

Healthy Birth

A woman who participated in the *tshibola* fertility initiation carried this masterpiece of Congolese sculpture. The figure assured a safe labor and delivery, as well as the good health of the newborn baby. Ancestor spirits inhabiting the figure protected the mother and newborn.

The elongated figure has a prominent pregnant abdomen, accentuated with fine concentric circles. These circles and the other carved patterns that cover the body reflect the practice of scarification within this society.

The precise details contrast with the overall rich sheen, which is the result of a ritual rubbing with oil and *tukula*, (a powder made with camwood dust) believed to have magical powers.

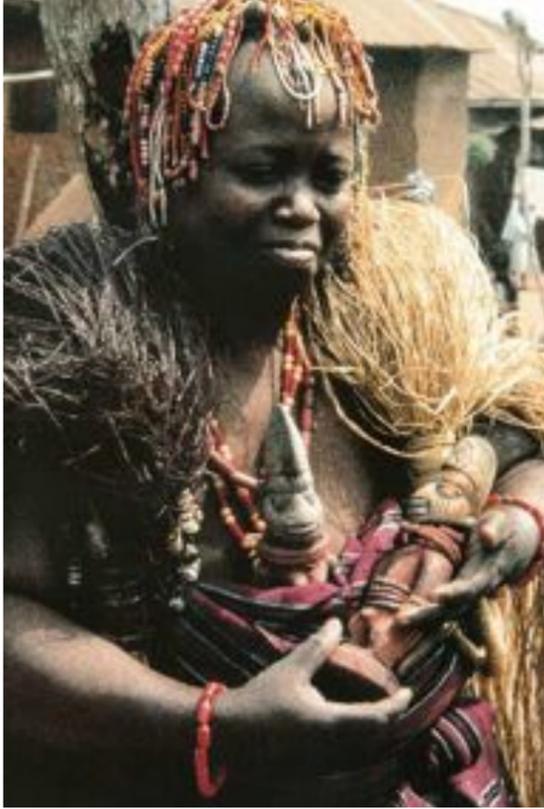
Statuettes are often given names, such as *lupingu lua luimpe*, or “statuette of beauty and good fortune.”

Female Figure

Democratic Republic of the Congo, Bena Lulua people
19th century
Wood with traces of *tukula* pigment
Gift of Rogers Family Trust and the Rogers Family
Foundation, 2004
(13,000.1)

Special Babies

In the Yoruba states of western Nigeria, where the twin birth rate of 4.5% is the highest in the world, a cult for twins developed. Twin babies are powerful spirits that bring either wealth or misfortune to their parents. With a high infant mortality rate, after the death of one or both twins, an Ifa divination priest will select a carver to create the *ibeji*, a



human figure that represents the twin as a fully developed human figure. Through ritual transformation, the carver invokes the spirit of the deceased twin into the figure. The mother and the generations that follow will carry, honor, feed and clothe the image. Accompanied by drummers and friends, the *iyabeji*, the mother of the twins, carries the image to the public marketplace while singing and dancing. The new *ibeji* joins generations of deceased twins at the family shrine.

The mother and family will give the *ibeji* the appropriate food of beans, palm oil, or sugar cane, and will rub its head with a blue indigo cloth. Ground camwood anoints the body for beautification and protection from harm. Colorful beads (blue for the deity Oshun), brass anklets (to protect it from life-threatening spirits), fibers (to protect it from illness), shell wristlets and clothing may be added.

Twin Figures (*Ibeji*)

Southwest Nigeria, Ede City, Yoruba people
Carved wood with indigo and camwood (red), blue glass
Gift of Valerie Franklin, 1985
(5367.1 & .2)

Twin Figure (*Ibeji*)

Nigeria, Yoruba people
Carved wood, glass beads
(4828.1)

Marriage Preparation

Basiae ba is a ritual cloth worn by a woman on two occasions: during the four-week retreat period following excision and for the *fura ci* celebration, the final stage of a marriage ceremony. Following the *fura ci* ceremony, this ritually significant mud cloth is formally presented to the girl's spiritual mother, who has cared for her during the ordeal of the excision. The cloth, impregnated with the girl's blood and sweat during the "woman's war" of entering womanhood, is therefore endowed with magical strength. The spiritual mother wears this skirt whenever she works at difficult tasks.

Reflecting the cloth's ritual weight, a *basiae ba* depicts essential symbolic motifs of womanhood—circles containing small crosses. The circle represents the round Bamana house that is customarily owned by a woman. In their polygamous families, the husband rotates his visits from one house to another. The house and the circle, therefore, symbolize child bearing and motherhood, which together epitomize ultimate womanhood. This traditional piece is made in the style current at the turn of the 20th century.

***Basiae ba* (Woman's Skirt)**

Created by Mignan Coulibaly,

Mali, Beledougou region, Bamana people

c. 1987

Cotton, plain weave, hand painting, natural dyes, hand stitching

Purchase, 1987

(5687.1)

Men Only

One of the most important passages in life for many African cultures is the transition from childhood to adulthood. For young boys, this passage ends close ties with their mothers when they begin studying with adult male members of a secret society. Through this process, the boys learn the duties and responsibilities of adulthood, such as hunting and farming, and the rituals they will carry out in the future. The initiation ceremonies are quite elaborate and often utilize costumes, masks, body paint, and musical instruments. Although it is difficult to determine the precise function of an object once it leaves the village context, these three pieces and body suit were once part of men's society ceremonies.



Dan masks are carved by the initiated male members of the Poro society, a powerful men's secret society responsible for maintaining laws, customs, education and initiation of the young. The masks are of two styles, feminine and masculine. The feminine masks have serene idealized faces with narrow eyes, while the masculine masks have round aggressive eyes. A feminine mask might keep

young initiates fearless as they learn of circumcision or enter into required acts of bravery. Round-eyed masks are often trophy masks awarded to the fastest participant in a running race and are used to enforce fire safety regulations.

Female Mask

Cote d'Ivoire or Liberia, Dan people, Poro Society
Carved Wood
Museum Fund Purchase 1975
(4295.1)

Mask

Cote d'Ivoire or Liberia, Dan people, Poro society
Carved, blackened wood, ochre pigment and plaited sennit
Purchase, 1979
(4794.1)

Among the people of Angola, there are over 100 types of masked characters called *makishi*, spirits of deceased individuals who return to the world to assist and educate members of the community. During the *mukanda*, initiation



for boys, the masqueraders wear full-bodied, hand-woven costumes with a variety of masks and adornments. The costumed performers can be chiefly characters, but a popular character is *Mwana wa Pwevo*, a female ancestor seen in the adjacent photograph. The masqueraders visit a village and receive gifts of money and cloth, as the villagers join in the singing and dancing with sounds from rattles, whistles and drums.

Two-pieced Man's Costume

Democratic Republic of the Congo or Angola, Chokwe or Pende
Net woven plant fiber
Exchange with Alfonso De Vallejo y Patino, 1980
(4830.1)

Lacking an individual ruler, the Ejagham (formerly Ekoi) people of the Cross River region of Nigeria, place social order in the hands of many secret societies of young men, each one regulating one aspect of the law. The members of these societies are identified by the masks and helmets used in ceremonies to enforce authority, initiate new members, and provide community entertainment. Although the helmets and masks vary widely, many are wooden forms, mounted on basket foundations and covered with antelope skin, producing an eerie and realistic image. Many masks have markings that represent the unique face painting symbols of a specific secret society.

Dance Headdress with Hood

Nigeria, Cross River Region, Ejagham (Ekoi) people
Painted and polished antelope skin
stretched over wooden frame
Purchase, 1978
(4637.1)

Honoring Young Girls



African girls are usually initiated in small groups following their education on married life, homemaking, and childbearing. Although most girls' initiation ceremonies do not include masks, the rare exception is the *Bundu* mask worn by the elder women of the Sande Society of the Mende people in Sierra Leone. These women supervise the training of young girls and the graduation celebrations. An elder wears

the mask as she shows off her students in a procession about town. The leader also wears a black raffia garment and a white scarf and holds bells and a broom switch.

The mask represents the Mende idea of virtue and beauty. The elaborate hairdo is a desired feminine quality, while the neck rings represent a healthy, prosperous woman, conducive to fertility. The small ears and mouth indicate the woman would not gossip, and the scarification patterns on the face signify the initiation rites are complete.

Female Helmet Mask

Sierra Leone, Mende People, Sande Women's Society
Carved wood
Purchase, 1958
(2441.1)

The Asante and Ewe people of Ghana are known for their colorful silk textiles, commonly known as *kente* cloths. The Asante and Ewe weavers only produce silk cloth for kings, royal families and chiefs. However, this colorful green cotton textile was for young girls, the color suggesting youth, newness and puberty.

As early as the 17th century, in the days before silk thread was commercially available, colorful silk threads for weaving were obtained by unraveling imported European silk cloth. The Ewe probably wove this *kente* cloth in the neighboring Asante style. Its green color, the style of its inlay blocks and the use of rayon and cotton materials suggest Ewe origin.



Kente cloth is traditionally made by sewing together several narrow strips that have been woven by men on portable double-heddle looms. Each strip is woven in elaborate, colorful geometric patterns. Some

kente cloth strips, where the entire warp is covered with extensive weft patterns, are appropriately called *adweneasa* or “I am exhausted.”

***Kente* Cloth**

Ghana, Probably Ewe people

c. 1986

Cotton and rayon, plain and supplementary weft-weave

Purchase, 1987

(5676.1)

Honoring Ancestors



African works of art often commemorate important people after their deaths. *Mbulu-ngulu* figures sit upon a reliquary box or basket holding the skull and bones of an important ancestor. To the villagers, the bones hold the power to protect the family. The abstract faces are not portraits, but they suggest elaborate hairstyles and stylized facial features. The brass and copper sheeting that adorns the sentinel figures declares the wealth of the deceased and drives away evil forces. Nineteenth century drawings depict the reliquary figures and baskets inside a communal sanctuary. Prior to any major village event, initiated male elders perform rituals and make offerings to the spirits of the ancestors to assure the fertility, health and welfare of the community. *Mbulu-ngulu* such as this greatly influenced many western artists such as Picasso and Modigliani.

Reliquary Figure (*Mbulu-ngulu*)

Gabon, Kota people
Wood, covered with sheets of brass and copper
Purchase, 1936
(4265)

Members of the Gohu men's society erect commemorative carved and painted posts (*vigango*) in abstract human forms following the dream appearance of former male members. The *vigango* (plural of *kigango*) provide a new abode for these unhappy spirits.

The *vigango* are near a community hut, facing westward toward the direction of origin of the Giryama people. The eldest male of the society provides ritual offerings of palm



wine in coconut cups, as well as slaughtered chickens and goats.

The incised markings, once filled with colored plaster, represent scarification of the honored person. The *vigango* are also decorated with cloth tied at the neck and waist as clothing. The *vigango*, having a limited life, are allowed to rot when the ancestor is no longer remembered by the living.

Funerary Posts (*Vigango*) (sing. *Kigango*)

Kenya, Giryama people
Carved wood with traces of polychrome
Purchase, 1933
(5142.1)

Devotion

The Yoruba people, one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa, place many works of art in shrines to honor the gods (*orisha*). This kneeling woman formed a pedestal to hold ritual implements for curing the sick or for scarification ceremonies. Kneeling is a sacred act, a symbol of submission to authority and salutation to the *orisha*. This devotee kneels to Oshun, the goddess of beneficial waters, who helps with childbirth and cures diseases such as smallpox. White spots, representing either ritual scarification practices or the scars from smallpox, cover her blue body. Blue is the color designated to Oshun. This figure sports both an elaborate head-dress adorned with a mask and a coral bead necklace, which is the symbol of a female chief. She holds a ritual rattle and staff with a bird in her hands. During the annual festival honoring Oshun, priestesses clothed in white collect the sacred water from the Oshun River and offer prayers, food, and dances to the goddess.

Kneeling Female Figure, Devotee of Oshun

Nigeria, Yoruba people
Early 20th century
Purchase, 1972
(4296.1)

Prestige and Wealth

Reflecting the Kuba matrilineal society, these embroidered and appliquéd textiles, which symbolize prestige and wealth, are only worn by elite, high-ranking women, not by the men who hold offices and titles. They may also be displayed as funeral shrouds to mark the wealth and status of the deceased.

The multi-ethnic Kuba Kingdom of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, formerly known as Zaire, dates back to the 17th century. Settling in a forest area bounded by the Kasai and Sankuru rivers, the Kuba did not experience European influence until the late 19th century. This long isolation from the outside world largely contributed to their maintaining, until recent times, a unique tradition of elaborately decorated raffia textiles. Cream-colored raffia fiber, prepared from young leaflets of the palm *Raphia vinifera*, is the traditional material for Kuba weaving. Men complete the basic weaving on traditional single-heddle looms, producing a raffia cloth in plain weave without any woven patterns. On the surface of this plain cloth, numerous varieties of geometric patterns are painstakingly embroidered or appliquéd by Kuba women.

Raffia Cloth

Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kuba people
Early-mid 20th century
Raffia fiber; plain weave, appliqué
Purchase, 1986
(5653.1)

]

Dance Celebrations

These splendid raffia cloths, particularly those embroidered with “cut piles,” are important components of Kuba ceremonial dance costumes.

With raffia “cut pile” embroidery, commonly known as “Kasai velvet” after the region in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, several rectangular pieces are sewn together to make a wrap-around skirt, which is held at the waist by a belt. Raffia “cut pile” skirts are associated with dance festivals marking the installation and death of kings or high officials. The key female dancer, usually a royal woman, wears the skirt as an important part of her spectacular dance costume.

Demonstrating their methodical and artistic manner, the Kuba attach great significance to naming the geometric motifs. *Molambo* (finger), *missinga* (strings), *kike* (eyebrows), *mienga* (fish), and *bisha koto* (crocodile’s back) are names derived from the patterns’ resemblances to natural physical phenomena. Other patterns bear names of legendary heroes, kings, or the embroiderers who invented them. Though altered and readjusted, these named motifs are passed on from generation to generation, and newly invented patterns are added to a continually expanding repertoire. Some special motifs acknowledge one’s status in society and creating new patterns is a means of raising the social esteem of the creators.

The “woot” pattern frequently appears in Kuba women’s embroidery design. Woot is the legendary founder-king of the Kuba nation and culture. To his mother is attributed the invention of the important household skill of mat weaving by crossing and interlacing. Perhaps symbolizing this early basic textile-making design, the name Woot was given to Kuba interlacing geometric patterns based on double chevrons (two superimposed chevrons facing in opposite directions) or “double-crossing” diagonal lines. Many Kuba embroidery designs are connected to, or derived from these fundamental designs. Woot motifs are also frequently used in body marking and woodcarving.

Far left:

Raffia Cloth

Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kuba people
Mid 20th century
Raffia fiber; plain weave, embroidery (cut-pile, uncut, and openwork)
Gift of the Rogers Family Foundation, 2004
(13,043.1)

Left:

Raffia Cloth

Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kuba people
Mid 20th century
Raffia fiber; plain weave, cut-pile and uncut embroidery
Gift of the Rogers Family Foundation, 2004
(13,044.1)

Right:

Raffia Cloth

Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kuba people
Mid 20th century
Raffia fiber; plain weave, uncut embroidery
Gift of the Rogers Family Foundation, 2004
(13,048.1)



Far right:

Raffia Cloth

Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kuba people
Mid 20th century
Raffia fiber; plain weave, cut-pile and uncut embroidery, appliqué
Gift of the Rogers Family Foundation, 2004
(13,049.1)

Religious and Secular Ritual

The staff to the left is a double-bladed axe, resembling stone axes once found in the fields of Yoruba states. It is believed that Oshe Shango cast the stones to the earth as lightning bolts during thunderstorms. Shango, formerly the fourth king of Oyo, lost his city in a violent thunderstorm following his misuse of powers. After his death, when lightning continued to plague the city, Shango was deified as a god. As Oshe Shango, he is responsible for justice, thunder and lightning. Devotees of Shango hope for rain and the blessings of good health, fertility and wealth.

The carved wooden staffs are personal possessions given to initiates as insignias of their religious affiliations. As in most Yoruban art, figures do not depict the deity, but a devotee, and are often decorated with clothing, jewelry, and the red and white colors of Shango.



Shrine rooms contain small altars filled with ritual offerings and staffs. The altars attract the deity as devotees perform ritual singing, drumming and dancing.

Devotees lovingly hold the staffs as they enter a trance during religious initiation, or they move the wand in sweeping, lightning-like dance gestures, as a symbol of Shango's power.

Thundergod Dance Wand (Oshe Shango)

Nigeria, Yoruba People
Carved wood, traces of polychrome
Purchase, 1976
(4382.1)

A time-honored Kuba ritual of hospitality is to offer a cup of palm wine (*maan*) to visitors. Tradition provides that a man should invite friends to share his palm wine so that he does not consume too much and become intoxicated. *Mbwoong ntey*, elaborately carved palm wine cups, are signs of status, good taste and wealth. Guests drink from the communal cup and then admire the work of art. Talented sculptors create the palm wine cups using patterns also seen in traditional Kuba textiles and in body scarifications. Kings traditionally used anthropomorphic shaped cups.

The knowledge that palm wine loses its sweetness and becomes more potent with age, prompts the Kuba saying that, “Man is like palm wine: sweet youth lacks wisdom, wise old age lacks sweetness of character.”

A palm wine cup filled with poison determined the fate of persons accused of witchcraft. Upon sipping the poison, their death was immediate judgment and punishment.

Palm Wine Cup with Figural Handle

Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kuba People
Carved wood
Gift of the Rogers Family Foundation, 2004
(13,033.1)

Nature Spirits

At the beginning of the planting season, traditional societies host celebrations to honor the creators or founding ancestors. These ceremonies, which are to ensure abundant harvests and successful hunts for the community food supply, demand the creation of specialized artwork. The villages perform rituals for each part of the farming season: tilling the soil, sowing the seeds, stimulating rainfall, and harvesting. Hunters honor the spirits of the forest with rituals before and after the hunt.

A Bamileke buffalo mask is part of a dance ritual prior to the hunt, used to transform the dancer into the familiar beast of the grasslands, a celebrated prize. The buffalo represents strength and courage, and is often a symbol of royalty. Hunters are obligated to present heads of buffalo killed to the *fon*, or hereditary ruler of the area, who hangs the heads over doorways.

Although it appears cumbersome and heavy, the hollow mask is lightweight and is worn horizontally over the head for the performance; elaborate costumes of raffia, fabric and beads further disguised the dancer. Imagine the impression this mask made to a crowd of people.

(Buffalo) Bush Cow Mask

Cameroon grasslands, Bamileke people
Purchase, 1976
(4368.1)

Chi Wara headdresses, worn by a pair of Bamana performers who dance as male and female antelope and anteater-like creatures, are associated with fertility and successful growth. The pair represents the cooperation needed for survival among the sun, the earth and the water, and between men and women.



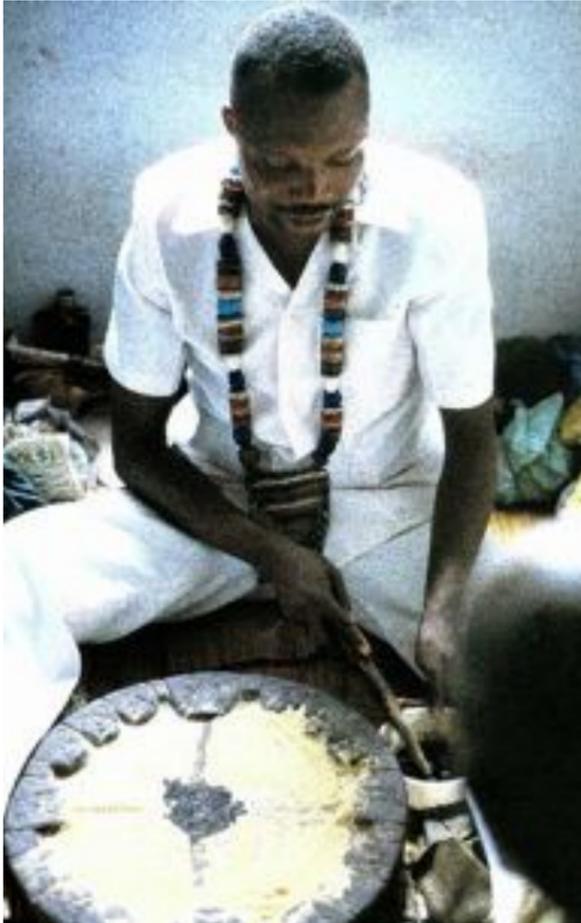
Legends speak of the Chi Wara (translated as the “animal of tillage”) as a mythological being—half human and half snake. Chi Wara tilled the earth with its claws and transformed the weeds into millet and corn, teaching the Bamana people to farm. The members of the Chi Wara Association wear the headdress and perform the dance to honor the Chi Wara. The dance also teaches the young the virtues of hard work and celebrates the important work of the farmers.

Both wooden headdresses attach to a woven cap; the male headdress has long horns or ears in order to hear the lessons of the ancestors. The dancers also wear fiber costumes that symbolize the water. Through the dance, the performers imitate the leaps and screeches of young antelopes in order to calm the earth’s spirits to ensure a bountiful harvest.

Chi Wara Antelope Headdress

Mali, Bamana people
Purchase, Academy Volunteers Fund, 1976
(4377.1)

Communication With Spirits



A traditional African diviner, either male or female, arrives at the profession by special circumstances and is trained for years under an experienced diviner. Anyone can ask the diviner for help in solving a problem, such as an illness, for guidance prior to a journey or crop planting. Divination varies throughout Africa; some diviners work through trances where spirits possess and speak through a person, others use implements to communicate with the spirit world in search of answers.

In Yoruba states, diviners known as *babalawo*, “father of secrets”, use a variety of accoutrements usually made of ivory, such as tappers (*iroke ifa*), palm nuts, a divining chain (*opele ifa*), and a divining tray (*opon ifa*). A rhythmic sound of the tapper against the wooden tray begins the divination, invoking the attention of the god of wisdom and divination, Ifa. The diviner chants appropriate prayers. Eventually, through the session, future events and necessary rituals are transmitted from the spirits and recited by the diviner.

The implements of the diviner's trade are stored in elaborately embellished bags. The bag to the left is covered with small European trade beads that are usually reserved for the regalia of kings and high priests and have been used by the Yoruba since the 19th century. In the center of the bag appears a small chameleon that, in the Ifa creation myth, was the first emissary to the planet, sent to check the firmness of the earth in preparation for the arrival of humans.

Apo Ifa (Diviner's Bag)

Nigeria, (possibly Ibadan region), Yoruba people
20th century
Leather, glass, shell and cotton, hand stitching,
beadwork and appliqué
Gift of Mr and Mrs Henry B. Clark, Jr., 1990
(6264.1)

The ivory tapper to the right is hollow and filled with a loose material, which adds to the audio effects of the divination practice. The central carved motif, visible between bands of geometric designs, is a kneeling woman holding her breast in an act of devotion and submission to the deity.

(Iroke Ifa) Divination Tapper

Nigeria, Yoruba people
19th century
Ivory
Gift of Mr and Mrs Henry B. Clark, Jr., 1990
(5867.1)

The Kuba use a small wooden carving in the form of an animal or lizard as a friction oracle. This animal may represent the crocodile, a symbol of clairvoyance. Animals serve as intermediaries between the spirits of nature and the diviners. To use the oracle, the diviner first applies water or oil to the knob on the back of the animal. While rubbing and spinning the knob, the diviner then recites possible remedies for sicknesses, names of criminals, or solutions to problems. When the diviner speaks the correct solution or remedy, the knob stops moving and remains "stuck," even when the animal is inverted. The intricate carvings on the animal's sides are stylistically similar to the carved wooden implements, woven textiles, and scarification patterns of the Kuba people.

Divination Implement

Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kuba people
Carved wood, braided sennit
Gift of the Rogers Family Foundation, 2004
(13,04.1)

Honoring Royals

Rulers use lavish materials to proclaim their power, wealth and status, and to impress and control their people.



Extraordinary beaded statuary of royal couples come from the Cameroon grasslands. The *fon*, or local chief, orders thrones and life-size sculptures to be built for use in court ceremonies. Wooden images are first carved and then covered with colorful beads imported from Venice or Bohemia. Cameroon craftsmen stitch the beads in rows on a cloth, then fit the cloth around the form, being careful to follow the

contours of the body with the lines and shapes of the colored beads. The red color covering this female statue is a symbol of life and fertility. The other strong colors provide liveliness to her rigid stance.

A pair of female and male figures is typically found on the back of the Bamileke ruler's ceremonial throne and foot stool (*mendu yenu*). Representing the king and queen, the figures hold symbols of power: a decorative bowl for kola nuts, a carved drinking horn (as seen to the far left), and royal necklaces for adornment.

Female Figure

Cameroon, Bamileke people
Wood, beads, cotton, thread
Gift of John Young, 1979
(4784.1)

Symbols of authority

Less accessible to the common person, metal is often a symbol of power in many cultures. Some traditional African rulers carry special swords or axes as part of their regalia to indicate their status or political power, but never actually use them as weapons. The face of a ruler stands in low relief in the center of this iron axe.

Ceremonial Axe

Democratic Republic of the Congo, Songe (BaSonge) people
Iron and wood
Gift of Mrs. Charles R. Hyde, 1931
(3023)

Throwing Knife

Democratic Republic of the Congo, Azande people
Steel blades, carved wood handle with coiled steel and brass wire
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Henry B. Clarke, Jr., 1987
(5639.1)

During ritual ceremonies, for the well-being of the kingdom, kings serve palm wine in ornate drinking vessels of buffalo horn. As prized possessions, the horns are preserved after the ruler's death. A bronze openwork ball covered with a seven-headed, intertwined snake covers the tip of this vessel. The snake is a royal icon often seen supporting the king's throne. The horn is covered with an incised low relief pattern, divided into over 50 compartments, that contains images of frontal human heads, elephant and buffalo heads, lizards and frogs, double-headed-snakes, mudfish, and spiders.

Drinking Horn

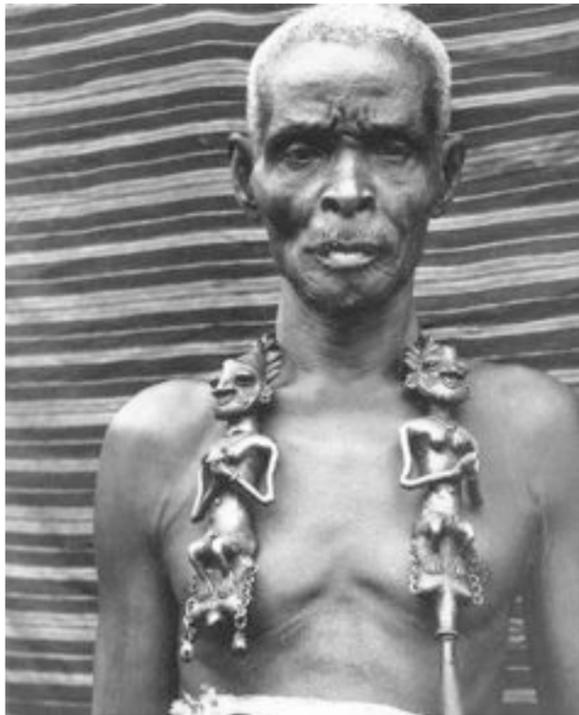
Cameroon, Bamileke people
Carved buffalo horn with cast bronze tip ornament
Purchase, March 1978
(4638.1)

As an Ashanti man reaches adulthood, he receives gold weights as a gift so that he might engage in trade. To complete any purchase, the buyer and seller need to agree on a price and then measure the necessary gold currency against the counterbalanced weight on both of their hand-scales. The small scales hang from the thumb. Gold weights are also exchanged as tokens of friendship, sent as messages by chiefs, or worn as protective amulets around the neck.

The weights come in many figurative and geometric shapes and might depict people, animals, birds, tools, and weapons. Each weight also represents an Ashanti proverb, serving as an educational tool to teach cultural values and language. Popular proverbs have changed with time, so it is not known what the proverb the Academy piece represents. However, this weight may be a reminder to show respect for rulers, for in it, a nude woman raises a ceremonial staff behind a seated man wearing a crown.

Gold Weight

Ghana, Ashanti people
Cast brass mixed with gold; lost wax method
Gift of J. Lionberger Davis, 1961
(2878.1)



The Ogboni Society of the Yoruba people is comprised of moral and political leaders of the community. During initiation to the Ogboni Society, male and female initiates receive the *edan*, a pair of cast bronze figures on iron shafts that are joined by a chain (missing in the Academy piece). The figures symbolize the primordial couple as well as all the men and women of the community. The female holds her

breasts as a greeting and the male holds his hands in the gesture of brotherhood, the left fist over the right fist with thumbs concealed. The surface is smooth, yet shows remarkable detail in the hair, face and eyes of each figure, with the characteristic bulging eyes, thought to accommodate the inner eyes of God. The *edan* are draped around the necks of the members of the society for protection and as symbols of their membership.

Sacred Insignia (*edan*)

Nigeria, Yoruba people, Ogboni Society
Cast bronze and iron
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Henry B. Clark, Jr., 1990
(5968.1)

Bridal Trousseau

A *kerka* is usually commissioned by the family of the bride as part of her trousseau and is extremely expensive to make. The weaving may take two months to complete and during that time the weaver and his family are supported by the bride's family who sacrifices animals several times to give feasts for the occasion.



An especially large type of blanket, called *arkila kerka*, is suspended horizontally (displayed vertically) over a bed in tent-like fashion to ward off mosquitoes. This blanket is made of six narrow strips, each decorated with traditional geometric patterns

of talismanic nature commonly seen in *kerka* blankets. One end strip depicts a slightly different design sequence, giving the piece a subtle but interesting rhythm.

A Fulani weaver wove this stunning *arkila kerka* for a wealthy Bozo family in the central Niger River area. A large caste of skillful male weavers among the Fulani is known for producing handsome thick wool blankets, mostly worn by men to protect against the cold weather and mosquitoes. The Fulani (Peul) people live in Mali, concentrated in the inland delta of the Niger River. Most are pastoralists moving through the flood plains according to seasonal transhumance patterns.

***Arkila kerka* (Mosquito blanket)**

Mali, Fulani people

c. 1957

Cotton and rayon, plain and supplementary weft weave

Purchase, 1987

(5652.1)

Promote Social Order

The Kuba mask of M'Boom appears frequently in ceremonies to tell the story of the founding of the Kuba nation and the struggle for love and power. The story has three characters: Woot, the first man, the primal cultural hero and the founder of Kuba; Mweel, his wife/sister; and the protagonist, M'boom, a commoner who challenges the authority and marriage of the ruler. These three masks are considered by many to be the most colorful and imaginative in all of Africa.



The M'boom mask is a helmet-shaped, lightweight wooden form with a bulging forehead, broad nose, and naturalistic ears. It is dramatically decorated with beads, shells and fiber, which provide rich visual texture. The beads have distinctive patterns, named for previous kings in whose reign they originated. The overall shape of the mask refers to the pygmy people who first inhabited the land. The story of M'Boom promotes the traditional social order and represents the commoners' relationship to the king.

M'boom Mask

Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kuba people
Wood, copper, cowrie shells, beads, kaolin, skin, cotton fabric, raffia
Purchase, 1974
(4254.1)

Power, Politics and Proverbs

Asafo companies of the Fante are traditional patrilineal paramilitary groups in which each male and female automatically belongs to the company of his or her father. Counterbalancing the Fante's matrilineal and aristocratic royal bureaucracy, Asafo companies, essentially democratic, are closely involved in the selection of a new chief, his installation and, occasionally, his overthrow. These Asafo companies, as many as seven active in a single town, have signatory names, numbers and visual signs. Before British rule in the 19th century they were martial in nature; today Asafo companies maintain their institutional strength as social and fraternal organizations. Traditional inter-company rivalry is now seen in competition expressed through their art forms. Each company has its proprietary color, motifs, and emblems and their appropriation by another company is considered a violation of artistic prerogatives and an act of martial aggression.



Along with costumes and shrines, flags are a major art form of the Asafo companies. Usually rectangular in shape, and decorated with colorful appliquéd motifs, these flags are displayed by companies' designated flag carriers/dancers in ceremonial events. New flags are made to mark significant events such as installment of a new chief. Old flags, even though tattered, are kept to preserve the glory of the past and to honor

deceased members. The colorful, and often quite humorous, motifs boast of the power and the strength of a company. They also speak to social and moral issues through proverbial expressions, as seen in many art forms in Ghana. During festivals where flags are displayed, elders read to youngsters the proverbs and stories that are vividly expressed in Asafo flags.

Far left:

The delightful image of a tree and eight red figures on this flag conveys the proverb, "When a child plucks (plays with) pepper it hurts his eye." The red figure at the right is rubbing his eye after touching the very hot West African pepper tree depicted in yellow stitchery. The warning message here is "one must know how to handle the enemy before going to war."

Asafo Flag, No. 2 Company, Kormantine

Created by Akwa Osei

Ghana, Fante people

c. 1900

Cotton and rayon, embroidery and appliqué

Gift of Mrs. Thomas Davis, 1989

(5886.1)

Left:

This flag with the Ghanaian tricolor at the upper left corner is a replacement for an old flag that commemorated a deceased company leader. His dates, 1913-1957, are displayed on the flag. The imagery of two figures, a bush and an antelope, seem to be related to childbirth. An enigmatic maxim attached to the flag reads, "The bush says it can help the antelope deliver its baby, but the black figure says to the bush, you are not a man so how can you help."

Asafo Flag, Tuafo No. 1 Company, Assafa

Created by Kwame Sumene

Ghana, Fante people

c. 1981

Cotton and rayon, embroidery and appliqué

Gift of Mrs. Thomas Davis, 1989

(5887.1)