collected in Lamu by myself. It is not quite impossible, however, that a few

two-legged Hawiya-Digil headrests should have found their way as far south as Afmadu. There was fairly general agreement among my informants that two-legged headrests were found among the Hawiya and the Digil, but less consensus about the single-legged type, of which a few were collected as well (plate 3). The whole topic requires further clarification.

Outside Somalia, two-legged headrests are found not only among the Somalis of northern Kenya but also among the wa-Boni who live in the Lamu hinterland and stretch across into southern Somalia here and there. The former are decorated in a style very similar to those from Somalia, though standards of workmanship are markedly lower. The latter vary: the ones published by Prins (1965) appear to be quite as well-made as the Somali ones, although the style of ornamentation is totally different; but two collected by the writer in Boni country for the Lamu Museum were of much poorer workmanship and had only a few crude shadings and drawings together with a written inscription to which we shall refer again below. None of my informants supported Prins' proposal (*ibid.*) that all two-legged headrests might be made by wa-Boni for the Somalis. It would not be typical of Somali nomads to confess to such a thing (yet perhaps it would be even less typical to pretend to manual labour for which they were not, in fact, responsible): but I am reasonably convinced that he must, in fact, be wrong, for two-legged headrests are so numerous among the Somalis (at least two thousand must have been sold in Mombasa and Malindi in the 1970-75 period, perhaps twice as many) that it would have involved the not very numerous wa-Boni in a large-scale industry to produce them all. The Hawiya and Digil live, furthermore, much too far to the north to have an exchange relationship with the wa-Boni.

Both men and women use the headrests, which are known in Somali as barshin or barkin (pl. barkimo). According to Lewis (*ibid.*) those of the women are more ornate than those of the men. Among those that I have seen it would be very hard to say that there are two types, one markedly less ornate than the other, and some informants have contradicted the idea. It may be that

it is predominately the more ornate ones which were bought for export (although I shall suggest below that some of the finest collected by me were men's) or it may be that the distinction is less clear among Ogaden-Darod headrests. The Somali headrests and those of the Boni are usually made of a tough, light-weight and light-coloured wood, very fine-grained and well-suited to delicate carving, known in Somali as hagar. It is the same wood used by the wa-Pokomo of the Tana Valley to make combs, and has been tentatively identified as Commiphora Erythraea. Other woods used are a softer, lighter, slightly reddish wood called by the Somalis galooi (from the bark of which is extracted a reddish dye, guduud) and - very rarely - ebony, that is, Dalbergia Melanoxylon, Swahili mpingo, or in Somali gorra. Only one ebony headrest has been collected, and it was the source of much admiration and envy among Somalis who saw it even though, being so hard, it was only very simply and crudely carved (Plate 4). Whatever the wood, the method of manufacture was the same: a tree must be found whose trunk forked into two equal branches, each about the thickness of a man's arm. This section was cut down, the headrest roughly shaped, and then a hole cut in the centre to give the two legs. An identical process was described for the Boni headrest by Prins (1965).

It is important to remember the social and ecological context of these headrests. Somali nomads live in an environment as hot, harsh and dry as any in the world and are obliged to move constantly to find grazing for their flocks and water for themselves and their animals. They can carry only a minimum of personal possessions, and the headrest is effectively their bed. To sleep they lie on their backs and rest the base of the head on it just above the neck. (According to Puccioni the Hawiya and Digil tribes require a headrest on account of their elaborate coiffeurs, but Lewis, ibid., regards this as "somewhat doubtful," and certainly very few Ogaden-Darod, Kenya Somalis or wa-Boni have elaborate coiffeurs.) When they wake up they have only to slip their long, slender hands through the headrest and they can carry it off on their wrist. (Single legged headrests, on the

other hand, require a string loop for easy carrying - (Plate 4). Herders sometimes stand on one leg and, resting the headrest on their shoulder, twist their head around so that they can rest their necks upon it, but it is not advisable to emulate this posture unless one is very supple or discomfort may well outbalance relief. The few other wooden items customarily carried by Somali nomads - the comb (shallo), spoon (fandhal), dishes for holding butter or ghee (calah, geleble) etc: Lewis, op. cit.; Grottanelli 1968 - are also almost invariably made from a single piece of wood and decorated with similar, very delicate designs. Inevitably there are acknowledged specialists in the manufacture of all these items, but any adult or adolescent male will try to make his own or an extra one for barter, whittling away with a knife or dagger while out herding or in the encampment in the evening.

The Somali nomad requires to be constantly on the alert. Dangers include trouble with his herds, raids from other tribes, or poisonous animals or insects. The only time he can really relax is when he is asleep: and even then he may require some protection from his enemies, as I shall be suggesting below.

Let us now return to the specific headrest with which we are concerned. First, its form. Prins (1965), writing of the Boni headrest's almost identical form (from the published photograph, it looks just a little squatter) says that, seen from the front (Plate 1 & 2), it resembles a cow's head: "the muzzle, the cheeks, the bovine front, the curved horns, they are all there" (loc. cit. 189). He therefore dubs it bucephalic even although, as he notes "now at least the Boni are no cattle-keepers". He is, of course, entitled to his view, but to the present writer the resemblance to a cow is much less persuasive and no single informant commented on it nor understood it, even when it was pointed out, as anything but a rather unexciting coincidence. The Hawiya and the Digil are, of course, camel-keepers who rather despise cattle-keepers, and most Somali cattle-keepers have rather an inferiority complex about the fact, which makes it even less

likely that a cow's head is the inspiration for headrests originating in Somalia; but even the Kenya Somalis, who are proud cattle-keepers, lacked enthusiasm for the bucephalic notion. They simply agreed with all other informants that the shape of the headrests was attractive and convenient for carrying. Let us next look at the headrest from the side. To Prins, from this angle, "beyond doubt (what is seen) is a circumcised phallus". Once again I find myself less than convinced, and once again no single informant was impressed by the notion, although one did rather half-heartedly suggest that the shape of the ornamentation on the outside of the shoulders (Plate 2) was reminiscent of a phallus. This motif, which appears unpatterned in the Boni headrest, Prins appears - perhaps rather surprisingly - to have missed. It seems impossible however that even this much smaller feature can have any real, long-standing phallic significance, since on some headrests (including single-legged ones and most older ones: Plate 5) it appears in a form in which not even the keenest anthropological imagination could detect anything phallic whatsoever.

So much for Prins' perhaps anyway rather light-hearted ideas of "a bucephalic object." Do we need to search for alternative symbols or associations? The necessity is not pressingly obvious. Somali nomads clearly have a remarkable eye for graceful lines as well as for symmetry, and also a strong feeling for lightness and portability: the form of the headrest combines all these attributes in remarkable harmony. Such forms may change slightly from time to time. It is not easy to say for how long the present design has been popular, but one headrest in the private collection of Mr. Peter Greensmith (to whom I am grateful for permission to study and photograph it), which was certainly collected before 1940 and almost certainly in the 1920s or early 1930s, has thinner legs, more or less triangular in section, with different though related designs carved on them and certain other minor structural and ornamental differences (Plate 5). If this was



the norm among Somali headrests at that time (and extreme deviation in individual models does not seem common), then the present design probably started as a cautious innovation by some specialist somewhere, was instantly recognised as an improvement (or at least an agreeable change: a new fashion for novelty's sake), caught on and was adopted everywhere. Conceivably the flood of headrests for sale in the 1970 - 75 period was the result of another such change, although grimmer possibilities such as prolonged drought or forcible settlement seem more likely explanations. If there is any underlying symbolism in the new model, it is not so likely to be the symbolism which 'sells' it to the public at large (unless of course unconsciously) but the combination of its increased utility and novelty or fashion value. This is what would happen with new styles of, say, beds or armchairs in most western societies, and there seems no reason to look for a different motive for evolution in Somali headrests unless such a motive is glaringly or well-known and widely accepted among Somalis themselves.

So far we have been discussing form. When we turn to ornament the case is very different. Decoration is by its very nature not subject to the same constraints as form and offers much more scope for individual or sectional diversity. It is sufficient to say that an item has such and such a shape because that is the most useful or convenient shape yet devised for it, but one cannot say that it is decorated in a certain style simply because to decorate it in any other style would be less beautiful. The sort of symbolism or sociological significance for which Prins was searching is much more likely to be seen in ornamentation.

There are two quite different aspects of the decoration of Somali headrests. On the outer side of the legs, on the outer side of the shoulders and in a narrow ring around the base, are a series of non-representational guilloche or interlacing designs, sometimes but not always symmetrical but

never quite the same from one headrest to another (indeed, they are so elaborate that it would be virtually impossible to reproduce them by hand on different pieces). In the centre of the upper side of the saddle there is sometimes another motif, again of guilloche type; and even more rarely there is either a less elaborate version of the same or else a simpler cross of some kind in the centre of the underside of the base. Only a minority of headrests have these extra decorations, but of those which have them, some 50% or more also have further decorations carved into the saddle, a much smaller proportion having them carved into the base as well. And these extra decorations are of quite a different category, being totally unsymmetrical and more or less representational, though occasionally somewhat stylised. The commonest thing represented is a scorpion (sometimes two), and occasionally the central motif in the saddle seems to have started as a guilloche motif and then been elaborated to become a stylised scorpion. Other items found include typically Somali daggers, spears (or perhaps arrows), stick-men carrying what appear to be daggers, and perhaps swords. One headrest has what is clearly a lorry, and others have stars and crescents. Kenya Somali headrests have, if anything, usually a snake, sometimes a scorpion as well, but often no central motif - an omission which is rare but not unknown in their Somalia counterparts (Plate 6). The piece upon which we are concentrating here has, on its saddle, besides the central guilloche motif with some strange hook-like things protruding from it, a scorpion, a sword or scimitar, and a star and crescent. Underneath its base, it has a raised central cross, another scorpion, the sword once more, and what appears to be a stylised tortoise (Plate 1).

Let us begin by considering the formal, guilloche-type designs. They cover the outer surface of each leg completely except for a small margin around the edge which is left free, but they may be framed in a band of lines or chevrons (Plate 7).

The shoulders are not entirely decorated, but have an oval ring at the top, within which is generally carved the guilloche design popularly known as the Yoruba Knot of Solomon, and below and adjoining it, an upright rectangle reaching down to the top of the leg containing a more elaborate version of the same thing. (It is the conjunction of these two shapes which gives an outline which may be described as phallic-without-implications.) Very occasionally, the rectangle is flanked by two more squares or circles containing the same motif yet again. The decorated band round the base is sometimes too narrow to hold an interlacing design and is just decorated with chevrons, oblique lines or some other simple device. But on our piece it shows a row of adjacent double diamond shapes from the front and back, alternating skilfully with a twisted rope design visible from each side (Plate 2). Of all these carvings only those on the shoulders are raised, but this seems to be invariable. All the others are incised.

The predominance of guilloche styles in this as in most examples of Somali carving is of interest. They are also prevalent in many similar contexts in Ethiopian carvings and illuminated manuscripts. And to the South they used to be fairly common in the Swahili world, but disappeared rather suddenly, but very completely, some time in the 17th century (Allen 1973, 2; 1976, 41). Since c. 1700 they are to be found, in the Swahili world, only in the one settlement of Siyu on Pate Island, which has clear evidence of Somali influence in other respects as well (Allen: 1978). Why should guilloche designs have disappeared in the Swahili settlements and remained so common in Somalia? One hypothesis is that they became associated, in Swahili minds, with Christianity, perhaps through some Ethiopian bibles brought by the Portuguese. Certainly Swahili art as a whole is much shier of anything redolent of Christianity than is Somali art. Crosses, although found in some pre-17th century architectural contexts (Kirkman 1964, 68, 30) are virtually unknown since that time, and it is

relatively rare to see three things in a row (as, for example, clasps on a silver talismancase) in a context where they might conceivably represent the Trinity. The Christian warriors of Portugal did not, of course, wreak the same bloody havoc on Somalis as they did on the coastal settlements, and in any case the ancestors of the Hawiya, Digil and Darod would not have been particularly near the coast in their time. Again, if the Christian associations of the guilloche designs stemmed only from some Ethiopic manuscripts, it is hardly likely that the fierce Somali Muslims, hereditary foes of the Ethiopians, would have designed to be alarmed by such an association.

Such a theory might explain why the Swahilis abandoned guilloche designs while their Somali neighbours did not: it does not explain how the Somalis came to adopt them in the first place. For this there are two hypotheses. One is again linked with religion. It has been suggested by Richard Wilding of the Department of Archaeology at the University of Addis Ababa (private to the author) that, in West Africa and the Maghrib, guilloche designs are associated with Islamic heterodoxy, notably with the Ibadhite sect who are a branch of the Kharijites. Ibadhites were certainly also present in East Africa at an early date - they are presumed, for instance, to have preceded the orthodox Sunnis in Kilwa, and there is much evidence of their presence further north at various times as well (Chittick 1973, 109; Kirkman 1964, 102; Allen 1974a, 66; Digby 1975, 51, 55). If Wilding's thesis regarding guilloche designs is correct, it might be extended to East Africa (and would not be by any means the first piece of evidence linking East African Islam with that of the Maghrib). The disappearance of guilloche motifs in Swahili towns could then be attributed to a religious ban, following the triumph of Sunni orthodoxy, a ban which never reached or influenced the scattered nomads of Somali Islam - or perhaps they were converted to orthodoxy at some earlier or later dates when sensitivity to guilloche patterns was not so great.

Another possibility is that guilloche designs came to East Africa not through the Kharijites but through the Zaidites, who are reported to have settled on the Benadir coast before any other Islamic group (Trimingham 1964, 3).

This theory explains the sudden disappearance of guilloche designs from Swahili art just as neatly as the 'Christian' theory; but it makes it necessary to assume they entered the repertoire of Ethiopian artists either from their Muslim neighbours or from some other, quite independent source. An alternative theory avoids this necessity but has its own snags. Guilloche designs are, after all, common all over the world, from the Kingdom of Judah or Ireland in the first millenium after Christ to the South Pacific and the New World. One source for them it has been suggested (but not necessarily, of course, the only one) is the practice, within any culture, of plaiting or braiding, interlacing twigs or thongs, and thus providing a pattern which artists would naturally try to emulate in woodcarving and other media. The Somalis and Ethiopians both do a great deal of leatherwork which would be an obvious source of inspiration to their respective carvers. The snag with this hypothesis is that the Swahilis do not practice leatherwork; and while they do plait palm fronds to make fences for their houses (and may indeed have been rather more cattle-minded in the past than is generally believed: Allen 1974b, 127), it is really much more plausible that guilloche designs should have spread from them to the Somalis, or vice versa, by diffusionist methods than that they should have evolved separately in each place.

I cannot say much more about guilloche patterns at this stage. The other type of ornamentation found upon our Somali headrests, the representational carvings which are sometimes incised on the saddle or under the base, present an entirely different sort of problem. Being representational, they are non-Islamic; and portraying as they do things like scorpions, they clearly have a local origin. The explanation provided for these carvings by several informants is unquestionably correct,

notwithstanding that it was indignantly denied by a few others (perhaps stricter or more self-conscious Muslims) who could, however, offer no alternative. The idea is, it seems, that by portraying a source of danger to the user of the headrest in pictorial form on the headrest itself, one can protect him from the reality. Scorpions are obviously a major threat to desert-dwelling nomads, hence their ubiquity. Poisonous snakes do not commonly bite nomads in Somalia, but are much more of a danger in the Tana River area of Kenya - hence they are found on the headrests of Kenya Somalis. (They are also a common form of decoration on leather belts made by Kenya Somalis; and it seems likely that their frequent depiction on, for instance, gourds of the Kamba people and in other ethnographic contexts in East Africa - not excluding rock paintings - may very plausibly be attributed to the same sort of superstition). Spears, knives and daggers are other dangers from which sleeping Somali nomads need to be protected - but not, perhaps, Somali women, who were not often harmed in minor tribal raid or skirmishes, so perhaps the headrests showing these items were all men's. The rifle is merely a modern expression of the same concept; and so, in my view, is the lorry, for it would not be uncommon for nomads in a thorny, scrub-land region to lie down to sleep in the middle of a cleared and seldom used road where occasional lorries would give them a rude awakening. Indeed it may not be too far-fetched to suggest that the lorry carved on the headrest in this collection (Plate 6) has the long bonnet characteristic of Russian-made lorries which are the commonest vehicles on some of the remoter roads of Somalia today.

Interesting if inconclusive support of this suggestion of the meaning of representational carvings comes from the Somali-influenced Swahili settlement of Siyu. There can be seen a door to a house carved all around its frame with little swords or daggers. Representational art of any sort is almost unknown among the Swahilis, even in the deviant art of Siyu, but this

door exists as an exception to the rule, and there is another in the author's possession which has <sup>02</sup> each side of the frame, slightly below waist height, what appears to be a carving of a bow and arrow, the arrow fitted to the bow but facing the ground. The meaning of these doors, if I am correct, is a desire to keep violent death, in one case by stabbing and in the other by shooting, out of the house. The age of the doors is interesting since we are unlikely to find many items of Somali carving more than fifty or seventy-five years old. These Siyu doors are certainly not less than one hundred and fifty, and possibly as much as four or five hundred years old, so the belief behind representational carvings on Somali headrests would appear to be an antique one in the area.

Let us return once more to our specimen headrests (Plate 1). Its saddle shows, beside the guilloche motif with attached hooks (to which we shall return), a scorpion, a star and crescent, and a sword. The meaning of the scorpion is clear. The star and crescent is presumably designed to furnish Islamic authority for what is basically a non-Islamic practice, of which strict Muslims could never approve. It is tempting to suggest that the owner of the headrest feared death by sword as much as by a scorpion-bite, but I am not sure that this is in fact the correct interpretation. All Somali swords known to me are straight with a simple hilt (although some Ethiopian ones are curved). The sword portrayed here, and again on the bottom of the piece, is strikingly reminiscent of the Sword of the Prophet Muhammad as it appears on countless cheaply-printed talismans and other Islamic writings which are available in little bookshops in any Islamic town. Perhaps it is, like the star and crescent, an attempt to Islamise the piece. Or perhaps it is intentionally ambivalent, a measure of protection against death by a sword (any sword) and at the same time a representation of the Prophet's Sword, with all the tutelary powers against any sort of danger which might reasonably be attributed to it.

Under the base we have the raised cross - interesting, I submit, mostly because it indicates total ignorance of, or oblivion with regard to, Christian symbolism - and once again the scorpion, sword and star and crescent. But what about the tortoise? Do Somalis fear tortoises as a source of possible death? Here, it must be confessed, no convincing information was forthcoming from any source. One not very convincing informer affirmed that Somali men believed that, if a tortoise walked over them while they slept (which is I suppose not impossible in the desert) they would become impotent. If this is true, then it is evidence that this headrest at least belonged to a man (unless, of course, tortoise-crossed women are held to become sterile: but here my informant's volubility faltered). Another possibility is that the creature is not a tortoise. Perhaps it merely represents all reptiles and four-legged creatures which might harm a sleeper. This could well be the case. Only further research will provide an answer.

Returning now to the central motif on the top of the saddle: One informant proposed, very hesitantly, that it was actually a form of shorthand for a prayer. It meant, he declared, something like "God defend me", and the scorpions and other items beside it extended its meaning by specifying what God was to defend the sleeper from. This suggestion fits well with our other conclusions, but I was unable to find any confirmation for it from other sources. If it is true, however, it is extremely interesting for another reason, as an example of a very primitive form of writing. The Somali language, it should be remembered, was not written until very recently, and official orthography having been adopted only after the military coup of 1969. It is not inherently improbable that, in the context of the manufacture of headrests, a formula to express in carving what in other cultures would be expressed by the written word, should have evolved and gained wide currency. If a guilloche motif of some sort means "God protect", then this would explain why



guilloche designs continued to be on the legs and shoulders of headrests as well (quite independently of the problem of the origins of that design). It might also explain why Boni headrests are decorated with totally different types of designs: as non-Muslims they would not, or perhaps dare not, use a symbol specifically associated with Allah.

As a matter of fact, and perhaps significantly, there is some writing on one of the Lamu Museum's Boni headrests (Plate 8). Not on the saddle, but on the outside of one leg, beside a roughly-drawn rifle, are the words (written in Roman script and in what appears to be the local Bajun dialect of Kiswahili rather than the Boni language) MAMA CHA KUPA, meaning, presumably "Mother (or the woman) will give." The meaning is not immediately clear, although it seems unlikely to be a prayer - at least in the sense that, it is suggested, the Somali headrests may be inscribed with a prayer. On the other leg are the enigmatic words ENI ENNI which have so far not been decyphered. Nevertheless it is significant that a headrest is seen, in this nearby culture, as an appropriate place to write anything at all.

We can best conclude by summarising what this article has proposed, and now firmly, about the interpretation of Somali headrests like the one chosen for special consideration. There remains an element of doubt about their provenance, but it seems likely that they are the work of the Ogaden-Darod Somalis as well as of the Hawiya and Digil. They are certainly very similar to, but not quite identical with, those of the Kenya Somalis and of the wa-Boni. Prins' hypotheses about the form of Boni headrests are not borne out by this study of Somali ones. The formal guilloche designs on the latter may have historico-religious significance in view of the use (or absence) of the same motifs among the Somalis' neighbours, but there is no particularly solid evidence on this matter as yet. They may have originated locally (perhaps inspired by leatherwork) or may have reached the area by diffusion - on this topic it may never be possible



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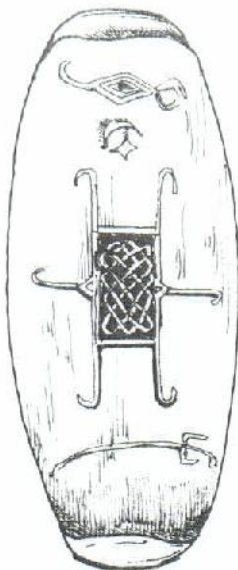


PLATE 1

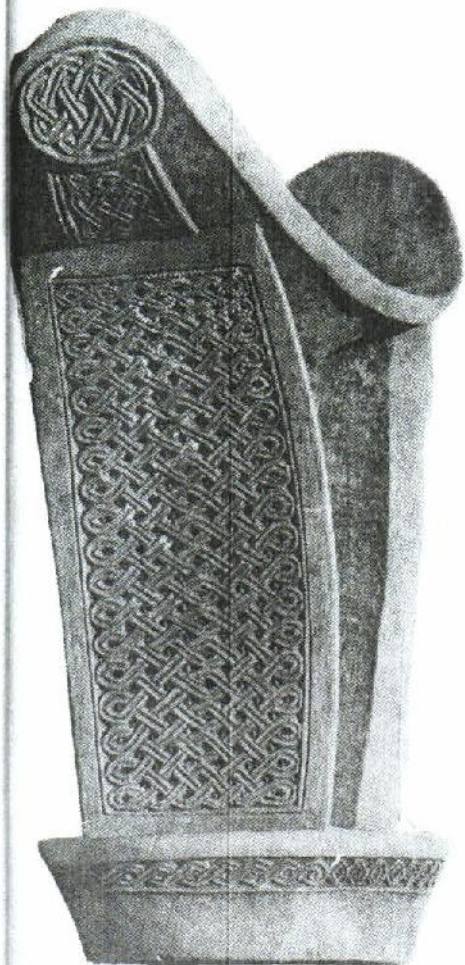


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PLATE 2





( $\frac{1}{2}$  Size)

PLATE 3



PLATE 4

( $\frac{1}{3}$  Size)

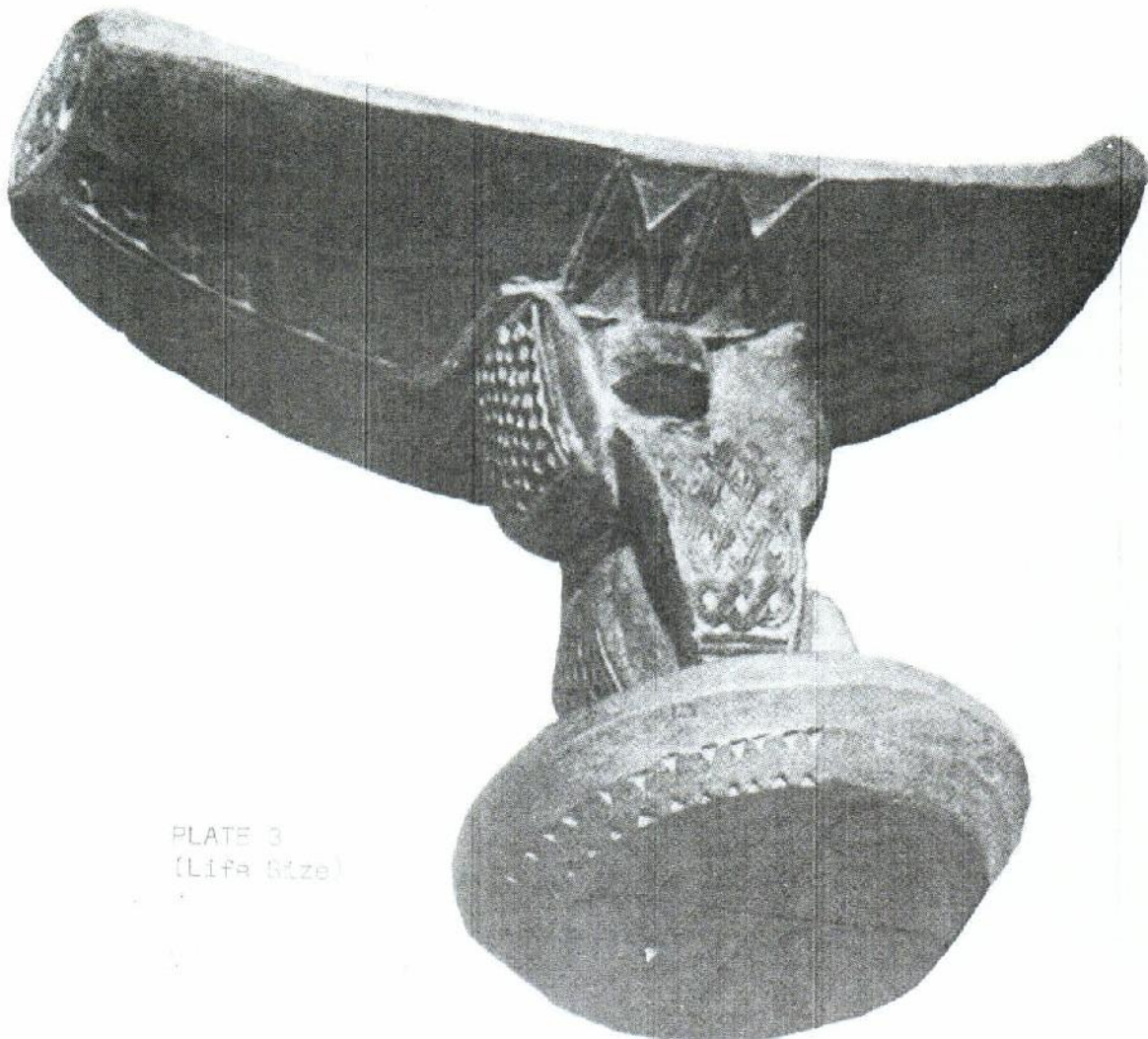


PLATE 3  
(Life Size)



PLATE 5





to reach a definite answer either way. The representational designs, on the other hand, are certainly of local and independent origin, and are important as reflecting a pre- or anyway non-Islamic element in Somali belief-systems. And finally the central, guilloche-type designs on the saddles may- but only may - represent an elemental form of script ( in which case the guilloche designs elsewhere gather an added dimension of meaning too.) It may just be added that, while the answers to most of the unsolved problems in this article lie in further research in Somalia itself, an answer to this last problem may conceivably be found elsewhere. The central motifs in some saddles (Diagram 6) bear a striking resemblance to designs embroidered on the robes of Muslim Africans in the ecologically comparable Sahelian zone of West Africa. If it could be shown that these West African designs have, or used to have, any significance comparable to the "God protect me" meaning proposed for their Somali headrests counterparts, then the idea that the Somali ones amounted to a primitive form of writing might be regarded as proved (and there would be other significant conclusions to be drawn by diffusionists as well). A beginning has perhaps been made, but much remains to be done.