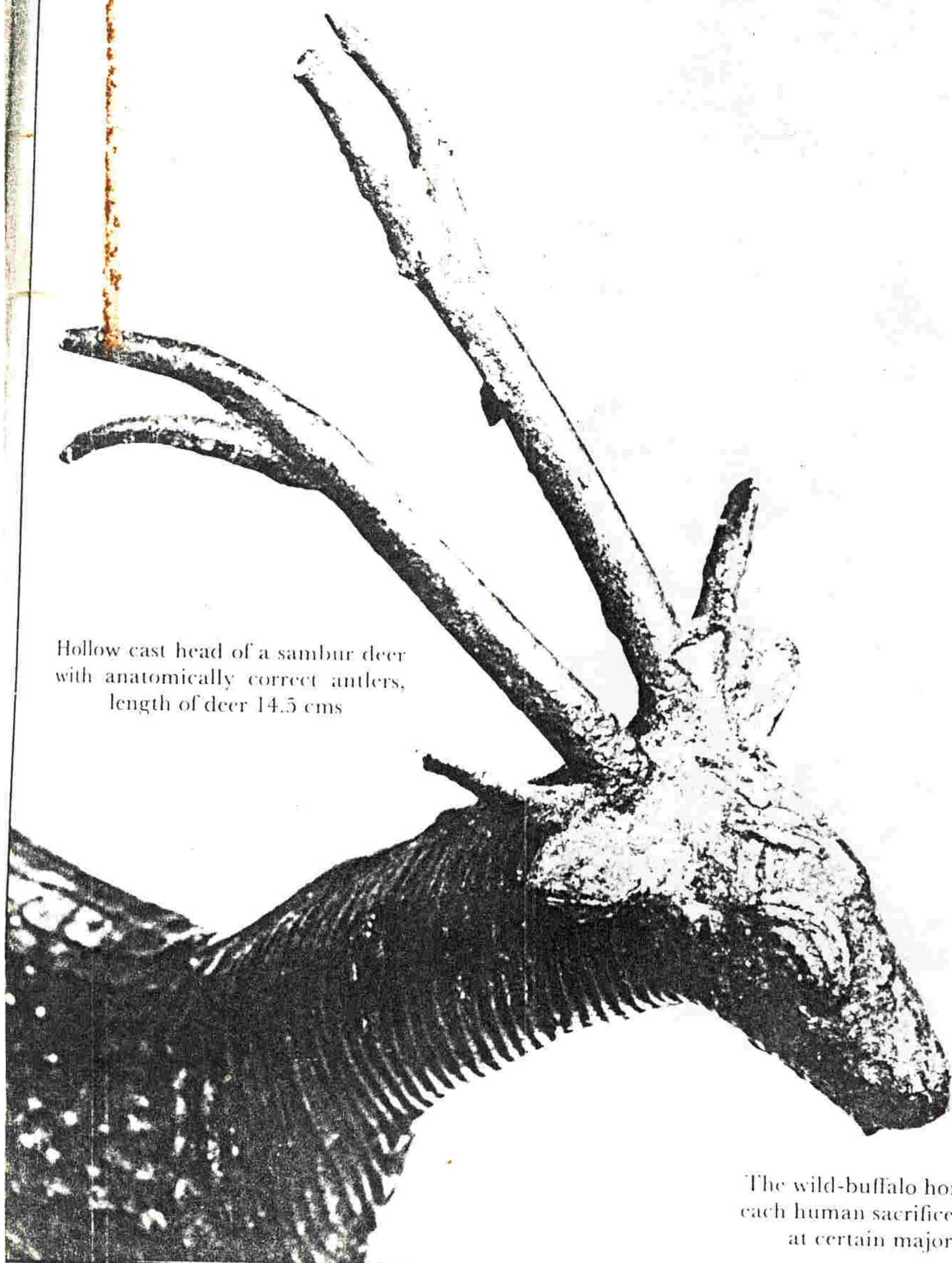


KOND BRONZES

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Hollow cast head of a sambar deer
with anatomically correct antlers,
length of deer 14.5 cms



Solid cast bronze dish which received
the blood of human victims until 1845
when animals were substituted



The wild-buffalo horn blown at
each human sacrifice still sounds
at certain major rituals



Shown right is the typical scenery in the Kond hill tracts where slash-and-burn agriculture is practiced on the lower slopes and the villages are hidden in the valleys. The girl, left, dressed for a festival and holding her nephew, is wearing the coronet and necklace of old silver rupees and the stiff silver necklers shown on the bronze female figures

THE FIRST reference to Kond bronzes is a brief word in the earliest report on Kond human sacrifice. That was in 1837 when the existence of the Konds had not long been discovered by Europeans. But in considering the cultural significance of these bronzes we need first to look briefly at their background.

"Our forefathers have been here since long, long ago", say the Konds, using the rising inflection that indicates extreme distance. They refer to that part of the Eastern Ghats whose hills drop precipitously in the north and north-west to the Mahanadi and its tributary the River Tel, and in the east to the coastal plains of Orissa. To the south-west the wild jungled hills merge into Saora and other tribal areas.

Little is known of the early history of the Konds whose population now numbers above three-quarters of a million. Some at least are probably a remnant of the aboriginal Dravidians who were driven from the richer coastal plains by the Aryan advance. These may have been joined by other tribal groups who took on the Dravidian Kui language and its associated beliefs. Loyal to their lineage group heads, strongly independent and ready fighters in raids on neighbouring villages, they preserved their culture and language down the ages despite nominal jurisdiction by Hindu Oriya feudal overlords.

Thus they remained unknown to the Western world until in 1835 the East India Company's troops climbed the Ghats in pursuit of the errant Raja of Goomsur who had fled from the plains. It was then that the British made what the ethnologist, E. T. Dalton (*Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, 1872), later described as: "the astounding discovery...that we include among our fellow-subjects a whole people who practised human sacrifice and female infanticide on a scale and with cruelty which had never been surpassed by the most savage of nations". These human victims were con-

stantly offered to the Earth Goddess to satisfy her thirst for human blood. Believing that animal blood was insufficient, the Konds, unlike other tribes of Middle India, declared: "Without the shedding of human blood on the ground there is no fertility". So a regular supply of human victims was bought or kidnapped by the Pans (Doms), subservient trader-artisans who act as middlemen for the Konds. These Pans live in small groups attached to Kond villages, in mutual interdependence with their hosts whose language and ritual they adopted in times unknown.

Over two-thirds of the Kond clans believed in the necessity for human sacrifice but the remaining one-third professed themselves shocked by it—though meanwhile practising female infanticide. The Konds explained this split in their beliefs mythologically. All agreed that Bura, the Supreme Being, created the Earth Goddess as his consort then found her wanting in wisely attentions; also that she tried to stop his creative activity but that he eventually created man. The time was a paradise of good relations in the created world except for her increasing jealousy which ultimately led to a fierce conflict for supremacy between the two. At this point all save the clans of the south-east maintain that the Earth Goddess was triumphant, though allowing Bura to continue as Creator in second place. She taught man the arts of hunting, war and agriculture on condition that she received their worship in the form of human sacrifice, her proper food. The minority clans who affirmed Bura as conqueror maintained that he sanctioned female infanticide for them by saying (*Memoirs of Service in India*, 1865): "From making one female being (the Earth Goddess) look what I and the whole world have suffered! You are at liberty to rear only as many women as you can manage!"

In 1855 the Konds were persuaded that

the Earth Goddess would accept buffalo substitutes. It was exactly a century later that some of their descendants in the eastern and central parts of the hills unexpectedly brought out from secret recesses their tribal bronzes, some of which are illustrated here. Their former gods were no longer able to meet their needs, they said, so they had decided to stop worshipping them and "learn about the Christians' God"; they had shown little interest during the previous 40 years of the predominantly Pan Church's presence in the region.

The existence of these bronzes was unknown previously. Research now shows that E. Thurston mentioned a collection in the Madras Museum in 1892, some of which may possibly be included in those brought to the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1911. Several museums in England also have very few. A considerable number, however, were handed to missionaries by Kond elders in the mid-nineteen fifties. The only suggestion regarding their use had come from Thurston (*The Journal of Indian Art*, 1891) who stated that the Madras collection was catalogued as Kond wedding gifts in the Calcutta Exhibition in 1883 and in the Ganjam Manual (*Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, 1909) as "brass playthings, such as horses, etc. for the bridegroom."

From study of the fragmentary documentation available I suggest rather that these bronzes fall roughly into four categories: first, those used formerly in human sacrifice by the large majority who acknowledged the Earth Goddess' supremacy; secondly, lineage-group emblems; thirdly, those included in brides' dowries; and fourthly, artifacts for various purposes. All are classed by the Konds today as *dorbo*, bronze articles or valuables, and some are always referred to as *pradi dorbo*, ancient bronze valuables.

Of the many animal and reptile emblems used in human sacrifice brought out by the

Kinder mord

Konds, most of the hollow-cast larger ones were quite dissimilar even when representing the same animal, but small stylised "double-peacocks" appeared repeatedly and were as like each other as hand-modelling would allow. Similarly there were well over a dozen solid-cast bulls, mostly very small. Light was shed on the prevalence of these peacocks and bulls by two early texts. The first is the very earliest report on the *Meriah* or human sacrifice compiled by the Hon. Mr Stevenson, *Madras Journal of Literature and Science*, 1837), who was Commissioner for the Goomsur (east-central) area in 1836. After a month of drumming, feasting and drinking, he said, the day prior to the sacrifice the garlanded deity is made to sit tied to the sacrificial stake "on the top of which is an effigy of bird, and at the foot of which the brass effigy of the same bird is buried". This stake beside the village's central shrine which "represented by three stones and near to which the brass effigy of a bird, before alluded intended to represent a peacock, is always buried". The other reference is by Colonel Meadows Taylor (*The People of India*) in 1875 who points out that in Boad State (northern) the Earth Goddess was worshipped in the form of a bull and in Goomsur a peacock, though he does not mention brass effigies. Thus it would be necessary for every sacrificing village, that is, every major age group, to possess in Goomsur a bronze peacock and in Boad a bronze bull. Also in the human sacrifice category is only example I have seen of a dish on which from which the Earth Goddess might receive the offerings of human blood, an object which was presented by the lineage group whose kin-emblem is a deer.

Like many people who are not only hunters and gatherers but agriculturalists living in well-settled communities, in addition to a complexity of gods and spirits, the ancestors hold an important place in Kond religious system. Far more than earlier realised, their lineage groups have been marked by animal or reptile emblems even by inanimate objects. Probably some ritual happening long ago served to connect the animal or object with that kin-group so led the two to form a mythological unit. Their respective clans then treated with reverence and observed taboos on touching or touching them and also at some time presumably had *cire perdue* (lost-wax) cast made.

In a dark corner of the main room in a Kond home is "the ancestors' place" where the head of the family makes libation offering to the ancestors alone, calling by name as far back as he is able and collectively. He never invites other gods to his place as is the Kond habit at most other tribal spots and it is here that the bronze lineage emblems are kept. The Konds are characteristically reticent about the whole subject, even to each other, and this must be the reason why these first two sets of bronzes were mentioned only in the very first British report and not apparently again

until the remarkable rejection of them by certain Kond groups in 1955.

Perhaps the Konds were taken unawares by the pressing curiosity of the white strangers, a curiosity their fellow-clans never dreamed of showing on this subject. Thus Stevenson was able to state in 1836: "They make in brass figures of elephants, peacocks, dolls (i.e. humans), fishes, these and the like, and keep them in their houses", making special offerings to them in times of affliction or sickness in the household or in connection with a recent ancestor's death. He adds that they assemble the ancestors (here denoting household images or gods) at the ritual naming of a child when the diviner seeks to learn which ancestor's name is to be given.

Konds of the central area seem to take their kin emblems from wildlife and natural objects whereas some clans on the periphery include artifacts. In the article "Totemism Among The Khonds", read to the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1904, J. E. Friend-Pereira gives as examples for the central Konds: the frog, snake, button quail, lesser florican, crow pheasant, *mahua* (tree from which liquor is distilled) and grass. To these may be added: spotted deer, nilgai, antelope, leopard, black panther, bear, chameleon, crab, owl, jungle cock, tortoise and doubtless more. Thus, Friend-Pereira maintains, in Kond religious observance each "totem ranks as the spirit of the ancestor-founder of the stock, who is also their chief tutelary deity, and secondly, the totem class is considered as a manifestation of the chief tutelary deity". At the same time it acted as a guide to kinship and descent for this pre-literate people in their observance of the rules of clan exogamy; for a man might not marry within his own totem-stock nor even with a different totem-stock which was in alliance with his own (in the days of clan warfare), only from potential enemy stocks.

A third use for the bronzes was as part of a bride's dowry. Thurston (quoting the Ganjam Manual) describes a Kond wedding in which the bride is carried shoulder high to the bridegroom's home. "Music is played and in the rear are carried brass playthings such as horses, etc. for the bridegroom", along of course with other articles of her dowry such as small *cire perdue* pots and ladle, and plain-style brass vessels, ornaments, and as presents for the groom, bow and arrows, traditional feathered headdress and red cloth. The *Madras Mail* in 1894 added that as soon as the bride enters the groom's house "She has enormous bracelets, or rather handcuffs of brass, each weighing 20 to 30 pounds, attached to each wrist". For three days the unfortunate girl had to sit wearing these to prevent her running back home. After that she was presumed to be reconciled. "These bangles" said the *Mail*, "are made on the hills and are curiously carved in fluted and zig-zag lines and kept as heirlooms in the family to be used at the next marriage in the house."

The bangles are in fact bronze *pradi dorbo*, ancient valuables. Today they form a sym-

bolic part of the dowry rather than an unhappy reception for the bride. Their name, *godu*, means snapping, breaking off, as the bride is "snapped off" from dependence on her former kin and becomes a member of the husband's kin-group. Heavy iron bead necklaces performed the same function.

All these bronze articles may form part of the dowry among richer Konds today. Elephants as well as horses are given, often with a rider shouldering either a *kukri* or a gun. These perhaps date from the Goomsur Wars onwards (post-1835) when the British officers' use of draught elephants surprised the Konds, familiar only with the ferociously destructive wild variety. Horses would be only slightly more familiar where there was contact with contiguous peoples. Musician figures such as the drummer are sometimes included in these dowries. Whether there is any exchange of animal emblems of a totemic nature at the coming together of two clans in marriage is not entirely clear, though Thurston accepts this without query.

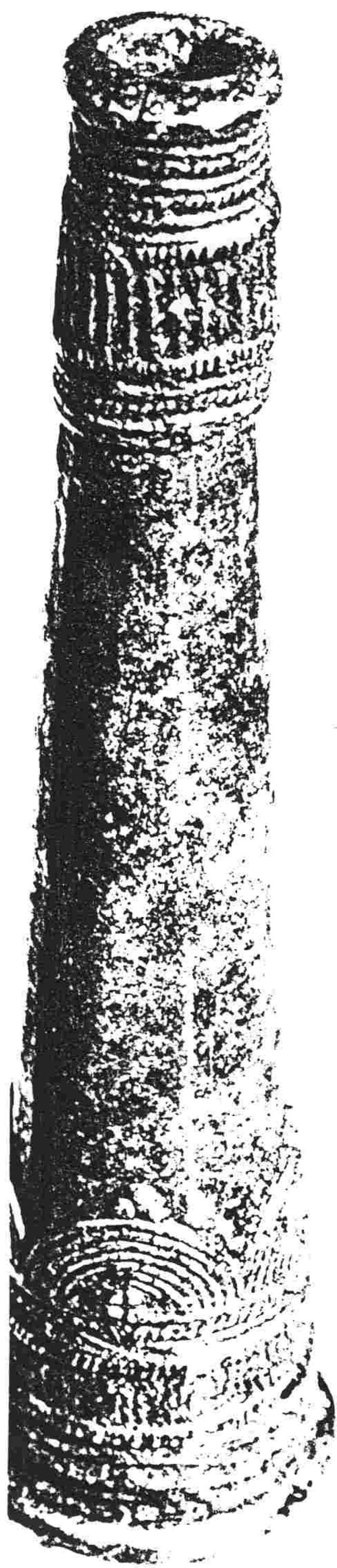
There is a certain element of "foreignness" in some of this group of bronzes. The horses and elephants with riders are often more finely finished and decorated than are the traditional and sacrificial objects and some lineage emblems. Some are in fact closer to the *cire perdue* techniques of North Orissa, Bihar and West Bengal. But this does not apply to the traditionally tattooed mothers with their babies, symbolising the hoped-for fertility of every Kond marriage and reminding the groom's clan that the bride's kin are giving away a very valuable asset in the person of the bride.

Dr Mohan K. Gautam of the Rijksmuseum Voor Folkloriekunde in Leiden suggests that all gifts from the bride's father to the groom would symbolise aspects of the groom's new role (i.e. as husband, protector, prospective father and mature member of his group). Thus, to describe these bronzes as playthings for the bridegroom does not ring true to Kond values even in the days when he might be only twelve or thirteen years old.

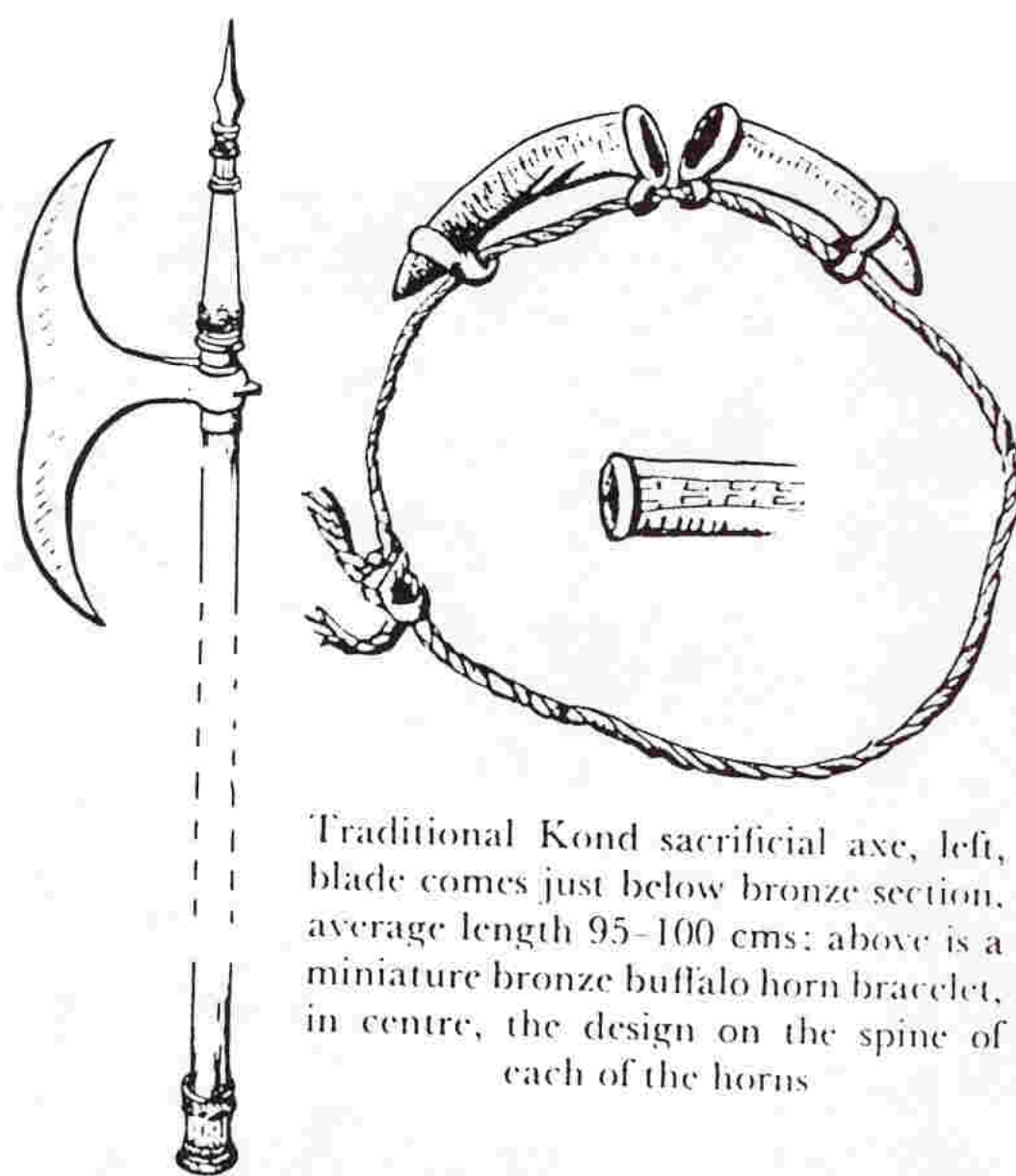
The fourth, or miscellaneous, group of bronzes includes such things as the upper shaft and handle of the ritual axe and the pair of miniature wild-buffalo horns on the



A typical Kond woman of the eastern region today showing the tattooing seen on many of the bronze female figures



w cast upper shaft of the Kond
cial axe, decorated with wax
throughout the Kond hills to a
nilar pattern, length 9.75 cms



Traditional Kond sacrificial axe, left,
blade comes just below bronze section,
average length 95-100 cms; above is a
miniature bronze buffalo horn bracelet,
in centre, the design on the spine of
each of the horns

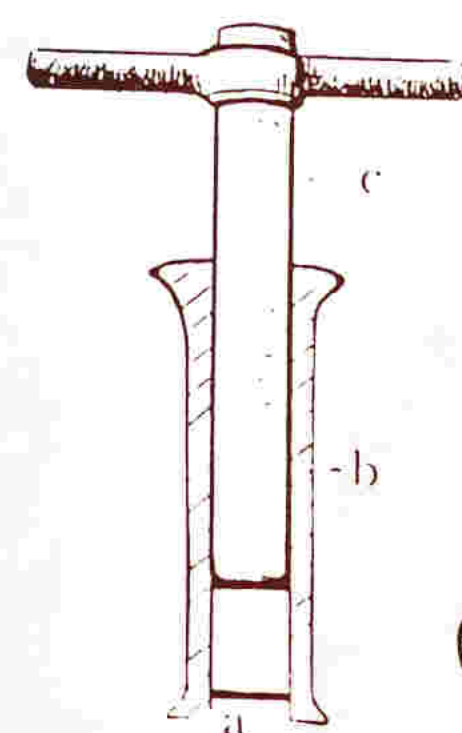
charm-bracelet illustrated here. There are also occasional little dish-lamps, the bell-mouths of certain primitive oboes and the long thin "antlers" fastened to the waist-drum for the wedding dance. These last three result from contacts outside traditional Kond communities and the two musical instruments are played by hired Pan musicians found also among neighbouring peoples.

Cire perdue or lost-wax metal casting is an art of the ancient world that is still practised in a number of Indian states today, including Orissa. For traditional Konds, however, the only honourable occupations were hunting, warfare and cultivating; so to supply them with the bronze objects of religious and social significance to which they must have become accustomed centuries ago, two or three small groups of metalsmiths settled beside Kond and Pan villages in the east and north-central area. They probably came from Belugunta in the Ganjam district of Orissa's plains. Belugunta has long been locally famous for its metalsmiths and has a market to which Pan traders from the Kond hills go annually to buy buffaloes, trekking back with them for Kond sacrifices or paddy cultivation.

These immigrant metal workers used both methods of lost-wax manufacture: solid casting for smaller figures, and the less expensive hollow casting for larger. In solid casting (see the bulls, standing figure and drummer) the required object is carefully modelled in beeswax made pliable with resin from the *Sal* tree (*Shorea robusta*) then a solid wax draining "tube" is put at its base and the whole is gently besmeared with soft clay, leaving the tube protruding. When dry the clay takes the shape of the wax model. Other layers of clay are plastered over the whole and it is finally fired at great heat in a simple outdoor hearth-furnace with the aid of goat-skin bellows. The wax melts, drains out of the now-melted channel (thus the name "lost wax") and molten bronze is poured into the channel to fill the exact contours of the model. When cool, the clay is removed and the bronze object remains. Elsewhere, rough areas are filed

and polished away but not so on the Kond bronzes.

In Orissa the hollow casting method is most widely practised. A simplified clay and sand core is modelled for the body, neck and head of the animal; this is from 1/16th to 1/8th smaller than the desired article. The method in other parts of India and East Asia is then to place thin wax sheets over the clay, encircling body, neck and head and joining the sheets together very carefully. Wax legs, horns, ears, tail, etc. are then hand rolled and pressed into place. The whole is covered by layers of clay with an exit-cum-entrance channel as before. The molten bronze flows into the thin space left by the melted wax between the inner core and outer clay. Sometimes a vent is also left for expanding gasses to escape from the clay core. In contrast, the metal workers of the Kond Hills, like those of Belugunta, have long practised a lattice-work variation of the hollow casting method, seen in the majority of Kond animal figures. Thurston (see above) first described this Belugunta method in 1891. After shaping the clay core as usual, instead of placing wax sheets over it, "thin wax threads are first made and arranged over the core so as to give a network, or placed in parallel lines or diagonally as the form of the figure or the fancy dictates."



Wax-wire press, showing a
a perforated bronze disc,
b hollow bamboo tube, and
c bamboo rod with handle

The horns, legs, tail etc. are modelled in the usual way but wax thread is added for eyes, leopard spots, cocks' combs, spiral designs and pure decoration. The warmed wax threads must be used speedily before they become brittle.

Some of the bronzes here illustrated have been ritually "purified" with cow dung and covered with sacrificial blood, which obscures the sharpness of detail. Though some are of recent date, at least those connected with human sacrifice are obviously older. An attempt was made at thermoluminescence dating but they proved unsuitable for measurement owing to the unusually fine-grained clay in the cores. This was probably due to the addition of fine termite-hill soil and cow dung to ordinary clay from the paddy-fields. Through picking up oxygen from the air this clay gave false signals and impeded the separation of oxygen of archaeological interest from the in-take oxygen. The bronze itself is of normal composition with a little zinc, except for the twin-headed cobra which is 97 per cent tin and 3 per cent antimony, with no arsenic.