



Going into Darkness: Fantastic Coffins from Africa

Thierry Secretan

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A giant wooden sardine is carried above the heads of a jostling throng. Realistically carved and highly painted, it is both symbolic and functional, for this is the coffin of the chief sardine fisherman of Teshi. Funerary art has many expressions, but seldom as surprising as among the Ga, the dominant people of the Ghanaian capital Accra and its region. Here, a remarkable contemporary folk art of coffin-building has developed, combining remembrance, respect, humour and celebration. The coffin may take almost any form - onion, cow, fishing boat, car, eagle - reflecting the occupation, status or particular attribute of the deceased. This is a record of a variety of these sculptures. It shows the making of the coffins, the funeral rites, the burial, and explains the history and background of the subject. The main protagonists are introduced: the artist-craftsmen, the mourners, and the central characters whose souls are being sent off in style.

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