

CALL AND RESPONSE JOURNEYS IN AFRICAN ART

To call and respond is to interact socially. A song leader who begins a solo is joined by the chorus who responds in support. Oftentimes the chorus will begin while the soloist is still singing, causing a momentary overlap. Creating a layer of rhythmic support, the chorus carves a space for the soloist's imagination. Thus, the song expands to include a wide range of innovations that arise from this dialogue between soloist and chorus. In *Call and Response: Journeys of African Art* the idea of expanding forms that result from association is extended to African art objects. This exhibition explores the call and response dynamic as objects and ideas move between African groups as well as between African and non-African peoples. Just as the soloist, or caller, is not the lone author of the song performance, African art objects are not simply defined by their moment of origin. They can be seen as dynamic, taking on a variety of identities and acquiring multiple meanings in response to specific needs. In this adaptation process elements are retained, modified and rejected. Sometimes roles shift and responders become callers. African objects—like African cultures—are not static.

CALL AND RESPONSE JOURNEYS OF AFRICAN ART

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CALL AND RESPONSE

JOURNEYS OF AFRICAN ART

Sarah Adams, Lyneise Williams, Barbaro Martinez-Ruiz, Co-curators

Joanna Weber, Exhibition and Catalogue Coordinator

Published in conjunction with the exhibition
Call and Response: Journeys of African Art
Yale University Art Gallery
December 15, 2000 – March 25, 2001

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New Haven, Connecticut
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ISBN: 0-89467-093-X

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Director's Foreword

JOCK REYNOLDS

his exhibition is the third in a recent series of a projects co-curated by Yale History of Art graduate students and Art Gallery fellows, providing advanced learners in our midst with opportunities to explore ways that African art can be displayed and interpreted in a museum environment. Earlier projects, such as *African Art at Yale: A Recollection*, co-curated by Sarah Adams and David Doris, brought forth a reinstallation of the Gallery's extant African art collection, while *Imaging African Art: Documentation and Transformation*, co-curated by Daniell Cornell and Cheryl Finley, juxtaposed an array of creative approaches certain twentieth-century artists have employed to represent African art and sometimes transform its imagery and content into new works of contemporary art.

Call and Response: Journeys of African Art, the result of a fruitful collaboration between Sarah Adams, Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz, and Lyneise Williams, focuses its attention on some of the original and continuing consequences of the African diaspora. The exhibition and this publication present African art objects and research gleaned from four anonymous private collections with maps, photographs, postcards, and other ephemera borrowed from the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum for African Art, Yale University's Sterling Memorial Library, Yale Manuscripts and Archives, and the Yale Map Collection.

The Gallery is not only indebted to the individual and institutional lenders who have kindly furthered our students' work, but also to art historian Professor Robert Farris Thompson and Assistant Curator Joanna Weber who have so generously guided our trio of curator/scholars in the preparation of their exhibition and catalogue, offerings we are now pleased to share with our university community and the Gallery's public audiences.

Jock Reynolds
The Henry J. Heinz II Director

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Preface and Acknowledgments

JOANNA WEBER

It is from our awareness of transcendent reality and our response to concrete reality that our minds command us on our way – not really on a path or to a gate – but to full response. Complete consciousness is present to us at all times, every moment, but we reject it in order to maintain our prejudices, our ideas. But sooner or later we will relinquish our ideas in favor of response because the truth prevails.—Agnes Martin, *Writings*

xcept for site-specific installations, all objects in an art museum have traveled through both time and geography. Coming to an art museum is an opportunity to encounter these traveling artifacts, and in their presence one can also travel. These works offer the opportunity to reconsider who we are in relation to the past, other cultures and other places. Traveling with them, we too end up elsewhere. They call and, if we have the courage, we respond.

In this particular exhibition, *Call and Response: Journeys of African Art*, **we are asked** to look at how the forms, patterns, designs, and shapes of objects have traveled within the rich and diverse continent of Africa. Through both the catalogue essays and the installation, we see how these individual pieces are linked to other manifestations in African art and culture. These selections exhibit how forms travel, shift, relocate, and migrate, the reasons for these changes, and how the objects and their shifting meanings refuse to become static. The exhibition includes masks, postcards, books, a carved ivory horn, and a secret society emblem, textiles, embroidery patterns, and an impressive group of *minkisi* – figures meant to function medicinally. A film by Sarah Adams of an Igbo mask dance, filmed in Nigeria earlier this year, further adds to the theme of travel and enhances our understanding of how particular objects or types of objects have traveled to New Haven.

Given this museum setting, it is fitting that Robert Farris Thompson, the



Figure 1
 Africa Ex Magna Orbis
 Terre Descriptione
 Gerhard Mercator,
 Holland, 1595
 Ink on paper.
 18 ½ x 22 ½ in.
 Yale University Map
 Collection, Yale Sterling
 Memorial Library
 Photo: Susan Cole,
 Alex Contreras, Yale
 University Art Gallery

Colonel John Trumbull Professor of African Art History at Yale, begins the catalogue by considering Kongo artifacts, both in Yale’s permanent collection and in this exhibition, in relation to strong works in the history of art. His three Africanist graduate students and co-curators of the exhibition, Sarah Adams, Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz, and Lyneise Williams, demonstrate in their individual essays how different groupings of African art objects have traveled through time and geography. Sarah Adams analyzes the movement of patterns from Ùri (Nigeria) body painting to embroidery design patterns. Lyneise Williams discusses the Efik Leopold Society Emblem and its shifting form, as well as how the Ode-lay society of Freetown, Sierra Leone, modifies their masks, incorporating elements from Hinduism. Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz carefully tracks the travel of the Kongo pictorial symbolism to the island of Cuba.

x

In working on this project, I must especially thank Professor Thompson, the chief warrior advocate for African art, whose quick smile and apt comment cut to the critical matter. Sarah Adams, Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz, and Lyneise Williams have transformed this project into a rich experience. Others also deserve gratitude for participating in this adventure. In the department of European and Contemporary Art, Yvonne Morant was truly “la comandante,” keeping the flow of administrative details on track and ensuring that good humor prevailed. Graduate student Clay Dean was always available and reliable in his support. Undergraduate student Mariana Mogilevich organized all details related to photography and rights. Our registrar, Lynne Addison, masterfully handled the lending and shipping of the objects in the exhibition. From the Department of Paper Conservation at the British Art Center, I would like to thank Theresa Fairbanks, Chief Conservator, Amy Gerbracht, postgraduate Mellon Fellow, and Alison Norton, Assistant Conservator, for solving the paper puzzles of the *Ùrì* patterns. Alex Contreras, John French, Janet Zullo, Susan Cole, and Carl Kaufman generously handled new photography. Joyce Ippolito calmly edited the manuscript, and Sonia Shannon designed this beautiful book. As always, Marie Weltzien in Public Relations generated much enthusiasm for the project. Education curators Mary Kordak and Ellen Alvord carefully prepared public programming. The art handling crew, Burrus Harlow, Clark Crolius, Christopher Mir, David Norris, and John Tweed, installed the exhibition, and Nancy Valley oversaw the lighting. It was Jock Reynolds, the Henry J. Heinz II Director, who first set this venture in motion. Knowing of my interest in the discipline of African art, he asked me to oversee this exhibition and its catalogue. Now, let the journey begin and may the truth prevail.

Joanna Weber

Exhibition and Catalogue Coordinator

Assistant Curator, Department of European and Contemporary Art

Figure 2

Power Figure Nkisi
19th—20th century
Wood. H: 12 in.
Democratic
Republic of Congo
Anonymous Collection
Photo: George Meister



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Kongo Art at Yale

ROBERT FARRIS THOMPSON

In the history of art, strong traditions—the Byzantine, the Gothic, Buddhist statuary—cross time and space. Greek temple siting, for example, spread to Paestum in Italy and Segesta in Sicily. Hellenistic painting, destroyed at Athens, survives in mosaic fragments at Pompeii and Herculaneum. Diasporic reflections refer back to sources. They help us rebuild the essential triad of art history, origins, development, and achievement.

Of all the civilizations of tropical Africa, none is more “strong,” in this sense, than Kongo. The poet laureate of Portugal, Camoens, lauded Kongo in his epic verse of 1550 as “the greatest of all kingdoms” on the coast of Africa. And so it was, a kingdom, like Portugal, like Spain. And it was backed by a deep and distinguished urban history. Heroic ancestors founded, in medieval times, the central settlement, Mbanza Kongo [city of Kongo], in present-day northern Angola.

At Mbanza Kongo, the capital, there was a famous law court, a currency, and superb art and architecture. The Kongo cluster of towns and cities, as George Peter Murdock pointed out long ago, “aroused the astonishment of early Portuguese explorers because of the complexity of their political institutions and their social life.” That complexity kept key aspects of their artistic culture alive even under slavery in the Americas where Kongo captives congregated in Cuba, Haiti, Brazil, South Carolina, and especially New Orleans, the city of jazz, where their impact is remembered in the name, Kongo Square, the term, *gumbo yaya* [“everyone talks at once”], and the body-whacking dance, *juba*, that stemmed directly from *nzuba* in Kongo.

Jews were carried away to Babylon but never forgot Jerusalem. So priests and priestesses of the classical Kongo religion in Cuba, Haiti, and Brazil never forgot Mbanza Kongo. Bakongo in Cuba in fact renamed Havana Kuna Mbanza. They crowned surrogate kings and queens in Montevideo, Havana, and rural Brazil. Kongo cultural influence gave us major popular dance





Figure 3
Maternity Figure
19th—20th century
Wood, white clay.
22 ½ x 10 ½ x 10 ⅝ in.
Democratic Republic
of Congo
Anonymous Lender
Photo: Carl Kaufman,
Yale University Art Gallery

forms of the twentieth century—rumba, mambo, samba, candombe, milonga, tango—all bearing names deriving from Ki-Kongo.

Against this background, we celebrate the strong and growing presence of Kongo art at Yale University Art Gallery. It is not only a font for further studies of the visual traditions in Kongo, including contemporary painting, but a growing base for understanding Kongo-derived art in the Americas.

Mother, Maker of the Way [nkisi mangudi]

The towering coiffure of the idealized mother in figure 3 resembles the crest of a rooster. For a woman to wear this strong style (called in Ki-Kongo *kipopo lusampa-sampa*) meant she was caparisoned as a *nkambakani* or *mutombo*, words meaning “medium.” She was trained to receive the spirit. She was a sacred mother of the clan. She held the keys to the secrets of healing. If this sculpture were intended for a memorial shrine, it brought back her talents for admiration and inspiration.

Note how the woman stabilizes her child with the palm of her left hand. Symbolically she sustains continuity. She builds (with her children) the fabric of the clan [*ntungi a lukosi lwa kanda*]. Traces of kaolin about her body tell us her powers, healing and giving, all stem from “the white,” the brilliance of glory, the dawn of the ancestors.

With her right hand she makes a strong gesture. She lights up her role as a healer. She opens her palm [*séngula kandazi*] atop a vessel [*kinzu*] filled with a powerful medicated earth called *mpolo*. Revealing her palm is set in conceptual opposition to concealing her palm [*bubika kandazi*]. Hiding her palm would be “oppressing” the medicine, keeping it down, blocking its power to heal. But by resting her open palm, ancient Kongo ideogram of transparent generosity, upon the *mpolo* she “accepts” the medicine.

At this charged ritual moment, so it is believed, a spiritual rain would fall into her palm. She would bring down the moisture of God. This connects with the belief that the first rain that ends the dry season is full of God’s spirit. It is a powerful medicine. People collect such rain in a vessel and use it in ritual aspersions, a Kongo equivalent to the offering of blessed water in Western cathedrals.

In Cuba among *paleros*, as followers of the classical religion of Kongo are known in the Caribbean, it is believed that water from the “first shower in May” [*aguacero de mayo*] is identically charged with medicinal properties. The water descends from God’s hand. There are songs that relate it to spirit in Cuba and the Cuban-American barrios of Los Angeles and New York. So





Figure 4
Kongo Wood Standing
Male Figure (Nkisi
Nkondi ya Ntilumuka)
19th century
Wood, pigments.
18 x 8 x 3 ½ in.
Democratic Republic
of Congo
Anonymous Lender
Photo: Carl Kaufman,
Yale University Art Gallery

the mother in Kongo has prepared her left palm, the hand of ritual, to receive this strong blessing.

Nails and blades embedded in a standing human figure and a janus-dog image stand for social issues [*mambu*] resolved by the healer-herbalists who once were in charge of these remarkable images. How so? Imagine a situation in which a person in the clan is suffering from a fever that strangely resists medication. The owner of, say, a janus-dog image is summoned as a ritual expert. He goes into trance. He discovers that an ancestor has been slighted, explaining the misfortune of the patient. The dogs [*mbwa*] stand for the healer in ecstasy, sending his spirit from this world (one dog) to the next (the other dog) just as a sportsman might release two prized hunting dogs to scent out game in the field and in the forest. After the problem, a forgotten vow, an unintended slight, has been identified, and solved by sacrifice or other acts of commiseration, it is “nailed” into the image, among other blades and nails. It becomes one more sign of past healing or conflict resolution.

As to the standing nkondi (fig. 4) blades, nails, and bars once again bristle with mnemonic fervor: each seals a vow, like a signature at the bottom of a treaty. The clustering of adjudicated issues [*mambu*] in the form of

Figure 5

Nkisi Nkondi
19th-20th century
Wood, nails. H: 30 in.
Democratic Republic
of Congo
Anonymous Collection
Photo: George Meister



the nails and the blades is the signature par excellence of the nkisi nkondi. It is the force that hunts down [*konda*] evil, the punning root concept behind the term *nkondi*. When nganga nkondi, the ritual expert in charge of such an image has identified a social problem, and indicated appropriate means of sacrifice and atonement, he seeks final agreement in this way: he draws out a blade to seal the promise, asking, “*Koma?*” [should I nail it?]. The client shouts back: *Inga! Koma!* [Yes! Go ahead and nail it!].

The concept of hunting down deeply hidden sources of social discord, and literally nailing down solutions to such problems, is brought to a pitch of poetic suggestiveness in the image of the double dog with blades. Canines, armed with their faculty of superior scent, become metaphors for priests mystically sniffing out trouble. Dogs are also seen as assistants [*muswami*] to priests and to healers. This idiom passed intact to Black Cuba. There the helpers of Kongo priests are also called dogs [but spelled *mbuá*, the Afro-Cuban form for *mbwa*]. Not only that, when palero priests become possessed by the spirit they may fall on their hands and knees and scent out the altar. They are sniffing out power. They are sniffing out danger. People around them call them *mbuá*. They become in the flesh what in Kongo was sculpture.

Only a seer who can traverse both worlds in his dreams or in trance can see through to the solution of deep problems. That is the gist of this remarkable sculpture: the problems which are identified and “nailed” [solved] in this world are simultaneously being nailed in the other [*dikangamane ku nseke dikangamane ku mpemba*]. In the process two dogs become one. And their mnemonic nails are doubled and mirrored.

The Naked Healer: Body as Argument in the War Against Evil

The original 1954 nucleus of African art at Yale, the Linton Collection, includes a small nkisi (or nkisi-inspired) masterpiece from the sculptures of healing [*minkisi*] (fig.6). It was collected in Kongo in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. A woman stands nude, with a bottle in one hand and a horn in the other. The containers are signs of her power to heal.

She stands totally naked [*télama mu ngunya yayo*] as a sign of intima-

Figure 6
Nkisi Figurine
19th century
Wood, porcelain, iron rings.
H: 10 in.
Democratic Republic of Congo
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. James M. Osborn
for the Linton Collection of African Art
Yale University Art Gallery
1955.61.18

tion [*sinsu kia wóonga*]. Her arms are carved clearly away from her body, doubling the effect of not hiding anything. Her body and her weapons are clearly perceived. This means: “she is ready to fight against *mambu* [whatever social problems as might arise]” (Fu-Kiau, interview, fall 1995).

The second standing figure, also representing a woman, is from Bembe in northern Kongo (fig. 7). It dates perhaps from the first two decades of the twentieth century. She brandishes a calabash medicine container [*nkalu*] thus announcing herself as a person who can heal and can govern. There are implications of rebirth in what she holds too: such a vessel might contain powdered red camwood [*tukula*] to rub on the bodies of persons being sworn in to important ritual societies.

Her bent knees are a sign of life and vitality and gender and existence are written in cicatrix code on her belly. There we see a diamond-form male world, the world of command, set over a matching emblem, domain of the women, the world that gives life.

With spiritualized eyes of white porcelain, and tightly pursed lips announcing her toughness [*kingolo*] and valor [*kibakala*], she stands in the world. Pulses counted, in vision and valor, give hint of the richness of classical Kongo religion.

To return to the first standing figure (fig. 6) that we examined, her weapons of healing, bottle and horn, recrystallize dramatically in the Americas. Bottles in Kongo not only contained medicine but could simultaneously communicate the capture of spirit. Cut to the Delta in Mississippi, from Eudora Welty’s famous 1936 short story, *Livvie*:

Livvie [a young African American] knew that there could be a spell put in trees, and she was familiar from the time she was born with the way bottle trees keep evil spirits from coming into the house—by luring them inside the colored bottles where they cannot get out again.

Before Western bottles arrived on the coast the people of Kongo used seashells as containers for their spiritualized medicines. The late and great black self-taught painter, Sam Doyle of Frogmore, South Carolina, painted an African American folk healer with an actual large seashell appended to his head as a sign of his power and learning. In addition, seashells adorn thousands of black graves across the United States as medicines of transition across water, “the land of demise and the means to glory” (Bessie Jones interview, 1972).

In another remarkable painting Doyle shows a black healer sucking blood from the wound of a patient with a horn, precisely the implement, for

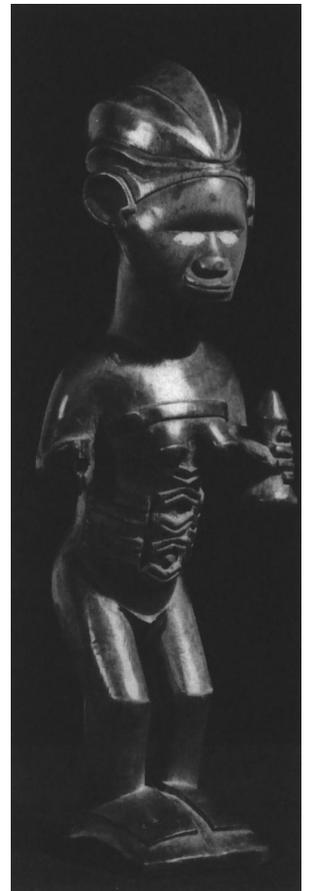


Figure 7
Female Figurine
19th–20th century
Wood, porcelain. H: 7 in.
Democratic Republic of Congo
Gift of Thomas M. Osborn
for the Linton Collection
of African Art
Yale University Art Gallery
1980.113.2

precisely the same purpose which we see the Kongo image holding in her right hand. The nineteenth-century iconography of Brazil also includes an image of a black healer at work with his horn. But Kongo emblems are multi-dimensional. Other meanings attach to this instrument. A horn [*mpaka*] can be used as a flute to make music, or a cup to drink strong ritual brews. Filled with spirit-earth and stoppered with a special plug it can stop the advance of a problem [*kanga mambu*].

In any event, stoppered or not, horns are synonymous with healers. So they remain in Black Cuba. Here a horn filled with medicine, stoppered with mirror, becomes an instrument of mystic vision [*vititi menso*, lit. herb eyes in action] in the Kongo religion of Havana and Mantanzas. The mirror-horn represents a creative rethinking of the myriad figured mirror-medicines [*minkisi lumweno*] of Kongo.

At the end, an abiding preoccupation with vision, with “the eyes of understanding” (MacGaffey), comes forward in the towering mediumistic headdress [*kipopo lusampa-sampa*] of the Kongo healing image with wide-open eyes [*meeso mazibuka*] and sparkling black pupils (fig. 6). With these staring orbs she will see what is sacred, she will see what is dangerous, and she will share her deep findings with all of us.

So Kongo art at the Yale University Art Gallery is urban, not “tribal,” transatlantic, not regional, and popular and sacred forever.

Robert Farris Thompson is the Colonel John Trumbull Professor of the History of Art at Yale University

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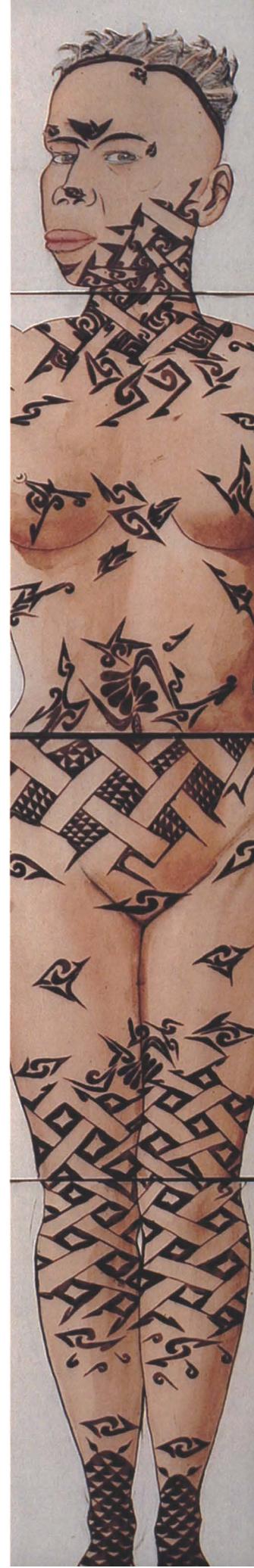
Praise Her Beauty Well

Ùrì from the Body to Cloth

SARAH ADAMS

had insomnia in Arochukwu, a small Igbo town in southeastern Nigeria. After each day's work I lay awake all night, watching the lazy turns of the ceiling fan, the rise and fall of my stomach. The first night my compulsive games of computer Solitaire made my eyes burn, so the next day I picked up a cheap red plastic shortwave radio at a small electronics store. All night I lay awake in the dark, fiddling with the dial and listening to broken streams of foreign languages—stations from London, Japan, France, and other places whose languages I couldn't identify. It was May of 1995, and I was living in General Sani Abacha's Nigeria. I had spent the preceding seven months talking my way through roadblocks manned by underpaid soldiers in mirrored sunglasses, and I remember the irritation I felt as I listened to a report on the shortwave radio about animal rights activists protesting bullfights in Mexico and the United States. My insomnia and restless irritation, I realize in retrospect, were fueled by worry. I was well into my year in Nigeria, and the tools I had developed to study *ùrì* (Igbo women's body and wall painting) in other areas of southeastern Nigeria were proving ineffective in Arochukwu.¹

In Anambra State and the Nsukka area I had generally started by looking for women who knew how to paint *ùrì* on the body or on the wall. Because *ùrì* painting is currently waning in popularity, this search was challenging in and of itself, but not impossible. When introduced to an artist I would first interview her and then commission work. I had also on occasion apprenticed myself to *ùrì* artists. These "starting" tools were ineffective in Arochukwu because it was difficult to find an artist who was still young enough and strong enough to do wall painting, a physically demanding art. In other areas I had worked around this problem by focusing on body painting, which doesn't require as much physical labor. But in Arochukwu, body painting was also a challenge because the women didn't want to paint themselves and no one would volunteer to be painted. I was used to young women shunning body



painting as “outdated,” but seeing older women reject it was a less common occurrence. When this dilemma had presented itself in other areas (such as with an artist in Nnobi who had converted to Catholicism and was worried that if she showed up in church with her body painted she would be accused of “backsliding”), I had successfully offered myself as a canvas. In Arochukwu my offer was generally not well received. One woman refused to paint me outright because she didn’t want to see me naked to the waist. As a last resort I tried to commission drawings on paper but these all seemed either hesitant or rushed. When I left after this first trip I felt I had learned a lot about Arochukwu generally, and I had heard many stories about body painting “in the old days.” But my work there felt somehow outside the rest of my research experience—I even kept my journal for this period in a separate file on my computer.

While in Nigeria in 1994/95 I had briefly crossed paths with Elizabeth Willis, a British scholar who was also studying *ùrì* painting, and she turned my attention to a collection of drawings housed at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. A large section of this collection of drawings was from Arochukwu, and Willis did a detailed analysis of these drawings using the “Hatcher Art Analysis” in her 1997 Ph.D. thesis.² I traveled to the Pitt Rivers Museum to see the drawings, and all I could think as I leafed through them was “take them back to Arochukwu.” So I did. On my next trip to Arochukwu, in March 2000, I took a binder of photocopies of the drawings, and they all but did my work for me. I had planned to use the drawings only to do research with the artists about aesthetics, but the rich, passionate conversations we had on this second trip turned in many directions. The women were both amazed and amused that a collection of drawings from Arochukwu is housed in a museum in “*òbòdò òyìbó*,” a term used generally to designate the land of foreign people. Together we studied and discussed the drawings in detail. These trips and their lessons were still very fresh in my mind when I saw the body painting on a carved female figure in a Connecticut collection (fig. 9). The body painting on the carved figure seemed to resonate with the drawings from Arochukwu at the Pitt Rivers Museum.

The clearest currents seemed to circulate between the sculpture (fig. 9) and an oddly unsettling drawing on paper of a similarly adorned woman in the Pitt Rivers collection (fig. 8). As the sculpture is probably Ibibio and the work on paper was likely done by Igbo artists, these pieces present us with a locus for unfolding and remembering mutual observation between body painters in the Cross River region of southeastern Nigeria. Affinities in patterns used and their placement on the body in these two pieces suggest a history of intercultural in body art between a variety of cultural groups in the Cross River area.³ The images also help open up an exploration of cross-cultural

Figure 8
Drawing of a woman
painted with *ùrì*, circa 1930s.
Duckworth Collection, Pitt
Rivers Museum, University
of Oxford.
1972.24.112
42 ½ x 9 5/8 ½



currents in aesthetic criteria used to create and judge body art in the Cross River area. Comparing black line body painting, or *ùrì*, aesthetics in Arochukwu with the body painting on the carved figure, it seems clear that some of the aesthetic criteria Aro women use to judge body art may also organize the body painting on the carved figure.⁴ The colonial history behind figure 8, however, links the piece to an early-twentieth-century mission embroidery cooperative that used *ùrì* patterns on cloth. Examination of transformations that occurred in *ùrì* art as a result of this project further illuminates an understanding of aesthetics not as timeless and culturally or geographically bounded, but mutable and subject to interculturalization.

The work on paper in figure 8 was donated to the Pitt Rivers Museum upon the death of Edward Harland Duckworth, a British colonial official who was posted in Nigeria from 1930 to 1953.⁵ “A. S. Arnot,” the name of a Scottish missionary who was posted in Arochukwu from 1911 to 1948, is written on the reverse. From this we can guess that figure 8 was probably painted by female *ùrì* artists in the Igbo town of Arochukwu at the prompting of either Duckworth or Arnot. Historically (and in contrast to the preserved examples of body painting on paper and wood we see in figures 8 and 9), this type of body painting is ephemeral. It is usually done on the body exclusively by female artists whose media is a greenish juice that turns black overnight and remains visible for about four days (see fig. 10). In some areas, women also use the body painting patterns for murals on clay walls. These murals are created during the dry season, and because the artists do not add binder to their pigments, they slowly return to the earth during the subsequent rainy season. Most of the Igbo body and wall painting artists I have worked with do not mourn the fading of their body and wall painting in these media—the disappearance of the object itself, but not necessarily the memory of that object, creates space and demand for new work.

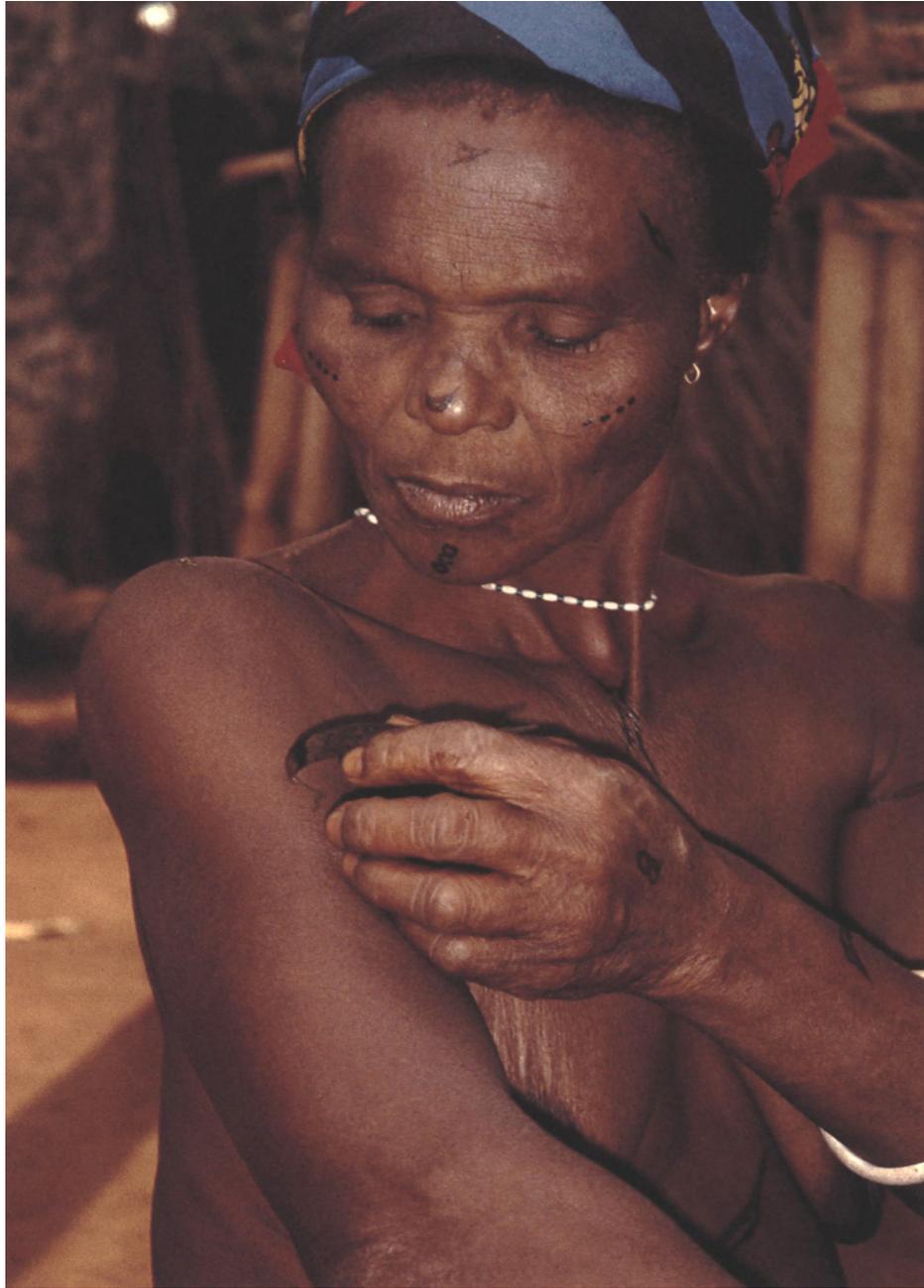
Surviving documents related to the drawing in figure 8 do not provide clues as to the number of artists involved in its creation. Duckworth or Arnot may have painted the watercolor of the woman and then asked body-painting artists from Arochukwu to paint over it, or an Igbo *ùrì* artist or a group of *ùrì* artists might be responsible for the work as a whole. It is quite common for *ùrì* artists to work in groups, especially on murals. The drawing (fig. 8) is painted on four sheets of paper tied together with string. The break in design continuity between the sheet of paper that depicts the torso and that depicting the lower stomach/pubic area—where floating designs suddenly meet a woven structure—suggests that the piece may be the work of more than one *ùrì* artist. The work on paper in figure 8 was probably commissioned specifically for collection and preservation in a British museum.⁶ Other drawings of *ùrì* on paper from this collection (see figs. 11, 13, 14, 15, 22, 23, and 24) prob-



Figure 9
Ibibio Ekon Society
Puppet (?). Wood, pigment.
H.: 28 in. Anonymous Lender
Photo: Carl Kaufman, Yale
University Art Gallery

Figure 10

Ekinma Ojiakor painting herself with ùrì. Ojiakor does both body and wall painting and lives in Agulu, Anambra State, northwest of Arochukwu. She is using a *mmanwuli*, the dull curved uli knife, to apply the juice from the ùrì pod. Agulu, 1995.
Photo: Sarah Adams



ably were commissioned by Arnot and used to create embroidery templates for a mission project in Arochukwu in the 1930s and 1940s.

Identification of the carved piece in figure 9 is also ambiguous. The wooden figure was likely carved and painted by a male, possibly Ibibio, artist. It is probably an Ibibio *Ekon* society puppet, although it also may have been either an ancestral figure or made specifically for sale to foreigners.⁷ Ekon society puppets are used in dramatic performances to “amuse audiences by ridiculing the motives and actions of well-known individuals and groups.”⁸ These performances use humor to entertain and exert social control; the puppet in figure 9 probably depicts a common type used in Ekon performances, the young woman fresh from the “fattening room.” The drawing of the woman

on paper was also identified by ùrì artists I spoke with in Arochukwu as a depiction of body painting worn by women on display from the fattening room; such women are called *m̀gbédé* in Arochukwu. In recent years this practice, which used to be common in the Cross River area and involved seclusion of young women in preparation for marriage, has fallen from popularity. This is largely due to economic factors and the economic and educational pull of urban centers. In his 1991 essay on Ibibio social organization, Eded Udo tells us “fattening persists but in a modified form.”⁹

During the pre-marriage fattening room period, usually lasting three months, a woman was kept sedentary and fed rich foods supplied by her family and sometimes her future husband. This period of seclusion was a time when women in the community who were members of this society instructed the young, unmarried women on sexual, religious, and general domestic matters. When the girls emerged from seclusion, they were presented to the community at the height of their beauty—their hair styled in elaborate coiffures, their bodies covered in sumptuous garments of black line body art like that depicted on the carved figure and in the work on paper. The carved representations of coiled brass anklets and bracelets seen on figure 10 were generally worn only by wealthier women on this occasion. In C. S. Okeke’s overview essay on the history of Igbo dress she explains that when an Igbo woman came out of the fattening room she “did not use cloth as apparel. . . . If she had to wear some cloth at all, it was a narrow piece across her waist . . . to further accentuate her hip area.” Okeke adds that during a young woman’s wedding she would tie a wrapper for the first time:



Figure 11

Ùrì drawing on paper, 1930/40s, Duckworth Collection, Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford. 1972.24.155

14 3/4 x 10 in.

Ùrì artist said this was a successful composition because it left space for *nkàsàjani*, another type of body art, to show through the ùrì.

And from then on she wore wrappers like a married woman. . . . In traditional Igbo culture children below these ages [21 for boys and 14 for girls] did not normally require much by way of clothing. . . . This was based on the belief that clothing could conceal their acts of licentiousness, particularly among the girls with regard to unwanted pregnancies. Nakedness was therefore a mark of purity among children.¹⁰

Therefore both preadolescent rejection of clothing, and the adornments worn by women from the fattening room such as those in figures 8 and 9 (“naked” in Okeke’s definition), expressed concepts of purity to future husbands, in-laws, and the community in general.

The carved and painted woman (fig. 9), fresh from the fattening room, is poised in dance. Her legs bent and palms flexed parallel to the earth, she displays the beauty of her body and its adornments to her future husband through motion. Unlike marionettes, Ekon puppets are manipulated from beneath, so although her feet are now eroded, she may have once been mounted on a base with an extending rod for the puppeteer to hold. These puppeteers are hidden from the audience by a cloth-covered, enclosed structure that stands about seven feet tall—the puppets appear just above this enclosure. Puppets vary in size and often have hinged arms or jaws. When this figure was used, her hinged arms would have swung at her sides to reveal glimpses of patterns painted under her arms that are almost completely obscured when she is on display in a museum. Unlike the bodily proportion of the woman depicted in the work on paper, the proportions of the sculpted figure divide roughly into thirds: head/neck, torso, and legs. Such proportioning, common in African sculpture, emphasizes her head and neck. From the side view the sculptor creates a balanced play of triangles and curves; triangular breasts are echoed by the points of her bent knees and the curve of her shoulder blade is restated through her rounded buttocks.

Although the body painting in the work on paper was more than likely done by one or more female Igbo *ùrì* artists in Arochukwu, the body painting on the surface of the carved figure was probably done by the male *Ibibio* artist who carved the piece.¹¹ Even with a cursory glance one can see similarities between the body painting depicted in both. Rather than cover the entire body, each artist (or perhaps group of artists for the work on paper) has created a dialogue between clusters of intense, energetic pattern repetition on the legs, stomach, and neck; and more open, serene spaces anchored with isolated design elements on the breasts and arms. The single, isolated pattern elements direct the eye through the open areas. In both pieces a thick black line circles the head; this line emphasizes the hairline and coiffure. It is possible that some of the aesthetic principles (along with their underlying moral

ideas about women's bodies) that govern the application of ùrì body art in Arochukwu (fig. 8), described to me by ùrì artists from that area, may also underpin the application of body paint on carved piece in figure 9, called *okun* or *uso idem* by the Anang Ibibio.¹²

In Arochukwu, I showed figure 8 along with a larger set of ùrì drawings on paper including figures 11, 13, 14, 15, 22, 23, and 24 to women who do or did paint ùrì on the body.¹³ The ùrì artists employed an articulated set of aesthetic criteria to critique this work. Those who knew and shared this first set of criteria tended to practice traditional religion and were prepared for marriage through seclusion in the fattening room. Their criteria express one set of ideas about women, their bodies, beauty, and morality in Arochukwu. The body painting on the carved figure seems to be organized along the same principles these women outlined. Though I use only the body painting in figures 8 and 9 to suggest interculturalism in body arts in the Cross River area, such a comparison is confirmed by comments Aro women made about seeking design inspiration for their body art from Ibibio women they met in

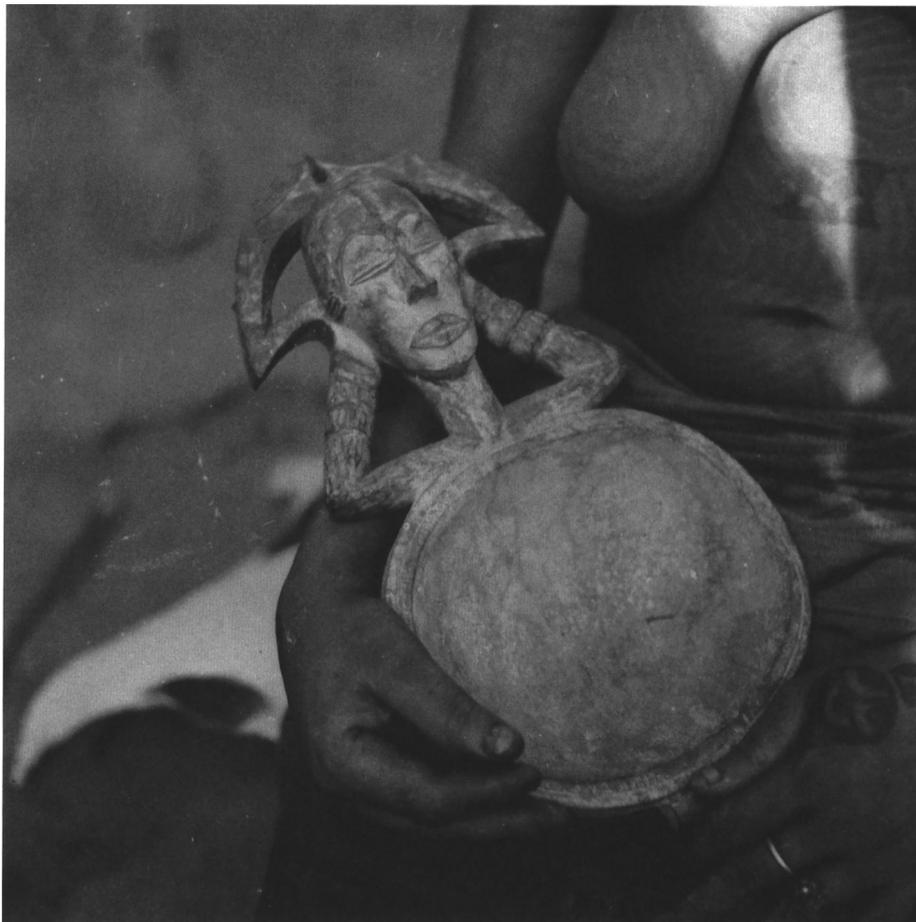


Figure 12

Woman wearing *nkàsjanj*. There is a single ùrì pattern on the woman's left hand, and she is holding an *okwa nzu*. This carved dish held white kaolin, used by titled men receiving guests. Courtesy of the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Photo: G. I. Jones



Figure 13
 ùrì drawing on paper
 from Arochukwu, 1930/40s.
 ùrì artists thought this
 drawing was *nji ukwu* (too
 black)—it doesn't leave
 space for *nkàsianì* to show
 through. Note the difference
 between the woven "*ókpa
 ngàdá*" pattern here and that
 shown on the embroidery
 template in figure 10a.
 Duckworth Collection,
 Pitt Rivers Museum,
 University of Oxford
 1986.19.2
 12 x 9 in.



Figure 14
 ùrì drawing on paper from
 Arochukwu, 1930/40s.
 Duckworth Collection, Pitt
 Rivers Museum, University of
 Oxford 1986.19.4
 12 x 9 in.

the market. The body painting on the sculpture in figure 9 merely suggests mutual observation—that women from other cultural groups in the Cross River area also sought design inspiration from their Igbo sisters. (For more on interculturalism in the Cross River area see also Lyneise Williams's article in this same volume.)

The set of aesthetic criteria the ùrì artists applied to the works on paper, criteria that may also be expressed in figure 9, is not, however, shared by all women in Arochukwu. This is because of the specific history of use of ùrì patterns in Arochukwu. Some of the women in this area used ùrì on the body, and others used these same patterns on cloth as part of a mission embroidery project founded in Arochukwu in the 1930s by Scottish Presbyterian missionary Agnes Siddons Arnot. Arnot was in Arochukwu from around 1911 to 1948, and figures 1, 4, 6, 7, 8, 16, and 17 probably came into being because of her project. She collected ùrì drawings on paper from ùrì artists and used them in the mission as templates for embroidery on tablecloths, napkins, placemats, and linens.

Arnot, who was born in 1881 in the tiny village of Kinross in Scotland, is still remembered in Arochukwu today.¹⁴ Inspired by the work of Mary Slessor, a celebrated Scottish Presbyterian expatriate missionary to Calabar, Arnot dedicated herself to mission work and first traveled to Nigeria in 1911 when she was thirty.¹⁵ In 1913 she returned to Scotland and married Reverend David Arnot, a minister, who died a year later. Arnot decided to return to the "mission field" in 1915, and she traveled back and forth to Arochukwu as a Church of Scotland missionary for thirty-seven years before she retired in 1948. During her lifetime she was Principal, Matron, and one of the founders of the Mary Slessor Memorial Home in Arochukwu.¹⁶

The Slessor Memorial Home, founded around 1916,¹⁷ had several functions; primary among these was its role as a "marriage training center." Young girls from Arochukwu and all over West Africa, including Ghana and Sierra Leone, were sent by their parents or prospective husbands to learn "domestic sciences" and receive a basic Western-style school education.¹⁸ The girls learned to cook, embroider, tailor clothing, do laundry, and garden, among other things. At Slessor, young women learned vocational skills that were marketable within a specific sector of the colonial economy. Mission philosophy behind such an education seems to have been that to ensure that Christianity developed deep roots in the country, the mostly male African evangelists who worked with the expatriate missionaries had to have Christian wives with a Western education. This would ensure a "Christian home," Christian children, and that these households would then duplicate themselves.

When the Slessor School opened, it existed in Arochukwu alongside the fattening room tradition, and therefore two sets of ideas about the role of

women in marriage began to mingle. The marriage training philosophy taught to young unmarried women in the fattening room and expressed on the body through ùrì body painting stressed (among other things) a young woman's physical strength as an expression of both moral strength and potential for financial success. In contrast, the mission school's training for marriage, as remembered by both mission and non-mission women, placed fewer demands on a woman's physical strength. The mission expected their graduates to make

Figure 16

This woman's photograph was printed in *Nigeria Magazine* in 1937 as a part of Agnes Siddons Arnot's article/advertisement about her embroidery project in Arochukwu. In the article the caption identified her as "a young woman artist of Arochukwu," but Marie Achinivu (whose mother was closely involved with the embroidery project) was able to identify the woman as Nwannediya Oti. According to Achinivu, Mrs. Oti came from Eniong along Itu Creek in a small town called Ntan Obu. She married in Ibom village in Arochukwu and gave birth to twins named Mary and Martha. The young girls were raised and educated at the Slessor School, probably because at that time in Arochukwu there was still something of a stigma attached to twin births. Achinivu noted that in addition to her participation in the embroidery project, as we see here, Mrs. Oti was employed by the missionaries to care for twins and their mothers. Mrs. Oti's daughter Martha now lives and works in Aba as a nurse at a secondary school and has two children of her own. Martha's sister Mary passed away in a car accident in 1997 and is survived by two daughters. Bodleian Library, University of Oxford MSS.Afr.5.1451, Box 10, A828 (5).



Figure 15

Ùrì drawing on paper from Arochukwu, 1930/40s. Women who had worked in the embroidery collective deemed this drawing "not good for cloth." Duckworth Collection, Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford 1972.24.149 14 x 10 in.

Figure 17

Ùri patterns embroidered
on cloth by Mleanya
Iheonyebuokwu (1930s?).
Woven textile, embroidery
floss, 21 x 11 ½ in.
Private Collection
Photo: Susan Cole, Alex
Contreras, Yale University
Art Gallery





Figure 17a

Template that Mleanya
Iheonyebuokwu used for the
embroidery in figure 17, paper and
ink, 15 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ in., 1930/40
Private Collection. Photo: Susan
Cole, Alex Contreras, Yale
University Art Gallery

Figure 18

Ùri patterns embroidered
on cloth by Mleanya
Iheonyebuokwu (1930s?)
Woven textile, embroidery
floss, 20 x 14 ¼ in.
Private Collection
Photo: Susan Cole,
Alex Contreras, Yale
University Art Gallery

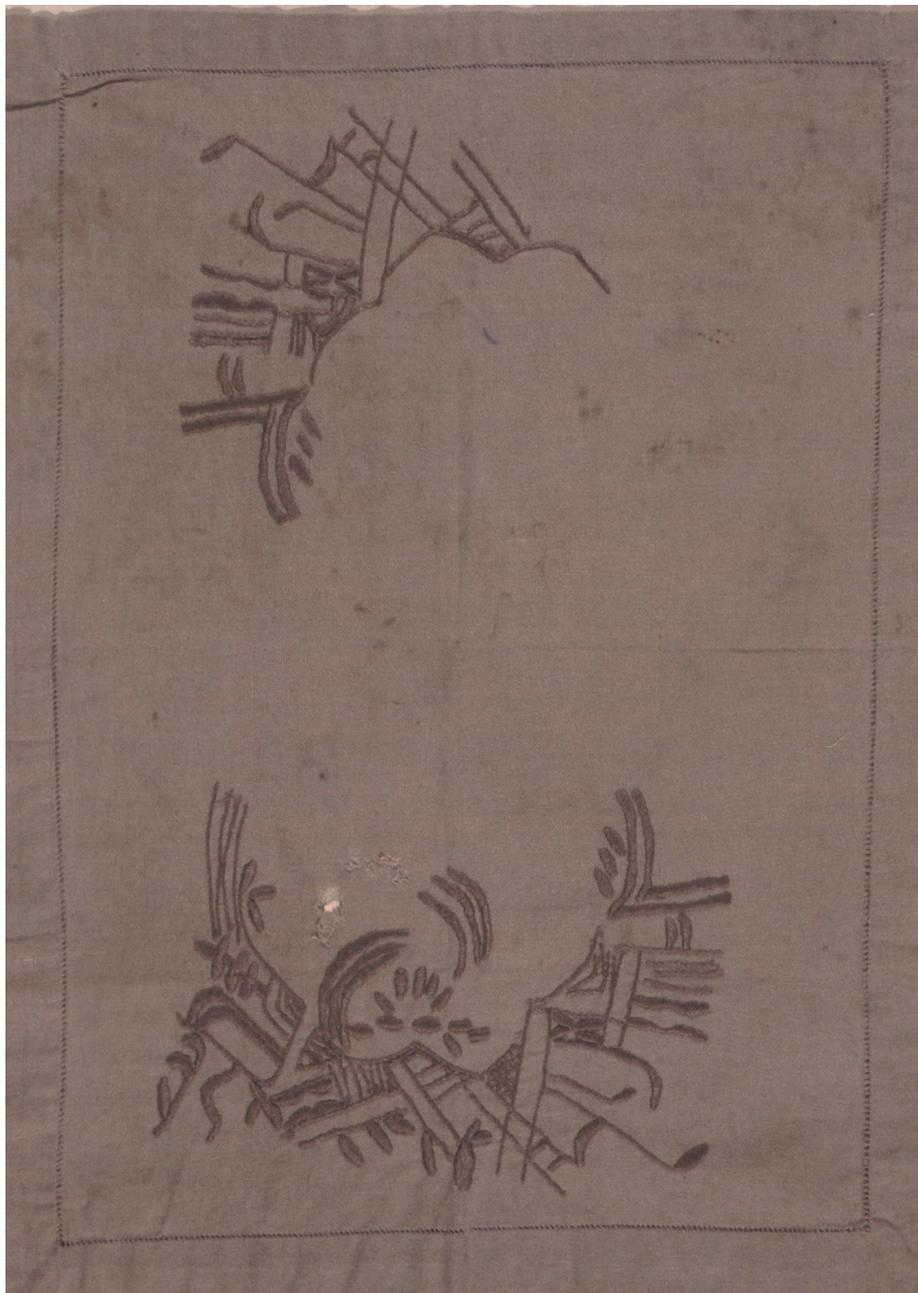


Figure 18a

Template by Mleanya
Iheonyebuokwu (1930s?)
for embroidered piece
in figure 18.
10 x 7 ¼ in.
Private Collection
Photo: Susan Cole, Alex
Contreras, Yale University
Art Gallery

their living by relying on less physically demanding skills, such as laundering, tailoring, or embroidery. In the mission marriage training system, a young, unmarried woman's moral strength, humanity, and potential for economic success seems to have been expressed on the body by covering it with clothing. Both Slessor and non-Slessor graduates I spoke with in Arochukwu pointed out that during this period preadolescent girls at the mission school wore clothes.

Embroidery was commonly taught at mission training schools in Nigeria in the 1930s and 1940s, but Agnes Arnot was unique in that in addition to teaching the women to embroider the expected “flower-and-bow” types of designs, she also sought inspiration from local ùrì patterns. This is especially interesting because while Arnot used ùrì for the embroidery project, the mission (specifically, women remembered, an evangelist who worked at Slessor named Mrs. Mackennell) did not permit women to paint ùrì on their bodies. Arnot started her embroidery project for “Christian widows in Aro who were destitute of means of sustenance,”¹⁹ but by soliciting drawings of ùrì on paper done by ùrì artists, she also provided financial assistance to non-Christian women in Arochukwu. The ùrì artists and Slessor embroiderers seem to have regarded one another across a chasm of difference made visual through dress (especially in their preadolescent years), yet they did work together on this project in an indirect way. Although women came to Slessor for training from all over Nigeria and West Africa, women in Arochukwu said Arnot limited participation in the ùrì embroidery project to local women.²⁰

These women were, embroidering ùrì patterns on locally woven cloth, Arnot explains, “making use of them (the patterns) in a way that is both acceptable and desired by the Aro women.”²¹ “The beautiful Aro designs formerly used in the decoration of girls were adapted to embroidery, with outstanding success.”²² In an article in *Nigeria Magazine*, Arnot explains that she founded the embroidery cooperative using the body painting designs “with the intention of preventing this art being lost.”²³

It seemed a pity that these old designs should be lost, as they seemed likely to be: girls now go to school and the body-painting is rarely seen. The old artists are dying out, the younger generation do not appear to have the skill, and the art seems to be disappearing. As we of the Mission in Arochuku [sic] became better acquainted with the women, we began to collect designs.²⁴

Arnot, working with the Eze at the time, asked older, mostly non-mission-affiliated ùrì artists from the community to draw ùrì on paper (hence the drawings in the Pitt Rivers collection), for which they were paid a shilling per drawing.²⁵ These drawings were translated into embroidery patterns (figs. 17a, 18a, 19, 20, and 21) either by mission women or by a third party in Scotland, as Mrs. Achinivu, daughter of Rebecca Okwarra (who worked closely with Arnot on the embroidery project), reported in a recent letter. Young women at the mission school and older women from the community, widows in particular, were then invited to embroider the traced linen (figs. 17 and 18). The finished work, she reported, “had a ready sale among Europeans all over Nigeria.”²⁶

Figure 19
Template in
Iheonyebuokwu's collection.
Paper, graphite, 14 ½ x 9 ½
in. The design for this
template appeared as a
completed embroidery in
Nigeria Magazine in 1937.
Private collection. Photo:
Susan Cole, Alex Contreras,
Yale University Art Gallery



Figure 17 shows a placemat embroidered with ùrì patterns made by Mrs. Mleanya Iheonyebuokwu. Figures 17a and 18a are templates she drew for transfer onto linen. The pattern she used in figures 17 and 17a is a modified version of the pattern on the knees of the woman in figure 8, and the neck of the carved woman in figure 9. Women in Arochukwu who were a part of the embroidery cooperative and attended the local mission school as children in

the 1930s and 1940s developed a distinct way of re-presenting the ùrì patterns. They also developed a set of aesthetic criteria used to judge ùrì on paper that is different from the set used by ùrì artists. So although we may explore, through analysis of the body painting depicted in figures 8 and 9, the idea that one set of aesthetic criteria may be shared across cultures, we must also acknowledge that due to the specific colonial history of this village and the missionaries and travelers who lived there at one time, at least one other set of aesthetic criteria exists besides this first set. I begin with the aesthetic criteria used by ùrì artists who actually used ùrì for the body.

Ùrì Aesthetics in Arochukwu

Listening to and watching ùrì artists Grace Nwosu and Victoria Nwosu discuss the photocopies of drawings of ùrì on paper, I began to notice that they constantly referred the drawings back to their own bodies. They sprang up out of their chairs, slapped a pattern on the paper—*nké à* (this one) and then patted their stomach, back, thighs, or neck—*ébé à* (here). Each work, not just figure 8, with its clear image of a woman's body, was discussed in terms of how or if it could be translated onto a woman's body. The two women, along with other women who filtered in and out of the receiving area of the Eze's palace at Ibom Isii in Arochukwu, rattled off pattern names and sometimes argued about them. Through their conversations and arguments about the work I established a rough guide to looking at ùrì in terms of some of their shared aesthetic criteria. Their criteria, as we will see, also work when applied to the body painting in figure 9. These criteria stand in contrast to those used by women who were involved with the mission school and Agnes Siddons Arnot's ùrì embroidery project there.

The Pitt Rivers Museum holds about thirty-seven drawings of ùrì on paper from Arochukwu. The drawing in figure 8 is anomalous among these because it shows the patterns placed on what looks to be a watercolor of a woman. Most of the drawings, like that in figure 11, are simply organized in response to the edges of the paper. Figure 8, like the carved and painted woman (fig. 9), is painted as a woman would be when she is on display from the fattening room. Ùrì is used here to express and underscore one set of Aro ideas about women's bodies and ideals of beauty. Some of these ideals for women's bodies in turn express a few of the community's social, moral, and economic expectations for women. Specifically, the legs and neck are emphasized because ideally they are supposed to be straight and strong so a woman can use this strength and straightness to bring wealth to the family. Black ùrì designs are concentrated on the stomach to draw attention to black pubic hair that would be on display at the public outing of young women from the

Figure 20

Fragment of an embroidery
template for a tablecloth
drawn by Iheonyebuokwu.

Paper, graphite

20 ½ x 36 in.

This piece may date from
the later Biafran revival of
the embroidery project that

Iheonyebuokwu helped

found. Private Collection

Photo: Susan Cole, Alex

Contreras, Yale University

Art Gallery



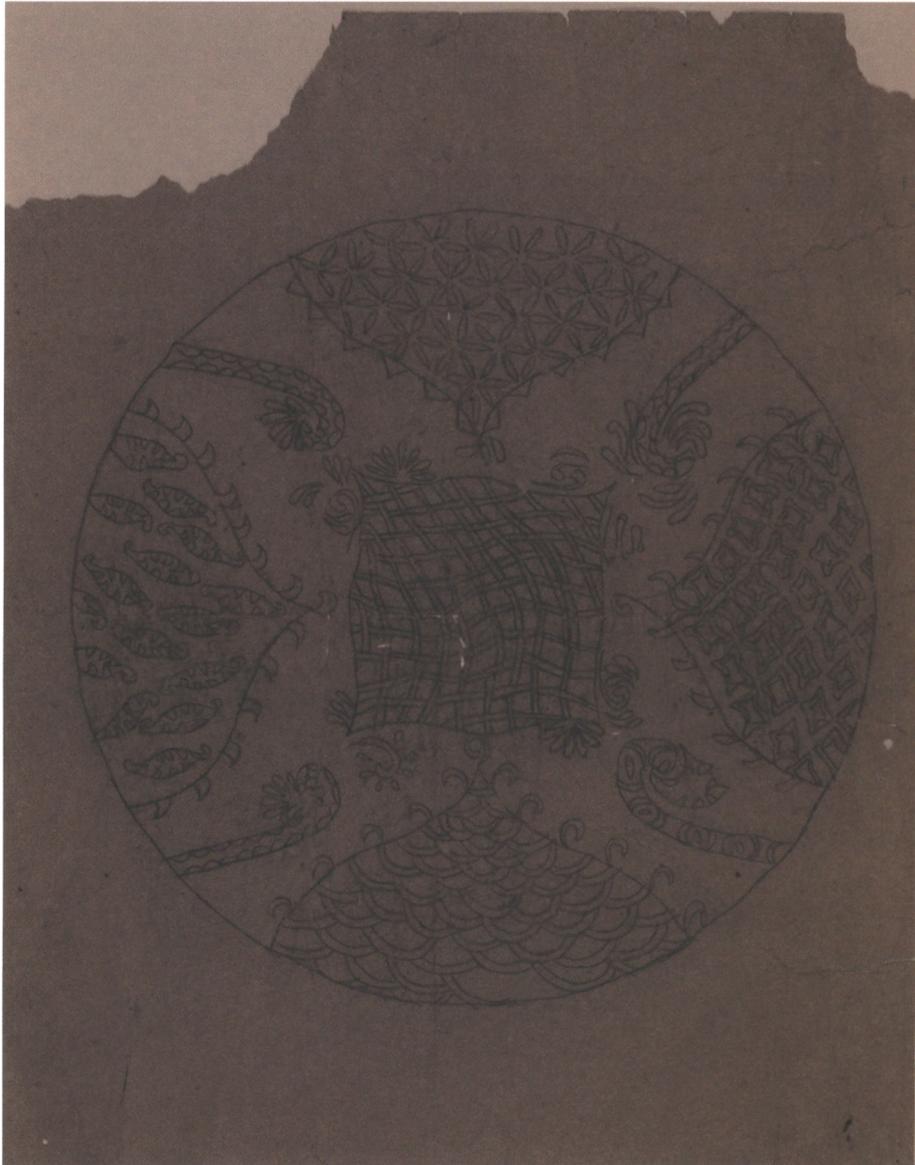


Figure 21

Embroidery template for a tablecloth drawn by Iheonybuokwu.

28 ¾ x 22 ¼ in.

Notice yet another, more curvilinear incarnation of the *ókpā ngàdá* pattern. This piece may date from the later Biafran revival of the embroidery project.

Private Collection
Photo: Susan Cole, Alex Contreras, Yale University Art Gallery

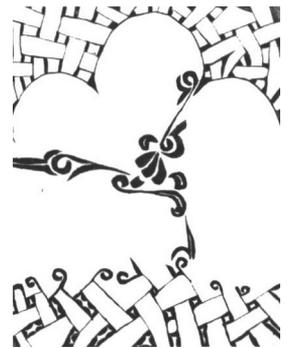


Figure 22 Ùrì drawing on paper from Arochukwu. Ùrì artists identified this as in the style of Obinkita. 1930/40s. Duckworth Collection, Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford

1972.24.169

11½ x 9 in.

fattening room. Lush black pubic hair is a sign of a woman's strength and fertility, a great prize for a young man seeking a wife.

Ùrì artists who had used ùrì on the body provided names for the patterns in the drawings I showed them. Although artists sometimes argued over some pattern names, they agreed that the pattern in figure 1 at the neck, waist, and knees is called *ókpā ngàdá*, the leg of a chair. The details of this pattern shift as it moves down the body—the tiny repeated triangular shapes on the stomach (reminiscent of patterns found on Ukara cloth) change at the knees to a square pattern that resembles the head of a kola nut—yet these changing details are all framed within a unifying “woven” *ókpā ngàdá* struc-

Figure 23

Ùrì drawing on paper from Arochukwu. 1930s/40s Iheonyebuokwu, graduate of the Slessor School, told me this pattern was used as a template for a loincloth that was sewn by mission school students and given as a gift by the mission to the late Eze Aro Kanu Oji, who was one of the Ezes in Arochukwu during Arnot's project. The Eze never converted, but sent one his wives, Mary, to the Slessor School to be a Christian (a rather sly strategic countermove on his part). Mary spent her life teaching women in Amuze, a part of Arochukwu, to read the Bible. She died as an elder of the church. Rather than name patterns or talk about this work as a whole, one woman who had worked in the embroidery collective gave me approximate prices for the various patterns in this drawing. Duckworth Collection, Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford 1972.24.148.1 14 x 10 in.



ture.²⁷ There are similarities between the *òkpāngàdá* pattern in figure 8, especially as it is interpreted on the woman's knees, and the one used on the neck of the woman in figure 9. The pattern on the carved figure looks as if it were made through irregular repetition of the square designs on the knees of the woman in figure 8.

In Arochukwu the artists said that the patterns on the neck in figure 8 emphasize that the woman's neck is straight and strong (*Íkí*) and long (*akalaka*). Many men and women in Arochukwu said that the neck is a center of beauty—a long neck is very attractive. Ùrì is used to accent the neck's length and beauty, and perhaps in some cases to create the illusion that a woman's neck is longer than it actually is. Ùrì on the neck of a woman from the fattening room also advertises to her future husband its straightness and strength, which means she can carry a heavy load on her head, and implies that she can work hard and will therefore bring wealth to the home. To support this explanation, Maazi Ogbonnaya Uku Ivegbonna, a member of the *Ékpè* society in Arochukwu, said that children in this area are sometimes named *Ólújíé*, which means "bent neck." Because there was and to some extent still is a high rate of infant mortality in this area, mothers who had lost many children would name a child *Ólújíé* to mark the newborn as undesirable to the spirits. Such a name is meant to trick the spirits into leaving the child in this world—spirits would reject an imperfect child. A child with a bent neck will grow to be a weak adult without the physical means to accumulate material success. In both the puppet and in the drawing, the neck is emphasized as

the location of beauty in a woman's body and as a sign of her potential for success in life through work. On the sculpted figure, this idea is expressed in both the rich concentration of patterns at the neck and the 1/3, 1/3, 1/3 proportions that exaggerate the length of the woman's neck.

Another proverb I heard from this group of women was “Ólú jíé ísí ádápù” (If the neck breaks, the head falls). They explained that to be a human being your head must sit squarely on your shoulders. This quality separates humans from animals, so ùrì is also used to emphasize humanity—it is employed, as Susan Vogel put it, as a “mark of civilization.”²⁸ To have a bent neck is to be in some way less than human and therefore clearly less than desirable. Victoria Nwosu also pointed out that to kill anyone you cut the neck, especially for sacrifice. Although the neck is a location of beauty, strength, and humanity, it is also vulnerable, as it connects the heart and the head. To emphasize this idea of the neck as a place of vulnerability, Grace Nwosu added, “Ónyé nārià òrià ólú ná ébì górógóró zìrì nà ùwásia ádíghī íké” (A person who is sick but whose voice vibrates shows that his/her sickness is not strong.) She explained that if a sick person's voice vibrates with strength, you don't worry; it is only when his or her voice (and she implied neck here) trembles and is weak that you are concerned for his or her health. If the neck and therefore voice are strong, the person is strong. John Umeh, a *dibịa* (Igbo doctor/diviner/psychologist) brings up a related proverb in his book *After*

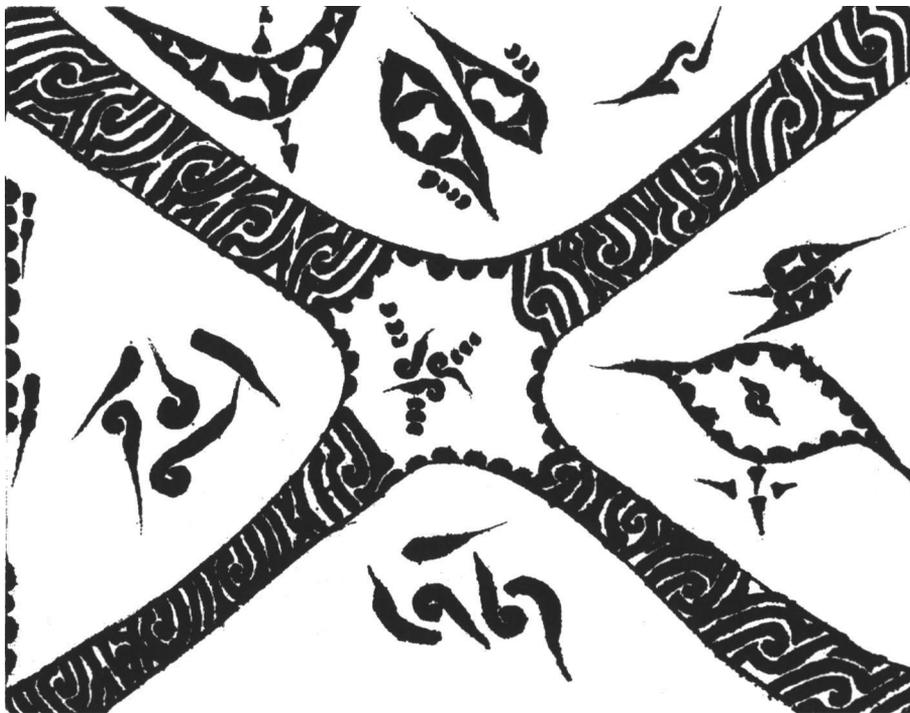


Figure 24

Iheonyebuokwu explained how this drawing could be embroidered on cloth and then made into a dress. A neck hole would have to be cut at the top between the two upper arms of the central cross motif. The two upper arms of the cross motif would then fold over the shoulders of the wearer. Duckworth Collection, Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford 1986.19.3 11 ½ x 9 in.

God Is Dibia—Ónyé gbá òkítì chí yá agbe, which he translates as “If one remains silent, unconcerned or aloof, one’s Chí [personal god or protector] would also remain silent, unconcerned and aloof.” Strength of voice, in other words, equals strength of character. So the use of ùrì to draw attention to a woman’s straight, strong neck focuses attention on her health, her essential humanity, her potential for financial success, and her ability to speak clearly and loudly to determine her destiny.

Ùrì artists in Arochukwu said that legs, emphasized through pattern concentration over the knees in figure 8 and on the upper thighs in figure 9, are important for some of the same reasons the neck is important. A woman’s legs must carry her back and forth from home to the market or farm; a woman who cannot hold a load on her head (and neck) and carry it with her legs to the market to sell it will not bring much wealth to her husband and family. Straight, strong legs emphasized by ùrì advertise both her beauty and her potential for creating wealth for herself, her husband, and her family. One woman said, “*Ókpā dī ñkó ijè kwe íhé í chòrò*,” which means if your legs move fast you’ll get what you want.

In figures 8 and 9, both women also have pattern clusters on their stomachs. Ùrì artists said that these patterns on the stomach draw the eye to a woman’s clean, lush, black pubic hair, which an *mgbédé* woman would have displayed as a sign of fertility when she came out of the fattening room. Maazi Iwegbuna commented here that in Arochukwu it is believed that a “big” (meaning wealthy) woman has “a well-developed pubic area.” “People fear a big woman for this,” he said, “and these women are called *ìkpù úkwú*,” which means great or large vulva. “*Ànághī àsò ìkpù úkwú ányá níhì ònághī árá ònwé yá*,” Iwegbuna said, “You do not fear *ìkpù úkwú* because she cannot have sex with herself.”

After speaking at length about the clustered areas of patterns on the body of the woman in figure 8, Grace Nwosu and Victoria Nwosu said that when they look at that image and the other drawings of ùrì on paper, they imagine *nkàsíanì*, a mild and colorless skin irritant used to raise welts in concentric patterns on a woman’s body, in all of the negative spaces of the drawing except on the face in figure 8 (*nkàsíanì* is not used on the face.) *Nkàsíanì*, visible on the breast and stomach of the woman in figure 12, is a subtle art that works through the manipulation of light and shadow on the body. Grace Nwosu and Victoria Nwosu’s ability to imagine *nkàsíanì* in the negative spaces of the drawings is particular to women who actually used ùrì on the body rather than those who used it for the mission embroidery project.

At the close of a woman’s pre-marriage isolation in Arochukwu, women were painted with *nkàsíanì*—only after this were they further adorned with ùrì body painting. Ùrì, I was told, actually functions merely to accentuate

nkàsìanì, a more understated form of body adornment. Nkàsìanì is so important in Arochukwu that some body-painting artists only specialize in the application of nkàsìanì and do not work with ùrì at all. I have seen Ibibio Ekon society puppets of women that have shallow, concentric incised lines over the surface to represent nkàsìanì, which is called *odun* or *odung* by the Anang Ibibio, with black line body painting depicted over the incised odun lines.²⁹ Perhaps the carver's creation shown in figure 9 left this aspect of the body art to the imagination of informed eyes like those of the ùrì artists in Arochukwu. Like the artists who painted the ùrì in figure 8, he may have painted this woman in such a way as to leave space for “nkàsìanì of the imagination” on the arms, torso, and just below the knee.

Victoria Nwosu commented, pointing to figure 23, “Nkè à bù áká ùrì ànyí. Ànyí ànāghī èdé ùrì nyágídí n'áhú kà nkàsìanì wèré pùtá n'áhú mgbédé,” which means, “This is our own ùrì style [literally, “our ùrì hand”]. We don't write too much ùrì so the nkàsìanì will show on the body of the mgbédé.” Grace Nwosu said of the densely packed drawings shown in figures 13 and 14 that “nkè à di nji úkwú” (this is too black)—the artist had not left enough negative space for nkàsìanì and as a result the work seemed too cluttered, too black, *nji úkwú*. From their comments it seems clear that good ùrì painting in Arochukwu leaves open spaces to help the nkàsìanì to *wèré pùtá* (come out).

Finally, this group of women was also able to identify styles from specific areas within Arochukwu. Figure 22 was identified as in the style of Obinkita, one of the communities within Arochukwu. For many other drawings the women would suddenly brighten and say, “nkè a bù áká ùrì ànyí,” which meant that the drawing depicted the style or, more literally, the “hand” of Ibom community. In light of this I think it is important to say that although there are currents running through the body painting in figures 8 and 9, there are subtle variations in the *áká*, the hand or style, not only from village to village, but even within the same village, and more specifically from ùrì artist to ùrì artist. Ùrì *di n'áká n'áká*, these women often say, which means literally that “ùrì is from hand to hand.” Figuratively, it means that every woman has her own style.

The responses of the ùrì artists in Arochukwu to the drawings from the Pitt Rivers Museum, especially figure 8, establish some elements of a set of aesthetic criteria used to organize body painting in the 1930s and 1940s. These criteria also give us a sense of one set of expectations placed on married women in Arochukwu during that period; ùrì was used to emphasize a woman's beauty by highlighting physical strength and straightness in her legs and neck. These qualities were read by future husbands not only as beauty but also as potential for economic success. Straightness in the neck, accentuated by ùrì, also underscored a location of humanity, because a straight neck is a quality that is

unique to the human body. Ùrì was used on the belly to draw attention to pubic hair, which was read as a sign of fertility and strength. Finally, ùrì was also applied in the pattern clusters we see in figure 8 to leave space for the subtle texturing of nkàsjanì.

The use of ùrì in Arochukwu was best summarized by Mr. Torty Nwa Torty, an elder member of the Ékpè society who told me that ùrì should “jáá yá mmá.” Literally, this means to “praise her well.” Echeruo’s dictionary further defines “jáá yá mmá” as “commend, extol, or praise, usually in the presence of the person praised.”³⁰ So ùrì was also used by the ùrì artist on the body of the young m̀gbédé to create wearable praise of her body. During the period Grace Nwosu and Victoria Nwosu discussed and remembered, unmarried women in Arochukwu danced in the market after seclusion with lyrical songs of praises for their bodies emblazoned on their skin.

Some of the same aesthetic criteria used to judge ùrì among ùrì artists in Arochukwu, along with their implicit notions about the body, also seem to organize the body painting on the sculpture in figure 9. Although the painted and carved figure may represent an Ibibio woman from the fattening room, I think it is also possible that this could be an Ibibio carver’s representation of an Igbo woman from the fattening room. Messenger writes about Ibibio representations of Igbo women in his essay on Ekon dramas,

Most of the songs concerning the Ibo, however, derided the sexual promiscuity of unmarried girls. Anang elders boast that their own daughters usually are virgins when they wed, because pre-marital coitus on the part of the female invited supernatural punishment from both deity and ancestors. . . . Numerous folk-tales, proverbs, and riddles of the Anang depict the Ibo as licentious, and warn young men not to marry Ibo women or Anang women living near the border who emulate Ibo ways. In one of the Nung Ita plays described by Jeffreys, “the loose morals” of the wives of Ibo living in Bonny were satirized; there adultery was so commonplace that no one claimed damages in court when it was discovered.³¹

The possibility that the carved figure may be an Ibibio representation of an Igbo woman adds yet another level to a discussion of interculturalism in body arts in the Cross River area. Whether the figure represents an Ibibio or Igbo woman, it speaks to the carver’s seeming mastery and use of organizing aesthetic principles in his application of body painting on the carving that are similar to those described by Igbo women in Arochukwu. Interculturalism as it relates to body arts in the Cross River area was confirmed by several ùrì artists in Arochukwu who said they admired and copied designs they saw on Ibibio women when they went to market.³² Regardless of the specific cultural

attribution of the carved figure, when considered in relation to the drawings from the Pitt Rivers Museum, these works speak to an interesting intercultural give-and-take in body arts of the Cross River region of southeastern Nigeria.

Aesthetics and Change: The Political Body

When Mrs. Mleanya Iheonyebuokwu (b. around 1919) and Mrs. Helena Mgboro Okoro (more than eighty years old), two women from Arochukwu who were involved with the mission embroidery project, discussed the drawing of the adorned woman (fig. 8), I was immediately struck by how different their comments about and responses to the work were from those of Grace Nwosu and Victoria Nwosu, the *ùrì* artists. Both Ihenonyebuokwu and Okoro were only able to identify the adornments shown in figure 8 in general terms, as designs used for women who have just come out of the fattening room, but could offer few specific names. Unlike the *ùrì* body painting artists, Iheonyebuokwu and Okoro could not explain why the patterns were organized on the body the way they are. The most striking difference between the responses of *ùrì* artists and the women who used *ùrì* for embroidery, however, is that unlike *ùrì* artists, Iheonyebuokwu and Okoro almost never referred the drawings back to their own bodies. Their perceptions had been shaped through their involvement with the mission embroidery project, and they now think of *ùrì* designs as embroidery patterns. In their minds, they translate the drawings on paper onto cloth, not the body. They saw the drawings as potential embroidery templates, which is probably what they actually are.

Figure 17 is an unfinished placemat embroidered by Iheonyebuokwu and 17a is the template she drew and used to make the placemat. Iheonyebuokwu took part in the mission embroidery project in the 1930s and 1940s and was also instrumental in reviving this project in the 1960s to raise money for the Biafran War, Nigeria's civil war (1967–1970). The dominant pattern she used in this piece is *òkpā ngàdà*, the same pattern used on the neck, legs, and stomach of the woman in figure 8, and on the neck of figure 9. The version of *òkpā ngàdà* Iheonyebuokwu used is closest, however, to that shown on the knees of the woman in figure 8. There the negative space created by the basket woven structure over her knees is anchored with a pattern that in other Igbo-speaking areas of southeastern Nigeria is identified as *ísí ójì*, the head of the kola nut. A more linear version of this pattern is repeated in an irregular *òkpā ngàdà*-esque maze on the neck of figure 9. This pattern depicts the negative space created by the meeting of four lobes of a kola nut when seen from above. It is an excellent example of *ùrì* artists' precise ability to suggest the world around them in their work by depicting only the essen-

tial lines that make up any given object.

But several critical changes occur in this pattern's transition from the body to the work on paper, to the template, and finally to the embroidered placemat. On the knees of the woman in the drawing in figure 8 the kola-nut design sits gemlike in the setting of the energetic and irregular lines of the *ókpā ngàdá* design. On the stomach and neck, too, the width of the lines of the *ókpā ngàdá* pattern vary as they move across the surface of the body, and there is what Robert Farris Thompson calls a “vivid suspension of the expected placement”³³ of the lines of the basket-woven structure. Rather than follow straight courses, the linear progressions of warp and weft are ruptured, a quality Thompson calls “off-beat phrasing.”³⁴ This quality is also found in the variation of this pattern on the neck in figure 9. Lines charge in one direction and suddenly break off—at one point on the neck, the squares even give way to a single unexpected pentagon, and the rest of the patterns respond in form and shape to maintain a dialogue with this “break.”³⁵

Iheonyebuokwu drew lines of *ókpā ngàdá* in her template (fig. 17a), and in this medium the affinities the pattern has with the one on the neck of the puppet are more apparent. After translation to embroidery in figure 17, however, the kola-nut design floats within what is now merely a suggested *ókpā ngàdá* pattern. Even more interesting, the lines of the now-imagined *ókpā ngàdá*, so energetic and vibrant with off-beat phrasing in figures 8 and 9, become gridlike and regularized in the embroidered piece. This increased emphasis on regularity is especially evident in the template Iheonyebuokwu drew for this design (fig. 17a). Some of the energy lost in the regularization of *ókpā ngàdá* in the embroidered piece is maintained elsewhere, however, through a degree of irregularity in the size and shape of each individual square kola-nut design element. There are also subtle variations in “hook” patterns that curl in different directions on both sides of the curved shape that encloses the kola-nut designs.

A second template/embroidery pair designed and sewn by Iheonyebuokwu (figs. 18 and 18a) gives us another example of subtle shifts that occur in the translation of *ùrì* from body, to paper, and finally to cloth. The template in figure 19 was shown as a completed, “anonymous” embroidery in *Nigeria Magazine* in 1937, so it is exciting that we can now connect this embroidery to Iheonyebuokwu.³⁶ There may have been an original *ùrì* design created by another woman, an *ùrì* artist (such as the ones we see in figs. 11, 13, 14, 15, 22, 23, and 24), upon which Iheonyebuokwu based this template's design. Because there are conflicting stories about how the embroidery templates were made, we cannot be sure who is responsible for design shifts that occur from paper to embroidery. Iheonyebuokwu said that she drew the patterns in figures 17a, 18a, 19, 20, and 21, but Marie Achinivu,

whose mother, Rebecca Okwara, was very closely involved with the embroidery project, wrote:

She [Rebecca Okwara] worked with the early Missionaries and got the women to design the “Ùrì” . . . on a paper for Mrs. Arnot to send to Scotland for transfer to a lighter paper which was then transferred to linen materials by ironing. When the design is ironed out once then subsequent transfers were made with carbon and knitting pins or pencils, (any pointed object).³⁷

Mrs. Okwara collected drawings on paper from ùrì artists (figs. 11, 13, 14, 15, 22, 23, and 24 were probably made for this purpose); after this either a third party in Scotland, as Achinivu reports, or students at the mission school, as Iheonyebuokwu reports, transformed the drawings into embroidery templates. I suspect both stories are true—Arnot probably sent some drawings to Scotland to have them made into iron-on templates, and students at the school probably made templates as well using pencils and tracing paper. Regardless, from the few existing examples of templates and embroidery we have (figs. 17, 17a, 18, 18a, and 19) we can see that it was in the transfer from paper to template that subtle shifts occurred. These changes may have been made in response to demands of different media (black ink on paper versus embroidery), or perhaps they were made at Arnot’s request in anticipation of the tastes of a new audience of consumers of ùrì art—Arnot states in an article in *Nigerian Field* that the embroidery was sold to Europeans in Nigeria.³⁸

Two larger embroidery templates drawn by Iheonyebuokwu also include the òkpā ngàdá pattern (figs. 20 and 21). These two works were ragged, worn, and badly in need of conservation.³⁹ Iheonyebuokwu remembered that when the Nigerian troops took Arochukwu, they came into people’s houses to destroy private property—among the possessions in her case were her embroideries and templates. “In Biafra,” she said softly, “we lost so many things”—a sentiment echoed in the letter sent by Marie Achinivu. The last typed sentence in her letter read, “I have searched in our house whether I could see any old photograph of the Missionaries, but I didn’t see any.” The last sentence she has written by hand, as if it were a meditation upon rereading the finished letter: “We lost many things during the war.”

I suspect that figure 21, a template for a tablecloth drawn on brown paper, was made in the late 1960s for the Biafran revival version of the embroidery collective. I am not sure where figure 20, also a template for a tablecloth, falls within the timeline of Iheonyebuokwu’s work. In the large work on brown paper (fig. 21), the woven òkpā ngàdá structure at the center of the circular composition undulates as if floating on water. The lines have been released from the rigid grid seen in the template in figure 17a, but they con-

tinue to reject the direction, breaks, and linear energy of the patterns we see on the neck, stomach, and knees of the woman in figure 8 and the drawing in figure 13. In the embroidered placemat and template in figures 17 and 17a, Iheonyebuokwu drew the lines of *ókpā ngàdá* framing the kola-nut pattern but then embroidered only the kola-nut pattern. On the tablecloth (fig. 21) she has separated these elements from the outset and organized them within a curvilinear grid. The second tablecloth template fragment by Iheonyebuokwu (fig. 21) also includes the repeated square pattern within this more fluid, curved grid. Some of the energetic off-beat phrasing seems to return to the *ókpā ngàdá* lines drawn on the left edge of this piece. If these two templates are from the Biafran project, and the embroideries and templates in figures 17, 17a, 18, 18a, and 19) are from the mission project, then perhaps the tablecloth templates represent a third, Biafran aesthetic for Iheonyebuokwu's work. Although the two pieces do not echo the body painting on the women in figures 8 or 9, they also lack the regularized lines of 17 and 17a. If, during the mission's embroidery project, the *ùrì* artists' drawings were sent to Scotland to be transferred to iron-on templates as Achinivu reported, then the shifts that occur in the lines may have been due to this overseas transfer process—perhaps those doing the transfer in Scotland “corrected” the *ùrì* artists' lines. During Biafra, on the other hand, drawings, transfers and embroideries were all done in Arochukwu.

In addition to visual differences between the drawings on paper by *ùrì* artists and the embroidered pieces, the comments of the women who attended the Slessor School and used *ùrì* on cloth stand in stark contrast to those who used *ùrì* on the body. The only time Iheonyebuokwu discussed the body was when she explained how figure 24 could be made into a dress. She indicated where the neck hole could be cut and where the woman's arms would come out of the sides. The women who attended Slessor thought of the drawings in terms of how they could be translated to cloth, not in terms of body painting. Mrs. Okoro gave the estimated price for each design in figure 11 if it were translated into embroidery, and both women explained how expensive one drawing on paper would be in relation to another if embroidered on cloth. “Good” drawings were those that would not take much time to embroider and would translate well onto cloth. Figure 15, for example, was simply deemed in English “not good for cloth.” While Grace and Victoria Nwosu (the *ùrì* artists) evaluated drawings with very little negative space, such as figures 13 and 14, as *nji ukwu*, too black and lacking space for *nkàsíanì*, to show through, Iheonyebuokwu and Okoro judged these same patterns to be “expensive.” They would require plenty of time and embroidery floss to complete.

Even more interesting than their aesthetic comments on these draw

ings, however, were the memories sparked by the drawings that led us to intense, at times troubling, discussions of the mission school. Figure 23, Mrs. Iheonyebuokwu remembered, was a template for a loincloth that was sewn and given as a gift to the late Eze Aro Kanu Oji, one of the Eze in Arochukwu during Arnot's project. Mrs. Mackennell, the evangelist who taught Bible lessons to the women at Slessor, apparently wanted the Eze to convert to Christianity and tried to woo him with an elegant wrapper embroidered with this design. Obviously, conversion of an Eze was seen by Mackennell as an important strategic priority. He never converted, but apparently he did send one his wives, Mary, to the Slessor School to be a Christian (a rather sly strategic countermove on his part). Mrs. Iheonyebuokwu recalled that Mary spent her life teaching women in Amuze, a part of Arochukwu, to read the Bible. She died as an elder of the church. Iheonyebuokwu's story is remarkable in how far it takes us from the memories recalled by ùrì artists of elegantly adorned women emerging from the fattening room.

Slessor women also recalled while looking through the drawings that although they were allowed to use ùrì for the embroidery project, Mrs. Mackennell forbade them from painting ùrì on their bodies. Iheonyebuokwu told me that if they appeared at school or church with ùrì body painting they "would be beaten,"⁴⁰ by Mrs. Mackennell (also known by the mission girls as "Daddy"). Although Iheonyebuokwu said she admired the body painting displayed at the annual Ikeji festival (the annual "New Yam Festival" in Arochukwu) by women who had been prepared for marriage in the fattening room, she refrained from painting it on her own body. Mrs. Iheonyebuokwu's father was an evangelist and therefore her school fees were paid by the mission, so she felt even more bound to follow its rules. As she put it, she didn't paint herself with the ùrì she admired because "the chains were so strong."⁴¹

Not all of the women I interviewed spoke with admiration about their memories of seeing ùrì body painting at the Ikeji festivals. In Okoro's eyes ùrì was beautiful on paper or embroidered on cloth, and she cooed over the drawings, but when we discussed ùrì on the body there was an abrupt change in her responses. Mrs. Okoro told me that women who went around painted with ùrì look "like beasts" (Ha di ka anu ovia)⁴² They were naked, she said of the young women on display at the Ikeji festival; their behavior "was not commendable." Mission girls (preadolescent and adolescent) were expected to wear clothes, often hand-me-downs imported from mission donations in the United Kingdom for this purpose, which was of course another reason they didn't paint ùrì on their bodies. Although clothing was common among adults in Arochukwu at this time, until the mission opened most children still didn't wear clothing until they reached puberty.⁴³ Okoro also commented that Mackennell would send them away if they came to school or church

painted because they “looked like juju,” meaning that it recalled traditional Igbo religion in her mind. “O di queer,” Okoro said about body ùrì. Ùrì was intimately bound up in “traditional religion” in the minds of missionaries, a theme I saw repeated in other Igbo regions in Nigeria. To come to the church one had to reject such body adornments.

One of the most telling things Okoro had to say about ùrì body painting was that “it makes you feel shy to write it (ùrì) on your body after being with them [missionaries].”⁴⁴ This is not surprising if we imagine their Bible lessons with Mackennell, where they were surely taught the story of Adam and Eve after the fall. As the story goes, when God enters the Garden of Eden after Adam and Eve have eaten the forbidden fruit, they “hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.” God calls to them, and Adam replies, “I heard the sound of thee in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself” (Genesis 3.8–10). After God judges and punishes them for their transgression he “made for Adam and his wife garments of skins, and clothed them” (Genesis 3.21). So the nature of humanity as described in the Bible and presumably taught by the expatriate missionaries, is fallen; the sign of that fall is clothing. In fact, humanity’s fallen-ness, and subsequent awareness of being naked and needing to cover that naked-ness, makes them more God-like according to the Bible. God tells Adam and Eve as they are being expelled from the Garden, “Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil,” therefore he is expelled from the garden, “lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever.” It is interesting to place this Christian notion of clothing as a marker of humanity next to the use of ùrì on a woman’s neck in figures 8 and 9 to stress its straightness as a sign of humanity. Ùrì artists used ùrì body painting on young unmarried women to “jáá yá mmá,” praise her body and spirit well, while Christian women at Slessor praised their bodies and spirits by covering them with clothing.

Conclusions

In Arochukwu and perhaps other parts of the Cross River area, as we saw through the comparison of figures 8 and 9, ùrì was used on a woman’s body to highlight and praise its purity, beauty, humanity, fertility, and strength. It advertised a woman’s potential to be a successful, productive wife. Physical strength and straightness in legs and neck, emphasized with ùrì, were very important for the non-mission women in Arochukwu, who were said to be more involved in heavy farm work and physical labor than their mission sisters. When ùrì was erased from the body, as it was from the bodies of young women who attended the Slessor School, these qualities were no longer un-

derscored visually. At the same time, clothing became an expression of purity, humanity, and spiritual strength as defined within Christianity. In the early half of the twentieth century then, adornment of the body in Arochukwu became an expression of the body politic. As Hildi Henrickson put it, “clothing and other treatments of the body surface are primary symbols in the performances through which modernity—and therefore history—have been conceived, constructed, and challenged in Africa. . . . Both the ‘modern’ and the ‘traditional’ are powerfully and principally constituted in body treatments.”⁴⁵ Swathing the body either in clothing during preadolescence or in *ùrì* at one’s outing from the fattening room, then, suggested one’s processes of negotiation through the religious, political, social, and on some level economic terrain. I don’t believe the line between those who wore *ùrì* and those who wore dresses was as cut and dried as I present it here, but I do think it is rather significant that those women I spoke with in Arochukwu who were involved in these negotiations through dress remember such a sharp division when they look back at that period now.

Ùrì artists said that *ùrì* was used to highlight the strength of a woman’s body in the 1930s and 1940s because it was assumed that women would make their living through physically challenging jobs like farming and marketing. When the mission school began to train women for less physically challenging jobs, it became less of an imperative for a woman to exhibit bodily strength to be considered “marriageable.” So mission women’s abandonment of *ùrì* on the body is not only about a different sense of body morality, it is also about a different definition of what it takes to be a “successful” wife. Potential for success is relocated in a type of vocational training (perhaps expressed in adoption of dress during preadolescence) rather than in bodily strength (highlighted with *ùrì*).

Women who had been trained for marriage in the fattening room and those who were trained at Slessor both saw Slessor women as physically weak. Mrs. Iheonyebuokwu said that the mission girls were “not all that free. We didn’t mix with them [non-mission girls].” Young non-Slessor girls in the community apparently viewed their mission school sisters with equal reserve. “The [non-mission] girls felt the mission girls were not strong enough to mix with them,” Mrs. Iheonyebuokwu said. They thought the mission girls were weak, and Iheonyebuokwu seemed to concur. “Sometimes, we would carry firewood with them but our load would not be as much as theirs.”

In *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (1992), Marjorie Garber draws upon the notion of the “third” dimension in Lacanian psychoanalysis (among other things) to propose transvestites as figures whose existence provides a necessary critique of binary thinking.⁴⁶ Transvestites are a “disruptive third” that acts to reconfigure the relationship between the origi-

nal pair. This notion is productive when applied to Arnot's embroidery project. Arnot's project and its products are a "disruptive third" in the remembered and somewhat overdetermined binary between varying preparations for marriage in the early twentieth century in Arochuwku (i.e., body painting/fat-tening room versus Western dress/embroidery). Even though the women who were encompassed by this binary seem to have seen one another across a chasm of difference, through the embroidery project they worked together to create an interesting "disruptive third"—embroidery with body patterns—within what they now remember as a binary cultural landscape. The embroiderers didn't know the patterns and needed to acquire and adapt them from the ùrì artists' drawings. The ùrì artists, in turn, were paid to make the drawings that kept the embroiderers in work. The very existence of the work embroidered with ùrì destabilizes the binary and allows us to critique the notion of the original binary as "opposed."

In spite of the troubling and at times sometimes tense picture of the mission's use of ùrì for embroidery coupled with its insistence on its erasure from women's bodies, Agnes Siddons Arnot is still remembered by these women with overwhelmingly positive emotion. Mrs. Achinivu wrote,

When Mrs. Arnot left, she handed the Industry over to Miss Green. . . . Miss Green did not stay for a long time in Slessor and she left and the Industry died out because no one could take the trouble that Late Mrs. Arnot was really taking. She was a real mother—caring for both old and young. No wonder she was named "Ezinne" Good mother!⁴⁷

Iheonyebuokwu, who made a living as a seamstress using the skills she learned at Slessor, helped revive Arnot's embroidery project to raise money for Biafra during Nigeria's civil war. Female refugees from all over southeastern Nigeria who were waiting out the war in Arochukwu were enlisted in the revived embroidery project. By reviving the project to raise money for Biafran independence, the women made the project wholly theirs, transforming it into a tool of liberation.

In addition to shifting notions about women's bodies played out through the history of ùrì in Arochukwu, we have also traced shifting ùrì aesthetics in this area—these shifts are intimately intertwined. Similarities in the body art depicted in figures 8 and 9 suggest a history of intercultural exchange in the Cross River area. These affinities are not limited simply to sharing patterns, but they appear to extend into aesthetic connections between various groups in the Cross River area through what seems to be shared placement of those patterns on the body. This shared placement in turn suggests a historical moment of shared notions about women's bodies in this area in the 1930s and

1940s. The affinities I note are further confirmed by the fact that they run between cultures that shared a history of training women for marriage through seclusion in the fattening room. The spread of this practice in the Cross River region implies the spread of certain notions about women's bodies that are then expressed in body art. Although we have this example of shared aesthetics and notions of the body across imagined "cultural boundaries," it is read against the presence of at least two contemporaneous sets of aesthetic criteria used to judge *ùrì* in Arochukwu. These two sets of aesthetic criteria used to judge *ùrì* in Arochukwu in turn point to historical changes in concepts of women's bodies. These disparate criteria, born from the use of *ùrì* in a variety of media in this area and coupled with the confluences traced between figures 8 and 9, force us to consider aesthetic as it relates to *ùrì* not as timeless or culturally bounded, but as constantly shifting and subject to specific local histories.

NOTES

This research would not have been possible without generous financial support from a variety of institutions. I would like to thank my parents for funding my first trip to Nigeria in 1992 with the School for International Training's undergraduate semester abroad program. I was awarded a Fulbright grant for one year of research in 1994/95. Yale University's history of art department awarded me two Mellon research grants to do research in Nigeria in 1996 and 2000, and another Mellon grant to do archival research on this project in the United Kingdom in 1999. Wellesley College graciously provided a Horton Hallowell grant to support my most recent research in Nigeria (2000).

I would also like to thank the women in Arochukwu who worked with me on this project, especially Grace Nwosu, Victoria Nwosu, Mleanya Iheonyebuokwu, and Helena Mgboro Okoro. Marie Achinivu's letter was also a great help. Professor Robert Farris Thompson has provided years of guidance and inspiration on all aspects of this project while I have been here at Yale. Professor Obiora Udechukwu and his family continue to be incredibly supportive. Special thanks to Francis and Oby Obi, Dr. Okoroji Ijoma at the University of Nigeria Nsukka campus, Dr. Ijoma's friend Maazi Ogbonnaya Uku Ivegbunna, who worked tirelessly with me during my trips to Arochukwu. I am grateful to the Eze at Ibom Isii who referred me to *ùrì* artists and let me conduct interviews in his sitting room. Many thanks to the following people who provided comments and insights, read drafts, and were excellent listeners as I put this work together: Professor Chukwma Azvomye, Professor Herbert M. Cole, Professor Simon Ottenberg, Professor Eli Bentor, David Doris, Cheryl Finley, Chika Okeke, Sejal Shah, and our fabulous editor Joyce Ippolito. Joanna Weber has been a goddess throughout the process for reasons too numerous to mention here, and I have taken inspiration from the conversations and laughter at the curatorial meetings with Joanna, Lynise Williams, and Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz.

Finally, I would like to thank my family, Sherman Powell, and his family for their never-ending support of both me and my work. I could not do any of this without you.

1. I use "*ùrì*" (pronounced oo-ree) to refer to body painting from here on because I discuss drawings I know were made in Arochukwu, where body painting is called *ùrì*. In other Igbo regions it is called "*uli*."

2. Elizabeth Anne Willis, "Uli Painting and Identity: Twentieth-Century Developments in Art in the Igbo-Speaking Region of Nigeria," Ph.D. diss., School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1997: 185–216. The Hatcher Art Analysis Willis used is drawn from Evelyn Payne Hatcher's *Visual Metaphors: A Formal Analysis of Navajo Art* (St. Paul: West, [1967], 1974). The system, Willis explains, "is based on defined terms commonly referred to in the literature of art. Each defined term or descriptive category is accompanied by a scale for assessment" (185). Some of the terms and descriptive categories include: Layout, Ratio (how "full" or "empty" the design field is), Spacing, Measure, Treatment of Lines, Composition, Shape of Lines. Willis regards this imbalanced focus on meaning and content over form in ùrì literature. Willis herself points out: "A criticism of this approach might be that I am describing the works according to criteria which were not, as far as we know, part of the conscious discourse of the artists" (185). She says she feels the approach is nonetheless valid because previous scholars of ùrì art have focused on qualities similar to those described in the Hatcher Art Analysis. I think the use of such formal analysis is best coupled with inclusion, where possible, of the terms and descriptive categories ùrì artists themselves use. ùrì artists in Arochukwu discussed some of the formal qualities included in the Hatcher system, but I think the use of their terms for these qualities sheds more light on their way of looking at the drawings. For example, rather than talking about what Hatcher calls "Ratio"—how "full" or "empty" the composition is—ùrì artists in Arochukwu talk about drawings that are *nji ukwu* (too black). The latter is more precise, in my opinion, than the former.
3. As Mary Louise Pratt has noted, "transculturation" is a term often used by ethnographers to describe how colonized groups select and transform cultural materials transmitted to them by the colonizer (Pratt 1992: 6). In her book *Imperial Eyes* (1997), Pratt redefines the term to include the way the colonized in turn define and determine the colonizer. Although I agree with her redefinition, I disagree with her labeling this process "transculturation." The prefix "trans," according to Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, means, "1: on or to the other side of: across: beyond <transatlantic>." It implies a flow in one direction. The prefix "inter" means, "1: between: among: in the midst. 2: reciprocal. 3: located between. 4: carried on between. 5: occurring between: intervening. 6: shared by or derived from two or more."⁴⁷ I feel that the term *interculturalization*, as opposed to *transculturalization*, better expresses the idea of a circular flow of culture. Therefore I use the word *interculturalization* to refer to the process Mary Louise Pratt has defined as reciprocal processes of determination and definition between colonizer and colonized (Pratt 1992: 6). I also apply this term to discussion of the circular flow of culture between various groups in the Cross River region of southeastern Nigeria.

When I speak of travel and interculturalization, it is not only between Europeans and "discrete cultural groups." There is of course a long history of travel, trade, and contact between various West African cultural groups. For this reason it is hard to attribute the figure to a specific cultural group; the piece represents and speaks to contact between many Cross River groups. Ikem Okoye, in his 1995 Ph.D. thesis, says, "a different approach to ethnic boundaries than is usually the practice pervades the writing [of the thesis]. Thus Fantes and Asantes (Ghanaians) appear together in the same space as do Saros (Sierra Leonis), Yoruba, Izhons, Igbos and Hausas. This is a more accurate representation of West African life generally, and of late 19th and early 20th century Nigerian life particularly . . . than seems generally admissible in anthropological and historical discourse" (60). Okoye also states, "It is not uncommon to find scholarship on particular places framed in terms . . . which essentialize cultural space, and imply a purity which may be misleading" (60).
4. Such a conclusion seems all but built into the history of Arochukwu, where inter-

- culturation is the very foundation of the town. Arochukwu was founded as a result of a war called “Agha Ibibio,” the Ibibio War. Sociologist Felcia Ekejiuna tells us, “The period from about 1500 and 1650 especially witnessed processes of forming and reforming of new groups as a result of movement of Igbo, Ibibio, and Ekoi into the Cross River basin. . . . These various movements for the first time brought parties of Igbo and Ibibio into close and dramatic interactions such as marriage, conflict over control of natural and human resources, as well as political overlordship of the area.” Felicia Ekejiuba, “High Points of Igbo Civilization: The Arochukwu Period,” in *Groundwork of Igbo History*, ed. A. E. Afigbo (Lagos: Vista Books, 1992), 316–317.
5. Empson, *Report on the Papers of E. Harland Duckworth (d. 1972) Inspector of Education in Nigeria*, 1–3.
 6. Arnot, “Art and Industry in Arochukwu,”: 10–14. My conclusion that figure 1 was probably collected by Duckworth specifically for a museum in the United Kingdom is based on evidence in his diaries at the Rhodes House library, and from the extensive collections he donated to the Pitt Rivers Museum and the Rhodes House library. Duckworth’s meticulously detailed diaries at the Rhodes House library give us glimpses of his fascination with ùrì body painting. One photo album (Duckworth, box 12, album 2, p. 57) depicts drawings of ùrì on paper he collected in Umuahia, and of course we also have the collection of ùrì drawings he donated to the Pitt Rivers Museum. It seems clear that he collected with an eye to preservation in a British museum. His work is part of a larger collecting frenzy in Nigeria at that time—when Duckworth goes to visit anthropologist and collector M. D. W. Jeffries, then headquartered in Awka, Duckworth writes that he finds Jeffries “surrounded by a crowd of men, women and children and a mass of curious old things spread out on the ground. He [Jeffries] had let it be known that he wished to purchase almost any old stuff the people cared to bring him and there he was busy handing out 1d here, 2d there, possibly a 1s, but usually pennies and in return collecting an amazing variety of old things. . . . *In time these things will find their way to London and so be preserved. A few years more and many of these treasures will have perished in the advance of corrugated iron and sardine tins*” [author’s emphasis].
 7. Ikot Ekpene, has a long history as a commercial trade center for African art within local cultural groups and the tourist market. In an early reference to the idea of interculturalism, Frank Willet in his 1971 *African Art: An Introduction* (Washington: Praeger, 1971:194), discusses the idea that “stylistic elements can be borrowed” between cultural groups, and he uses Ikot Ekpene as an example. He comments that in 1959 boys’ masks used around the Benin area “had all been carved by Ibibio carvers in Ikot Ekpene, well over a hundred and fifty miles away across the other side of the River Niger” (194). In this same area northeast of Benin he says he “bought a typical Ikot Ekpene doll from an old lady who declared that she had had it since she was a child, which suggests that the trade in Ibibio sculptures is not a very recent phenomenon” (197).
 8. John C. Messenger, “Anang Art, Drama and Social Control,” *African Studies Bulletin* 5.2 (1962): 29.
 9. Eded A. Udo, “Ibibio Social Organization: Marriage, Family and Kin,” in *The Ibibio: An Introduction to the Land, the People and Their Culture*, ed. Monday Abasiattai (Calabar: Alphonsus Akpan, 1991), 169. In Elizabeth Willis’s 1997 Ph.D. thesis on uli painting, she uses images of mgbédé women from 1956, 1975, and 1989 to suggest modifications over time of the dress used for mgbédé women. “The photo of 1956 was of a very well fattened young woman dressed ready to go to her husband, wearing a very narrow cloth around her hips, and a head tie. . . . Though the photo was fading, Uli patterns could be seen faintly. In the photograph from 1975 the *mgbede* was wearing . . . nkàsjanì. . . . On top of the nkàsjanì designs were Aro Uli

designs for the neck, which were common in the 1930s, and more patterns across the breasts. . . . The photograph taken in 1989 was of two slender girls ready to enter a cultural competition. The neck of one of the two was painted with the popular Aro Uli pattern of the 1930s, with variations on the popular 1930s designs for the navel, thigh and calves” (148–149).

10. C. S. Okeke, “Igbo Textiles, Costumes and Apparel,” in *Groundwork of Igbo History*, ed. A. E. Afigbo (Lagos: Vista Books, 1992), 789–790.
11. Women are usually body painters, and the skill is generally passed down from woman to woman through the apprenticeship system, so this gender shift is interesting. The male carver’s depiction of women’s body painting on this piece implies that although men do not actually paint on the body, some male artists have acquired the skill through observation, memory, and imitation.
12. G. J. Ikafia, “Body Art,” unpublished B.A. thesis, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 1979, cited by Elizabeth Willis in her Ph.D. thesis, p. 60.
13. The sample for this study was small because there simply are not that many women left in Arochukwu who know how to paint ùrì and still have vision good enough to see the drawings.
14. According to Jean Dunn, a niece of Mrs Arnot.
15. Church of Scotland Minute of Appreciation for Mrs. Arnot, Church of Scotland Mission, Calabar, Mission Council meeting, May 1948, Document Acc. 9638 B1, National Library of Scotland, Mission Archives.
16. Obituary, *Kinross-shire Advertiser*, Saturday, December 5, 1953.
17. Minute of appreciation.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. In light of the comments ùrì artists in Arochukwu made to me about seeking design inspiration for their own work from body painting artists of various cultural groups, it is interesting that Arnot limited participation in the embroidery project to women from Arochukwu.
21. Arnot, “Art and Industry in Arochukwu,” 12.
22. Minute of appreciation.
23. Arnot, “Art and Industry in Arochukwu,” 11.
24. A. S. Arnot, “Ùrì Body Painting and Aro Embroidery,” *Nigerian Field* 15, 3 (1950): 134.
25. Ibid. “Eze” is the title used for traditional rulers in Arochukwu. Politically, Arochukwu consists of three patrilineages or kindred groups: Oke Nnachi, Ibom Isii, and Eze Agwu. Each of these kindred groups has its own Eze, and each Eze’s kindred group is divided into sub-villages. The Eze Ibom Isii and Eze Eze-Agwu “are the immediate lieutenants of the Eze Aro.” J. Okoro Ijoma and O. N. Njoku, “High Point of Igbo Civilization: The Arochukwu Period,” in *Groundwork of Igbo History*, ed. A. E. Afigbo (Lagos: Vista Books, 1992), 199.
26. Arnot, “Ùrì Body Painting and Aro Embroidery,” 134.
27. Ukara cloth is worn by male initiates of the Ékpè society in Arochukwu. Though women do not wear ukara cloth, they are familiar with the patterns. While looking through the drawings from the Pitt Rivers Museum, women in Arochukwu would often identify ukara patterns in various works.
28. Susan Vogel, “Marks of Civilization,” in *Marks of Civilization: Artistic Transformations of the Human Body*, ed. Arnold Rubin (Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History, 1988), 97–105.
29. G. J. Ikafia, “Body Art,” unpublished B.A. thesis, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 1979, cited by Elizabeth Willis in her Ph.D. thesis, p. 61. The Ekon society puppet I refer to here is shown in Alfred L. Scheinberg, *Ekon Society Puppets: Sculptures for*

Social Criticism, exhibition catalog, Tribal Arts Gallery Two, 13 October–17 December 1977, plate 1.

30. Echeruo, *Igbo-English Dictionary*, 77. Ironically, artist and art historian Chike Okeke has also pointed out to me that “jáá yá mmá” is often used in Pentecostal churches in southeastern Nigeria in reference to God.
31. Messenger, “Ibibio Drama,” 216–217.
32. Ùrì artists in Arochukwu were not the only Igbo artists who sought inspiration from neighboring Ibibio artists. In a 1935 issue of *Nigerian Field*, E. R. Chadwick wrote about the *Mgbaja* (wall) in the Igbo village of Okwu in Umuahia (this wall still stands today in rather good condition). The wall, originally built of clay by men in the village and painted in earth pigments by local ùrì artists, was and is a source of considerable local pride. Chadwick reports that around the turn of the century the people of Okwu declared war on the neighboring Itu clan when they built a similar wall. Itu was forced to level their wall and deliver some of its broken chunks to Okwu to prevent a war between the two groups (Chadwick, 177).

Wall painting on private homes was common among Igbo women from this area, and Chadwick comments, “The majority of houses throughout the Clans have decorations on their outside walls, usually round the doors and windows. These decorations are, for the most part, abstract designs in black and white, and similar to some of the patterns which the women paint on their bodies” (179). Apparently the *Mgbaja*’s long history of ùrì wall painting by women changed when the people of the neighboring village of Umuajatta built a towering meeting house which they commissioned an Ibibio artist to paint. It seems the people of Okwu took this as a challenge. Not to be outdone, they decided to rebuild their *Mgbaja* in cement and have it painted by an Ibibio muralist. To identify an appropriate Ibibio artist, the people of Okwu consulted with “some itinerant Okwu traders” who were “commissioned to find the best Ibibio artist” (180–181). The Ibibio artist was male, and although he depicted Ibibio body painting in his mural scenes of “girls ready to leave the fattening room” (Chadwick, caption for image, 180), his work on the whole was more literal than ùrì artists’ works tend to be. He painted a string of scenes (each one framed within an ornately patterned cartouche) of Ékpè masqueraders, people on bicycles, schoolboys, pythons, and so forth.
33. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 207.
34. *Ibid.*, 207.
35. Robert Farris Thompson talks about the “break” in reference to Mbuti women’s paintings from Democratic Republic of Congo. Thompson, “Impulse and Repose: The Art of Ituri Women,” in Meurant, Georges, and Robert Farris Thompson, *Mbuti Design: Paintings by Pygmy Women of the Ituri Forest* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 191.
36. Arnot, “Art and Industry in Arochukwu,” 11.
37. Marie Achinivu, letter to the author, April 19, 2000.
38. Arnot, “Ùrì Body Painting and Aro Embroidery,” 134. Here we get into the issue of audience, which is somewhat ambiguous in relation to this project. Iheonyebuokwu told me that while Arnot was in charge of the project, if a piece didn’t come out well she sold it locally. She also said that for a while in Arochukwu, even after Arnot left, it became fashionable for young newlyweds to commission sets of linens embroidered with ùrì patterns. When the price of good linens rose, this practice fell out of fashion. So there do seem to have been local patrons for this embroidery, which may suggest that changes in the patterns were due to perceived demands of the medium rather than perceived tastes of a European clientele.
39. I am very grateful for Amy Gerbracht’s careful work in conserving these pieces.
40. Mrs. Mleanya Iheonyebuokwu, personal interview in Arochukwu, 30 March 2000.

41. Ibid.
42. Mrs. Helena Mgboro Okoro, personal interview in Arochukwu, 30 March 2000. Most of my interviews with Slessor graduates were conducted in English and Igbo.
43. S. O. Onwukwe, *Rise and Fall of the Arochukwu Empire, 1400–1902* (Enugu, Fourth Dimension, 1995), 12.
44. Ibid.
45. Hildi Hendrickson, ed., *Clothing and Difference: Embodied Identities in Colonial and Post-Colonial Africa* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 13.
46. Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, 9–17.
47. Marie Achinivu, letter to the author, April 19, 2000.

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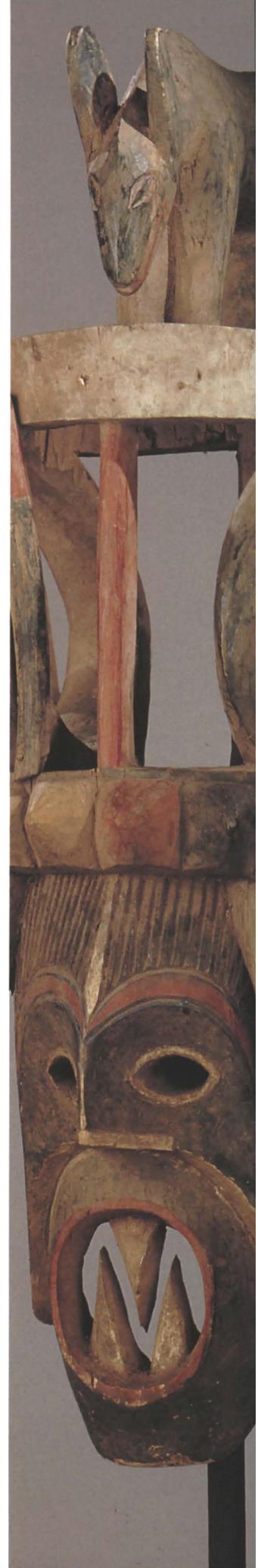
Intermezzo

Field Notes on Masks, Migration, and Creolization

SARAH ADAMS

n Christmas day in 1994 I stood with a crowd of people outside a one-story cement house in Eha Alumona (an Igbo village just outside the university town of Nsukka in southeastern Nigeria) waiting for a masquerade called “*m̀m̀ánwù spoon*” (spoon masquerade) to appear. As the crowd milled about, periodic eerie metallic rattling sounds—like nails being poured onto a sheet of metal—emanated from within the house. The sounds somehow compelled and unsettled us enough to stay outside in the hot sun and wait. Hemmed in by cassava fields to our sides and a sandy path behind us, we stood facing the house, eyes glued to the door. After an interminable wait punctuated by the slow, disembodied rattle, we heard thrashing sounds in the cassava field to our right. Rather than appear at the door of the masquerade house, the *m̀m̀ánwù spoon* made its way toward us from the cassava field with deliberate steps, injecting palpable energy into the crowd as it advanced toward us. Emerging from the field, it paused for a moment, giving us a chance to admire the contrast between the colorful array of cloth circling its waist and the glint of hundreds of metal spoon heads covering its neck, arms, torso, and legs (fig. 25).

The masked spirit we saw perform that day was called *m̀m̀ánwù spoon* or “spoon masquerade,” but it was also referred to by the more general name *mgbadike*. When I returned to Nigeria in February 2000, I planned to do a focused study of *mmanwu spoon* as an example of an *mgbadike*-type masquerade performance. I hoped to link *mmanwu spoon* to the research on *mgbadike* masquerades done by Cole and Aniakor, and Enekwe,¹ and place it within the context of three *mgbadike* masks held in a private collection in Connecticut. Through my research, however, I came to understand the *mmanwu spoon* performance in Eha Alumona not as an *mgbadike*-type masquerade existing within a bounded geographic area, but as an emblem for a history of travel and interculturalization within southeastern Nigeria.



Cole and Aniakor discuss mgbadike masquerades in *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos*, commenting that they are widely distributed in the north-central region of southeastern Nigeria.² Aniakor narrowed this region of origin down further to the Anambra area of southeastern Nigeria.³ These masks are generally described as large, with “dark coloration, bold, outsized features such as open mouths with large, menacing teeth; and elaborate, integrally carved headdresses always displaying horns. Their bulky costumes are often hung with seeds or other rattling devices or studded with quills”⁴ (fig. 26). Mgbadike masqueraders personify strength, bravery, and vitality, ideals for middle-aged men. The carved portion of the mask is generally “a constellation of forms, of human figures and animals such as deer, lion, snakes, and sometimes more recent motifs such as heraldic angels and birds and other creatures.”⁵ Mgbadike masquerades often perform for funerals of wealthy, important people.

The three masks held in a private collection in Connecticut (figs. 27, 28, 29) have horns that curl beside the temples of the mask’s face—performers often grip these to steady the heavy and unwieldy mask while dancing or walking. Like the carved masks pictured in figures 25, 26, and 30, the masks in figures 27, 28, and 29 have open mouths with varying numbers of bared, sharp teeth—a common feature of Igbo masks. The superstructures of these masks are divided into two levels; on the masks in figures 27 and 28 these two levels are laden with symbolically significant figures such as fierce leopards



Figure 25

Mgbadike masquerade performance in Umabor, Eha Alumona, December 1994. The masquerade approached the audience from the field rather than a path to demonstrate that it is from the wild bush rather than the world of humans.

Photo: Sarah Adams



Figure 26

Mgbadike masquerade in Ifite Agulu, Anambra State, March 2000. This masquerade rode on a lorry to get to a funeral where it was to pay a condolence visit. The body of the costume is covered with overlapping, dried akwebilisi seed pods, and the neck is covered with rolled pieces of metal. The masquerade holds a machete in its right hand. Photo: Sarah Adams.

and sacred pythons; monkeys and antelopes (possibly for sacrifice); and a horse and rider (owning a horse would have been a sign of prestige). The mask in figure 29, compared to those in figures 27 and 28, is pared down and sleek, surmounted by only one figure on the second level. Ichi marks are carved on the forehead of the mask in figure 29 and the forehead and temples of the masks in figures 27 and 28—these marks represent scarification that was once common (less so now) for Ozo-titled men and women. In the Igbo Ozo title-taking system, membership is conferred upon those in the community who have accumulated both prestige and wealth. Such a title gives a person's voice greater weight and authority in the community. These three masks give us a sense of the tremendous potential for variation within one masquerade type.

If we consider the historic "geographic area" for mgbadike-type masks, my encounter with a masquerade of this type in Eha Alumona (northeast of the Anambra area) points to travel and transformation. Throughout the twentieth century in southeastern Nigeria there was a significant migration of the labor force from agricultural jobs in rural areas to higher-paying jobs in urban centers. Such migration remains common in southeastern Nigeria. It was through such travels, members of the masquerade group told me, that this masquerade was brought from the Anambra area to Eha Alumona. This point was driven home when, in February 2000, I commissioned a mmánwù spoon



Figure 27

(Facing page, image on left). Mgbadike-type mask surmounted by several monkey-like figures, a snake and an equestrian figure. Fragments remain of two horns that curled down along the jaw line of the mask and were used to steady the mask when in use. Wood, pigment, 35 ½ x 16 x 15 in., Anonymous Lender. Photo: Carl Kaufman, Yale University Art Gallery

Figure 28

(Facing page, image on right). The lower part of this Mgbadike-type mask combines a monkey-like face, ram's horns and a what may be a snake's tongue curling over its brow (the tongue is repeated in the back). The scalloped decoration on the left side of the superstructure of this mask may refer to carved pillars framing carved doors that were once very common at the entrance to titled people's compounds in the Anambra area of southeastern Nigeria. On the right side of the mask it looks as if these scalloped decorations may have broken off accidentally and then the scarred wood painted over. Wood, pigment, 33 x 13 ¼ x 18 in., Anonymous Lender. Photo: Carl Kaufman, Yale University Art Gallery

performance and was told that it had to be scheduled when enough of the seventeen members of the masquerade group (called Izu Owerre) were in Eha Alumona (figure 30). Immediately after the scheduled Sunday performance, several members of the masquerade group left to travel back to jobs in Port Harcourt and Enugu.

Izu Owerre's *mmanwu* spoon, members reported, is about twenty years old, and the masquerade of an old man (fig. 28) is about fifteen years old.⁶ Either or both of these masquerades can be hired for funerals, marriage ceremonies, graduations, convocations, or any special occasion—therefore, the Eha Alumona *mgbadike* is being used for what Chike Aniakor, an artist and art historian who specializes in Igbo masquerades, calls “secular” or “entertainment” purposes. This intention was further emphasized when the group purchased a public address system in 1999. With the addition of this system, the group's patrons could rent just the public address system; the public address system and the musicians; or the public address system, musicians, and either or both masquerades. Chike Aniakor was present at the performance in 2000, and he commented that the musicians' heavily percussive music was not *mgbadike*, but strongly reminiscent of the music of the popular Nigerian musician Chief Perricomo Okoye. *Mgbadike* masquerade music uses skin-covered drums rather than the wooden slit gongs Izu Owerre uses (see fig. 29). Members of the masquerade group confirmed Aniakor's observation, and they said they had learned to play Okoye's music by listening to it over the radio and imitating it. Chief Perricomo Okoye is from an outpost of Arochukwu called Arondizuogu, a place whose very existence speaks to migration and travel, which adds yet another interesting layer to the history of this masquerade. Aniakor also suggested that *mmanwu* spoon and the old man masquerade were probably afterthoughts or footnotes to the music—that originally this was simply a group of musicians. This masquerade group,

Figure 29

The side horns of this *mgbadike*-type mask, in contrast to those in figures 27 and 28, have been left smooth and devoid of any identifying details. The clean lines of the arrowlike nose are restated in the three razor-sharp teeth. Wood, pigment 36 x 13 x 14 in. Anonymous Lender. Photo: Carl Kaufman, Yale University Art Gallery





Figure 30
Mgbadike or mmanwu
spoon masquerade on the
left, and a masquerade of an
old man on the right. Both
masqueraders are carrying
canes, a sign of age and
status. Even though there
was no electricity in Eha
Alumona the day of this
performance, the public
address system was set up
just in case the power came
on, and the group's vocalist,
Mr. Simon Aleke, used the
mike as a prop. Photo:
Sarah Adams.

as is evident from the images, is also not organized by age group as masquerade groups used to be. The young man who plays *oja*, or flute, is still in secondary school, while the rest of the men are in their mid-to-late thirties.

Masquerade migration is not uncommon in southeastern Nigeria, and it is not confined to this geographic area. A carver I interviewed in Awka who goes by the trade name “Cassidy” told me that he has carved mgbadike masks for Igbo Union groups in the United States and had seen mgbadike masquerades perform as far north as Jos in Nigeria. Cassidy also carves miniature masks, including mgbadike masks (fig. 31), for sale overseas and for teaching purposes. The Mgbadike masquerade performance in Eha Alumona is a visual and aural representation of travel, interculturalism, and transformation. In essence, the masquerade performance represents the confluence of masquerade and music from two distinct places of origin in a third alien place.

NOTES

1. Herbert M. Cole and Chike Aniakor, *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos* (Museum of Cultural History: Los Angeles, 1984), 131–135. Eneke, Onrora Ossie, *Igbo Mask: The Oneness of Ritual and Theatre* (Otunsayo Enterprises: Lagos, 1987), 105–110.
2. Cole and Aniakor, *Igbo Arts*, 131–135.
3. Interview with Chike Aniakor, February 2000.
4. Cole and Aniakor, *Igbo Arts*, p. 131.
5. Chike Aniakor in *The Spirit's Dance in Africa: Evolution, Transformation and Continuity in Sub-Sahara*, Esther Dagan, ed. (Westmount: Galerie Amrad African Arts Publication, 1997), 205–209.
6. The old man masquerade did not accompany mmanwu spoon during its Christmas 1994 performance.

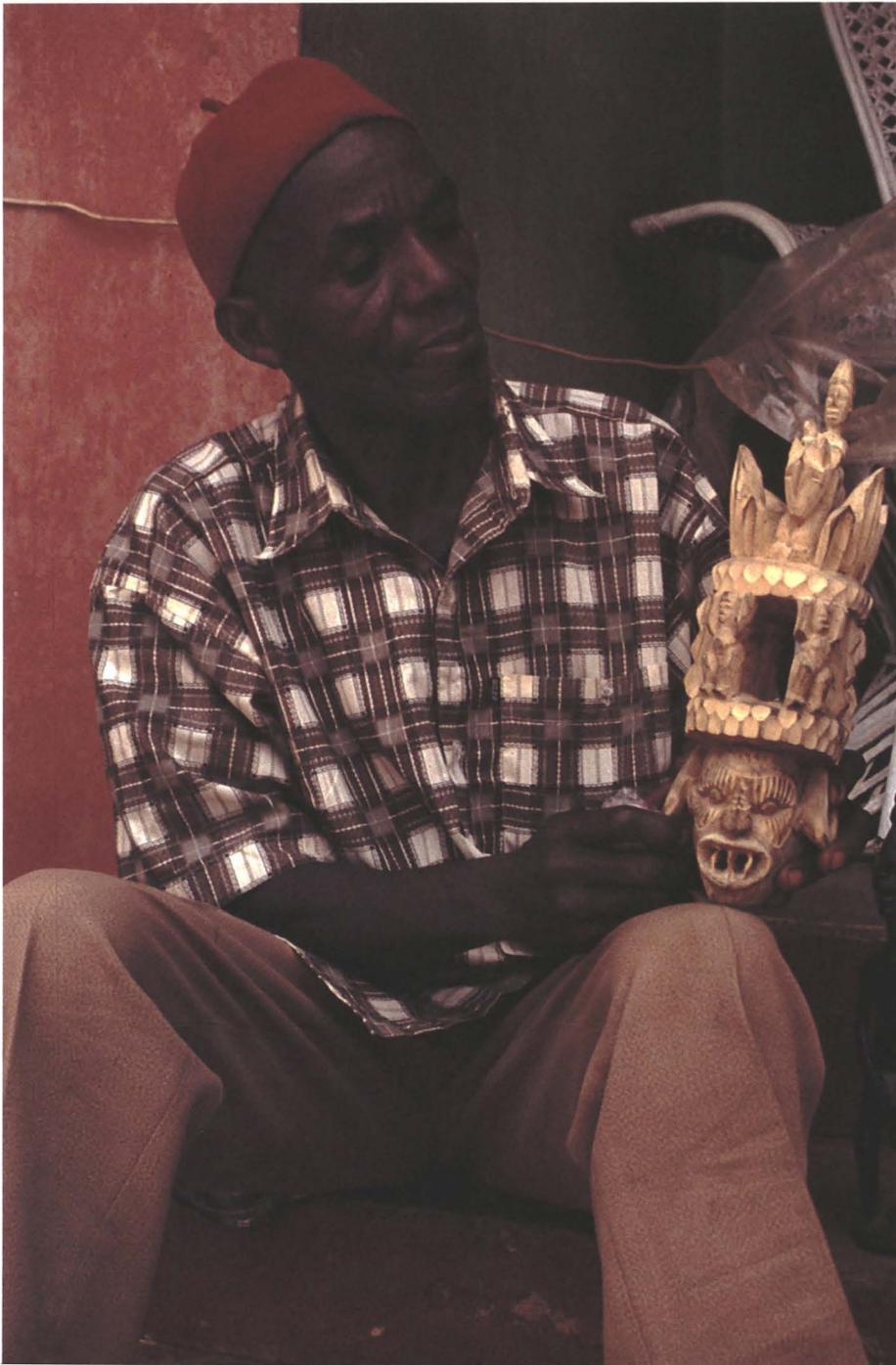


Figure 31

Cassidy, a carver from Nawfia, with a miniature mgbadike mask he carved to demonstrate the type of carving he does for trade overseas and teaching purposes. He calls carvings he creates for decoration in the home “furniture.” When I commissioned this piece he brought out an illustrated poster titled “Animals of the World,” which he had purchased in the market in Onitsha, for me to choose animals for the superstructure. He said his clients do not limit themselves to local animals—one client requested a kangaroo because it can run fast and fight while protecting its young in its pouch. Photo: Sarah Adams, April 2000

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Traveling Concepts

Making and Remaking Culture

LYNEISE WILLIAMS

Migration, forced or voluntary, is ancient in Africa. Trans-African diasporas date as far back as the turn of the first millennium, when Bantu-speaking people began to migrate out of north-central Africa east and south toward the rainforest region of the Kongo. Even in contemporary times daily migrations are not uncommon for purposes such as employment or education. When people travel, they take along their languages, ideas, belief systems, and often objects that hold meaning for them. Up to now, museum exhibitions and their catalogues listed one, maybe two ethnic categories for such objects. Recently, however, scholars have pointed out that people's histories on the African continent are more complicated than that. Ethnic groups we assumed to be factual are found to be less than stable or coherent, historically as well as in the present. Some are even artifacts of colonial administrations. Upon settling among existing groups, identities, terms of power, and status must be renegotiated constantly. In what ways do African civilizations respond to ideas and objects belonging to other immigrant African groups? How do we classify objects that are adopted by a group or groups outside the culture of their originators? What if the group attributed as originators is historically mixed due to migratory practices?

Focusing on an emblem of *Ngbe* (the leopard society) as adopted by the Efik during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, and masks associated with the Ode-lay society of late-twentieth-century Freetown, Sierra Leone, I explore some of the complexities of objects in transition and travel to develop a more fruitful concept of call-and-response.

Efik-cizing the Leopard Society and Its Emblem

Even though *Ngbe* originated in Usak Edet, now Isangele in southwest Cameroon,¹ it was embraced by various Cross River groups who modified it



for their specific needs. The Efik, who purchased it as the slave trade in the Cross River region was developing, cast a particular contour to the society and most likely to its associated objects like its emblem. Comparable responses to non-indigenous ideas by neighboring groups have been observed in horizontal masks by art historian Patrick McNaughton. His investigation of the masks' possible history across west and central Africa led to a construction of a hypothesis—particularly useful in the present study of the leopard society and its related objects:

I suggest that adoption and adaptation have often typified the responses of African artists and audiences to the arts of near or distant neighbors, and that the opportunistic transformation of other peoples' traditions is an essence of creativity and art history in Africa, as in many other areas of the world.²

Adaptations can involve the subtraction of certain characteristics by a group, or assertive individuals or the addition of others—all of which are expressions of identity.

Generally speaking, the Leopard Society is an association with ranked grades that seeks to control the energies of the leopard spirit, a lived metaphor for government in much of Nigeria and parts of Cameroon. The leopard spirit appears through masquerade messengers who carry a staff or whip in one hand and boughs of medicinal plants in the other. These objects are used to whip non-initiates who are expected to be out of sight during the masquerade's appearances, and to sometimes form *nsibidi*, the society's graphic writing system that extends into gesture, rhythm, music, and dance, with members of superior grades.³

Emblems, owned only by the higher grades, and other ritual objects are kept in private restricted spaces inside the centrally located society houses in which the all-male members gather for a variety of functions. Keith Nicklin reported that early-twentieth-century colonial officer P. Amaury Talbot illustrated two examples of emblems in his early volumes. The first one, from a 1912 publication, presented an emblem hung on the society meeting house wall demarcating a kind of inner sanctum, while the second illustration from 1926 showed the emblem mounted on a central pillar above the sacred foundation stone of another meeting house.⁴ A 1998 photograph from Ajaman village in Cameroon shows an emblem displayed on a decorated pillar above the society shrine similar to Talbot's earlier illustrations (fig. 32). Although Talbot was able to illustrate the objects, data about them are limited, especially from the precolonial period, probably because of the strict tenets of secrecy among society members. According to Malcolm Ruel's observations



Figure 32
Shrine of the *Ngbe* of
Ejagham leopard society
with hanging emblem.
Ajaman village, Cameroon,
December 1998. Photo:
Ute Rösenthaler

among the Ejagham-influenced Banyang of the upper Cross River in Cameroon from 1969, “knowledge concerning the emblem is said to be especially recondite and held only by its senior members.”⁵ More recently, in 1989 Nicklin observed that “throughout my field researches I was discouraged from asking questions about the [emblem].”⁶

The emblem conjoins raw elements from nature and manmade objects fastened to a square or rectangular woven fiber mat. The elements attached to this emblem are so densely packed that the mat framework is rendered

Figure 33

Ngbe Society Emblem.
20th century
Animal skulls,
turtle shells, horn,
fiber, wood, rattan.
41 x 44 in.
Cameroon, Nigeria
Anonymous Lender
Photo: Carl Kaufman,
Yale University Art Gallery

invisible (fig. 33).⁷ Ruel describes a society emblem as essentially constituted in the “form of a shield (*nhpa*), a woven mat, with raffia surround, on which are fixed certain leaves, animal bones, skulls and horns, and which is hung from the central post of its leader or owner’s *aca* (lodge). The added objects have apparently both the force of ‘medicines’ (referring to what has been eaten in the sub-association) but also act as a ‘charter’ for it.”⁸

At the center of the emblem’s configuration is a drum minus its membrane. It is enigmatic because it lacks a skin. “But for that very reason,” notes Robert Farris Thompson, “it may well allude to the ‘drums of silence’ that lie at the heart of leopard society ritual.”⁹ The 1998 photograph from Ajaman includes a drum situated close to the mounted emblem.

Although the full meaning of many elements of this emblem still eludes us, Nicklin offers valuable insights into the significance of some components based on his Ejagham research.¹⁰ He identifies the animal skulls and bones as the material remains of society “foundation feast” rituals related to the establishment of a particular grade or new member’s initiation.¹¹ Two bound broomlike elements such as those on either side of the emblem are employed for sweeping away hostile medicines.¹² The centrally located drum as well as the one near the base are important symbols of the society’s authority, said to



resemble those used by society masqueraders, and those that alert the community to important legislative announcements.¹³

The drum plays a role in the origin myths of the Ejagham-derived leopard society in black Cuba. According to Thompson:

Tanze was an ancient king of the Ejagham. A long, long time ago, when the king died, his spirit became a fish, which a woman captured, discovering thus in the river the fortune of the kings of Ejagham. And a man came and took this power away from her, killed this woman, and set up the religion [of the leopard society]. Lord Tanze was a departed king who entered the body of a fish and then became the body of a female drum.¹⁴

The drum on the emblem may represent the leopard society's founder. As such, it potentially illumines the proclamation of laws and the calling of leopard spirit masqueraders. Twisted coils of rope seen near one of the ceremonial brooms on the emblem can be used to deter thefts and to also refer to the restraining of the leopard spirit with ropelike objects to prevent its return to the forest.¹⁵ Talbot documented examples of looped or coiled rope in caplike coverings sometimes used for sacred *Ngbe* foundation stones as well as for ritual headgear worn currently by society members as documented by Nicklin. The covering of both a sacred stone and the head of an initiate speaks to the ritual transference of power.

Soon after they acquired *Ngbe*, the Efik, who arrived at their Cross River destination through a series of migrations from the northern Cross River region, changed the name of the society from an Ejagham word for leopard to *Ekpe*, meaning leopard in their own language. As numerous scholars have already shown, naming is inextricably connected to power relations. Thus, by renaming the leopard society, the Efik's intentions to exert some degree of their identity over this non-indigenous organization are clear. Prior to the moment of acquisition, Efik identity seemed to center around their self-perceived superiority. After moving into the Uruan area during their period of heavy migration, Eyo Okon Akak pointed out that the Efik referred to existing residents as "Ibi-Ibom," meaning the people of Ibom in contrast to their self-named "Ifa-Ibom," translated as the strongest, most powerful and real people of Ibom.¹⁶ The name Ifa-Ibom clearly implies a hierarchy of people in the area in which the emigrants placed themselves at the top. The name Efik, derived from the Efik verb root "fik" meaning "to oppress,"¹⁷ alludes to this social ranking. The fact that this group did not refuse this name after it was given to them by a neighboring group, who perceived them as contentious,¹⁸ underscores the Efik's assertion of their own preeminence.

The Efik, who are and have historically represented themselves as aggressive people, eventually dominated Old Calabar politically and economically from their Cross River residence since early in the nineteenth century.¹⁹ This concurs with their acquisition and use of the leopard society for reasons of cultural aggrandizement. Scottish missionary Hope Masterson Waddell comments about a group purchasing *Ekpe* from the Efik in Creek Town. Her description points to the elaboration of *Ekpe* in the hands of the wealthier Efik as compared to the society in its original home in Cameroon,²⁰ although the extent of this embellishment remains unknown. According to Waddell, writing in 1846:

The day I visited Eyo . . . I was privileged to witness a grand and rare [*Ekpe*] ceremonial. Some persons of consequence had come from a far country to purchase the honors and authority of that institution, that they might introduce it among their own people, and become the founders of a new branch. This was the equivalent to entering the confederation of which Calabar was the head, and they were consequently treated with distinguished respect. It was a public display of [*Ekpe*] grandeur, and all the townspeople were allowed to come forth and witness it. They crowded both sides of the wide main street from top to bottom, and even the women, especially excluded on other occasions and who dare not utter the name [*Ekpe*], as too sacred for their lips, were now spectators, and filled the gates and yards respectively.²¹

In this description the grand display of wealth intermingled with fear and awe, forming an alliance that could offer spiritual as well as social and political leverage in the group's new environment. Historian A. J. H. Latham points out that the introduction of *Ekpe* coincided with changing patterns of commerce at Old Calabar and the development of the internal slave market, calling the leopard association "an integral part of this process."²² He successfully argues that *Ekpe*'s essential role resulted from the Efik addition of a debt-collecting function—critical to a society with a credit trading system—to the existing religious, judicial, commercial, and social charges. Simon Ottenberg and Linda Knudsen also noted that *Ekpe* was employed to frighten, beat, and control slaves.²³ Once this debt-collecting role was established, an English captain related that European traders could now give Africans credit with full confidence that it could be recovered.²⁴ If neighboring groups wanted to become creditworthy, they had to purchase *Ekpe* from the Efiks. In this position, Latham demonstrates that the Efiks gained control of the European trade by excluding all other peoples from direct European access. Thus, the

reformulation of *Ekpe* enabled the Efiks to enhance their monopoly on the slave trade and gain leverage in long-distance commerce. That the association's four highest and most important grades were restricted to Efik freemen while slaves were allowed to join only the remaining lower five underscored the convenience of using this powerful spiritual resource to sanction Efik superiority. Moreover, this Efik-derived duty of exacting punishment, which implies threats of violence, fear, and most certainly subjugation, added to their long-standing perception as aggressive people.

How does all this relate to emblems? Cultural representations and their associated ritual performances are inherently political. As we have already seen, the Efik appropriated the leopard society from another group at an opportune moment and made it their own by manipulating it to serve their economic, political, and social ambitions. Thus the objects associated with *Ekpe* were probably adjusted to project this same ideology of fear, aggression, and Efik superiority. Although this particular emblem has been attributed to the Ejagham, its twentieth-century date means that visual examples from earlier leopard association models, like those used by the Efiks, had already been in circulation. Indeed, scholars have noted that early in the nineteenth century the society diffused from the Ejagham country to Calabar (in the Cross River region), then back to the Ejagham in a more extensive form.²⁵

Although the association's public face would be elegantly covered masqueraders in their bright horizontally striped body masks, emblems suggest the institution's private face. Its context is sacred rooms viewed only by senior members or glimpsed by newcomers in the process of initiation. The surface, richly endowed with spiritual energies in the form of tortoise shells, bunches of leaves, animal skulls, and sacred drums, ensures the group's survival—and even prominence—in the world. The emblem symbolically attacks, protects, and heals. Each skull and tortoise shell is at once a protective device and container of powerful medicines.²⁶ There is an aggressiveness to the way the animal remains force themselves on top of and overlap other objects. Skeletal parts, particularly skulls, could play into fears invoked by the threat of a rarely executed *Ekpe* sanction—"the power to execute an offender, either by decapitation, or by tying him to a tree in the bush with his lower jaw removed."²⁷ In addition to implications of animal subjugation, the human presence makes itself known in the manmade drums and brooms. The dramatic placement of the brooms is almost framelike, defining borders that keep medicinal objects contained on one side, but thinly veiling an eruption of possibly malevolent energies on the other side. They also recall the constant, fluttering, broomlike gestures of the hands and wands in *Ngbe/Ekpe* masquerader actions. The drum, situated at the center, brings a degree of

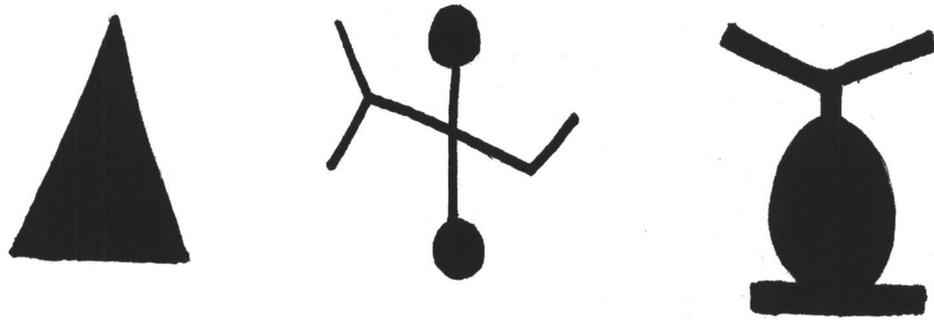


Figure 34
Shaded Nsibidi signs of serious danger. Illustration: Lynaise Williams, from Thompson, 1984

order to the configuration. Rendered shadeless by the removal of its membrane, it seems to project a menacing stare of warning. Thompson notes that shaded forms or “dark signs” mean danger and extremity in *nsibidi*, the communication system of *Ekpe* (fig. 34).²⁸ This is a thick, dense, and impenetrable space in which blood has been spilled, gathered, and coalesced into a collective energy to be managed, hopefully resolved, and reintegrated back into the human experience by privileged society members.

Inter-Ethnic Constellations in Sierra Leone Ode-lay Masks

Emerging from a different configuration of identity issues are two late-twentieth-century masquerade headpieces produced by Ode-lay societies of Freetown, Sierra Leone (figs. 35–36). Each headpiece is arranged in a single vertical tier. Worn on top of the head, it is attached to a wire structure onto which cloth costumes and other decorative elements are attached. The masker’s face is hidden by these added elements. On headpiece number one, a bust of a black female is situated on top of the head of another female with light-red-colored skin (fig. 35). The arms of the black woman, featuring wrist shackles, are crossed in front of her chest. Below this figure, the second female figure stares forward. Headpiece number two is more complex in design and materials (fig. 36). Instead of the top portion being defined by a single figure, it illustrates a scene where an enormous bird devours a human figure. Blood gushes from the figure’s neck. Short green pants expose nearly white arms and legs. In the bottom portion, long satin panels, mirrors, yards of shiny ribbons, trims, and colorful pom-poms frame a diminutive face. Chiseled eyes, rimmed heavily in black, and tiny red lips stand out against the whiteness of the face. In both headpieces, the range of skin tones represented is immediately noticeable. The diverse colors suggest the ethnic multiplicity of Ode-lay society recruitment patterns as well as the vibrant history of interethnic contact built into the foundation of Freetown, Sierra Leone, society.



Figure 35
Ode-lay Society
Masquerade Headpiece
20th century
Polychrome, wood
33 3/4 x 10 1/2 x 16 in.
Sierra Leone
Anonymous Lender
Photo: Carl Kaufman, Yale
University Art Gallery



Figure 36
Ode-lay Society
Masquerade Headpiece
20th century
Polychrome, wood,
fabric, mirrors
42 5/8 x 18 1/4 x 18 in.
Sierra Leone
Anonymous Lender
Photo: Carl Kaufman, Yale
University Art Gallery

The settlement from which Freetown originated was established in 1787 by British philanthropists and supporters of antislavery to be “The Province of Freedom,” an experiment based on rationalist thought. Conceived as the residence of four different groups of African-derived peoples, each group arrived through different circumstances. The first group to be transported to the settlement were 356 people of London’s poor black population. Shortly after their arrival, the settlement was burned down by members of the indigenous Temne group, from whom the land was originally “purchased.” Not far from the first settlement site, the survivors established another settlement, called Freetown, under the newly chartered Sierra Leone Company. In 1792 this first group was joined by more than 1,100 ex-slaves from the United States, dissatisfied with their relocation to Nova Scotia in return for service to the British during the American War for Independence. A third group of more than five hundred Maroons who had been defeated, then forcibly removed to Nova Scotia from Jamaica by the British, were the last to be transported to the Sierra Leone Company settlement in 1800. Financial burdens for the new company resulted in the transferral of the settlement to the Crown of Great Britain early in 1808, also the year slavery was abolished there. In order to enforce their new law against slavery, British naval blockades were constructed along the coast of West Africa to intercept slave ships. The fourth and largest group of African settlers was composed of enslaved Africans who were given their freedom after being released from captured slave cargoes. Liberated Africans arrived in Freetown continually from 1807 to the 1840s, totaling more than fifty thousand by the end.²⁹ Among this large group, which included Fon, Nupe, Ibo, Hausa, Efik, Ibibio, Mende, Malinke, and Akan, the majority were Yorùbá. “By the late 1820’s,” former Sierra Leone archivist Christopher Fyfe observed, “most recaptives were from the Yorùbá country.”³⁰ Historian Philip Curtin indicated that in 1848, the number of recaptives coming from Yorùbá-speaking regions, then classified under the Bight of Benin, was close to 8,000 out of a total of 13,273 captives from all of western and central Africa.³¹ Commonalities in language and general aspects of culture led to this group being regarded as a cohesive entity even though “it does not seem that they [Yorùbá speakers in their native homelands] have ever constituted a single political entity and it is even more doubtful whether, before the nineteenth century, they referred to each other by a common name.”³² Renamed “Aku,” derived from one of their greetings, this majority group of Yorùbá speakers became the dominant presence among the liberated Africans.

The origins of Freetown Ode-lay societies have been traced to Yorùbá-based hunting and Egúngún societies that were a part of early-nineteenth-

century colony society.³³ Under British rule, liberated slaves were in close contact with notions of British superiority played out in Christianity and in Western medicine. Many among the Aku converted to Christianity after exposure to these ideas; however, conversions did not necessarily mean the exclusion of the religious and healing systems still claimed from their native homelands. Even as massive churches were erected to give the impression of Christianity's success and pervasive presence, African-derived masquerades appeared in street processions. John Nunley cites an example by Reverend T. Edwards of such an encounter from 1839:

On the evening of 20 June he heard the sound of Yorùbá drums, which were played in honor of Shango [*Sàngó*], the Yorùbá god of thunder. A heavy thunder and lightning storm transformed the evening sky, which otherwise was thick and motionless during the rainy season. The minister, anxious to quell the fires of Shango and his devotees, marched directly to the hut where the celebrants (men, women and children) participated before a "small idol of mean appearance and small dimensions decorated with beads and other things."³⁴

One of many references to the cult of *Sàngó* in early accounts, Nunley found that rituals in these nineteenth-century cults involved similar medicines and sacrifices employed by Ode-lay societies during the 1980s.³⁵ In adsuch as Egúngún, Gèlèdè, and those for hunters associated with the deity Ogun, were seen in the early years of the Freetown colony. In Egúngún societies,

Figure 37
Egúngún Dancer, Ipapo,
Oyo Country, Nigeria
Summer 1965
Photo: Robert Farris
Thompson



such as Egúngún, Gèlèdé, and those for hunters associated with the deity Ogun, were seen in the early years of the Freetown colony. In Egúngún societies, based on the belief that deceased ancestors have a continuous relationship with living descendants, members elicit blessings from and honor the spirits of these family members through extravagant masquerade performances seen in Nigeria as well as in nineteenth-century Freetown. Egúngún masquerades, which may incorporate multilayered constructions, emphasize the use of expensive and luxurious indigenous and imported cloth and trimmings (fig. 37). Serving as important status symbols for the living, masquerade costume expenses are not spared. Equally impressive are the masquerades of Yorùbá Gèlèdé associations (fig. 38). Gèlèdé society members are concerned with harnessing and appeasing the potentially destructive power of postmenopausal women. Their masquerade performances express the importance of these women and encourage them to channel their creative energies into the well-being of the community. Ogun, the Yorùbá deity commonly known as the god of hunting, iron, and warfare, is praised and venerated in hunting societies. His supernatural powers are embedded in iron and iron objects, instruments employed by hunters, herbalists, and warriors. Sandra Barnes and Paula Girshick Ben-Amos have noted themes of aggression and civilization in Ogun concepts of Guinea Coast kingdoms that could foster a deeper understanding of his society's prevalence among newly transplanted Africans. The authors pointed out that "the Ogun concept encapsulated the progression from hunting to agriculture and the mastery of metallurgy, to urbanization and, ultimately, in these people's own view, to the development of empire."³⁶ Among Freetown's Yorùbá-based groups reported to have a "king," healers and a commercial organization through which members could draw upon monies, the members controlled their own activities.³⁷ Clearly, Aku self-sufficiency and self-preservation were integral to the establishment of these societies. Through the society's support, members rose from lower to upper class, or Creole, in the social class system. The "fancy" aesthetic of Ode-lay masquerades is defined by Nunley as the continuum of the Egúngún and Gèlèdé preference for the most expensive, visually arresting fabrics on their masquerades.³⁸ This quality is often combined with what he calls the "fierce" aesthetic, associated with Ogun hunting societies, rooted in combined feelings of fear and respect directed toward ancestors.³⁹ Since the early nineteenth century, this fierce aesthetic has been asserted with spectacular horn projections and arrangements of medicine containers made of animal and vegetable elements. Though meant to scare viewers, these arrangements were also required to be attractive, thus fierce is understood as being visually striking as well as frightening.



Figure 38
Oro Efe Gèlèdè
Masquerader
Sawonjo, 1978
Photo: Henry J. Drewal

This headpiece embodies both fancy and fierce aesthetics (fig. 36). While the bottom portion features flowing panels of dark, sumptuous black satin with bright red ribbon sewn over gold chenille trim, glossy, red blood gushes down the back of a human figure being ingested by what appears to be a large vulture in the top half of the headpiece. Vultures appeared during a Yorùbá-based feast ritual called *awujoh* performed by Creoles of Freetown in 1963. In this ritual, ancestors are invoked to give blessings to their descendants on such occasions as a welcoming for a newborn child, a marriage, and the death of a family member. According to Leo Spitzer's 1963 source:

For the *awujoh* itself, he invited family and friends and, according to his wealth, slaughtered chickens, goats, or even a cow for the feasting. A portion of the food was kept separate and cooked in palm oil without salt. This portion belonged to the dead. Vultures, who were thought to represent the ancestors, were fed a small part of this reserved food and it was considered bad luck if these birds failed to appear. Since garbage ridden Freetown abounded with vultures, however, the probability of their absence was remote.⁴⁹

Although the vultures are interpreted as symbols of embodied ancestral spirits, evidence in Yorùbá beliefs among New World practitioners, as well as in Nigerian Yorùbá mythology, suggest that this animal is emblematic of a more complex idea. John Mason notes that vultures refer to an aspect, or road, of the Yorùbá deity Ọ̀ṣun called Ọ̀ṣun Ìkólé by practitioners of the Yorùbá religion in Cuba and North America. The name Ìkólé translates as "Messenger from Earth," and when paired with the deity's name it translates as "the stream that builds the House." As the attendant of Ọ̀ṣun, the vulture, Ọ̀ṣun Ìkólé, is able to carry messages to the supreme creator, Olódùmarè, when others find it impossible. This idea, carried over to the New World by enslaved Africans, is present in Yorùbá myths of Nigeria. According to this myth,

Olódùmarè and Earth went out to hunt. Between them, they caught only one rat. On their return, they arrived at the parting of the ways where they were faced with the problem of what to do with one rat. Olódùmarè claimed it as His right because He was senior; but Earth protested and claimed to be older, and that therefore it was she who must take the rat away. Olódùmarè thereupon let Earth have the rat but went back to heaven determined to show Earth how much she was mistaken. The upshot was that when He arrived in heaven, He immediately "switched off" things, with the results that all the benefits which Earth used to receive from heaven

were no longer obtainable: there were no more rains; the crops failed on the farms; and all living things were perishing. Earth became worried. She took counsel of the oracle, and was advised to send the rat with apologies to Olódùmarè. The way to do it was to make a sacrifice of it. She made the sacrifice; but at first she could find no one to take it up to Olódùmarè. In the end, however, the vulture volunteered. When Olódùmarè had received the propitiation, He gave a small gourd to the vulture and told him to smash it on reaching Earth's gates. The vulture, overcome by curiosity, smashed the gourd too soon after he left the presence of Olódùmarè. The result was that it immediately began to rain in torrents on Earth. Every living creature took shelter and barred the entrance. The vulture could find nowhere for shelter because he was dripping wet. At each attempt to enter any shelter, he was severely pecked on the head. So he had to content himself with staying out in the open til the rain had stopped. Hence the baldness of the vulture's head and his permanent shabby appearance!⁴¹

Because of the vulture's successful delivery, Earth and its inhabitants were saved. Clearly, the vulture acted as both messenger of Earth and, in spite of his curiosity, of "the stream that builds the House"—as its name, *Ọ̀ṣun Ìkólé* indicates. With this understanding, the vulture on the Ode-lay headpiece can be seen as transporting a sacrifice (the corpse of a person of European descent) as a form of propitiation to Olódùmarè. Birds are also associated with the powers of postmenopausal women in Yorùbá *Gèlèdè* societies, and with witchcraft in religious beliefs of the Temne. "Among the Temne," Nunley reported, "the witchbird is a common carrier of bad fortune . . . old and unkept women [are believed] to be perpetrators of witchcraft. Such women, they believe, send witchbirds to make children ill."⁴² The incorporation of references to indigenous groups is common in contemporary Ode-lay masquerades despite the tension that characterized much of the contact between the two groups since the first settlement in 1878. Because birds have symbolic resonance in both Yorùbá and Temne religious beliefs, Ode-lay artists may be interpreted as asserting an aesthetic amalgam reflective of both their intercultural organization and Freetown audience.

Indigenous, or "up-country," groups were initially treated with contempt and fear by immigrant Africans.⁴³ The Temne burned the British settlement to the ground in 1879 to avenge the British destruction of their village.⁴⁴ This indigenous group continued to be involved in other attacks of the English settlement, although they were spared the harsh labels given to



Figure 39

Sowe Mask, 20th century, Sierra Leone. Wood, 13 ¼ x 7 ¾ x 8 ¾ in., Gift of Mr. and Mrs. James M. Osborn for the Linton Collection of African Art, Yale University Art Gallery. 1959.72.3

other indigenous groups like the Mende. This was probably because the Muslim religion, practiced by the majority of the Temne, was deemed “acceptable” by colonists. The Mende, however, who were neither Christian nor Muslim, were referred to as “heathens.”⁴⁵ Certain acts of violence were constructed as synonymous with Mende-ness as a way of underscoring the Creole’s negative determination of this group. When a war broke out in 1898 resulting from Mende refusal to pay a British-instigated tax on their dwellings, it was commonly referred by the colonists as the “Mende War” instead of the Hut-Tax War. By racializing this massacre, the ethnic category, Mende would always evoke ideas of aggressive violence widening the distance between Mende and Creole identities. Spitzer commented on the implications of this naming:

For the most part, however, the effects of the 1898 war were detrimental. In a sense, the Mende atrocities fulfilled the Creoles darkest dreads about up-countrymen: they had truly acted like the barbarians that all up-country men were purported to be. Mende became stereotyped by the Creoles in the most virulent terms. They were referred to as “looters,” “those bloody people,” “fighters and robbers of other people’s properties,” and “that blood-thirsty tribe.” Certainly, the massacre tended to legitimize the opinion of those Creoles who wanted to believe the absolute worst about up-country men and who had long predicted the eventual annihilation of the Sierra Leone community at the hands of the hinterland Africans.⁴⁶

Unfavorable descriptions of the Mende appeared in a variety of venues. In the 1876 prize-winning essay titled “Our Native Manners and Customs,” written by James A. Fitz-John, a Creole, the Mende are represented in stereotypical terms such as “brutal and bragging.”⁴⁷ James Africanus Beale Horton, one of the first Creole Sierra Leoneans to be trained and qualified as a doctor in England, referred to the Mende as “very warlike and troublesome” in his 1892 text on surrounding territories of Sierra Leone.⁴⁸ The *Bundu* society, a secret organization for women and girls, among many indigenous groups of Sierra Leone, was labeled as “barbaric” by Creoles in the *West African Reporter* on 18 March 1899.⁴⁹

Even though the stereotypes that held sway through the nineteenth century advocated the invisibility of indigenous ritual elements in Freetown society, contemporary Ode-lay masquerades foreground references to these groups

residing in Freetown. For example, this headpiece makes a direct reference to the *Bundu* society (fig. 36). Its resemblance to *Bundu/Sowei* society masks is unmistakable (fig. 39)⁵⁰. Both exhibit delicate and dainty features like small pursed mouths and sharply defined noses.⁵¹ Unlike the slitted eye of *Sowei* masks, however, the eyes on this Ode-lay headpiece are represented opened relatively wide. Heavy black outlines define them as well as the thick eyebrows above. With the white facial color and added cicatrization marks on each cheek, these elements also suggest Yorùbá Gèlèdè masks, especially like those found on an example carved in Freetown (fig. 40) The combination of *Sowei* and Gèlèdè elements in one facial form alludes to the blurred boundaries resulting from mixing of ethnicity in Ode-lay societies, as well as through intermarriage practices operating since the beginning of the colony. It can also be seen as making fun of Western perceptions of African ethnicities as fixed categories, as opposed to the fluidness that characterizes them in actuality. Western perceptions can play into this headpiece's interpretation in yet another way. Both Gèlèdè and *Sowei* masks are well-known examples of African art in Western collections. Indeed, other than *Poro* society masks, *Sowei* masks are the main indicators of Mende culture in African art studies.⁵² Because Ode-lay artists are known for their incorporation of Western elements into their masquerades,⁵³ the Yorùbá and Mende elements can also resonate as African control over Western definitions of Yorùbá-ness and Mende-ness, turning the notions of the West as primary arbiter of African art on its head. Upon considering the headpiece in its totality, the combination of parts seems to bring together tensions that have historically and more currently divided Freetown society. The messenger vulture, *Ọ̀ṣun Ìkólé*, springs forth from the head of Freetown's mixed society in order to avenge inequities (such as the "purchase" of Freetown and later diamond mines) exacted by Europeans.

Obvious characteristics referencing well-known mask types are absent from headpiece number 1 (fig. 35). Her facial expression of acceptance and forthrightness is underscored by her erect posture. Although wrist shackles can imply enslavement, her overall appearance offers no hint at her identity. As a result, several possibilities can be considered in the context of Ode-lay societies. She could represent a female enslaved African, but from London, Nova Scotia, Jamaica, or western and central Africa. She could also be an African woman placed in bondage by another African group. Many Africans became slaves as a result of war, famine, commercial bankruptcy, judicial punishment, or religious persecution in Africa by Africans. Mason found connections between slavery and *Ọ̀ṣun* in the New World. Regarded as the mother

Figure 40

Gèlèdè Mask of the Autta Gèlèdè Society of Freetown. Photo: John Nunley

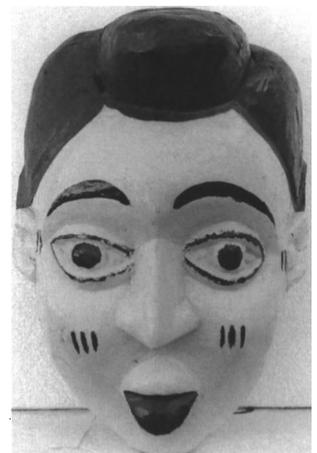




Figure 41
 Religious print of al-Buraq published in Cairo. This is one of several prototypes for al-Buraq images that were widely distributed in Muslim communities of West Africa. © Fowler Museum of Cultural History, University of California, Los Angeles Photo: Don Cole

of slavery, whose bracelets were the first handcuffs and leg irons, she is believed to have “helped her people to survive the middle passage, to come out of the death holes of the slave ships and to come once again into the light of day. Like many powerful Lùkù mí women in Cuba, she is looked to for help in buying the freedom of Lùkù mí slaves taken in war.”⁵⁴

Thus far, it is unknown whether this aspect was associated with Ỗsun among recaptives of Yorùbá origin in Freetown although the idea of enslavement and forced migration was shared by all those enslaved. Although the shackles on the headpiece are an obvious reference to physical bondage, they may also hint at nonphysical modes of captivity. For example, as a representation of a Creole colonist, the black woman’s shackles may be seen as symbolic of the enforced enslavement to British customs and tastes that Creoles projected situationally, even though her hairstyle attests to their refusal to relinquish all aspects of their African culture. The idea of symbolic enslavement could be extended further, denoting an indigenous African bound by Creole-inflicted stereotypes. Her crossed-arm gesture might be seen as part of the

gestural vocabulary of Kongo groups from the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire). However, estimates of captives in Sierra Leone do not support a strong central African presence in the Freetown area during the colonial era. Recently, Nunley's mention of a contemporary settlement in Freetown called Congo Valley as well as the Freetown lantern club known as Congo Market suggest the possibility of a more current Congo interest or presence. The arms-across-the-chest gesture is also common in figures of the Virgin Mary in Christian imagery. Often appearing in scenes depicting the Annunciation and Adoration of the Magi, the gesture symbolizes Mary's acceptance of a higher authority. The Virgin Mary's response to the archangel Gabriel, "Behold, the handmaiden of the Lord," after he informs her that she has been chosen by God to bear his son, underscores the gesture's aspect of humility. This kind of humility and recognition of a higher calling is suggested in the Ode-lay headpiece. Represented as a black woman, this Virgin Mary is also *Ọṣun*, who gave birth to slavery and then took on the burden of safely carrying the Africans across her healing waters. Expressing no hints of fear, this black Mary looks straight ahead with a strong sense of purpose.

A similar confidence is put forth by the female figure in the headpiece's lower portion. Her light-red-colored face introduces an element of fantasy or fiction to the headpiece. Indeed, religious prints widely distributed in Muslim communities of western Africa featured a mythological winged half-horse, half-human creature with a light red face called *al-Buraq*, according to Ali Mazrui (fig. 41).⁵⁵ Nunley points out that images of this creature, said to have carried the prophet Muhammed to heaven, were part of the repertoire of Ode-lay masks in Freetown.⁵⁶ In this supporting position on the bottom of the headpiece, the *al-Buraq* figure becomes the vehicle that transports the black woman away from her enslaved condition into heaven. The red-and-black-painted face of this woman may also reflect Indian imagery found on chromolithographs, also common in Freetown markets. Ethnic interaction was not inaugurated during the Atlantic slave trade.

Intense interaction among Cross River peoples and residents of Freetown, Sierra Leone, heightened by large population movements, illuminate and emphasize the porousness of ethnicity in Africa. Identities are constantly being renegotiated. Part of this process can involve objects employed as boosters of identity distinction as well as visual weapons that meld boundaries. As we shed our perception of African cultures as hermetically sealed entities, we open ourselves to the creative and dynamic flexibility in the construction of cultures and their associated objects.



JOLLY MASKS ARE PERFORMED BY
YOUNG MEN'S SOCIETIES FOR ENTERTAINMENT PURPOSES AROUND
CHRISTMAS AND NEW YEAR'S DAY,
AND DURING WEDDINGS. INDIAN-
STYLE FACE PAINTING ON THIS MASK
ALLUDES TO THE INFLUENCE OF
CHROMOLITHOGRAPHS COMMON
IN FREETOWN MARKETS.

Figure 42
Ode-lay Society "Jolly"
Masquerade Headpiece
20th century
Polychrome, wood, fabric
53 1/2 x 18 1/4 x 18 in.
Sierra Leone
Anonymous Lender
Photo: Carl Kaufman,
Yale University Art Gallery

NOTES

I am grateful to Jo Anna Hunter, Diane Scillia, David Coleman, Marissa Vincenti, Kathy Curnow, Eric Worby, Gul Rukh Salim, John Nunley, Joanna Weber, Camara Holloway, Sarah Adams, and Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz for their thoughtful suggestions and advice given to me at various stages of this essay. I am especially grateful to Robert Farris Thompson, who read many versions of this essay and offered insightful comments.

1. Keith Nicklin, "An Ejagham Emblem of the Ékpè Society," *Musee Barbier-Mueller* (Geneva: Musee Barbier-Mueller, 1991): 8.
2. Patrick McNaughton, "Is There History in Horizontal Masks?: A Preliminary Response to the Dilemma of Form," *African Arts* 24 (April 1991): 50.
3. Simon Ottenberg and Linda Knudsen, "Leopard Society Masquerades: Symbolism and Diffusion," *African Arts* 18 (February 1985): 38.
4. Talbot cited in Nicklin, 4.
5. Ruel cited in Nicklin, 5.
6. Nicklin, 4.
7. Although the basic format of these emblems is similar, the arrangements of the attached objects varies from emblem to emblem. For examples, see cover image of *Musee Barbier-Mueller* (Geneva: Musee Barbier-Mueller, 1991); Nicklin, 3; Tom Phillips, ed., *Africa: The Art of a Continent* (Munich, London, New York: Prestel, 1995): 372; The Center for African Art, *Perspectives: Angles on African Art* (New York: The Center for African Art, 1987): 84.
8. Ruel cited in Nicklin, 5.
9. Personal communication with Robert Farris Thompson, August 1, 2000.
10. Nicklin conducted his research among the Banyang of the Upper Cross River, Cameroon. He mentions that his interpretations are based "on my own field data and the writings of others such as Robert Farris Thompson, Alfred Mansfield, and Malcolm Ruel." Nicklin, 5.
11. Nicklin, 4.
12. *Ibid.*, 5.
13. *Ibid.*, 5.
14. Thompson cited in Nicklin, 5.
15. Nicklin, 5.
16. Chief (Dr.) Eyo Okon Akak, *Efiks of Calabar: vol. 2, Language Origin and Grammar* (Cross River State: Akaks and Sons, 1982): 142.
17. R. F. G. Adams, *Efik-English Dictionary* (Liverpool: Philip, Son, and Nephew, 1952): 196; Donald C. Simmons, "An Ethnographic Sketch of the Efik People," in Daryll Forde, ed., *Efik Traders of Old Calabar* (London: International African Institute, 1968): 1; Monday Efiog Noah, *Old Calabar: The City States and the Europeans, 1800–1885* (Uyo: Scholars Press, 1980): 6.
18. Incidents at various points during their migration suggest a desire by this group to distinguish themselves as exceptional among others. In one incident from an Efik source, this group of people originally migrated from the Sudan into Ghana, then south to the Niger Delta where they settled near Burutu and acquired the name "Eburutu," a term related to their location. Later, "a great misunderstanding arose between the Ibibios and the Eburutus as a result of which the Ibibios nicknamed them 'Efik' or 'oppressors.'" Another version from an Ibibio historian reflects the long-standing debate that the Efik were Ibibio by origin. According to this version, the Ibibio, who then occupied the Cross River estuary, were ordered to move away

from this constantly flooding area by their king Offiong, “who was also so tyrannical and oppressive that he earned the epithet ‘Efik’ (the oppressor), from his subjects.” This source maintains that the use of the name was extended to Offiong’s entire family and relatives, some of which left the mainland and crossed to the east side of the river but “continued to answer to that contemptuous title once borne by the great ancestor,” while the remaining kin “had long dropped it [the name Efik] as a sad reminder of King Offiong’s tyranny.” Because there is not enough evidence to determine the degree of truth in regard to this perception, the idea that choices may have been made in response to this naming is quite telling. See Noah, 4–10; Akak, 142; and Adams, 196.

19. Rivalry and competition are constantly evident in southern Nigeria and sometimes institutionalized. Among the Yorùbá, the Ogboni society helps to balance the respective powers of men and women. Chiefs in Benin are also known to test each other supernaturally as they vie for control. These issues are certainly not exclusive to Africa. See Barbara Groseclose, “Imag(in)ing Indians,” *Art History* 13, no. 4 (December 1990): 488–515; Vishakha N. Desai, “Painting and Politics in Seventeenth-Century North India: Mewar, Bikaner, and the Mughal Court,” *Art Journal* 49 (winter 1990): 370–78; Sheila Ffolliott, “Casting a Rival into the Shade: Catherine de’Medici and Diane de Poitiers,” *Art Journal* 48 (summer 1990): 138–143; Gulru Necipoglu, “Suleyman the Magnificent and the Representation of Power in the Context of Ottoman-Hapsburg-Papal Rivalry,” *Art Bulletin* 71, no. 3 (September 1989): 401–427.
20. Ottenberg and Knudsen, 40.
21. Rev. Hope Masterson Waddell, *Twenty-Nine Years in the West Indies and Central Africa: A Review of Missionary Work and Adventure, 1829–1858* (London: Frank Cass, 1970): 265.
22. A. J. H. Latham, *Old Calabar, 1600–1891: The Impact of the International Economy upon a Traditional Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973): 37.
23. Ottenberg and Knudsen, 40.
24. Latham, 38.
25. Ottenberg and Knudsen, 40.
26. Personal communication with Robert Farris Thompson, July 6, 2000.
27. Latham, 38.
28. Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Vintage, 1983): 245.
29. John Peterson, *Province of Freedom: A History of Sierra Leone, 1787–1870* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969): 17.
30. Christopher Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962): 170.
31. Philip Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969): 245.
32. S. O. Biobaku, *Sources of Yorùbá History* (London: Clarendon, 1973): 1.
33. See John Nunley, *Moving with the Face of the Devil* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987): 3–36, 61–68.
34. *Ibid.*, 20–21.
35. *Ibid.*, 22–23.
36. Sandra T. Barnes and Paula Girshick Ben-Amos, “Ògún, the Empire Builder,” in *Africa’s Ògún: Old World and New*, ed. Sandra T. Barnes (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989): 57.
37. Nunley, 32.

38. Ibid., 103–138.
39. Ibid., 120.
40. Leo Spitzer, *The Creoles of Sierra Leone: Responses to Colonialism, 1870–1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974): 27.
41. E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olódùmarè: God in Yorùbá Belief* (Nigeria: Longman, 1962): 51. Jo Anna Hunter and David Coleman offered a variation on this myth expressed to her by Lucumi practitioners in Black Cuba. According to her sources, “the vulture, an embodiment of the deity *Ọ̀sun*, became bald because his feathers were singed by the sun.” Personal communication with Jo Anna Hunter and David Coleman, August 2, 2000. Lydia Cabrera casts *Ọ̀sun* Ikole in a more sinister light, calling her “the smiling and seductive *Ọ̀sun*, who has fallen very low, ‘drags herself in the mire of the river’; she is an obstinate witch, inseparable from the Scabby Vulture (*Cathartes Vulture*), and from there comes the nickname *Ibu-Kole*. She is found in dejected misery; she possesses only one tunic, which was yellow—her symbolic color—and which from so much washing has turned white. She eats whatever the vulture brings her. She flies with it or on it, and all her works are evil.” Lydia Cabrera, *Yemanya and Oshun: The Water-Goddesses of Cuba*, trans. John Turpin and Blanca Martinez (New York: E. Torres, 1980): 72.
42. Nunley, 108.
43. Spitzer, 102.
44. Ibid., 82.
45. Ibid., 82.
46. Ibid., 102.
47. Fitz-John cited in Spitzer, 73.
48. Horton cited in Spitzer, 73.
49. Spitzer, 75.
50. According to Sylvia Boone, “Bundu is the Krio (the language of the Creoles of the western coastal, colonized region) and Temne name for the same women’s society referred to by the Mende as Sande.” See Sylvia Ardyn Boone, *Radiance From the Waters: Ideals of Feminine Beauty in Mende Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), xxii. The Mende call this genre of masks *Sowei*.
51. Side flanges such as those on this headpiece appear on a *Sowei* mask example in Warren M. Robbins and Nancy Ingram Nooter, *African Art in American Collections, Survey 1989* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989): 263. These particular features, however, are not explained and do not appear on any other reproduced mask examples. I thank Sarah Adams for pointing out this example.
52. The text, Williams L. Hommel, *Art of the Mende* (College Park: University of Maryland, 1974).
53. Nunley, 38–53, 61–68, 75–96, 103–132, 139–158, 160–173.
54. Mason, 367 fn.7.
55. Ali Mazrui, “Islam and African Art,” *African Arts* 27, no.1 (1994): 55.
56. Nunley cited in Doran Ross, “Elephant: Animal and Its Ivory in African Culture,” *African Arts* 25, no. 4 (1992): 76.

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Mambo Comes from the Soul

BÁRBARO MARTÍNEZ-RUIZ

Los símbolos en los objetos más que formas
constituyen la esencia de una filosofía
del pensamiento y del espíritu.—Clemente M. Faik-Nzuji

any art historians have explored the fundamental theme of the problem of the form when describing the evolution of the representation of styles. In this chapter, I explore the notion of object as a form of writing, an orientation uncommon in the historical tradition of Western art. The art to which I refer is rooted on the classic civilization of the Kongo in central Africa and the diaspora on the American continent. Many parallels and differences can be seen between these two experiences of art and culture, which have been shaped by countless historical occurrences since the end of the fifteenth century, with the arrival of the Portuguese in the Congo in 1482 and the Spanish occupation of the Caribbean in 1492.

Studies of central African culture have been conducted throughout the years, investigating various historical, aesthetic, and anthropological orientations. Such works have helped to expand the current knowledge and each offers an avenue of inquiry through its critical references, value judgments, and biographical references toward a better understanding of the other forms of communication and transmission where objects are transformed into a kind of writing.

Certain writings should be considered classic documents within the historiography of the art of central Africa, including Karl Laman's *The Kongo I-IV*, Robert Farris Thompson's *Flash of the Spirit*, Wyatt MacGaffey's *Religion and Society in Central Africa*, and K. K. Fu-Kiau Buseki's *Self-Healing Power and Therapy: Old Teachings from Africa*. These works collectively form a detailed picture of the culture, art, and religion of central Africa and emphasize its role in the Caribbean.

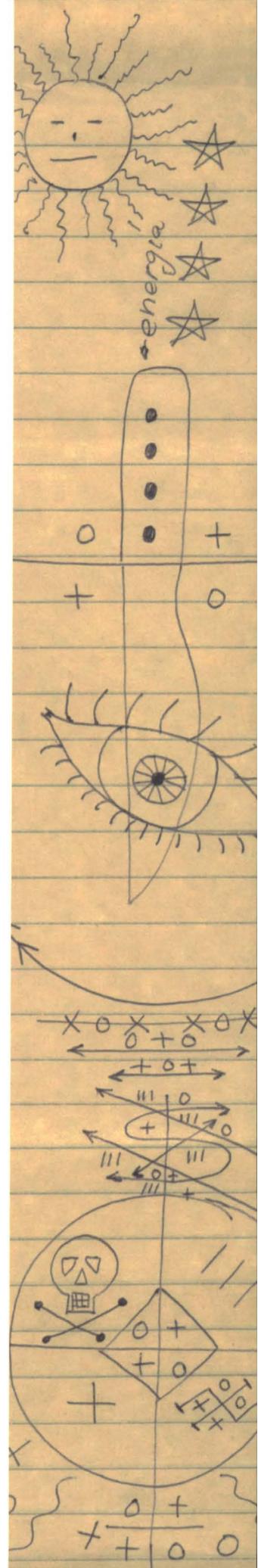


Figure 43

Feticos de Angola
(men with *minkisi*), ca. ?
African Postcard
Collection *1575
3 1/2 x 5 1/2 in.
Yale Sterling Memorial
Library, Manuscripts &
Archives (Angola)
Photo: Susan Cole, Alex
Contreras, Yale University
Art Gallery

Any study of central African art and religion should involve the notion of object within African art history. Such consideration will, however, result in a paradox: on one hand, one must take apart the aesthetic and expressive foundation in order to characterize the objects to place them in a mark of reference far beyond the culture, religion, art, and philosophy. On the other hand, one must avoid reducing a culture to its objects, which would limit it to speculative, idealistic, or conventional hedonistic interpretations. My intention is to see beyond the stereotypes, formal views, and fetishization of African art and to bring some of the anthropological discourse into its study.

Interest in this notion is not new within the study of central Africa and the Caribbean. The insights of such authors as Giovanni A. Cavazzi, Filippo Pigafetta, Fernando Ortiz, Lydia Cabrera, and John K. Thornton are essential. Their studies of central Africa have gathered under the notion of the object, *nkisi* (plural *minkisi*)¹ in the Ki-Kongo language, the ancient official tongue of the Kongo civilization. *Nkisi* is a type of religious object that exists as both a three-dimensional form and a form of writing. In view of this meaning, the term “*nkisi*” seems loosely used and overused to refer to the majority of art objects used as religious objects in central African art studies. I use the term “*nkisi*” to refer to any kind of religious tools used to engage energy—as for medicine, spiritual vibration, and forces of nature. At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, Karl Eduard Laman, the Swiss missionary, used this term in the most general sense in the third volume of his series on the Kongo, *The Kongo III*, in which he dedicates various chapters to

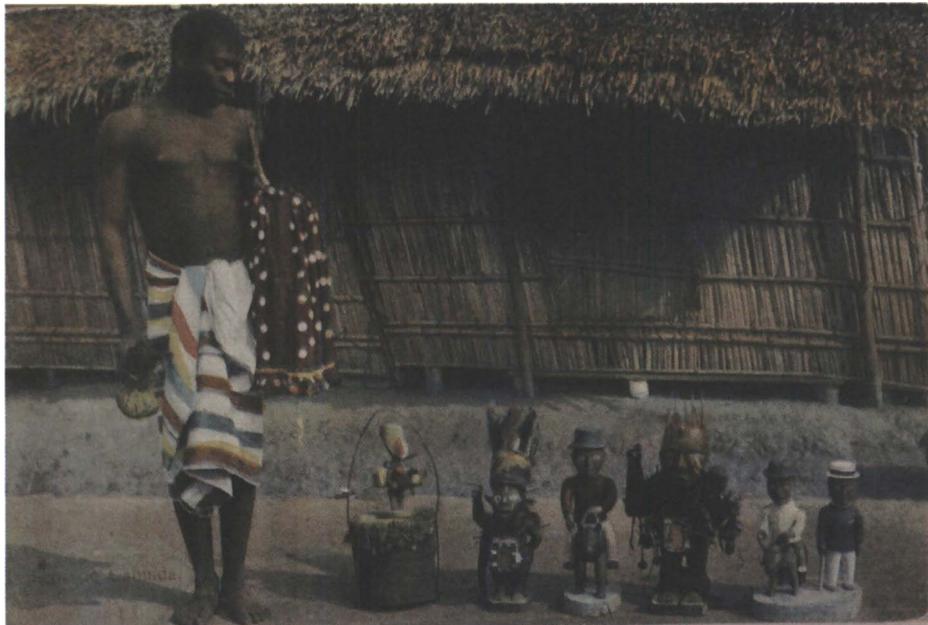




Figure 44
Man with Nkisi, Lwangu
(Loango), Popular
Republic of the Congo.
19th-century drawing from
Pechuel-Loesche, *Volkskunde
von Loango*, (Stuttgart:
Strecker & Schröder, 1907)
Yale Sterling Memorial
Library
Photo: Susan Cole, Alex
Contreras, Yale University
Art Gallery

Figure 45

Congo Fetiche du Bas-Congo [Congo Fetish of the Lower Congo]

Hand-painted collotype
3 ½ x 5 ½ in.

Photographer unknown
c. 1900

Published by Nels, Brussels,
Belgium, Serie 14, No. 88

Postcard Collection

Eliot Elisofon Photographic
Archives National Museum
of African Art

Smithsonian Institution

[*Congo Belge Indigenous
Peoples*, vol. 2]

The figure is posed in front
of the house of an nganga.

the definition and classification of minkisi on the basis of their function and morphology. Laman argues that the first nkisi was Nzambi and was characterized as medicine (*bilongo*),² also recognizing that it contains *Mwala* (breath, life, and soul).³ Laman also believes that all of the minkisi are born from Nzambi and are characterized as being “strong, hav[ing] eyes and ears, life and power, and they are able to cure the sick.” He also comments, “The minkisi have subsequently come from man’s spirit, for according to native theories of the soul, the deceased have lived to pass over into *Nkita* and *Simbi* spirits. They have left the world of the dead to take up their abode here and





Figure 46
Powerful Nkisi Figure
(Nkisi Nkondi),
Wood, nails, mirror, cloth
H: 20 in.
Democratic Republic
of Congo
Anonymous Lender
Photo: Carl Kaufman, Yale
University Art Gallery

there in and on the earth, e.g. under stones, in watercourses and forests, or on the plains, etc.”⁴ (fig. 43).

The anthropologist Wyatt MacGaffey, in the introduction to his book *Art and Healing of the Bakongo*, defines nkisi as “a personalized force from the invisible land of the dead; this force has chosen, or been induced, to submit itself to some degree of human control effected through ritual performances.”⁵ Later in the same text he extends this definition, writing, “the nkisi itself, the embodiment of the spiritual entity.”⁶ Finally, Robert Farris Thompson is the first author who presents a continuation of the notion of nkisi, in his book *Flash of the Spirit*, describing it as a type of medicine with parallels in the Bakongo⁷ tradition and its migration to the Americas through the forms of Afro-American religions such as Palo Monte,⁸ Macumba, and Voodoo. For example, Thompson observes “the sacred Kongo medicine, or minkisi; the use of graves of the recently deceased as charms of ancestral vigilance and spiritual return; and related supernatural uses of trees, staffs, branches, and roots”⁹ (figs. 44–46).

Laman, MacGaffey, and Thompson offer us a base from which to understand better the art and culture of central Africa, an understanding that is echoed in many of the works I discuss here. I examine these works as a form of writing, as a legitimate space of memory and knowledge, and, moreover, as a monument to the human legacy of the cultural world.

The tradition of representation in central African culture and its descendants in the Americas demonstrates firstly that a form of language or writing exists beyond the representation of the objects, or rather, the objects themselves are a conceptualization of reality. Thompson emphasizes a unity of reality and language in which the concept of beauty must be understood as part of the recognition in the objects of the ambient experiences, corporeal actions, dance presentations, and rituals. Art expresses existence, spirituality, the cosmos, and the ancestral forces. In addition to Thompson’s concept of beauty, beauty is associated with a feeling of collectiveness, the unity of all beings in society, a consequence of the communication common across all forms of cultural expression.

The written forms of communication are referred to as “graphic writing systems,” known in central Africa as *bidimbu*¹⁰ and in Cuba as *firmas* (signatures)¹¹ in the speech of ritual practice and the oral literature. In general, beauty proportions the necessary and functional pieces of knowledge in order to understand a philosophy that is founded in the beginnings of a comprehension of nature. As such, knowledge results from the interaction of man and nature through artistic forms, ritual and religious experiences, and other areas of knowledge and daily life (fig. 47).

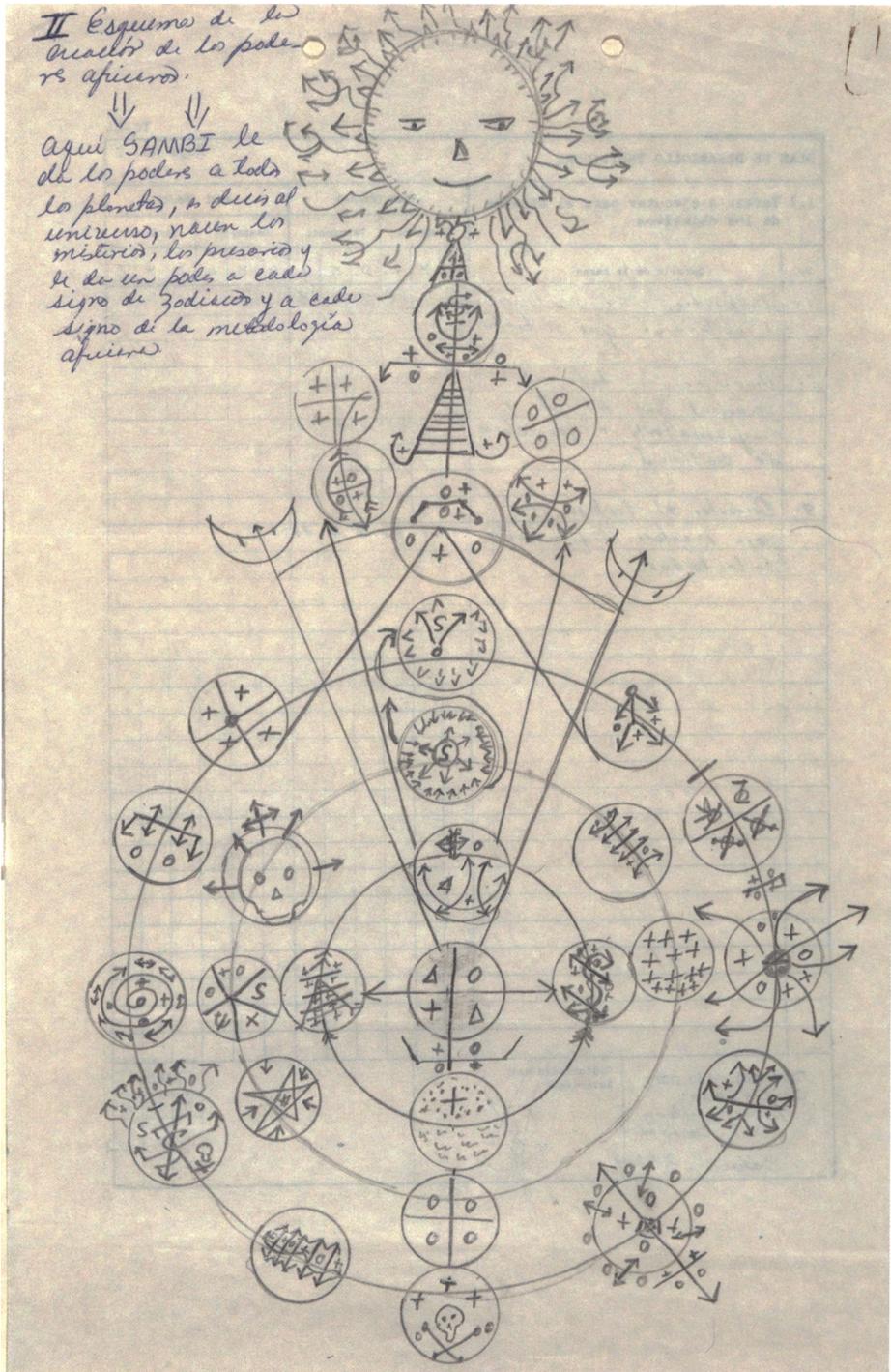


Figure 47
 Firma of Nzambi Mpungu.
 Religious document from
 Osvaldo Fresneda Bachiller,
 Havana, Cuba. Bárbaro
 Martínez-Ruiz, Personal
 Collection, 1989
 8 x 11.5 in.
 Photo: Susan Cole, Alex
 Contreras, Yale University
 Art Gallery

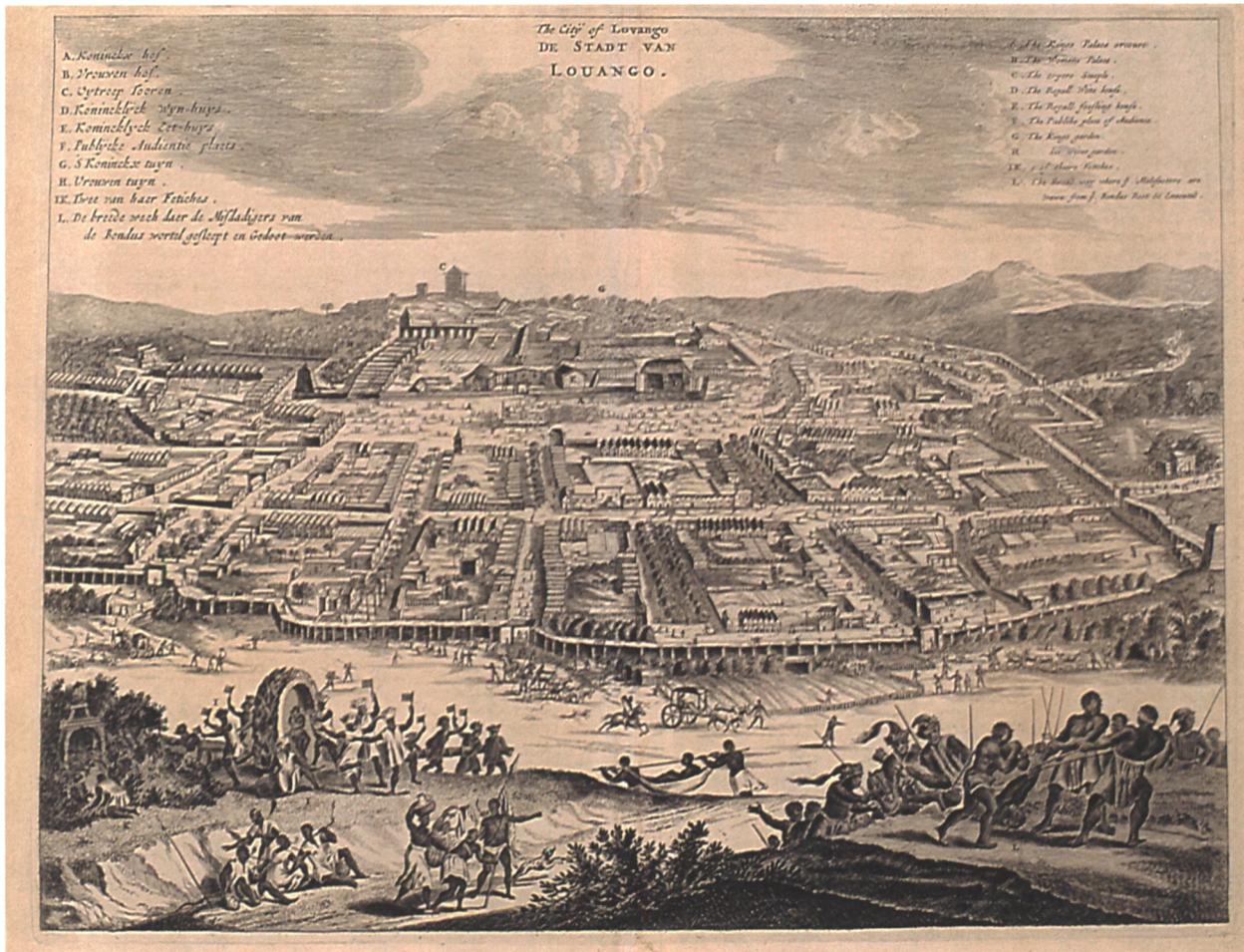


Figure 48
De stad van Louango.
 London: John Ogilby, 1670.
 From *Ogilby's Africa: Being an accurate description . . .*
 Printmaker: Olifert Dapper.
 12 3/8 x 14 3/4 in.
 Map coll. *652 1670.
 Yale University Map Collection
 Yale Sterling Memorial Library, in "City of Lwangu."
 Photo: Susan Cole, Alex Contreras, Yale University Art Gallery

The graphic writing systems should be thought of primarily in terms of their sociological function, and they serve as a bridge to articulate specific themes that are obligatory references for comprehending the African cultures and their constant metabolism in the American continent. Thompson states, "We have to compare traditions rather than objects. The objects may be questionable, but the traditions are not."¹² This affirmation calls attention to the notion of art and forms of communication within the Bakongo tradition that defines art through recognition of the cosmological ideas and definitions present in the objects. As such, the knowledge of nature is represented in a rational and conscious form of the principles of harmony and human interaction with the world.

Certain concepts are fundamental to understanding the cultural references of central African origin and their reinsertion via the religions and Afro-Cuban culture. Especially important are the migratory character of these terms and their passage to a new context. These terms include: *nkisi* (plural *minkisi*)

versus *nganga/prenda* (the creolized form of Kongo nkisi that bristles with feathers, earths, and sometimes skulls), *nganga* (plural *banganga*) versus *tata nkisi/palero* (a priest in the creolized Kongo religion of Cuba), *munanso* versus *nso nganga*, *bidinbu* (scripture) versus *firmas/gango*, *mooyo* versus *mpungo* (force or energy), and other simple terms like *bilongo* (medicine), *ma-longo* (contee, grande distance, lion)¹³ / *malongo* (nature), *makuto* (type of amulet),¹⁴ *zarabanda*, *mpaka*¹⁵ (magic horn or key that ensures the mpungo inside the nkisi), *vititi meeso* (magic crystal, also as a means of protection), *ngweyo* (godsons or someone being initiated in Palo Monte), *bandoki* (sorcerer), *nkandu* (a ritual form of establishing the relationships between the forces and practitioner), *mambu* (word, subject, process, discussion)¹⁶ / *mambo* (the lyrical ritual of the practice of Palo Monte), *simbi* (plural *bisimbi* from *simba*, hold, keep, preserve; also refers to a strong spirit that lives under the water),¹⁷ and *nkita* (guardian spirit of the *simbi* country, or land of the dead).

Religion and Mythology

The Palo Monte religion in Cuba developed as a means for organizing knowledge, like cosmogony and philosophy, through “artistic expression,” with wide implications for mythological, metaphysical, and cosmological thought. In the religious sense, Cuban Palo Monte involves both comprehension and action in relation to the principles that support harmony between humans and nature. Religious knowledge requires a dialogue among humans, nature, and the cosmos. The Kongo-Cubans practice these forms of thought and knowledge through the extensive vocabulary of *Palo*, a generic term popularly used in Cuba to refer to the roots and trunk of a tree.¹⁸ In the cryptic vernacular Castillian of the religion, Palo Monte signifies the strength and power of a tree on a mountain. For this reason, the practitioners of Palo Monte, like the original Kongo that preceded it in the central African countries of the Popular Republic of the Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Popular Republic of Angola, and Gabon, base their religious practice in the powers and energies of the trees, plants, elements of nature, and cosmic forces. The Kongo denomination is linguistically related to the Bantu dominant in the spoken rituals of the diverse forms of the Palo Monte religion.¹⁹

The Palo Monte religion is organized around the myth of Mambe, common across all forms of its practice in the diaspora. The notion of Mambe refers to the great ancestor, the first human being, whose importance is evident from the numerous mythical references to his death and in the mambos²⁰ of the initiation rituals.

For Kongo-Cubans, the great ancestor is actually represented in the

mythological figure Mambele²¹ (the old witch), although over time, this figure has lost much of its significance within the oral articulation of meaning and ritual experiences. It is Mambele that, within Palo Monte mythology, represents political and spiritual authority and is the keeper of religious secrets. As told in the religious oral literature, his functions include performance of divination exercises to broadcast the principles necessary for maintaining balance between the community and nature.

Another fundamental figure in the myth, marked by his ritual and literary importance, is that of Ngo,²² the leopard guardian of the community, with the role of maintaining equilibrium in the mutually protective relations of community and nature. As part of the Kongo-Cuban triangular myth, his importance and metaphoric significance is exceeded by the figure of Mambe, the principal figure of the myth by way of his metaphorical, conceptual, and ritual significance, as the human archetype, the first human. Mambe has all of the ritual and symbolic attributes of the great ancestor, Mambele, whose religious importance is emphasized only in references to religious oral literature.

For the religious liturgy, all of the mythological figures participate equally in the sentences of power invoked within the religious practice. Only Mambe has a double significance within the myth, or rather, the principal references to Mambe are evidenced in a very discreet form of mambo²³ and, of course, in ritual experiences like the oaths of the forces within the sacred room of religious practice.

The versions of the myth of Mambe or Lwangu in Palo Monte have survived until today in the form of one coherent myth, with another version known as Lwangu (Luango), which also continues to be widely used. The two versions of the myth were most probably created to help slaves survive and deal with their isolation. In fact, the arrival in Cuba of slaves of diverse ethnic groups from the extensive zone of the ancient kingdom of Kongo necessitated disenculturation and integration, and led to the formation of a new consciousness of group identity within a context of economic and cultural marginality. Here I refer to the two versions and explore the three principal branches of the Palo Monte religion, drawing upon sources that include testimonies of Cuban *paleros*²⁴ (priests), residents in the provinces of Havana and Matanzas, and in the U.S. cities of Miami, New York, and Los Angeles.

The first version of the Mayombe²⁵ branch was found in the El Cotorro neighborhood of Havana, with its continuation coming from the province of Matanzas:

One day Ngo was divided by the approaching death of the hamlet, when the ancients knew the delicate news, they decided to consult with the elders of the community, notable men, and the *Tata*

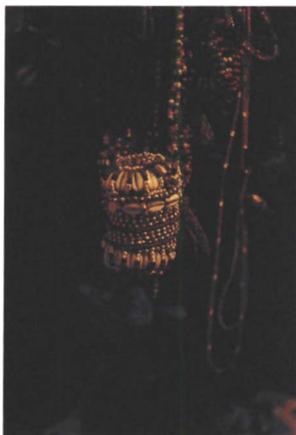


Figure 49
Type of amulet known as *makuto*. Felipe Garcia Villamil, Personal Collection, Los Angeles, California. Photo: Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz, 2000

*Nganga*²⁶ (priests) of the neighboring villages; owing that the stability of the community depended upon the life of the old guardian. After long hours of meditation and listening to the predictions of the oracle through the Chamalongos,²⁷ they arrived at the conclusion that what needed to be done was an offering of blood from a young member of the hamlet so that Ngo would return to life and would be able to maintain the honor, prosperity, salvation, the vital power of nature, and the energy of all things in the cosmos. When Mambe, the youngest son of Murabunda, learned of this news he decided to give his own life for the life of Ngo and ensure that the harmony of the community would be recaptured. The spirit of Mambe, after his death, was transformed into stone, fragmented by its grandfather Mambele in order to create the foundation for the diverse branches of the Palo Monte system.²⁸

In Palo Monte mythology, Mambe and Lwangu are known as rock, the memory of all spirits transforming into stones at the beginning of life. Human beings and animals, after death, become first bones and later stone. During the Palo Monte initiation ceremonies, each person becomes the spirit of Mambe, a transformation that represents life's first change. In Mambo, Mambe is celebrated in such songs as "Canto de Coralillo" and another proverb sung to me by Felipe Garcia Villamil:

hay muertos que no hacen ruido,
pero son duras sus penas²⁹

there are spirits that are quiet,
but their suffering is great

Furthermore, according to Robert Farris Thompson,³⁰ in central African tradition *Mambe* stands for a strong spirit from the forest.

The death of Mambe signaled the start of the practice of the cult to the ancestors. The power and souls of ancestors are honored by the first sentence said in every ceremony, as the priest calls the spirit, saying *Mambe-Yo* (I am Mambe).³¹ Mambe is the first spirit that is needed to make any kind of nkisi. The importance of this spirit in Kongo-Cuban tradition is acknowledged in the Cuban mambo "Mambe Vivo" (Living Mambe).

Muna munan Nzambe nganga muna Nzambe
abre cutere Tata Nzambe yeto yeto llega a insulo
hocico Congo mira insulo lengua congo llega a Nzambe
Abre munelando munanso Nzambe vensala.³²



Figure 50
Prenda or nkisi of Palo Monte religious practice. "Face of the Gods: Altar of Africa and the African Americas," The Museum for the African, New York, New York. Felipe Garcia Villamil, Personal Collection
Photo: C. Daniel Dawson, 1993

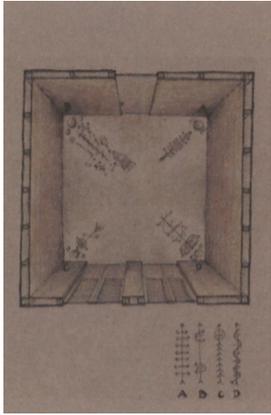


Figure 52
 Nso nganga (temple)
 according to the practice of
 Palo Monte in Matanzas,
 Cuba. From Felipe Garcia
 Villamil sketches, Los
 Angeles, California, 2000.
 Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz,
 Personal Collection
 Drawing by Michael Lee-Poy
 Photo: Susan Cole, Alex
 Contreras, Yale University
 Art Gallery

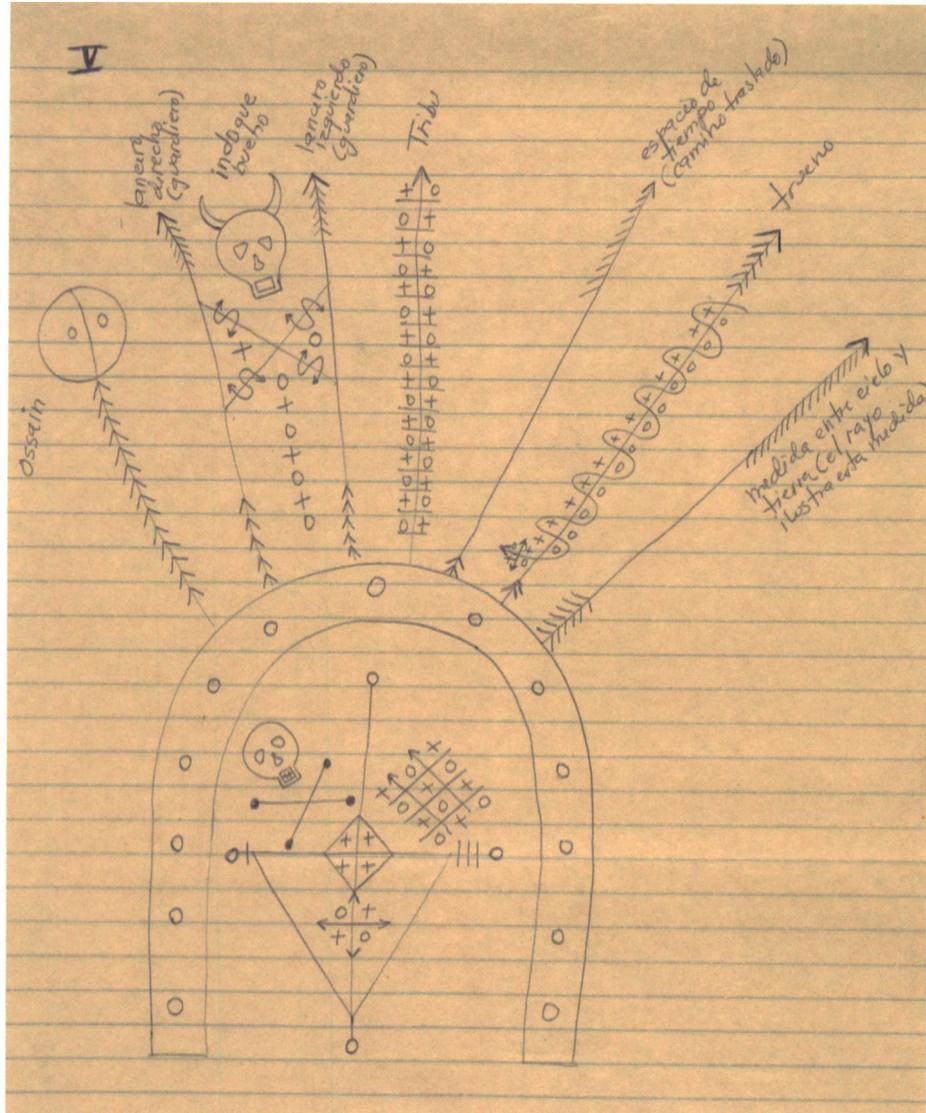


Figure 51 Firma of Saca Empeño. Osvaldo Fresneda Bachiller, personal document,
 Havana, Cuba. Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz, Personal Collection, 1989. 8 x 11.5 in. Photo:
 Susan Cole, Alex Contreras, Yale University Art Gallery

For the sign of God's command that I have prayed to
 Open great God's almighty blessing as we arrive at the gates of heaven
 Congo's mouth look at the sky, Congo speech arriving in God's realm
 God's open door through the work of the ritual.

Mambe is also integral to the veneration of the first *nfumbe* (an ancestor that lives inside the nkisi and talks through them), which accompanied the first plant of power, the palo *ebano* (of ebony), and the rights of Ntubirona

(the person who sacrificed Mambe). The rights of Ntubirona are: a head of a crocodile; wax; spring water; honey; a rumandio bird; seven coconuts; twenty-one *corojos* (Cuban fruit); the lightning rock (a rock representing this force); a stick of burning ebony; a serpent; a vulture; a vulture egg; two drums with which to celebrate the death of Mambe as a symbol of honor, courage, and good will; offerings of the weapons of the most illustrious warriors; sea water, snail shells, and ocean water as symbols of greatness and mystery; well water to symbolize depth; land; yam; corn; and plant. The Garcia-Villamil family of Matanzas, Cuba, tells this version of the myth:

Lwangu³³ (Loango) was the brother of Tangume, who fulfilled the function of Tata Nganga in the community. During a day of hunting, Lwangu died fighting with a wild animal, so Tangume gathered together the community in order to choose a new Mayordomo.³⁴ After long hours of predictions, he decided that the one who was able to capture the great leopard of the jungle would be initiated³⁵ as the Mayordomo of the community. All of the members of the community went in search of the great leopard, but it was the warrior Kuruma that was able to capture the fierce animal.

The council met in a cave called Simbirico la Krillumba that guarded a pot³⁶ which contained the head of Lwangu, and here initiated Kuruma as Mayordomo. In the moment of initiation, the spirit of Lwangu appeared saying I am Sarabanda Cuye. In order to care for the path to the Simbirico cave where the nkisi/nganga “Batalla Congo”³⁷ was, the decision was made to look for the kongo Diamlunqueto³⁸ (personal name of member of the religion). After the Congo Malangumbe³⁹ (another member of the religion) appeared and sanctified the foot of the Nganga, and later, for greater security, initiated the youngest son of Tangume as guardian of the council.⁴⁰

In the two versions of the myth we can see that death, and the consecration of the spirit of death, is a basic component of all practice of Palo Monte. With the deaths of Mambe and Lwangu we see the indistinct representation of the birth of the Kongo’s first nfumbe⁴¹ (an ancestor at the service of a priest through a secret pact), or the spirit at the service of the *nganga* (priest) and of the first nkisi of the Cuban style. Lwangu represents the practice of Palo Monte in Matanzas to the mythical city of the Kongo, Lwangu.⁴² All practitioners of Palo Monte believe their ancestors come from this mystical city (fig. 48).



Figure 53
Nso nganga front door according to the practice of Palo Monte in Matanzas, Cuba. From Felipe Garcia Villamil sketches, Los Angeles, California, 2000. Drawing by Michael Lee-Poy. Private Collection, Susan Cole, Alex Contreras, Yale University Art Gallery

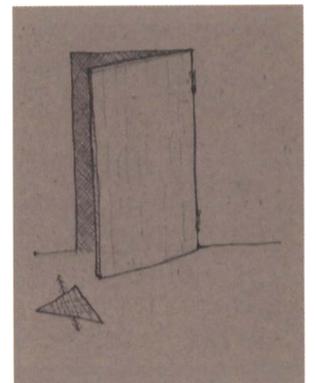
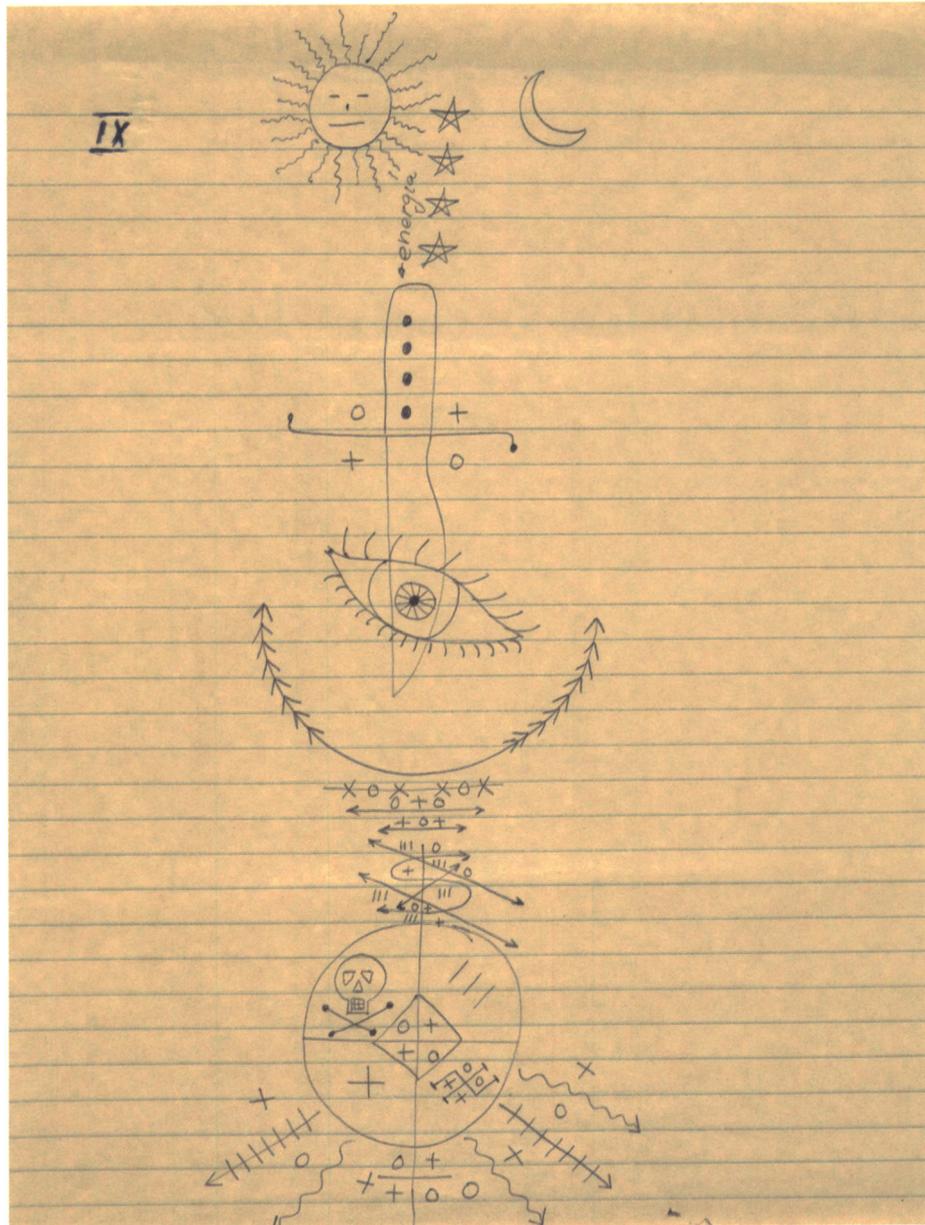


Figure 54
Nso nganga back door according to the practice of Palo Monte in Matanzas, Cuba. From Felipe Garcia Villamil sketches, Los Angeles, California, 2000. Drawing by Michael Lee-Poy. Photo: Susan Cole, Alex Contreras, Yale University Art Gallery

Figure 55

Firma of the contract of Siete Rayos (seven rays of lightning). Religious document from Osvaldo Fresneda Bachiller, Havana, Cuba. Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz, Personal Collection, 1989. 8 x 11.5 in. Photo: Susan Cole, Alex Contreras, Yale University Art Gallery



The Kongo religions are characterized by their constant dialogue with nature, with this exchange allowing for the development of a pragmatic vision of humanity's part in this dialogue and its willingness to live in such communion. We can exemplify this with a look at the construction of *minkisi*, which are produced with great morphological diversity: in the form of a bag, cauldron, pumpkin, basket, horn; in the form of anthropomorphic sculptures with magical power (medicine) formed by accumulations of energy by way of keys and/or bags; in the form of zoomorphic actions of magic power by way

of keys and/or bags or packets; and in the amorphous form of a packet or sack.⁴³

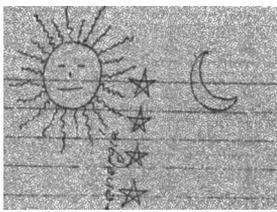
In Cuba the *minkisi* tradition is reinstated in two basic forms: (1) a sack or pouch (*bumba*,⁴⁴ an ancient form that possibly is related to the *nkisi* form known as *makuto*) slightly larger than a pocket amulet (fig. 49), and (2) a caldero,⁴⁵ called *prenda* or *nganga* (the recipient or cauldron this spirit inhabits), the equivalent of *nkisi*⁴⁶ in central Africa (fig. 50).

The vast majority of the *nkisi* are found in the Cuban Palo Monte religion in the form of a cauldron (*pawns*) known as *prenda*.⁴⁷ Cauldrons that contain the major spirit and the twenty-one associated spirits are made of iron or ceramic. Another form of *nkisi* in Kongo-Cuban tradition is in the form of a packet, or *makuto*.⁴⁸ Also, the center of the *nkisi* is called the heart or *makuto* because it is formed by pairs of branches of medical trees and orientated in the direction of the four cardinal points in order to attract energy. *Prenda* and *nkisi* both reflect the central idea of the established religious practice, in which miniaturizing of the world is essential in religious objects. Robert Farris Thompson has observed that miniaturizing the world means to simplify and condense the earth without changing the value to get better harmony and understanding, and to control the feelings and emotions for world comprehension and protection. Laman adds to this definition: “forming of medicine derived from these respective spheres (land, water, sky).” Thompson expands the definition of *nkisi* or *nganga/prenda* as an iron cauldron or pot that conforms to the recapitulation of nature, that in the form of energy or vital force contained in all the things of the earth.⁴⁹ Figuratively, the *nkisi* represents all of the power of the earth in miniature.⁵⁰ This definition establishes a bridge from Cuba that calls to the recipients of power and medicine in the Kongo religious tradition. In central Africa these are found under the denomination of *nkisi*⁵¹ that includes a variety of *minkisi* marked by their aesthetic quality, morphology, and function. For example, Laman distinguishes nine types of *minkisi*; the pepper *nkisi* (a bag with pepper and other strong medicines) for the taking of medicine, for the diagnosis of disease, and for the disclosing of criminals; protective *nkisi* for protection in war, from certain maladies, and from evil spirits; restoring *nkisi* to guide the soul back to the sick body; suction *nkisi* to suck out stones, and hail; reviver *nkisi* for fertility and productiveness; *nkisi nkondi* for the swearing of oaths, the conclusion of treaties, and the pronouncing of blessings or curses; awakening *nkisi* for love;

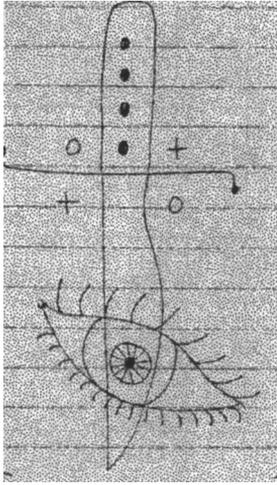
Figure 56

Nkisi nkondi or Power Figure *Nkisi* Kongo. Popular Republic of Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Popular Republic of Angola, wood, nail, mirror, cloth. H: 13 3/8 in. Anonymous Collection. Photo: George Meister





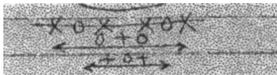
57



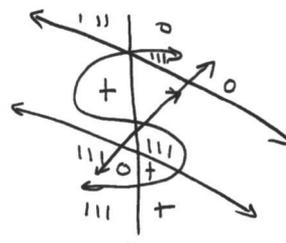
58



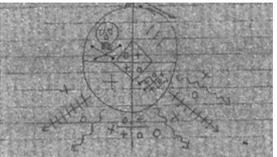
59



60



61



62

Figures 57–62

Sello from the signature
Seven Rays. Osvaldo
Fresneda Bachiller, personal
document, Havana, Cuba.
Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz,
Personal Collection, 1989
Photo: Susan Cole, Alex
Contreras, Yale University
Art Gallery

nkisi *nkula* for the subjugation of spirits; and coronation nkisi for hunting. This list reveals that these minkisi cover all aspects of daily life, society, and the political, legal, and religious spheres.

One verse of a mambo of the Palo branch Lwangu, as told by Francisco de Armas Gonzales, says “tonimagua wantonima,” which can be translated approximately as “little things change all else.”⁵² This statement reveals the primary philosophical position of the Bakongo on both sides of the ocean, particularly the paleros in Cuba. The practitioners of Palo Lwangu understand that the general conditions of potential religious knowledge are determined by an understanding that any religious practice is founded upon spiritual actions. Such spiritual actions are determined by the forms of knowledge that exist, like objects produced to regulate ritual practice and serve as mediators between the practitioners and the circumstances of daily life. These objects are more than symbolic in that they open an avenue of understanding, a symbolic numerical codification related to the experience and memory of religious practice. On the other hand, these objects are part of a unified set of spiritual containers that aid the understanding of, and communication between, the practitioners, uniting the spheres of medicine, myth, and language.

Systems of Graphic Writing/Language

Robert Farris Thompson, in the second chapter of *Flash of the Spirit*, refers to the cosmogram as a basic form of expression of the Bakongo, explaining that cosmograms are “marked on the ground for purposes of initiation and mediation of spirit power between worlds.”

Kongo graphic writing systems that exist in Africa and in the Americas consist of cosmograms, pictograms, and ideograms. These symbols appear in two- and three-dimensional forms. They may be drawn with chalk on the ground, on the surfaces of minkisi and prenda, or on floors and walls; they may also be engraved on masks or sculpted, as seen in cement funerary monuments. The graphic writing systems are powerful spiritual forces, with cosmograms acting as codes to attract such forces. In addition, Kongo music is considered a living historical document, with the lyrics sung during Palo Monte ceremonies expressing knowledge of religious ceremonies, philosophy, and history. The ways in which songs convey specific philosophical concepts allow for an exploration of the relation between humans and nature.

To understand the concept of “writing” in Cuba, one must consider other elements of the Kongo graphic writing systems. The signatures have at least four possible meanings that have evolved from various attempts to place forms of Kongo writing in a Cuban social context. We see this first in

pictograms,⁵³ or picture writing; second, in ideograms or in corporate ideograms; third, in phonological or compound verbal signs and syllabic and alphabetic writing; and finally, in mnemotechnical⁵⁴ form.

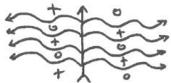
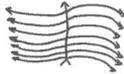
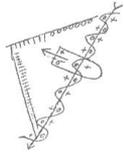
The term “graphic writing systems” can be credited to Gerhard Kubik, who argued that such a system must be understood as a “visual communication system whose constituent parts are made upon a grapheme, i.e. the smallest meaningful unit in the system.”⁵⁵ Following from Kubik’s idea, graphic writing systems relate to any form of language that produces meaning through infinite play of signs. For example, in Cuba, the system refers to different types of knowledge and philosophy using various forms of graphic record, such as cosmograms or testimonial histories about origin, to convey man’s conception of the gods, power scriptures, or religious documents used for ritual purposes, and to questions of metaphysical knowledge that include “such issues as the possibility of a priority knowledge, the nature of memory and abstract thought, the reality of the external world.”⁵⁶

The “Firmas/Fimbas,” Maps of the Mpungo

The signature system, known as *firmas*⁵⁷ (literally in Spanish: signatures), is the designated graphic writing system in Cuba. The system is also known as *Gángo*,⁵⁸ literally “the passageway of mpungo; the signal and the essence of God are working down on the earth.”⁵⁹ The signatures function as a type of map or electrical circuit whereby the electricity and force of God, and the cosmic vibrations through the minkisi, circulate and materialize like the creative force of God. Lydia Cabrera defined the system as “magical drawings that the Bakongo drew on the ground.”⁶⁰ Firmas originally provided the Kongo-Cuban people with a sense of belonging to the Caribbean diaspora, of belonging to a physical and geographical place, and secured their future within the new nation. They became vital to social-religious consciousness and, in placing the individual at the service of the group, increased the power of the group as a whole. This heightened group consciousness became visible with the emergence of the principal religious systems in the Caribbean (such as Palo Monte, Santería, Arara, Vodoun, and Abakua).

The symbols in each signature are ordered from the superior part to the base, to be read or interpreted from top to bottom (fig. 51). The superior part must always be oriented toward the nkisi (nganga/prenda), and the inferior part toward the center of the room and in the direction of the practitioners or visitors (fig. 52). A “Saca Empeño”⁶¹ charm represents the nganga/tata nkisi of the temple. This symbol (*sello*) on the door provides information on the type of nkisi/prenda that marks the house, but it also documents happenings

in the lives of the members of the house and the priest (fig. 53). In front of the door, the stamps represent the entrance to the temple. The left one is a stamp of entrance and the right one is a stamp that allows entry and exit through the same door. This stamp is fundamental because the temple is like a cemetery in that in order to enter and exit one must make a treaty with the dead and the ancestors that rest in the temple.



The first symbol, “Guarime Posta,” signifies the guarding of the door from the inside, and is drawn behind the door.

The second symbol is the stamp that signifies tolerance. When this stamp accompanies the signature, members of other forms of Palo Monte or other religions can be received.

The third symbol signifies that someone in the family has died and that his or her house, or temple, is in mourning.

The fourth symbol signifies the death of a young person, or a relative or godson.

The fifth symbol signifies that it is an inopportune day for a visit, basically referring to days of ceremonies that receive dark or bad spirits.

The sixth symbol signifies that the temple is at war with another temple and visits are not permitted.

The plan in figure 52 shows the temple (*nso nganga*).⁶² The letters A, B, C, and D represent the position of the *Nkarime* guards or stamps that guard the corners and mark the limit of the room in the plan. There is one stamp in each corner. In front of the stamps the *prendas/minkisi* are located, orienting the signature from the center of the temple in the direction of the *nkisi/prenda*. The orientation of the *minkisi/prendas* is: northeast: *Nsasi*, northwest: *Sarabanda*, southeast: *Kikoroto*, and southwest: *Mama Chola*. Also, each corner can have seven *minkisi/prendas*.

Finally, if the temple has more than one door it is generally necessary to draw a stamp on the exit door, as shown in figure 54.

These signs are called “stamps” because of their independent character, as they conform to syllables that, in a consecutive series, can form concepts or ideas. In addition, they refer to materials that are necessary for the activation of the signature and to give life to the *nkisi/prenda*, the signs that are complemented on the inside of the *nkisi/prenda*. The signatures also permit the teaching of the godson (*ngweyo*) about the order of the religious events and the materials that are necessary for the ritual practice, like herbs, minerals, animals, or spirits that will help during the invocation through the sign.

The signatures date back to the actual presence of Kongo slaves in Cuba that formed part of the population base since the beginning of the sixteenth century, although the references in Cuban studies of the Palo Monte religion



Figure 63

Kongo Wood Standing
Male Figure (Nkisi nkondi
ya ntilumuka) 19th century
Wood, pigments

18 x 8 x 3 1/2 in.

Democratic Republic
of Congo

Anonymous Lender

Photo: Carl Kaufman,
Yale University Art Gallery

Figure 64

Vititi meeso (a horn with a magic crystal). Felipe Garcia Villamil, Personal Collection, Los Angeles, California. Photo: Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz, 2000



Figure 65

Mpaka (a magic horn or key that ensures the mpungo). Felipe Garcia Villamil, Personal Collection, Los Angeles, California. Photo: C. Daniel Dawson, 1995



century, although the references in Cuban studies of the Palo Monte religion date only to the middle of the eighteenth century. This writing system was from its beginning more complicated than the alphabetic system introduced by the Spanish at the end of the fifteenth century. The signatures contain around six thousand signs that usually have more than one meaning. This writing system was intimately related to the new forms of life and socialization of the Bakongo within the colonial Cuban context up until today through the practice of religion.

Robert Farris Thompson argues a similar point relating to the traditional African conceptualization of writing systems. In the chapter on action writing in *African Art in Motion*, Thompson states that writing is a kind of secret idiom: “[It] is a gesture language referring mainly to the symbols and ideas which bind men together and lend them strength or inspiration for the hearing

and resolution of a discordant social situation.”⁶³ Writing is a sequence of signs that are arranged in varying patterns in order to engage different issues of religious practice.

Another concept within the Palo Monte tradition is used to refer to the forces contained in the *prendas* that glide through the signatures like a canal or tunnel where electrical values or vibrations of *mpungo* circulate. The value of these vibrations is determined principally by the emphasis of the drawing, the type of material that is used to draw the signature, and the combination of symbols or syllables that compose them with the objective of creating a narrative that orders the ritual practice and the reception of the *Mpungo*. For example, white chalk generally signifies good, and carbon, actions of defense and protection. Vibration values are also determined by the volume and diversity of the materials that accompany the drawing. For example, materials like sulfur or gunpowder on the crosses, may be used to ask the *nkisi* about certain things, like daily life, health, work, and fortune. Also, sulfur combusts much slower than gunpowder; this situation is related to the demand or question that was made to the *nkisi*, and a delayed response is better because time has been taken to ensure its verity. The gunpowder (*fula*), which burns quickly, is used for jobs that need an immediate resolution such as protecting people, the village, or the flora and fauna, and for divination, health, and destruction of the *bandoki*.

Finally, the structure of the signature is of vital importance because it ensures the feeling of circulation of these forces in a complementary order from the *prenda* toward the center of the temple. In this signature, the seven (X) marks indicate the stores of gunpowder (seven because the spirit of *Sarabanda*⁶⁴ speaks through this number), the circles mark the position of the sulfur, and the thrice-repeated (o) marks the way of *Sarabanda* to defend from the enemy attacks.

Ingredients that are part of the ceremonies with the signature include plants: Guinea peppers (*Xylopia Aethiopica*) and *yaya* (*Oxandra Lanceolata*); animals: scorpion, spider (*tarantula*), hawk, and chameleon; materials: sulfur, mercury, and gunpowder.

As previously mentioned, the signature system is a means by which Palo Monte practitioners are able to understand and consolidate the foundations of knowledge as they relate to other forms of linguistic expression. The signature in figure 55 represents the *nkisi nsasi* or *Insancio* (In-Sanci-O) that

Figure 66

Loango Carved Ivory Tusk, Lwango (Loango) coast, Popular Republic of Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Popular Republic of Angola, H: 25 ¼ in. Anonymous Lender. Photo: Carl Kaufman, Yale University Art Gallery



Figure 67

Tusk illustration, Luwangu (Loango) coast, Popular Republic of the Congo. 19th century drawing from Pechuel-Loesche, *Volkskunde von Loango* Yale Sterling Memorial Library
Photo: Susan Cole, Alex Contreras, Yale University Art Gallery

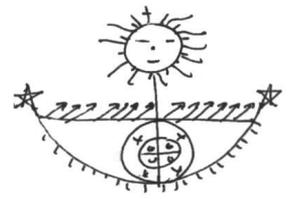
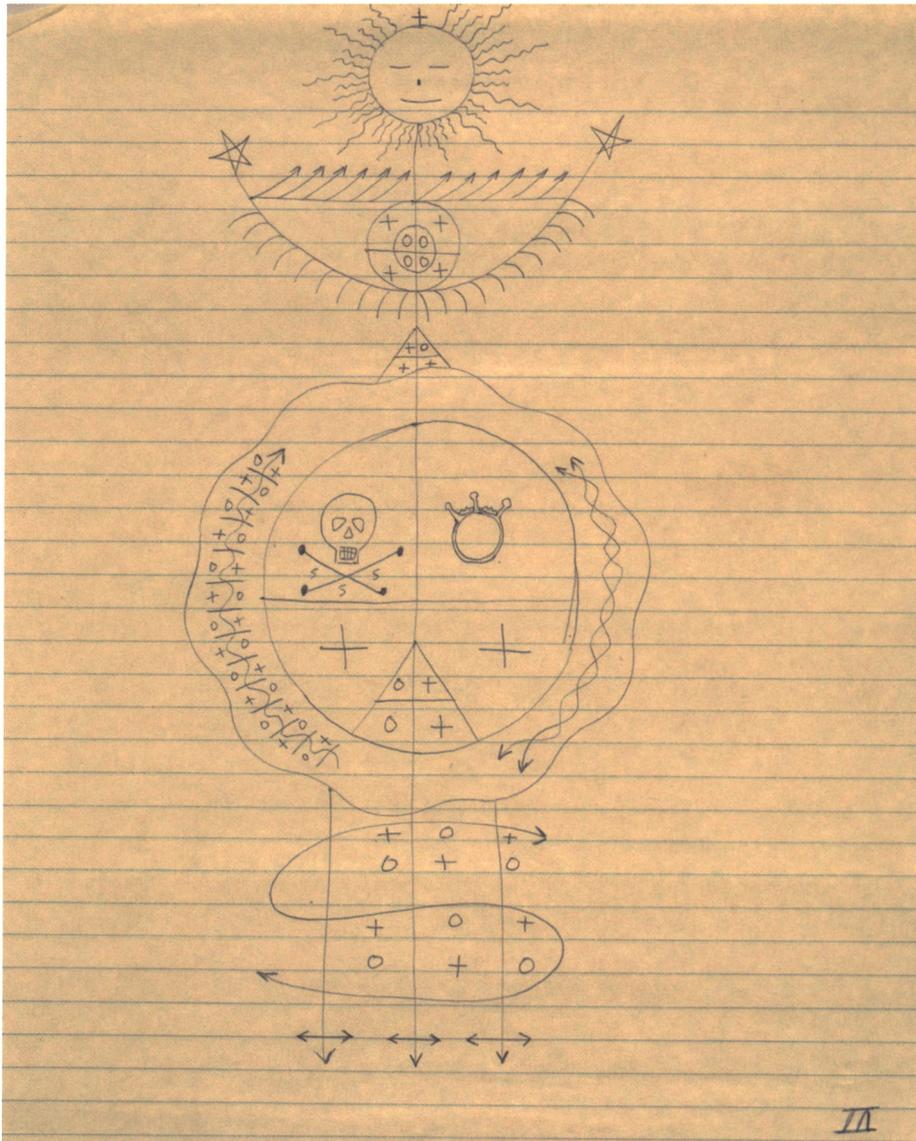


comes from the creolization of the word *Nzazi*. In the classic Ki-Kongo dictionary produced by Laman, *Nzazi* means “lightning.” Laman also classifies the types of *minkisi* as belonging to the classes of land, water, and sky. In Palo Monte creole, *Nzazi* became *Nsasi* or *Torito de la Loma* (the bull for the mountain) and *Siete Rayos*⁶⁵ (seven rays of lightning). But according to Laman’s description, this *nkisi* is closer to the description of *nkisi nkondi*,

with the explanation being that this nkisi is the lightning that belongs to nkondi or some other nkisi of the sky. The names that are used for Nsasi/ Insancio, like Siete Rayos, metaphorically represent the energy that is transmitted through them and refer more specifically to the type of nkisi. Furthermore, nsansi charm manifests the pulsation of the stars that are engaged in the shape of prenda or through the signal on the signature. The Palo Monte

Figure 68

Firma of the contract of the secret cavern. Osvaldo Fresneda Bachiller, personal document, Havana, Cuba. Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz, Personal Collection, 1989, 8 x 11.5 in. Photo: Susan Cole, Alex Contreras, Yale University Art Gallery



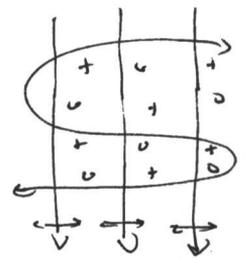
69



70



71



72

Figures 69–72

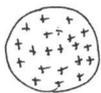
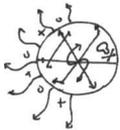
Sello from the signature of the secret cave. Osvaldo Fresneda Bachiller, personal document, Havana, Cuba. Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz, Personal Collection, 1989.

religion classifies the minkisi in four groups: nkisi related to the energy of the cosmos (manifestations of such forces include comets, stars, and planets), energy of nature (dew, sun rays, flora, and fauna), energy of the atmosphere (cyclones, rain, tornadoes, and earthquakes), and energy of technology (forms of intelligence and skills, problems created by humans in society). Nsasi nkisi belongs to the cosmos and atmosphere classes.

In the religious practice of Palo Monte, contract (*nkandu*) usually refers to an agreement between two or more parties. In this case, the notion of contract refers not to a legal commitment but to an agreement between humans, ancestors, and forces of nature. Also, its allusion to ritual methodology in the Palo Monte religion attempts to establish the principles for the manipulated vibrations at the ritual performance. Furthermore, contract is a type of commitment with values of forces and vibrations controlled through a priest and endorsed within the nkisi. Some kinds of contracts in the Palo Monte religion are:

- (a) Contract with vegetation, with the energy of plants, herbiage, and trees.
- (b) Contract with animals, with the energy of the animals that represent the nature and cosmic forces.
- (c) Contract with the elements, energy of nature and cosmos manifested as fire, volcanic eruptions, tornadoes, earthquakes, and as bodies of the universe such as planets, stars, and comets.
- (d) Contract with the psychic world, energy of psychological manifestation such as dreams, hallucinations, intuitions, and spirit communication.
- (e) Contract of complement, energy as result of combination of the above modalities.

The nkisi nkondi represents parallel forms of expression of religious knowledge of the Bakongo (fig. 56). This nkisi nkondi can be compared with the signature nsasi (fig. 55). Beginning with the superior part, the head of nkisi is crowned with a circle of feathers (*nkanda*). This crown represents a type of contract that is received and made physically apparent (takes place) within the head. The feathers signify that this is a guardian and messenger nkisi. They are positioned from the head toward the floor, representing the movement of the vibrations of the cosmos to nature. This action is evident in the representation of the blade in figure 55. Note also in this figure the direct relation with the stamp shown at the side, which represents fire, and the second stamp shown, which represents the force of the planet Jupiter, which is received in all the signatures of nsasi. This contract of nsasi as fire, and as a manifestation



of the vibrations of Jupiter, refers to a contract that protects against sight problems, skin infections, low blood pressure, feelings like anger and hate, and excessive pride. It also protects from the shadows (the dead that accompany a person and create disturbances), circulatory problems, pain in the vertebral column, and problems with liquid in the knee. This nkisi, like the signature of nsasi, assumes the same functions as the previous signature through its contract. Also note the eyes of crystal, known as “eyes that cut.” They are totally transparent eyes (*muilva messo*) that serve as a metaphor for the bisimbi spirits represented by the transparency of crystal as water. An nkisi with this type of eye and the persons related to this nkisi have the power of both the world and the vision in their hands. Another element of the figure is the contract (*nkandu*) located in the box at the center of the figure. This alludes directly to another type of contract, which is also a form of medicine, with the Kalunga spirit through its milky coloration (the abdomen like milk) as a metaphor for the perfect union of the sky and the sea in Kalunga. Finally, the arms over the abdomen signify a principal gesture of the Bakongo that means “I am the medicine” and stands for protection.

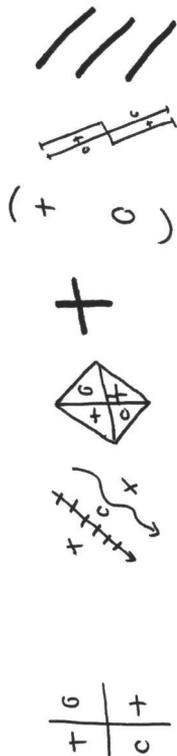
Through the signature of Insancio we can observe the syllables that conform to the combination of diverse stamps. The syllables contain the forces that in their totality give life to the signature. The principal stamp in figure 57 combines the symbols of the sun, the moon, and four stars. The sun represents Nzambi Mpungu (almighty God). The moon, or more specifically *luna nu* (moon of water), which attracts the forces (*mpungo*) Saca Empeño, Sarabanda, Baluende, and Kubayende, ensures that the divinatory ceremonies stay absolutely secret and the members of the house maintain the necessary discretion. This stamp is also used to release the negative thoughts that can arise during the course of the ceremony on the part of the witnesses. The four stars symbolize the impulsive creativity of the cosmos materializing through the force of nsasi. This last symbol is represented frequently during the sections of divination with six or twelve stars. The first stamp shows us in a simple graphic form the complexity of the Palo Monte religious conceptualization; for example, the symbol of the sun as a force, which is required in all religious ceremonies. We are able to find its parallel in the mambo “Nzambe above, Nzambe below, and Nzambe in all corners.” God is in the superior part of the signature, “Nzambe above” mediating between the prenda (nkisi), the tata nkisi, and the godsons (*ngweyo*).

Another stamp represents a blade crossing an eye (fig. 61). The blade in this case signifies that the signature must be drawn on the leaf of a blade in order to control the negative forces (*bandoki*). This stamp must be made at the entrance of a cave that is represented by a convex half circle (fig. 60), and

it controls the destructive forces known as “bad winds” that represent illnesses, ghosts, fierce animals, and such sentiments as discordance and hallucinations. The eye represents the action of visualizing the divine powers through the *vititi menso* (magic mirror). The vititi menso is represented by the cross formed by the vertical line of the blade and the horizontal line representing the hilt of the blade and the combination of the two crosses and two diagonal circles. The crosses also signify sacrifice, death, and birth (in a dialectic sense) to all initiates into the religion. Finally, this stamp marks that this ceremony must be made in a vititi menso so the participants can visualize and confirm the arrival of the divine messages in the crystal.

Figure 60 represents the entrance to the bandoki, which controls the bandoki of the enemy (fig. 61). The stamp in figure 62 signifies protection, ensuring that the enemy doesn't touch the paths or change the character of the work that is being done. This stamp can also be inverted and used to surround the course or prevent the enemy from following the trail. It also represents the map of where the greatest ancestors descend, the spirits of plants and animals (the flora and fauna). This symbol also alludes to the *Piedra de Rayo* (kind of rock) and the *Piedra Iman* (magnetic rock), which must be present over this signature to give it strength.

Figure 62 represents Earth with all its manifestations. The circle is divided in four parts:



(1) the symbol of a skull and crossbones, which represents the Kongo ancestors,

(2) the symbol of the flower, which is drawn as three diagonal lines,

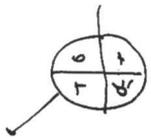
(3) a cross, alternated with two little crosses and two circles that represent the *guiro* (the fruit of the calabash tree), which marks the sacrifice of animals such as a goat and two doves, and a cross signifying life, light, and prosperity.

Within the circle is another symbol, a double triangle joined at the base, representing “four winds” that are used to steal the good fortune and energy inside the enemy's temple. The final part of this stamp is the lines that come from the inferior part of the circle. These lines represent the radiation of energy from the *prenda* (nganga) toward the godsons. For example, the straight line crossed with multiple diagonal lines represents the spirit of Mambe, a principal spirit that must be called in order to give strength to the work. The irregular line represents the rest of the ancestors that protect the cave, and in the center of the base of the circle is a cross, or, more precisely, a double cross, that represents the way of the earth to the sky, or rather, the connection between the sky and the earth.

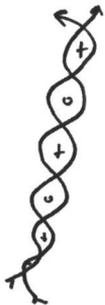
Figure 63 shows another example of the nkisi nkondi, called the smasher

or lion,⁶⁶ according to Laman's classification. Laman states that these nkisi are "from Konda, lie in wait for intercept, lie in ambush for game,"⁶⁷ going on to declare that it is "a common name for a kind of minkisi with large sculpture in which pieces of iron are often hammered in for the swearing of oaths and concluding of alliances."⁶⁸ Considering the nkisi nkondi *ya ntilumuka* "that flies, seizes in the woods, in the trees,"⁶⁹ Laman would most likely classify this nkisi under the class of "sky." Also, this nkisi, in general, is primarily constructed according to the classic Kongo methodology in which each part of the figure responds to a specific type of contract.⁷⁰ Laman assumes it relates to a nkandu like a type of charm or magic pistol used to attack and defend from the bandoki. For example, the superior part of the nkisi refers to a type of contract that is attracted to the head, and the head is converted into an antenna with which to receive the vibrations that have the power to create the mpungo and the bilongo. The head refers to another important gesture of the Bakongo, the look of the nkisi toward the sky. This head position clearly indicates reverence and respect for the elders and the ancestors. Another significance of the head in this position is that it simultaneously becomes one with *vititi messo* (magic eye, through the detail of the eyes) (fig. 64) and an *mpaka* (magic horn, through the contract that crowns the horn) (figs. 65, 66, 67). The head of this nkisi represents two of the most important contracts within the Kongo religious tradition that continue their development in Cuba. In Cuba, a *vititi messo* and an *mpaka* are two nkisi that have separate functions although they are related to the principal nkisi from which they were born (a *prenda*). Other elements within this figure can be explained, such as the partly open mouth (*bamuna* or the beginning of life) that represents the circulation of the vibrations, a metaphor for the breathing of the mpungo (the nkisi is ready to speak) and for a window open to the sun. The large milky eyes show that the spirit of Kalunga is in the eyes or that Kalunga speaks through the eyes. The large pupils signify the eyes as a form of spoken communication (*messo kiswezwe*), the eyes as an argument (*mambo*), that interrogates you.⁷¹ Also, the ears shaped like a snail shell represent the basic form of the spirit Simbi, which inhabits the depths of the sea. Another important contract in this figure is the double coil of rope around the neck, a fragment of textile that drapes over the body and protects the nkisi from the actions of the bandoki and the eyetooth of a lion (frequent in nkisi nkondi). The belly is another important contract in this figure, as it represents another place where the mpungo and bilongo are located. A rectangle over the abdomen represents the spirit of Kalunga in the crystal as transparent as water, and the horizontal line divides the crystal in two equal parts the way the Kalunga divides the two worlds (the land of the ancestors and the land of the living). The horizontal

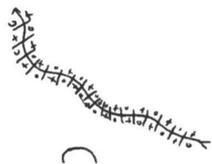
line in the center of the rectangle and the imaginary vertical line from head to feet symbolizes the cosmogram Yowa in the Kongo tradition in central Africa and “four winds” in Cuba. Thompson explains that this cosmogram represents the power of reincarnation and the power of death, as well as the crystal symbolizing the mystic vision through the water as a barrier that divides the two worlds. Felipe Garcia Villamil and Robert Farris Thompson understand how much the Yowa cosmogram signifies for the Palera philosophy the point of a new life, of change, of mediation of the forces, and of balance. Finally, this piece is integrated through the keys that represent the multiple magic actions demanded of the nkisi. The keys represent distinct types of subjects (problems, mambo) that cover a diversity of aspects of daily life.



I would like to compare this nkisi with a similar one from Cuba in the form of a signature (fig. 68). This signature represents a treaty with which to enter the cave where the ancestors rest as well as grants access to the mysteries hidden there. This signature, like the previous nkisi, begins with a contract in its superior part. This fragment (stamp) (fig. 69) is composed of three basic elements: the symbol of the star at the right as a *lucero prima*, or first star, the symbol of the sun in the superior part as an attribute of Nzambi Mpungu, the star *lucero madrugador*, or last star, and finally, the half circle as a symbol of vititi meso in the center. The stars guide the mpungo as well as contain the creative force of the universe (the force of Nzambi Mpungu). According to Palo Monte tradition, the human existence originated in a star. The symbol of vititi meso in this stamp can see through time and provide information regarding the behavior of the creatures and social changes. The symbol in figure 70 represents a triangle divided in four parts, with these parts marked with crosses representing the power of the ancestors that are blessed by Nzambi Mpungu.



The symbol in figure 71 represents an irregular circle within which there is a perfect circle with four divisions with independent symbols in each division and a triangle in the inferior part of the vertical line dividing the circle. Also notice that between the two circles, the left part shows two exit spaces partly covered by crosses and circles. This symbol represents the force of the living beings and the minerals that live beneath the surface (earthworms, rats, rabbits, microorganisms, etc.). The symbol on the right represents members of the religion that care for the secrets of the religion. The symbol within the left superior part of the interior circle represents the spirits of the dead Kongo. On the right part of that circle is a symbol representing the force of the fauna through the dead Kongo that speak through this stamp, and on the right the crosses represent the sense that this action is a positive one. Finally, inside the circle is a triangle with alternating crosses and circles representing the force of



Nsasi that is fixed (speaks and manifests itself) in this symbol, and at the same time complementing the stars of the superior part of the signature.

The bottom part of the signature (fig. 71) represents the type of mpungu that protects this signature in the form of animals and people, up to the manifestation of the fauna as camouflage of the entrance to the cave. This stamp also represents the action of the Nzambi Mpungu as ghosts to distract attention and avoid detection of the cave.

In the minkisi, as in the signatures, there are parallels between the two forms, in the minkisi in the form of contracts and in the signatures through the stamps. In addition to their social and religious role, the minkisi in central Africa and in Cuba make up a system that has acquired other characteristics of a communication medium, providing a clear composition in which single characters, each with individual meanings, are recognizable. Furthermore, the symbols establish the relationship among the written character, which forms the surface composition, the physical materials that serve as transmitters of empirical mathematical knowledge, and the numerical space represented within each signature and nkisi.



The Stamps, the Syllables of the Bakongo Universe

For the occidental linguistic systems, syllables are fundamental to maintaining the fluidity of the language and establishing an educated communication. They are also of vital importance for the writing systems characterized by their graphic character. The stamps (sellos) act as syllables in the signatures, creating a simple and uninterrupted form of sound, but the autonomous symbols are formed by a variety of independent signs and by the combination of other signs for the formation of an idea or concept. The letters in the signatures are called stamps, secret symbols that relate to the practitioners certain principles of divine forces (cosmic and terrestrial).

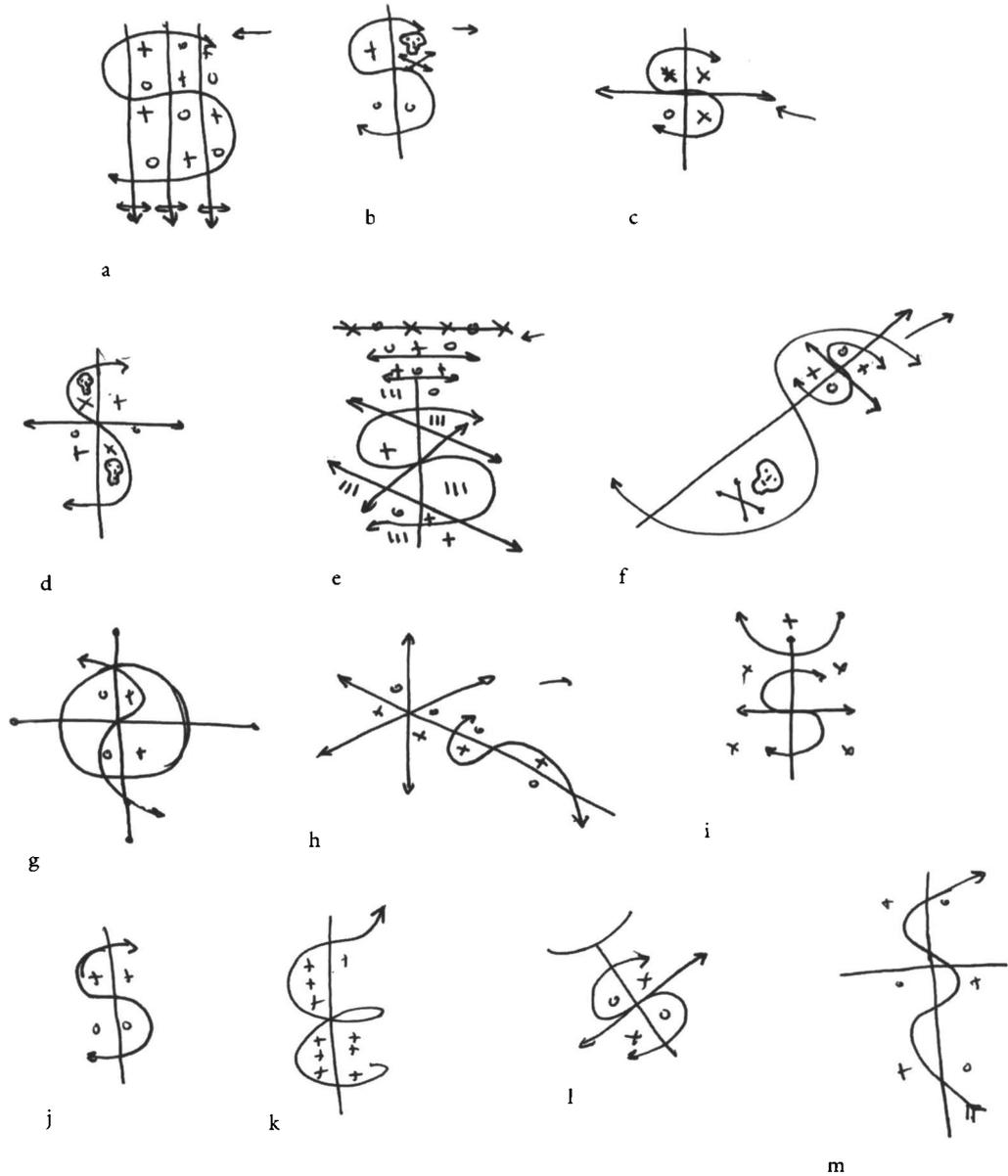
Each stamp has the possibility of changing according to the energy that is created by the vibrations in the interior of the prenda and in the interior of the practitioner. In addition, the stamps are instruments and vehicles for communication, for attracting multiple forces, and for meditation. Such stamps are used occasionally to teach the initiated how to attract and receive special types of forces, to articulate fragments of the mythological literature, and to understand the history of the religion.

Figure 73 shows two sequences of stamps that have a similar morphology but imply different ideas and concepts.

Figure 74 shows two sequences of stamps that share the same concept but are represented differently.

Figure 73

A sequence of stamps that have a similar morphology but imply different ideas and concepts. Osvaldo Fresneda Bachiller, personal document, Havana, Cuba. Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz, Personal Collection, 1989. Photo: Susan Cole, Alex Contreras, Yale University Art Gallery



- a. The guardians of the cave (humans–animals–fauna).
- b. Sarabanda charm.
- c. The cave.
- d. The grasping or sending of death.
- e. The entrance of the ndoki to control the energy of the enemy.
- f. Negative forces and the treaty of the day and night.
- g. The earth with all its forces.
- h. The law, medicine.
- i. The path or way.
- j. The forest, the jungle.
- k. Positive brotherhood.
- l. Negative ghosts, witchcraft, and animals in the forest.
- m. Strong, dangerous mountain.
- n. Seven Rays of lightning, thunder.

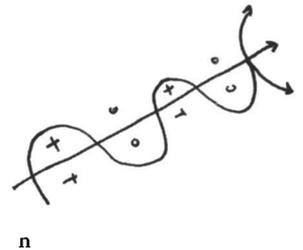


Figure 75 shows a sequence of stamps with a variety of forms and ideas.

The stamps are closely related to the mambos; if there is no mambo, there may be no contact between the forces that are called forth or want to be manipulated through specific rituals. The stamps serve as a basic form of attraction for these forces. Mambo establish the awakening of the mpungu that live within the prendas, the cosmogenic forces that complement the prenda, and the spirituality of the practitioners. The mambos are also a form of meditation and mental purification for the practitioners so that they are able to dispose of the negative energies, the dark deaths, and the evil spirits (bandoki).

Ultimate Mambo

The Bakongo are characterized in Cuba as reinstituting much of their knowledge through diverse forms of communication and cultural organization like religion, music, dance, and language. Therefore, Caribbean cultures have formed a new type of writing system that is based on African writing tradition. The notion of nkisi is a strong example of writing and recording knowledge; nkisi became writing and collectively function as representational language. This language continues in the Caribbean as an autonomous mode of understanding that is distinct from historical thought. This mode involves historical occurrences that have been described as forms of law, order, and civil dialogue within their primary social or cultural context.

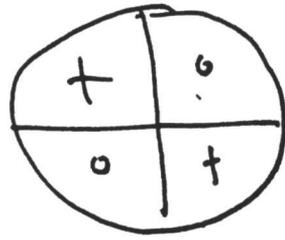
The religion of Palo Monte led to the development of a unique type of writing, which I consider an optimal form of writing by virtue of its capacity to mix within one system other forms of existing languages. Kongo Cuban culture recognizes the concept of the signature as an extension of the Kongo graphic system, which maintains a vast complexity of languages; first with the articulated language, known as Ki-Kongo, and second, through the graphic writing systems. For the practitioners of Palo Monte, Kongo writing is a paradigm for understanding and consolidating the foundations of knowledge as they relate to other representational linguistic expressions like the rhythmic system of music or communication through sounds that attach the body to ancestral forces and the cosmos. It is also believed that music based in rhythm represents symbolic phrases that express the valor of energy from the universe and is forever espoused of body and music; gesture systems or dance represent a physical graffiti or body-writing; and number systems represent communication through the divination art.

The notion of nkisi as a writing system in Cuba (signature) is intimately related to other forms of expression and religious knowledge, acting as a single

Figure 74 A sequence of stamps that share the same concept but are represented differently.

Oswaldo Fresneda Bachiller, personal document, Havana, Cuba. Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz, Personal Collection, 1989

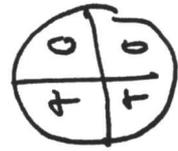
Photo: Susan Cole, Alex Contreras, Yale University Art Gallery



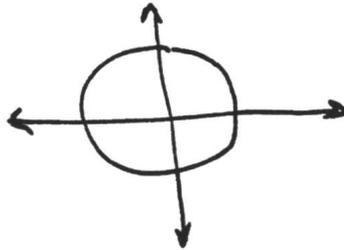
a. Power of the earth.



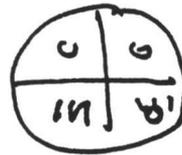
b. Internal force of the ocean.



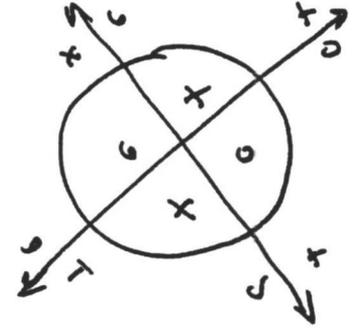
c. The wind.



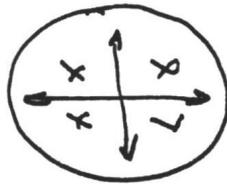
d. Tiembla Tierra charm.



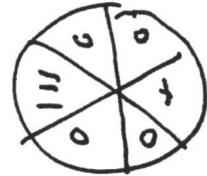
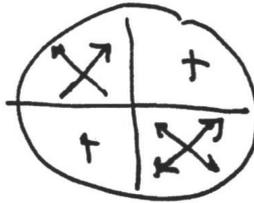
e. Four winds.



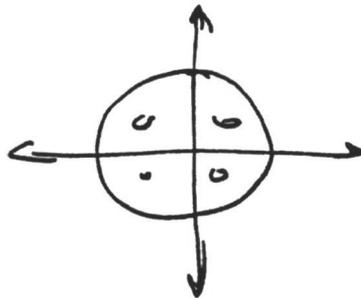
f. Four winds.



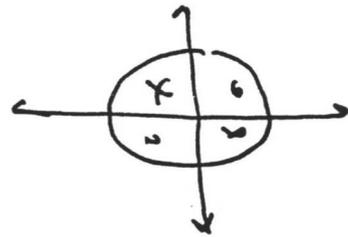
g. The earth and all its forces.



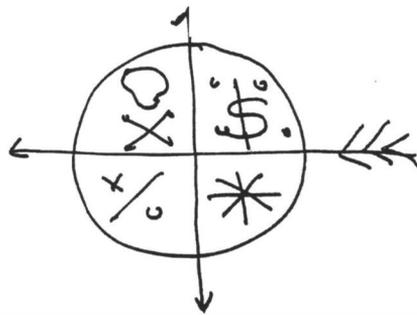
h. Stars.



i. The cemetery or the negative things of the earth.



j. Seven Rays.



k. Bad Spirit, used to provide forces to this spirit.



Figure 75 (a–z, from left to right).

A sequence of stamps with a variety of forms and ideas. Also functions as an alphabet of signs, syllables, concepts, and letters. Osvaldo Fresneda Bachiller, personal document, Havana, Cuba. Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz, Personal Collection, 1989.

system that integrates metaphysical teaching and moral philosophy. Developing such understanding is important in shaping the Bakongo self-perception and the practice of their culture in the diaspora in the Americas. The Bakongo have succeeded in maintaining different existing forms of language, from the phonetic languages of the Ki-Kongo, Kimbundo, Umbundo to the graphic writing systems.

NOTES

1. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*. “Is a strategic object,” “there is one to protect the human soul and guard it against illness for whoever is sick and wishes to be healed,” “Nkisi contains medicine (bilongo) and soul (mooyo), combined to give it life and power,” p. 117.
2. Laman, *Dictionnaire Kikongo-français*, p. 68.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
5. MacGaffey, *Art and Healing of the Bakongo*, p. 4.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 5.
7. The people from the Kongo area. Robert Farris Thompson made this observation in *Flash of the Spirit*, p. 103. See also Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*: “The slavers of the early 1500s first applied the name Kongo solely to the Bakongo people. Gradually they used the name to designate any person brought from the west coast of central Africa to America” (p. 188).
8. An Afro-Cuban religious practice of Congo origin.
9. Thompson, *Dancing Between Two Worlds*, p. 2.
10. Personal conversation with Robert Farris Thompson, summer 2000. See Cabrera, *Vocabulario Congo*, p. 73. Cabrera mentions the terminology firms through the words *Bangó* and *Gandó*.

- a. Love.
- b. Positive energy from the earth.
- c. Sacrifice, forfeit, and pureness or unblemished filings.
- d. The spirit, or bad spirit, to whom the priest gives something to eat.
- e. Circle of new life.
- f. Push.
- g. *Garabato*, or good fortune.
- h. Hypocrisy and lies, distortion.
- i. Clear ideas.
- j. Just, honest.
- k. *Finda*, or the forest.
- l. Lucero, or the position.
- m. *Malongo*, or nature.
- n. Force and power from Nazambi Mpungo or God.
- o. Sarabanda charm, God of work and technology.
- p. Accident, tragedy, illness, and disorder.
- q. Coconut plant for divination and money.
- r. The jungle or woods and Mambe’s land, good and bad things simultaneously.
- s. Wizard of the spirits.
- t. Spirit route in this earth.
- u. Strong natural forces.
- v. Bad winds, like cyclones and storms.
- w. Hurricane.
- x. Route on this earth.
- y. Direction, course, and flow.
- z. Light, illumination from God.

11. The magic ritual symbols that represent the spirit that inhabit the nkisi (prenda). Also, these are used to identify the priests.
12. Robert Farris Thompson, interview, July 2000.
13. Laman, *Dictioinaire Kikongo-français*, p. 448.
14. *Kutu* (plural *Makutu*: mensonge, tromperies, filouterie, intelligence, ruse); *makuto en Cuba*: amuleto, “resguardo,” Laman, *Dictioinaire Kikongo-français*, p. 343.
15. *Mpàka*: corn. Laman, *Dictioinaire Kikongo-français*, p. 573.
16. Laman, *Dictioinaire Kikongo-français*, pp. 138, 490.
17. Laman, *Kongo III*, pp. 33, 36. Laman defines bisimbi as “human beings who have died twice, first on earth and then in the land of the dead” (p. 33). “A special class of being created by Nzambi, living in the underworld” (p. 35). “Bisimbi are divided into land and water spirits” (p. 36).
18. Huguet and Pedro, “Voces Bantu en el Vocabulario Palero,” in *Estudios Afro-Cubanos*, vol. 2, ed. Lazara Menendez, p. 142.
19. Schwegler, “El Vocabulario (ritual) Bantú de Cuba,” p. 3.
20. Complicated system of communication with a house of Palo Monte between the ritual participants, the *Tata Nganga* (priest), the nkisi (the recipient of the power), and the *mayordomo* (who fulfills organizational functions in the ceremony).
21. Osvaldo Fresneda Bachiller, a priest and authority in the Palo Monte religion, interview, summer 1995.
22. Personal communication with Osvaldo Fresneda Bachiller, fall 1997.
23. See Cabrera, *Vocabulario Congo*, pp. 40, 41. Song (or prayer); mambo, or prayer for “CHIQUEAR” as a feast to the spirit that acts upon the magic recipient Nganga. “No hay palo como tu, Palo, ah palo! Tu llega ribá loma Gruabba. Cuál Nganga má pué que yo? Tu cogé tu guarina, tu van sube palo la loma.” Palo also calls to the spirit and it is understood that one resides in each tree.
24. A priest in the creolized Kongo religion of Cuba. Robert Farris Thompson, “Communication from Afro-Atlantic.” Class lecture, History of Art, Yale University. September 23, 1999.
25. See Cabrera, *Vocabulario Congo*, p. 99.
26. Eladio Garcia, a priest of Palo Monte religion, interview, summer 1997.
27. *Chamalongos*: Seven objects with circular or semicircular form in the ancient version. In contemporary practice, four parts of a fruit or coconut shell are used.
28. *Ngo*: leopard in the Ki-Kongo language. In Cuba, it is known as *Engo*. Etymologically, Ngo and Engo are related through phonetic adaptations of “Ki-Kongo” vocabulary in Spanish. Interview with Osvaldo Fresneda Bachiller, summer 1995.
29. Felipe Garcia Villamil, a priest of the Palo Monte religion, Los Angeles, California, May 2000.
30. Conversation with Robert Farris Thompson, winter 2000.
31. Felipe Garcia Villamil, personal communication, June 27, 2000.
32. Osvaldo Fresneda Bachiller, personal documents, 1995.
33. Robert Farris Thompson, personal conversation, winter 1999.
34. *Mayordomo* refers to the position within the house or town that has the function of directing religious events and the obligation to carefully maintain the performance of all rituals. In addition, he is the one that helps the pledge and guides the spirit when it appears. From Felipe Garcia Villamil and Osvaldo Garcia, personal documents, summer 1999.
35. Consecrate or initiate a person into the secrets of the religion.
36. See Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, pp. 121, 122.
37. Personal documents, summer 1999 in New York, from Felipe Garcia Villamil and

- Oswaldo Garcia Batalla Kongo (an nkisi for defense from bandoki)
38. Diamlunqueto as Baconfula (the doctor in the Palo Monte religion); this person has the function to make medicine using the nkisi. Also, he introduces the godsons to discipline and religious secrets. He writes and teaches chants and myths by use of the writing system (firmas).
 39. Malangume as Manzanero (the singer of the temple); he has the function of singing the ritual chants and giving food and drink during the performance of the ritual. Additionally, only he can perform animal sacrifice.
 40. Tangume as *Guardiero* (guardian of the temple).
 41. Oswaldo Fresneda Bachiller, in Havana, Cuba, interview, summer 1988. Human spirit (ancestor) at the service of Tata Nganga through a secret pact.
 42. This town was represented during the period of the Vili's transition from the trading of ivory to that of slaves. At this time, the Kongos were experiencing a period of anarchy that ended with their migrations toward the Niari Valley. This period was marked by both the height of the power of the royal family of Lwangu (Loango) and the entrance of the French in the regional slave trade. Finally, Lwangu is represented as a commercial center one year before the complete consolidation of Portuguese power in Angola and the creation of a new urban center in Luanda. Also, see Merlet, *Autour du Loango (XIVe and XIXe siècle)*, pp. 140 and 142.
 43. Laman, *Dictioinnaire kikongo-francais*, p. 72.
 44. *Bumba* in Ki-Kongo (*Bomba* in Palo Monte). Bomba is the name received in Cuba by the old pledges that are equivalent to the contemporary Ngangas. It has been understood through the literature and religious practice that the Bomba vocabulary is an ancient mode of pledges, but typological diversity exists within Cuban religious practice as in Africa. Personal communication with the priest of "Palo Lwangu" Francisco de Armas, Matanzas, winter 1995. See Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, p. 126.
 45. *Ganga*, a denomination that the Calderos in Cuba receive that represents the forces of nature and the cosmos. Etymologically, Ganga is related to the Ki-Kongo *Kimbundo Nganga*, which designates the Kongo sacerdots. We can also associate it with words like *Kimbanda*, *Nkisi*, *Ndoki*, or *Mbiki*.
 46. Balandier, *Daily Life in the Kingdom of the Kongo*, p. 224. Georges states that in the Bakongo nkisi are traditionally divided into many groups: first the major groups, *nkosi* (the lion) to inspire terror and protect from theft of property or souls, and to overpower the life aspect in order to protect health, guarantee success, maintain the fecundity of women and the fertility of the earth, defend against *bandoki* (sorcerers), and defend against violence and theft. Other types of nkisi include "*kunya*, *mpindi*, *nkondi*, *mavena*, the image of a dog, and *ntadi*" the guardian, a small figure with a human face and a feather atop his head that represents the messenger or guardian; this nkisi communicated danger warnings via dreams.
 47. Robert Farris Thompson, personal conversation, summer 2000.
 48. See Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, pp. 123, 131.
 49. Robert Farris Thompson, personal conversation, summer 2000.
 50. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, p. 121.
 51. *Minkisi* means spirits (medicines), plural form of nkisi.
 52. A priest of the Palo Lwangu (Loango in Cuba) branch in the town of Carlos Rodriguez, the municipality of Marti in Matanzas, January 12, 1996.
 53. Kubik relates to the mode of communication three forms: pictograms or "picture writing," ideograms or ideographs, and phonological scripts: (a) syllabic, (b) hieroglyphic, (c) phonemic. Kubik, "African Graphic Systems," p. 73.

54. Obenga, *L'Afrique Dans L'Antiquité*, p. 358.
55. Kubik, "African Graphic Systems," p. 73.
56. Childers and Hentzi, *The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism*, p. 185.
57. In Palo Monte the magic ritual symbols that attract and represent the major spirits that control and inhabit the nkisi/prenda.
58. Also, in the Abakua religion this type of writing is known as Fimba. Conversation with Felipe Garcia Villamil, July 27, 2000.
59. Ibid.
60. Cabrera, *Reglas de Congo, Palo Monte Mayombe*, pp. 73, 74.
61. Osvaldo Fresneda Bachiller, interview, winter 1999. He has the stronger type of nkisi that is used for counterattacks. Felipe Garcia Villamil told me that Saca Empeño (*Watiriamba*) charms are used to resolve serious problems. The spirits that live in this type of prenda can travel only with the prenda owner (priest). Also, Felipe mentioned to me that Saca Empeño is of the Ossain type, which is stronger and used for defense.
62. The sacred house or room in the Palo Monte religion.
63. Thompson, *African Art in Motion: Icon and Act*, pp. 181, 182.
64. *Sarabanda*: Represents the secret of the forest, force and power of work and technology, and metals and iron.
65. *Insancio*: A force, charm, or energy representing fire, thunder, and lightning forces.
66. Laman, *Kongo III*, p. 86.
67. Ibid.
68. Ibid.
69. Ibid.
70. Ibid., p. 77.
71. Thompson, "Communication from Afro-Atlantic." Class lecture, History of Art, Yale University, September 23, 1999.

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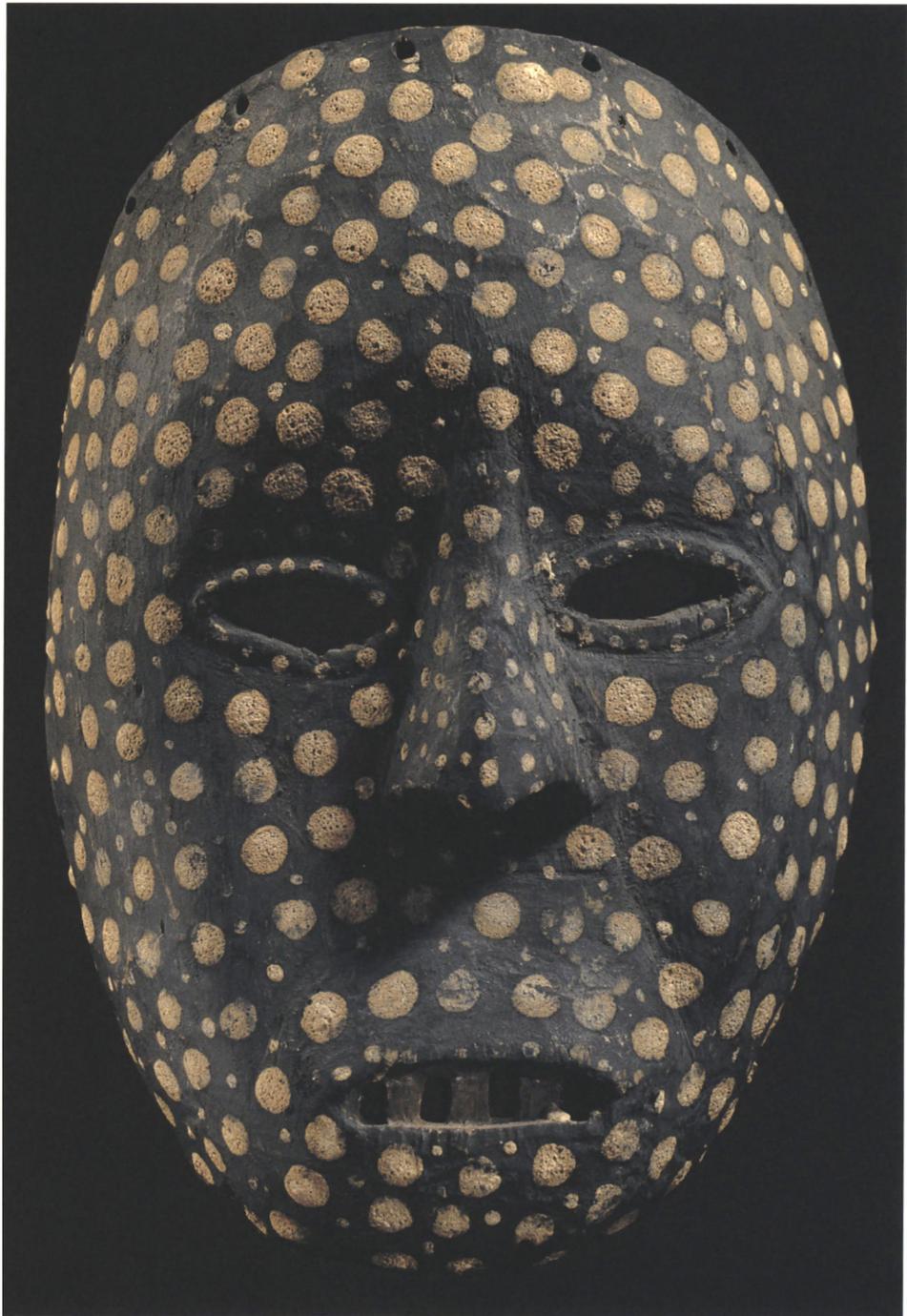


Figure 76

Mask Byeru, wood, pigment, 9 ¼ x 6 ½ in., Democratic Republic of Congo, Anonymous Collection. Photo: George Meister. This mask represents the performance of the circumcision ritual of initiation into the adult community in the jungle Ituri of the north of the Aruwimi River and its convergence with the smaller Ngayu river. This is an example of a type of communication and writing that is founded upon visual elements such as the spot, which serve as a form of symbolic iconography. The spots are an example of speech through nonverbal elements, full of symbolic character.



Figure 77

CONGO-BELGE—No. 4—*Un danseur Mongletta* [Belgian Congo—No. 4—A Mongletta dancer]. This postcard represents the same type of visual writing tradition within the zone of the jungle Ituri in Zaire and the Bayaka of southwestern Central African Republic. Photographer unknown, c. 1910. Published by Imprimerie Delvaux, Huy, Belgium. Hand-tinted Collotype. 3 ½ x 5 ½ in. Postcard Collection, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution.



Figure 78

Crucifix, Solongo, Kingdom of the Kongo, Democratic Republic of Congo, brass, wood, nails, $11\frac{1}{4}$ x $7\frac{3}{8}$ in. Anonymous Collection. Photo: George Meister. This crucifix is from the zone of the Mbanza Kongo, the capital of the ancient Kongo empire, generally known by its Portuguese name, San Salvador. It is one of the most concrete examples of the intercultural and cross-border influences. One can clearly recognize elements of the manner in which the cultural impact of the Kongo was felt in Portuguese iconography, and vice versa.



Figure 79

Fetiços Fetishes. This postcard shows the same type of crucifix displayed with other religious objects (minkisi). Photographer unknown, c. 1920. Published by Casa 31 de Janeiro, Luanda, Angola. Collotype. $3\frac{1}{2} \times 5\frac{1}{2}$ in. Postcard Collection, No. 1985-142108, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution.



Figure 80

This photograph shows a crucifix displayed within a prenda (nkisi) from the Palo Monte tradition. Felipe Garcia Villamil, Personal Collection, Los Angeles, California. Photo: Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz



Figure 81

Maternity Figure Phemba, Democratic Republic of Congo, wood, pigment, H.: 11 ¼ in., Anonymous Collection, Photo: George Meister

Exhibition Checklist

MASKS

MGBADIKE-TYPE MASK

Figure 27
Nigeria
Wood, pigments. 35 ½ x 16 x 15 in.
Anonymous Lender

MGBADIKE-TYPE MASK

Figure 28
Nigeria
Wood, pigments. 33 x 13 ¼ x 18 in.
Anonymous Lender

MGBADIKE-TYPE MASK

Figure 29
Nigeria
Wood, pigments. 36 x 13 x 14 in.
Anonymous Lender

ODE-LAY SOCIETY MASQUERADE HEADPIECE

Figure 35
Sierra Leone
Polychrome, wood, 33 ¾ x 10 ½ x 16 in.
Anonymous Lender

ODE-LAY SOCIETY MASQUERADE HEADPIECE

Figure 36
Sierra Leone
Polychrome, wood, fabric, mirrors.
42 ⅝ x 8 ½ x 10 ¾ in.
Anonymous Lender

ODE-LAY SOCIETY MASQUERADE HEADPIECE

Figure 42
Sierra Leone
Polychrome, wood, fabric. 53 ½ x 18 ¼ x 18 in.
Anonymous Lender

MASK BYERU

Figure 76
Democratic Republic of Congo
Wood, pigment. 9 ¼ x 6 ½ in.
Anonymous Collection

FIGURES

MATERNITY FIGURE

Figure 3
Democratic Republic of Congo
Wood, white clay. 22 ½ x 10 ½ x 10 ⅝ in.
Anonymous Lender

KONGO WOOD STANDING MALE FIGURE (NKISI NKONDI YA NTLUMUKA)

Figures 4, 63
Democratic Republic of Congo
Wood, pigments. 18 x 8 x 3 ½ in.
Anonymous Lender

POWER FIGURE NKISI

Figure 2
Democratic Republic of Congo
Wood. H.: 12 in.
Anonymous Collection

NKISI NKONDI

Figure 5
Democratic Republic of Congo
Wood, nails. H.: 30 in.
Anonymous Collection

IBIBIO EKON SOCIETY PUPPET (?)

Figure 9
Nigeria
Wood, pigment. H.: 28 in.
Anonymous Lender

NGBE SOCIETY EMBLEM

Figure 33
 Nigeria, Cameroon
 Animal skulls, turtle shells, horn, fiber, wood,
 and rattan. 41 x 44 in.
 Anonymous Lender

POWERFUL NKISI FIGURE (NKISI NKONDI)

Figure 46
 Democratic Republic of Congo
 Wood, iron nails, cloth, mirror. H.: 20 in.
 Anonymous Lender

**NKISI NKONDI
(POWER FIGURE NKISI KONGO)**

Figure 56
 Democratic Republic of Congo
 Wood, nails, mirror, cloth. H.: 13 3/8 in.
 Anonymous Collection

LOANGO CARVED IVORY TUSK

Figure 66
 Democratic Republic of Congo
 Ivory tusk. H.: 25 1/4 in.
 Anonymous Lender

**CRUCIFIX, SALONGO,
KINGDOM OF THE KONGO**

Figure 78
 Democratic Republic of Congo
 Wood, brass, nails. 11 1/4 x 7 3/8 in.
 Anonymous Collection

MATERNITY FIGURE PHEMBA

Figure 81
 Democratic Republic of Congo
 Wood, pigment. H.: 11 1/4 in.
 Anonymous Collection

POSTCARDS**FETICOS DE ANGOLA (MEN WITH MINKISI)**

Figure 43
 Ink on paper. 3 1/2 x 5 1/2 in.
 African Postcard Collection, Manuscripts and
 Archives, Yale Sterling Memorial Library

CONGO FÉTICHE DU BAS-CONGO

Figure 45
 Photographer unknown, c. 1900
 Hand-painted Collotype. 3 1/2 x 5 1/2 in.
 Postcard Collection. Eliot Elisofon Photographic
 Archives, National Museum of African Art,
 Smithsonian Institution

FETICOS, FETISHES

Figure 79
 Photographer unknown, c. 1920
 Collotype. 3 1/2 x 5 1/2 in.
 Postcard Collection. Eliot Elisofon Photographic
 Archives, National Museum of African Art,
 Smithsonian Institution

**CONGO-BELGE- NO. 4
UN DANSEUR MONGLETTA**

Figure 77
 Photographer unknown, c. 1910
 Hand-painted Collotype. 3 1/2 x 5 1/2 in.
 Postcard Collection. Eliot Elisofon Photographic
 Archives, National Museum of African Art,
 Smithsonian Institution

MAPS**AFRICA EX MAGNA ORBIS TERRE
DESCRIPTIONE**

Figure 1
 Gerhard Mercator, 1595
 Holland
 Ink on paper. 18 1/2 x 22 1/2 in.
 Yale University Map Collection, Yale Sterling
 Memorial Library

DE STADT VAN LOUANGO

Figure 48
 John Ogilby, 1670
 England
 Ink on paper. 12 3/8 x 14 3/4 in.
 Yale University Map Collection, Yale Sterling
 Memorial Library

TEXTILES AND PATTERNS

URI PATTERNS EMBROIDERED ON CLOTH

Figure 17
1930/40
Mleanya Iheonyebuokwu
Nigeria
Woven textile, embroidery floss. 21 x 11 ½ in.
Private Collection

TEMPLATE FOR EMBROIDERED CLOTH

Figure 17a
1930/40
Mleanya Iheonyebuokwu
Nigeria
Paper, ink. 15 ¾ x 6 ½ in.
Private Collection

URI PATTERNS EMBROIDERED ON CLOTH

Figure 18
1930/40
Mleanya Iheonyebuokwu
Nigeria
Woven textile, embroidery floss. 20 x 14 ¼ in.
Private Collection

TEMPLATE FOR EMBROIDERED CLOTH

Figure 18a
1930/40
Mleanya Iheonyebuokwu
Nigeria
Paper, graphite. 10 x 7 ¼ in.
Private Collection

TEMPLATE FOR EMBROIDERED CLOTH

Figure 19
1930/40
Mleanya Iheonyebuokwu
Nigeria
Paper, graphite. 14 ½ x 9 ½ in.
Private Collection

FRAGMENT OF AN EMBROIDERY TEMPLATE FOR TABLECLOTH

Figure 20
1930/40
Mleanya Iheonyebuokwu
Nigeria
Paper, graphite. 20 ½ x 36 in.
Private Collection

EMBROIDERY TEMPLATE FOR TABLECLOTH

Figure 21
1930/40
Mleanya Iheonyebuokwu
Nigeria
Paper, graphite. 28 ¾ x 22 ¼ in.
Private Collection

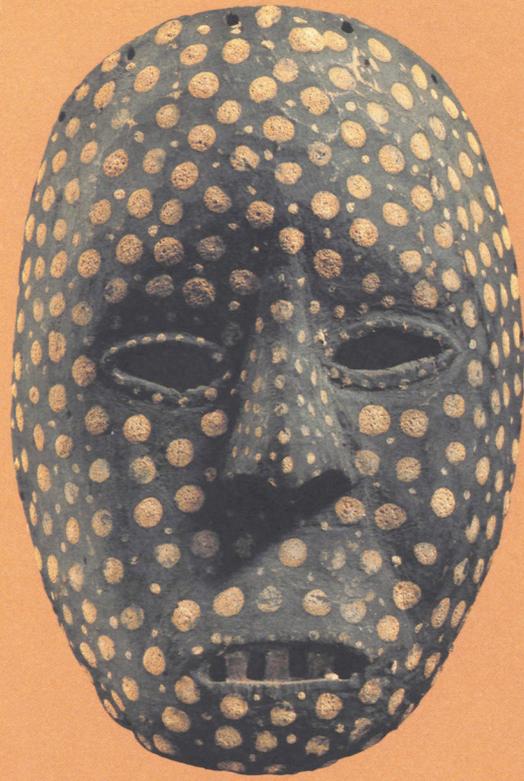
Adobe Galliard with Lithos display

Joyce Ippolito, editor
Sonia L. Shannon, designer
Herlin Press, printer

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