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African Art and Rituals of Divination

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

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Alisa LaGamma

with an essay by John Pemberton III

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK

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Director's Foreword

We are at the turn of a new century and, more momentously, a new millennium—events that traditionally inspire reviewing the past and contemplating the future. It is therefore appropriate that this encyclopedic museum consider the relationship of art to human quests for answers to universal dilemmas. The exhibition "Art and Oracle" illustrates how the visual arts are rooted in our most basic human impulses and aspirations. It does so by examining how the art of diverse peoples of Africa relates to their attempts to gain insight into their personal circumstances and improve their lives. The word "oracle" evokes a tradition that goes back beyond that of the oracle of Apollo at Delphi. Since ancient times, oracles have combined wisdom with close observation of the world as well as cultural traditions handed down over generations. "Art and Oracle" explores the way aesthetic sensibilities have been engaged in furthering the understanding of forces that influence the human condition. The works presented in this exhibition were designed to connect people throughout sub-Saharan Africa to the worlds of their gods, ancestors, and spirits, as concrete expressions of their fundamental belief systems. By examining these, "Art and Oracle" sheds light on the exhilarating diversity of different creative solutions across a range of cultures.

The ideas that inform and inspire the works of African art under consideration in this exhibition share an affinity with practices in worlds as seemingly disparate as those of ancient Greece, Etruria, China, Tibet, and India. In these cultures, divination and other systems devised to help one understand and control one's fate have inspired individuals and entire societies, and at times have even changed history. Over the centuries, the prediction of important events and the systems of thought and belief drawn upon by a society's visionaries have provided creative artists with important subject matter. Often, their efforts have resulted in visually arresting images that transcend their own mundane experience. Works included in the exhibition couple the art of the diviner with the skill of the sculptor to address many problems. Among them is the desire to gaze into the future in order to anticipate developments, to provide counsel and direction, to identify perpetrators of evil, to cure, and to protect. These various functions are expressed and embodied in creations that are often composed of elemental matter invested with special properties capable of invoking the omniscience of otherworldly beings. These present a distinctive contrast to a Western tradition that has historically striven to project an idealized and illusionistically rendered world of the living to invoke the divine. This category of art widens our own expectations of what art can be and the role it can play in enhancing human experience.

Works featured span the development of the Metropolitan Museum's African collection, from the bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller to that of Klaus G. Perls and other gifts to the collection. The exhibition also benefits from the generosity of loans from important African art collections in New York City and nearby areas and is the first special exhibition of African art at the Metropolitan that draws upon a range of European lenders, both institutional and private.

In this publication, Alisa LaGamma, Assistant Curator in the Metropolitan's Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, provides an overview of the creative currents that bring together aesthetics and local traditions in forms as diverse as a formidable *nkisi nkondi* figure riven with nails, from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and a serene and elegant pair of male and female figures commissioned by a Baule diviner. John Pemberton III, professor emeritus at Amherst College and scholar of African religions, has contributed an essay that provides an essential foundation for understanding the spiritual and religious ideals that inform these works of great aesthetic power. In the main body of this catalogue, Dr. LaGamma considers fifty of the most representative works and situates them both within their distinctive world views and as a point of cross-cultural comparison.

The Museum extends its sincere thanks to the William Randolph Hearst Foundation for its support of the exhibition. We are also extremely grateful to The Ford Foundation for its generous assistance toward the realization of the exhibition Web site and this catalogue.

A spirit of collegial collaboration across institutions has brought together the efforts and talents of the staffs of the Metropolitan Museum and the Museum Rietberg in Zurich. I would like to express my appreciation to all those at the Rietberg involved in the planning of this endeavor and in facilitating the European loans to the exhibition. Although "Art and Oracle" differs significantly in its presentation here in New York, it has benefited from the research and ideas that developed through a sustained dialogue between curators at both institutions. And to the organizer and author of the catalogue, Alisa LaGamma, I extend the Metropolitan's particular appreciation in this effort to create a bridge between the Metropolitan's diverse audiences and African art.

Philippe de Montebello
Director and Chief Executive Officer
The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Introduction

Alisa LaGamma

Throughout history, peoples everywhere have sought the intervention of divine powers to understand their fate. The exhibition "Art and Oracle" presents African artifacts created to communicate with ancestors, spirits, and gods in order to obtain insight into human quandaries. The term "divination" describes efforts to foretell future events or to discover hidden knowledge by supernatural means. In Africa, the legacy of such efforts is evident in works that display an especially diverse range of artistic expression. This exhibition assembles a selection of these from some fifty different African cultures. Their design usually reflects a collaborative endeavor, joining the skill and creative talent of artists with the expertise of ritual specialists. In some instances, their combined efforts gave form to divination instruments used to tap into otherwise inaccessible knowledge; in others, they led to the creation of works prescribed to benefit the diviner's clients and enhance their quality of life. The results range from utilitarian implements to the masterpieces presented here, artifacts that reflect the highest level of execution and ingenuity. "Art and Oracle" focuses on some of the most imaginative works of African art inspired by the human quest to reach beyond the limitations of ordinary experience.

The aesthetic qualities of the works in this exhibition represent an essential dimension of their original role as instruments designed to further divinatory quests. Most often they acted as bridges between the living and an ancestral spiritual realm. Their effectiveness in achieving this was invariably enhanced by their compelling visual appeal, for an artifact's aesthetic merits were seen as a measure of its potency and the diviner's professional standing. Such qualities also inspired the confidence of clients. Thus, a diviner would often commission works of surpassing beauty to convey his or her great status, power, and competence. Similarly, the beauty of works commissioned by individuals on the advice of diviners, ranging from personal amulets to sculptures placed on altars, appears to have been a factor in their efficacy. Frequently, a diviner or suppliant sought recourse to spiritual entities through dreams or divination rites to communicate the most appropriate design elements to the artist. Diviners or suppliants who gained the services of the most accomplished artists available would acquire an invaluable asset: a work eloquently embodying criteria that made it an especially effective vehicle.

"Art and Oracle" considers the broader complex of ideas, religious beliefs, and ritual practices affecting the creation of divination instruments and the immediate concerns they address. In the essay that follows, Professor John Pemberton III, scholar of African religions, explores five regional traditions and their divination practices. He has selected the Azande, Luba and Songye, Yaka, Yoruba, and Malagasy models of divination as representing some of the most widespread or distinctive forms of divination in African cultures and as points of departure for examining the comparative religious and social structures to which they relate. He considers the nature of the concerns and problems that are analyzed through divination, from chronic ailments to marital infidelity, and the specific divination techniques that have been developed to provide people with insight into their current dilemmas and give them direction for future action.

This catalogue presents fifty of the most representative works from twenty-eight African cultures—including those discussed in Pemberton's essay—as illustrative of various divination systems. In extensive commentaries, each of these is examined from its distinct cultural perspective. As a series, they provide insight into the commonalities and contrasts among the different divination methods and the cultures in which they developed. Whatever their relationship to the divination process, all of them appear to have been designed to awaken the senses and stimulate perception.

The works featured in the first eleven catalogue entries are figurative sculptures that served as mediums through which a spirit world might be addressed and a divinity's omniscience could be transmitted. Among these can be found the sublime delicacy, elegance, and civilized cultivation expressed through the male and female figures owned by a Baule diviner; the powerfully intimidating physical presence and moral authority of a towering Yombe *nkisi nkondi* figure; and the indeterminate human silhouette of a shrouded *kafigeledjo* figure once used in inquiries by Senufo elders. Irrespective of their culture of origin, these creations embody abstract spiritual forces through representations that served as transitory sites for these ephemeral entities to communicate otherworldly insights to the living. This is the primary motivation underlying the patronage of Baule trance diviners and Senufo Sando diviners today, who commission artists to make aesthetically appealing images that flatter and attract the spirit world. Many of these draw inspiration from—and idealize—the human form, which suggests that in these cultures humankind is the ultimate measure of beauty and stands at the center of world views as different as those of the Sherbro of Sierra Leone or the Kongo peoples of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Catalogue numbers 12 through 16—all instruments used in the Yoruba divination system known as Ifa—enabled diviners to invoke the Yoruba deity of wisdom, Orunmila, and transcribe his insights, while at the same time providing him with offerings of great beauty. In these works, through a rich language of visual metaphors, Yoruba artists conveyed their concept of the cosmos and the forces that animate it. They include an ordinary gourd inscribed with a diagram of the

Map of Sub-Saharan Africa, showing the locations of many of the principal cultures

two hemispheres of Yoruba existence, and a costly ivory vessel supported by a graceful female caryatid, designed to hold the sixteen sacred palm nuts cast by Ifa diviners during consultations. Ifa rites provide an avenue of communication between the spirit world and that of the living, initiated when the diviner strikes a tapper (*iroke Ifa*) on the flat wooden surface of a divination tray (*opon Ifa*). This tray, adorned with carved images and dusted with powder, serves as the template on which sacred signs (*odu*) related to the personal concerns of a diviner's client are traced as the point of departure for analysis. In contrast to those transitory signs, the more permanent backdrop of the carved motifs on the tapper and tray constitutes an artistic exegesis of the forces that shape human experience and the universal needs fulfilled by such quests for enlightenment.

Catalogue numbers 17 through 21 are kinetic devices designed to provide revelations through various forms of physical manipulation. A mechanism inside the double chamber of the Baule oracle known as *gbekre* records the movements of mice, which are subsequently interpreted as clues to a client's situation. Among the divination instruments developed by Pende diviners and sculptors earlier in this century, *njinda*, a wild and unsettling otherworldly apparition, responded to inquiries by leaning from side to side, whereas the flexible accordion-like form of *galukoji* sprang upward in reaction to the pronouncement of the name of a guilty party. Across central Africa, answers to questions posed by diviners are indicated through the movements of handheld devices known as friction oracles. Sculptors carve these instruments in the form of a variety of figurative or zoomorphic representations that allude to beings endowed with especially acute sensory powers.

The dynamic nature of the divination process is further illustrated through the works featured in catalogue numbers 22 through 24. Each of these consists of a collection of elemental signs compiled by a diviner to create a microcosm of the universe. The extensive range of substances in such divination instruments owned by Songye and Chokwe diviners includes bits of mineral, plant, and animal matter as well as miniature figurative elements carved by sculptors in a series of standardized motifs, contained in a gourd or basket. A comparable Shona system uses ivory or wooden dice (*hakata*) inscribed with a series of four standardized signs that resonate with that culture's larger social and spiritual precepts. When shaken or cast, the components of these divination sets fall into configurations that are regarded as a visual commentary arranged by spiritual forces, and are interpreted by the diviner in terms of their relevance to an individual's concerns. The same elemental ingredients whose significance is deciphered by Songye diviners may also be integrated into the sculptural form of a power figure (*nkishi*), the joint effort of a diviner and a sculptor, which functions as an object of symbolic interaction between

the diviner and the ancestral realm (see cat. nos. 10, 43). So it is too with Shona artists and diviners, who are powerfully linked by their common quest for inspiration from the spirit world.

The important role of music as a medium of communication and artistic expression in divination contexts is recognized in catalogue numbers 25 through 28. The sounds produced by these musical instruments serve as essential catalysts in the divination process. As part of a public theatrical spectacle, a Baule diviner beats a finely carved wooden mallet against an iron gong during a divination session and enters a state of trance and possession, enabling nature spirits to contribute their insights. Similarly, Senufo diviners invoke spirit entities through the combined display of compelling artifacts and musical overtures. In Yaka society, the hollowed figural form of a slitdrum (*n-kookwa Ngoombu*) serves as a mouthpiece for the spirit world when it is struck, producing a sound that is regarded as an oracular pronouncement.

The works featured in catalogue numbers 29 through 35—carried, wielded, or worn by diviners—provide focal points for exploring the complex identity of the diviner and his or her exalted status and important social role. The beaded bag in which Yoruba diviners carry their divination instruments is an emblematic yet highly personalized accessory, emblazoned with dynamic graphic designs. Like the ivory used for making divination tappers and vessels, beads were a costly material restricted to a privileged elite in Yoruba society; here, they are used to comment on the diviner's role as a sacred mediator. The power and influence wielded by individuals who occupy this position in Yombe society are suggested by the idealized representation of a diviner's mask, whose heightened realism and meditative expression inspired confidence in the wearer's powers of perception. A Komo headdress embodies a Bamana diviner's great spiritual power and mastery of esoteric knowledge through a design composed of a diverse assemblage of organic matter, evoking the ferocity and power of a wild beast. The Basinjom masquerade, performed along the Cameroon–Nigeria border, employs an anti-aesthetic amalgam of carefully selected natural matter that intimidates viewers, endows omniscience upon the wearer, and dramatically evokes the arsenal of powers at its command. This emphasis on harnessing the elements of the natural world and on mastery and knowledge of the properties of its animal and plant life is also reflected in the abstract beauty and harmonious design of a necklace once worn by a Barambo diviner.

A broad range of sculptural works prescribed for individual clients as an outcome of consultations with diviners, given concrete and enduring form, is presented in catalogue numbers 36 through 43. Such works are usually highly personalized, created in response to the specific needs of individuals as they arise. Guro and Lobi diviners often counseled their clients to commission male and female figures from artists and to place them in shrines, often as the result of specific directives from spirit entities. Similarly, the Luluwa and Igbo maternity figures were designed to assist women afflicted with infertility and were placed in shrines as celebrations of the desired state of motherhood. The miniature protective pendants worn by Bobo, Lobi, Nunuma, Senufo, and Tusya individuals are items of personal adornment prescribed by a diviner to shield them from harm; the iconography of such images is customized so that it relates directly to the identity of the patron. Although little idiosyncratic detail is discernible in the highly reductive, abstract design of Moba shrine figures, they too are closely tied to the well-being of a specific household.

The pervasive influence of divination in many African cultures is suggested in the iconography of the works presented in the final catalogue entries, numbers 44 through 50. Though not divination instruments, they evoke the subject of divination. While many of the works included in this exhibition survive as impressive visual documents of the quest for insight by individuals now long forgotten, several were monuments commissioned by African leaders before colonialism, created in response to auguries concerning their particular destinies. Unequaled in their expressive power, they eloquently convey to contemporary viewers the personal aspirations of their royal patrons. The gleaming copper-alloy divination portrait of King Glele (r. 1858–89), in the guise of the armed war god, Gu, projects a sense of invulnerability and martial strength at the height of Dahomey's power. His son Gbehanzin (r. 1889–94), however, inherited Dahomey on the eve of its defeat to French imperialism. His consuming preoccupation with keeping that enemy force at bay is reflected in a lifesize representation of a surrealistic creature that fuses shark and human features, commissioned before his exile to Martinique. Another work, a Yoruba carved wooden door by one of Africa's most celebrated artists of the last century, Olowe of Ise, directly evokes divination in its depiction of an Ifa divination tray surrounded by flocks of birds. Its masterful composition and accessible imagery express the central role of divination as the ultimate avenue to enlightenment in Yoruba society. Olowe draws on an established visual vocabulary to combine references to the diviner's primary investigative tool—a divination tray—and metaphysical concepts of life force and personal destiny alluded to through the bird imagery. A costly prestige piece affordable only by a Yoruba king, this African sculpture reflects the artist's essential role in elucidating and visually articulating the faith that forms the core of a people's world view (comparable to a Renaissance painter's fresco illustrating the Christian concepts of transubstantiation or resurrection).

The works presented in "Art and Oracle" were designed to capture the attention of the spirit world, whether through the efforts of highly accomplished artists in sculptures that evoke or celebrate spiritual forces, or through the application of raw matter that represents the distillation of a diviner's knowledge. They were created to connect personal concerns to those of higher powers, and thus to benefit from insights that lay beyond the scope of ordinary human perception. Like most religious art, this goal was achieved through images that use the familiar as a point of departure. In exploring the nexus of spiritual belief and artistic expression embodied by these works, "Art and Oracle" illustrates some of the many means by which African cultures, each in its own way, seek to transcend the limitations of human knowledge by reaching out for intervention and protection from the realm of the divine.

Divination in Sub-Saharan Africa

John Pemberton III

Rituals of divination are found throughout sub-Saharan African cultures, from west, central, and east Africa and the Sudan to South Africa and Madagascar.[1] Sharing the universal concern for human suffering, Africa's peoples have developed many such rituals to deal with a variety of difficult conditions: bodily affliction and dying; social conflict; the seemingly arbitrary destructive forces of nature; an individual's uncertainty, ignorance, and moral perplexity in making decisions that will affect his or her future or that of an entire community. They also use rituals of divination to discover a context of meaning for their lives and, sometimes, to discern a personal destiny.

Africa's peoples are not alone in employing rituals of divination. The throwing of coins or sticks, resulting in a pattern or configuration catalogued and interpreted in the *I Ching* (*Book of Changes*), has its origins in China during the twelfth century B.C. or earlier; this method of divination is still employed today by many people in Asia, Europe, and the United States to help them understand the significance of their experiences and to obtain guidance for the future. Astrology—interpreting the lives of individuals and predicting events according to the changing configurations of the sun, moon, planets, and stars—flourished in ancient Near Eastern, Hellenistic, and Asian cultures, underwent a revival in Europe during the Renaissance, and remains popular today in many societies. Shamanism was once an important part of the religious life of Northwest American Indians and still is among Tibetan Buddhists. Though severely criticized by Jewish, Christian, and Islamic authorities, the divination rituals of prophecy, selecting random passages from Scripture or Psalter as augury, casting lots, and speaking in tongues were widely practiced and continue to flourish among certain groups. Whatever the form, all divinatory practices reveal the human quest for a larger context of meaning, a means by which to understand and respond to the many faces of suffering and uncertainty. Inherent in all these practices is the assumption—or faith—"that the world order in its totality is, could, and should be a meaningful 'cosmos.'"[2]

For most sub-Saharan African peoples, divination rites are an essential part of daily life. An individual casts pieces of a kola nut or addresses questions to a friction oracle in the morning in order to determine what to do to make his or her way successfully through the day; a family consults a diviner to learn why death is repeatedly taking a mother's newborn children or to know the will of the ancestors for resolving conflicts within the household; a king seeks the knowledge of his diviners to make his position of authority secure. Diviners are also the agents of memory, the preservers of a people's history, or, in times of crisis, the creators of a "past" or a "vision" by which the living may endure. A person's status is often determined by what is revealed in rites of divination at the time of birth, coming of age, marriage, investiture to priestly or royal office, death, and other critical events.

The number and diversity of divination rites in Africa are enormous, varying in form among ethnic groups and even within the cultural life of a particular people. Among the Dogon peoples of the Bandiagara escarpment in Mali, village elders study fox tracks that cut across the pattern of squares they have inscribed in a field outside their village for indications of future events, especially such fundamental matters as births, marriages, harvests, and deaths.[3] The Azande, who live in the southern Sudan and the northern portion of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (D.R.C., formerly Zaïre), employ the poison oracle (*benge*) to address serious questions such as accusations of committing adultery or practicing sorcery, and use the friction oracle (*iwa*) to find out if witchcraft is being practiced against them or to determine whether to proceed with a journey.[4] In the eastern part of the D.R.C., a friction oracle is also used by the Luba and Songye peoples.[5] Among the Luba the rite is known as *kashekesheke*, and the friction device is called *kakishi* (the Songye equivalent of which is *katatora*; see cat. no. 20), a small, carved wooden object held jointly by client and diviner and whose movements provide answers to the client's questions. The Ding, Kuba, Lele, Luluwa, and Wongo in the central areas of the D.R.C. use the *itombwa* (see cat. no. 21), often in the form of a beautifully carved image of an animal (most commonly a crocodile, bush pig, or dog), the back of which is rubbed with a small handheld, bulbous piece of wood; the movements of the latter provide "yes" or "no" answers to questions asked by a suppliant through the diviner.[6] Sometimes, the jaw of a crocodile is substituted for the *itombwa.*

Among the Luba and Songye there is also a more elaborate form of divination, featuring the sacred gourd (*mboko*), in which the diviner tumbles a variety of natural and manufactured objects and then interprets the configuration formed by the objects that end up on top.[7] Spirit possession, which is usually associated with this form of divination, appears to be of even greater importance among the Yaka (who live in the

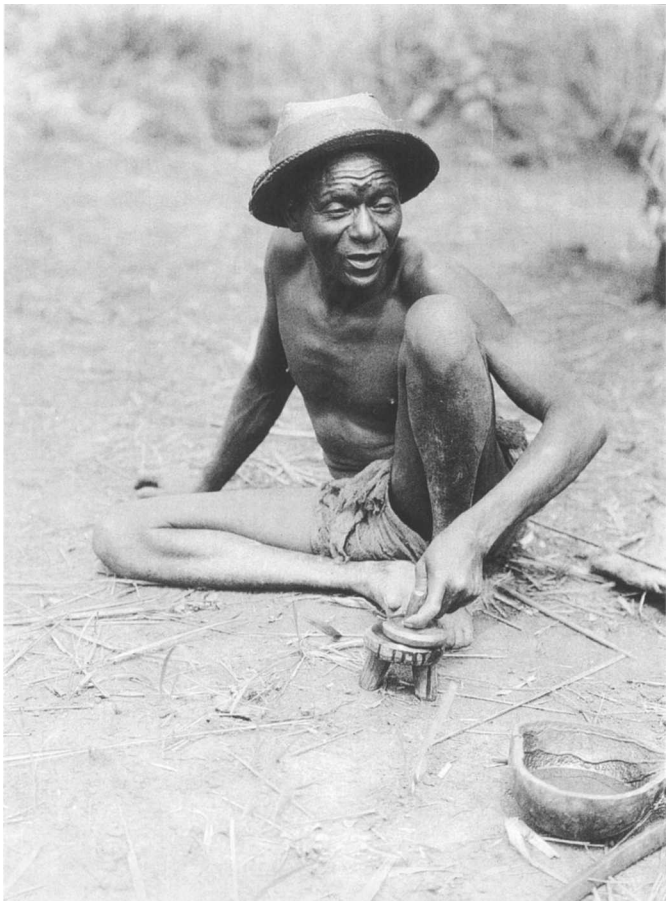

Fig. 1. An Azande diviner uses a friction oracle (*iwa*), holding his foot against the lower part to keep the instrument in place and rubbing the upper part against it.

southwestern part of the D.R.C.) than among the Luba or the Songye.[8] The Chokwe of Angola employ basket divination—a comparable method of interpreting the pattern formed among a group of objects (see cat. no. 23)—and spirit possession. In one Chokwe form of divination involving spirit possession, the reflective surface of water or a mirror enables the diviner to see the source of a client's affliction.[9]

Among the Lobi, who live in the southern part of Burkina Faso, a diviner sits next to his client and places small sculpted figures (*bateba*) on the ground in front of them.[10] The *bateba* serve as witnesses to the divination, in which diviner and client join hands and address questions to the figures; the rising or falling motion of their clasped hands indicates positive or negative responses from the spirits (*thila*) represented in the sculptures. In northern Côte d'Ivoire, a similar rite is performed by Senufo female diviners known as Sandobele,[11] who use male and female sculpted figures to communicate with the powerful bush spirits and/or ancestors (*madebele*). In Banyang villages in Cameroon, a form of divination rarely seen today is the Basinjom masquerade, in which an individual wearing a wild, otherworldly mask and costume is endowed with clairvoyant powers capable of identifying people who have powers of witchcraft (see cat. no. 33).

Along the upper west coast of Africa, there are several types of divination that rely on "sixteen signs." Ifa divination among the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria and its probable derivative, Fa, among the Fon of the Republic of Benin, has been the most fully studied of these.[12] It was brought to the Americas during the mid to late eighteenth century, at the height of the slave trade. The casting of sixteen palm nuts or cowrie shells continues to be widely practiced today by Caribbean and Brazilian people of West African descent in New York and other metropolitan centers in the United States, and is therefore the best known of African divination systems. The "sixteen signs" type of divination may have its origins in Islamic sand writing (*khatt ar-raml*), and its traces are found not only in Ifa and Fa but also in divination systems in the Mande cultural zone in Mali, in Madagascar, and among the Shona in southern Africa.[13] While all the different versions of the "sixteen signs" have certain basic elements in common, the particular interpretation of the signs is almost entirely determined by the cultural values, oral traditions, and social experiences of the people who practice the divination rite.

Two other forms of divination involving the consultation of signs are mouse divination, employed by the Baule and Guro of Côte d'Ivoire,[14] and spider divination, which is prevalent among the peoples of Cameroon.[15] Here, the signs are not the result of human actions but are formed through the random movements of a mouse or a spider—the mouse scampering over bats' or birds' bones or sticks that a diviner has laid out parallel to one another, and the spider emerging from its nest in a hole in the ground and dislodging small, distinctively shaped cards that have been cut out of the rigid leaves of the "African plum" tree and placed neatly around the hole—in each case creating new configurations. These signs too must be interpreted by a diviner, one capable of "reading" the patterns of bones or leaves. While the procedure in every instance may seem random or accidental, the signs that appear are considered not at all random—and incapable of human manipulation—since they are directed by spiritual powers who communicate to the living by this means.

In all these societies, there is more than one system of divination. In addition to mouse divination, the Baule have the ritual of the "trance dancers," in which certain individuals—after being "chosen" by a nature spirit (*asye usu*) and a deity known as Mbra and trained in the performance of trance dancing—identify the causes of public and private misfortunes and then recommend solutions. As Susan Vogel has noted, "The largest, oldest, and most elaborate Baule figure sculptures are made as the loci for gods and spirits that possess their human partners and send messages through them in trance states."[16] Among the Tabwa, in the southeastern sector of the D.R.C., the Luba friction oracle (*kashekesheke*) is employed; and in extreme cases, shamans (*tulunga*) are called on, for they know and can control the powers of sorcery.[17] In neighboring Kenya, prophets (*iloibonok*) among the Samburu and Maasai have the power to "see" past, present, and future by using containers (*enkidong*)—usually gourds—filled with divination objects, and they also have the ability to cure misfortunes and practice sorcery using special substances (*entasim*). Though sought out for protection, the *tulunga* and the *iloibonok* are often feared and mistrusted and therefore occupy an ambiguous status in society.[18] In addition to friction oracles

of the *itombwa* type, *nkisi* figures and certain masks among several Kongo peoples have divinatory status, since they confer on those who utilize them the power to see hidden things.[19] All these divination systems are largely concerned with understanding the present in terms of the past—near or distant—and its implications for the immediate future, as well as with healing or protection against witchcraft and sorcery. However, divination among the Dogon of the western Sudan and the Malagasy of Madagascar addresses questions pertaining to the future. The Malagasy want to know about matters of destiny and how what one does in the present determines what will occur, but whereas Dogon elders study fox tracks across patterns inscribed in the sand, the Malagasy often employ written texts and astrological calculations.[20]

Faced with the variety of divination rites, one might be tempted to try to create a typology that would place them in some coherent scheme. Plato distinguished between two types of divination: augury and prophecy[21]—a distinction that many scholars have adopted and that has the virtue of simplicity but often leads to oversimplified reductions that do little to help one understand divination in the lives of particular peoples. E. M. Zuesse distinguishes among "intuitive divination," in which the diviner spontaneously "sees" or "knows" reality or the future; "possession divination," in which spiritual beings are said to communicate through intermediary agents; and "wisdom divination," in which the diviner decodes seemingly random patterns found in nature.[22] His discussion makes helpful distinctions and recognizes subtypes within each of the major categories, thereby seeming to provide a basis for pursuing cross-cultural studies. However, as with all typological analyses, it removes one from the particular, from life situations, from the cultural world and idiosyncratic experience of people; indeed, Zuesse acknowledges that a specific type may often be combined with other types and/or be understood in a markedly different way in varying cultural contexts.

Rather than impose typological categories or other abstractions on the living, perhaps the best way to provide a basic understanding of divination among the peoples of sub-Saharan Africa is to limit the discussion to a few specific peoples and to focus on the relationship between their cosmologies and their systems of divination and on the role of ritual artifacts in the lives of diviner and client. In the brief survey that follows—describing and analyzing divination practices among the Azande, Luba and Songye, Yaka, Yoruba, and Malagasy—an attempt has been made to convey the distinctiveness of thought and ritual life of peoples geographically separated, but whose religious and aesthetic responses to human suffering and the quest for meaning have much in common. Keep in mind, however, that Africa's peoples have never lived in isolated, tightly structured cultural worlds and have always maintained contact with one another through trade, marriage, and warfare. They have constantly experienced change over time due to the forces of nature, social and political circumstances, and technological innovation, and they continue to do so. As people move by choice or necessity, their ideas, practices, and objects move with them, are adapted and/or adopted, or are abandoned within their new cultural context. Also keep in mind that the information presented here and its interpretation—in common with the varying approaches of numerous scholars of African systems of divination—must rely on theoretical systems reflecting Western conceptual frameworks for understanding African and other non-Western cultures.

It is appropriate that we begin our survey with the Azande of the southern Sudan and the northeastern region of the D.R.C., since their divination practices are the first in sub-Saharan Africa to have been thoroughly examined and written about, in E. E. Evans-Pritchard's masterful study *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, published in 1937. For decades it remained the only extensive and serious discussion of divination as practiced by sub-Saharan African peoples. Evans-Pritchard established the norms by which future students would address the subject, including the premise that divination is a form of inquiry and communication that has to be taken seriously, if one is to understand the world views of the Azande and other African peoples. For them, divination is a method of harnessing spirit forces to obtain guidance in dealing with ill will, envy, suspicion, and other universally human feelings and behaviors.

The Azande dwell in savanna forest, where they cultivate the soil, raising a variety of plants, and also hunt and fish. They live in relatively small villages that are linked through identification with larger areas presided over by princes within what was once a larger kingdom prior to the colonial period. Their world is one of interaction with kinsmen, neighboring peoples, and ancestral spirits and other spiritual powers—the latter distinguishable from, but participating in, a primal Spirit that pervades the universe of human experience in all its diversity. Evans-Pritchard's study established that witchcraft—the manipulation of matter and words as agents of demonic powers—is an inextricable part of Azande life. An often-quoted passage from that study provides a context for understanding witchcraft and oracle among the Azande:

> In Zandeland sometimes an old granary collapses. There is nothing remarkable in this. Every Zande knows that termites eat the supports in [the] course of time and that even the hardest woods decay after years of service. Now a granary is the summerhouse of a Zande homestead and people sit beneath it in the heat of the day and chat or play the African hole-game or work at some craft. Consequently it may happen that there are people sitting beneath the granary when it collapses and they are injured, for it is a heavy structure made of beams and clay and may be stored with eleusive [millet] as well. Now why should these particular people have been sitting under this particular granary at the particular moment when it collapsed? That it should collapse is easily intelligible, but why should it have collapsed at the particular moment when these particular people were sitting beneath it?[23]

As Evans-Pritchard observed, the Azande fully understand that termites and the granary's own weight caused the structure to collapse, and that on a hot day people might well be sitting beneath it and be hurt or killed. One could say that it was a coincidence of events, "two chains of causation intersected at a certain time and in a certain place." For the Azande,

the question remains: why these people at this moment at this place? The question is not simply one of "how," but of "why"; and the Azande answer is that "it is due to witchcraft."[24] The Azande understand multiple causality and do not blame witchcraft as the cause of an event when it is evidently a transgression of social norms (such as adultery) or a violation of customary law (such as theft),[25] but they do regard witchcraft as an ordinary event in their lives. Indeed, it is considered hereditary, and no one appears to be spared the power—or at least the possibility—of being a witch. At times, the accused may be unaware of having used such powers.

In Azande life and thought, oracles and other divination practices are closely linked with witchcraft. When misfortune occurs—such as a granary falling on a group of people, or a failure in the hunt, or the onset of a physical ailment—an oracle is used to find out whether witchcraft is involved. In this respect, divination is a means of understanding present circumstances in connection with past events, especially in terms of the ways people are affected by those events. However, divination is also concerned with future possibilities—for example, whether one should fear the intrusion of witchcraft on a journey that one plans to take, or whether the woman one wishes to marry will die early in life due to the power of a witch.

Given the Azande people's pervasive anxiety about witchcraft and its varied manifestations, it is not surprising that they have developed numerous different forms of divination. The most powerful and accurate form is the poison oracle (*benge*, a term that also refers to the poison itself). This rite is performed outside the village, in the bush—untamed wilderness—with the participation of those who are actively involved in the consultation or are consulted as witnesses to it. A man without any special standing in the community, if he knows the required procedures and has respected the prohibitions against certain kinds of behavior—such as refraining from sexual intercourse for several days or abstaining from eating forbidden food, especially elephant meat—is selected to administer poison to a young chicken. After the group arrives at the location chosen for the divination rite, the suppliant addresses a question to the *benge*, and the chicken is given the poison. The phrasing of the question is crucial; it must be neither too vague nor too specific. The *benge* responds through the action of the poison: if the chicken is still alive, then the suppliant's suspicions may be allayed; but if the chicken dies, those suspicions are confirmed. After the inquiry and response, the poison is administered to another chicken to learn if the first response was accurate. Resolution of the suppliant's problem may require a series of questions and several chickens. As in Western modes of "objective" inquiry, doubt is part of the process of divinatory inquiry for the Azande. Due to the costs, time, and people involved, *benge* is used only for the most serious circumstances, such as the death of a family member, illness, barrenness, or accusations of adultery.

Another form of divination employed by the Azande is the termite oracle (*dakpa*), in which termites are offered branches from two species of tree—*dakpa* and *kpoyo*—and responses to questions are determined by which type of tree branches the termites choose to eat.[26] Sometimes both will be eaten, and this response also has a particular significance. As with the *benge* oracle, the questions put to *dakpa* are often concerned with the possibility of witchcraft being used against one in the course of an enterprise, such as building a house or clearing a plot of ground for seed; and the questioning can refer to specific people or families one suspects of harboring ill will. When the responses suggest that the problem is serious, then *benge* will be employed in order to confirm what one has learned from *dakpa*.

The most widely used form of divination is the friction oracle (*iwa*).[27] The poison oracle entails the expense of owning and preserving the rare substance *benge*, and the termite oracle takes time and requires a particular setting—a termite mound—in which to be performed. *Iwa*, however, is valued for being easy to use and readily available when one needs to ask questions and make decisions. It is not considered as reliable as the other oracles, which involve independent agents and are less prone to manipulation, but it is quickly accessible and its responses may subsequently be confirmed by *benge*.

A person may carve and prepare his or her own friction board. The Azande, though not a people noted for their visual arts, have a reputation as excellent smiths, potters, and carvers of domestic objects, and in the past were noted for their beautiful carved harp-lutes.[28] The *iwa* is often made in striking geometric shapes. It consists of "male" and "female" parts: the lower part, shaped somewhat like a three-legged stool with one leg extended, on which a person places a foot to hold the instrument in place; and an upper part, a lidlike object that serves as the rubbing implement (fig. 1). Once the *iwa* is carved, preparing it is of the utmost importance. The suppliant—who must respect the same ritual prohibitions stipulated for consulting *benge*—scores the rubbing surfaces with a hot iron, rubs the carved areas with the juices of various plants, hides it under several inches of soil on a well-trodden path for several days, and then applies leaf and root preparations to the rubbing areas. While the friction oracle is in use, the rubbing implement is regularly dipped in a gourd of water.

When a question is addressed to the oracle—for example, inquiring about the cause of a sudden illness or if a journey should be avoided because of witchcraft—the movement of the rubbing implement indicates a positive or negative response. This is determined by whether it moves with ease or with difficulty—for example, sticking to the surface of the lower, female portion—or simply moves in a noncommittal circular fashion. As with the poison and termite oracles, a second, confirmatory test is usually made. The advantage of the *iwa* is that it is easy to use in public and can be consulted anytime the need arises, such as to solve a vexing problem that is diverting attention from other matters.

Moving from the Azande to the Luba in the eastern sector of the D.R.C. is to enter what could almost be another world. It is an area of forests and rivers; and the Luba, though divided into numerous subgroups, have a historical awareness as a people that seems to be absent among the Azande. The latter appear to live their lives focused on the here and now, with past and future regarded as an extension of the present. This perception may be very much the result of Evans-Pritchard's approach to ethnographic studies, developed when anthropology was

Fig. 2. A Luba Bilumbu diviner prepares to consult his *mboko*, the sacred gourd in front of him; seated at his right is his wife, and at his left is a female bowl figure, representing the spirit by which he is possessed during the ritual.

concerned with social systems and paid slight attention to a people's historical sensibilities. By the time Mary Nooter Roberts and Allen Roberts pursued their studies among the Luba in the 1980s, there was an understanding of the importance of memory among a people, a vital sense of history. Their research for the exhibition "Memory: Luba Art and the Making of History" (1996) is testimony to the change in anthropological studies, as well as to an appreciation for the acute historical self-awareness of the Luba.

The heartland of the Luba people is in what is known as the Upemba Depression, in the eastern part of the D.R.C. The research of archaeologists clearly indicates that it was occupied along numerous rivers as early as the seventh century A.D. and that there was extensive trading in the region by the seventeenth century. Evidence from grave sites, dating from between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, reveals that some degree of social stratification had developed.[29]

Oral traditions provide a narrative that associates the origins of the Luba with the establishment of a sacred kingdom. A hunter prince from the east, Mbidi Kiluwe, came to the region and sired a son, Kalala Ilunga, whose care he entrusted to Mijibu wa Kalenga, the first spirit medium. In an epic struggle after Mbidi's death, Kalala defeated his maternal uncle, the tyrant Nkongolo Mwamba, and established a royal court at Manza (which in precolonial times was an important iron-producing district).[30] It was Mijibu's counsel that saved Kalala's life and was the basis of his success in instituting the enlightened form of leadership introduced by his father. Thus, it is from Mijibu that the royal Bilumbu diviners derive their authority, an authority that is essential to, and perhaps the warrant for, Luba sacred kingship.[31] The third principal branch of Luba royal culture is the Mbudye association. They are "men of memory," who, through rituals entailing spirit possession, are the repository of the precepts and principles believed to have been handed down by Mbidi, Kalala's father.[32] Through the ritual use of *lukasa* memory boards, it is their task to "teach and encode an 'official' history of the Luba state, while at the same time subverting historical absolutism by allowing for transmutation and refabulation with every narrative telling, from one political arena to the next."[33] Such is their authority that it is the Mbudye association that initiates the king and royal Bilumbu diviners into their official political roles. Bilumbu diviners must also master the teachings of the *lukasa* memory board, for they too are "men of memory." Thus, there is a remarkable interweaving of roles and authority in Luba political life.

Like Mijibu, contemporary Luba royal mediums possess an esoteric knowledge and an ability to bring their knowledge to bear upon the concerns of the present (see cat. nos. 11, 46). Bilumbu diviners provide judicial expertise and counsel on war, sorcery, and renewal rites, and assist in the adjudication of conflicts within the realm. Their authority lies in their power as mediums between the realm of the spirits and humans, their ability to be "grasped" (*kukwata*)—that is, seized by a spirit, which involves "stopping time" and seeing quickly and clearly "the problem amid the 'noise' of lived reality."[34] Spirit possession is induced, not by chemical substances but through percussive instruments, such as a rattle or hand gong played by the diviner's wife or husband (women may also be royal diviners),[35] and through the diviner's chants. The combined sounds provide the stimulus for awakening the diviner's spirit to divination. Once possessed by the spirit, the diviner decorates his or her own body with chalk designs and adorns him/herself with necklaces and beautifully colored headbands of beads and fur, the patterns of the beads signifying the presence and power of the spirit. Animal skins hang from the diviner's waist. When possessed, the diviner "talks, acts, and thinks" as—and, indeed, assumes the identity of—his/her "consulting spirit."[36] When a male diviner conducts a divination ritual, his wife will sit at his right and a sculpture of a seated or kneeling female figure holding a bowl will be placed on his left (fig. 2). The carving represents the wife of the diviner's possessing spirit, for among the Luba, women are regarded as vessels of spiritual power.

A consultation proceeds with concerns addressed to the diviner by the suppliant(s). The diviner in turn speaks to his/her spiritual consultant while shaking an *mboko*—a covered gourd filled with various items: animal bones, dried beetles, birds' beaks and claws, shells, seeds, seed pods, twigs, caddisfly cases, beads, tiny iron replicas of tools, and small, carved

Fig. 3. A Luba diviner and her client, performing a *kashekesheke* divination ritual, jointly hold a friction oracle known as a *kakishi* on a woven mat on the ground between them.

wood figurines in various postures covered with chalk. It is an extraordinary assemblage of natural and manufactured materials. When the diviner opens the lid, he/she interprets the configuration of objects that have ended up on top. They provide what Roberts and Roberts refer to as "organizing images," which lead the diviner to "a hypothesis concerning the client's difficulty. The process is repeated again and again until a relatively clear understanding of the problem has been formulated."[37] The small wood carvings may have relatively fixed meanings, but as with most symbols, they and all the other objects are multireferential. It is in the association of objects that meaning is to be discerned. As Victor Turner observed regarding basket divination among the Ndembu people of northwestern Zambia—who practice a form similar to Luba *mboko* divination—the diviner's skill is in adapting his/her general interpretation of the objects to the given circumstances of the client(s).[38]

The form of Luba divination called *kashekesheke*, which is said to be from before the time of Luba kingship and thus older than spirit possession, provides the ritual context for the creation of small and often exquisitely carved friction devices called *kakishi*; similar friction oracles, called *katatora*, are employed by the Songye, a neighboring people to the northeast of the Luba (see cat. no. 20). The devices, in styles ranging from highly representational to abstract, are rarely more than six inches high, have an open body for the insertion of the fingers of client and diviner, and are adorned with a carving of a beautifully coiffured woman's head. It is a form of divination that does not entail spirit mediumship or esoteric knowledge. Rather, in its simplicity of ritual action it is a means for addressing ancestral spirits when an individual is faced with a personal crisis or great uncertainty regarding a future course of action. In this respect, it is similar to the Azande's use of *iwa*.

Kashekesheke is performed by both diviner and client. Once the diviner (usually a woman) has prepared the friction device with the juices of certain plants and uttered words to invoke the spirits, the *kakishi* is placed on a woven mat on the ground between the diviner and client. The suppliant addresses his or her question to the *kakishi*, and then diviner and client insert their first two fingers into the space that constitutes the body of the device. The *kakishi* moves in various patterns, which signify "yes" or "no" answers or no answer at all (fig. 3). The raspy sound of its movement on the woven mat is possibly the origin of the name of the divination procedure.[39]

The friction devices known as *itombwa*, used by the Ding, Kuba, Lele, Luluwa, and Wongo peoples to the west of the Luba, often take the form of animal figures, their backs forming the rubbing surface. The animals, such as dogs and bush pigs, are associated with hunting prey or rooting out a plant, thus symbolizing a diviner's quest for knowledge and insight. Other *itombwa* merge anthropomorphic and zoomorphic elements, combining an animal's body with a human head, or even depict a human body, which functions as the friction device.

The Yaka people, who number about 250,000, exist in a political and cultural borderland in the southwestern region of the D.R.C. They live in village groupings of patrilineages, although the northern Yaka recognize descent through the matrilineal line as well. Their land possesses few natural riches; technological development has passed them by; and their young people often leave to go to the capital city of Kinshasa in the hope of finding employment and a better life. René Devisch has written extensively and with great insight on Yaka social institutions and on spirit mediumship, which lies at the heart of Yaka divination.[40]

Devisch points out that "while the political leader, in consensus with a council of elders or customary judges, can arbitrate in disputes where there is a common rule, the Yaka diviner draws on clairvoyance and can point with authority to the complex intertwinement of social, moral, and physical onset of sickness, ill luck, or death."[41] As with the Azande and other peoples of Africa, the Yaka approach problems of sickness and family conflict in terms of a search for a cause, and there are explanations and responses available through common sense, traditional medicinal knowledge, and social memory. However, such solutions to problems are often not adequate in themselves, especially when the problems persist or when the question is why someone has died. Therefore, they use divination to probe further for a larger context of meaning, although such an inquiry is not necessarily their original goal.

In preparation for a divination session, the representatives of the interested groups—for example, two families—will meet with the diviner, who may be male or female, to test his or her divinatory powers, giving no information about the problem. If the matter is very serious, they will seek out a diviner a day or more distant from their village. They must be convinced that the diviner possesses clairvoyance, which is demonstrated by the diviner declaring that they have come as clients and indicating that he/she knows why they have come.[42] Then the diviner enters a trancelike state, in which he/she discourses on the complexities of kinship relations and the Yaka

code of social behavior, discussing problems such as failing to keep one's obligations to matrilineal ancestors and the consequences that such transgressions might create for living relatives. While speaking, the diviner pays close attention to the clients' reactions, for clues to what is troubling them—nods of the head or murmurs of assent or denial at various statements he/she makes. Through these clues, the diviner begins to discern the problem that has brought them there. In the case of a death or some other extreme problem, they will present the diviner with an object that has been in close contact with the deceased or afflicted person.

Much like a hunting dog that pursues its quarry, the diviner sniffs the object. Knowledge gained through divination entails not only the senses of sight, sound, and touch, but the discriminating capacities of the olfactory sense as well.[43] Thus, the action of "sniffing out" information is not only metaphorical—it is prompted by the diviner's heightened physical sensibilities. At night the diviner places the object next to his/her ear and, while asleep, receives the message it conveys in dream-like images. The next day, he/she incorporates the images into a staccato commentary accompanied by rhythmic tapping on a wooden slitdrum (*n-kookwa Ngoombu*; fig. 4, cat. no. 27). The diviner weaves metaphors from his/her dreams together with references to problems of kinship relations and the norms by which members of the community must live. Throughout, he/she listens attentively to the responses of those who have come for help, then presses them to react to what he has been saying and speak among themselves. The diviner's insights help them to see their situation in a new light, to disentangle the threads of conflict by turning their thinking to the fundamental norms of Yaka society, requiring and enabling them to come to terms with the extent to which these norms have or have not been maintained.

Unlike Turner, who interprets divination among the Ndembu people of northwestern Zambia in terms of the pragmatics of social transformation and as a multivocal and theatrical drama,[44] Devisch approaches Yaka divination as an "event-in-the-making," a "process of reoriginating," a "birthing process" in its ongoing development. Oracular discourse "plunges one's world of speech back into its deepest springs of life."[45] Drawing on psychoanalytic studies as well as recent feminist critiques of anthropological inquiries, he interprets the diviner's slitdrum, with its uterine body and phallic head, as a visual expression of the primordial oneness of life, even as a representation of the womb. According to Devisch, as a ritual artifact, it

> is more than an object; it is an agent filled with power, a being entailing a developmental symbolic process forming a bridge between the physical and spiritual worlds, the realm of the living and the deceased. . . . The divinatory slit drum . . . imprints the sound and message of the oracle (that is, of the spirit speaking through the diviner-medium) upon the clients and the wider society.[46]

Thus, the Yaka diviner is one who has passed through a process of rebirth. This begins with the onset of excited speech, often sounding clairvoyant, and with erratic behavior due to having been possessed by a deceased diviner in the matrilineal line (*n-kooku*). Such an abnormal condition identifies an individual

Fig. 4. Lusuungu, a Yaka diviner in Yibeengala village, taps a slitdrum (*n-kookwa Ngoombu*) while possessed by a spirit during a divination ritual.

(male or female) as a potential diviner and attracts the attention of a senior diviner, who brings the candidate under his or her tutelage in a series of initiation rituals. Initiation begins with seclusion in a specially constructed house for an extended period of time, and includes drinking purgatives, eating special foods, breaking out of the house as a chick breaks through the shell of an egg, being taken into the bush and returning on the shoulders of young men to the sound of slitdrums. The initiate bites a chicken's head off, clutching it in his/her teeth while being led back to the village. The climax in the initiatory rite comes when, to a chorus of slitdrums, the initiate behaves like an otter-shrew, digging a tunnel in the earth from which he/she reemerges through another hole dug by the senior diviner. The initiate is now prepared to accomplish the task with which he/she has been charged: to bring suppliants in contact with the primordial womb of the world (*ngoombu*) and "to effect a transition between the *ngoombu* . . . and the domain of language and culture."[47]

There are between 15 million and 20 million Yoruba in southwestern Nigeria and the neighboring Republic of Benin. Their origins may be traced to the ninth century A.D.[48] From the beginning, Yoruba culture has been characterized by an urban life-style and a political system of sacred rulers. By the twelfth to the fifteenth century, the political/cultural position of the Yoruba city of Ile-Ife had developed to a point where an artistry of extraordinary technical skill and imagination created the famous Ife bronze and terracotta sculptures, and there were other Yoruba artistic centers at Esie in the northeast and Owo in the southeast. By the seventeenth century, Oyo, a city in the north-central Yoruba region, was emerging as a

significant political power that over the next century would establish itself as the center of an empire.

Ifa divination—which, as noted previously, is probably the best known of sub-Saharan African systems of divination outside the continent—is widely practiced among the Yoruba. In contrast to forms of divination in central Africa that employ spirit mediumship, Ifa divination does not rely on a person having oracular powers but rather on a system of signs that must be interpreted by a diviner, who is an Ifa priest (*babalawo*, literally "father of secrets"). Nevertheless, the concerns that a *babalawo* seeks to address are the same as those faced by Luba, Yaka, and other diviners of central Africa.

The Yoruba conceptualize the universe in terms of two halves of a closed calabash. These represent the realm of living beings (*aye*), comprising all humans, animals, and plants, and the realm of spiritual powers (*orun*), which includes the 401 deities (*orisa*)[49] and the ancestors (*ara orun*, literally "the living dead"), but there is no metaphysical notion of a "beyond," as there is in Greek philosophy or Christian theology. Reference is made to *orisa* Olodumare, who is without shrine, priesthood, or followers and yet is acknowledged as the "High God." It would appear that Olodumare is an expression of the unity and integrity of their universe, despite all its diversity and the existence of malevolent powers. In this respect, Yoruba cosmology is similar to that of the peoples of central Africa, though organized quite differently. The Yoruba universe consists of numerous powers that make claims on an individual. There are not only other people in one's family, town, and region, as well as foreigners, with whom one must deal—there are powers not readily seen, such as ancestors, deities, nature spirits, and also the powers of death, disease, and witchcraft (the work of *ajogun*, "malevolent spirits"). The Yoruba employ the word *ase* to refer to the intrinsic "power" by which a person or thing is what it is—the component of a person's or thing's nature that represents its inherent authority, stemming from his, her, or its character, position, or function. Woman has her *ase* and man has his. Each *orisa* has her or his *ase*, and so too do the ancestors. Rulers (*oba*) have their *ase*, as do priests. Animals, forests, rivers, rain, lightning all have *ase*. Thus, in the Yoruba universe, *ase* is the ground of being, the life force, the warrant for existence in all its manifestations.

The essential concern of every individual is to make one's way prosperously through life, drawing on the *ase* of gods, ancestors, parents, and nature to enable one to fully realize the personal destiny (*ori inu*) that he or she chose before coming into the world (*aye*). The means of achieving this is Ifa divination, which is based on the interpretation of signs known as *odu Ifa*. These are related to the Odu Ifa, a vast body of oral literature in prose and poetry that contains the wisdom of the Yoruba. There are sixteen principal Odu, each with its identifying sign and name and consisting of sixteen subordinate Odu, each with its sign and name, making a total of 256 Odu. There are also 256 *odu* signs, each associated with one of the 256 Odu subsections and its particular story about the lives of gods, humans, and animals. The subsections are ranked in importance, a ranking said to have been determined by the order in which the Odu—which came from *orun* and are regarded as *orisa*—arrived in *aye* and became known among humans.

Wande Abimbola, the second-ranking priest of Ifa in Ile-Ife and former vice chancellor of the University of Ife, has written extensively on the training of Ifa priests and on the Odu Ifa.[50] A youth who shows intellectual imagination at an early age will be regarded as a candidate for training to be a *babalawo*, especially if divination in a rite known as Imori ("knowing the head [*ori*]"), performed when he was a small child, revealed that he was a "child of Ifa." The youth will live with a local priest of Ifa, learning ritual procedures, memorizing passages from the Odu Ifa, observing divination sessions, as well as carrying out the daily chores of the priest's household. He may spend several years with his mentor. As he matures, refining his knowledge and skills, he will seek out *babalawo* in other areas for further instruction, moving from one tutor to another over a period of several years, during which time he will begin to "cast Ifa."

Ifa priests say that Orunmila, a deity present at the time of Creation, knows the prenatal destiny that every individual has chosen, and that this deity gave sixteen sacred palm nuts (*ikin Ifa*) to his children on earth so that they might be in communication with him. It is also believed that Orunmila's wife, *orisa* Odu, gave him the "secrets of Odu"—the power to guide those who seek his wisdom. A divination session begins with the priest calling on Orunmila and the ancient *babalawo* to witness the proceedings. He then shakes sixteen palm nuts in his cupped hands and, holding the *ikin* in his left hand, attempts to grab the entire group with his right hand. If one palm nut remains in his left hand, he makes two vertical marks with his fingers in the *iyerosun* dust on the diviner's tray (*opon Ifa*); if two palm nuts remain, he makes one vertical mark (fig. 5). When eight successful casts have been made, there will be two columns of four vertical marks, forming a configuration that represents one of the 256 possible *odu* signs. A shorter version of casting Ifa is possible by using a divining chain (*opele Ifa*). It consists of eight seed pods or small copper-alloy plates with concave/convex surfaces linked by a metal chain or strands of beads. The diviner holds the chain at its center point and casts the chain so that it falls on the cloth laid before him in a pattern that reveals the *odu* sign.

While waiting for Orunmila's response in the form of an *odu* sign, all who are present focus intently on the methodical, rhythmic ritual procedure of casting Ifa and on the carved images—such as the kneeling female figure holding a bowl, the rider surrounded by his retinue, and the struggle of the intertwined snake and bird—that adorn the diviner's tapper (*iroke Ifa*), the bowl (*agere Ifa*) containing the palm nuts, and the border of the *opon Ifa*. After the *odu* sign appears on the divination tray, the suppliant, who has whispered his or her concerns and requests to the *ikin Ifa*, listens to the priest chant verses from the Odu subsection indicated by the *odu* sign. In these verses, he/she hears of others who suffered various problems, some perhaps greater than those that brought the suppliant to Ifa, and of the joy that they knew after performing the sacrifices that Ifa had asked them to make.

He was told to offer sacrifice with *irana* hen.
He did as he was told
And he did not die.

He was dancing,
He was rejoicing,
He praised his Ifa priests,
While his Ifa priest praised Ifa.
As he opened his mouth a little,
The song of Ifa entered therein,
As he stretched his legs,
Dance pulled them.[51]

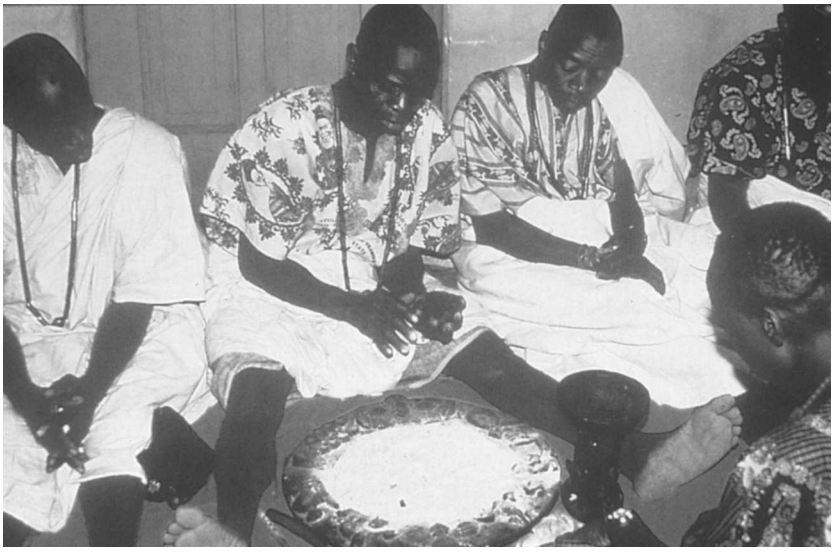

Fig. 5. Ifa priests at the palace of the Orangun-Ila cast the sixteen sacred palm nuts (*ikin Ifa*) to determine which subsection from the Odu Ifa they must consult, and the corresponding sign is traced in the *iyerosun* powder on the diviner's tray (*opon Ifa*).

The suppliant may ask the priest about the significance of the Odu, perhaps concentrating on one set of verses, with or without acknowledging the problem that has brought him/her to consult Ifa. The Ifa verses provide a context for thinking about one's situation in terms of the values that have shaped Yoruba self-understanding, and they recommend what sacrifices must be made by the suppliant, and to what powers. The suppliant leaves the divinatory session with the confidence to take effective action for improving his/her life. Ifa divination provides knowledge; but knowledge without effective action is of little use. Therefore, every divination rite entails an appropriate offering or sacrifice, in some instances a simple gift of food, in others the ritual slaughtering of an animal. Depending on the needs and circumstances of the suppliant, the offering may be to an *orisa* or to one's personal destiny (*ori inu*), or to an ancestor or a malevolent spirit, in an acknowledgment of that entity's powers and as a means of petitioning it to bestow or withhold them. Finally, there must also be a sacrifice to *orisa* Esu (also called Elegba), the guardian of the ritual process, who conveys the messages of the gods and other spirits to humankind and carries their sacrifices to the realm of the spirits. Esu's *ase* makes life whole and meaningful.

The divinatory systems noted thus far have two features in common: all of them are used to gain an understanding of present circumstances in terms of past events, near or distant; and questions about the future focus on matters in the immediate future, such as recovery from illness or adjudicating a family conflict—with the exception of the ever present desire to know if one will have a long and prosperous life. There is also pervasive concern about witchcraft as a cause of personal misfortune, although other causes are identified as well. Among the Malagasy of Madagascar there is a very different focus of interest. As John Mack has observed, *mpanandro*—the most prestigious form of divination among the Malagasy—is primarily concerned with destiny (*vintana*).[52]

According to Pierre Vérin and Narivelo Rajasonarimanana, the *ombiasy*—a general term for a diviner who practices *mpanandro*—is a "destiny maker."[53] The Malagasy regard the ancestors' role in their lives as crucial, and there is constant communication between the living and the ancestors through dreams, possession, and other signs. However, the significance of the messages is not always clear and requires one to seek out the expertise of a diviner.

For the Malagasy, the most important method of divination is *sikidy,* a form of geomancy that relies on the interpretation of "sixteen signs," using texts known as *sorabe* (literally, "great writings"). These texts, written in Arabic script, have been passed down over generations. They "are at once a repository of esoteric knowledge indicating precedent in the past, and an ongoing archive of observation, . . . an evolving work of reference."[54] *Sikidy* is employed when the diviner does not know the date of birth of his client or lacks other information essential for bringing the esoteric knowledge of the great texts to alleviate the anxieties and suffering of his client. As in Yoruba Ifa divination, the session begins with the diviner calling on the masters of divination and the great ancestors to aid in the inquiry. As described by Vérin and Rajasonarimanana, figures are then "set up by interpreting even and odd piles of grain. Single or double dots are arranged by fours in sixteen columns, each of which has a name."[55] Then the figures are read in accordance with the importance of the columns. (This procedure is strikingly similar to the tossing of coins or sticks and the interpretation of the resulting configuration through the tetragrams in the *I Ching.*) To the layman, the *sikidy* procedure seems almost mechanical and its resulting patterns cryptic, and the *sorabe* texts are equally unfathomable. Thus, the diviner plays an essential role, interpreting the signs and translating the texts in relationship to the client's *vintana*, and situating the individual within a larger context of cosmic forces.

The idea that an individual's destiny is closely related to the cosmos is at the heart of Malagasy divination. It is not a matter of fulfilling a prenatal destiny that one has chosen prior to entering the realm of the living, as in Yoruba Ifa divination, or being in rapport with originating powers, as in Yaka spirit mediumship. Malagasy divination is "astrologically based." It is, as Mack observes,

> a system which seeks to locate people, things and events in time and space. It further seeks to influence otherwise inevitable results by setting them in the most judicious temporal and spatial context. This is done by

> identifying more and less propitious moments for action against a background of information on the destinies of individuals determined by their times of birth and subsequent life experience.[56]

In this system, positioning in space—as in the construction of a house in a particular area, or the relationship of houses to one another in a town, or the location of household artifacts inside a house—is of paramount importance, for compass directions have auspicious and inauspicious associations. The northeasterly direction is the sacred or ancestral direction and is therefore regarded as the most beneficial direction during the performance of certain rituals, such as circumcision. Similarly, the timing of the events in a person's life is believed to affect his or her destiny, with particular hours, days, and months considered to be the most (or least) propitious for certain activities. Within the Malagasy world view, "destiny is constantly in motion, encountering zones of varying significance on the way."[57] By consulting *sikidy* and *sorabe*, an individual achieves an understanding of his or her life in terms of the forces that shape one's destiny, and an awareness of how to live and to orient oneself in relation to such cosmic powers.

All systems of divination are modes of communication developed to bridge realms that are intimately related yet distinguishable—the realm of ordinary or "visible" experience and the realm of unseen powers. Through words, gestures, sounds, and artifacts, divination rites arrest the conventional sense of time and place, providing for a moment another realm of experience, a world dense with meaning, perhaps more real than that in which one has been pursuing his or her daily life. Because they are one form of expression of a larger system of religious thought and practice, divination rites must be understood within a more encompassing cultural context and not as a prescientific mode of inquiry.[58] Pluralistic visions of the world coexist in sub-Saharan African cultures. The problems they find themselves confronted with are morally complex, and resolving them requires a combination of faith and skepticism. Life entails multiple possibilities, choices, and decisions, and there is no single answer to the question of how to live. In contrast to Christian and Islamic world views, in sub-Saharan African cultures there are no definitive solutions to specific individual problems, only temporary expedients based on the unique circumstances of each situation and a high degree of responsiveness to the particular needs and demands of various individuals and peoples. Hence, divination is concerned with the immediate experience of people and attempts to place it in a context of cultural meaning.

Similarly, an exhibition of artifacts that were created for use in divination rituals must place the objects in a context of cultural meaning. It is obvious that, as with all ritual artifacts, those employed in African systems of divination are instruments, utensils. They have their meaning in the context of ritual performance, used in executing prescribed gestures, prayers, chants, and dances. They are analogous to a crucifix, which is not simply an ornament or a religious symbol, but has its essential meaning in the context of the Catholic Mass. The object is informed by the words of the liturgy and, in this instance, by an elaborate narrative known to those participating in the rite. The same may be said about the sixteen sacred palm nuts (*ikin Ifa*) and the sculpted caryatid bowls (*agere Ifa*), which are the central implements in Yoruba Ifa divination rites. The diviner and the suppliant know the story of Orunmila giving the palm nuts to his children to enable them to receive the wisdom of his counsel after he departed for the world of the gods; and the sculpted figures on the bowls represent people whose lives have been empowered by Orunmila's wisdom. Likewise, the sculpture of a kneeling female figure holding a bowl, which is placed next to a Luba diviner when he or she is using an *mboko*, is recognized by the suppliant as evoking the spiritual power of the diviner, who, like women, is a container of hidden resources.

A ritual artifact is an instrument used to invoke spiritual powers and to signal to the participants transitional moments in the ritual sequence. Through gesture, it is also an extension of the powers of the priest into the surrounding space, enlarging that space and making it sacred, and thus linking priest and suppliant. Furthermore, in the fabrication and consecration of a ritual artifact, a person is imaginatively re-creating the self in terms of a spiritual entity (an ancestor or a deity) that is not otherwise observable apart from the ritual. A Christian crucifix, a Russian Orthodox icon, or a Yaka slit-drum, in its ritual context—whether public or private—is an expression of the inner life of each individual who participates in that ritual. Such artifacts may be said, therefore, to link the self and the transcendent (the "not self"), acting as instruments through which a person becomes in some measure the embodiment of the transcendent, as in the case of a Catholic reliquary or a Kongo *nkisi*.

Art critic Roberta Smith, in her review of the exhibition "Baule: African Art/Western Eyes," observed that "the intended use and meaning of an African object is central to understanding its form, no matter how beautiful and self-sustaining the form may be."[59] Rowland Abiodun's analysis of the long, graceful, conical form of a Yoruba divination tapper (*iroke Ifa*) in terms of the Yoruba concept of prenatal destiny (*ori inu*, literally "inner head") and the central importance of this concept in Ifa divination rites confirms Smith's observation.[60] In African art, form and meaning are inextricably related, and meaning entails a knowledge of an object's use.[61]

Following David Freedberg's critique of an art theory of "formalism" with reference to the visual arts of Western culture,[62] Wyatt MacGaffey points out that "art objects are more than just objects"; in our society, artworks have a "quasi-religious status . . . as embodiments of spiritual power," making the museum the "successor to the municipal temple."[63] Even so, MacGaffey, who has written extensively on the peoples and ritual art of the Congo, goes on to say that "once an object has been appropriated as art . . . its original context and visual effect cannot be recovered and may be irrelevant." Indeed, MacGaffey holds that "culture is untranslatable."[64] To be sure, when a ritual artifact, whether a medieval altar painting or an African shrine sculpture, "has been appropriated as art," the very act of appropriation serves to distance it and perhaps deny its religious and cultural context and meaning, and thus to impose a somewhat alien aesthetic upon it. I say

"somewhat," since it is evident that an artist's interest in aesthetic considerations plays a significant part in the creation of such objects and remains, if not always transparent, at least perceptible to the viewer. Abiodun has made it abundantly clear that Yoruba artists are concerned with matters of composition, with the formal properties of a sculpture, and that a sculpture or beaded vestment reveals the artist's "eye for design" (*oju-ona*), as well as "insight" (*oju-inu*) into the work's subject.[65]

Because cultures are not easily translatable, a foreigner cannot readily know what a Yoruba or Luba or Yaka person experiences in the presence of a ritual artifact. And yet, a work of creative imagination seems able to transcend cultural and historical distances. At the very least, it requires us to take it seriously as a visual presence possessing an informative power. It has the capacity to evoke in us wonder, perhaps even awe or anxiety, which requires us to look again and again and, as far as possible, seek to understand the culture that engendered it.

Freedberg has observed, "Images work [i.e., have the power to signify] *because* they are consecrated, but at the same time they work *before* they are consecrated."[66] In the creation of a Yoruba divination bowl or a Luba kneeling female figure with its bowl or a Baule mouse-oracle vessel or a Kongo *nkisi* figure, it is the skill of the artist who makes it—before its preparation and use by a diviner—that gives the ritual artifact its conceptual significance. In these Yoruba, Luba, Baule, and Kongo carvings, the concept of the self as a container—an embodiment—of power is the underlying subject. In every instance, the object's effectiveness in conveying that idea is the ultimate criterion of its aesthetic quality and provides the basis of its meaningful use within a ritual.

The *nkisi* figure is perhaps an exception, for it is an assemblage of various materials added to the sculpted form by the diviner and other people over the course of time. It is the creation of many hands, each contributing to its awesome visual and ritual power. Other works of art in Africa have a similar history, evolving over many years and shaped by the experiences of many people. In a review of an exhibition of Buddhist art from Tibet, art critic Holland Cotter observed that "when it comes to religious art, the value of an object often derives less from its physical form than from its history: where it has resided, what ceremonies it has been involved in, who has seen it or handled it. In many cases, though, it would be difficult to separate spiritual content from esthetic form."[67]

The challenge that African sculptural art presents to a Western art museum is to arrest the viewer's attention. Exhibitions must make the viewer feel somewhat discomfited with the recontextualization of African art in a museum environment that has been shaped by Western aesthetic notions and, to some extent, by the colonialist mission of collecting artifacts of "exotic" cultures. At the same time, exhibitions of Africa's art must induce a sense of visual engagement in order to draw the viewer into a new awareness of the skill, imagination, and conceptual sophistication of Africa's artists and the cultural traditions in which they lived and worked. As the exhibition "Art and Oracle" clearly reveals, artistry has an informative power in the ritual life of Africa's people and, if one observes with a sensitive eye, the power to inform others as well.

Notes

1. I wish to express my appreciation to Alisa LaGamma and Lorenz Homberger for their invitation to write this essay. It has provided the opportunity to pursue further the problem of cross-cultural studies among Africa's peoples and to analyze more fully the relationship between African art and rituals (see also Pemberton 2000). To address such questions is to have to face the extent to which one's thinking is informed by one's own cultural situation. Since the eighteenth century, the Western intellectual tradition has been shaped by the disciplines of the sciences and an approach to art in terms of a privileged class of objects set apart for contemplation. To study African systems of divination and African art and ritual artifacts is to have one's presuppositions called into question and to seek to understand anew the nature of knowledge and the definition of art.
2. Max Weber, "The Social Psychology of the World Religions," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. E. H. Gerth and C. W. Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 281. Weber used this phrase in reference to "the core of religious rationalism"—that is, to the theodicies articulated by "religions of salvation," such as Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. For Weber, it was what distinguished religions of salvation from "primitive" types of religion whose cosmologies entailed a plurality of references, a multitude of spirits and gods for the explanation of suffering. In each religion of salvation, there is a single "fault" marking humankind, as in the Puritan declaration "In Adam's fall we sinneth all," and there is a single solution: the Path of the Buddha, the Law in Judaism, Christ in Christianity, and the Koran in Islam. Weber's distinction between the two types of religion is too restrictive, revealing his inadequate knowledge of religions beyond the four "world religions" and his Western intellectual propensity to think in terms of a single referent—what Jacques Derrida would later call "the onto-theological" habit of mind. Africa's religious systems are far more complex and more fully articulated than Weber was aware.
3. Griaule 1937; Geneviève Calame-Griaule, *Words and the Dogon World* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1965/86), pp. 523–27.
4. Evans-Pritchard 1937, pp. 258–386.
5. Mary Nooter Roberts and Allen F. Roberts, "Memory in Motion," in *Memory* 1996, pp. 180–85.
6. Marc L. Felix, in Marc L. Felix, Charles Meur, and Niangi Batulukisi, *100 Peoples of Zaïre and Their Sculpture* (Brussels: Zaïre Basin Art History Research Foundation, 1987), pp. 30–31, 62–63, 74–75.
7. Roberts and Roberts, "Memory in Motion," in *Memory* 1996, pp. 185–204.
8. René Devisch, "Mediumistic Divination among the Northern Yaka of Zaïre," in Peek 1991, pp. 112–32.
9. Sonia Silva, "The Birth of a Divination Basket," in *Chokwe!* 1998, pp. 140–51; Manuel Jordán, "Art and Divination among Chokwe, Lunda, Luvale, and Related Peoples of Northwestern Zambia," in Pemberton 2000.
10. Piet Meyer, "Divination among the Lobi of Burkina Faso," in Peek 1991, pp. 91–100.
11. Glaze 1981, pp. 54–74.
12. Abimbola 1976; Bascom 1969.
13. Louis Brenner, "Muslim Divination and the History of Religion in Sub-Saharan Africa," in Pemberton 2000.
14. *Kunst der Guro* 1985, pp. 23–26; Lorenz Homberger, "Where the Mouse Is Omniscient: The Mouse Oracle among the Guro and Baule," in Pemberton 2000.
15. Paul Gebauer, *Spider Divination in the Cameroons*, Public Museum Publication in Anthropology no. 10 (Milwaukee, Wis.: Public Museum, 1964).
16. *Baule* 1997, pp. 221–25.

17. Allen F. Roberts, "Difficult Decisions, Perilous Acts: Producing Potent Histories with Tabwa Boiling-Water Oracle," in Pemberton 2000.
18. Eliot Fratkin, "The *Loibon* as Sorcerer: A Samburu *Loibon* among the Ariaal Rendille, 1973–87," *Africa* 61, no. 3 (1991), pp. 319–21.
19. Wyatt MacGaffey, entries for catalogue numbers 64 and 65 in *Kings of Africa* 1992, p. 310; Marc L. Felix, *Art & Kongos: Les Peuples Kongophones et Leur Sculpture Biteki Bia Bakongo* (Brussels: Zaïre Basin Art History Research Center, 1995), p. 36.
20. John Mack, "Telling and Foretelling: African Divination and Art in Wider Perspective," in Pemberton 2000.
21. Plato, in his *Phaedrus* (a dialogue between Phaedrus and Socrates), has Socrates speak of "a madness which is a divine gift, and the source of the chiefest blessings granted to men. For prophecy is a madness, and the prophetess at Delphi and the priestesses at Dodona when out of their senses have conferred great benefits on Hellas, both in public and private life, but when in their senses few or none. And I might also tell you how the Sibyl and other inspired persons have given to many an one many an intimation of the future which has saved them from falling." Socrates goes on to distinguish between "prophecy, which foretells the future and is the noblest or arts, . . . an inspired madness" (and which, he notes, only differs from the Greek word for "madness" by one letter), and "augury," compared to which, "prophecy is more perfect and august . . . both in name and in fact, in the same proportion as the ancients testify, [as] madness is superior to a sane mind, for the one is only of human, but the other of divine origin." Quoted from *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. and with analyses and introductions by B. Jowett, vol. 1 (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1982), pp. 396, 449–50. See also *Plato's Phaedrus*, trans. and with introduction and commentary by R. Hackworth (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1952), pp. 56–57.
22. Evan M. Zuesse, "Divination," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 375–82.
23. Evans-Pritchard 1937, p. 69.
24. Ibid., p. 70.
25. Ibid., p. 75.
26. Ibid., pp. 352–57.
27. Ibid., pp. 359–74.
28. Jan-Lodewijk Grootaers, in a letter to the author, December 1999.
29. S. Terry Childs and Pierre de Maret, "Re/Constructing Luba Pasts," in *Memory* 1996, pp. 49–59.
30. William J. Dewey and S. Terry Childs, "Forging Memory," in *Memory* 1996, p. 62.
31. Roberts and Roberts, "Memory in Motion," in *Memory* 1996, p. 180.
32. Ibid., p. 126.
33. Ibid., p. 118.
34. Ibid., p. 189.
35. Both men and women may be Bilumbu diviners. Female royal diviners are referred to as Kifikwa. According to Roberts and Roberts, oral traditions suggest that, in the past, "female diviners were more common than their counterparts." Although today most Bilumbu diviners are male, some are female and are held in high regard. Ibid., p. 187.
36. Ibid., pp. 189–94.
37. Ibid., p. 195.
38. Turner 1975, p. 217.
39. Roberts and Roberts, "Memory in Motion," in *Memory* 1996, pp. 182–85.
40. Devisch 1985; Devisch, "Mediumistic Divination," in Peek 1991; René Devisch, "The Slit Drum and Body Imagery in Mediumistic Divination among the Yaka," in Pemberton 2000.
41. Devisch, "Mediumistic Divination," in Peek 1991, p. 112.
42. In every divination rite, an element of doubt is present on the part of the client. As Rosalind Shaw observed in her study of Temne divination in Sierra Leone, divination as a "truth-constructing process . . . presents an image of truth as enigmatic." In contrast to more analytical divinatory procedures, many forms of divination entail understanding and resolution that depend on an "intense act of vision required of the diviner" and an awareness by the suppliant that "powerful hidden knowledge" may have "ambivalent ethical connotations." Shaw, "Splitting Truths from Darkness: Epistemological Aspects of Temne Divination," in Peek 1991, pp. 141–44. Even in the consultations of Ifa, one can discuss matters of concern with the *babalawo* or ignore him, seek a second opinion by having Ifa cast again, or go to another diviner.
43. Z. S. Strother, "Smells and Bells: The Role of Skepticism in Pende Divination," in Pemberton 2000.
44. Turner 1975.
45. Devisch, "The Slit Drum," in Pemberton 2000.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
48. See *Yoruba* 1989, pp. 45–75.
49. The phrase "401 *orisa*" is a Yoruba convention meaning "many," "an abundance," "a plethora" of deities (*orisa*). It is similar to the biblical use of the number forty to refer to an extended period of time ("forty days and forty nights"). There are a number of *orisa* that are well known throughout Yorubaland, but even this number is not fixed. Quite often *orisa* have different names in different towns and among people within the same town. See John Pemberton, "A Cluster of Sacred Symbols: Orisha Worship among the Igbomina Yoruba of Ila-Orangun," *History of Religions* 7, no. 3 (1977), pp. 1–29; and Karin Barber, "How Man Makes God in West Africa: Yoruba Attitudes Towards the *Orisa*," *Africa* 51, no. 3 (1981), pp. 723–45.
50. Abimbola 1975; Abimbola 1976; Abimbola 1977.
51. Abimbola 1977, pp. 24–25.
52. Mack 1986; Mack, "Telling and Foretelling," in Pemberton 2000.
53. Pierre Vérin and Narivelo Rajasonarimanana, "Divination in Madagascar: The Antemoro Case and the Diffusion of Divination," in Peek 1991, p. 54.
54. Mack, "Telling and Foretelling," in Pemberton 2000.
55. Vérin and Rajasonarimanana, "Divination in Madagascar," in Peek 1991, pp. 53–68.
56. Mack, "Telling and Foretelling," in Pemberton 2000.
57. Ibid.
58. Peek 1991, pp. 193–208.
59. Roberta Smith, "Objects of Wonder That Are Too Potent for Mere Display," *New York Times*, September 11, 1998, p. B37.
60. Rowland Abiodun, "Ifa Art Objects: An Interpretation Based on Oral Tradition," in Abimbola 1975; Abiodun 1981.
61. To speak of African ritual artifacts as art is either to recontextualize them within a culturally legitimated post-Kantian aesthetic of formal properties, as a class of objects set aside in a museum or personal collection, or to be mindful of the extent to which the ritual artifacts of sub-Saharan Africa call into question such an aesthetic perception.
62. David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).
63. MacGaffey 1998, pp. 229–30.
64. Ibid., p. 230.
65. Abiodun 1983, pp. 13–30; Abiodun 1987, pp. 252–70; *Yoruba Art and Aesthetics* 1991, pp. 20–26.
66. Freedberg, *Power of Images*, p. 98.
67. Holland Cotter, "Remnants of Tibetan Splendor, Divine and Intimate," *New York Times*, October 29, 1999, p. E38.

1. Figures for a Trance Diviner: Couple

Baule, Côte d'Ivoire

Wood, pigment, beads, iron; male: H. 55.4 cm (21⅞ in.); female: H. 52.5 cm (20⅝ in.)

19th–20th century

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1969
1978.412.390,.391

From a Baule perspective, human experience evolves out of and remains inextricably tied to the ancestral world (*blolo*)—referred to as "the village of truth"—which controls and determines the fate of the living.[1] *Blolo* affects the quality of harvests or the availability of game as well as the physical well-being and fertility of members of the community. The underlying causes and solutions to collective and individual difficulties that arise are relayed by diviners. This information is revealed to them by the omniscient gods and ancestors within *blolo* through various methods, such as dreams, dances performed while in trance, and several divinatory instruments (including one activated by mice; see cat. no. 17).

Baule diviners (*komien*) are individuals that have been selected by spirits of the earth (*asye usu*) as mediums through whom important insights may be conveyed while in a trance state. Any individual may be selected to fulfill this role as seer. While an initial experience of this kind is invariably manifested as a dramatic possession, professional success requires an extended apprenticeship that can last years. One must learn the system of augurs, invocations, dances, and chants and develop the skill necessary to control the state of awareness through which the spirits communicate. On becoming initiated, an individual formalizes an agreement with the gods by honoring them through sacrifices and observing a special code of behavior. Successful *komien* may ultimately achieve renown and financial compensation,[2] but they have no political authority in their own right.

Critical to a *komien*'s professional practice is ownership, either through inheritance or purchase, of artifacts required by the spirits.[3] *Asye usu* are associated with untamed wilderness—also referred to as "the bush"—and various elements of the landscape. They are conceived of as grotesque beings whose demeanor is erratic and unpredictable.[4] Diviners commission figurative works as a means of attracting their attention and bringing them out of the bush and into the village. The sculpture is described as the *asye usu*'s "stool," because the spirit uses it as a resting point.[5] Such works represent idealized male or female figures in their prime, which the *asye usu* consider desirable forms to inhabit.[6] Often an individual work will subsequently be provided with a companion of the opposite sex, further enhancing its appeal and efficacy. Details such as posture, cicatrization markings, bodily ornaments, and coiffure may be suggested to the diviner by the *asye usu*.[7] The more elaborate the ornamental and decorative features of an individual work, the more time was invested in its execution by a sculptor, and the greater the expense to its owner. Bodily adornments are especially significant, because they confer on the wild and unruly *asye usu* culturally desirable attributes of civilization.

The elegant and refined couple shown here is especially successful in capturing such an ideal. Their figures are slender, with long torsos and muscular legs that are slightly flexed. Both reflect the same tranquil meditative attitude of contemplation, with their eyes closed and hands resting on their abdomens. They are symmetrical and fluid in design, and their facial features are described with precision and great attention to detail. The recessed eye sockets are accentuated with a layer of white kaolin, reflecting the practice of diviners, who apply kaolin to their own eyes and lips to enable them to see and hear the spirits while in trance.[8] This state is induced through exposure to sculptural representations of this kind and songs accompanied by striking an iron gong with an elegantly carved striker (see cat. no. 25).

The female figure is slightly smaller, with finely carved breasts that extend downward. Her torso is adorned with three small, raised points across the chest and a vertical column of points topped by several diagonal stripes. Her hair is arranged in an elaborate coiffure of sagittal tresses—patterned bands pulled back in parallel rows. She wears delicate strands of seed beads around her neck and hips, and metal bands and strands of beads around her ankles. The male figure's slightly larger scale is accentuated by the manner in which his hair has been dressed in two conical masses projecting from his forehead and crown. His facial features diverge from those of his female companion through the long vertical extension of his beard. Bodily adornments include beaded strands around his neck, hips, and ankles. Both figures' feet rest on circular bases and are covered with an incrustation of sacrificial matter. From time to time, sacrificial offerings of blood are sprinkled on the feet (but almost never applied to the face, in order that the work's aesthetic refinement not be marred).[9]

These elaborate figurative sculptures were originally designed to serve as a diviner's primary asset. The level of their artistry directly affects their owner's ability to prophesize by seducing nature spirits and inducing them to divulge insights into the human condition. When used by Baule diviners, such works not only flatter the *asye usu* but add to the theatrical spectacle of a public pronouncement of a divinatory revelation. They are housed in a shrine in the diviner's sleeping chamber, and are prominently displayed during the enactment of ritual performances in order to impress the community at large. Their aesthetic quality dazzles potential clients with the caliber and sophistication of the instruments associated with a particular specialist, and advertises the diviner's success as an intermediary with the spirit world. The enthusiasm of an audience's response in turn reinforces the *asye usu*'s desire to assist people. Consequently, diviners prosper by commissioning superlative figures as divinatory instruments, and this allows them the means to acquire additional works of even greater accomplishment from established artists. Ownership of extraordinary objects thus directly affects a diviner's professional standing and enhances public perception of his or her talent.[10]

1. Guerry 1975, pp. 138–44.
2. Ibid., p. 159; *Baule* 1997, pp. 224, 225, 227.
3. *Baule* 1997, p. 230.
4. Guerry 1975, p. 151; *Baule* 1997, pp. 224, 232.
5. *Baule* 1997, p. 332.
6. Ibid., p. 230.
7. Ibid., p. 231.
8. Ibid., p. 234.
9. Ibid., p. 232.
10. Ibid.

2. Divination Figurines

Senufo, Côte d'Ivoire
19th–20th century

left to right:

a. Copper alloy; H. 5.9 cm (2⅜ in.)
Arnold Syrop Collection

b. Copper alloy; H. 7 cm (2¾ in.)
Brian and Diane Leyden Collection

c. Copper alloy; H. 6.9 cm (2¾ in.)
Brian and Diane Leyden Collection

d. Copper alloy; H. 11 cm (4⅜ in.)
Brian and Diane Leyden Collection

e. Copper alloy; H. 7.5 cm (3 in.)
Brian and Diane Leyden Collection

f. Copper alloy; H. 4.9 cm (1⅞ in.)
Arnold Syrop Collection

g. Copper alloy; H. 4.8 cm (1⅞ in.)
Arnold Syrop Collection

h. Copper alloy; H. 6.9 cm (2¾ in.)
Brian and Diane Leyden Collection

i. Copper alloy; H. 4.2 cm (1⅝ in.)
Brian and Diane Leyden Collection

j. Copper alloy; H. 5.4 cm (2⅛ in.)
Arnold Syrop Collection

k. Copper alloy; H. 3.9 cm (1½ in.)
Brian and Diane Leyden Collection

The source of divine knowledge and power within the Senufo universe is Kolocolo, an omniscient Creator.[1] A distant force metaphorically represented by light and sky, this Supreme Being set in place the shared balance of power that diviners must negotiate. In the beginning, the earth's inhabitants were animals and immortal entities known as *madebele*. Shortly after the world's creation, a conflict developed between Kolocolo and the *madebele*, who challenged his authority. Consequently, the Creator revoked the *madebele*'s immortality and banished them from the firmament, condemning their souls to remain invisibly on earth. He further displaced the *madebele* by creating human beings, who appropriated their farming techniques, social institutions, and crafts and chased them out of the village and into the bush along with the animals —a rupture that lies at the origin of a fundamental opposition between village and bush. To this day, Senufo society is largely agrarian, intermixed with wood-carvers, brass-casters, blacksmiths, and other artisan groups (all of which are also distinct ethnic groups), who have lived among the farmers for centuries and have become an integral part of their culture.[2]

As a result of the exile of the *madebele*, a tense and volatile relationship has governed their interaction with humans ever since. Outside the boundaries of the village, the natural landscape is overrun by these invisible bush spirits, who populate its waterways, mountains, and even the fields cultivated by Senufo farmers. Unknowing human beings continually disturb them inadvertently, provoking them to lash out in anger. Within Senufo society, diviners are delegated the role of intermediaries with the potentially hostile *madebele*. In order to effectively placate them, the diviners cultivate a relationship of mutual respect and seek to induce them to act as messengers from the spirit world. Diviners rely on artists to create the works required for communicating with the *madebele* and the artifacts that serve as antidotes to their clients' problems.

Most Senufo diviners receive their training as members of Sandogo, a powerful women's organization that unites female leaders from a community's various households. Sandogo is invested with the responsibility for maintaining good relationships with the spirit world and for overseeing important social contracts, including guidelines concerning descent. Only a select few of its members, however, are capable of becoming Sandobele (singular, Sando)—dedicating themselves to mastering the complex system of signs that must be interpreted by professional diviners. Divination may also become an individual's calling as a result of having committed an action that incites a bush spirit's wrath.

Sandobele are consulted by members of the community for many different reasons, from the desire to fulfill a wish to the need to determine the cause of an illness or a natural disaster. The divination technique used by Sandobele depends on close interaction with the *madebele*. Diviners make a special effort to attract the *madebele* by seducing them with a work environment of outstanding aesthetic appeal, the centerpiece of which is a pair of figurines (*tugubele*) representing an idealized image of them. The divination ritual is initiated when the diviner calls up the *madebele*, who reside within the figurines while being interrogated.

The particular features of the *tugubele* are determined by the *madebele*, who appear

to the diviner in her dreams. She describes them to an artist, whose task is then to capture their essential qualities accurately in the form of the sculpted figurines; sometimes, details are communicated by the spirits through the artist's own dreams. This level of precision is highly valued by the *madebele*, and the intimacy of a diviner's relationship with her spiritual partners is measured by the number of idiosyncratic elements—such as coiffure designs and cicatrization markings—that are incorporated into these idealized portraits.

During the early years of a diviner's career, such works are made of copper alloy. Eventually, Sandobele aspire to acquire more costly and impressive wood versions featuring even finer detail. The most inexpensive, generic *tugubele* sold at market represent their subject with a minimum of specificity and are thus considered the least effective divinatory instruments. Sandobele who are able to commission flashier, more costly works generally retain the less refined ones as well. Many diviners also acquire miniature twin figurines (*ngaabele*) made of copper alloy, for their spiritual power to act as mediators and to effect great good or harm. Within Senufo cosmology, the importance of balancing gender is repeatedly emphasized. The offspring of the first human couple was a set of male and female twins; likewise, the *madebele* are conceived of as male and female pairs.

Tugubele display a broad range of formal possibilities and a high level of inventiveness, both of which are apparent in the group presented here. These delicate and refined miniatures were commissioned to delight the eye and convey the spirits' wisdom and guidance in resolving a variety of problems faced by members of Senufo communities.[3] Such works forge the necessary collaboration between diviner and *madebele*, and their small scale reflects the intimate nature of that relationship. Despite the size of these objects, however, the artists who designed them invested them with the same qualities of elegance, balance, and proportion as the finest monumental works of Senufo sculpture. In doing so, they created works whose beauty appealed to the *madebele*, thus making them effective oracles.[4]

In some of these figurines, the human form has been reduced to a linear silhouette, while others are far more modeled, depicting figures shifting their weight in classical contrapposto stances or articulated with anatomical details such as nipples, umbilicus, shoulder blades, and buttocks. Despite the great sense of artistic license they embody, certain basic stylistic features provide a thread of continuity. Male and female figures are both invariably depicted with arms resting on their hips. This uniform posture affords a play of negative and positive space between the torso and the contour of the arms. Similarly, within the conventions of bilateral symmetry established for twin figures, the richness of creative solutions is extraordinary. The artists who make such figurines credit the high level of innovation to the bush spirits, inspiring them with images revealed in dreams (the diviners' and/or their own).

The *madebele*, while they are residing in the figurines, direct the course of *tyeli*, the divination technique practiced by Sandobele. During *tyeli*, the client is seated facing the diviner as she sifts through a set of disparate elements that she has collected, most of which constitute signs suggested by the spirits that guide her.[5] She shakes these together in a bowl and casts them before the *tugubele*. Through the resulting configuration of objects, the *madebele* communicate their insights into the situation under investigation and, after ascertaining the cause of the problem, direct the Sando's hand to one of the objects. This object conveys a particular symbolic meaning that determines a specific course of action for the client to take to resolve his or her problem.

Problems discerned through divination and the measures recommended for their resolution are both referred to by the term *yawiige*, meaning "something that follows you." The action most commonly prescribed is to commission brass ornaments such as pendants, bracelets, anklets, and rings. These, like the *tugubele* figures, are of the highest possible aesthetic quality, designed to please the *madebele*, and their artistry and level of workmanship are directly related to their efficacy. In addition to redressing conflicts uncovered through divination, they will subsequently serve to protect the owner from all harm.

1. Veirman 1996, pp. 147–49.
2. Glaze 1981, pp. xii, xiv, 4–6.
3. Ibid., p. 67.
4. Anita Glaze notes that "speaking is indeed one of the two principal purposes of the figure sculpture in the Sando [diviner]'s own thinking; the other is visual enhancement. Because they 'speak,' the *madebele* sculpture[s] can properly be called oracles. Their primary importance is their role as the mouthpieces or messengers of beings in the supernatural world." Ibid., pp. 67, 69.
5. A Sando diviner's collection of objects is typically stored in a large, lidded basket. It is composed of an assortment of elements, including miniature symbols that evoke essential activities in the life of the community and equipment used in divination as well as more abstract symbols and natural matter such as seeds or shells. Elements are also added to enhance the aesthetic quality of the ensemble and to "camouflage the core set from the client and prevent his or her comprehension of the technique." Ibid., pp. 64, 66.

3. Diviner's Figure: Equestrian (*Syonfolo*)

Senufo, Côte d'Ivoire

Wood, paint; H. 19.7 cm (7¾ in.)

19th–20th century

Museum Rietberg, Zurich RAF 318

Senufo wood and copper-alloy figurines that depict equestrian warriors, such as the one shown here, are not essential components of a Sando diviner's kit (see cat. no. 2). Instead, they constitute artistically accomplished tributes to the professional success of the diviners who commissioned them.[1] The dazzling beauty of these prestige pieces, known as *tana* ("ornamental" forms that contribute a spectacular and ostentatious effect), amplifies the efficacy of the diviner's basic set of implements by enhancing her ability to attract the *madebele*'s interest and favor.[2] Since only the most successful diviners can afford to engage the better sculptors to create such works, their ownership and display in turn indicate to the community at large the diviner's attainment of an exceptional level of professional competence.

In this representation of a warrior atop his steed, the duality of the motif is underscored visually through the artist's dynamic interpretation: within a harmonious composition that consistently reduces features to essential forms, horse and rider are distinguished from each other through a formal tension produced by juxtaposing the human figure's sharp angularity with the rectilinear treatment of the horse. The warrior's upper body is composed of a series of features that taper into sharp points: at the top is the sagittal crest that crowns the head, and below it the elongated mouth, the protruding breasts and abdomen, and an arm bent at the elbow. In contrast, the horse is essentially a horizontal mass with a series of blocklike, vertical appendages: the head hanging down, two supporting leg elements, and a tail. At the visual point of intersection of horse and rider, however, they are unified, where the rider's left hand is held flat along the horse's flank. This accentuates the complete fusion of the figure's lower body with the horse.

As emblems of professional success acquired by diviners at the height of their careers, equestrian figures such as this one are synonymous with spiritual efficacy.[3] Referred to as "lord of the horse" (*syonfolo*), this image of martial strength suggests formidable power. Among Senufo elders, the motif evokes memories of mounted invaders from faraway territories—primarily the Djula peoples from the north—whose superior strength wreaked devastation upon local inhabitants during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The foreign character of the image complements the otherworldliness of the *madebele*, while the assured confidence with which the rider guides his horse and carries his weaponry alludes to the diviner's skill. No mere aesthetic flourish or esoteric luxury item, this supplement to a diviner's essential tools makes a forceful visual statement evoking the dynamics of power and success in Senufo society.

1. Glaze 1981, p. 720.
2. Anita Jean Glaze, "Senufo Ornament and Decorative Arts," *African Arts* 12, no. 1 (1978), p. 63.
3. *Kunst der Senufo* 1988, p. 85.

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4. Oracle Figure (*Kafigeledjo*)

Senufo, Côte d'Ivoire

Wood, iron, bone, commercially woven fiber, organic material; H. 82.6 cm (32½ in.)

19th–20th century

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Raymond Wielgus, 1964 1978.412.488

A hybrid creation that lies outside the realm of anything recognizable in nature, this oracle figure deliberately provokes anxiety through its shrouded anonymity and the sense of suffocation and entrapment it suggests. Such works and the ritual practice in which they are used are both known as *kafigeledjo*, a term that is variously translated as "he who speaks the truth," "tell the truth," or "saying true things." The figures give visual representation to invisible bush spirits and function as divination devices.[1] In contrast to the sublime humanism of works of Senufo Sando divination (see cat. nos. 2, 3), they clearly embody a wild and unsettling anti-aesthetic.

Kafigeledjo divination is used to uncover misdeeds, false testimony, and culpability. Like the *tyeli* divination technique practiced by Sandobele (see cat. no. 2), this pursuit of truth ultimately seeks to preserve and uphold Senufo social guidelines concerning descent. It does so by unveiling illicit behavior and by punishing with supernatural sanctions those who violate rules pertaining to forbidden sexual relations

and exogamous marriage. The *kafigeledjo* figure is concealed within a small hut, and although it has the potential to affect all members of a Senufo community, access to this oracle figure is restricted to the most enlightened senior male and, occasionally, female members. These elders occupy positions of leadership, as initiates into the highest level of esoteric knowledge imparted by Poro, the Senufo men's initiation association. Poro and its counterpart, Sandogo (the Senufo women's association), function as a system of government and oversee religious education and all ritual practices.[2] *Kafigeledjo* is reputed to have been an instrument of such elites throughout Senufo society in the past, but more recently it has been the sole province of the Kulebele wood-carvers, a Senufo artisan subgroup in the Korhogo region.[3]

Kafigeledjo is thus a formidable force wielded by Kulebele leaders to distinguish their heritage and preserve the special interests of their constituents.[4] In order to harness its power and operate it successfully, these leaders establish their commitment through ritual sacrifices, which unevenly cover the oracle figure's surface with crusty matter. A loosely fitting bodysuit made of a coarse fiber textile (probably burlap) exposes only the feet of the figural representation within; above the neck—where the garment is cinched tightly by a cord—the cloth flares out in an inverted cone. The sleeves are empty and weighted down by appendages tied to them with cord: on the figure's left side, a bone from a large bird, and on its right, a hooklike form made of iron (a scythe?), which extends to the ground.[5] The figure's head is crowned by a row of feathers interspersed with porcupine quills. At the figure's back, two packets of organic materials are suspended by a knotted cord, giving the appearance of weighing the figure down. The effect of engulfing the figure in a textile sack blurs the boundaries between material and immaterial, playing with the ambiguity between obscured and revealed form.

The details regarding usage of *kafigeledjo* figures are shrouded in secrecy. Moreover, no documentation exists to provide descriptions of how such works operated or were physically manipulated. Beyond identifying their divinatory role and the sense of intimidation they inspire, commentaries also fail to elucidate the significance of the *kafigeledjo*'s appearance. On a purely descriptive level, its design resembles that of Fila, a genre of Senufo masquerade costume found throughout the Kufolo region. The term *fila* is literally "dye-painted cloth," a patterned textile associated with *madebele* and Sando divination.[6] When performing the masquerade, referred to as a "divination cloth masquerade" or "amulet masquerade," a Fila dancer wears the textile sack-style in a manner that recalls *kafigeledjo*'s bodysuit. Underlying this formal affinity, the design and the symbolism of both representations are dictated by local divination systems. Fila masquerades are commissioned as part of a Sando diviner's prescription for a female client, to placate bush spirits she may have offended. She must arrange for someone to perform silently as a Fila dancer at funerals as a form of offering for the rest of her life. It is impossible to say whether *kafigeledjo* figures influenced the costume of Fila dancers or vice versa. Whatever the origin of the imagery, to some extent they may be considered inversions of each other: one represents a wild force that has been subdued and harnessed as a means for unveiling and punishing transgressions, while the other embodies a hopeful appeal directed toward such an entity for social and spiritual harmony to be restored.

1. *Kunst der Senufo* 1988.
2. Glaze 1981.
3. *Kunst der Senufo* 1988; Dolores Richter, *Art, Economics and Change: The Kulebele of Northern Ivory Coast* (La Jolla, Calif.: Psych/Graphic Publishers, 1980).
4. Richter, *Art, Economics and Change*, p. 57.
5. In most *kafigeledjo* figures, both of these appendages are made of wood, rather than bone or iron, but it is typical for one of them to be curved, as in this example.
6. Glaze 1981, pp. 79, 221.

5. Yassi Society Figure: Female Figure with Tray Base

Sherbro, Kanwo, Sitwa Chiefdom, Sherbro Island, Sierra Leone

Wood; 45 x 22 cm (17¾ x 8⅝ in.)

19th–20th century

University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia 37-22-279

In many cultures throughout what is now Sierra Leone, the term "medicine" has historically been used to characterize power and knowledge controlled by members of a number of different secret societies. Such groups establish rules of social conduct, which the "medicines" guarantee will be respected. Their efficacy in enforcing sanctions derives from a spiritual agent that must be invoked to render their ingredients effective.

According to Sherbro belief, all deaths and diseases, except those caused by obvious

violence, are attributed to potent "medicines" or to witchcraft, activated when a rule of conduct mandated by a "medicine" has been violated. Although most "medicines" are intended to cause injury or death, each has an antidote, which can be applied only in the presence of the agent or person who controls it.[1] Consequently, when individuals fall ill, they will consult a diviner (*theng no*) to determine what "medicine" has caused their illness. In order to be treated for their ailment, they must ultimately appear before the "medicine," confess to a transgression, and provide compensation.

One such especially potent "medicine," or spiritual force, was once at the core of the Sherbro Yassi society. Yassi was historically active in both Mende and Sherbro communities. Its equivalent in Mende culture, Njayei, was characterized as an association concerned with the cure of certain mental conditions as well as the propagation of agricultural fertility. Membership was selective, predominantly female, and, according to some accounts, included those to whom the empowering "medicine" appeared in a dream.[2] At the apex of its hierarchy of leadership, the supreme head was known as Behku Mama. Next in importance was Yamama, followed by a class of high-ranking officials with the title Kambeh.

This beautifully carved figure—collected by Henry Usher Hall during his 1936–37 expedition to Sherbro Island for the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology—was conceived as a serene sibyl to serve as the spirit medium for a force that has no known, defined form. A tranquil and silent priestess, she provided insights into past human misconduct and the key to future redemption in response to inquiries made on behalf of suppliants. The work's distinctive design integrates a female figure and a medicinal receptacle into a unified composition. Depicted from the waist up, with hands clasped together below her breasts, the figure appears to levitate above the surface of the tray. Despite her ethereal quality, she embodies Sherbro ideals of cultivated refinement and healthy, mature womanhood through her elaborately designed coiffure, luminous skin, and long neck with pronounced neck rings. Hall's documentation

indicates that such a work was placed as a guardian in front of the compartment within the Yassi meetinghouse where the "medicine" was kept. The Yassi structure functioned as a treatment center for those afflicted by the "medicine," and its presence was distinguished in the community by a trademark sign of white, black, yellow, and brown spots.

Such works were removed from the Yassi meetinghouse and carried aloft in public processions to celebrate the initiation of new members and to commemorate a member's death. "When newly initiated members are brought before the public," observed Hall, "one of the Kambe[h] leads the procession carrying the figure on her head. Portions of the 'Yassi medicine' are placed in the bowl."[3]

Although Hall simply emphasized its therapeutic associations, an earlier commentator on the use of Yassi sculpture, T. J. Alldridge, described it as having a divinatory function in which it acted as a spirit mediator for the "medicine."[4] According to Alldridge, the intangible Yassi force interacted with its caretakers through this figurative spokeswoman, whom he referred to as "Minsereh."[5] On such occasions, the Yamama or Kambeh interrogated the sculptural representation to establish whether the Yassi "medicine" had been responsible for an individual's problem. In order for it to take on the role of interpreter, the figure was anointed with the "medicine." The Yassi official then held the figure at waist level in both hands and posed questions concerning the individual's affliction. This was addressed through inquiries into whether the individual might have violated some form of Yassi social mores. The figure signaled negative responses through gradual inclinations toward the official's chest and assented by remaining immobile.[6] Beyond the context of these consultations, the figures were also purported to communicate with Yassi leaders through dreams.

A work such as this, in addition to acting as the public insignia of a Yassi society and as a visual metaphor for the individuals invested with the powers of the "medicine," enabled the Sherbro community to have a concrete, tangible point of contact with this intangible force. Other separate and distinct regional sculptural traditions reflect a comparable dynamic among "medicines," those who have knowledge of their properties, and members of the community. Both Sherbro and Mende female initiation societies have similar full-bodied representations of female figures that stand beside the "medicine" in the meetinghouse and are brought out and displayed on public occasions.[7] Such works feature a similar idealized feminine aesthetic, suggesting a powerful connection between transcendent beauty and spiritual mediation.

1. Hall 1938, p. 11.
2. Little 1951, p. 240.
3. Hall, quoted in Hart 1984, p. 85.
4. Alldridge 1901, pp. 147–48.
5. W. A. Hart has suggested that when Alldridge inquired about the subject of such representations and they were described to him as *min* (the Sherbro term for "spirit"), he misunderstood *min si le* ("the spirits") to be a proper name. In contrast, Hall used the term "Kambe[h]," which is also the name of the Yassi official who appears to have been designated to interact with the sculpture most extensively. Hart 1984, pp. 84–85.
6. Alldridge 1901, p. 148.
7. Hart 1984, pp. 84–86.

6. Figure

Mumuye, Nigeria

Wood, organic material; H. 99 cm (39 in.)

19th–20th century

Fondation Beyeler, Riehen (Basel)

Sculptors in Nigeria's Benue River valley have created a broad range of variations on the bold conception of the human form represented by this piece. Although the role such works originally played is undocumented, and therefore remains unclear, the primary one that has been attributed to them is as an oracle. Mumuye sculptural works, which range in scale from 20 to 160 centimeters, appear to have been deployed for a variety of needs, including divination, healing, and protection.[1]

According to Jan Strybol, figurative sculpture enhanced the influence and reputations of leaders and religious specialists in Mumuye society by furthering their efforts to predict the future, heal the sick, and make rain fall.[2] Their interaction with these figurative implements is characterized as a dialogue prompted by physical handling. According to some accounts, applications of substances such as the juice of the gadele plant on the figure's face might serve as a catalyst for activating its power to communicate. When manipulated over the course of judicial trials, the figure may judge the veracity of testimony provided, and its heightened awareness enables it to identify criminals.[3]

In the dynamic figural abstraction shown here, the attenuated columnar form of the torso constitutes the dominant feature. Within its boundaries, a lyrical play of negative and positive space unfolds around the vertical axis framed and circumscribed by bodily appendages. At the top, the helmetlike head includes two prominent sagittal crests flanked by lateral extensions. The only facial feature given form here is the gaping orifice of the mouth.

The smooth, polished surface of the torso is minimally articulated through finely rendered nipples and a boldly projecting conical navel carved in relief. The shoulders are represented as a continuous mass that extends down into long lateral arms, bent at the elbows; the forearms reach around toward the front, terminating in the abbreviated masses of the hands at the level of the pelvis. At this juncture, the lower body, consisting of a horizontal element that bridges blocky legs with accented knees, echoes the passages of the shoulders and the head. A sense of vitality and a suggestion of swaying motion are introduced into the design through subtle modulations of the bilateral symmetry. These include the slightly higher angle of the arm and shifting of weight on the figure's left side.

This monumental sculpture is very closely related in form to one in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, attributed by Arnold Rubin on stylistic grounds to the regionally important carving center of Pantisawa.[4] Although sculptors do not ordinarily enjoy positions of privilege in Mumuye society, the work of the best sculptors is held in sufficiently high regard that their reputations live on beyond their lifetime.[5]

1. Arnold Rubin, entries for cat. nos. 91 and 92 in *For Spirits and Kings: African Art from the Paul and Ruth Tishman Collection,* ed. Susan M. Vogel, exh. cat. (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1981), p. 155.
2. Jan Strybol, "Les Mumuye," in *Arts du Nigéria: Collection du Musée des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie* (Paris: Réunion des Musée Nationaux, 1997), p. 239.
3. Philip Fry, "Essai sur la Statuaire Mumuye," *Objets et Mondes* 10, no. 1 (1970), p. 27.
4. Rubin, in *For Spirits and Kings*, p. 155.
5. Fry, "Essai," p. 27; Strybol, "Les Mumuye," p. 279.

7. Female Figure (*Kosi*)

Lumbo, Gabon

Wood, glass inlay, string, metal; H. 39.4 cm (15½ in.)

19th century

Cincinnati Art Museum, Museum Purchase: Steckelmann Collection, gift by special subscription 1890.1545

In southern Gabon's Ngounie River region, individuals who suffer from chronic ailments that are not readily resolved through ordinary medical prescriptions are generally perceived to be victims of mystical aggression. In such instances, family members appeal to a divination specialist, known as an *nganga kosi*, to assist in alleviating the problem. In order to determine the culprit's identity and exact retribution, they use an instrument referred to as a *kosi*.[1] The introduction of *kosi* as an investigative force within the region is attributed to Nzebi, Massango, and Mitsogho peoples. There is an extraordinary variety of *kosi* in a wide range of forms, including a genre of figurative *kosi*, of which this work is an example.[2] These are sculptural forms that have undergone a transformation (*oukalousse*) performed by an *nganga.*

Figurative *kosi* are portraits of spirits contained within the sculpture itself. Local conceptual definitions of such works emphasize the importance of an artist's ability to evoke lifelike qualities inspired by specific subjects. An *nganga* might commission the sculpture as a physical manifestation of some individual's essence, or life force, which he has captured to help him gather information in order to resolve a

problem. Alternatively, the *kosi* may depict a victim whose case is under investigation. The fact that women are most frequently the subjects of *kosi* reflects the common perception that they are especially vulnerable to being controlled or victimized by members of their extended families. Women of alluring beauty present especially desirable subjects, since *kosi* also function as ruses or traps (*diele*), whose magnetic powers irresistibly attract culprits.

The subject of such a representation is mystically directed by the *nganga*, who sends it on missions, enabling him to pursue justice no matter what the geographical distances involved. Both the artist's and the *nganga*'s contributions to its basic properties reinforce each other in essential ways. While the artist is concerned with achieving a convincingly lifelike likeness, the *nganga* who owns it invests it with a dynamic essence.

This elegantly poised female figure was at once a diviner's most sophisticated investigative agent and a portrait of idealized beauty. Rendered with extreme naturalism, its features are articulated with exacting precision within its smooth, fluid contours. The figure is enhanced extensively through classical forms of bodily ornamentation from the nineteenth century that are no longer in use. These include an ornate helmetlike coiffure that frames the face, crowned by a prominent sagittal crest, as well as facial and bodily cicatrization markings. Lozenge motifs appear on the forehead, temples, and stomach, while two rows of V's extend across the chest. The figure's graceful stance, with knees bent, long and slender arms extended downward, and hands holding medicinal gourds, suggests that the artist has depicted her dancing. This lifelike quality is further reinforced by her penetrating gaze, which is intensified through additions of glass inlay. Collected during the late 1800s, this work was acquired by Carl Steckelmann of Columbus, Indiana, an agent for an English trading company.

1. Alisa LaGamma, "The Art of the Punu 'Mukudj' Masquerade: Portrait of an Equatorial Society" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1996), pp. 119–26.
2. Sculptural works in this style have been created throughout the region by culturally related groups categorized since colonialism as ethnically distinct. Consequently, various attributions have been used in the past by Western art historians in their attempts to classify them. These have included "Lumbo," "Massango," "Ngunye River," and "Shira Punu." The term "Shira Punu," proposed by Leon Siroto in *African Spirit Images* 1976, draws on regional linguistic studies to recognize a related cultural tradition shared by Eshira, Lumbo, Massango, and Punu peoples.

8. Figure

Hungaan, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Wood, horn, seed pod, cord; H. 40 cm (15¾ in.)

19th century

Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Museum für Völkerkunde III C 3310a-b

Originally empowered by a Hungaan ritual expert, this work stands as the most elaborate sculptural form of its kind to have been preserved in the West. It was collected in 1886 by Richard Kund and Hans Tappenback, the first Europeans to cross the Kwilu region; no documentation of its use at that time was recorded, and the larger tradition to which this figure belonged came to an end shortly thereafter. This work's precise ritual function is unknown, but, generally, figurative sculpture in Hungaan society is associated with ritual experts (*nga*) specializing in protection, healing, and divination.

Although there is no extensive contextual data for any Hungaan sculptural artifacts in Western collections today, a diverse range of figurative genres appears to have once existed. Surviving evidence indicates that there was a close relationship between Hungaan leaders and the *nga*, and that such works were managed by them jointly to promote the fertility, well-being, and longevity of their communities. A family authority (*leme*) acted as guardian of a series of power-charged lineage symbols, including figurative sculptures, created and activated by specialized experts with the help of the ancestors.[1] Likewise, village headmen and chiefs underwent an initiation during which they acquired knowledge from elders and ritual experts and became caretakers of ritually consecrated works on behalf of their constituents.

Ritual specialists were male or female members of the same lineages that produced headmen and chiefs who had undergone the prescribed initiations, enabling them to fulfill a variety of essential needs. Some of these specializations were protective in nature or enhanced the quality of life, while others ensured the successful outcome of activities such as hunting and warfare. Those charged with divination were referred to as *nganga ngomo*. *Nganga kiluba* were divination specialists who exposed liars and thieves, using male and female figurines along with a pot of clay as instruments of detection. Miniature figurines, on the intimate scale of those appended to this work, are associated with ritual fertility experts known as *nganga bilele*.[2] Figurines consecrated with kaolin and blood, known as *minkonki*, helped ordinary individuals in preserving property and were worn as protective amulets by women and children, hung in domestic contexts, or attached to poles in fields. Ritual sculptures were often collectively stored in a shrine structure whose sacredness was indicated by one or more larger figurative works accompanied by a bundle of powerful materials displayed on an exterior platform.

As in related Kongo traditions, works such as the figure shown here were activated according to specific rules and prescriptions.[3] In its combination of a large-scale central figure and miniature figurine attachments in the same style, this example appears to have been created for both the public good and the more personal needs of individuals. The use of bold, sweeping lines to define the human form is shared by other regional traditions, such as those of the Mbala, Suku, and Yansi.[4]

By drawing analogies with neighboring traditions, it has been suggested that the supplementary figurines may have provided a means of conferring the central figure's power on a specialist's individual patients.[5] Ten of these figurines are suspended by a cord tied around the main figure's neck, along with an animal horn and a large wooden bell, obscuring the rounded form of its stomach. In a distinctive contemplative gesture, the figures' hands are raised to the mouth, so that they support the chin and are fused with the lips. The hair is dressed in a traditional coiffure composed of a high sagittal crest and two lateral ones that extend down the back, and a columnar vessel is balanced on top of the head.

In its depiction of a central protagonist deeply immersed in thought and acting as an anchor for a multitude of others, this work alludes to an ideal of harmony and balance, toward which members of Hungaan society aspired. Whatever specific needs it may have addressed, its larger subject is the relationship between spiritually enlightened leaders and the specialists who advised and supported them, as well as the dissemination of their expertise to individuals in need.

1. Daniel Biebuyck, *The Arts of Zaïre*, vol. 1: *Southwestern Zaïre* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985–86), pp. 154–55.
2. Ruth Engwall, cited in ibid., p. 158.
3. Biebuyck, *Southwestern Zaïre*, pp. 153, 155.
4. Ibid., p. 157.
5. Ibid., p. 158.

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9. *Nkisi Nkondi:* Mangaaka

Yombe, Democratic Republic of the Congo
Wood, metal, shells; H. 121 cm (47½ in.)
ca. 1880–1910
Private collection

The Yombe are a subgroup within the extended Kongo culture. In Kongo cosmology, existence is regarded as an infinite continuum of a cyclical nature.[1] The universe consists of a bipartite division between "this world" and the "land of the dead," which are separated by a body of water, *kalunga*. Across this barrier an inversion occurs, so that at the rising and the setting of the sun, the living and the dead exchange day and night.[2] Within these parallel realms of experience, existence unfolds in a relationship that is largely, though not entirely, symmetrical and complementary. It is the responsibility of leaders to mediate whatever conflicts arise.

In Kongo culture, the highly complex, sophisticated instruments known as *minkisi* (singular, *nkisi*) have afforded diviners extraordinary powers of perception. *Minkisi* are composed and operated by the Kongo intelligentsia, who respond to physical and social crises by striving to restore spiritual equilibrium.[3] These specialists, including diviners, healers, and adjudicators, have been compared to Western scientists.[4] Through their accrued wisdom, specific types of *minkisi* have been designed to address particular needs.

At the core of every material *nkisi* is a spiritual force that has been selected and induced to submit to some degree of human control,[5] and this force defines an *nkisi*'s character. In an *nkisi* deployed for divination, the force is usually an ancestral spirit and is contained in a receptacle that may range from a carefully sculpted wooden figure to a visually unremarkable object such as an ordinary clay pot, a snail shell, or raffia cloth.[6] *Minkondi* (singular, *nkondi*, meaning "hunter") are an especially powerful category of *minkisi*, primarily associated with moral revelation. An *nkisi nkondi*'s primary purpose was to pursue and expose witches, thieves, adulterers, and other wrongdoers.[7] Ritual experts known as *banganga* (singular, *nganga*) equipped themselves with *minkondi* to expose the perpetrators of antisocial acts on behalf of clients who had been victimized.

This particular figure is an unusually eloquent example of a distinct genre of *minkondi* known as Mangaaka, created to house the greatest spirit of the Mayombe region.[8] Here, Mangaaka's power was given visual form by a sculptor in the Chiloango River basin between 1880 and 1910. Art historian Ezio Bassani has identified this work as belonging to a group of more than a dozen related monumental sculptures attributed to the combined efforts of that Chiloango River master's workshop and an *nganga*.[9] Through this collaboration, these specialists developed a series of visual and conceptual metaphors that determined the figure's appearance and the internal and external materials selected to empower it. In Kongo culture, however,

the *nganga* was considered its primary author.[10]

Among Mangaaka's most expressive features are its posture, expression, and scale. This figure's physiognomy and stance convey a sense of physical power and heightened awareness. Its boldly conceived eyes, semicircles cut from white shells that have been affixed to the wooden surface, are accentuated by dark pupils and prominent carved eyebrows; and its parted lips reveal sharply filed teeth. The head is crowned by a cap defined by an incised pattern of interlace with a knoblike projection at the apex. This special headdress of leadership, *mpu*, is associated with the authority and power of chiefs and priests in ancient Kongo culture.[11]

The figure's broad, rounded shoulders form a continuous curved arch extending downward and outward, with arms bent at the elbows and hands resting on the hips. A finely rendered plaited cord is knotted around each of its muscular upper arms. Such woven fiber bands, *nsunga*, were prescribed by an *nganga* as a protective barrier to shield the wearer from harm.[12] In the middle of the abdomen, a white cowrie shell is placed at the center of a protruding mass. At the base, its relatively short legs rest on blocks, contributing to the figure's towering presence. The fact that the figure's head and upper body are thrust slightly forward and its lips are parted suggests that it is portrayed forcefully delivering a statement before an audience. It has been proposed that the figure's posture and gesture convey an attitude of heightened awareness, alertness, and extreme assertiveness, and a spirit of challenge.[13]

Such works are carved from *Canarium scheinfurthii*, a tree that is sacred for *minkondi*.[14] The definition that is given here to Mangaaka's face and body is relatively rare. Often the bodies of figural *minkisi* are much more roughly hewn, in anticipation of their serving as the site for empowering matter. Once they leave the carver's hand, a second creative phase begins, directed by the diviner.[15] His contributions physically alter the work, adding internally and externally such materials as white clay or grave dirt, associated with the realm of the ancestors and their clairvoyance, or materials drawn from animal and plant sources because their names suggest attributes that have the potential to enhance the *nkisi*'s performance. While some of these "medicines" serve to attract the spirit that activates the *nkisi*, other types direct it to focus on and address potential crises.[16]

The concentration of empowering additions to this work's abdomen is consistent with other sculptures attributed to the same workshop. Wyatt MacGaffey has commented on the significance of this body part by noting that *myooyo*, the term for "belly," also means "life."[17] In Kongo society, the power that enables individuals to accomplish extraordinary feats is *kundu*, an organ situated within the stomach. When controlled for personal gain, the *kundu* is perceived as harmful to others, whereas leaders, elders, and diviners may control its power for some greater good.[18] Robert Farris Thompson suggests that the protrusion of Mangaaka's abdomen accented with a shell alludes to *kundu* and to the threshold into a parallel spiritual realm inhabited by the dead.[19] Originally, this mediating role would have been further enhanced by rubbing the entire surface of the figure with red clay.[20]

In contrast to the Western idea that an artist's finished work is to be regarded as unalterable, here nails, spikes, and other iron elements were later inserted around the figure's chin, into its shoulders, and over much of its torso—additions that inevitably have a powerful effect on a viewer's experience of the work. They were not part of the original design but were added over a period of time. A diviner would use the power figure for different consultations, adding to it and altering it according to the requirement of the case. Since Christian images of various martyred saints, studded with piercing elements, were introduced into the region from Portugal beginning in the sixteenth century, it has been suggested that Kongo

culture may have drawn upon its experience of that visual vocabulary.[21]

In analyzing a related work, Thompson distinguished three forms of iron hardware that make up its bristling armature, suggesting that each of them reflects and physically represents a particular purpose.[22] This would correspond to the exacting precision with which the *nkisi*'s internal contents are selected. Due to the preponderance of rectangular-shaped blades (*mbeezi*), this work appears to have been used primarily for important matters of civil jurisprudence. At the turn of the century, it was documented that nails driven into *minkondi* provided a means of determining an accused person's culpability. The suspect would be directed to remove the nail with his or her hands, and if he/she failed, this was interpreted as a sign of guilt.[23] Another use for nails driven into sculpture was to seal agreements with a vow.[24]

1. MacGaffey 1986, p. 44.
2. Ibid., p. 43.
3. *Astonishment and Power* 1993, p. 60.
4. MacGaffey 1986, p. 89.
5. MacGaffey 1991, p. 4.
6. *Astonishment and Power* 1993, p. 60.
7. Ibid., p. 76.
8. Thompson 1978, p. 219.
9. Ezio Bassani, "Kongo Nail Fetishes from the Chiloango River Area," *African Arts* 10, no. 3 (1977), pp. 36–40, 88.
10. Zdenka Volavkova, "Nkisi Figures of the Lower Congo," *African Arts* 5, no. 2 (1972), p. 57.
11. Thompson 1978, pp. 207, 214.
12. *Astonishment and Power* 1993, p. 44.
13. Thompson 1978, p. 215; *Astonishment and Power* 1993, p. 44.
14. Thompson 1978, p. 208.
15. Volavkova, "Nkisi Figures," p. 57.
16. In its present state, this figure's exterior appears relatively bare compared to its counterparts in the collections of the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago and of the Africa Museum in Tervuren, Belgium. Though structurally very similar, these other works feature a massive clay-and-fiber beard, which extends down from the perimeter of the chin, and a skirt composed of a series of fiber bundles tied to the hips, which rests on the feet. This garment, known as a *makolo*, was worn by the ritual experts associated with *minkondi*. *Astonishment and Power* 1993, p. 42.
17. Ibid., p. 43.
18. MacGaffey 1986, p. 168.
19. Thompson 1978, p. 219.
20. *Astonishment and Power* 1993, p. 44.
21. Volavkova, "Nkisi Figures," pp. 55, 56.
22. Thompson 1978, p. 216.
23. Ibid., p. 212.
24. Ibid., p. 216.

10. Community Power Figure (*Nkishi*)

Songye, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Wood, metal, palm oil, organic material; H. 41 cm (16⅛ in.)

19th–early 20th century

James Ross Collection

A Songye community's most influential leaders, including lineage chiefs and other distinguished elders, come together to commission a sculptural work—a power figure—that will collectively benefit its members. The role that such works, *mankishi* (singular, *nkishi*), subsequently play is so central to collective experience that they become the principal marker against which life unfolds. *Mankishi* enhance the overall quality of life by assuring that universally shared concerns, such as procreation, protection against illness, witchcraft, and war, are addressed through divine intervention.[1]

Along with allocating the necessary resources for an *nkishi*'s acquisition and selecting the ritual specialist (*nganga*) who will design and empower it, the elders appoint a guardian who will act as its interpreter. The *nkishi* imparts information relevant to the community's welfare to that individual in the form of prophetic dreams. In times of extreme crisis, such as an epidemic, the *nkishi* might be carried outside the village into the bush, where it would indicate specific plant ingredients to be prepared and administered as a remedy.[2]

The sculptural form of a community *nkishi* may be designed by a regionally renowned carver, but its essential qualities are determined by an *nganga*. Such works are objects of symbolic interaction between the *nganga* and the ancestral realm.[3] In Songye cosmology, spirits of the dead are perceived to beneficially or adversely affect harvests, health, and women's fertility. The *nganga* is endowed with the mystical knowledge necessary to make "medicines" (*bishimba*) that invoke the spirit world by sparking a catalytic reaction. These "medicines" are associated with awesome power and strength, and thus draw upon matter such as the bones, flesh, fur, or claws of physically powerful and aggressive animals selected for their metaphoric associations with force. Bits of hair and nails taken from members of the community are included as a means of particularizing a work's relationship to its constituency—that is, the entire community. The unique combination of ingredients contained in a *bishimba*'s sacred formula ultimately determines a work's potential to spiritually fortify its patrons.[4] Effective *mankishi* become the site for ancestral spirits to communicate their insight and project their influence.

During the creation of its *nkishi*, members of a community are engaged in the process and attentively follow it as it unfolds. As the primary author, the *nganga* oversees its execution and directs their participation. The ancestors are invoked over the course of a procession from the village to the site of the tree from which the sculpture will be carved. Dances and songs of

tribute pay homage to the ancestors while the tree is cut down. Once the carving is completed, the most important phase of execution occurs at night as the *nganga* visually and metaphysically transforms the figure by inserting its crucial *bishimba* within cavities in the head and abdomen and attaching external paraphernalia. To attract the ancestors' attention to the work, all fires are extinguished except for one near the figure, and sacrificial offerings are made.[5]

Ultimately, the composition of an *nkishi* not only incorporates intimate particulate matter belonging to its patrons but has the outward appearance of an idealized portrait of a leader. The physiognomy and regalia of a community *nkishi* emphasize the influential character of its subject, conveying a degree of physical strength and social rank commensurate with the spiritual power it commands.[6]

External features include additions of chiefly regalia, such as the strands of white and blue beads wrapped around the neck and the animal hide and raffia skirt below the waist. Pelts of various kinds of animals that project strength, dominance, and authority may be selected, and their names (or those of chiefs) are appropriate choices for the titles assigned to such works.[7] Though relatively small, this especially refined sculpture seems to project a monumental stature, accentuated by the pedestal-like base that is an integral part of its design. The broad, rounded forehead suggests omniscience. The head narrows toward the base of the chin, which extends into a long rectangular beard, an attribute of leadership. Large, almond-shaped eyes, made more prominent by raised, arched eyebrows, suggest a contemplative and inward-looking expression. The finely articulated facial features are accentuated with copper bands, punctuated by metal tacks, extending vertically from the forehead to the tip of the nose and diagonally across each cheek. This metal appliqué refers to forces such as lightning, which the *nkishi* can counteract and redirect to benefit its constituents. Diminutive hands rest on either side of the pronounced abdomen, a sign of fertility and the cyclical nature of life, which relates a community's ancestors to its unborn members.

The efficacy of an individual *nkishi* is regarded as finite, and therefore it must eventually be replaced. When this happens, however, it continues to be remembered for specific feats attributed to it and becomes a quintessential point of reference for entire chapters of a community's history.[8]

1. Dunja Hersak, *Songye Masks and Figure Sculpture* (London: Ethnographica, 1986), p. 120.
2. Ibid., p. 132.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., pp. 30, 128.
5. Ibid., p. 128.
6. Ibid., pp. 130, 131.
7. Ibid., p. 121.
8. Ibid., p. 120.

11. Female Bowl Bearer (*Mboko*)

Luba, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Wood, beads; H. 36.8 cm (14½ in.)

19th century

American Museum of Natural History, New York 90.0/2423ab

Designed to forecast future events, this bowl bearer—known as a *mboko* (the name for the sacred vessel held by the figure)—is a vivid example of how knowledge and divination are visualized in Luba culture. Luba bowl figures commemorate the first mythical Luba diviner, Mijibu wa Kalenga, and were primarily the preserve of royal diviners, who used them as oracles. More recently, such works have also been commissioned by rulers for use as containers filled with sacred chalk, an empowering material associated with purity, renewal, and the spirit world.[1] *Mboko* are thus icons of royal authority and legitimacy; their ownership by both types of patrons points to the historic relationship between divination and the origins of the Luba state.

In Luba tradition, the establishment of the Luba charter of kingship in the seventeenth century was due to the acumen of Mijibu wa Kalenga. According to the charter's genesis myth, the heroic foresight of this diviner led to the overthrow of a cruel despot, Nkongolo, and the institution of a refined form of sacred kingship.[2] Mijibu is characterized as a sensitive visionary whose role as mentor and guardian to the prince Kalala Ilunga assured the Luba people's adoption of a stable and enlightened form of leadership.[3] Mijibu is credited with having invented Bilumbu divination and prototypes of the various implements used by contemporary royal diviners.[4] From that time on, Luba society has depended on the royal Bilumbu diviner for its well-being and prosperity. Today, diviners fulfill the roles of doctors, therapists, lawyers, and priests for individuals, families, chieftaincies, and entire kingdoms.[5] All Bilumbu diviners, male and female, are regarded as personifications of Mijibu, from whom they derive their influence.[6] Leaders rely on diviners' perception and wisdom to guide them in resolving crises affecting their territories and to advise them on affairs of governance ranging from the most mundane problems to serious medical and judicial matters.[7] (See pp. 14–15 of "Divination in Sub-Saharan Africa" by John Pemberton, in this catalogue; see also cat. nos. 35, 46.)

In Luba cultures, the act of divination, *kubuta*, is defined as a consultation of spirits through consecrated formulas in order to learn hidden things.[8] A successful divination results in the desired information being revealed—an action conveyed by the Luba verb *kusokola*.[9]

Luba conceive of human experience as governed and controlled by two distinct types of spiritual entities, and have developed divinatory processes through which they are addressed. Ancestral spirits of the deceased, *bafu*, are considered responsible for problems relating to domestic life and the affairs of individual communities. The more powerful *bavidye* spirits, associated with natural resources, inhabit features of the landscape and may affect the welfare of entire regions and chieftaincies.[10] Because of the scope of their influence, *bavidye* are considered vital to effective governance and are closely linked to royalty by Bilumbu diviners through spirit possession.[11]

Among the most important of the tools used by Bilumbu diviners in the act of divination is the *mboko*, a sacred gourd that contains an assortment of natural and manufactured objects. This divinatory instrument is conferred on specialists during their initiation as a symbol of the spiritual guidance from which they benefit. Its very name is related to the term for success or prosperity, and it is considered a source of well-being, wealth, good health, and truth.[12]

Bilumbu diviners develop the ability to enter a state of possession through a combination of music, voice, and percussion. While in a trance, they become mediums through which various *bavidye* communicate their insights.[13] Visual metaphors constitute the primary means through

which knowledge is transferred. The extraordinary perception that a diviner acquires while in trance is described as *kuntentana kwezi*, the monthly rising of the new moon illuminating that which had been obscured.[14] It is only in this visionary state that the contents of the *mboko* are shaken and its constellation of symbols is interpreted by the Bwana Vidye.[15] His wife, the guardian of his spirit, assists him by invoking his spirit and then translating the information it imparts through him.[16]

On those occasions, the placement of a sculptural representation of a female bowl figure, such as this one, on the diviner's left provides a symmetrical counterpart to his human interpreter. Female bowl figures are the most important genre within a broad group of representations deployed by Bwana Vidye known as *mankishi* (singular, *nkishi*).[17] When a diviner composes or commissions an *nkishi*, it is "charged" with *bijimba*, which are empowering materials that invite a spirit to inhabit the figure and, in doing so, endow it with extraordinary powers.[18] Over the course of a consultation, the diviner may speak to the figure, describing the nature of the problem to be dealt with.[19] Like the diviner himself, the figure becomes an oracle by serving as a mouthpiece for the spirit's responses. It is reputed to gather evidence on suspected criminals, track down malevolent forces, and effect cures.[20]

In this especially lovely version of a bowl bearer, a naturalistically proportioned figure is seated with her long, slender legs extended before her, resting the bowl on them while holding it with her hands and supporting it with her feet. She is depicted at the prime of life, and her beauty is enhanced by an elegant cruciform coiffure and raised cicatrization markings on her lower back, abdomen, and thighs. The figure has variously been interpreted as representing the wife of the diviner's possessing spirit or even Mijibu wa Kalenga himself. Mijibu's portrayal as an idealized woman relates to the Luba notion of the female body as the natural receptacle for spirituality.

The many visual resonances throughout the composition are enriched by the work's underlying conceptual meaning. The form of the vessel held by bowl bearers closely resembles the *mboko* gourd, and diviners traditionally placed chalk and beads within it.[21] The combined representation of woman and gourd evokes the interaction between human and spiritual realms.[22] Although another bowl figure by the same artist is represented holding a gourd, in this particular work the form is clearly that of a clay vessel.[23] The motif of the incised decorative band that wraps around it is taken from the repertory of designs (*n'kaka*) inscribed on Luba women's bodies. *N'kaka* refers to both the cicatrization pattern favored by most women and the beaded headdress worn by Luba prophet-diviners.[24] This formal device creates a sense of unity between the female form serving as a spiritual vessel and the ritual container adorned as a woman.

Form and meaning reinforce each other repeatedly throughout the composition of Luba bowl figures. Their richness as a subject for both artistic interpretation and visual analysis is comparable to the multireferential nature of the contents of the *mboko*'s metaphorical elements. A close reading of the sculpture's formal elements, like the diviner's reading of the *mboko*'s contents, may yield enlightenment.

1. *Memory* 1996, p. 70.
2. Ibid., p. 180.
3. Ibid., p. 187.
4. Ibid., p. 180. Although, historically, practitioners were predominantly female mediums, referred to variously as "Bifkwa" and "Bibinda," today they are generally male diviners, addressed as "Bilumbu" or, when in trance, "Bwana Vidye." Ibid., p. 187.
5. Ibid., p. 180.
6. Nooter 1991, p. 201; *Memory* 1996, p. 197.
7. Nooter 1991, p. 200; *Memory* 1996, p. 187.
8. Van Avermaet and Mbuya, cited in *Memory* 1996, p. 178.
9. *Memory* 1996, p. 178.
10. Nooter 1991, pp. 173–74.
11. Ibid., p. 176.
12. Petit 1995, p. 115; *Memory* 1996, p. 195; Nooter 1991, p. 119.
13. Nooter 1991, pp. 201, 205; Petit 1995, p. 114.
14. *Memory* 1996, p. 189.
15. Ibid., p. 194; see also n. 4, above.
16. Ibid., p. 204.
17. Ibid.
18. *Bijimba* may be enclosed in a horn inserted into the figure's head, as well as in tiny incisions in the figure's ears and temples, which relate strategically to sensory perception. *Memory* 1996, p. 206.
19. Nooter 1991, p. 128.
20. *Memory* 1996, p. 177.
21. Ibid., p. 204.
22. Nooter 1991, p. 126.
23. A bowl figure attributed to the same hand, in the Museu Carlos Machado, Ponta Delgada, Portugal, is illustrated in *Memory* 1996, cat. no. 80, p. 197. The style of these two works is almost identical, except that the figure in Portugal holds a calabash with a lid and handles, her hands are less finely modeled, and there are several miniature secondary figures.
24. Nooter 1991, p. 241.

12. Carved Calabash

Yoruba, Oyo, Nigeria

Calabash; Diam. 25 cm (9⅞ in.)

19th century

Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde, Munich 18-22-15

The object shown here serves as a metaphor for one culture's concept of the cosmos. This Yoruba calabash distills one of the most complex ideas conceived by the human imagination into a design of elegant understatement and simplicity. The medium is an ordinary gourd that has been cut in half, scraped out, and dried before being carved. The surface of this simple, bisected sphere is covered with a series of finely incised interlace and bird motifs framed by elaborate borders. Here, the universe is envisioned as an entity composed of two distinct symmetrical units. The upper half depicts *orun*, the invisible spiritual realm of the ancestors, gods, and spirits, while the bottom half symbolizes *aye*, the visible, tangible world of the living. Thus, the work expresses the Yoruba cosmos as a union of structurally equal, autonomous elements, found repeatedly as the guiding principle in other Yoruba sacred artifacts.[1] (See pp. 17–18 of "Divination in Sub-Saharan Africa" by John Pemberton, in this catalogue.)

Yoruba spiritual precepts conceive of existence as a cyclical trajectory, according to which individuals experience life in *aye*, depart to *orun*, and are reborn. Olodumare, the Yorubas' removed and distant creator god, acted as a prime mover, infusing both hemispheres and all that they contain—gods, ancestors, spirits, humans, animals, plants, rocks, rivers—with life force (*ase*). *Ase* is at once the essential ingredient necessary to spark existence, an equivalent of the Western "anima," and the catalyst that allows things to change.[2] *Ase* is alluded to figuratively in the gourd's decorative motifs through bird imagery, associated with the mystical powers attributed to women and divine kings in Yoruba society.

The threshold between *aye* and *orun*, represented as the line that bisects and joins the two spherical units of the calabash, is presided over by Orunmila, the deity responsible for the Yoruba system of divination known as Ifa, and Esu (also called Elegba), the divine messenger and mediator. According to Yoruba oral tradition, Orunmila's presence at creation endowed him with knowledge of every human being's destiny. At one time Orunmila (also called Ifa)[3] moved easily between the realms *aye* and *orun*. However, the boundary between those two realms became a nearly impassable chasm after he retired to the world of the gods. While on earth, Orunmila had had eight children, the youngest of whom, Olowo, became king of the Yoruba city-state of Owo. Orunmila's omniscience made him uniquely qualified to serve as a wise counsel to his children, and, in return, he expected to be honored by them. Olowo rebelled against doing so, precipitating Orunmila's departure for *orun*. After he abandoned his children, they petitioned him to return. Instead, Orunmila provided each one of them with sixteen palm nuts (*ikin Ifa*) as a means of addressing questions to him.[4]

Since that time, the *ikin* have facilitated dialogues between Orunmila and individuals seeking to clarify their destiny. Ifa is consulted at each important phase of one's life, as well as in times of crisis, through the intermediation of professional specialists (*babalawo*). During Ifa rituals, *babalawo* repeatedly cast the *ikin* so that they reveal *odu*—signs that correlate with ancient verses of poetry that expand on their significance. The diviner recites these and interprets their significance to suggest influences that are affecting one's life and actions that one might consider taking.[5] Although one's personal destiny (*ori inu*) is defined before coming into the world, a significant degree of self-determination allows one to make decisions that enable one to fulfill that destiny.

Beyond its metaphysical significance, this prestige object served as a ritual container used in sacrifices to the gods and for divination.[6] It was collected in Yorubaland by Leo Frobenius in 1918, and its design suggests that it was made in the province of Oyo.

1. *Yoruba* 1989, p. 16.
2. Ibid.
3. "Ifa, . . . a Yoruba system of divination, is presided over by Orunmila, its deified mythic founder, who is also sometimes called Ifa." Ibid., p. 15.
4. Rowland Abiodun in ibid., p. 93.
5. Henry John Drewal, "Art and Divination among the Yoruba: Design and Myth," *Africana Journal* 14, nos. 2–3 (1987), p. 140.
6. *African Masterpieces* 1987, p. 145.

13. Ifa Divination Tray (*Opon Ifa*)

Fon, Allada, Republic of Benin

Wood; 34.4 x 55.7 cm (13½ x 21⅞ in.)

16th–17th century

Ulmer Museum, Ulm, Exoticophylacium Weickmannianum

This divination tray (*opon Ifa*) entered a European collection about 1650, making it the oldest African wood sculpture to have been preserved in the West.[1] It left Africa during the middle of the seventeenth century through commercial trade that existed between the Atlantic coast and Augsburg. There, it was acquired by a prosperous German merchant from Ulm, Christoph Weickmann.[2] Documentation that accompanied the work indicates that it was originally owned and utilized by the king of Ardra (Allada),[3] an Aja state that remained under the hegemony of the Yoruba empire of Oyo until the kingdom of Dahomey was

consolidated as a power in the late seventeenth century. During the reign of King Agaja (1708–40), Ifa became recognized as an official divination ritual in Dahomey and known as Fa. The fact that this work is supposed to have been an elite possession, owned by an Aja king, suggests that it may have served as an exotic divination technique adopted by the leadership to fortify and protect the power of the state.

Fon, Ewe, and Aja peoples—who eventually became integrated within the kingdom of Dahomey—continually drew on Yoruba religious and political traditions, but, as Suzanne Blier has pointed out, their forms of visual expression reveal very different aesthetic roots.[4] Other scholars have noted that although the tray's design was undoubtedly based on a Yoruba prototype, its distinctive carving style suggests that it was executed at Allada by a local carver.[5] According to Ezio Bassani, the figural representations reflect a departure from the relative "humanism" of much Yoruba wood sculpture in favor of an austere rectilinear style closer to that of Ewe carving.[6]

Ifa divination trays are usually designed as a circular or rectangular surface circumscribed by a raised border of relief carving. (See p. 17 of "Divination in Sub-Saharan Africa" by John Pemberton, in this catalogue.) In this exceptional example, both configurations have been combined: a circular board inscribed within a rectangular one. The diviner uses the surface of the clear central depression as his work space, a perpetual tabula rasa upon which signs specific to individual petitioners may be inscribed and interpreted. Robert Farris Thompson has described the visual center of divination trays as "a screen where man views his problems with a clarity not previously obtained."[7] While the abstract configurations of *odu* markings made by the diviner are ephemeral, the images inscribed within the border provide a constant backdrop. Consequently, two types of visual signs converge within the framework of divination trays: an artistic exploration of the forces that govern human experience, and a succession of notations that relate to the specific and immediate concerns of the diviner's clients and require his interpretation.

The term *opon* means "to flatter," and the *opon Ifa* is a utilitarian instrument that is not only a diviner's primary tool but a work of high aesthetic quality that enhances his status and pays tribute to the essential role he plays.[8] In designing such a work, a carver strives to achieve a clarity of composition to match the lucidity and clarity that the diviner brings to a consultation. To do so, the artist celebrates the spiritual forces and formative events underlying the surface of human experience, which are revealed through a diviner's insights. Mythological and everyday events, as well as the exploits of legendary diviners whose experiences provide precedents for actions and remedies in the present, serve as potential sources for appropriate subjects. The motifs that appear in the border of this particular work may reflect either the initiative of the carver who executed the commission or a design requested by the patron.[9] Individual images are depicted as autonomous units, shown frontally or in profile, and are spatially distinct from one another in order to make them as "readable" as possible. Throughout the densely composed imagery, a great deal of attention to specific detail is apparent. Blier has proposed that this approach reflects an attempt on the part of the artist and patron to introduce an alien system of belief to the uninitiated.[10]

As noted previously (cat. no. 12), visual metaphors for Yoruba conceptions of the cosmos include a gourd divided into two halves, as well as a divination board. The formal interpretation of this particular *opon Ifa* is especially successful in its fulfillment of that role. Its continuous band of relief carving extends around the perimeter, framing the rectangular outer contours, and penetrates the center of the picture plane to create a distinct circular unit. The images contained within this unifying band do not form a single narrative; rather, they depict the diversity of interdependent and competing forces that populate the universe, including references to leadership, warfare, survival, fertility, protection, and sacrifice.[11]

The *opon Ifa*'s horizontal orientation is established by the motif of a face in the middle of one of the tray's long sides. It is crowned with three calabashes, medicine gourds (*oogun ase*) positioned at the apex of the circle. *Opon Ifa* invariably feature an iconic reference to Esu (also called Elegba)—divine messenger, facilitator, transformer, trickster, and provocateur—in this position. As mediator between gods, ancestors, spirits, and humankind, Esu presides over the divination process, and this image is strategically positioned opposite the diviner during a consultation. Much of the imagery depicted around the circle clearly relates to the use of the board in Ifa: At the base of the circle, directly opposite the head, an unobstructed channel is flanked by two vertical stacks of four palm nuts each, and three divination tappers occupy most of the arc to the right of the circle. The arc to the left of the circle is filled with a free-flowing, continuous chain of intertwined animal and human protagonists. The rectangular border contains larger human figures, including a soldier (upper left), a woman preparing to make a sacrifice (top, left), and a man smoking a pipe (top, right). These last two figures—and the others in the horizontal segments of the border at the top and bottom—are oriented laterally to fit into the border, giving them a floating, weightless appearance. A visual accent of a zigzag motif on most of the images serves to unify the composition.[12]

In contemporary Yoruba society, individuals may seek information to help resolve specific problems or personal, medical, social, political, or religious questions through the agency of Ifa. On such occasions, the *opon Ifa* serves as the ritual centerpiece upon which responses are marked by the diviner.[13] He performs his role as intermediary seated on the ground with the board before him. Signs of the extensive use of this *opon Ifa* are evident in the pocked surface of the central area of the inner circle where the diviner struck a tapper to invoke the gods.

In order to maximize the *opon Ifa*'s efficacy, each time the diviner prepares it for use he imposes a grid on the tray's surface, referred to as the crossroads (*orita meta*). He does so by dusting it with powdered wood or flour in which he inscribes a configuration of intersecting lines vertically from bottom to top, center to right, and center to left. The design conveys the idea that divination rites link the spirit world with our own, and has the effect of subdividing the spatial geography of the tray into units that are conceived of both as individual paths of communication and as the personified entities of famous diviners from the past.[14] At the outset of a consultation, each of these sections is invoked through praise poetry in order to alert its spiritual power and activate it.[15]

1. Bassani 1995, p. 80.
2. Weickmann included this tray in his compilation of "naturalia, artificialia, and mirabilia," which was published as a catalogue in 1659. Ibid., p. 79.
3. Ibid. During the seventeenth century, Allada was an important Aja state that controlled two ports active in the slave trade, Offa and Jakin, on the Gulf of Guinea.
4. Blier 1998, p. 98. This centuries-old artifact is a document of the historical longevity of African divination systems such as Ifa; both its design and the repertory of images that adorns it are consistent with trays used by contemporary Ifa diviners. It also reflects long-standing traditions of cultural borrowing, through which divination methods used in one center crossed into neighboring regions.
5. *Yoruba* 1989, p. 235; Bassani 1995, p. 81.
6. Bassani 1995, p. 85.
7. *Black Gods and Kings* 1976, p. 5/5.
8. *Yoruba* 1989, p. 17.
9. *Yoruba Art and Aesthetics* 1991, p. 21.
10. Blier 1998, p. 98.
11. *Yoruba* 1989, p. 14.
12. Bassani 1995, p. 83.
13. *Yoruba* 1989, p. 87.
14. Ibid., p. 25.
15. Ibid., p. 23.

14. Ifa Divination Tapper (*Iroke Ifa*)

Yoruba, Nigeria

Ivory; H. 42 cm (16½ in.)

18th century

Laboratoire d'Ethnologie, Musée de l'Homme, Paris 97.4.1

The divination tapper (*iroke Ifa*) is an essential tool for Yoruba diviners, used to initiate the Ifa divination ritual by invoking the god of fate, Orunmila.[1] At the beginning of a consultation, the priest gently taps the divination tray with the *iroke Ifa* as a form of greeting.[2] By attracting Orunmila's attention through this action and through the tapper's pleasing visual form, he opens the necessary channels of communication with the spirit world. (See pp. 17–18 of "Divination in Sub-Saharan Africa" by John Pemberton, in this catalogue.)

Ifa tappers are sometimes made of copper alloy or wood, but are usually carved out of ivory. Most of them are composed of three distinct sections: a middle section that frequently features a sculpted image of a human figure, in contrast to the pointed and hollow ends, which feature animal images or geometric patterns, or may be without any exterior design or decoration at all.[3] The aesthetic beauty invested in the elaboration of an especially lovely instrument is perceived to be tangible proof of its owner's devotion, like an offering or a prayer, thus enhancing the efficacy of the appeal.[4]

In this classic example, the pointed end of the tusk is carved in the form of a bird's beak, and the bird is balanced on the head of a kneeling female figure represented in the tusk's middle section. The hollow end is plain, except for a series of closely spaced grooves just below the figure, and inside it is an ivory clapper attached to a bar. A series of carved loops around the circumference, above and below the figure, once held small ivory rattles. The curve of the work's overall contour and the fluidity of the female figure extended by the upward orientation of the bird, with its wings folded at its sides, combine to give the representation a soaring quality.

In Ifa ritual paraphernalia, images of women in attitudes of reverence are believed to act as ideal intermediaries with the gods (*orisa*), since women are regarded as being receptacles for life force (*ase*). Representations of nude female figures in a kneeling position are conceived of as women praying and serve as a visual metaphor for all suppliants who seek Orunmila's wisdom in order to clarify their understanding of their personal destinies. The figure's nakedness suggests the state in which one communicates with the Creator. This is reinforced by the fact that kneeling in deference is associated with the beginning of a person's existence, when he or she kneels before the Creator, Olodumare, to receive his or her personal destiny—an action that is subsequently repeated in consultations throughout that individual's lifetime to obtain guidance in fulfulling that destiny. As an appropriate attitude for saluting the *orisa*, the kneeling position is also associated with childbirth and the procreative power of women, on which all human life depends.[5]

The pointed section of the *iroke Ifa*, even when it is a plain conical segment extending from the crown of a figure's head, refers to the concept of *ori*. *Ori* is a person's "destiny," which in Yoruba philosophy comprises his or her past, present, and future. The juxtaposition of head and cone alludes to the distinction between one's visible head (*ori ode*)—that is, one's actual being—and inner head (*ori inu*)—

one's unrealized potential.[6] In this version, the abstract concept of destiny is in the form of a bird, which also refers to the hidden powers of women alluded to in the central image.

Beyond its role in bridging both realms, the fine quality of its carving and the costly nature of the material of this *iroke Ifa* attest to the social rank and professional success of the diviner who owned it. A dozen other tappers have been attributed to the Owo author or workshop that produced this particular work.[7] Acquired in Abomey, the capital of the kingdom of Dahomey, by General Alfred-Amédée Dodds during the French conquest of Dahomey in 1892–93, it was undoubtedly one of many important Ifa implements commissioned by the Dahomean monarchy from their Yoruba neighbors.[8]

1. See cat. no. 12, n. 3.
2. *Black Gods and Kings* 1976, p. 5/1.
3. *Yoruba* 1989, p. 109.
4. Henry John Drewal, "Art and Divination among the Yoruba: Design and Myth," *Africana Journal* 14, nos. 2–3 (1987), p. 139.
5. *Yoruba* 1989, p. 111.
6. Ibid.
7. *African Masterpieces* 1985, p. 138; and see cat. no. 15.
8. Blier 1998, p. 90.

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15. Ifa Divination Vessel: Female Caryatid (*Agere Ifa*)

Yoruba, Owo, Nigeria

Ivory with wood or coconut-shell inlay; H. 16.2 cm (6⅜ in.), Diam. 11.4 cm (4½ in.)

17th–19th century

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991 1991.17.127

This ivory divination vessel (*agere Ifa*), consisting of a bowl supported by a female caryatid, served as a receptacle for the sixteen sacred palm nuts (*ikin*). Through this medium, Ifa priests communicate with the god of fate, Orunmila, in order to obtain insight into an individual's destiny.[1] (See pp. 17–18 of "Divination in Sub-Saharan Africa" by John Pemberton, in this catalogue.) The investment in costly material and the high-quality artistry apparent in its design elevate it beyond a mere functional implement. This depiction of a woman bearing an offering in a devotional attitude conveys the notion that it was conceived of as a form of prayer to the divine.[2]

This tribute to Orunmila takes the form of a kneeling female figure, whose legs are folded beneath her. She balances an offering bowl on her head and supports it with raised arms, hands held to either side of it. Her strong, broad torso contrasts with the graceful sweep of her attenuated arms. Her facial features are boldly carved, with deeply incised pupils and three vertical cicatrization markings above either eye. A bead necklace that rests on her chest is her only form of bodily adornment.

Most *agere Ifa* are made of wood. The relative rarity of ivory *agere Ifa*, such as this one, suggests that they were either owned by the highest-ranking Ifa priests or served as the ritual art of royalty.[3] On stylistic grounds, this work has been attributed to the Yoruba ivory-carving center at Owo,[4] located on the far-eastern edge of Yorubaland. Owo's leadership traces its origins to the divine kings of Ife. According to oral traditions, Owo's founding king was one of the youngest sons of the god Orunmila. Owo emerged as a distinctive regional artistic center, specializing in ivory carving. So acclaimed were Owo's ivory carvers that their services were sought after by patrons in neighboring regions.[5]

The high value placed on ivory goes back to antiquity and is reflected in mythical accounts of Orunmila's preference for and association with it. Because ivory was such a precious resource, and the preferred material for denoting the status of kings, chiefs, warriors, and diviners, elephant tusks were a commodity controlled by a powerful elite. Within Owo's sphere of influence, elephant hunters retained only one tusk out of every pair of tusks and were required to present the other to the Olowo (the king of Owo). After the Olowo, Ifa priests constitute the second most important consumers of ivory artifacts.[6] By commissioning divination implements in this prestigious medium, they emphasize their ties to Orunmila and commemorate the origins of Ifa.

The *agere* type of vessel, which holds and raises the *ikin*, has been likened to a miniature temple of Orunmila.[7] The caryatid serving as the vessel's base, here portrayed as a kneeling woman, takes a variety of forms, including dancers, musicians, and equestrian figures. These subjects at once reflect the diviner's clients' hopes for prosperity and express their gratitude to Orunmila for successful consultations. The female suppliant featured in this work is perceived as especially effective in predisposing the gods to act favorably on the suppliant's behalf, and as an ideal means for expressing thanks.[8]

1. Rowland Abiodun in *Yoruba* 1989, p. 112; and see cat. no. 12, n. 3.
2. Henry John Drewal, "Art and Divination Among the Yoruba: Design and Myth," *Africana Journal* 14, nos. 2–3 (1987), p. 139.
3. *Yoruba Art and Aesthetics* 1991, p. 68; Abiodun in *Yoruba* 1989, p. 112.
4. *Royal Art of Benin* 1992, p. 285.
5. Robin Poynor, "The Ancestral Arts of Owo, Nigeria" (Ph.D. diss., University of Indiana, 1978), p. 22; *Royal Art of Benin* 1992, p. 285.
6. Abiodun in *Yoruba* 1989, pp. 104–5; *Yoruba Art and Aesthetics* 1991, p. 68.
7. Abiodun in *Yoruba* 1989, p. 112.
8. *Royal Art of Benin* 1992, p. 285.

16. Ifa Divination Vessel: Equestrian Warrior (*Agere Ifa*)

Yoruba, Nigeria
Wood; H. 29.5 cm (11⅝ in.)
19th century
Museum für Völkerkunde zu Leipzig *Maf22514*

The vessel element of this *agere Ifa* crowns the head of an allegorical leader. Mounted on a horse, he holds a rifle in his right hand and the horse's reins in his left. At the base, his feet rest in the stirrups and a miniature drummer accompanies him on his left. The figure portrayed here belongs to the category *alase* (knowledgeable ones), which includes kings, queens, priests, diviners, and elders. This term refers to their ability to harness *ase* (life force) and channel it for their own benefit and on behalf of others. Such imagery reflects the association between positions of authority in Yoruba society and great knowledge and enlightenment. (See pp. 17–18 of "Divination in Sub-Saharan Africa" by John Pemberton, in this catalogue.)

This work's style of carving and equestrian subject suggest that its author was a master from the Ekiti region in northeast Yorubaland. Equestrian motifs were used in architectural sculpture, masquerade headdresses, and Ifa divination cups to commemorate the legendary hunter-warriors credited with establishing sixteen kingdoms there during the eighteenth century.[1] In divination vessels, such images promise clients potential prosperity and the ability to prevail over their enemies and personal challenges.[2]

1. *Yoruba Art and Aesthetics* 1991, p. 69.
2. Rowland Abiodun in *Yoruba* 1989, p. 112.

Dynamic Devices: Kinetic Oracles

17. Mouse Oracle (*Gbekre*)

Baule, Côte d'Ivoire
Wood, terracotta, leather, beads, metal, cord; H. 26 cm (10¼ in.)
ca. 1900
Marceau Rivière Collection, Paris

Inside this finely carved receptacle, a device composed of sticks records the movements of mice as signs that reveal insights into matters of importance. Mouse divination is probably of Guro origin and is one of several divination techniques used in Baule society; it is practiced in eastern and central Côte d'Ivoire by Agni-speaking peoples, which include the Guro and Yaure. Regional oral traditions recount that in the distant past mice could speak. At that time they lived in the forest with the earth spirits (*asye usu*) until a spiritual specialist carried them into the village to be kept in captivity.[1] Their natural proximity to the earth's surface and their ability to burrow beneath it permit mice to gain intimate access to the omniscient *asye usu* and the ancestors, thus enabling them to foretell events.

Specialists spend several years mastering this divination technique. Their training emphasizes properly compensating the divinities and oracle for the enlightenment they provide, to ensure that they will remain favorably disposed. It also includes practical lessons on preparing medications and instruction in interpreting a vocabulary of visual signs. On becoming initiated into the secrets of the profession, the diviner is provided with his own mouse oracle (*gbekre*) and may establish an independent practice.[2]

The physical apparatus of the *gbekre* is contained within a terracotta vessel inside a hollow wooden cylinder. A shelf divides the vessel into two distinct chambers, which are connected by a hole. The mice are placed in the lower chamber and pass through the hole into the upper chamber, in which the diviner has placed ten small sticks (originally, birds' or bats' bones were used). The small sticks, called *gbekre nyma* (literally, "eyes of the mice"), are coated with flour and attached at one end with fiber to the shell of an earth turtle. The actions of the mice in the upper chamber change the positions of the sticks, creating a new configuration that constitutes the sign to be translated by the diviner. Such reliance on interpreting actions of animals perceived to be innately endowed with insight into human experience is comparable to divination systems elsewhere, most notably spider divination in Cameroon. (See p. 11 of "Divination in Sub-Saharan Africa" by John Pemberton, in this catalogue.).

Each morning and night, the diviner invokes the *gbekre*, asking if it is satisfied and posing questions that concern him and questions concerning family members and clients. In preparation for a consultation, the mice are made to fast and placed in the lower chamber. The person who is consulting the oracle places a forefinger on the container's upper rim, invokes the *gbekre*, and asks it the questions he or she would like answered. The diviner stands next to the client and accompanies each question by striking the oracle, an action that attracts the protective deity's attention and galvanizes the mice. They feed on the flour that coats the sticks, rearranging them through their movements. The diviner explains the

on a base that takes the form of a Baule woman's circular stool. A single male figure holds on to the upper edge and stands with his feet balanced on the ledge that encircles the bottom of the container. The harmonious design of the body emphasizes a succession of rounded forms: elegant head, strong torso, buttocks, and calves. The finely carved details of the figure's features contrast sharply with the vessel's lack of surface articulation. These include the elegantly textured coiffure, and cicatrization markings on the temples and neck, enhanced by beaded strands around the neck and hips. In its position attendant upon this oracular device designed to reveal knowledge, the figure appears to be either its muse or a suppliant.

significance of the new configuration of the sticks according to fixed interpretations established over time for various patterns, such as "open path, favorable augury," "the consultant will receive a visit," "sickness," "death of a woman in the village," "successful labor," "unfavorable sign for a projected marriage," and "death of an individual in another village."

While functional Baule mouse oracles may be extremely rudimentary, their exterior surfaces are rarely physically damaged or worn and thus provide an ideal format for decorative enhancement. Such works frequently feature animal imagery, masks, or human heads carved lightly in relief; very occasionally, they are accompanied by figural statues carved entirely in the round and connected at the back or pubis. Susan Vogel has noted that Baule mouse oracles featuring freestanding figures are so exceedingly rare and atypical that this work is one of only three such examples that are known.[3]

This mouse oracle was first analyzed in 1935 by Carl Kjersmeier.[4] Its overall design is that of a plain, lidded container resting

1. Labouret 1935, pp. 5–6.
2. Ibid., p. 10.
3. *Baule* 1997, p. 271. The other two are a celebrated work in the collection of the Musée de l'Homme, Paris, and another in the Musée d'Ethnographie, Neuchâtel.
4. Carl Kjersmeier, *Centres de style de la sculpture nègre africaine* (1935), vol. 1 (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1967), pl. 54.

18. *Njinda* Divination Figure (*Ngombo*)

Eastern Pende, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Wood, shells, horn, cloth, beads; H. 102.3 cm (40¼ in.)

20th century

The University of Iowa Museum of Art, The Stanley Collection X1986.505

This wild apparition was intended to command attention by shocking audiences with its fearful appearance. Its complex character as an image derives from its ability to simultaneously unsettle and reassure through its suggestion of unparalleled spiritual might. Its efficacy as a divinatory tool served to safeguard Pende communities from sorcery being practiced against them and other dangers.

According to Pende cosmology, Maweze (God) created a world divided into two parallel realms of existence—the realm of the living and, beneath it, "the other world" (*kalunga*)—with life conceived of as a cyclical journey between the two. Responsibility for overseeing the prosperity of the living was delegated to the dead, who monitor human reproduction, agriculture, and the hunt. In order to facilitate communication between the two realms, the ancestors designate "transistors," known as *mahamba* (singular, *hamba*), who provide the living with access to the omniscience of the collective dead.[1]

When a family suffers an unusually high rate of illness, death, or other such serious problems, the dead will sometimes intercede in order to assist them in their time of need by divinely ordaining a member to serve as their mouthpiece. More typically, though, problems are addressed through professional diviners (*nganga ngombo*), usually male, who have pursued the study of *wanga*, the manipulation of physical and metaphysical forces for personal advantage. Their efforts to obtain insights are not facilitated by the ancestors but rather through a variety of charged instruments, (*ngombo*), which are continually being developed. *Nganga ngombo* are entrepreneurs who establish lucrative careers based on their reputation for using their influence toward essentially positive ends and for successfully launching new strategies. Within this highly competitive profession, a premium is placed on attracting clients through up-to-date, innovative practices. They are therefore willing to experiment with different methods and frequently try techniques devised by foreign specialists, such as friction oracles, Chokwe divination baskets, and the practices of various gynecological cults.

Among the techniques appropriated from foreign sources by Pende diviners was *njinda* (or *nginda*), thought to be of Lele origin and introduced to the Pende by the Wongo during the 1920s. It appears that the power of this type of *ngombo* was harnessed by the Pende as a weapon to resist colonialism. Under Belgian rule, subjugation of the peoples of the Congo was especially

brutal and led to great social turmoil.[2] It has been suggested that the Pende's vulnerability to a ruthless foreign power led them to perceive themselves as victims of an enormous sorcery attack. In order to reassert control over their society, they sought to realign themselves with the ancestor world. They could not hope to prevail against such hostile forces without spiritual and psychological reinforcement, and thus a number of different antisorcery movements arose, including Njinda.[3] Such was an *njinda* figure's supposed potency that in Pende communities it was displayed to counter the tyranny of Belgian colonial rule, which posed a critical threat to them. According to some accounts, an *njinda* figure was placed outside the village in order to neutralize antisocial practices within. Others suggest that it was kept near the buried skull of an ancestor to facilitate communication with the dead and that it circulated at night in search of sorcerers harmful to the well-being of the community. Some report that initiated specialists would carry it through the village until it stopped in front of the house of an accused sorcerer. The accused had the choice of drinking a poison to affirm his or her innocence. Individuals who were wrongly accused would presumably vomit up the poison and survive the ordeal. Sorcerers who confessed were given the option of discarding all their "medicines" and power figures.

Five surviving examples of this genre of *ngombo* are known. All five are tall, highly expressionistic figures with protruding eyes and breasts, an antelope horn emerging vertically from the head, and short, stout, sturdy legs. The arms are joined to the torso at the hips, and thick ropes tied around the middle of the arms hang down on the floor. The figure wears a short fiber skirt, and there is usually a tortoise shell attached near the navel and a coil of beads around the neck. This particular *njinda* figure is a towering presence, its elongated torso contrasting emphatically with its blocky diminutive legs, and appears to sway as a result of a pronounced lean toward its left side. The face is defined as a flat planar surface against which the conical volumes of the eyes and triangular nose project dramatically, with a faintly incised line for the mouth.

In Pende society, ritual works associated with chiefly authority favor female imagery, since women are associated with loyalty and obedience. The feminine personification of the formidable forces invested in the *njinda* figure reassures members of the community that those forces are being harnessed toward positive ends. At the same time, her protruding eyes denote exceptional vigilance and appear to be bulging with unrestrained anger and violence, intended to intimidate viewers from approaching. Both the antelope horn and the emphasis given the nose (through the use of sculpted relief and a contrasting color) relate to Pende conceptions of sorcery as something that exudes an odor discernible by diviners; traditionally, such horns packed with "medicines" enhanced a diviner's ability to distinguish criminal activity and prescribe the appropriate neutralizing agents. The minimal representation of the figure's mouth is modeled after images of chiefs in which a suppressed mouth suggests measured and wise counsel.

The prominent presence of the antelope horn and the tortoise shell are overt references to the manipulation of *wanga.* These two components were packed with substances that activated the figure—earth and grave dirt enriched with "medicines" composed of animal and plant matter. Firm control of these forces by the *nganga ngombo* is alluded to by the coils of braided raffia rope tied to the figure's forearms, the same material used for the figure's coiffure and skirt. Raffia is associated with the wild bush, the domain of great hunters and ritual specialists.

Despite its seemingly unwieldy scale, the *njinda* figure was kinetically manipulated by the ropes tied around its arms, and it would indicate responses to questions through shifts in its position. Its caretakers posed questions in a form that included their own diagnosis of the situation under investigation and a possible answer; the figure would indicate its confirmation or negation of each one by leaning to one side or the other. Some accounts suggest that it oscillated—tipped back and forth and vibrated—or kept still to signal its response to questions about minor matters, and decisively fell to one side or the other in reaction to a question of major concern.

It is said that during a 1931 Pende rebellion against Belgian colonial rule, one of the leaders, Matemu a Kelenge, used this form of *ngombo* to consult the dead and to provide Pende soldiers with protection.[4] Despite brutal colonial retaliations against the Pende, some *njinda* figures survived after 1931. The increasingly martial character of such works is especially apparent in an example at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, which features a double-sided sword (*nkusa*) and

bells.[5] This kind of sword had been primarily known as a key insignia of chiefly office; however, during the rebellion of 1931 it became emblematic of a just war sanctioned by the ancestors. Even as some *ngombo* instruments were discarded in favor of newer, innovative models capable of addressing more contemporary concerns, effective forms could be refined and customized to respond to specific crises.

1. This and all other information on Pende culture presented in the following paragraphs is based on a forthcoming essay on Pende divination by Z. S. Strother, "Smells and Bells: The Role of Skepticism in Pende Divination," in Pemberton 2000.
2. In 1884 Europe's leadership granted Belgium's constitutional monarch, King Leopold II, the authority to administer the Congo basin as his private domain, the Congo Free State. Brutal measures were pursued to defeat the region's independent African peoples and to exploit local resources and labor. When this territory was annexed to the Belgian state in 1908 as the Belgian Congo, local peoples continued to be subjected to severe political repression and economic exploitation, and for the next thirty years revolts against Belgian authority occurred throughout the colony.
3. Sikitele Gize a Sumbula, cited in Strother, "Smells and Bells," in Pemberton 2000.
4. De Sousberghe 1959, pp. 150–51, cited in ibid.
5. This *njinda* figure (acc. no. 90.2/2957) was acquired in 1933 by G. Capresse, a journalist.

19. *Galukoji* Divination Instrument (*Ngombo*)

Pende, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Wood, bamboo, feathers, fiber, beads, arbrus seeds, camwood powder; 39.4 x 96.5 cm (15½ x 38 in.)

20th century

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Mrs. Ruth Trunzo, 1976 1976.410.1

The integration of a face into the design of this kinetic mechanism—a divination instrument (*ngombo*) known as *galukoji*—suggests that its actions are guided by some spiritual force. This type of innovative Pende divination apparatus appears to have been developed during an especially active period of experimentation in response to accelerated changes in Pende society.[1] Radical transformations that resulted from colonial rule over the region fueled local demands for a greater number and variety of analytic tools that might afford insight into unfamiliar experiences.

The first *galukoji* instrument documented in the West was acquired in 1928 near Koshimbanda, on the northwestern border of the Central Pende region.[2] Léon de Sousberghe, during his stay in the Central Pende region in 1951–53, observed that this type of divination instrument was in widespread use throughout the area. However, shortly thereafter the practice of *galukoji* appears to have been abandoned, and the artifacts themselves discarded; thus, reliance on this particular divinatory technique probably spanned a generation of practitioners between the 1920s and the 1950s.

This work is a classic example of the distinctive genre of *galukoji* instruments, featuring a disembodied head facing outward from the end of a mechanism that resembles a wooden "accordion" gate and that is similarly expandable and retractable. The accordion mechanism consists of nine intersecting segments of palm bamboo, each about 30 centimeters (11¾ inches) long, joined at the top, midpoint, and base with raffia fiber. In this example, each end of the bamboo segments is charged with empowering matter—alternating blue and white tubular glass beads inserted into the tips, with an animal tail projecting from the last of these, and red seeds embedded in the segments' undersides. The head takes the form of a miniature mask, which is bound with raffia fiber to the two foremost bamboo segments. The surface of the face is covered with red kaolin, and the top and sides are adorned with chicken or guinea-fowl feathers. The facial features are crudely rendered; below the pronounced forehead, the brow forms a continuous line above closed eyes.

During a consultation, the diviner would lay the instrument on his knees with the head facing up. He held it by inserting his finger at some point in the crossbars while names of individuals suspected of crimes were recited. In response to the mention of the culprit's name, the *galukoji* sprang upward, approaching the diviner's head.[3] The oracle's protruding forehead evokes the possession of dangerous knowledge—such as the diviner's awareness of an individual's crime—and also accentuates the dynamism of the action that propels it forward to expose and bring wrongdoing to light.

1. This and all other information on Pende culture presented in the following paragraphs is based on an essay on Pende divination by Z. S. Strother, "Smells and Bells: The Role of Skepticism in Pende Divination," in Pemberton 2000.
2. It is now in the Africa Museum in Tervuren, Belgium (acc. no. 30731).
3. De Sousberghe 1959, p. 81, cited in Strother, "Smells and Bells," in Pemberton 2000.

20. Friction Oracle: Janus (*Katatora*)

Songye, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Wood; H. 14 cm (5½ in.)

19th–20th century

Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, The Barry D. Maurer (Class of 1959) Collection of African Art, purchased with Amherst College Discretionary Funds and Funds from H. Axel Schupf (Class of 1957) *AC1999.1*

Within Songye methods of divination, *katatora* (or *katola*) instruments of this kind acted as the physical site of interaction between diviner and client—the point of contact that initiated the diviner's analysis of an individual's particular case history. (See pp. 11 and 15 of "Divination in Sub-Saharan Africa" by John Pemberton, in this catalogue.) The term for this divinatory process is said to evoke the rapping noise that the implement makes when tapped against the wood surface of a headrest or stool.[1] Similarly, the verb *kutotola* (meaning "to hit something several times to obtain a result" or "knocking on a door repeatedly to gain entrance") suggests a physical catalyst that triggers admission to privileged insight.[2]

To begin the consultation, the diviner and client each insert the first two fingers of one hand into the circular or rectangular opening of the friction oracle's hollow body while facing each other. They jointly hold the *katatora* as the diviner inquires into the cause of the client's problem, phrased as a series of "yes" or "no" questions directed to the diviner's spiritual counsel. Responses are registered through movements of the instrument: an affirmative response is usually communicated by a forceful counterclockwise, circular motion, and a negative response by an inclination of the instrument followed by a sweeping motion back and forth across the surface of a mat, stool, or the ground.[3] Evidence of such extensive actions over time is reflected in the wear and abrasion apparent on the underside of such instruments. The diviner expresses gratitude for its efficacy by rubbing the instrument with chalk whenever a new moon rises—an event associated with enlightenment and renewal.[4]

While the object manipulated may be a gourd or metal receptacle entirely devoid of aesthetic refinement, more expensive, sculpturally elaborated artifacts such as this one were commissioned by diviners from artists.[5] Such works generally take the form of a head or torso above a rectangular frame. The figurative element is frequently inspired by a dream in which the diviner visualizes his or her spiritual adviser. It has been recorded that Songye carvers gave shape to these forms out of the hard wood of the *kikewebaii* tree, the sap of which is commonly used as an emetic. There is thus a metaphorical connection between the nature of the material and the voluminous quantity of knowledge that is discharged over the course of a successful consultation.[6]

In this especially elegant example, the design is perfectly symmetrical. Two heads facing in opposing directions share a broad neck that connects them to a large open oval form below. The sense of evenly balanced forms is further reflected in the unity between the horizontal block at the base—which is used as a rubbing surface—and the flattened surface of the heads at the top. The mediating potential of such instruments is reinforced visually by the Janus representation, which suggests exceptional clairvoyance and omniscience.

1. *Memory* 1996, pp. 182, 183.
2. D'Orjo de Marchovolette 1954, cited in *Memory* 1996, p. 182.
3. *Memory* 1996, pp. 182, 185.
4. Ibid., p. 185.
5. Ibid., p. 182.
6. Theodore Theuws, cited in *Memory* 1996, p. 182.

21. Friction Oracle: Janus-Headed Animal (*Itombwa*)

Kuba, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Wood; L. 26 cm (10¼ in.)

19th century

Museum der Kulturen, Basel *III 5654*

Regarded as infallible divinatory instruments, friction oracles (*itombwa*) were used to mediate between diviners and omniscient nature spirits in order to determine the cause of illnesses and appropriate courses of treatment and to expose dishonesty. They performed this role in the guise of an animal form, favored by nature spirits, designed to register their insights in response to human manipulation. (See pp. 10–11 and 15 of "Divination in Sub-Saharan Africa" by John Pemberton, in this catalogue.)

Kuba friction oracles are invariably wooden representations of a four-legged animal with a flat back. The back serves as the surface against which an implement

made of wood, fiber, or resin is rubbed. It is through the action of moving this implement back and forth across the surface of the oracle that responses to inquiries are obtained. Although usually the animal's head is depicted at one end and its tail at the other, sometimes there is a head at each end, as in this example.

When initiating a consultation, the diviner moistens the implement with oil or water and rubs it on the friction oracle's back. For a medical consultation, the diviner performs the action while making a series of statements about potential measures that might be taken (for example, "Don't eat manioc," "Don't smoke tobacco," etc.); when the most appropriate treatment is mentioned, the rubbing implement suddenly stops moving, and the diviner feels it resisting his efforts and sticking to the surface of the oracle.[1] Likewise, in cases that involve determining the perpetrator of a crime, the diviner recites names of residents of the community until the oracle responds similarly. In such cases, the client will confront the suspect, and if he or she denies culpability, this claim of innocence is put to the test. This involves the two going to a tree, cutting a square into the bark without detaching it from the trunk, and then both of them striking the tree until the square is dislodged. Should it land bark side down, the accused is innocent, but if it lands bark side up, the verdict of the friction oracle is confirmed.[2]

The use of *itombwa* for divination among the Kuba may be traced to the early seventeenth century, before the era of Kuba kingship.[3] The practice was introduced at that time by Kete peoples when the forebears of the Kuba migrated into Kete territory. This was linked to their adoption of Kete reverence for invisible nature spirits (*ngesh*), which were believed to populate the landscape's forests and water sources. *Ngesh* were regarded as playing an active role in influencing the course of human affairs, favorably or otherwise. Their appearance to an individual either in a dream or through a supernatural encounter constituted a calling to the diviner's vocation.[4] The diviner's role was to interpret and resolve conflicts as they arose, in consultation with the *ngesh*.

One primary distinction between divinatory instruments used by Kuba and neighboring Lele diviners is that while those designed by the Lele and many other groups are anthropomorphic, almost all Kuba oracles are zoomorphic.[5] The zoomorphic subject matter of Kuba *itombwa* constitutes a noticeable departure from the larger Kuba sculptural tradition, noted for its extensive range of forms that share a humanist emphasis.[6] The imagery of friction oracles draws on certain classes of animals that are associated with divination and are considered capable of forging links between the world of humans and the world of the spirits. For the most part, these ideal mediators inhabit the environment of the marshy forest or thick bush along with the *ngesh*. Consequently, crocodiles, bush pigs, warthogs, tortoises, porcupines, iguanas, and dogs are considered ideal messengers used to appeal to the *ngesh*. Because dogs' keen sense of smell makes them able hunters, they are seen as an appropriate metaphor for the diviner's ability to track down criminals.

When designing an *itombwa*, Kuba sculptors are limited to these animal subjects in order to ensure the instrument's efficacy, but within those prescribed iconographic parameters, artists are afforded a degree of license. This is reflected in a range of stylistically diverse works that evoke the features of appropriate animals but deviate from them in significant ways to suggest otherworldly creatures. In this example, that sense is apparent in the synthesis of doglike and crocodilian characteristics and the doubling of heads, implying extraordinary vigilance and awareness. The pronounced concave curve of the back, caused by extensive use, is a sign of its successful role as an emissary.

1. Torday and Joyce 1910–11, p. 122; Torday 1925, p. 239.
2. Torday and Joyce 1910–11, p. 122.
3. Vansina 1978, pp. 201–2.
4. Mack 1981, p. 53.
5. François Neyt, *Arts Traditionnels et Histoire au Zaïre* (Brussels: Société d'Arts Primitifs, 1981), p. 170. Related divinatory traditions that rely on the use of friction oracles are widespread within and outside the Kasai region among Azande, Ding, Lele, Lwalwa, Ngbaka, and Wongo peoples.
6. Mack 1981, p. 51.

22. Divination Kit: Gourd and Elements

Songye, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Gourd, wood, metal, fiber, leather, other materials; Diam. 21.6 cm (8½ in.)

19th–20th century

Private collection

The divination instrument for a method of inquiry practiced extensively in central and south-central Africa consists of a gourd or basket containing natural and manufactured objects. When it is shaken, the arrangement of its contents is interpreted as a visual code used by the spirit world to reveal and communicate insight into human experiences.

The design of this Songye diviner's vessel, like its contents, represents a seamless synthesis of natural and manufactured elements. Its structure is that of a hollowed gourd, the top of which has been carved to form a lid, with a handle made from a bullet cartridge. Through holes that have been drilled around the perimeter, a strand of vegetable fiber has been threaded and used to suspend a series of miniature iron clappers and eleven wood figurines. Two of the miniatures are dogs, the rest human. With their hands resting on either side of a somewhat distended abdomen, these relate stylistically to monumental Songye community *nkishi* sculptures (see cat. no. 10).

The gourd contains an assemblage of items, including carved miniatures—additional figures and a drum—as well as organic matter composed of bones, seeds, bird skulls, twisted vines, eggs, claws, feathers of various birds, and animal teeth (lion and elephant). Such a collection of matter is inert unless ignited by the diviner (*nganga*) who owns it and recognizes its potential. His vision must allow him to extrapolate from these component particles a complex of ideas associated with the sources from which they are drawn. As individual units, each evokes a distinct series of ideas and associations. Comparable materials interpreted by Ndembu diviners in northwest Zambia have been characterized as "polyvalent," and Mary Nooter Roberts and Allen F. Roberts have called attention to the "mnemonically multireferential" quality shared by each item within a Luba *mboko* gourd.[1] Victor Turner recorded the far-reaching scope of the ideas associated with items in Ndembu divination baskets, with some of them suggesting principles of social organization, others alluding to customs that regulate social behavior, and still others relating to aspirations and emotions.[2]

When linked to one another in physical juxtapositions resulting from a diviner's actions, the interpretive possibilities increase exponentially. Each time he randomly reconfigures the gourd's contents by shaking it, the relative placement of symbolic elements shifts, and these relationships are themselves similarly associated with a range of meanings.[3] An *nganga*'s ability to interpret successive images is rooted in his understanding of the natural world and how he connects it to a specific case at hand. This ability to interpret abstract precepts insightfully and relate them to contemporary realities enables him to wield enormous influence, which is regarded as a force in itself, called *bukopo*.[4]

The Songye and their Luba neighbors are closely related and share many cultural institutions, forms of representation, and divination techniques (see cat. no. 20 and pp. 14–15 of "Divination in Sub-Saharan Africa" by John Pemberton, in this catalogue); some of these techniques are also practiced by Lunda Aruund, Chokwe, Lovale, and Ovimbundu diviners (see cat. no. 11). The work shown here appears to be especially closely related to the *mboko* gourd of Bilumbu diviners and to another Luba form of gourd divination known as *kilemba*, used to determine the guilt or innocence of individuals suspected of criminal acts ranging from theft and adultery to sorcery and murder.[5] Mary Nooter Roberts observed comparable divination gourds with Songye-style figures in use in Luba areas.[6]

1. Turner 1975; *Memory* 1996, p. 194.
2. Turner 1975, cited in *Memory* 1996, p. 195.
3. Ibid., p. 194.
4. Alan P. Merriam, *An African World: The Basongye Village of Lupupa Ngye* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1974), pp. 157–60.
5. *Memory* 1996, p. 202. Roberts and Roberts note that a large decorated gourd called *kilemba*, like the *mboko* or *kileo*, "contains an assortment of items that respond to questions posed by the diviner. . . . Whenever there is a disagreement between the diviner and the client, the 'kilemba' is placed on the client's lap. If the gourd is sensed to adhere to the client's legs, this implies guilt, or indicates that the client has been lying. If the client is shown to be innocent of the crime or dilemma in question, the diviner will take chalk from the gourd and spread it on the person's arms, face, and chest to signify acquittal." Ibid.
6. Mary Nooter Roberts, in a telephone conversation with the author, May 1999.

23. Divination Basket (*Ngombo Ya Cisuka*) and Miniature Divination Figurines (*Tuphele*)

Chokwe, Democratic Republic of the Congo and Angola

Basket: fiber, organic material; Diam. 28 cm (11 in.)

Figurines: wood; H. 5.5–9 cm (2⅛–3½ in.)

19th–20th century

Musée d'Ethnographie, Neuchâtel

The most ambitious and highly regarded diviners in Chokwe society strive to attain omniscience by constantly mining the

world around them, seeking the ingredients necessary to create a microcosm of the universe. Housed within a woven basketry structure, this chaotic jumble of seemingly eclectic debris is continually reconfigured in visual combinations that yield insight into the human condition.

In this method of divination, the *ngombo ya cisuka* specialist analyzes a basket's contents, consisting of a collection of signs (*tuphele*) associated with a fixed set of meanings. These are assembled or created by the diviner and include carved wooden miniature figurines, an assortment of animal matter (horns, hooves, claws, feathers, and bones), and mineral and vegetal ingredients (wood particles, pods, and nuts). Ultimately, the basket is conceived of as an exhaustive and comprehensive representation of social situations, problems, and animate life encountered in the Chokwe universe.[1]

A Chokwe diviner's analytic instruments are known as *ngombo* (see cat. nos. 18, 19). There is an extensive range of *ngombo* divination techniques, but professionals usually specialize in the practice of a single one of these. A form of friction oracle of Lunda origin, *ngombo ya kakuka*, is considered to be the earliest of these devices to be used by Chokwe diviners. However, the most important and highly regarded method is basket divination (*ngombo ya cisuka*), also practiced by Lucazi, Lunda, Lwena, Lwimbi, Ndembu, Ngangela, Nyemba, Ovimbundu, and Rotse peoples.[2]

Although a diviner's diagnosis of a client's problem depends equally on interpreting the organic matter as well as the figurative elements in the basket, Western viewers have been especially drawn to the aesthetic qualities of figurative *tuphele*.[3] Approximately twenty of these standardized motifs exist, conceived in diverse styles ranging from highly reductive and abstract to the most exacting naturalism. Isolated from the context of the basket, these tiny elements have no real significance but possess a lyrical beauty. When interpreted in the course of a consultation, each of them conveys a very precise meaning, but as independent images they simply portray the human form in a series of postures and attitudes that suggest universal emotions.

Among the key protagonists depicted are figures that simultaneously allude to essential ancestral forces, embody human foibles, and presage potential hardships. These allegorical images include the following personifications:

"Kalamba kuku wa lunga" is a silhouette-like representation of a crouching figure. His knees are bent and raised so that his elbows rest on them, and his hands are held to either side of the head. The form creates an especially striking series of negative spaces. Its design suggests a sense of lonely desolation associated with an ancestral being who, though essential to the well-being of his former community, is occasionally forgotten and neglected by his descendants.[4] His female counterpart, "Kalamba kuku wa pwo," is a standing figure who has one arm raised and a hand held to her mouth or chin, while her other arm hangs at her side. This tentatively apprehensive gesture may

signal the approach of death, an attitude of reflection, or the recognition of a potential threat.[5] Another female protagonist, "Katwambimbi," holds both hands to her head, covering her face, and sometimes carries an infant clinging to her back. Her lament and mournful stance anticipate her imminent death.[6]

The symmetrically interlaced limbs of a male and female couple, "Mbate," create a fluid, gracefully balanced form. Their arms cross one another and become fused with their partner's side, and their legs are often crossed as well. In many versions of this motif, the sexual nature of their entanglement is especially explicit. This primordial coupling is often associated with tensions in a marriage, which may result from socially condemned deviations in sexual behavior, such as adultery.[7] Another representation that depicts a series of interrelated figures is that of "Jinga hamba," in which "Cikunza," a Chokwe masquerade personage wearing a tall conical headdress associated with male initiation and fertility, is flanked by twin figures. The three are depicted as a contiguous line of identical bodies that hold their hands to their abdomens. Their appearance evokes the spirit of fertility and the hunt, and they may be prescribed as an amulet worn by hunters.[8]

Two distinct teleological forces are invoked in prayer by members of Chokwe society. They are the Supreme Creator (known as Kalunga or Nzambi) and the spirits of the ancestral founders of the Lunda empire.[9] These two primal forces are reflected in the contents of a divination basket, in which raw materials are balanced with figural elements that metaphorically refer to human behavior. According to the Chokwe belief system that governs *ngombo ya cisuka*, all experiences are quantifiable. Much as a Western physicist comprehends the laws that govern matter, energy, motion, and force, this system may objectively be applied to reveal the underlying cause of any distressing development.

Chokwe diviners interpret signs provided by the *mahamba*, ancestor and nature spirits that act as intermediaries between the Creator and humankind. *Mahamba* may reveal the circumstances responsible for precipitating certain crises and at the same time may be the catalysts responsible for such developments. They become dissatisfied and unhappy when they fail to receive the respect and attention considered to be their due, and inflict harsh punishments on those guilty of showing disrespect. These take the form of a variety of misfortunes, including illness, accidents, death, sterility, impotence, poor hunting, spirit possession, and loss of property. Such troubles are also caused by *wanga*, evil activated by malevolent enemies (see cat. no. 18). The principal course of action taken in response to these problems is to consult a diviner in order to obtain a diagnosis and advice on how to alleviate the situation.[10]

Because of their ability to resolve these conflicts, diviners (*tahi*) play a role of exceptional importance. They are eminently respected and make indispensable contributions to the social and spiritual well-being of their communities. As a consequence, they invariably attain the status of notables in their village and occupy a position of leadership second in importance only to the chief.[11] Diviners are granted their supernatural abilities by powerful ancestors. After undergoing an extensive and demanding course of study and initiation, candidates are possessed by *ngombo*, the ancestral spirit that inspires and guides divinatory inquiries.[12]

To prepare for a consultation, the diviner enhances his or her clairvoyance by applying ritual white and red clay to the corners of his/her eyes and to the basket's rim, and invokes a tutelary ancestor by shaking a rattle. With the client seated opposite the diviner, the session is initiated by shaking the basket and its contents. *Tuphele* that come to rest at the side facing the petitioner constitute a response to the inquiry, a portent that is interpreted by analyzing the symbolic significance of the *tuphele* and their relative positioning.[13] Although the accuracy of the diviner's reading is dependent upon spiritual possession and guidance, this technique inspires the clients' confidence because the visual evidence is openly accessible to them as well.[14] Theoretically, the basket and its contents represent a catalogue of all the potential variables in an individual's lived experience. However, although the particular interpretive possibilities for each item are finite, the components are like atoms or words, which can be linked in combination. These combinations define meaning, and such meanings have the potential to inspire an almost infinite range of narratives.

1. Marie-Louise Bastin, *La Sculpture Tshokwe* (Meudon, France: Alain and Françoise Chaffin, 1982), p. 55; Lima 1971, cited in Areia 1985, p. 21.
2. Areia 1985, p. 54.
3. Ibid., p. 175.
4. Ibid., pp. 185–89.
5. Ibid., pp. 189–92.
6. Ibid., pp. 206–8.
7. Ibid., pp. 204–6.
8. Ibid., pp. 181–83.
9. Bastin in *Chokwe!* 1998, p. 16; Bastin, *La Sculpture Tshokwe*, p. 53.
10. Bastin, *La Sculpture Tshokwe*, p. 55; Areia 1985.
11. Baumann 1935, cited in Areia 1985, p. 19; Bastin, *La Sculpture Tshokwe*, p. 53.
12. Bastin, *La Sculpture Tshokwe*, p. 55; Lima 1971, cited in Areia 1985, p. 53. The term *ngombo* is used to refer to both the spirit force and the various divination techniques and apparatus employed by diviners in Chokwe and related cultures.
13. Bastin 1982, p. 57.
14. Areia 1985, p. 77.

24. Divination Dice (*Hakata*)

Shona, Zimbabwe

Wood; 12 x 4 cm (4¾ x 1⅝ in.)

19th–20th century

The Horstmann Collection, Zug, Switzerland

Sets of dice (*hakata*) are the quintessential Shona instruments used to divine the source of illness or personal misfortune. These consist of a series of four miniature tablets, made of wood, ivory, or bone, each with a distinct design motif inscribed on one side. According to Shona conceptions of experience, personal difficulties—ranging from unemployment or poor grades in school to the death of one's livestock—may all be attributed to some spiritual agency. Consequently, a distinction is made between medical treatment of certain ailments and a diviner's probing analysis and diagnosis of the ultimate cause of a client's problems.[1]

To arrive at these insights, Shona diviners use one of two divination methods. The first involves spirit possession. Diviners who rely on this method to direct their inquiries enter into a trance at the beginning of a session. Any pronouncements they make while they are in this state are attributed to the spirits that they host.[2] The same spirits that communicate to diviners in trance may also reveal knowledge about a client's welfare through the medium of the *hakata*. The divining dice are regarded as the physical embodiments of these

insights, presented through the configuration in which they arrange themselves after being cast onto a surface by the diviner.[3] In order to operate effectively and sharpen their visionary potential, dice must periodically be ritually purified or "medicated" by a diviner.[4] Although dice sets are most commonly used for this form of divination, diviners may also employ collections of shells, seeds, or bones.[5] This practice is also found among neighboring Venda, Tsonga, and Batoka peoples.

Family heads have their own set of *hakata*, used mostly for inquiries into matters that concern the family's interest and well-being.[6] However, for investigations of more serious problems caused by sorcery, a professional diviner (*nganga*; plural, *banganga*) must be consulted. Although diviners are expected to be able to diagnose a client's problem without any advance knowledge of his or her case history, some of them experience revelatory dreams before the consultation takes place.[7]

Before each casting, the diviner directs specific questions to the *hakata*. When the dice are cast, the ones that fall face up form a configuration through which affirmative or negative responses are articulated. There are sixteen possible throws, each of which has a name and a range of interpretations.[8] Many highly skilled diviners throw four or eight sets of dice at a time in order to achieve a more complex and nuanced interpretation of a situation.[9]

The earliest description of the use of *hakata* divination is documented by a Portuguese visitor to the region in 1586:

> All these [people] before undertaking anything, whether it be a journey, business or planting, cast lots to discover if the issue will be fortunate or not, and if the lot is not favorable they put off their business for that day. . . . These pieces of wood, or lots, the [people] call "chacatas," and every [man] carries these "chacatas" with him threaded on a string in order to use them when any doubt arises. In such a case he throws them, as we throw dice, several times, and they say that they are thus shown whether a thing be good or evil.[10]

The longevity of *hakata* designs and their widespread resonance are both suggested by the fact that divination instruments of this kind, as well as stonework displaying a similar aesthetic, have been found in various archaeological sites. Ivory palettes featuring carved lions, which may have been part of a set of divining dice, were uncovered among the hill ruins of Khami, the capital of the Torwa state (1450–1700).[11] Furthermore, the design

motifs that appear on most contemporary dice resemble those on the masonry of numerous architectural structures and on one of eight soapstone birds discovered at the site of Great Zimbabwe, dating from 1250–1500.[12] In light of this, *hakata* symbolism and design have been proposed as relevant clues in interpreting the spatial layout of elite architectural structures built by Iron Age ancestors of the Shona.

The standardized motifs that appear on *hakata* implements correspond to four identities, representing different ages and genders and symbolizing essential aspects of the life force, such as wisdom and fertility. The set shown here consists of (from left to right) *khami*, representing old and senior women, in the form of a double-knot interlace; *chitokwadzima*, old and senior men, in the form of a crocodile; *chirume*, young and junior men, as two parallel bands of lozenges; and *nhokwara*, young and junior women, as a single band of interlace.[13]

There is a wide range of formal variations on these basic design configurations. The "old man" form is often alluded to abstractly by a variety of circle and dot motifs and by pitted designs that may refer to crocodile skin. Crocodiles are associated with sacred leadership in part because of their dangerous, ferocious, and fearless behavior. Most important, they can communicate with the ancestral world at the bottom of deep pools of water.[14] "Old woman" is always represented by a pair of small, identical designs that resemble portions of "old man" or "young woman" design elements and stands for the unity of the family. "Young woman," represented by twisted snakes or other interlaced designs, is associated with fertility.[15] "Young man" is characterized as a python and is identified with rain and the fertility of the land.[16]

The design and use of *hakata* reflect the convergence of diviners' and artists' sensibilities. Not only are diviners the primary patrons of artists in Shona society, but the two share the same source of divine inspiration in practicing their respective vocations. Some individuals may have dreams in which they are called on to become diviners by relatives who were themselves *banganga*, after which they are inhabited by a spirit (*shave*).[17] Similarly, the careers of artists are often launched by a diagnosis of an affliction signifying that an ancestor desires them to develop the skills of a sculptor or blacksmith.[18] The creativity involved in the design of traditional Shona forms of expression does not reflect an emphasis on originality on the part of the individual artist. Instead, it too is conceived of as the product of divine inspiration communicated by the *shave*.[19]

1. Bucher 1980, p. 120.
2. *Legacies of Stone* 1997, p. 198; Bucher 1980, pp. 115–16.
3. Bucher 1980, p. 116.
4. Ibid.
5. *Legacies of Stone* 1997, pp. 229, 294.
6. Kuper 1954, p. 34.
7. *Legacies of Stone* 1997, p. 128.
8 Bucher 1980, p. 116.
9. Ibid.
10. João dos Santos, cited in Huffman 1996, p. 114.
11. Huffman 1996, p. 58.
12. Ibid., fig. 5.35.
13. Ibid., p. 113, fig. 67.
14. Ibid., p. 29.
15. Ibid., p. 67.
16. Ibid., p. 29.
17. Bucher 1980, p. 114.
18. *Legacies of Stone* 1997, p. 66.
19. Ibid., p. 64.

25. Gong Striker: Equestrian (*Lawle*)

Baule, Côte d'Ivoire

Wood, cloth; 10.8 x 25.1 cm (4½ x 9⅞ in.)

19th–20th century

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Purchase, Pace Editions Inc., Fred and Rita Richman, and Mr. and Mrs. Milton F. Rosenthal Gifts, 1977 1977.335

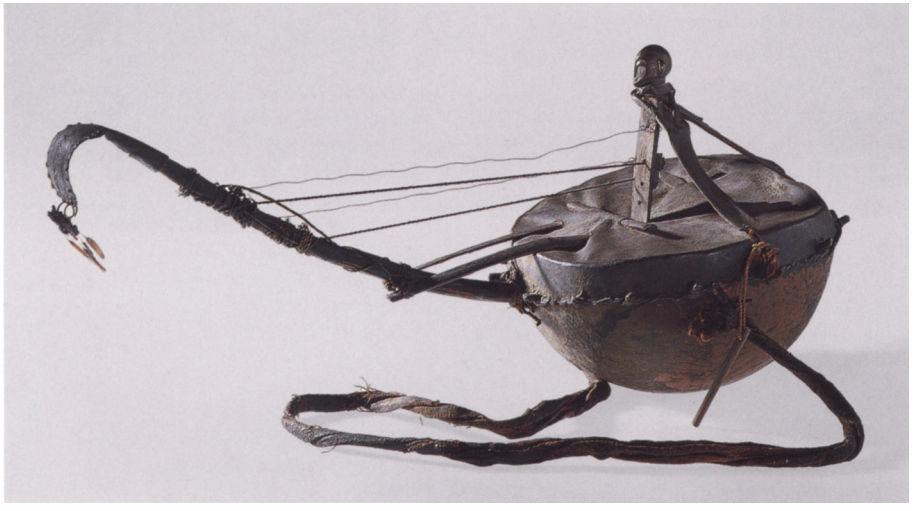
A dramatic spectacle enhanced by dance and music provides the arena for revelations made by Baule trance diviners (*komien*). The sound of a gong hit with a finely carved gong striker, such as this example, acts as a catalyst that triggers the state of awareness necessary for *komien* to serve as mediums. This work was originally designed to be struck against a bell-shaped iron gong by the diviner in the privacy of his or her shrine room before initiating a public session. The percussive ring induces trance and possession by nature spirits (*asye usu*), and if the diviner senses their departure at any point before the event's conclusion, it is struck again. Within the context of the consultation witnessed by the community, the beauty of this carefully carved implement contributes to the aesthetic appeal of the dramatic spectacle, which is choreographed to combine costumes, dance, and music with a display of various sculptural forms owned by the diviner.[1] These add to the theatrical appeal of the event and denote the diviner's professional stature.

There are two distinct types of gong strikers: *kokowa*, utilitarian strikers devoid of embellishment, and *lawle*, intricately carved implements that display their maker's deliberate aesthetic intentions.[2] In these more elaborate works, the repertory of motifs joined to the handle includes

female figures, zoomorphic imagery, and *bo nun amuin* masks (men's sacred masks kept in bush sanctuaries where women are forbidden to enter). Although the maker of the example shown here would not have seen the equestrian subject it depicts, the design of this *lawle* ranks among the most accomplished of its genre.

The overall conception of the expressionistic horse fuses together a swayback and a long camellike muzzle with the carefully rendered minutiae of the carved reins. The scale of the rider's upper body contrasts sharply with that of his legs. Below, the broad concave curve of the horse's stomach is emphasized by the crescent-shaped negative space between it and the concave curve of the finely carved base. The delicate imagery featured in the base both distinguishes its two sides from each other and unifies them. A turtle is the principal protagonist on one side, and a serpent that dominates the other reaches over to bite its foot. This bilateral asymmetry is an intentional aesthetic device used by the Baule makers of such works to create contrast as well as to surprise and to demonstrate their inexhaustible invention.[3] At the base, a small pad of woven cloth is attached to the striker's hammering element.[4] The top of the base, decorated with a carved openwork figurative passage, is joined at a slight angle to the handle, which has been rendered in a classic ropelike form. Baule sculptor Lela Kouakou has noted that this design element is recognized as a mark of an artist's virtuoso talent.[5]

1. *Baule* 1997, p. 237.
2. James Baldwin et al., *Perspectives: Angles on African Art*, exh. cat. (New York: Center for African Art, 1987), p. 147.
3. *Baule* 1997, p. 29.
4. Ibid., p. 221.
5. *Perspectives* 1987, p. 152.



26. Harp-Lute (*Korikaariye*)

Senufo, Côte d'Ivoire

Wood, string, gourd, metal, leather, cloth; 28 x 72 cm (11 x 28⅜ in.)

20th century

B. and U. Gottschalk Collection, Düsseldorf

Senufo Sando diviners (see cat. nos. 2, 3) appeal to the *madebele* spirit entities for insight through a display of compelling sculptural artifacts accompanied by sonorous musical overtures. These aesthetic effects create an optimal setting and act as essential catalysts that facilitate communication.

Over the course of a consultation, a diviner skillfully choreographs the interplay of a series of visual and auditory stimulants to achieve a state of extrasensory transcendence.

An individual's immediate concerns are addressed in an intimate encounter in which the Sando diviner and the client sit on the ground facing each other with the *madebele* sculptures placed in front of the diviner. Invariably, this process of inquiry is launched with a short musical invocation. While the female diviner sounds out this musical preface with a gourd rattle, a male diviner plays a six-stringed harp-lute (*korikaariye*). The score is essentially a form of praise that flatters the *madebele* and expresses gratitude for their intercession. It engages them by a dynamic of call and response, through which they are summoned forth to participate, seduced by the beauty of the music, and are ultimately induced to reveal their knowledge to the diviner.[1] By initiating and sustaining this process of communication over the course of a consultation, music carries equal weight with the visual components of the divination process.[2]

The potential to perform as a catalyst is expressed especially eloquently in the design of this particular instrument. Beyond its functional capacity to produce music, it features a sculptural representation of a bush spirit.[3] This floating, ethereal presence rises out of the calabash resonator, which is covered with cowhide. Centrally situated, it functions as the bridge from which the strings span the long, curving neck, joining the two essential components of the instrument. Iron and brass attachments suspended from the tip of the neck allow the musician to accompany his playing with percussive sound.[4] Conceived as a fulcrum, the anthropomorphic string holder takes the form of an idealized woman featuring an elaborate crested coiffure.[5] Her position suggests a metaphor for the divination process on several levels: the role of the musician-diviner as arbitrator between the *madebele* and the diviner's clients, the *madebele* as intermediaries between humankind and the forces of nature, and finally, the potential of music to transcend the barriers of metaphysical states.

1. Veirman 1996, pp. 152, 154.
2. Ibid., p. 156.
3. Glaze 1981, p. 176.
4. *Sounding Forms: African Musical Instruments*, ed. Marie-Thérèse Brincard, exh. cat. (New York: American Federation of Arts, 1989), p. 90.
5. Glaze 1981, p. 176.

27. Hunting Charm: Slitdrum (*N-kookwa Ngoombu*)

Yaka, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Wood, metal, seeds, fiber, organic material; H. 31.1 cm (12¼ in.)

19th century

Brooklyn Museum of Art, Museum Expedition 1922, Robert B. Woodward Memorial Fund 22.1461

Yaka beliefs acknowledge a celestial Creator as the originator of life and death who, however, is removed from the concerns of everyday experience. Humankind instead relies on the elders or ancestors for guidance. In Yaka society, people who seek insights into experiences of misfortune, sickness, death, or other unsettling developments may consult any of various divinatory oracles,[1] in the course of which the afflicted undergo an initiation and cast aside their condition upon experiencing a ritual death and rebirth.[2] Initiates into the Ngoombu cult ultimately become invested with the ability to take on the role of professional diviners. (See pp. 15–16 of "Divination in Sub-Saharan Africa" by John Pemberton, in this catalogue.)

Ngoombu reveals the faculty of clairvoyance to be an innate quality of certain individuals. This calling is manifested through symptoms of chronic illness or hallucinations, which affect men and women whom ancestral diviners have designated to take their place. Ultimately, the symptoms of their vocation are addressed through an extended course of treatment that includes seclusion, initiation, apprenticeship, and the learning of ritual procedures.[3]

Over the course of supervising a novice's initiation, a master diviner invites a sculptor to carve a figurative slitdrum. Indeed, the human form of the example shown here is characteristic of Yaka slitdrums, which are the province of trance diviners, who value them as indispensable mediums for divine inspiration. Once the artifact is created, the master diviner consecrates it, so that it is transformed into a source of mediation with the ancestral diviner (*n-kooku*). As a result, the slitdrum comes to incorporate the spirit of the mentoring diviner, and the instrument is designated as *n-kookwa*. It is the clairvoyance of this ancestor that will direct the novice in his or her own practice, and the slit will serve as the mouth of the oracle's voice when the slitdrum is struck.[4] The significance of this aperture is acknowledged by the master diviner, who, by coating the instrument's interior with kaolin, salt, pepper, and other substances to make a ritual tribute, invites the *n-kooku* to assume his or her role as omniscient commentator.

The diviner is never briefed on cases beforehand. Instead, he or she is presented with a fragmentary clue in the form of an object that has been in contact with the client's person. Drawing on his/her powers of clairvoyance, the diviner uses the object

to reveal essential elements of the case. The next morning, after having experienced visionary dreams, the diviner fleshes out a diagnosis in greater detail.

As the source of divinatory messages conveyed by the diviner, the slitdrum is conceived of as the preeminent sacred object associated with revelation in Yaka society, as well as its owner's alter ego.[5] It plays a pervasive role in the diviner's professional life and has multiple uses. It is sounded to signal a diviner's arrival in a community to

perform a consultation. It may be employed as the platform on which its owner is seated while dispensing insights. Or it can be used as a vessel in which "medicines" are prepared and from which they are ingested.[6]

Though clearly created to serve as a Yaka diviner's oracular mouthpiece, this particular work features additional elements that suggest it was modified at some point to transform it into a charm (*nkisi*; plural, *minkisi*). Its classic design includes a head with closed eyes, a trilobed coiffure, prominent ears, and a cylindrical body bisected by a vertical cavity. Suspended around the neck from a fiber cord are a lock, key, and animal horn. In Yaka society, Ngoombu diviners prescribed *minkisi*, manufactured by specialists, that enhanced their client's abilities to fulfill some specific need. Hunting has traditionally been the most highly productive activity pursued by Yaka men, and *minkisi* created for private or collective hunts were in great demand. The visual forest of added elements, which appear to weigh down and restrain this form, symbolically alludes to the idea of entrapment and capture.

1. Arthur P. Bourgeois, *The Yaka and the Suku* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1985), pp. 2–4.
2. Devisch 1995, p. 99.
3. Daniel Biebuyck, *The Arts of Zaïre*, vol. 1: *Southwestern Zaïre* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 177.
4. Devisch 1995, p. 103.
5. Ibid.
6. Biebuyck, *Arts of Zaïre*, p. 195.

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28. Divination Whistle: Monkey (*Nsiba*)

Vili, Mayumba, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Wood, antelope horn, fiber; L. 29 cm (11⅜ in.)

19th century

Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Museum für Völkerkunde
III C 717a-c

Music often plays an essential role as a catalyst for ritual processes. Exquisitely refined miniature whistles (*nsiba*) were part of a complex of "medicines" operated by a diviner according to specific procedures in order to achieve magical results. The combined appeal of their visual form and lyrical call activated a spiritual force invested with power over some aspect of human experience.

The name *nsiba* is a combination of *nsia*, a species of antelope (*Silvicapa*) from which the horn is taken, and the verb *siba*, which describes these whistles' role as instruments that invoke an *nkisi*, the spirit addressed by the diviner.[1] Antelope-horn whistles topped by finely carved miniature sculptures were made and used in many different central African cultures.[2] The miniature sculptures exist in a variety of figurative, zoomorphic, and abstract geometric forms rendered in many individual styles. They are 10 to 20 centimeters high, with conical holes at the base into which the pointed end of the horn fits, reinforced by a string threaded through a hole near the pointed end and a vertical hole in the sculpture. Occasionally, as in this instance, two sculptures are attached to the same string.[3]

Nsiba adorned in this elaborate manner were never carried by ordinary people, only by prominent members of the community such as healer-diviners and possibly village chiefs.[4] They were not prestige artifacts, however, but rather were conceived as "medicines" prescribed by a particular *nkisi* and utilized in rituals performed to combat witchcraft or to heal the sick. Ultimately such works performed a dual role as signal whistles used to hunt and as spirit intermediaries for diviners (*banganga*). These activities complement each other metaphorically—just as a hunter stalks his prey, so does a diviner track down criminals, sorcerers, and other sources of illness, death, and suffering.[5]

Animal imagery associated with *nsiba* includes antelopes, monkeys, dogs, and birds. It appears that many of the subjects of the carvings illustrate proverbs that were potent in their own right. The two carved figures accompanying the whistle shown here both relate to a diviner's vocation. In one, the artist captures the agility of a monkey balanced on a branch and leaning forward. It has been proposed that the monkey is probably the long-tailed *mutadi*, whose name means "one who spies out," a metaphorical reference to the diviner.[6] The other, a Janus-faced cylinder, similarly suggests the diviner's powers of observation, which allow him to gaze simultaneously into visible and invisible worlds.

1. Söderberg 1966, p. 8; *Astonishment and Power* 1993, p. 58.
2. Söderberg 1966, p. 6.
3. Ibid., p. 7.
4. *Astonishment and Power* 1993, p. 56.
5. Söderberg 1966, p. 24.
6. Wyatt MacGaffey, entry for cat. no. 73 in *Kings of Africa* 1992, p. 311.

29. Diviner's Bag (*Apo Ifa*)

Yoruba, Nigeria

Cloth, beads, leather; 25.4 x 21.6 cm (10 x 8½ in.)

20th century

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Claire and Michael Oliver, 1999
1999.296

The most emblematic and personalized accessory of a Yoruba diviner (*babalawo*) is his *apo Ifa*, a beaded leather bag featuring brilliant adornment that is not merely decorative but constitutes a commentary on his vocation through its materials and color scheme. Dedicated to the perpetual pursuit of knowledge, diviners lead a peripatetic existence, making themselves available as advisers and seeking out renowned colleagues whose wisdom and talent might expand their own understanding.[1]

In view of their itinerant way of life, Yoruba *babalawo* have been compared to artists and are described as "travelers who are strangers everywhere, at home nowhere."[2] Their mobility and freedom to practice their profession anywhere are facilitated by a portable set of divining implements (see cat. nos. 12–16), which includes palm nuts (*ikin Ifa*) or a divining chain (*opele Ifa*), a tray (*opon Ifa*), a tapper (*iroke Ifa*), and a small ivory head symbolic of the god Esu (also called Elegba). These are carried in the *apo Ifa*, the outer flap of which may be decorated with cowrie shells or imported European beads. The fundamental importance of the *apo* in the diviner's way of life is indicated by the epithet *akapo* ("carriers of bags").[3]

The high status of Ifa diviners in Yoruba society is reflected in the access they have to materials reserved for royalty, such as ivory and beadwork. The primary emblem of Yoruba divine kingship is a beaded crown, which is worn with other beaded accessories, such as slippers and gowns. That such highly valued and expensive materials are also incorporated into the finery associated with diviners is not merely a sign of their elevated rank but an acknowledgment that both kings and diviners are leaders whose authority stems from their relationship to *orun*, the otherworld. There is a diviner's aphorism that alludes to their beaded regalia as visible signs of their comparable power: "[I] share things equally with rulers, they wear kings' crowns and I wear [diviners'] beaded necklaces."[4]

The sensibility that guides the carving of Ifa divination trays is also evident in the beadwork or shellwork applied to *apo Ifa*, with motifs similarly arranged to form compositions that reflect multiple perspectives.[5]

However, in *apo* these are asymmetrical, consisting of distinct fields of different patterns in a patchworklike configuration. In the work shown here, this design tactic is apparent in its two contrasting halves—one filled with a schematic "dancing" figure, the other subdivided into three squares of dissimilar abstract patterns: interlocking triangles, a checkerboard, and a large X. Thus, any sense of a visual center is sacrificed as the eye constantly moves from one segment to the next. Without any single unifying element, the picture plane breaks down into an aggregate of diverse forms, resulting in an aesthetic vitality and dynamism expressed by the Yoruba principle known as "shine."[6] A contributing factor to this compositional approach may be the beadworker's practice of turning the bag as he worked.[7]

According to Yoruba color theory, the chromatic scale may be measured in terms of tonal gradations and temperature, and their full range serves as a metaphor for forces within the cosmos.[8] Three primary color groups are each associated with distinct character traits: white (*funfun*) is associated with cold; red and the related colors pink, orange, and yellow (*pupa*), with heat; and black and the related colors blue, purple, and green (*dudu*) are the mediating tones in between. Here, the beadwork composition features a palette that dances between "hot" pink and yellow and "moderate" blue and green, accented by white, black, and red. The dynamic reflected in this color field is that of *pupa* and *dudu* set within a backdrop of the full spectrum of possibilities, or wholeness.[9] This color combination is often worn by diviners as an expression of their efforts to reveal and mediate the forces of the world and the otherworld.[10]

1. Henry John Drewal in *Beads, Body, and Soul* 1998, p. 229.
2. Olabiyi Yai, "In Praise of Metonymy," in *The Yoruba Artist*, ed. Rowland Abiodun, Henry John Drewal, and John Pemberton III (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), pp. 112–13.
3. Drewal in *Beads, Body, and Soul* 1998, p. 229.
4. Ibid., p. 238.
5. Henry John Drewal, "Art and Divination among the Yoruba: Design and Myth," *Africana Journal* 14, nos. 2–3 (1987), p. 143.
6. Drewal in *Beads, Body, and Soul* 1998, p. 78.
7. Drewal, "Art and Divination," p. 143.
8. Drewal in *Yoruba* 1989, p. 18.
9. Drewal in *Beads, Body, and Soul* 1998, p. 104.
10. Drewal in *Yoruba* 1989, p. 18.

30. Diviner's Staff: Birds (*Osun babalawo*)

Yoruba, Nigeria

Iron; H. 115 cm (45¼ in.)

19th–20th century

Drs. Daniel and Marian Malcolm Collection

In southern Yorubaland, distinctive wrought-iron staffs used by healers and Ifa divination priests feature motifs that evoke a gathering of birds, which celebrate Osanyin, the god of herbal medicines.[1] Diviners venerate Osanyin, who guides their use of leaves in preparing "medicines" for their clients.[2] The vocations of diviner (*babalawo*) and healer overlap somewhat, and both are devoted primarily to battling witchcraft on behalf of their clients, a goal that may be accomplished through the mere possession of such a staff.[3] This unifying attribute acknowledges the unique combination of wisdom, effective action, and authority that underlies their power and influence.[4] However, while *babalawos*' vast knowledge of nature affords most of them a dual role that includes the practice of medicine, not all healers are knowledgeable about divination.

Representations of birds in Yoruba ritual arts (see also cat. nos. 14, 44) evoke the mystical power (*ase*) commanded by female elders, referred to as *awon iya wa*, literally "our mothers."[5] This procreative power has the potential for being either beneficial or destructive. Acknowledgment of its fundamental importance in the realm of political authority is reflected in the representation of clusters of birds at the top of royal crowns.[6] Within the context of art forms associated with the divination process, birds are often represented as witnesses to divination consultations with Orunmila (also known as Ifa), the god of wisdom and divination.[7] Thus, a bird depicted at the apex of an Ifa staff is referred to as the "bird of Ifa." Such birds are believed to invoke the power of the hawk (*asa*), symbolizing the diviner's ability to address problems expediently and effectively.[8] The bird imagery of divination paraphernalia also draws inspiration from Ifa poetry, which recounts that *eye kan* ("the lone bird") was bisexual and could not give birth. After consulting Ifa and making the appropriate sacrifices, *eye kan* took up residence in the house of the diviner and was thenceforth known as *eye ile* ("the bird of the house").[9]

The scepter shown here is an especially elegant tribute to the potentially boundless reaches of a diviner's influence. At the top of the long iron shaft, its finial takes the form of two birds, one slightly larger than the other, rendered as silhouettes facing opposite directions.[10] The contours of the forms create a dynamic series of sweeping curves—the beak, crest, neck, wings, and body—unified by an additional pair of wings at the base. Although these are represented in metal, the fluidity of the lines imbues the composition with an ethereal quality. Iron is chosen as the medium for the staffs of diviners and healers because it is also used to make tools to cut and collect plant ingredients for healing and to make weapons against destructive forces.[11]

The prototype for diviners' staffs is associated with Orunmila. Such staffs have become the attribute of important Ifa priests such as the Ojubona, a leader among diviners.[12] They may carry these in public processions to signal the fact that they are preparing to cast Ifa or to mark significant occasions, such as the initiation ceremony of a new priest.[13] As one of his most valued possessions, a diviner's staff is placed in front of his home as both an emblem of his vocation and as a protective safeguard.[14]

1. *Yoruba* 1989, p. 38.
2. Bascom 1969, p. 84.
3. *Black Gods and Kings* 1976, p. 11/1.
4. *Yoruba Art and Aesthetics* 1991, p. 42.
5. Henry John Drewal and Margaret Thompson Drewal, *Gelede: Art and Female Power among the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983).
6. *Yoruba* 1989, p. 38.
7. See cat. no. 12, n. 3.
8. Henry John Drewal, "Art and Divination among the Yoruba: Design and Myth," *Africana Journal* 14, nos. 2–3 (1987), p. 42.
9. Ibid., p. 34.
10. While the staffs owned by diviners and herbalists are usually described as being indistinguishable from one another, some scholars have suggested that staffs with a single bird, bells, and inverted cones on their finials are diviners' staffs and that those with more than one bird are herbalists' staffs. *Black Gods and Kings* 1976, p. 11/2.
11. Ibid., p. 11/3; Drewal, "Art and Divination," p. 142.
12. C. O. Adepegba, *Yoruba Metal Sculpture* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Ibadan University Press, 1991), p. 29.
13. *Yoruba* 1989, p. 41; Adepegba, *Yoruba Metal Sculpture*, p. 29.
14. Drewal, "Art and Divination," p. 140.

31. Komo Helmet Mask (*Komokunw*)

Bamana, Mali

Wood, quills, tusks, bird skull, organic material; 25.4 x 85 x 23.2 cm (10 x 33½ x 9⅛ in.)

19th–20th century

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Morton Lipkin, 1961 1978.412.426

In Mande culture, Komo headdresses such as this helmet mask (*komokunw*) are repositories of great ritual power generated through prescribed combinations of elemental matter. When worn in performance, these works have the potential to transform their owners into omniscient social commentators.[1]

For the Bamana, a people of Mande heritage, the basic form of energy animating

the universe and fueling all activities, whether natural or mystical, is known as *nyama*. The ability to control, direct, and channel *nyama* toward specific ends requires a command of the most potent knowledge conceivable.[2] Those who possess this knowledge, which is referred to as "sorcery," are regarded with ambivalence, since they have the potential to greatly benefit others or do them great harm.[3] Anyone motivated to do so may pursue the acquisition of this knowledge by devoting the time, effort, and resources necessary to learn from a master. Most people, however, rely on the services of experts (*donnikelaw*, literally "persons who know") to direct *nyama* on their behalf by diagnosing the cause of their problems. Through divination, and by fortifying them against danger with protective amulets, these specialists assist the people they advise to live up to their full potential.[4]

Within societies of Mande origin, members of *nyamakala* groups—families of specialized professionals, such as blacksmiths—are innately endowed with such abilities, which they further refine over the course of their extensive apprenticeships.[5] Blacksmiths (*numuw*), as individuals who master the technically demanding process of ironworking, manage enormous quantities of *nyama* by transforming iron ore into implements and artifacts.[6] Thus, their abilities may be directed beyond overseeing metallurgical processes to include mediating endeavors that require the same profound insight into managing power, such as healing and divination. The association between blacksmiths and divination is alluded to in a Bamana oral narrative concerning a smith named Fa Sine Dyara, who served as the valued counselor to the leader Sousan through his ability to interpret the "language of the birds."[7] Smiths may practice a variety of divination techniques, interpreting signs such as the movements of snakes, configurations of thrown cowrie shells (*kolonw*), and designs drawn in the sand (*cenda*).[8] They often confirm their findings in one method by verifying it through a second one. Ultimately, they may be able to visualize definitive answers to the inquiries of community members while participating in a Komo society performance.

Komo is an initiation association led by blacksmiths, whose mandate is to promote the general well-being of the community and to protect society from harm. Teenage boys, after they are circumcised, are eligible to join Komo and become participants in its secret affairs.[9] During meetings restricted to members, high-ranking officials (*komotigiw*) perform dances while wearing wooden helmet masks (*komokunw*).[10] These dances respond to petitions from the community for various kinds of help, ranging from divining the cause of a family's crop failure to correcting a problem of infertility. Individuals are called to positions of Komo leadership by a spirit with whom they enter into a relationship; they will subsequently create or inherit a mask that is also invested with spiritual power. In order to divine while dancing, the performer concentrates on combining his *nyama* with the *nyama* of this spirit and that of his own mask.[11] Through a sort of free association, answers to the problems that have been presented to him come into his mind, and during a performance he reveals these solutions to his audience through the medium of song.

The Komo mask is an artifact that portrays wisdom and erudition through its complex arrangement of materials and serves as a deterrent to antisocial acts through its monstrous ferocity.[12] The juxtaposition of dissonant organic elements creates a wild, inscrutable appearance that defies Bamana aesthetic ideals.[13] New Komo masks are assembled by their owners in a process that takes four to six weeks.[14] Once the proper wood is selected for the understructure, the carving takes place within an afternoon. The *komotigiw* must subsequently gather the work's herbal contents and hunt for its animal components, and then prepare them, following a series of recipes (*daliluw*) that will empower the work to accomplish specific actions.[15] Knowledge of the various *daliluw* that define the composition of an individual Komo mask is necessary to control the work—knowledge that is available only to the mask's maker or owner.[16] The unrestrained, raw power projected by the design of such works correlates with the intensely intellectual exercise in applied engineering that went into making it.

The work shown here is in the classic form of a horizontal sculpture of a saurian beast, with a dome-shaped forehead and with horizontal ears carved on either side. Additions of animal elements extend this sculptural form at both ends. At the left, horns that curve upward, attached to the tips of the ears, refer to the power of the bush and evoke the strength and endurance of the animal world. They suggest danger and aggression and are associated with knowledge through their use as medicinal containers.[17] At the right, the mouth is depicted with jaws open, exposing serrated

rims of sharp teeth and terminating in a snoutlike form, on top of which a bird skull with a long, narrow, pointed beak has been attached. In Mande culture, speech is considered a potent form of *nyama*, and the enormous maw represents a reservoir for vast quantities of powerful oratory.[18] Patrick McNaughton has suggested that they are modeled after the jaws of the hyena, a creature perceived to be keenly intelligent and immensely knowledgeable about the natural landscape.[19]

The bird skull that juts from these jaws evokes several metaphorical associations. Birds are linked with the notion of wisdom.[20] In their airborne position, they mediate between humans and the sky, thus making accessible the omniscience of the heavens, which they communicate through a special divinatory technique. Their representation in Komo masks, whether through bundles of vulture feathers or through a skull, as in this example, makes specific reference to the mask's oracular powers. The skull has been covered with quills from a porcupine, another animal that is a symbol of wisdom and the preservation of knowledge.[21] The quills themselves refer to weaponry such as darts, arrows, and bullets used by Bamana hunters, suggesting their power to combat sorcery. The skull's surface is a crusty layer of sacrificial matter combined with earth of uneven and crackled consistency. Continually added to over the course of the work's lifetime, this incrustation has gradually obscured the mask's features while enhancing its power to dispense clarity and anticipate future events.[22]

1. McNaughton 1988.
2. Ibid., p. 15.
3. Ibid., p. 12.
4. Ibid., pp. 13, 51.
5. Ibid., p. 12.
6. Ibid., pp. 7, 16.
7. Ibid., p. 52.
8. Ibid., pp. 52–56.
9. Ibid., p. 131.
10. Ibid., p. 129.
11. Ibid., pp. 135, 141.
12. Ibid., p. 130.
13. Ibid., p. 138.
14. Ibid., p. 133–34.
15. Ibid., p. 43.
16. Ibid., p. 134.
17. Ibid., p. 136.
18. Ibid., p. 137.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., p. 136.
22. Ibid., p. 138.

32. Diviner's Mask

Yombe, Democratic Republic of the Congo and Angola

Wood, organic material; 22.9 x 16.8 cm (9 x 6⅝ in.)

Early 20th century

Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas

A genre of Yombe face mask in this relatively naturalistic style is associated with an especially powerful divination specialist, the *nganga diphomba*. Such works played an integral role in the real-life drama of prosecuting antisocial acts in Yombe communities. In that context, these works inspired confidence in the *diphomba*'s ability to dispense justice and instill fear in the minds of people with guilty consciences.

The *nganga diphomba* was a specialist devoted primarily to the detection of witches. The preeminent seers and analysts within their profession, *diphomba* were without equals in their ability to expose the underlying causes of disruptive developments, ranging from crimes, accidents, and deaths to natural disasters such as droughts and scarcity of game.[1] They ultimately attributed all these problems to covert actions by some members of the community, who were motivated by malice, greed, or envy. In order to arrive at these conclusions, *diphomba* either interpreted signs indicated by devices such as friction oracles or themselves served as the vehicle for oracular pronouncements of ancestral spirits.[2]

The Yombe are a subgroup within the extended Kongo culture. In Kongo societies, most therapeutic interventions that affected the well-being of the community at large took the form of public spectacles. The masked *diphomba* dispensed his verdict on such a matter and identified the culprit while participating in a performance wearing a skirt of touraco feathers and a belt with small brass bells, his body painted with black, white, and red pigments applied in geometric designs.[3] Within Kongo culture, the use of this combination of colors is restricted to rituals of diagnosis and divination. The black color of the mask shown here is similarly associated with judgment, divination, and witchcraft trials.[4]

It is thought that such masks are idealized representations of the diviners who wore them. Yombe masks, which are part of the broader tradition of relatively naturalistic Kongo sculptural forms (see cat. no. 9), all show an especially striking emphasis on heightened realism.[5] Here, the subject has been depicted with his eyes closed and mouth open and displays an expression of intense concentration. In other Yombe masks, portraitlike qualities are suggested through such additional features as teeth or piercing gazes, the latter rendered through fully articulated eyes punctuated by empty pupils. The head is usually crowned by a simple cap form, and some examples include beards composed of animal hair attached to the base of the chin.

In Kongo societies, the regard in which diviners are held is somewhat ambiguous, as is the case with others who occupy positions of leadership. Reigning cultural perceptions attribute any remarkable quality or accomplishment that sets an individual apart as an unnatural achievement acquired

through witchcraft (*kindoki*). Even when used as a power directed toward legitimate ends to help others, the ability to foretell the future is interpreted in this manner.[6] In order to effectively assist the more vulnerable members of society in resolving problems and combating destructive forces, it is essential that diviners be invested with the very powers of witchcraft that besiege the populace.

1. Raoul Lehuard, *Art Bakongo: Les Masques* (Arnouville, France: Arts d'Afrique Noire, 1993), pp. 774, 778.
2. MacGaffey 1986, p. 166.
3. Lehuard, *Art Bakongo*, p. 774.
4. Anita Jacobson-Widding 1979, p. 225.
5. Lehuard, *Art Bakongo*, pp. 774–96.
6. MacGaffey 1986, p. 168.

33. Basinjom Mask and Costume

Banyang, Cameroon

Mask: wood, feathers, mirrors; costume: cloth, fiber, genet pelt, shells

Mask: 20 x 43 cm (7⅞ x 16⅞ in.); costume: 195 cm (76¾ in.)

19th–20th century

Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden 28.154

In Banyang and Ejagham communities, situated on opposite sides of the border that divides Cameroon and Nigeria, Basinjom (or Obasinjom) represents the voice of unerring prophecy. Its pronouncements are made manifest through an individual who takes on its persona while cloaked in the guise of an otherworldly creature. This wild masquerade ensemble drapes the body in a flowing robe and is crowned by a crocodilian head adorned with a tiara of plumage. Characterized as a "speaking mask," "the one who never tells lies," and "the one who tells and acts," Basinjom unveils subterfuge and denounces wrongdoing. Such revelations form the core of Basinjom's dramatic visual spectacle and are of vital concern to the well-being of its audience.

The forecasting practices of Basinjom (which, literally translated, means "the future brought by God") appear to have been developed at the turn of the century by the Ejagham in southwestern Nigeria, who refer to it as Obasinjom.[1] By the 1930s, its divinatory powers were adopted by the neighboring Banyang in western Cameroon (where this work was acquired), who altered the name slightly. Throughout the region, Basinjom represents a source of protection to its communities by detecting and exposing negative forces that threaten them. Such potential disruptions generally arise out of acts of selfish egotism, which run counter to social ideals of cooperation and generosity and are characterized as "witchcraft."[2]

According to Banyang oral history, God provided them with the knowledge

to create antidotes to witchcraft—recipes for specific "medicines" (*njom*) using combinations of plants—so that humankind could protect itself.[3] Basinjom is the personification of the most potent of these "medicines" and the only regional masquerade form invested with clairvoyance.[4] It is therefore able to perceive the underlying causes of problems such as illnesses or infertility and to discern when God and the ancestors are displeased.[5]

This divinatory role is explicitly referred to by Basinjom's reflective glass eyes.[6] Through the medium of these probing specula, the antisocial acts that Basinjom strives to combat appear to it cinematographically. The powers of perception that guide it are introduced to selected members of the community during an extended initiation, which includes extensive training to learn and harness the properties of plants and a ceremonial "washing" of the initiate's eyes with a medicinal preparation, *bajewobabe*.[7] This opening of his eyes prepares the initiate for an exegesis of the esoteric properties of Basinjom's masquerade ensemble.[8]

Basinjom's physical features constitute an amalgam of elements associated with land, water, and air.[9] It has the gaping maw of a crocodile, which allows Basinjom to speak of controversial matters while in the guise of a dangerous predator that lives both on land and in the water. The crest is composed of the blue feathers of the touraco, a bird said to have the power to combat witchcraft. These are interspersed with quills from a porcupine, a terrestrial creature endowed with the ability to shield one from celestial thunder and lightning. Inserted into the headdress are plant roots that are symbolically associated with individual initiates who might wear the costume in performance. The skin of a genet (a species of wild cat), a predator of domestic animals, is appended to the front of the costume as a defensive measure. The robe's dark blue or black hue also shields the dancer from harm, by concealing him from "witches"; and its raffia trim, in the form of a shawllike element and ruffs around the rim of the sleeves, is taken from the forest as a sign of Basinjom's medicinal powers.

The display of Basinjom's masquerade ensemble in front of the leader's compound announces that a divinatory performance is imminent. Referred to as an "assembly of medicine," such events are organized in order to address a series of problems that have been plaguing members of the community.[10] Basinjom's chief priest directs a mist of *bajewobabe* into the eyes of the individual who will be entrusted with the leading role, thus inducing him to enter into a trance state.[11] Subsequently, the dancer is publicly dressed, and although the audience is aware of his identity during the performance, it is believed that Basinjom is ultimately responsible for directing all his actions.[12]

Basinjom is set in motion by the sounding of a variety of percussive instruments and songs that accord it a place of honor. To prepare for the time when they will wear it themselves, other initiates participate in performances as accompanists in the role of musicians or members of a corps of armed attendants. Under the influence of the "medicine," the dancer propels himself with rapid and fluid movements, gliding before the spectators in circular configurations.[13] Ultimately, the performance becomes a form of trial in which the dancer reveals divinatory insights that relate to the problems at hand. At its climax, Basinjom publicly confronts the guilty party, usually leading to a confession and a plea for forgiveness that is necessary to dissipate the problem.[14] The performance closes with promises of reparations and reconciliation.[15]

During periods of inactivity, a community's Basinjom members are responsible for fortifying the "medicine" through prayers and sacrificial offerings. Periodically, the entire ensemble is renewed, and its consecration invokes Basinjom to intensify its sensibilities and oracular abilities "to see well, hear well, speak nothing but the truth, and act in time."[16]

1. *Black Gods and Kings* 1976, p. 210.
2. Koloss 1985, p. 209.
3. Ibid., p. 63.
4. Ibid., p. 99.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., p. 64.
7. *Black Gods and Kings* 1976, p. 210.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., p. 212.
10. Koloss 1985, pp. 98–99.
11. *Black Gods and Kings* 1976, p. 213.
12. Koloss 1985, p. 98.
13. *Black Gods and Kings* 1976, p. 215.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., p. 216.
16. Koloss 1985, p. 98.

34. Necklace Owned by Namandiaro

Barambo, Poko, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Wood, plant fiber, seedpods, gourd, antelope horn; 47.6 x 41.3 cm (18¾ x 16¼ in.)

19th century

American Museum of Natural History, New York 90.1/3586

This highly valued necklace composed of elements gathered from nature—which served as both a professional instrument and an insignia of power—was the intimate possession of a renowned female healer from central Africa.[1] Its aesthetic reflects efforts by the Barambo and their closely related Mangbetu neighbors to make compositions out of natural matter in arrangements that provide protection and produce heightened awareness. Tailored to respond to the individual needs of their owners, such "medicine strings" operate according to the same principles governing many other varieties of regional oracles.

On a microcosmic scale, this refined article of adornment reveals a profound understanding of the earth's plant, animal, and mineral resources and an awareness of the forces that control and direct such a work. According to the world view that inspired it, nature is regarded as a fixed and ordered entity independent of a divine Creator.[2] In following this system of beliefs, family heads begin each day by reciting prayers for good fortune. These are directed toward the first human, whose descendants regard him as a civilizing hero credited with discovering elemental matter such as water and fire and developing essential technologies that harnessed those forces.[3] Ancestors (*atolo*), who are able to affect the welfare of the living, expect respect in exchange for their benevolence. Offerings are also directed to appease *ope*, invisible spirits that populate forests, mountains, and water sources; *ope* sometimes bring messages to people in their dreams and can inflict harm through oracles.[4]

The raw materials of nature have historically provided members of Barambo society and their neighbors in the region with a great measure of control over their lives. Some specialists could manipulate natural substances to create "medicines" (*neo*), which are imbued with mystical power and can be directed toward either good or

evil ends.[5] Human ill will was perceived as having the potential to afflict a community with sickness or death. This could be achieved by individuals who had inherited powers of witchcraft or acquired the knowledge necessary to manufacture "bad medicine."[6] In response, healers would formulate other "medicines" to counteract these negative powers. Oracles were consulted to learn of potential dangers.[7]

Even the most powerful "medicines" could be produced by anyone with a specialized knowledge of the properties of plants. Among these was *nekire*, a form of "medicine" composed of certain bushes that have been fashioned into the form of a cylindrical wooden whistle, with a hole drilled lengthwise into one end.[8] When blown into and accompanied by verbal directives, *nekire* were especially effective devices used in healing, combating sorcery, and bringing prosperity.

Other types of plants were harvested to create "medicines" endowed with oracular properties. Most men consulted a personal oracle known as a *nondukpale*, an instrument manipulated to provide auguries through physical signs, empowered by the wood from which it was carved and the vegetal oils applied to its surface.[9] Throughout the region, the beneficial medicinal properties of *naando* (the root of the forest plant *Alchornea floribunda*) were also recognized.[10] Harvested by hunters to enhance their good luck, it was used by specialists as the catalyst in rituals to discern hidden things and foretell the future.

As early as the 1880s and into the present day, the most accurate and potent "medicine" deployed in regional divination has been the *mapingo* oracle.[11] Because of the investment in time and resources it represents, it is generally used only by a community's leader or reserved as a recourse for its members when other techniques prove ineffective, and only for the most serious problems, such as determining the underlying cause of a death. *Mapingo* derives its power from an apparatus consisting of a horizontal banana trunk supporting a series of short, small sticks of wood. These are arranged in groups of three and anointed with a medicinal mixture of plant matter and palm-kernel oil. During a consultation, the diviner petitions the sticks to provide truthful responses to his questions, which they communicate by the configurations into which they fall.

Both formally and conceptually, the composition of this "medicine string" resembles that of the *mapingo* oracle. Its design of regularly alternating elements of seedpods and sticks suggests the exacting, formulaic precision of a medicinal prescription. In the necklace's lower half, several prominent elements—four "medicine whistles," a gourd, and an animal horn—provide syncopated visual accents and are easily accessible to the owner when the necklace is worn. Invested in these are distinct medicinal properties, with the horn and calabash serving as containers for potent substances, and the whistles activating powers when blown. Each whistle is made from a different wood associated with a specific ability. These include inflicting sickness, causing financial gain or loss, and bringing luck or misfortune.

Visually, this fusion of disparate materials produces a mellifluous combination of mellow forms and tonal values ranging from light browns to black. A photograph shows its owner, Namandiaro, wearing the necklace elegantly draped diagonally across her chest and over her right shoulder, with a whistle bracelet on her wrist. The necklace's exceptional beauty reflects a harmonious convergence of aesthetic design informed by an intellectual awareness of the power inherent in nature.

1. Enid Schildkrout and Curtis A. Keim, *African Reflections*, exh. cat. (New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1990), p. 182.
2. Ibid., p. 178.
3. Ibid., p. 174.
4. Ibid., p. 180.
5. Ibid., p. 181.
6. Ibid., p. 177.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., p. 185.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., p. 169.
11. Ibid., pp. 173, 178, 185–87.

35. Ceremonial Adze: Female Heads (*Kibiki* or *Kasolwa*)

Luba, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Wood, metal; H. 34.3 cm (13½ in.)

19th–20th century

Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, State University of New York, gift from the Lawrence Gussman Collection of African Art 1999.06.112

In Luba society, the enlightenment, counsel, and therapeutic benefits afforded by diviners provide an essential complement to the executive and legislative role of the governing elite.[1] The status and rank of Bilumbu diviners as an advisory branch of royal authority is underscored by their ownership of a ceremonial adze, carried over the shoulder. This, together with a range of additional costume elements worn by Bilumbu diviners, outwardly alludes to their alliance with the king and other Luba politico-religious leaders and distinguishes them from nonroyal mediums, such as diviners who operate friction oracles in the practice of the form of divination known as *kashekesheke*. (See cat. nos. 11, 20, and see also pp. 10 and 15 of "Divination in Sub-Saharan Africa" by John Pemberton, in this catalogue.)[2]

Mary Nooter Roberts notes that the most ornate Luba adzes were probably reserved for kings, chiefs, and court officials, and those that served as emblems of diviners were not necessarily embellished with figurative elements. Because contextual documentation was rarely recorded for such works now in museum collections at the time they were gathered, it is difficult to determine the vocation of the person who originally owned the example shown here.[3]

The carved female heads at the top and bottom of this adze are identical, except for the addition of the iron blade that extends out from the mouth of the one at the top like a tongue. This doubling may be related to the paired female images that evoke possessing spirits associated with sacred kingship, found throughout Luba prestige arts. The flat, slightly arched blade, flared at the tip and decorated with incised linear designs, was forged by hammering and welding various grades of steel.[4] Prominent conical iron pins projecting from the back of the coiffure represent a sacred hammer or anvil form (*kinyundu*) that appears in most Luba royal regalia.[5] Their placement on this attribute of power and authority ensures that the owner may channel its spiritual energy.

Iron played a vital role in Luba society as the material that blacksmiths used to make implements necessary for subsistence, and it took on spiritual significance in the creation of ceremonial adzes and conical hairpins, among the most important artifacts designed by blacksmiths to "forge and recall royal memory."[6]

1. Nooter 1991, p. 172.
2. *Memory* 1996, pp. 187, 213.
3. Ibid., pp. 76, 194.
4. Dewey and Childs in *Memory* 1996, pp. 61–83.
5. *Memory* 1996, p. 60.
6. Dewey and Childs in *Memory* 1996, pp. 66, 76.

Empowering the Individual: Diviners' Prescriptions

36. Shrine Figures: Couple (*Zuzu* or *Mi Iri Ni*)

Guro, Côte d'Ivoire

Wood, pigment, beads; male: H. 71.1 cm (28 in.); female: H. 63.5 cm (25 in.)

20th century

Private collection

The relative rarity of Guro figurative sculpture, compared to the output of artists in neighboring Baule areas, suggests that members of Guro communities commissioned such works rather infrequently. They appear to have been acquired on the advice of foreign specialists, Wan and Mwa diviners, who prescribed the figures for their Guro clients.[1] Conceived of as protective spirits (*zuzu*), these "small wooden people" (*mi iri ni*) were never intended to portray the features of any specific individual.

Kept in personal domestic shrines dedicated to the *zuzu*, *mi iri ni* safeguarded their owners, sometimes by appearing to them in dreams to prescribe solutions and cures to difficult problems. As a gesture of appreciation, libations were placed in a small bowl to "feed" them. Guro patrons may have obtained *mi iri ni* from local sculptors or from Mwa workshops. Most Guro figurative works depict female subjects; a male and female couple such as this is extremely rare.

There is a marked contrast between the depiction of the male figure and that of the female figure, although they are formally very similar and undoubtedly carved by the same hand. Both stand in a stiff attitude with hands held out at the sides and knees slightly bent, their weight evenly balanced on both feet. Their

faces share the same meditative gaze, and their heads are each crowned by elaborate and slightly asymmetrical coiffures. However, she is shorter, and her torso is slightly broader and physically more dominant; also, a strand of beads adorns his neck, and a series of raised decorative patterns on her stomach and lower back distinguish her body from the smooth, uninterrupted surface of her companion's body.

1. Eberhard Fischer and Lorenz Homberger, *Die Kunst der Guro: Elfenbeinküste*, exh. cat. (Zurich: Museum Rietberg, 1985), pp. 227–30.

37. Shrine Figures: Couple (*Bateba Phuwe*)

Lobi, Burkina Faso

Wood; male: H. 57.2 cm (22½ in.); female: H. 46.4 cm (18¼ in.)

20th century

Thomas G. B. Wheelock Collection

The impetus for the creation of these works and the manner in which they should ideally appear came from spirits who conveyed the desired images through the medium of a diviner. Their subsequent realization fulfilled a prescription that resulted in curing an ailment or otherwise relieving some personal difficulty.

According to Lobi conceptions of existence, God (*thangba yu*), the Creator of all life on earth, is an abstract and distant force.[1] More directly engaged in human experience are the *thila*, invisible and bodiless beings endowed with superhuman powers and abilities. Through the medium of diviners (*buor*), the *thila* issue injunctions against certain kinds of behavior; anyone who violates them will be punished with an ailment or some other misfortune. They also provide the means to reverse these conditions by prescribing cures and protective measures, also conveyed through *buor*.

This dynamic was set in place by *thangba yu* in order to establish standards of political, social, and moral order in Lobi society, which humans had been incapable of managing by themselves. At the time of creation, according to oral traditions, humankind had enjoyed a carefree state in which *thangba yu* had provided for all its needs, a world where sickness and death were unknown, as were war or conflict of any kind. As a requirement of these idyllic conditions, *thangba yu* prohibited adultery and killing—commandments that were violated when the population grew out of control. Consequently, *thangba yu* retreated forever, leaving humanity to provide for itself and vulnerable to suffering and mortality. To mitigate this isolation, the Creator assigned to the *thila* the responsibility of responding to human needs and protecting people against witchcraft and sorcery.

The directives (*bonoo*) given to individuals through *buor* are very exacting and must be fulfilled with precision. Failure to do so is thought to lead either to some form of punishment by the *thila* or to the persistence of the difficulties being experienced. Because they are amorphous beings, the *thila* depend on human mediums to communicate their instructions. *Thila* select individuals to fulfill this role by revealing themselves directly to them, or through notifying other diviners. Individuals usually resist this calling, as it is considered an onerous responsibility in view of the time commitment it represents and its lack of remuneration. Training is relatively informal and consists of observing consultations and rituals and learning the signs that the *thila* use to communicate.[2]

Individuals consult diviners to gain insight into a broad range of situations that concern them. They enter into this relationship without describing the problem at hand. Instead, the diviner positions himself beside the client, grasps his hand, and, in order to determine independently the nature of the problem and which *thila* is involved in this particular situation, poses a series of questions that can be responded to with "yes" or "no" answers. Responses are indicated through specific movements of their joined hands.[3] A diagnosis ultimately reveals behavioral prohibitions that must be followed, sacrifices that are required, and instructions that may request the construction of a shrine or the commissioning of figural sculpture (*bateba*).[4]

Small wood figurines are often part of the collection of paraphernalia owned by the *buor*, whereas works that are commissioned to fulfill prescriptions are larger in scale. The sculptor (*bateba thel*), who may himself have been directed toward his vocation by his *thila*, carefully follows the guidelines for such works, provided by the spirits through the diviner.[5] This couple represents a unified vision of the human form

but displays subtle distinctions between the male and female figures. Although the female is slightly smaller in scale, she shares the same bold rectilinear cast, crisply rendered features, and gradually swelling torso with a pronounced navel. Both are depicted in a state of intense concentration, eyes closed and lips pursed, the male figure facing forward while his female counterpart turns her head in profile. This creates a dramatic shift between the orientation of their bodies and her gaze.

Lobi figural sculptures commissioned as a result of a divination consultation represent *tibila thil*, people who help a spirit and are designed to be placed in a residential or public shrine.[6] These two figures are thought to be *bateba duntundara*, a genre of *bateba* that serve to shield their owner against the witches that might attempt to enter his or her home.[7] *Duntundara* can be found in a broad range of representations, including figures that gesture dramatically or feature unusual physiological characteristics such as multiple heads or arms. Standing with their arms at their sides, this couple falls into a category of "plain" (*phuwe*) figures. Despite their tranquil stance, they embody an attitude of vigilance and acute awareness that surpasses ordinary reliance on sensory perception and intimidates potential malefactors.

1. Piet Meyer in Peek 1991, p. 92.
2. Ibid., p. 94.
3. Labouret 1931, p. 453; Piet Meyer in Peek 1991, p. 96.
4. Piet Meyer in Peek 1991, pp. 98–99.
5. Ibid.
6. Meyer 1981b.
7. Piet Meyer, *Kunst und Religion der Lobi*, exh. cat. (Zurich: Museum Rietberg, 1981), p. 56; Meyer 1981a, pp. 21–22.

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38. Three Protective Pendants

19th–20th century

Thomas G. B. Wheelock Collection

a. Crescent Pendant: Female Figure
Nuna, Burkina Faso
Copper alloy; 9 x 8.5 cm (3½ x 3⅜ in.)
b. Crescent Pendant: Mask
Nuna, Burkina Faso
Copper alloy; 9.5 x 9.1 cm (3¾ x 3⅝ in.)
c. Pendant: Four Figures
Tusya, Burkina Faso
Copper alloy; 7.3 x 7 cm (2⅞ x 2¾ in.)

Personal artifacts of an intimate nature, such as bracelets, rings, and pendants, are prescribed by diviners throughout the western Sudan to shield their clients from disease and sorcery. These customized items of adornment both protect and enhance their owner. In addition to drawing from a repertory of classic forms, artists create or adapt images that relate personally to a patron's identity and individual needs.

This genre of adornment includes distinctive cast copper-alloy pendants in crescent form owned by members of Bobo, Lobi, Nunuma, Senufo, and other groups.[1] They range from small, relatively simple versions worn by children to more ornate designs commissioned by adult women. In each of the two elaborate examples shown here, the flat surface of the crescent serves as a backdrop for a fully realized sculptural representation that projects from the center and juts out beyond the crescent's boundaries. In one, a female figure extends her arms and holds on to the surface of the crescent with her flat, oversize hands, while her heels rest on the crescent's rim, feet projecting out into space. In the other, a bird's long, curved beak projects out over the rim, its head crowned by the vertical element of a plank mask. The bird featured in this miniature representation of a mask is probably a hornbill, a bird associated with witchcraft and divination.[2]

Such works were created to help women afflicted with reproductive diseases. Diviners would advise clients suffering from these problems to petition their family's protective spirit for a cure. Often a woman would return to her father's home and have her brothers commission a pendant that featured the family mask, to encourage the spirit of the mask to intervene and facilitate the cure.[3]

Similarly, figurative compositions cast in copper alloy by the Tusya and Senufo are used as personal protective devices. Versions of these figures are employed in divination, where they are thrown by a diviner, who interprets their position within a larger configuration of elements to determine the client's problems. He may subsequently prescribe a copper-alloy pendant in order for his client to secure the blessings of the spirit causing the ailment.[4] In this example, four figures standing side by side give the sense of an impenetrable phalanx, their curved arms joined (except for the arms at either end), hands on hips. Their torsos are narrow columns, each adorned with three large spiral motifs behind which the bodies are barely visible. Their heads are long and narrow, with eyes on either side of a sagittal line extending from the crown of the head to the mouth. The figures are unified at the base by horizontal bands of serpentine design, another sign associated with divine protection.

1. Christopher Roy, *Art of the Upper Volta Rivers* (Meudon, France: Alain and Françoise Chaffin, 1987), p. 76.
2. Ibid., p. 240.
3. Ibid., p. 76.
4. Ibid., pp. 76–77.

39. Clan Shrine Figure (*Tchitcheri Sakwa*)

Moba, Togo
Wood; H. 135 cm (53⅛ in.)
19th–20th century
The Horstmann Collection, Zug, Switzerland

In Moba communities of northeastern Ghana and northwestern Togo, diviners influence and direct the commissioning, design, and ritual treatment of sculptural forms created for several different kinds of domestic shrines.[1] Both the scale and the relatively abstract form of this particular work suggest that it was probably owned by an extended family or clan. It was associated with their origins and played a vital role in assuring their collective well-being.

In Moba society, when ancestral offerings fail to provide an individual with desired relief, an earth oracle with an established reputation is consulted.[2] In advising individuals, families, or clans, Moba diviners prescribe *tchitcheri* figures to fortify their clients and improve their lives. Such works increase the efficacy of the ritual actions performed at shrines by calling forth positive ancestral influences. They are protective and promote health and prosperity on a range of different levels. When a particular problem disrupted an individual's life, diviners often recommended the addition of a figurative work to that person's private altar. Similarly, problems of broader concern, such as diseased livestock, poor harvests, or infertility, often led diviners to prescribe that a larger work be commissioned for a family shrine.

Challenging an account by Leo Frobenius from the turn of the century, which suggested that the owner of such a work carved it him- or herself, Christine Mullen Kreamer determined that it was invariably made by a specialist. Although in Moba society, wood carving is a skill that all may acquire, *tchitcheri* may be fashioned only by individuals whose fathers are diviners. Carving *tchitcheri* is considered a delicate and highly dangerous operation, and diviners give their sons special protection needed for the creation of such ritually charged objects. Those who transgress this sanction are thought to risk blindness or insanity.[3]

Three different genres of *tchitcheri* may be distinguished by their patronage, contextual placement, scale, and degree of abstraction. The smallest of these, *yendu tchitcheri*, are placed in personal shrines, which all adults possess. They do not represent any particular person or ancestor but are considered an individual's direct link with God. Middle-size *bawoong tchitcheri* (between 25 and 90 centimeters high) are designed for household shrines situated prominently in the vestibule of a family compound. These figures represent recent ancestors, such as the parents or grandparents of current compound leaders (no more than three or four generations removed), whom the diviner advises the family to petition. Because the figures correspond to known ancestors, they are more detailed in representing bodily and facial features.

The work shown here falls into the category of *tchitcheri sakwa*, which evoke and are named after a clan's founding member. The Moba are subsistence agriculturalists, and rituals are conducted before planting and harvest by the family's eldest male member, who applies libations to its *sakwa* commemorating the founding ancestor.[4] Stylistically, *sakwa* fall between the extremely abbreviated, faceless, anonymous *yendu* and the more specifically identifiable *bawoong* portraits. These monumental works are prominently placed outside, in the household yard. Although the features of a family's *sakwa* become abraded by the elements, it stands from one generation to the next as an indelible marker of its spiritual life. No contemporary works of this kind have been commissioned, and oral history and the condition of some surviving works suggest that they may be several centuries old.

The highly standardized design of *tchitcheri* reduces the human figure to an elemental form. Attenuated arms may either form a single unit with the torso or be detached at chest level. Minimal attention is given to facial features, details such as hands and feet are generally omitted, and only occasionally is gender suggested. This extremely reductive polelike figure is crowned by a rounded knoblike head with a blank expression. The upper body forms a unified, continuous surface, with its arms held at its sides along the length of the torso. The trunk is represented as a recessed rectangle with raised nipples and umbilicus; at its base, it narrows and then flares outward slightly to suggest hips. Below, clothespinlike legs are carved as two separate prongs that taper off into narrowed stems. Despite an emphasis on bilateral symmetry, the figure leans very gently to one side. Throughout the weathered surface, abrasion and splits reveal the effects wrought upon the work over time.

1. Moba sculptural forms have been classified as belonging to a substyle related to peoples of Gur-speaking heritage who have settled from the western Sudan through the Benue River basin; Sieber and Rubin 1968 and Roy 1978, both cited in Christine Mullen Kreamer, "Moba Shrine Figures," *African Arts* 20, no. 2. p. 53. This suggests that a common cultural legacy underlies the formal affinity between the work shown here and the Mumuye figure in cat. no. 6.
2. Frobenius 1913, p. 430, quoted in Kreamer, "Moba Shrine Figures," p. 53.
3. Kreamer, "Moba Shrine Figures," p. 53.
4. Ibid., p. 54.

40. Figure: Janus (*Bocio*)

Fon, Republic of Benin

Wood, bone, wire, organic material; H. 49.5 cm (19½ in.)

19th–early 20th century

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Purchase, Denise and Andrew Saul Philanthropic Fund Gift, 1984 1984.190

The harsh severity of the expressions on the two faces of this Janus figure (*bocio*) is heightened by additions of powerfully suggestive unrefined matter to its surface. In Fon culture, the long-standing integral relationship between such works and divination predates the dominant contemporary method of divination, Fa, introduced in the eighteenth century (see cat. no. 13). Before that, Fon diviners frequently relied on a method known as Bo—the earliest remembered form of divination in that culture—and prescribed these figures, *bocio*, as protective devices for their clients. Bo is referred to as the "oracle of the ancestors," and in Fon society the term for a diviner or geomancer is *bokonon* ("owner of Bo knowledge").[1] In adapting Ifa from their neighbors the Yoruba, the Fon integrated two distinct divination strategies, and therefore later *bocio* forms often conceptually draw on specific Fa divination signs.[2]

Bocio are prescribed by priests and diviners to promote health and well-being.[3] They can be designed to respond to an endless variety of needs and desires, such as achieving intimate personal goals, influencing the weather, detecting thieves, or shielding one's family from sorcery.[4] Most *bocio* are proactive defensive mechanisms commissioned by individuals to eliminate problems before they can cause any harm. In order to ensure their owners' protection, they serve as surrogates for the people who commission them, functioning as decoys and deflecting the imminent danger onto themselves.

A *bocio* consists of a sculpture carved of wood onto which various kinds of unrefined matter are added by the individual who is considered to be its "activator." Only men carve *bocio* sculptures, and since the added materials are more important than the figure itself, the sculpting is often done by nonspecialists.[5] Most *bocio* are made by ordinary people for their family members, but these are not perceived to be as potent or efficacious as those made by specialists, who draw on esoteric knowledge and sources of power. Those specialists include *bokonon* empowered by Fa—the source of all divinatory insight—and priests associated with various deities (*vodun*).

In view of its scale and its masterful fusion of figurative and additive elements, this work suggests a collaboration between professionals—a sculptor together with a priest or diviner. The rawness of the carving style is complemented by the exposed empowering matter displayed on the surface. The weathered condition of the carved wooden bust creates an effect of vulnerability.

The face on the front side of the Janus is fuller than the other, and clearly dominant. Its expression reflects a state of intense concentration—the lips are pursed and the prominently carved eyes closed. Projecting from either side, the ears are disproportionately large. On the reverse side is a more roughly hewn face with asymmetrical eyes. The animal skull that crowns the head is oriented in the same direction as this cruder face, whose otherworldly gaze is accentuated by the skull's empty eye sockets. The surface of the head is textured with added organic matter, and the two faces are unified by a garland of strung vertebrae that encircles the neck.

The subjects of *bocio* representations have been interpreted as portraying both the patron and the harmful forces they

deflect.[6] In the work shown here, the presence of two sets of eyes and ears powerfully conveys its heightened vigilance and acute sensory awareness. Such *bocio* featuring Janus imagery are especially prevalent, and are variously referred to as "owner of two heads" (*tawenon*), "owner of four eyes" (*ene nukun non*), or "eye in front, eye in back" (*nukun do gudo nukun do nukun*).[7] Numerous different meanings have been associated with this genre and its characterizations. For example, in Fon culture, sorcerers are believed to have "double vision," and those empowered to combat them must be similarly endowed. The double-faced image is also the preeminent sign of omniscience, and thus evocative of the deity of geomancy, Fa, who often empowers such works. In addition, two heads and four eyes are attributes of the almighty solar god, Mawu, the ultimate arbiter of divine sanction and retribution.[8] While the style of this particular work is one usually found in works by Fon commoners, the leadership also relied on Janus representations for protection.[9]

Although general formulas may exist for the organic composition of certain types of *bocio*, no two are ever exactly alike, and nobody but the maker of a *bocio* knows what matter has gone into its creation.[10] These comprise a broad range of plant and animal elements, selected primarily for their associations with physical and metaphorical strength. While some suggest this through their appearance, others allude to legends, proverbs, or various *vodun*. The vertebrae strung around this figure's neck are believed to be those of a snake. In such contexts, reptiles are generally associated with poison and swelling. Serpents also figure prominently in the larger Fon visual culture as the primary emblem of the kingdom of Dahomey. A serpent biting its tail is a visual sign for the name "Dahome," which, literally translated, means "in the middle of the serpent."[11] Likewise, the god Dan—the Fon deity who represents a person's capabilities in life and is critical to his or her identity—is personified as a serpent and is identified with wind and motion.[12]

The dog's skull on top of the figure's head reinforces notions of guardianship and surveillance. Dogs are associated with loyalty and domesticity, and warn their owners of potential danger by barking. Because dogs are proficient as swimmers, such a relic may protect one from drowning; and it is also considered appropriate for *bocio* made for pregnant women, since the dog is regarded as a model of easy childbirth.[13]

Given its apparent ability to observe and detect danger coming from any direction, such a work would have been employed as a sentinel for a home, temple, or city. Positioned along paths, roads, agricultural fields, and near domestic compounds, as well as inside homes and shrines, *bocio* operate at a crossroads between the spiritual and human realms of experience.[14]

1. Blier 1995, p. 105.
2. "The central place of 'bo' and 'bocio' within Fa . . . is what distinguishes this divination tradition from the closely related divination form called Ifa employed by the neighbors of the Fon, the Yoruba." Ibid., p. 105.
3. Ibid., p. 69.
4. Blier 1993, p. 186.
5. Blier 1995, p. 67.
6. Ibid., p. 131.
7. Blier 1995, p. 283.
8. Ibid., pp. 286–87.
9. Ibid., p. 287.
10. Ibid., p. 186.
11. Ibid., pp. 206–7.
12. Ibid., p. 201. Blier also notes that another material associated with the deity Dan is cord, which evokes the umbilicus as well as other related anatomical features, such as veins and ligaments. Ibid.
13. Ibid., p. 235.
14. Ibid., p. 16.

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41. Maternity Figure (*Ntekpe*)

Igbo, Nigeria

Terracotta; 32.4 x 13.3 x 12.7 cm (12¾ x 5¼ x 5 in.)

19th–20th century

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Drs. Herbert F. and Teruko S. Neuwalder, 1982 1982.395.2

The idea for this maternity figure was born out of a divinatory revelation, and it was executed as an enduring tribute to that inspiration, shaped by the talent of a female artist.

In Igbo society, some degree of self-determination guides fluid religious practices. This is reflected in the widespread assumption that the capacity to divine is an innate human ability, giving individuals the power to discern a course of action that will address their own particular needs. In northeastern Igboland, this is manifested through a distinctive divination system and shrine complex.[1] Through revelations communicated to individuals by divination, deities may prescribe the creation of shrines in their honor. As a result of implementing these requests, family compounds usually have at least one shrine, which is placed at the entrance or outside the home or in a domestic garden. Often these shrines come into being for purposes of healing, but as they acquire reputations, their purview may broaden.[2] Divination may further reveal a deity's desire that the shrine feature protective ceramic vessels and figures, making it a dazzling sight.

The hand-built and coiled clay creations designed by Igbo women have been recognized as among the finest achievements in west African ceramic traditions.[3] This genre of figurative representation is generally the province of elder female potters

past menopause.[4] Although younger women make utilitarian vessels, it is thought that ritual representations may in some way threaten their potential to conceive.

Such figurative terracottas created for shrines may be commissioned directly from a female potter or acquired at market. Known as *ntekpe*, these "children of the shrine" often take the form of pairs of male and female figures or a single mother and child.[5] Although certain images are widespread, the significance of the iconography within particular shrines reflects a great deal of individual interpretation.[6] The work shown here, a tribute to motherhood, renders its classic subject in an especially sensitive and evocative manner. The female figure sits on a stool, which is fused with her lower back, legs extended before her. In her arms she cradles a child, who nurses at her breast. Her head is crowned by a coiffure composed of a series of five extensions that radiate outward and upward, conveying a sense of vitality.

1. Herbert M. Cole and Chike C. Aniakor, *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1984), pp. 81–82.
2. Herbert M. Cole, in a telephone conversation with the author, May 1999.
3. Leith Ross 1970, p. 146, cited in Cole and Aniakor, *Igbo Arts*, p. 78.
4. Cole and Aniakor, *Igbo Arts*, p. 81.
5. Ibid.
6. Cole, in a telephone conversation with the author, May 1999.

42. Maternity Figure (*Bwanga Bwa Cibola*)

Luluwa, Democratic Republic of the Congo
Wood; 28.9 x 8.6 x 8.2 cm (11⅜ x 3⅜ x 3¼ in.)
Mid to late 19th century
The Art Institute of Chicago, Wirt D. Walker Endowment Fund 1993.354

This work expresses a precept central to Luluwa social values—the preciousness of bringing new life into the world. The outcome of a diviner's counsel, it provided an expectant mother with spiritual protection and subsequently shielded her newborn from potential harm. One of a genre of representations commissioned by women preoccupied with such concerns, this example stands as an exceptionally accomplished artistic depiction of a woman exemplifying Luluwa ideals of beauty and well-being.[1]

Luluwa women who have lost children or who experience difficulty conceiving consult a diviner. The diviner determines the underlying cause of the malady, which may involve spiritual forces. The most popular diagnostic technique employed to reveal this information is that of a basket filled with small objects whose contents are cast out onto a surface, forming a configuration that is subsequently interpreted by a diviner. When diviners are unable to provide remedies for problems that they diagnose, they refer their clients to appropriate specialists. In cases concerning infertility or infant mortality, women are usually directed to healers who initiate them into a fertility cult that is prevalent throughout the region.

The cult is known to the Luluwa as *bwanga bwa cibola*, a name that refers to its objective of alleviating sorrow and misfortune by boosting fertility, preventing miscarriage, and safeguarding newborns. This is achieved through a strict regimen requiring that the patient follow a prescribed set of rules, most of which regulate diet and behavior. Although the Luluwa direct their prayers toward a Supreme Being, Mfidi Mukulu, it is the ancestors (*bakishi*) who respond to them and intercede when those prayers are accompanied by offerings. Among the delicate operations the fertility specialist performs is to reincarnate a deceased ancestor in the newborn child. To accomplish this goal, he monitors the mother's life-style and prescribes protective "medicine," which she wears on her person and places in her home. In the case of infertility "medicines," a wooden figure (*lupingu*) may serve this function. There are two varieties of these representations: small, rudimentary ones and larger, more highly refined works, such as the present example. "Medicines" are both inserted into cavities within the figure's body and contained in attachments that are tied to it. Here, holes have been drilled at the top and back of the head for that purpose, since, according to Luluwa beliefs, the fontanels (cranial depressions) are associated with divine insight into past and future experience.

It is probable that Luluwa women each owned two figural artifacts, one of which always remained at home, while the other was carried suspended from a belt or around the neck. These figures were anointed with libations and applications of red clay, palm oil, and camwood powder. Judging from its size and the two short wooden pegs at the base of its feet, the work shown here was probably created for a domestic context where it was inserted into a ritual vessel filled with "medicines." It is believed that once the goals of the initiation were successfully fulfilled, all ritual paraphernalia, including the wood figures, were destroyed.

The rarity of *bwanga bwa cibola* figures of this size and expressive quality suggests that the work shown here was commissioned from a highly accomplished professional sculptor and that its patron must have been a woman occupying an important position of authority. Several works of comparable stature in the collection of the Africa Museum in Tervuren, Belgium, have been attributed to the same workshop. By creating a work of exceptional beauty,

beyond what one expects of a merely functional artifact, the artist has produced both a status object and an especially effective entreaty for its owner's prayers to be fulfilled.

The subject represented here is clearly conceived of as a celebration of motherhood. She holds a child in her arms, firmly angled against her body, and appears reflective as she gazes forward, her eyes slightly downcast. This expression is given emphasis by the figure's disproportionately large head and high forehead, which suggest her intelligence. Her attention appears to be somewhat distracted from the child, as if focused inward on spiritual matters, conveying an attitude that accentuates the role ascribed to women in Luluwa culture as mediators between natural and spiritual realms. This role is further underscored by her prominently protruding navel, which alludes to the cyclical nature of life and to the relationship between the ancestors and the living.

The figure projects a powerful physical presence, solidly anchored by her massive feet. The woman's strength is clearly apparent in the muscularity of her body, which is depicted as a series of discrete interconnected volumes. This formal definition reflects the artist's delight in complex surface articulation, as displayed in the typical nineteenth-century hairstyle (representing a wig made of vegetable fibers rubbed with palm oil and camwood powder) and the body's contours and richly inscribed decorative patterns. The latter are cicatrization motifs (*nsalu*)—concentric circles, fields of points, and sinuously curved linear flourishes—set against luminously polished skin. As adornments, they aesthetically enhance her body and endow it with the utmost cultural refinement, while at the same time, as apotropaic motifs, they provide spiritual protection. Along with her apparel of a *cibola* initiate (a loincloth and a belt with small gourds hanging from it), such decorative enhancements suggest that this maternity figure may depict an idealized image of its owner.

1. All information concerning contextual use of this *cibola* figure, Luluwa ritual practice, and iconography is drawn from the analysis of this work by Constantine Petridis in Petridis 1997.

43. Personal Power Figure (*Nkishi*)

Songye, Democratic Republic of the Congo
Wood, metal; H. 21.8 cm (8 ⅝ in.)
Late 19th–early 20th century
Private collection

A Songye diviner (*nganga*), in addition to designing and empowering a community *nkishi* (plural, *mankishi*) for the protection and well-being of all the members of a village (see cat. no. 10), may prescribe a smaller *nkishi* for the private use of an individual, customized to his or her personal needs. Individuals direct prayers to ancestral spirits through personal *mankishi* for many different reasons. While some seek protection for themselves and their families, others may appeal for success in pursuits that affect their livelihood, such as hunting. The most common need they address, however, is an individual woman's desire to have children and to prevent miscarriages.[1] Thus, a woman may commission an *nkishi* that is designed specifically to enhance her potential to conceive.[2] Personal *mankishi* may also be incorporated into efforts to heal other ailments. Once an *nganga* effectively treats a patient with herbal medications, he may prescribe the commissioning of such a work as a form of protective reinforcement.[3]

Consequently, the rituals that are essential for the creation and use of personal *mankishi* relate to the specific needs they fulfill in the lives of their owners. These privately commissioned works are usually not publicly accessible but are kept in their owners' homes. In order to motivate the ancestors to provide assistance in a personal crisis, suppliants offer prayers and sacrifices to them. To mark the occasion of *mukapasu*, the first day of the first quarter of a lunar cycle, all the villagers take their personal *mankishi* and place them around the community *nkishi*, and these become the focus of ritual proceedings led by the *nganga*.[4] This celebration of the reappearance of the moon is associated with prosperity and regeneration.

The scale and aesthetic form of the *nkishi* shown here reflect its role as a personal devotional object. Whereas all community *mankishi* display a classical Songye ideal of male leadership, smaller customized works of this kind show a far greater range of idiosyncratic designs. Within this more eclectic genre of representations, though, the level of aesthetic accomplishment demonstrated by the various artists' handling of sculptural form is less consistent than for community *mankishi*, which are usually commissioned from artists with regional reputations.

The surface of this male figure is almost entirely engulfed in metal tacks, a systematic obscuring of the figure's head and body that gives it a wild, unruly appearance. However, their absence in areas such as the eyes and mouth makes those features look like especially deep recesses. Where "medicines" (*bishimba*) were once inserted, an empty cavity is evident in the area of the stomach. Alan Merriam has recorded that the explicit carving of male or female genitalia evident in such representations suggests the desired gender of a couple's first child.[5] He notes that the turret-headed copper nails, *elengyela* (plural, *malengyela*), that cover the figure may record consultations with the *nkishi* while at the same time aesthetically enhancing the figure.

Once the principal reason for their creation was fulfilled, such works no longer had relevance. While some personal *mankishi* are passed on from one generation to the next, they are generally discarded after they perform the role for which they were conceived.[6]

1. Alan P. Merriam, *An African World: The Basongye Village of Lupupa Ngye* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1974), p. 121.
2. Dunja Hersak, *Songye Masks and Figure Sculpture* (London: Ethnographica, 1986), p. 121.
3. Ibid., p. 129.
4. Ibid., p. 134.
5. Merriam, *An African World*, p. 121.
6. Hersak, *Songye Masks*, p. 121.

44. Olowe of Ise (ca. 1873–ca. 1938)

Door Panel: Birds and Divination Tray (*Ilekun*)

Yoruba, Nigeria

Wood; 194.3 x 65.5 cm (76½ x 25¾ in.)

Late 19th–early 20th century

Rolf and Christine Miehler Collection, Munich

Carved by the most celebrated Yoruba sculptor of the last hundred years, this architectural panel stands as a spectacular tribute to the diviner's profession and a celebration of the pervasive importance of his insights. The imagery suggests that it was originally designed for the entryway of an Ifa meetinghouse or for the court within a Yoruba palace where the king's Ifa priests divined on his behalf.[1]

In either case, its masterful composition and the intricate level of detail displayed in the carving would have represented a costly commission. Sought out by Yoruba princes of his day, Olowe was renowned for programs of architectural sculpture at the palaces of Akure, Ikere, Ise, and Owo. Born about 1873 in Efon-Alaye, Olowe moved during his youth to Ise, where his carving skills were employed at the palace of the Arinjale, launching a successful career.[2] He became known for his skill in breaking free from traditional pictorial conventions through his dynamic compositions, in which the subjects extend out into the viewer's space in unusually high relief. In the work shown here, Olowe has employed the visual vocabulary of divination to transform a utilitarian door panel into a commentary on the infinite reach of Ifa's influence. The composition is symmetrical, with a divination tray of relatively modest scale depicted in a square at the middle, flanked above and below by "birds of Ifa," a motif that pervades the iconography of divination paraphernalia. Through this flock of birds gathered next to the tray as if poised to fly away, Olowe gives eloquent expression to the centrality of Ifa in Yoruba experience and its unparalleled ability to transcend physical limitations. The long rectangular format suggests that this was the left-hand panel of a two-panel door.

The smooth, unadorned surface of the divination tray's central area, on which the

Ifa priest traces the patterns of the *odu* (see cat. no. 13), stands out as the only area of the entire panel not filled with figurative elements, suggesting the open-ended possibilities of the divination process. Each side of the tray's elaborately decorated border curves inward from the edges of the square in which it is inscribed, in an exaggeration of the distinctive contours of a board form from the Ekiti region. A large zigzag serpent motif occupies the space between each curved border section and a side of the square. The border is filled with parallel rows of a smaller zigzag motif, punctuated by the image of a face in the middle of each section.

The "birds of Ifa" appear to converge on the tray as if in a flock, in three rows above the tray and three rows below it. The birds in the rows closest to the tray face toward it, while the birds in the other rows face one another. They are carved as if viewed from above, in such high relief that they cast shadows on the tray's surface. The vantage point gives us a full view of their backs, with their wings extended, and a great deal of care has been given to rendering their plumage as incised striations, with an echo of the zigzag motif in the middle row of birds. This choice of perspective maximizes their surface area, allowing Olowe to exploit the artistic possibilities of texture. The complex treatment of the surface and the high degree of relief endow the representation with a vividness and vitality typical of the oeuvre of Olowe of Ise.

The aesthetic power of the arrangement is further enhanced by the visual commentary it provides. The Ifa board serves as a vehicle for communication and as a template upon which divine wisdom may be conveyed (see pp. 17–18 of "Divination in Sub-Saharan Africa" by John Pemberton, in this catalogue). This process is facilitated both by the snakes, which serve as messengers between humans and the spirit world, and by Esu (also called Elegba)—the god whose face appears in the border on each side of the tray—who transforms the sacrifices made by humans into food for the gods. These exchanges between humankind and Orunmila, the god of divine insight, are witnessed by the gathering of birds.

1. Roslyn Adele Walker, *Olowe of Ise: A Yoruba Sculptor to Kings*, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1998), p. 52.
2. *Yoruba Art and Aesthetics* 1991, p. 39.

45. Throne: Divination Scene (*Ngunja*)

Chokwe, Democratic Republic of the Congo and Angola

Wood; H. 99.1 cm (39 in.)

19th–20th century

Trustees of the British Museum, London 1951 AF 32.9

In Chokwe society, a throne did not merely serve as a functional seat or a remote dais upon which a leader sat in splendid isolation. Instead, it represented a treatise on the breadth of a leader's concerns and responsibilities that was intended for his subjects' contemplation. This was achieved by distilling a comprehensive program of ideas into a lucid, well-structured sequence of images. The overarching theme expressed by this visual narrative is that social harmony and continuity can be assured only by the control of destructive forces through the strength and vigilance of enlightened leaders.[1] As a consequence, the same concerns addressed by diviners are invoked through a shared visual vocabulary.

The integral relationship between divine insight and responsible leadership is the subject of the commentary that informs this sculpted throne. The term for "throne," *ngunja* (plural, *ngunji*) is used to describe the elaborately carved seats of office that belonged to Chokwe chiefs, headmen, or important elders. Among the ultimate emblems of authority, *ngunji* inspired respect for both their owners' influential rank and the figurative narrative that unfolds across their splats, rungs, and legs.[2] The sum of a throne's images evokes an ideal of harmonious existence, which may be facilitated by enlightened rulers. Their ability to govern and perform their duties effectively enforces social order, thus preempting a need for excessive interventions by diviners. In society, the ambitious and encyclopedic visual program of a ruler's throne is comparable to the contents of a diviner's basket and suggests the parallel and complementary nature of their respective owners' roles as mediators with the spiritual realm (see cat. no. 23).

Chokwe chiefs share a common ancestry with their Luchazi, Lunda, Luvale, Lwena, Mbunda, and Ovimbundu counterparts, and conceive of their role as leaders to be a divinely ordained vocation.[3] Rituals of enthronement render the chief's person sacred, establishing him as God's representative on earth and an intermediary with the realm of ancestral spirits. His title, *mwanangana* ("lord of the land"), carries with it the responsibility for the well-being of his constituents, which is ensured by his performing propitiatory ceremonies that commemorate and honor the ancestors.

It was in the context of such crucial mediation efforts that Chokwe leaders displayed their thrones. These seats of power

often took the form of high-backed chairs composed of a series of independently carved and joined supports. This indigenous form of expression derives from the adaptation of a Western furniture design to conform with local aesthetic values. It appears that the European prototypes on which it is based were introduced to the region by Portuguese dignitaries at the beginning of the seventeenth century.[4] Before that time, Chokwe thrones were probably elaborately carved stools with figurative supports. As innovative forms associated with power and prestige, European decorative arts were integrated into sub-Saharan leadership arts along the Gold Coast as early as the 1480s.[5]

During the 1930s, German ethnographer Hermann Baumann documented the process of creating *ngunji* and noted that their authors were not the artisans who designed utilitarian objects but rather professional sculptors (*songi*) responsible for ritual artifacts. Since not every village had such a specialist, leaders often considered the far-reaching reputations of regional artists when awarding commissions.[6]

While each of the scenes featured on a throne visually evokes some distinct aspect of Chokwe experience, as a unified series they convey a broader message. The component elements of each individual work juxtapose worldly concerns with spiritual ones.[7] Each image addresses an event that all members of a leader's constituency may universally identify and relate to. These include birth, initiation, marriage, illness, hunting, divination, and death.[8] Within this richly diverse body of imagery are a series of motifs found in diviners' baskets.

A number of works, such as the example shown here, feature a depiction of a divination consultation. In this scene, two men, who respectively hold a divination basket and a divination instrument in the form of a double gong (*ngonge*), face each other. It has been suggested that a comparable representation on another throne may be a commentary on a chief's ability to identify antisocial elements in his community.[9] Just as divination scenes appear on the rungs of thrones, images of these seats of authority may be included in divination baskets. Baumann documents an element from a diviner's basket in the form of a miniature chair, associated with an ancestral appeal for the banishment of evil.[10]

1. Reinhild Kauenhoven-Janzen, "Chokwe Thrones," *African Arts* 14, no. 3 (1981), p. 72.
2. Ibid., p. 69.
3. *Chokwe!* 1998, p. 29.
4. Marie-Louise Bastin, *La Sculpture Tshokwe* (Meudon, France: Alain and Françoise Chaffin, 1982), p. 251.
5. Roy Sieber, *African Furniture and Household Objects*, exh. cat. (New York: American Federation of Arts, 1980), pp. 158–59.
6. Kauenhoven-Janzen, "Chokwe Thrones," p. 69.
7. Ibid., p. 74.
8. Ibid., p. 71.
9. *Chokwe!* 1998, cat. no. 19.
10. Kauenhoven-Janzen, "Chokwe Thrones," p. 70.

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46. Royal Spear: Female Figure (*Mulumbu*)

Luba, Democratic Republic of the Congo
Wood, metal; H. 135.9 cm (53½ in.)
19th century
The Field Museum, Chicago 210462

According to the genesis myth recounted in Luba oral history, inhabitants of the region of Shaba, in the southeastern area of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, were governed during the seventeenth century by a tyrannical ruler, Nkongolo Mwamba. The end of Nkongolo's reign was foreshadowed by the arrival of a hunter prince, Mbidi Kiluwe, from the east. The union of Mbidi with one of Nkongolo's sisters produced a son named Kalala Ilunga. Kalala displaced his uncle through the guidance of the diviner Mijibu wa Kalenga and implemented a new political system of sacred kingship introduced by his father.

Kalala's triumph is most notably memorialized in an account of a mythical encounter in which Nkongolo invited his nephew to perform a dance over a concealed pit planted full of upright spears. Forewarned by Mijibu, Kalala avoided being impaled by detecting the pit and uncovering it with his own spear.[1] The revelation that saved Kalala from destruction is celebrated in ritual reenactments of this episode, the dance of spears (*kutomboka*), which is performed at the end of every chiefly investiture. The crucial importance of Mijibu's intervention at the inception of Luba sacral kingship is profoundly embodied by the elaborately decorated figurative spears (*milumbu*) owned by Luba chiefs and kings. According to Luba ideology, Mbidi bestowed a prototypical set of royal insignias on his son Kalala at his investiture as the first legitimate Luba ruler. Each subsequent leader has owned a comparable set of insignias, but they are considered by definition to be merely reproductions.[2] In addition to the spears, these may include a throne, staff, ceremonial adze, ornamental bow stand, *lukasa* memory board, and *dikumbo* relic basket. Bestowed upon leaders at the beginning of their reign, they assure its legitimacy. During the investiture rites (*mulopwe*), the chief's sister and his wife plant the staff and *mulumbu* in the ground at his left and right sides, and he holds them as he swears his oath of office.[3]

In this classic example, the female figure stands at the intersection of the metal blade and the wooden staff, symbolizing her role as an intermediary between two

Detail, cat. no. 46

worlds. Her closed eyes and facial expression suggest a meditative state, and she holds her hands to her breasts—a gesture that in Luba culture refers to the idea that women guard knowledge essential to sacral kingship within their breasts. Here, they contain the stipulations for the royal behavioral prohibitions that must be observed in order to harness the supernatural powers upon which Luba leadership depends.[4] The strands of beads that adorn her neck and hips are worn by royal titleholders, healers, and Bilumbu diviners and are more broadly suggestive of devices that yield information by triggering memories.[5]

The spears' inclusion in royal treasuries and their appearance in rituals associated with investiture reflect the defining influence of divination on directing the course of Luba history, and also suggest the original impetus for the essential role that divination has played in Luba governance.

1. *Memory* 1996, p. 76.
2. Nooter 1991, p. 132.
3. Ibid., p. 133.
4. Ibid., p. 243.
5. *Memory* 1996, p. 29.

47. Door (*Anuan*)

Baule, Côte d'Ivoire
Wood, pigment; 130 x 61 cm (51⅛ x 24 in.)
19th–20th century
Museum Rietberg, Zurich RAF 520

Carved and decorated doors (*anuan*) such as this one once enhanced the entrances to courtyards and rest houses within Baule family compounds. However, utilitarian works on this monumental scale appear to have been commissioned from artists relatively infrequently. The patron who commissioned one would have intended it to suggest his or her personal concerns and discriminating taste, and would have given the artist some degree of creative license to customize it.[1] Although the images adorning such secular works were selected mainly for their aesthetic appeal, many of them illustrate proverbs.[2]

The work shown here consists of a long rectangular wooden panel featuring several motifs carved in relief and accented with color, set against a checkerboard field of recessed black and white squares. The gong and striker of a diviner (*komien*) are featured prominently in the middle of the composition, suggesting the important role that divination plays in everyday life in the resolution of problems (see cat. no. 25). At the top is the dominating form of a horned head in a style similar to that of Baule Mblo portrait masks, which depict idealized faces crowned with decorative animal horns. The bilateral symmetry of the diviner's gong and striker is repeated below, in the motif of two oval female faces (oriented sideways) flanking a central rectangle. The formal balance of these two heads is enlivened by the asymmetry of their contrasting colors:

one is red, the other black. In some Baule masquerade contexts, where red-masked and black-masked personages appear together, the colors indicate male or female gender (or vice versa) and accentuate their contrasting and complementary roles.[3] At the bottom, concentric red, black, and white arcs serve to anchor the composition and tie together the overall color scheme. Throughout, the smooth surfaces of the refined figurative elements contrast with the rough-textured field against which they have been arranged.

1. *Baule* 1997, p. 272.
2. Susan Vogel, in *Art of Côte d'Ivoire*, vol. 2, edited by Jean-Paul Barbier (Geneva: Barbier-Mueller Museum, 1993), p. 136.
3. *Baule* 1997, p. 171.

48. Attributed to Ganhu Huntondji

Divination Portrait of King Glele as the War God, Gu (*Bocio*)

Fon, Republic of Benin
Copper alloy, wood; H. 105 cm (41⅜ in.)
19th century
Musée Dapper, Paris

A metaphysical portrait, this work is a visual projection of a king's destiny set forth by his divination sign. During the nineteenth century, Dahomey's leadership came to rely heavily on institutionalized prophecy by adopting the divination system known as Fa. This depiction of an ambitious king in the guise of a god conveys sheer force of character and confidence, fueled by the conviction that its subject would triumph in whatever endeavor he chose to pursue. It was commissioned by Glele in honor of his father, Guezo, whose glorious reign it celebrates, one that his son aspired to follow.

Glele's reign (1858–89) over Dahomey has been described as a dynamic period of change and expansion. During his own lifetime, his reputation as a cosmopolitan leader traveled as far as the princely courts and urban centers of many of his counterparts in Europe and the Americas. Faced with fundamental challenges to the well-being of his state, Glele responded with imagination and assurance. His aspirations were to maintain Dahomey's hegemony within the region and to generate a new source of economic wealth to replace a waning slave trade. As a result, a policy of constant vigilance and military prowess preempted incursions by neighboring

Yoruba Oyo monarchs, and an export trade of palm oil was developed.[1]

When a Dahomean king ascended to power, a prediction was made by a diviner (*bokonon*) about the nature and character of his reign. This was determined by his sacred personal Fa sign (*du*), derived from a combination of two of sixteen elemental signs. Each *du* is related to a series of proverbs, songs, and tales that express the salient themes associated with one's destiny. In order to ensure the well-being of the state, this sensitive information was carefully safeguarded and only imparted during a secret rite.[2] The *bokonon*'s original counsel was continually renewed to address daily developments. Awareness of one's fate afforded one an advantage in preempting potential dangers while capitalizing on potential opportunities. In their role as indispensable advisers, *bokonon* not only guided the lives of Dahomey's leaders but critically influenced the kingdom's position as a regional power.

In Dahomey, succession was not rigidly dictated by primogeniture. Instead, the selection process was competitive, and significant consideration was given to the character and personal qualities of individual princes.[3] During Glele's youth, a diviner had predicted his kingly destiny. Glele's divination sign, Abla-Lete, indicates great strength of character and the stamina necessary to sustain demanding challenges, thus suggesting that he had the potential to take on the responsibilities of leadership and fulfill them with distinction.[4] In addition, Abla-Lete is associated with worldly success and prosperity. At the outset of his reign, Glele signaled his determination to launch an invulnerable and productive career through a name adapted from a phrase associated with his divination sign, "Glele lile ma yon ze" ("The cultivated field is difficult to move").[5]

The king's divination sign and the *bokonon*'s insights into that destiny inspired the design of sculptures (*bocio*) that served an important function (see cat. no. 40). Created by a group of specialists known as *kpamegan* (literally, "chief of secrets"), these objects of power fortified the state by compensating for individual leaders' liabilities.[6] Accordingly, these works were displayed in royal ceremonial processions, placed at strategic defensive points in the realm, and brought to combat sites to help win battles.[7]

The figure shown here is one of the most visually expressive defensive icons within the extensive body of works commissioned by Glele. Originally positioned near the main Abomey gate, leading into the city from Cana, it extended protection to the king, the royal family, his troops, and his people. Its name, "Du su mon majeto" (literally, "The hole prevents the enemy from passing"), refers to its placement beside a dry moat that encircled the perimeter of the city as a fortification.[8]

Despite this sculpture's relatively small scale, the charismatic dynamism that emanates from it suggests a towering presence. A wooden sculpture covered with hammered brass sheets applied to the surface in sections, it was originally displayed with an array of apparel.[9] These included a European hat with a broad brim, textiles draped in the manner of a cape and loincloth, and several pendants suspended from the figure's neck. In his hands, he holds two swords, with broad, curved blades, pierced by round and triangular holes. His long, thin legs are anchored to broad, flat feet. The modeled volume of his head displays features that are added or incised into the surface. His expression, with eyes closed and teeth bared, suggests an attitude of intense, concentrated effort.

Several distinctive elements are attributes specifically connected with Glele's destiny as sovereign. Chief among these are the swords (*gubasa*), the preeminent deadly weapon associated with the war god, Gu.[10] One of Glele's Fa phrases alludes to them: "The audacious knife [*gubasa*] gave birth to Gu and vengeance continues." Glele interpreted this as a mandate to sustain Dahomey's martial invincibility. In fulfilling his commitment to uphold Dahomey's independent and autonomous status, he adopted the imagery of the sword as a principal motif linking his legacy with that of his father, Guezo. Glele's strength was further expressed by an iconographic element that has since been separated from the figure: one of the pendants that hung from his neck, a circular disk, the surface of which was covered with a tangled mass of interlace. The motif, referred to as *togodo*, illustrates the Abla-Lete phrase "The wind cannot make the mountain dance."[11]

The technique of encasing wood sculpture in sheet metal enabled artists at the court of Dahomey to exploit the properties of costly and precious metals by using them frugally. This method was much less expensive than the lost-wax castings commissioned by neighboring Yoruba and Benin monarchs (see cat. no. 50). In addition to suggesting the luster of royal patronage, the striking use of metal in this particular

sculpture reinforces ideas of Glele's physical might suggested by the iconographic features. The traditional association of Gu with both iron and brass is even more apparent in this instance, since its metal is said to have derived from recycled spent bullets.[12] It appears that the use of this potent material was further enhanced by ritual dustings of gunpowder applied to the surface in the course of war ceremonies.

1. Blier 1991, p. 45.
2. Blier 1990, p. 42; Blier 1993, p. 191.
3. Blier 1990, p. 45.
4. Remy Hounwanou, cited in Blier 1990, p. 45.
5. Blier 1990, pp. 45–46.
6. Blier 1995, pp. 311, 317, 319.
7. Ibid., p. 329.
8. Blier 1998, p. 119.
9. Blier 1995, p. 336; "*Magies*," exh. cat. (Paris: Musée Dapper, 1996), p. 98.
10. Blier 1995, p. 340.
11. Blier 1990, p. 45.
12. Blier 1995, p. 337.

49. Sosa Adede (fl. ca. 1860–1900)

Divination Portrait of King Gbehanzin as a Man-Shark (*Bocio*)

Fon, Republic of Benin

Wood, paint; H. 160 cm (63 in.)

19th century

Laboratoire d'Ethnologie, Musée de l'Homme, Paris 93.45.3

As an image of force and invulnerability, this monument represents the defiant response of King Glele's successor, Gbehanzin, to the prediction of a difficult reign. In his interpretation of Gbehanzin's resolve, the artist, Sosa Adede, depicted the metamorphosis of a mortal into the awesome being of a Dahomean king. The tragic nature of this work is that it was made for the king who presided over the Fon at the time of the subjugation of his people by the French. Despite his being armed with foresight and protective imagery, the shifting tide of history proved too powerful to overcome, and thus the subject of this divinatory likeness stands as a defeated figure.

This gigantesque monument of a man-shark is one of the most renowned royal Fa *bocio* sculptures linked to martial enterprises. Its role in the context of conquest is alluded to in one of Gbehanzin's court songs:

> Gaou [the war minister] made a
> "bo" for me, the shark
> I will try the "bo" to see
> If I try this "bo" in the land of
> no matter whom
> I will take his child as my child
> I will take his wife as my wife
> I will take his country as my country
> I will suppress all who are there
> And if someone is there
> He will say what happened.[1]

In its focus on the individual, Fa provided Dahomean royalty with an ideal alternative for the more communal and popular forms of Fon divination that predated its introduction. In the privacy of Fa consultations, highly trained male specialists acted as intermediaries with the spirit world.[2] Similar aesthetic characteristics distinguish *bocio* commissioned by popular patrons from those sponsored by individual kings. While commoner works (see cat. no. 40) reflect an anti-aesthetic in their overt display of the unrefined ingredients that empower them, royal *bocio* are invariably outwardly elegant and refined, concealing the materials within that endow them with power.[3]

Known as the "shark who made the ocean waters tremble," Gbehanzin was the son of one of Dahomey's most illustrious kings, Glele.[4] Founded at the beginning of the seventeenth century, the kingdom of Dahomey rapidly expanded through military conquest until it reached its apogee in the nineteenth century. Gbehanzin's brief reign from 1889 to 1894 coincided with Dahomey's fall and conquest by French colonial forces. After his defeat, he was exiled to Martinique and died in Algeria in 1906.

Gbehanzin's divination sign, Aklan Winlin, foreshadowed a powerful enemy and a reign characterized by adversity and serious conflict.[5] Likewise, warnings of the dangers of the ocean were pervasive.[6] In an attempt to control and influence these predictions, an image believed capable of conquering and subverting them was given the form of a surreal predator regarded as invulnerable, whether on land or in the sea. Commissioned and publicly presented on the occasion of a king's enthronement, such works were believed to allow leaders to prevail in dangerous conflicts, and became icons that referred obliquely to their divination signs.[7]

In its fusion of human and shark features, this work embodies the transformative powers attributed to Dahomean kingship.[8] Incised scales create a textured

pattern across the surface of the torso, and dorsal, frontal, and lateral fins project outward. The figure's dynamic stance—left arm extended forward, right arm extended laterally and raised upward—evokes both the powers of the god of metal, war, and technology, Gu, and the ferocity of Dahomey's troops.[9] The position of the stocky, muscular legs, the left leg forward with slightly bent knee, suggests a distribution of weight reminiscent of contrapposto. It has been suggested that the posture and gesture are derived from European prototypes. Local artists were aware of and influenced by outside artistic traditions through an expansionist policy of warfare against their neighbors, as well as by participation in transatlantic trade. This particular pose is shared by a group of life-size sculptures of Catholic saints acquired by Glele's father, Guezo, from the French.[10]

A related work by Sosa Adede honoring King Glele portrays him as a man-lion. Glele's *du*, Abla-Lete, in contrast to his son's *du*, promised a full, rich, and prosperous life (see cat. no. 48). Over the course of a reign that conformed to these optimistic expectations, Glele commissioned an extensive corpus of impressive works that rank among the most exceptional achievements in African art. These include two additional divination portraits whose imagery draws upon phrases associated with his sign—a copper-alloy warrior figure in the Musée Dapper (cat. no. 48) and an iron war god at the Musée de l'Homme, both in Paris.[11]

1. Blier 1995, p. 330.
2. Edna G. Bay, *Wives of the Leopard: Gender, Politics and Culture in the Kingdom of Dahomey* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998), pp. 94, 256.
3. Blier 1995, pp. 30, 336.
4. Blier 1998, p. 120.
5. It includes the phrase "Gbe hen azi bo aji jele" ("The earth holds the egg that the universe desires").
6. In this *du* sign, one of those verses portends: "The *ale* bird will lose itself in the ocean while singing." Anyone holding this sign is warned to avoid the sea, so as not to be swallowed up and destroyed by the forces that reside within. Blier 1995, p. 333.
7. Blier 1993, p. 191; Blier 1998, p. 120.
8. Blier 1995, p. 316.
9. Ibid., pp. 202–4.
10. Blier 1998, p. 120.
11. Blier 1993, pp. 191–92.

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50. Plaque: Three Men Striking Idiophones with Birds of Prophecy

Edo, Court of Benin, Nigeria

Brass; 47.3 x 34 x 12 cm (18⅝ x 13⅜ x 4¾ in.)

16th–17th century

Trustees of the British Museum, London

98.1–15.117

The event portrayed in the plaque shown here is a defining moment in the history of the kingdom of Benin—a court ceremony that commemorates the victory of a sixteenth-century king, Esigie, over seemingly insurmountable odds. Both the work itself and the ritual represented constitute tributes to a divine king's ability to triumph over fate and destiny.

The musical instrument held by each of the three protagonists in this choreographed celebration scene is an idiophone, or clapper, consisting of a cylindrical shaft topped by a bird-motif finial. Each man is holding the clapper in one hand and a metal rod in the other, and two of the men (the central figure and the figure at the right) appear to be striking the rod against the bird's beak. The display and use of these hand-held clappers in performances by Benin titleholders are the musical and visual highlights of an annual court festival known as Ugie Oro.

The bird perched with outstretched wings on the finials of the instruments is usually called the "bird of prophecy" (*ahianmwen-oro*) and sometimes the "messenger of god" (*odibosa*).[1] Although Benin artists invariably rendered it with exacting details, which include a long neck with wattles and narrow bib below its long, curved beak, it is difficult to determine what species of bird it might be modeled after. While it has been variously referred to as a kingfisher and a vulture, recent scholarship indicates that healers use the name *ahianmwen-oro* to refer to a white-tailed ant thrush because of its predictive powers; however, this small-beaked bird with white-tipped feathers looks nothing like the subject of the clappers. Consequently, it may be that as a metaphor for an abstract concept—prophecy—*ahianmwen-oro* is a mythical creature that has been interpreted by Benin artists as a composite of different birds.[2]

In Edo society, a traditional healer (*obo*; plural, *ebo*) pursues one of several specializations, such as curing illnesses, divining the future, combating witchcraft, or administering trials to determine the guilt of suspected wrongdoers.[3] *Ebo* who specialize in predicting the future use several different divination methods. In one of these, known as Ewawa, the *obo* fills a cup with small brass images of humans, animals, and objects, along with cowrie shells and pieces of chalk, and then shakes the cup and analyzes the resulting configuration. Another method in widespread use, Orunmila, is closely related to Yoruba Ifa divination.[4] *Ebo* derive their divinatory abilities from *osun*, the spiritual force inherent in the leaves and herbs that they use to make "medicines," which transform those natural substances into instruments of power. Their emblem of authority is an iron staff, *osun ematon*, at the top of which is a bird motif, a design resembling that of staffs owned by neighboring Yoruba diviners and healers (see cat. no. 30). In precolonial times, these were carried by warriors in order to ensure success in battle.[5]

From the reign of Esigie onward, the bird of prophecy has been regarded as a sign that the kings of Benin are endowed with the power to alter the course of history. Before that time, according to oral history, it was associated with predictions of disaster. On the eve of an epic crisis involving combat against a formidable enemy, the Igala, its appearance before Esigie and his troops was interpreted by his diviners as a portent of a devastating outcome.[6] Rather than follow their advice to heed the "bird that cries disaster" and retreat, Esigie defied the prediction and rallied his troops to proceed into battle. His audacity was rewarded. Under Esigie's command, the Benin army went on to defeat the Igala and further

expand the kingdom's sphere of influence. As a means of commemorating this victory, Esigie commissioned the royal brass-casters to create instruments personifying the augury he had triumphed over, kingly counterparts to diviners' staffs.

The court ritual Ugie Oro was introduced by Ewedo, Benin's fourth divine king (*oba*), to celebrate the power of all Benin kings. It was expanded by Esigie to include references to his victory over the Igala as a specific case illustrating the power of the *oba* to prevail over natural and supernatural forces that affect humankind.[7] The sounding of the clappers on this occasion celebrates his ability to protect his people and the defeat of something much more significant than an enemy army.

During the early sixteenth century, a number of important developments affected power dynamics in the region. The Portuguese first arrived in Benin during the reign of Esigie's father, Ozolua. Esigie's own reign was shaped by two major challenges to his authority, and in these conflicts his most important assets proved to be his alliance with the Portuguese and the astute counsel of his mother, Idia, as adviser. In the first, he battled over succession rights to the throne with his brother Aruaran. In the second, Benin's hegemony was threatened by the Atah of Idah when the Igala army came dangerously close to attacking the capital. It was on that occasion that the Portuguese soldiers in Esigie's following are reputed to have executed his order that the bird of prophecy be silenced.

Esigie's resilience, resourcefulness, and self-confidence as a leader are reflected in the body of diverse artistic traditions that are associated with his reign. Many of the ideas developed during this period were translated into images that provided a rich source of motifs, which were then reused and recombined in Benin art for centuries to come. This resulted in a creative collaboration with the guild of brass-casters, Igun Evonmwon, who worked directly under the king's patronage. Art historians have noted that it was probably during the reign of Esigie, or of Ewuare a century earlier, that the brass-casters were organized as a professional association within the palace. Among the genres of artistic expression that flourished under Esigie's visionary leadership are the "bird of prophecy" idiophones and the rectangular architectural plaques that were displayed on the palace's facade. There are approximately nine hundred such works with relief imagery depicting scenes from court life, which were originally hung on the exterior pillars of the palace. The example shown here is especially effective in achieving Esigie's goal of reinforcing the power and mystique of divine kingship at Benin while immortalizing his own quest to alter the course of history.

1. *Royal Art of Benin* 1992, pp. 197–201.
2. Ibid., p. 200.
3. Ibid., p. 215.
4. Ibid., p. 218.
5. Paula Ben-Amos, *The Art of Benin* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), p. 74.
6. *Royal Art of Benin* 1992, p. 198.
7. Ibid., p. 201.

Checklist of the Exhibition

The objects in the exhibition are listed here according to the name of the culture in which each was created. Unless specified otherwise, the dimensions are given as follows: height precedes width (precedes depth) or length precedes width.

Amharic (?), Ethiopia

Healing Scroll
Parchment, pigment; 170 x 17 cm (66⅞ x 6¾ in.)
19th–20th century
Laboratoire d'Ethnologie, Musée de l'Homme, Paris
31.74.3576

Azande, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Figures (*Yanda*)
a. Wood; H. 16 cm (6¼ in.)
20th century
The Horstmann Collection, Zug, Switzerland
b. Wood; 12.4 x 4 cm (4⅞ x 1⅝ in.)
19th–20th century
Laboratoire d'Ethnologie, Musée de l'Homme, Paris
46.51.8
c. Terracotta; 15.2 x 5.7 x 7 cm (6 x 2¼ x 2¾ in.)
19th–20th century
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York,
The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection,
Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979
1979.206.284

Friction Oracle
Wood, fiber; H. 30.5 cm (12 in.)
19th–20th century
Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, The Barry D. Maurer (Class of 1959) Collection of African Art, purchased with Amherst College Discretionary Funds and Funds from H. Axel Schupf (Class of 1957)
AC 1999.25a,b

Whistle
Wood, copper alloy, hide; H. 16 cm (6¼ in.)
19th century
American Museum of Natural History, New York
90.1/2636

Baga, Guinea

Shrine Piece (*a-Tshol*)
Wood, metal, organic material; 50.8 x 30.5 x 76.2 cm (20 x 12 x 30 in.)
19th–20th century
Private collection

Bamana, Mali

Komo Helmet Mask (*Komokunw*) *See cat. no. 31*

Banda Linda, Central African Republic

Friction Oracles
19th–20th century
Laboratoire d'Ethnologie, Musée de l'Homme, Paris
37.51.32,.33,.34
a. Wood; 5 x 16.5 cm (2 x 6½ in.)
b. Wood; 5 x 27.5 cm (2 x 10⅞ in.)
c. Wood; 4.4 x 17.5 cm (1¾ x 6⅞ in.)

Banyang, Cameroon

Basinjom Mask and Costume *See cat. no. 33*

Barambo, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Necklace Owned by Namandiaro *See cat. no. 34*

Baule, Côte d'Ivoire

Door (*Anuan*) *See cat. no. 47*

Figure: Monkey
Wood; 54.6 x 15.9 cm (21½ x 6¼ in.)
19th–20th century
Clyman Collection

Figures for a Trance Diviner
Wood, beads
19th–20th century
a. Janus, H. 35.6 cm (14 in.)
Brian and Diane Leyden Collection
b. Seated Male, H. 38.4 cm (15⅛ in.)
Private collection

Figures for a Trance Diviner: Couple *See cat. no. 1*

Gong Striker: Equestrian (*Lawle*) *See cat. no. 25*

Gong Strikers (*Lawle*)
Wood
19th–20th century
a. Female Figure, 7 x 26 cm (2¾ x 10¼ in.)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York,
The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection,
Purchase, Nancy Hanks Gift, by exchange, 1971
1978.412.638
b. Drummer, 6.5 x 22.5 cm (2½ x 8⅞ in.)
Private collection, Switzerland

Mouse Oracle (*Gbekre*) *See cat. no. 17*

Bembe, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Figure: Male
Wood, ivory, organic material; H. 19.5 cm (7⅝ in.)
19th–20th century
Museum Rietberg, Zurich RAC 606

Bwa, Burkina Faso

Protective Ornaments
Copper alloy; 4.3–6.5 cm (1¾–2½ in.)
19th–20th century
Thomas G. B. Wheelock Collection

Figure
Bwa or Turka (?)
Wood; 40 x 10 x 12 cm (15¾ x 4 x 4¾ in.)
19th–20th century
Museum Rietberg, Zurich RAF 306

Chokwe, Democratic Republic of the Congo and Angola

Divination Basket (*Ngombo ya cisuka*) and Thirty-four Miniature Divination Figurines (*Tuphele*) *See cat. no. 23*

Six Hunting Amulets (?)
Wood; 7.5 x 5 cm (3 x 2 in.)
19th–20th century
Musée d'Ethnographie, Neuchâtel III C 6200, 6209

Figure: Female
Chokwe or Lwena (?), Angola
Wood, snakeskin, cloth, fiber, glass beads, arbus seeds, mirror, metal, wire, resin, clay; 22.2 x 9.5 x 5 cm (8¾ x 3¾ x 2 in.)
19th–20th century
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Ernst Anspach, 1988 1988.367

Throne: Divination Scene (*Ngunja*) *See cat. no. 45*

Dogon, Mali

Diviner's Necklaces with Pendants (*Dugo*)
Stone, iron
19th–20th century
H. 44–73.7 cm (17⅜–29 in.)
The Graham Collection

Ritual Container: Horse's Head with Figures (*Adun koro*)
Wood; 52.1 x 236.2 x 47 cm (20½ x 93 x 18½ in.)
16th–19th century
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York,
The Michael C. Rockefeller Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 1979.206.255

Edo, Court of Benin, Nigeria

Divination Instruments
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991 1991.17.119,.117, .89,.107
a. Divination Cup
Brass; 12.4 x 10.5 x 10.8 cm (4⅞ x 4⅛ x 4¼ in.)
18th–20th century
b. Divination Tapper
Ivory; H. 34.3 cm (13½ in.)
19th century
c. Idiophone: Bird of Prophecy
Brass, iron; 33 x 8.9 x 11.8 cm (13 x 3½ x 4⅝ in.)
16th–19th century
1991.17.89
d. Side-Blown Trumpet
Ivory; L. 36.8 cm (14½ in.)
20th century

Plaque: Three Men Striking Idiophones with Birds of Prophecy *See cat. no. 50*

Fang, Gabon

Bwiti Harp
Wood; H. 69.5 cm (27⅜ in.)
20th century
Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, State University of New York, gift from the Lawrence Gussman Collection of African Art 1999.06.39

Fon, Republic of Benin

Attributed to Ganhu Huntondji , Divination Portrait of King Glele as the War God, Gu (*Bocio*) *See cat. no. 48*

Figure: Janus (*Bocio*) *See cat. no. 40*

Ifa Divination Tray (*Opon Ifa*) *See cat. no. 13*

Necklace: Divination Portrait of King Glele
Copper alloy; H. 14 cm (5½ in.)
19th century
Musée Dapper, Paris

Sosa Adede, Divination Portrait of King Gbehanzin as a Man-Shark (*Bocio*) *See cat. no. 49*

Grassfields Region, Cameroon

Chair: Spider Motifs
Wood; 86.4 x 55.9 x 45.7 cm (34 x 22 x 18 in.)
20th century
Private collection

Guro, Côte d'Ivoire

Shrine Figures
a. Couple (*Zuzu* or *Mi Iri Ni*) *See cat. no. 36*

b. Female (*Zuzu* or *Mi Iri Ni*)
Wood, beads; H. 43.5 cm (17⅛ in.)
19th–20th century
Museum Rietberg, Zurich RAF 309

Gurunsi, Burkina Faso

Protective Ornaments
Copper alloy; 5.5–15.2 cm (2⅛–6 in.)
19th–20th century
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Bryce Holcombe Collection of African Decorative Art; Thomas G. B. Wheelock Collection

Hungaan, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Figure *See cat. no. 8*

Whistle: Seated Figure
Wood; 10 x 3 x 1.3 cm (4 x 1⅛ x ½ in.)
19th–20th century
Museum Rietberg, Zurich RAC 238

Igbo, Nigeria

Maternity Figure (*Ntekpe*) *See cat. no. 41*

Kissi or Sapi (?), Guinea or Sierra Leone (?)

Figure (*Pomdo*)
Stone; 11.7 x 5.7 cm (4⅝ x 2¼ in.)
16th century (?)
Laboratoire d'Ethnologie, Musée de l'Homme, Paris 36.9.51

Kongo, Democratic Republic of the Congo and Angola

Bells
19th century
a. Mother and Child
Wood, metal, cane, rattan; H. 18.5 cm (7¼ in.)
Drs. Daniel and Marian Malcolm Collection
b. Double Bell (*Kunda*)
Wood; 13.9 x 4.4 cm (5½ x 1¾ in.)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Crosby Brown Collection of Musical Instruments, 1889 89.4.2836

Figure (*Nkisi Kula*)
Cloth, organic material; 45 x 12.5 cm (17¾ x 4⅞ in.)
19th century
Laboratoire d'Ethnologie, Musée de l'Homme, Paris 36.18.10

Figure: Female (*Nkisi*)
Wood, glass, pigment, accoutrements; H. 20.5 cm (8⅛ in.)
19th–20th century
Ernst Anspach Collection

Friction Oracle
Wood; L. 20.3 cm (8 in.)
19th–20th century
Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, The Barry D. Maurer (Class of 1959) Collection of African Art, purchased with Amherst College Discretionary Funds and Funds from H. Axel Schupf (Class of 1957) AC 1999.24a, b

Jewelry of an *Nganga*
19th century
a. Indian trade cloth, elephant hair; H. 90 cm (35⅜ in.)
Laboratoire d'Ethnologie, Musée de l'Homme, Paris x990.74
b. Fiber, leather, mirror; H. 62 cm (24⅜ in.)
Trustees of the British Museum, London 1905.11-11.32

Kuba, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Friction Oracle (*Itombwa*)
Wood; L. 33 cm (13 in.)
19th century
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Museum für Völkerkunde III C 19541a,b

Friction Oracle (*Itombwa*)
Crocodile jaw, beads, cowrie shell; L. 39 cm (15¾ in)
19th century
Trustees of the British Museum, London 1909.5-13.316

Friction Oracle: Janus-Headed Animal (*Itombwa*) *See cat. no. 21*

Lobi, Burkina Faso

Diviner's Staff
Wood
19th–20th century
55.9 x 15.9 cm (22 x 6¼ in.)
Thomas G. B. Wheelock Collection

Figure: Bird
Wood; H. 61 cm (24 in.)
20th century
Thomas G. B. Wheelock Collection

Protective Ornaments
Copper alloy
19th–20th century
H. 3.3–9.6 cm (1¼–4¾ in.)
Arnold Syrop Collection; Thomas G. B. Wheelock Collection

Shrine Figures: Couple (*Bateba phuwe*) *See cat. no. 37*

Luba, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Anthropomorphic Vessel
Terracotta, fiber; H. 17.7 cm (7 in.)
20th century
Private collection

Ceremonial Adze: Female Heads (*Kibiki* or *Kasolwa*) *See cat. no. 35*

Divination Pestles
19th–20th century
a. Wood; H. 24 cm (9½ in.)
Museum Rietberg, Zurich RAC 122
b. Wood; H. 32.4 cm (12¾ in.)
Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, The Barry D. Maurer (Class of 1959) Collection of African Art, purchased with Amherst College Discretionary Funds and Funds from H. Axel Schupf (Class of 1957) AC 1999.26

Figures: Female
a. Wood, cloth, iron, snakeskin; 13.7 x 3.2 x 4.5 cm (5⅜ x 1¼ x 1¾ in.)
19th century
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Purchase, Nelson A. Rockefeller Gift, and Anonymous Gifts, in memory of Vera de Vries, 1967 1978.412.561
b. Wood, fiber, beads, organic material; H. 32 cm (12⅝ in.)
19th–20th century
Drs. Daniel and Marian Malcolm Collection

Figures: Female Bowl Bearers (*Mboko*)
a. *See cat. no. 11*
b. Wood, iron; H. 32 cm (12⅝ in.)
19th–20th century
University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia AF 5120

Friction Oracles (*Kakishi*)
Wood
19th–20th century
a. H. 13.5 cm (5⅜ in.)
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Museum für Völkerkunde III C 44925
b. H. 12.8 cm (5 in.)
Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, The Barry D. Maurer (Class of 1959) Collection of African Art, purchased with Amherst College Discretionary Funds and Funds from H. Axel Schupf (Class of 1957) AC 1999.23

Headdress (*Bilumbu*)
Beads, cloth, fiber, leather, fur; H. 51 cm (20⅛ in.)
20th century
Private collection

Royal Spear: Female Figure (*Mulumbu*) *See cat. no. 46*

Whistle: Anthropomorphic
Ivory; 9 x 3.6 x 3.8 cm (3½ x 1⅜ x 1½ in.)
19th–20th century
Museum Rietberg, Zurich RAC 256

Luluwa, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Maternity Figure (*Bwanga Bwa Cibola*) *See cat. no. 42*

Lumbo, Gabon

Female Figure (*Kosi*) *See cat. no. 7*

Lwalwa, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Friction Oracle (*Kashita*)
Wood; 18.4 cm (7¼ in.)
19th–20th century
Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, The Barry D. Maurer (Class of 1959) Collection of African Art, purchased with Amherst College Discretionary Funds and Funds from H. Axel Schupf (Class of 1957) AC 1999.6a,b

Mangbetu, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Necklace
Wood, iron, copper alloy, plant fiber; 14 x 11 cm (5½ x 4⅜ in.)
19th century
American Museum of Natural History, New York 90.1/4175

Meje, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Whistle
Wood, hide with fur, fibercord, gray parrot feathers; L. 36 cm (14⅛ in.)
19th century
American Museum of Natural History, New York 90.1/2126

Merina, Madagascar

Talismans (*Moharas*)
19th–20th century
Laboratoire d'Ethnologie, Musée de l'Homme, Paris 61.60.79, 63.72.702, 974.63.26
a. Wood, cloth, metal, beads; H. 23.5 cm (9¼ in.)
b. Wood, bone, fur, metal, cloth, beads; H. 34 cm (13⅜ in.)
c. Bone, cloth, beads; H. 28 cm (11 in.)

Moba, Togo

Shrine Figures
19th–20th century
a. Clan Shrine Figure (*Tchitcheri Sakwa*) *See cat. no. 39*
b. Household Shrine Figure (*Bawoong Tchitcheri*)
Wood; H. 105 cm (41⅜ in.)
The Horstmann Collection, Zug, Switzerland

c. Personal Shrine Figure (*Yendu Tchitcheri*)
Wood; H. 26.5 cm (10⅜ in.)
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Museum für Völkerkunde
III C 13268b

Mumuye, Nigeria

Figure *See cat. no. 6*

Nuna and Nunuma, Burkina Faso

Protective Ornaments (*including cat. nos. 38a and 38b*)
Copper alloy
19th–20th century
H. 5.3–9.5 cm (2⅛–3¾ in.)
Thomas G. B. Wheelock Collection

Pende, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Divination Figure (*Njinda*) *See cat. no. 18*

Divination Instrument (*Galukoji*) *See cat. no. 19*

Pair of Miniature Masks
Wood; each 2.5 x 1.3 cm (1 x ½ in.)
19th century
The University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology AF 1956a,b

Senufo, Côte d'Ivoire

Amulets (*Yawiige*)
Copper alloy
19th–20th century
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection; Jerome Vogel Collection

Divination Figurines (*Tugubele* and *Ngaabele*)
Copper alloy
19th–20th century
a. Ten figurines, H. 3.9–12 cm (1½–4¾ in.)
Brian and Diane Leyden Collection *See cat. nos. 2b–e, 2h, 2i, 2k*
b. Seven figurines, H. 4.4–5.9 cm (1¾–2⅜ in.)
Arnold Syrop Collection *See cat. nos. 2a, 2f, 2g, 2j*
c. Five figurines, H. 2.2–7.9 cm (⅞–3⅛ in.)
Jerome Vogel Collection
d. Figurines, H. 4.1–6 cm (1⅝–2⅜ in.)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Diviner's Figures
a. Equestrian figure (*Syonfolo*) *See cat. no. 3*
b. Equestrian figure (*Tugubele*)
Copper alloy; H. 8.6 cm (3⅜ in.)
19th–20th century
Private collection
c. Two female figures (*Tugubele*)
Wood
19th–20th century
H. 19–25 cm (7½–⅞ in.)
Jean and Noble Endicott Collection; and private collection
d. Couple (*Tugubele*)
Wood, beads, oil; male: H. 17 cm (6¾ in.); female: H. 17.5 cm (6⅞ in.)
19th–20th century
The Horstmann Collection, Zug, Switzerland

Harp-Lute (*Korikaariye*) *See cat. no. 26*

Oracle Figure (*Kafigeledjo*) *See cat. no. 4*

Sherbro, Sierra Leone

Yassi Society Figure: Female Figure with Tray Base *See cat. no. 5*

Shona, Zimbabwe

Divination Dice (*Hakata*)
19th–20th century
a. *See cat. no. 24*
b. Ivory (?); 12 x 4 cm (4¾ x 1⅝ in.)
The Horstmann Collection, Zug, Switzerland

Songye, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Community Power Figure (*Nkishi*) *See cat. no. 10*

Divination Kit: Gourd and Elements *See cat. no. 22*

Friction Oracle: Janus (*Katatora*) *See cat. no. 20*

Personal Power Figure (*Nkishi*) *See cat. no. 43*

Sundi (?), Democratic Republic of the Congo and Angola

Whistles (*Nsiba*)
Wood, antelope horn, fiber
19th century
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Museum für Völkerkunde
III C 3285, 3326
a. 19 cm (7½ in.)
b. 22 cm (8⅝ in.)

Temne, Sierra Leone

Figure: Female
Wood; H. 56.2 cm (22⅛ in.)
19th–20th century
The University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology 29-94-10

Tsogo, Gabon

Gong: Female Figure
Wood, metal, pigment; 40.6 x 12.7 x 10.5 cm (16 x 5 x 4⅛ in.)
19th–20th century
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Purchase, Nelson A. Rockefeller Gift, 1966
1978.412.516

Tusya, Burkina Faso

Protective Ornaments (*including cat. no. 38c*)
Copper alloy
19th–20th century
3.8–37.5 cm (1½–14¾ in.)
Thomas G. B. Wheelock Collection

Vili, Mayumba, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Divination Whistle: Monkey (*Nsiba*) *See cat. no. 28*

We, Liberia or Côte d'Ivoire

Divination Object (*Gbaule Gle*)
Clay, feathers, cow's tail, cloth, metal, cowrie shells, leather, glass, rattan, rice heads; 57.2 x 41.9 x 8.9 cm (22½ x 16½ x 3½ in.)
19th–20th century
Brooklyn Museum of Art, Gift of Blake Robinson
1982.196.3

Yaka, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Handle of a Slitdrum (*N-kookwa Ngoombu*)
Wood; H. 42.3 cm (16⅝ in.)
19th–20th century
Africa Museum, Tervuren, Belgium RG 32887

Hunting Charm: Slitdrum (*N-kookwa Ngoombu*) *See cat. no. 27*

Slitdrum (*N-kookwa Ngoombu*)
Wood; H. 61 cm (24 in.)
19th century
Museum der Kulturen Basel III 8120

Yombe, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Diviner's Mask *See cat. no. 32*

Nkisi Nkondi: Mangaaka *See cat. no. 9*

Yoruba, Nigeria

Carved Calabash *See cat. no. 12*

Diviners' Bags (*Apo Ifa*)
Cloth, beads, leather
20th century
a. 35.5 x 36.9 cm (14 x 14½ in.)
b. 28.2 x 33 cm (11⅛ x 13 in.)
Claire and Michael Oliver Collection
c. *See cat. no. 29*

Diviner's Staff: Birds (*Osun Babalawo*) *See cat. no. 30*

Esu Head (*Ela* or *Irin Ifa*)
19th–20th century
Ivory, 9.9 x 4.1 x 4.1 cm (3⅞ x 1⅝ x 1⅝ in.)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991 1991.162.1

Group of Figures: Esu (*Esu Igbomina*)
Wood, cowrie shells, leather, fiber, pigment; H. 34.6 cm (13⅝ in.)
20th century
Sol and Josephine Levitt Collection

Ifa Divination Tapper (*Iroke Ifa*) *See cat. no. 14*

Ifa Divination Tray (*Opon Ifa*)
Wood; L. 48.7 cm (19⅛ in.)
19th–20th century
Drs. Daniel and Marian Malcolm Collection

Ifa Divination Tray Lid (*Opon Ifa*)
Wood; Diam. 46 cm (18⅛ in.)
19th–20th century
Peter and Veena Schnell Collection

Ifa Divination Vessels (*Agere Ifa*)
a. Equestrian
Ivory; H. 22.2 cm (8¾ in.)
19th century
Adriana and Robert Mnuchin Collection
b. Equestrian
Wood; H. 22.5 cm (8⅞ in.)
19th century
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Museum für Völkerkunde
III C 27200
c. Equestrian Warrior *See cat. no. 16*
d. Female Caryatid *See cat. no. 15*
e. Caryatid Figures
Yoruba, Owo
Ivory; H. 14 cm (5½ in.)
18th century
Musée d'Ethnographie, Neuchâtel 70.2.12
f. Mother and Child
Yoruba, southern Ekiti
Wood; H. 25 cm (9⅞ in.)
19th century
Museum für Völkerkunde zu Leipzig Maf 22502
g. Pangolin
Wood; H. 17.3 cm (6⅞ in.)
19th–20th century
Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, Gift of Marc Felix in memory of Barry D. Maurer (Class of 1959) AC 1994.152

Olowe of Ise (d. 1938), Door Panel: Birds and Divination Tray (*Ilekun*) *See cat. no. 44*

Yoruba, Republic of Benin

Base of an Ifa Divination Vessel: Divination Scene
Wood; H. 16 cm (6¼ in.)
19th century
Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde, Munich
28-12-2

Zombo, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Slitdrum (*N-kookwa Ngoombu*)
Wood, bronze; H. 29 cm (11⅜ in.)
19th–20th century
Private collection, Brussels

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