



fig. 4
Benin. London, British Museum

priestesses of Ogun wear iron anklets because they are devotees and agents of the god of metal. If indeed the brass rings were necklets they can have been meant for only one purpose: to signify that the wearer was either a captive or slave, most probably a slave of the king. Neck rings would thus have served to identify the status and owner of a particular person: he is a palace slave. The motif of predatory vultures graphically emphasizes this because it depicts the king's power over human life, while the consistent arrangement of the figures asserts the hierarchic quality of the Benin court. The rings appear to have been designed in such a way as to be best viewed from a particular vantage point, that is, about eye or neck level. Approximately the same diameter as an *odigba* (the coral-beaded collar worn by the Oba and his chiefs on ceremonial occasions), such necklets would probably have been as unwieldy. That the rings, if worn round the neck, must have been extremely uncomfortable and awkward would have been of little moment however. In an hierarchical society hedged by lengthy rituals and heavy costumes, physical discomfort is a privilege of all ranks. To prevent palace slaves from escaping (assuming they were at some liberty to move about), the rings would have been «cooked» (i.e., ritually processed) with herbal medicine and the appropriate incantations. Slaves thus magically arrested were immobile because they feared the supernatural consequences of escape. When a slave was sacrificed for a deity, his neck ring could have been kept on that god's shrine as a memento. After serving «hot» gods such as Ogun (god of metal) and Ogiuwu (god of death), or the deities Okhuaihe and Ovia, this was absolutely crucial. For these spirits it is wise, even imperative, to leave everything connected with the victim on the shrine, including the rope he was tied with (or tethered in the case of animals), to demonstrate that everything belonging to the victim remained with it. Since nearly every shrine has a small Ogun altar attached to it regardless of whom or what it commemorates (Ogun is the instrument