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The Art of Osei Bonsu

DORAN H. ROSS

Studies of traditional African artists were initiated by students of the Yoruba led by William Fagg. Fagg was also among the first African art historians to identify the individual carving style of Osei Bonsu (Figs. 1,2), without question the most important Asante carver of 20th-century Ghana (1968:fig. 99).¹ Over thirty years earlier, however, Marion Johnson published a short biography of this remarkable artist in an obscure Ghanaian journal (1937:269-70). Fagg's identification was tentative, but the carvings illustrated in the single photograph published by Johnson make it clear that his attribution was correct. These carvings are reproduced here in a photograph taken in 1937 by the prolific Akan scholar Eva Meyerowitz (Fig. 3).

While Johnson and Meyerowitz were the first to acknowledge Bonsu's work, Robert S. Rattray illustrated several unattributed carvings by the master in his 1927 volume, *Religion and Art in Ashanti*.² Bonsu's father, Kwaku Bempah, and to a lesser extent Bonsu himself were employed by Rattray as informants and translators in his important studies of Asante culture. The two carvers also produced works under Rattray's patronage for the Gold Coast Section of the 1924 British Empire Exhibition at Wembley. Beginning with Rattray's study, the art of Osei Bonsu has been published more frequently and in greater variety than that of any other traditional African carver, with over fifty carvings published prior to this paper.³ In subsequent years such well-known African art scholars as Meyerowitz, R.P. Wild, William Bascom, and Frank Willett worked with Bonsu and commissioned carvings from him.⁴ Prominent Ghanaian scholars have also benefited from his art and knowledge. Kofi Antubam, Meyerowitz's principal informant, and himself an author of a book on Ghanaian art (*Ghana's Heritage of Culture*), learned to carve from Bonsu in the late 1930s. Both J.B. Danquah and A.A.Y. Kyerematen used the carver as an informant for their studies. More recently Kwaku Andrews, Dennis Warren, Sharon Patton, Herbert Cole, and I consulted him for his wide knowledge of Asante art and culture. This broad attention from scholars is a clear measure of Bonsu's place in 20th-century Asante art history not only as an artist but also as a student of his culture's art. These same scholars also provide an unprecedented body of information upon which to base a study of this artist's work.

The principal sources on Bonsu's life are Johnson's early biography, an important student thesis by Seth Doe Kwashie Hodinyah (1971),⁵ the reflections of Eva Meyerowitz (personal communication, 1978), and my own work with the artist over a four-month period in 1976. While these four records reflect different periods in Bonsu's life and vary in minor details, they are in general agreement in all important aspects. For the



1 NTAN FIGURE, ca 1935. 47.6cm.
COLLECTION OF MR. AND MRS. JEREMIAH FOGELSON.

2. NTAN FIGURE ca. 1930. 53.3cm. COLLECTION OF JENNY LEDERER.



purposes of this paper, I will follow my own notes and cite differences when appropriate.

Osei Bonsu was born in Kumase, October 22, 1900, the son of Kwaku Bempah (d. 1936) and the grandson of Asantehene Mensah Bonsu (r. 1874-83).⁶ Bonsu's father was both a drummer and a carver, learning the latter art in the palace from court sculptors. Taught by Bempah, Bonsu began carving at the age of ten and worked as an apprentice for his father until he was seventeen. Johnson's biography, which is a literal presentation of the artist's own account, cites several commissions garnered by Bonsu in his teens from the chiefs of Akim Swedru, Akim Oda, Adanse, and Manpong (1937:269-70). These represent highly precocious accomplishments. It also suggests that chiefs from many parts of the Gold Coast looked to Kumase for carvers to create their regalia.

Beginning in 1920, Bonsu, his senior brother, and their father were employed by Captain R.S. Rattray as informants

and carvers, accompanying the anthropologist throughout many parts of Asante. The father and brother traveled to England for the British Empire Exhibition in 1924, while Bonsu remained home and received several important commissions from Asante chiefs, most notably the Adansehene. The next fifteen years were among his most active, and many of his best carvings date from this period, 1925 to 1940.

A major part of Bonsu's adult life was spent in the part-time employment of three important colonial schools. In 1933 Father Edward Evans hired him to teach carving at the Anglican Mission School in Kumase, where he worked until 1937. From 1937 to 1945 Bonsu taught at Achimota Secondary School near Accra,⁷ and from 1947 to 1956 in the Arts and Crafts Department of Adisadel College, Cape Coast. Because of his consistent employment by colonial schools during these twenty-three years he was able to work almost full time as a carver, a rare situation for an Akan artist. The moves to Accra and Cape Coast also

facilitated numerous commissions from non-Asante Akan chiefs. At the same time the breaks in school terms allowed Bonsu to return to Kumase to fulfill commissions from Asante patrons, especially the Asantehene.

Bonsu retired to his place of birth in 1956 and moved into a new cement-block house near the Asantehene's palace. For reasons still unclear, the sculptor fell from favor under the Nkrumah regime and was detained at Usher Fort, Accra, from 1960 until the February 1966 coup. He did not carve at all during this period; of the six years Bonsu said simply, "I just sat." Six months after his release he began teaching at the University of Science and Technology, Kumase, where he worked through the spring of 1976. During the summer of 1975 the artist traveled to the United States under the auspices of the Smithsonian Institution for the Festival of American Folklife (June 25-July 26). He visited the U.S. again the next summer and traveled across the country, presenting carvings to dignitaries in Denver, Los Angeles, and Honolulu. Returning to Kumase in September 1976, Bonsu spent the last months of his life in his home, where he remained a prolific carver until his death on March 1, 1977.

During his lifetime Bonsu was the chief carver to three Asantehenes. When Prempeh I returned from exile in 1924, the sculptor participated in restoring the regalia of the Kumase stool, carving several linguist staffs, sword hilts, flywhisk handles, and ornaments for sandals and coronets. He was also involved in the reconstruction of the desecrated Golden Stool (Cole & Ross 1977:138). The enstoolment of Prempeh II in 1931 and the restoration of the Asante Confederacy in January 1935 prompted a further burst of commissions (including several of the linguist staffs illustrated in Ross 1982b: figs. 4,6,23). A similar situation ensued with the installation of Opoku Ware II in 1970. His role as chief carver to three Asantehenes gave him national prominence in Ghana, encouraged commissions from other chiefs, and led to his carving several pieces for the Ghana National Museum.

Osei Bonsu's carving style is best known from the often published figure formerly in the collection of Katherine White and now in the Seattle Art Museum (Fagg 1968: fig. 99; Thompson 1974: 46; Cole & Ross 1977: fig. 353; *African Arts*, vol. 7 no. 2, 1974: inside back cover). This sculpture is consistent in style with those he carved between 1930 and 1936, while he was still based in Kumase. In the field I photographed



3. FIGURAL GROUP OF A CHIEF AND HIS ENTOURAGE, CARVED BEFORE 1937.

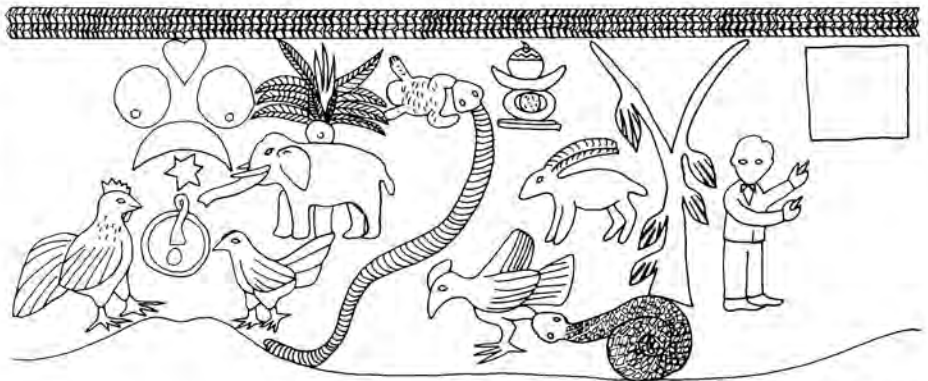
TOP: 4. NTAN FIGURES FROM ADUAMOA, CARVED IN LATE 1934. PHOTOGRAPHED IN NOVEMBER 1976. BOT- TOM: 5. NTAN FIGURES FROM ADUMAN, CARVED IN 1933. PHOTOGRAPHED IN NOVEMBER 1976.



similar figures dating from 1933 and 1935 (Figs. 4,5). These all have oval, almost egg-shaped heads that, when compared with other traditional African carved figures, are only slightly oversized. (Figure 2, with its massive head, is an exception.) Female coiffures are generally elaborate and elegant, while male hairdos are simple and occasionally just suggested by paint. Characteristically there is a high sloping forehead rising from pronounced eyebrows, with almond-shaped eyes dominated by a projecting upper lid. The straight nose is rarely prominent and lacks flared nostrils. Set low on a pointed jaw is a small slit-like mouth without well-defined lips. Necks on both males and females generally are ringed. Rounded shoulders slope downward to relatively small hands, and the feet are likewise small and lacking in detail. Overall Bonsu's figures are well-rounded and feature a carefully finished surface. Very few of his carvings display the traditional Asante vegetable paint made from *tatwia* roots; most of his freestanding sculptures are completely covered with commercially produced gold paint or other multicolored enamels.⁸ All things considered, Bonsu's carvings are among the most



6. NTAN DRUM FROM ADUAMOA, CARVED IN LATE 1934. 123.2cm. PHOTOGRAPHED IN 1983. PRIVATE COLLECTION. RIGHT: 7. ROLLOUT DRAWING OF FIGURE 6, NOT TO SCALE.



8. ROLLOUT DRAWING OF FIGURE 9, NOT TO SCALE. OPPOSITE PAGE. TOP LEFT: 9. NTAN DRUM, ca. 1935. 102.5cm. THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN ART, WASHINGTON, D.C. GIFT OF ROBERT PORTMAN. TOP RIGHT: 10. NTAN DRUM, FROM ADUMAN, CARVED IN 1933. PHOTOGRAPHED IN NOVEMBER 1976. BOTTOM LEFT: 11. NTAN DRUM, ca. 1935. PRIVATE COLLECTION. BOTTOM RIGHT: 12. NTAN DRUM, ca. 1935. 108.6cm. THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, GIFT OF JAY M. HAFT 1980.

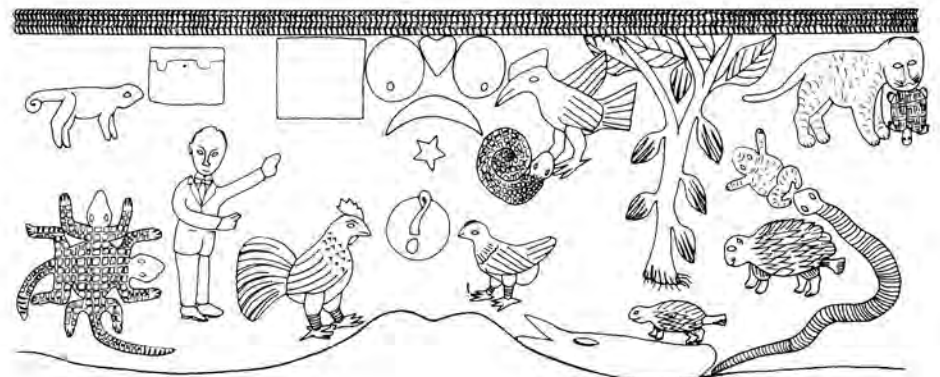
naturalistic of those created by Asante artists.

Bonsu's commitment to naturalistic carvings was recorded in his own words in relation to another's work in an important study by Warren and Andrews (1977: 13): "If after examining a sculpture critically, he is satisfied with it, he will nod his head in appreciation and say 'Well done, it is correct.' If unsatisfied he will then return it with a series of questions such as 'Look at that crooked head carefully and correct it'; 'Is this how God created you?' meaning some anatomical mistake should be corrected; 'Correct those ears that look like those of the hare,' meaning that the ears are too big; 'If a girl has this type of breast, would you take her as your wife': Nana prefers carvings with very smooth finishes; a piece with a rough finish will elicit a reaction like: 'Feel the surface with your hands; it is just like *fufu* (pounded yams, a staple food) which has fallen into the gravel.' Bonsu will say, 'Do away or scrape or sand off the rough surface which looks like *fufu* which has fallen into the gravel.' If sexual features are not well expressed, he might ask, 'Is it a female Kodwo?' (i.e., a hermaphrodite)."⁹

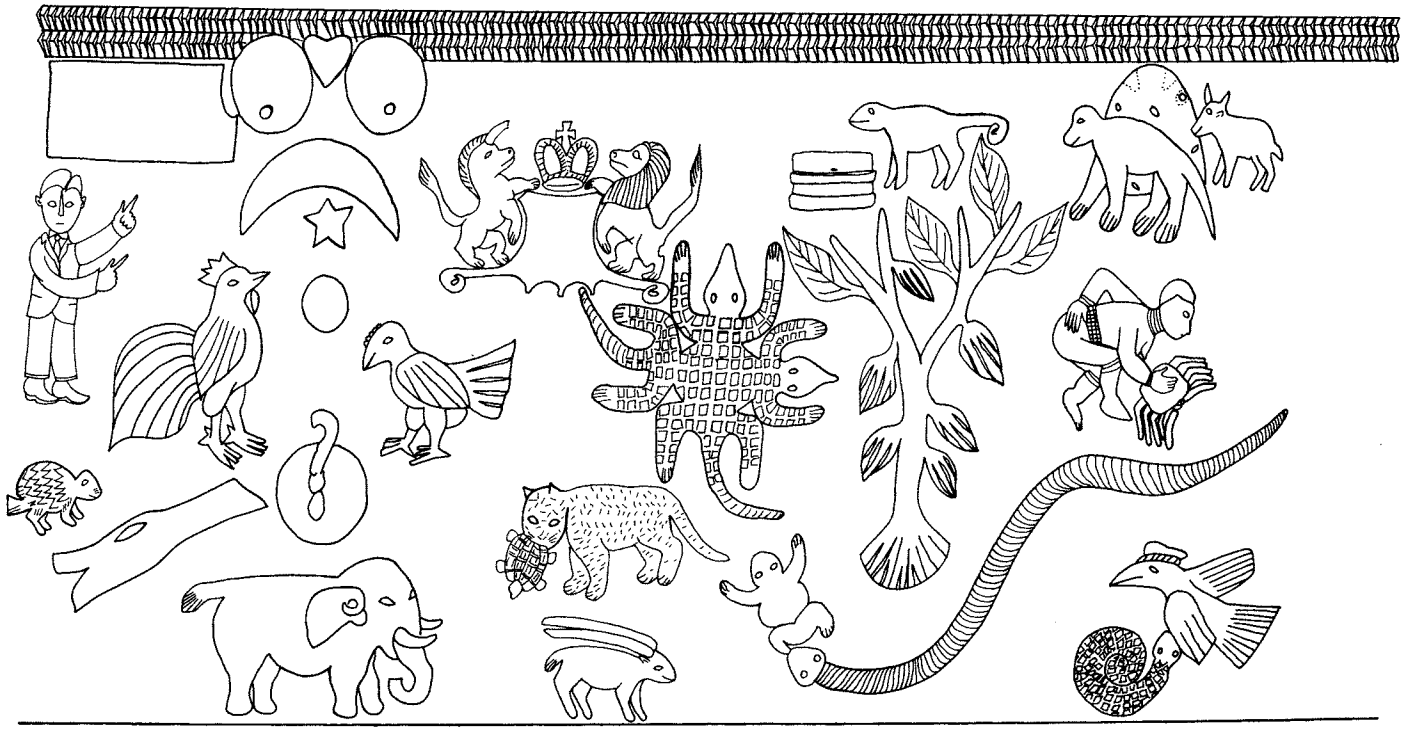
While Bonsu occasionally carved figures for traditional Asante shrines, most of his freestanding figures known today (including Figs. 1, 2, 4, 5) were part of the sculptural ensembles associated with *ntan* drumming groups (Cole & Ross 1977: 176; Bonsu is seated on the right in the facing photograph). Nketia identifies *ntan* as one of the traditional "popular bands" common in many parts of the

Asante region (1963: 67-74). These bands featured drums with elaborate relief carving; groups of carved figures were set up next to the drums on the ground or on adjacent tables, from which carved depictions of trees occasionally projected (Cole & Ross 1977: pl. XV).¹⁰ Essential to the sculptural groups were images of a chief and queen mother. Other carvings represented members of the traditional entourage of a chief and included linguists, swordbearers, umbrella carriers, bell ringers, drummers, and executioners. Reflecting the colonial presence on the Gold Coast, many groups also included a District Commissioner, Native Authority Police (with red fez), and handcuffed "political prisoners" (Jahn 1983: figs. 46, 48-54).

Bonsu generally painted the skin of the chief and queen mother in light pigments (gold, silver, white, and yellow) and the skin of the remainder of his figures brown. The presence of carvings of light-skinned traditional rulers in conjunction with colonial officials was given conflicting interpretations by two neighboring *ntan* groups. The elders of the Aduamo *Ntan* Players stated that the colors were designed to pay homage to the chief, since white is a sacred color. At Aduman, however, the elders maintained that the royal figures were painted white because during colonial times chiefs were often appointed by the







13. ROLLOUT DRAWING OF FIGURE 14, NOT TO SCALE.

British, and traditional lines of inheritance were not followed. The light skins, the elders said, were a means of mocking these "puppet" chiefs.

The mocking of chiefs by drumming groups could not have occurred in pre-colonial times. According to Osei Bonsu, the Asante borrowed the tradition of decorated drums from the Fante about 1915. Before that time all drumming in the Asante region, including recreational performances, was controlled by the chiefs. Under the colonial administration the chiefs lost much of their traditional power, and well-organized drumming groups were allowed to develop with drums distinct from those typically used by royalty. Rivalry between two bands in the same town, coupled with the dancing and drinking that accompanied performances, often led to public disturbances that brought the groups into conflict with the British authorities and eventually led to regulation of performances by requiring permits.

The two interpretations presented by the elders of the Aduamo and Aduman *ntan* groups probably were not the original purpose of the figures. In *The Arts of Ghana* it was briefly argued that Rattray's patronage prompted the creation of figurative scenes of a chief and his entourage (Cole & Ross 1977: 176). Rattray commissioned "nearly a hundred figures" representing a chief and his court for the Wembley exhibition (1927:274). Several carvers, including Bonsu, his father, and senior brother, were hired for this project. Their carvings are illustrated by Rattray (1927: figs. 188-202), who emphasized that the subject matter was his

idea: "I should like to make it clear that all the carvings are modern. They were made, *as a group*, on my suggestion, and at my request. . ." (1927:274, italics added). In another place he says: ". . . these artists set to work, at my suggestion, to portray in wood a king, a queen mother, and other officials in the entourage of an Ashanti Court in the old days. Beyond suggesting the subject as a whole, however, I did not take any direct part in the work, which, though modern in one sense [subject matter], represents the technique and workmanship of the old school of artists" (1927:274). Rattray further notes that his project attracted much attention from local Asante: "Hundreds of old men and women came every week from all over the country to my bungalow at Mampon to see this group, the report of which had spread far and wide" (1927:274).

Bonsu maintained that he was the first to carve these figurative scenes specifically for *ntan* drumming groups in the late 1920s. In 1976 Bonsu named 53 villages or towns where he had carved *ntan* drums with their accompanying figurative scenes between 1926 and 1940, when he made his last drum set. Since the typical set had 7 figures in it, Bonsu would have to have carved 371 figures for the 53 drums. He said that on the average it took him a month to carve a full set of figures along with the drum, and that he generally had two or three apprentices working with him. The artist admitted that not all drums had associated figures, but this nevertheless represents a considerable achievement for the time span involved.

Since his father was both a drummer and carver, it was perhaps natural that drums were to become an early carving specialty of Bonsu's. I have examined eleven *ntan* drums by him. Most cannot be associated with their original provenance. In 1976 I saw two drums still in the possession of their original groups at Aduman (Fig. 10) and Aduamo. The latter drum (Figs. 6,7) was subsequently covered with black paint and is now in a private Los Angeles collection. The sculptural entourage associated with this drum is illustrated in Figure 4. It is possible that the Aduman drum has also left Ghana, since two of its accompanying figures (Fig. 5), the policeman and the prisoner, are now in a private European collection and were recently illustrated by Jahn (1983: figs. 48, 50). Bonsu and the elders of Aduman and Aduamo agreed on dating the two drums and their figures to 1933 and 1934 respectively.

A third drum, in the UCLA Museum of Cultural History collections (Cover), was published in *The Arts of Ghana* (Cole & Ross 1977: figs. 351, 352) and can now be traced to the town of Abofo near Ofinso. Three more drums are in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Fig. 12), the National Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C. (Figs. 8, 9), and a private Los Angeles collection (Figs. 13, 14). The seventh drum was published in three views by Lewis (1973: fig. 46), and another is illustrated in a student thesis by Afranie (1974: pls. VII-IX). The remaining three drums (one is illustrated in Fig. 11) were in the hands of dealers, and their current location is unknown.



14. N TAN DRUM, ca. 1935. 106.6cm. PRIVATE COLLECTION.

15. SWORD HILT OF A CHIEF HOLDING A SWORD, MUSKET, AND STOOL, ca. 1940. STATE TREASURY OF AKWAPIM, AKROPONG. PHOTOGRAPHED IN SEPTEMBER 1967

Based on documented motifs from the Aduman and Aduamoa drums, the proverbial imagery on the Abofo drum was identified and discussed in *The Arts of Ghana* (Cole & Ross 1977: 173, 176). The motifs on all eleven drums are tabulated on page 90. It is apparent that on most of the drums Bonsu repeated many of the same motifs. All of them feature two breasts, a heart, a dish and grinding spoon, and the snake and hornbill. Six of the drums are mounted on the backs of lions, three on elephants, and two have

no supports. Seventeen motifs occur on six or more of the drums in different combinations.

An important issue in the study of Akan art concerns who dictates the imagery on a given object type and whether the imagery is specifically relevant to the function and context of the object or, on the other hand, chosen somewhat arbitrarily from the large pool of motifs available to all artists. In the case of linguist staffs, for example, the chief and his elders invariably select the motif, and it is

generally associated with asserting the powers of the ruling elite. In the case of *ntan* drums it would appear from the Bonsu corpus that the artist, rather than the patron, selects most of the designs, and that they have little bearing on the performance role of the popular band. While it would seem that Bonsu attempts to make each drum somewhat different (no two drums have an identical set of motifs), he nevertheless has a strong tendency to repeat favored images.

Three of the drums are reproduced here in rollout drawings that show Bonsu's sense of composition and allow an easy reading of the imagery (Figs. 7, 8, 13). Only those motifs explained by Bonsu in 1976 and not discussed in *The Arts of Ghana* (Cole & Ross 1977: 173, 176) in relation to the Abofo drum will be considered here. One of the most common motifs on his drums is a cock facing a hen, always positioned below the breasts (seen on all three drums). Also a common linguist staff image, it depicts the proverb "Although the hen knows when it is dawn, she leaves it for the cock to announce" (*Akoköbereë nim adekyeë nanso otie onini ano*).¹¹ This asserts the pre-eminence of the male in decision making and conceivably argues for the leadership of the *ntan* in community affairs. The porcupine (Fig. 7) is one of the



principal symbols of the Asante; it generally illustrates the maxim "If you kill a thousand, a thousand will come" (*Wokum apim a apim bëba*), which refers to the invincibility of the Asante. On this drum from Aduamoa, however, Bonsu associates the porcupine with its biological cousin the hedgehog, depicted to the left.¹² For the combined image Bonsu gave the expression "The porcupine did not accept the hedgehog as a brother, though they are from the same mother" (*Kötökö ammfa apësë annyë onua, nanso oni ba no*). Bonsu explained that even among brothers there is bound to be dissension and that one will always be the senior (the porcupine in this case).

Another common motif (found on five of the drums) is that of a woman bending over to pick up a crab (Fig. 13). According to Bonsu this represents the proverb "When you bend down to pick up the crab (lit. 'cheat on the crab'), you expose your buttocks to God" (*Wubu òkotò kwasea a, Onyame hunu wo to*). To avoid its claws, one must deceive the crab and approach from the back; this proverb argues that the supreme god is aware of all deceptions. The motif of ape, antelope, and



16. LINGUIST STAFF OF A MAN WITH A BOY ON HIS SHOULDER, ca. 1955. 38cm. GHANA NATIONAL MUSEUM, ACCRA.



17. UMBRELLA FINIALS, 1939. LEFT TO RIGHT: HEN AND CHICKS, 31.4cm. HORNBILL AND PYTHON, 39.2cm. PREKESE, 31.7cm. BRITISH MUSEUM.

termite hill (Fig. 13) is depicted on four drums. Bonsu associated the image with the saying "By rubbing its body against a termite hill, the ape does not become an antelope" (Twi not recorded). The adage is based on the observation of the ape's ability to imitate and the little duiker's propensity for sharpening its horns on termite hills. The duiker is viewed as one of the wisest animals in the forest. With this proverb the Asante recognize that mere imitation of the wise does not necessarily make one's deeds wise.¹³

Four of the drums illustrate a leopard by itself. (Six other drums show the leopard with a tortoise in its mouth, which is discussed in Cole & Ross 1977: 173.) The isolated leopard, according to Bonsu, represents this proverb: "The leopard has seventy-seven spots on its body; when it rains they get wet, but they do not disappear" (*Kutotwiamansa ho akurokyireyë aduosonson; nsuo bo no a, ëfö nanso ënhoho*). It was explained that even in adversity, people of character do not change. The remaining motifs of the table were not explained by Bonsu.

Ntan drums and figures are clearly a major part of Bonsu's work, and they are the forms most commonly found in Western collections. Of equal importance are linguist staffs and umbrella tops, most of which are fortunately still part of the regalia of Akan chiefs. The artist's tenure at the two schools in Accra and Cape Coast prompted commissions from numerous southern Akan chiefs, and his fame as the Asantehene's carver led to patronage by many of the most prominent paramount chiefs. Bonsu also received many commissions from chiefs in the southeastern Ivory Coast, two of which are illustrated by Huet (1978: fig.

65). A number of his staffs have been published, but unfortunately they have been rarely identified with the artist.

The staff most commonly requested by chiefs from Bonsu is that of two men seated at a table. Three different examples by the artist have been published (Cole & Ross 1977: fig. 10; pl. XIV, staff on the left; Ross 1982b: fig. 4), and a fourth, from the Fante divisional chief at Essakyir and carved around 1950, is illustrated here (Fig. 19).¹⁴ Its proverb, "The food is for the man who owns it, not for the man who is hungry" (*Deë adeë wò no na ödie na ënyë deë ëkòm de no*), asserts that chieftaincy is for the rightful heir and not for those who hunger after it. Another Fante staff from about the same date is in the regalia of the paramount chief at Mankesim (Fig. 20). It represents a chief standing over a basket covering four small chicks. The Omanhene explained its meaning in English: "If the chief takes care of his subjects, they will in turn take care of him" (cf. Ross 1982b: fig. 21). An unusual motif adorns another staff carved a few years later for the Ghana National Museum in Accra (Fig. 16). According to museum records it depicts a small boy trying to jump over his father's shoulder, although the explanation in the records is somewhat confused. Essentially the motif seems to say that one should not attempt to do what is beyond one's capabilities.

TOP LEFT TO RIGHT: 18. LINGUIST STAFF OF A LION WITH A HUNTER, ca. 1950. AWUTU. PHOTOGRAPHED IN SEPTEMBER 1979. 19. LINGUIST STAFF OF TWO MEN AT A TABLE, ca. 1950. ESSAKYIR. PHOTOGRAPHED IN AUGUST 1975. BOTTOM. LEFT TO RIGHT: 20. LINGUIST STAFF OF A CHIEF WITH CHICKS, ca. 1950. MANKESIM. PHOTOGRAPHED IN JULY 1975. 21. LINGUIST STAFF OF A MAN SCRAPING BARK OFF A TREE, ca. 1950. 44.4cm. PRIVATE COLLECTION. 22. LINGUIST STAFF OF A CHIEF HOLDING AN EGG, ca. 1940. 27.9cm. PRIVATE COLLECTION.



In 1939 Meyerowitz commissioned a linguist staff of a lion disarming a hunter (Ross 1982a: fig. 3). Its proverb, "If you fire at a lion and do not kill it, it would have been better not to fire at all" (*Së wo bëto gyata tuo na wanwuo deë fanyinam*), argues that force should be used judiciously and with precision (cf. Ross 1982b: fig. 13 for the same motif with a leopard, by a different carver). A nearly identical staff by Bonsu dating from about fifteen years later was photographed during the Awubia festival at Awutu in 1979 (Fig. 18).

Two more staffs are currently in a private collection in Houston. The first represents a man scraping bark off a tree (Fig. 21). Bonsu explained this same motif in relation to a staff belonging to the *ntan* group at Aduamoa (Cole & Ross 1977: pl. XV): "If one man scrapes the bark [medicine] off a tree, it will fall to the ground" (*Baako werë aduro a ëgu*). The image stresses the idea that one person alone cannot do a thing successfully. The second staff in this collection depicts a seated chief holding an egg (Fig. 22). I did not record the meaning of this motif from Bonsu, but its proverb has been



25. LINGUIST STAFF FINIAL OF "THE CIRCULAR RAINBOW," BEING CARVED BY OSEI BONSU, NOVEMBER 1976, KUMASE.

published by Kyerematen (1964: 96): "To be a ruler is like holding an egg in the hand; if it is pressed too hard it breaks; but if not held tightly enough it may slip and smash on the ground."

One of Osei Bonsu's last major commissions, in 1976, was a staff for a linguist newly appointed by Asantehene Opoku Ware II. The Asantehene wanted a new and unusual motif so he asked Bonsu for his advice. The carver

suggested "the circular rainbow" (*kon-tonkrowe*), a motif important in stool imagery, but previously unknown on linguist staffs. The finial displays three men whose necks are encircled by a ring (Fig. 25). Unfortunately the carving was clumsily covered with gold leaf so that the quality of the sculpture is obscured. Bonsu said the motif emphasized that the Asantehene was the rainbow that surrounded all his subjects, clearly a flattering metaphor for the paramount chief of the Asante peoples.

In addition to the lion and hunter staff mentioned previously, Meyerowitz commissioned three umbrella finials from Bonsu in 1939, which are now in the British Museum (Fig. 17). The first of these represents a hen and four chicks, the second the python that has caught the hornbill, and the third the sweet-smelling plant *prëkësë*. These images are included here as examples that further expand the range of Bonsu's art; the highly conventionalized meanings of these motifs have been published elsewhere several times.¹⁵ A motif not previously published is that of a man with his hand to his mouth who is standing in front of a snake; it appears on an umbrella finial carved around 1935 and now in the Ghana National Museum (Fig. 24).¹⁶ According to their records this figure "tells us that when you are standing near a fearful object you should make no noise. You can only make noise when you are far away from the object and your position is secure. The interpretation of the above figure is similar to an Akan proverb which says that, 'It is a taboo to insult a chief in his presence, but you can rain any amount of insult on



23. SWORD HILT OF A SASABONSAM, ca. 1950. 38.6cm. MUSEUM OF CULTURAL HISTORY, UCLA. GIFT OF WILLIAM BRILL. RIGHT: 24. UMBRELLA FINIAL (?) OF A MAN WITH A SNAKE, ca. 1935. 29cm. GHANA NATIONAL MUSEUM, ACCRA.



the chief when he is not present." It is regrettable that the provenance of this well-used finial was not noted.

The proverbial sayings for the foregoing motifs have been elucidated here in part because Bonsu clearly delighted in recounting the maxims his art represented. He often spoke in proverbs, and he took great pleasure in carving motifs for aphorisms that he had never seen in sculpture before.

Bonsu's human and animal carvings are relatively easy to recognize. Non-figurative carvings and lesser items of regalia, such as sword and flywhisk handles, sandal and crown ornaments, are considerably more difficult. Nevertheless, some of these also have representational motifs. A fine gold-leafed sword hilt from about 1940 is still in the state treasury of Akwapim (Fig. 15). It depicts a figure holding a sword, a musket, and a stool.

Another sword hilt by Bonsu is perhaps more important, as it represents a conventionalized image of a *sasabonsam*, which the artist maintains he originated (Fig. 23). As illustrated here, the motif is partially based on the Christian devil, having horns, bat-like wings, and a beard. In spite of its acculturated rendering, *sasabonsam* is firmly rooted in traditional belief as a fearful, witch-related bush spirit that lives in trees. It

has long legs that hang down from the trees or bend into loops when it is seated on the ground. (See Rattray 1916: 47-50, and 1927: 26-31 for further discussion of this creature.) Bonsu first carved a *sasabonsam* image like this one in 1925 for a linguist staff of the Adanse divisional chief at Bodweseanwo. According to local tradition, that chief's great-great-grandfather had successfully fought the spirit, and the Bonsu staff was made to commemorate the victory.

Shortly after the staff was carved, Captain Wise, secretary of mines at Obuasi, observed the image at a durbar and commissioned Bonsu to carve a replica of it. This was followed by a similar request from Rattray and, according to Bonsu, many other people, including Dr. J. B. Danquah. Today this syncretic form is considered a devil image by both Christian and non-Christian Ghanaians, and it is also a popular tourist carving, probably because it satisfies the Western conception of what African bush spirits should look like. In 1937 Meyerowitz photographed Bonsu carving a similar *sasabonsam* at Achimota.

Johnson's 1937 biography also recorded the expatriate demand for the artist's carvings. Bonsu told Johnson: "Before I met Captain Rattray I had met a friendly European on the staff of one of the mining companies who found a

ready market for my carvings. In 1920 I sold some of my work to Lieut.-Colonel Rose and came to know some of the European officers who purchased things from me" (1937: 270). One of the objects most frequently requested from Bonsu by foreigners was the traditional *akuaba*. This form has almost become a cliché in Akan art, and it is a staple for most Akan carvers who expect any commercial success. Bonsu's *akuaba* are considerably more naturalistic than the traditional Asante forms. This is particularly evident in the facial features of a figure he carved in August 1936 (Fig. 26) and another carved in 1959 (Fig. 27), both of which seem to be typical of his earlier *akuaba*.¹⁷ The cylindrical torsos and arms of these two pieces, however, are consistent with traditional *akuaba*. Near the end of Bonsu's life, his interpretation of this genre featured a more voluptuous, full-bodied torso that seems to be an exaggerated caricature of the original form (Fig. 28). If connoisseurs of traditional African art have trouble appreciating Bonsu's last conception of the form, tourists apparently did not. In October and November of 1976, his apprentices were busy filling an order from Lomé, Togo, for 400 *akuaba* based on the model illustrated in Figure 28.

Although Bonsu's best works were probably carved for traditional patrons,



26. AKUABA CARVED IN AUGUST 1936 FOR R.P. WILD. 36.9cm. BRITISH MUSEUM.



27. AKUABA CARVED IN 1959 FOR FRANK WILLETT. 34cm. COLLECTION OF FRANK WILLETT.



28. AKUABA CARVED IN 1976 FOR THE AUTHOR. 32.3cm. MUSEUM OF CULTURAL HISTORY. UCLA.



29 SHRINE CARVING BY KWAKU BEMPAH, ca. 1925. 40cm. PRIVATE COLLECTION.

his art was quite responsive to the sculptural innovations of the 20th century. His sixty-year career spanned most of Britain's colonial domination of Asante, and he experienced nearly all the influences that the Western world brought to African sculpture. As a prominent Asante carver, Bonsu was frequently called upon to make gifts for colonial dignitaries and for friends of the modern Ghanaian government. In 1939 he carved a chief and his entourage for Lord Swinton as a gift to President Franklin Roosevelt. Thirty-six years later, while in Washington, he carved a coffee table for President Gerald Ford. If artistically unsuccessful, it represented a conceptually sophisticated composition of an African Atlas supporting a map of the United States on his shoulders! Other acculturated carvings generally incorporated traditional designs into object types functionally more appropriate to the 20th century, such as lamps, flower vases, and napkin rings. This was the opposite of the long-standing Akan demand for new motifs that could be incor-



30. LINGUIST STAFF OF TWO MEN SEATED ON EITHER SIDE OF A TREE, CARVED BY KOJO BONSU ca. 1970. CAPE COAST. PHOTOGRAPHED IN SEPTEMBER 1980.

porated into traditional object types. Yet, both situations required creative innovations, which has been the hallmark of Akan art since its first contact with the Europeans in 1471. Regardless of patronage, Bonsu usually carried out his commissions with care. For example, there was no difference in quality between an electric lamp carved for a guest of the Asantehene and a flywhisk handle carved for an Ivory Coast chief, both of which depicted three heads surrounding a cylinder, representing the traditional saying "One head does not go into council."

It is customary to write about the destructive effects of the modern world on the arts of West Africa. This is certainly true for Asante arts in the religious sphere, and it is notable that Bonsu did relatively little religious carving. Royal arts, on the other hand, have prospered throughout most of this century. An examination of Bonsu's royal commissions in the last months of his life confirms this. During the month of October 1976 alone he carved six linguist staffs, three umbrella finials, two flywhisk handles, two sword hilts, decorations for two pairs of sandals, a crown, and a double-barreled shotgun on commission from ten different chiefs. All of these items were subsequently gold leafed.

Bonsu's carving style owes a strong debt to that of his father, Kwaku Bempah. Many examples of Bempah's work were published by Rattray in 1927.¹⁸ One carving by the father, a gong handle, is in the collections of UCLA's Museum of Cultural History (Cole & Ross 1977: fig. 202). I photographed an heirloom piece in the possession of the current head of Bempah's family, and a third carving, a figure seated on a stool with its hands in a begging gesture, is in a private Los Angeles collection (Fig. 29). All of these share a readily recognizable style. The head is carved as a rounded elongated rectangle and has a very high forehead. Hair and headgear are rarely depicted. Eyes are generally wide open and are surmounted by a subtle brow. Distinctive of Bempah's style are squared-off shoulders that project from the torso. Fingers are long and paddle-like.

Osei Bonsu's legacy did not end with his death. His eldest son, Kojo Bonsu, continues to produce traditional carvings for numerous Asante chiefs, and he also supplies elaborately carved doors and other items for wealthy Ghanaians and Europeans. The son's style is reminiscent of his father's, although it is clearly distinguishable (Fig. 30). The son's figures are generally heavier, less detailed, and feature a distinctive sloping forehead not found in his father's carvings. A nephew, Bediako Bonsu, was also trained by Osei Bonsu and has a thriving business producing tourist carvings, doing extensive restorations on traditional pieces, and creating accomplished fakes for the international trade in African art. Three more distant relatives constitute a prolific workshop that is responsible for most of the Asante fakes widely represented in many prestigious museums and private collections (see Ross & Reichert 1983).

The discussion of Osei Bonsu presented here is only a small part of the story. The artist died before it could be developed further. As an informant he was a crucial contributor to many of the ideas presented in *The Arts of Ghana* (Cole & Ross 1977).¹⁹ He spoke very good English, was well educated in Asante history, and possessed an almost encyclopedic knowledge of Akan proverbial lore. Today, royal commissions by Osei Bonsu may still be found in many of the most important Akan states. Although this survey is based on approximately one hundred carvings by the sculptor, only by expanding this corpus and by comparing it with the works of other artists will we fully appreciate his contribution. Bonsu's epitaph could have been written in his own words. When asked to critically appraise his own work he replied: "Salt does not say of itself, 'I'm sweet.' That is for the tongue to decide." □

Notes page 90

ROSS, notes, from page 40

1. This paper is based on interviews conducted with Osei Bonsu from September to December 1976 and with his son Kojo Bonsu and nephew Bediako Bonsu during the summers of 1979 and 1980. I would like to thank Asantehene Opoku Ware II, Eva Meyerowitz, and Malcolm McLeod for their contributions to this study. Robbie Reid did the sensitive drawings of the three drums.

2. All three carvings in Rattray's figure 189 and the carving on the left in figure 190 are by Osei Bonsu.

3. See especially Rattray 1927: figs. 189, 190; Johnson 1937: 270; Robbins 1966: fig. 119; Fagg 1968: fig. 99; Leuzinger 1972: 133; Lewis 1973: fig. 46; Bankes 1975: fig. 16; Fischer & Himmelheber 1975: figs. 10, 12, 13; Rattton 1975: 8, 10; Segy 1975: fig. 205; Cole & Ross 1977: figs. 10, 329 (staff on far right), 335, 337, 351, 353, 354, 397, pls. XIV (staff on far left), XV; Huet 1978: fig. 65; McLeod 1981: 100, 171; Ross 1982b: figs. 3, 4, 17, 23, 28, 29; Jahn 1983: figs. 46, 48-55.

4. Three carvings (Fig. 17) were commissioned by Meyerowitz in late 1939 and are now housed in the British Museum (1952 Af 24.7, 1952 Af 24.8, 1952 Af 24.9). Also in the British Museum are five carvings commissioned by Wild: a hornbill and python umbrella finial carved at Achimota in 1939 (1947 Af 13.6); two freestanding sculptures of what seems to be images of al Buraq, both carved in November 1935 (1935 11-4.3, 1947 Af 13.5); a *sasabonsam* figure (1935 12-12.1), and an *akuaba* carved in August 1936 (Fig. 26, 1936 11-17.1). Sometime between 1942 and 1944 Bascom acquired male and female busts by Bonsu, which are now in the Lowie Museum of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley (5-4884 and 5-4885). In 1976 I commissioned four carvings from Bonsu that are now in UCLA's Museum of Cultural History: a drummer (X82-1210); a queen mother (X82-1211); a linguist-staff finial of two men seated at a table (X82-1213); and an *akuaba* (Fig. 28, X82-1209).

5. Hodinyah's study merits publication and includes valuable information on tree-felling, tool purification, and other carving rituals, as well as data on the Asante apprenticeship system. His thesis is based on extensive interviews with Bonsu.

6. In 1937 Bonsu's birth date was published as October 27, 1901 (Johnson 1937: 269).

7. Bonsu was not the first person hired to teach carving at Achimota. Pippet mentions an unnamed "reliable African wood-carver in a village in the interior" (1935: 20) who started work at Achimota in September 1931. About two hundred boys and some girls took the carving classes. Pippet's paper offers several insights on issues of acculturation in Akan woodcarving: "As a rule the boys are quite definite as to what they wish to carve; but I often find it necessary to advise them to do something else. Their imagination prompts them to impossible tasks—like the carving of a motor-car or bicycle. To the boys all the world over such things appeal. . . . I encourage them to look for models in their own land; native objects that they knew about and could visualize. . . . when they

realized how interesting these were to carve, they gave up, to a great extent, wanting to turn out aeroplanes etc." (Pippet 1935: 21). Pippet also editorialized on early tourist arts in Ghana: ". . . the undesirable objects of which shops etc. in Accra are filled—the kind of stuff that is turned out by the worst European taste" (1935:22).

8. The unpainted carvings in Figure 3 were made for Meyerowitz and not for indigenous consumption. Similar figural groups were often carved as presentation pieces for colonial administrators, and such pieces were invariably unpainted. The black paint on Figure 1 is also atypical of the Asante penchant for polychrome *ntan* figures.

9. See Warren and Andrews (1977:13) for the vernacular of Bonsu's quotes.

10. As with most Akan art, the iconography of this sculptural ensemble illustrated in Cole & Ross (1977: pl. XV) relates to traditional proverbs or sayings. The whole scene depicts the expression "Only a brave man goes under a big tree," celebrating the power of the chief. The birds on the tree are the Akan equivalent of "Birds of a feather flock together," stressing group unity. At the top of the tree is a bird swallowing the head of a snake, which illustrates the proverb "Without the head, a snake is just a rope," suggesting that any problem can be solved with the proper approach.

11. For typographic reasons δ has been substituted for the *open o* symbol and the ϵ for the *epsilon* symbol. A linguist staff with this motif carved by Bonsu is in the state treasury of Offinso and has been published in Rattton 1975: 8; Cole & Ross 1977: fig. 335; and McLeod 1981: 100.

12. On most of Bonsu's drums the hedgehog on a log appears without the porcupines. As an isolated motif its proverb was recited by Bonsu as: "If the hedgehog gets fat, it is to the benefit of the rotten log it lives in" (*Apēsē yē kēsēē a ōyē ma dyōfkyēē*; Cole & Ross 1977:173).

13. A sword ornament from the state treasury of Juaben also depicts this motif (cf. Cole & Ross 1977: 152, fig. 317).

14. Two replicas of this motif are in the UCLA Museum of Cultural History collections, one carved by Bonsu (X82-1213) and the other by his eldest son, Kojo Bonsu (X82-1212). Both finials were carved in late 1976.

15. A hen and her chicks is explained in Kyerematen (1964: 95), the python in Cole & Ross (1977: 173), and *prēkēsē* in Cole & Ross (1977: 166).

16. Although the museum's records identify this carving as an umbrella top, the configuration of its base is more typical of Bonsu's linguist-staff finials.

17. An even earlier *akuaba* attributed to Bonsu is said to have been carved for the 1924 Wembley Exposition (Bankes 1975: fig. 16). The popular belief that the full-bodied *akuaba* is a 20th-century innovation was refuted by Bonsu, who said that his father made them when Bonsu was a child.

18. Bempah's work is illustrated in Rattray 1927: fig. 196 (carvings 1, 3), 197 (carving 2), 199 (carvings 1, 3, 4). Rattray

also published a photograph of Bempah (fig. 157).

19. Osei Bonsu provided critical information for *The Arts of Ghana* (Cole & Ross 1977) on linguist staffs (p. 160), *akuaba* (p. 103), *ntan* drums (pp. 170, 173, 176), and on the reconstruction of the Golden Stool (p. 138), and considerable information on Akan proverbial lore.

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TABLE: Bonsu Drum Motif analysis

Motif	Location/Collection/Reference										
	Aduamo Fig. 6	Aduman Fig. 10	Abofo MCH Cover	P.C.1 Fig. 11	MMA Fig. 12	P.C. 2	Lewis 1973 (fig. 46)	Afranfe 1974 (pls. VII-IX)	P.C. 3	P.C. 4 Fig. 14	NMAA Fig. 9
1. Lion support	X			X		X					X
2. Elephant support		X	X		X		X				
3. No support									X	X	
4. Two breasts	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
5. Heart	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
6. Dish + grinding spoon	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
7. Snake + hornbill	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
8. Crescent + star	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
9. Crescent moon		X							X		
10. Cock + hen	X	X		X	X	X		X	X	X	X
11. Cock									X		
12. Cock + egg			X								
13. Cocoa tree	X	X	X	X		X			X	X	X
14. Hedgehog + rotten log	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
15. Porcupine	X										
16. Snake + frog	X	X	X	X		X			X	X	X
17. Leopard + tortoise	X		X	X		X			X	X	
18. Leopard		X			X	X	X				
19. Crossed crocodiles	X		X	X		X			X	X	
20. Cameleon + box	X	X	X		X	X	X		X	X	
21. Man pointing at sign	X	X			X	X	X				X
22. Name plate						X			X		
23. Woman + crab		X		X	X		X				
24. Basket + stick		X									
25. British Royal Arms			X	X	X	X			X	X	
26. Man on horse			X		X				X	X	
27. Long-horned antelope			X	X	X	X	X		X	X	
28. Elephant + palm			X	X		X	X		X	X	X
29. Elephant									X		
30. Ape, antelope, anthill					X		X		X	X	
31. Circle in relief					X	X			X	X	
32. Man with headload						X					
33. Stool with orb											X
34. Woman + horn									X		
35. Metal mirror frame									X		

MCH = Museum of Cultural History, UCLA. MMA = Metropolitan Museum of Art. P.C. = Private Collection. NMAA = National Museum of African Art.

NEVADOMSKY, notes, from page 47

The reader is referred to Part 1 of this article (Nov. 1983, p. 87) for acknowledgments and additional bibliography. In addition I wish to acknowledge the assistance of the late Chief Isekhurhe, who provided much of the information contained in Part 2.

1. Until very recently (1982) the post of Iyase had been vacant for a long time. The Esogban, second in rank among the town chiefs, functioned as Iyase.

2. R.E. Bradbury, "Field Notes" (ser. BS 87: Interview with Oba Akenzua II).

3. This is speculation, however. For one thing, there are no popular terms for directions in the Bini language. Of the four technical terms that some claim are the Bini words for directions (*okuo* for north, *aho* for south, *eken* for east, and *orrie* for west), only *orrie*, which means the "path of return" or "the road to home" may, by stretching it, be used to indicate "west" (i.e., the sun returns home through the western path). For another, there are no directional conjunctive contrasts in Bini as there are in English, such as north and south, east or west. Thus, direction does not seem to be a strong symbolic orientation, and the Bini probably do not see reality in the context of directional opposites.

4. The deeper meaning is that those who get closest to the Oba are often those who deceive him the most.

5. This is further emphasized by one of the terms by which a dog is known: *ovi-akota*, "child of the evening."

6. Camwood is rubbed on some of the objects carried by the Ewaise, or palace doctors, during the Oba's festivals (*ugie*). Shango priests also rub it on their bodies. More commonly, it is used by women as body decoration.

7. Cowrie shells are a dense symbol. They offer protection against witchcraft and are also used to appease those who have died childless. Cowries were once used as currency