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# People of Wood: Baule Figure Sculpture

SUSAN MULLIN VOGEL

**The art is part of the function, not simply its later illustration, and the function is part of the art, not simply its precondition. The aesthetic is not an overlay but an integral part of primitive culture.**

—Robert Goldwater<sup>1</sup>

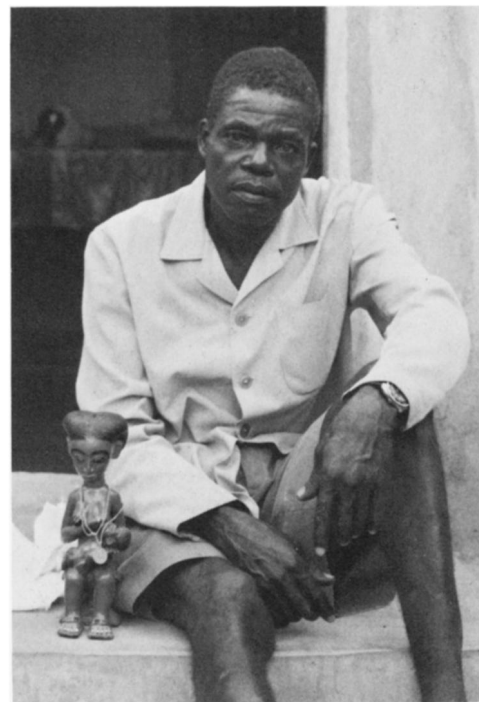
This essay will attempt to describe and interpret Baule figure sculpture in relation to the behavior and belief contexts in which it is embedded.<sup>2</sup> It will deal mainly with their function since recent work by anthropologists and my own observations in the field contradicts the widely held assumption that Baule figures were ancestor portraits. The Baule themselves describe their figures as either nature spirits or spirit lovers.

The Baule people of the central Ivory Coast number about 500,000. They were “pacified” by the French relatively late in the history of Africa’s colonization in about 1912. Baule masks, figures, and decorated objects have been admired and collected in Europe since the early part of this century. Their relative naturalism, refinement, and careful finish made Baule art one of the most approachable of the “savage arts”. The Baule Sculptures that concern us here are usually less than two feet high and are made of stained and polished wood. They depict nude men and women, standing or seated, often with elaborately carved coiffures and ornamental scars. The Baule call them simply *waka snan*, literally “people of wood.”

To understand the meaning of these figures, we must consider both Baule explanations and the implications of the behavior and belief surrounding them. Victor Turner has pointed out that in Africa the level of conscious explanation usually consists of basic dogma which tends to stress the harmonious and positive aspects of experience.<sup>3</sup> The negative aspects, often truths too threatening to express outright, are only stated metaphorically.

Let us first consider the beliefs about *asie usu* (nature spirit) figures (Fig. 1). One of the fundamental divisions in Baule cosmology opposes the world of nature to that of man; much of human experience is explained with reference to these two poles. Between the two are refinements and intermediate categories, but they do not concern us here;<sup>4</sup> *asie usu* figures elaborate on the broad opposition of nature to culture, of bush to village.

The Baule explain that *asie usu* are nature spirits who dwell in trees, rocks, rivers, and other natural phenomena.<sup>5</sup> People who have seen *asie usu* in the forest say they are hideous, with hunchbacks, feet that point backwards, filthy skin, wild red hair, huge eyes, a single long arm, etc. They are unpredictable and potentially dangerous. An elder recounted how in his youth, he was carried off by a forest spirit and spent five days in the wilderness without food. His brothers made sacrifices to



Kofi Alany, a Baule sculptor, and his *blolo bla* in 1972. He carved this figure six years ago to replace one he had acquired in 1934. The figure reflects the current taste and is painted in red enamel. In a dream the *blolo bla* told him she should be carved with a child. The figure is not normally displayed but is wrapped in the white cloth at her side and kept in Kofi Alany’s Room.

calm the spirit, and he returned unharmed. Afterwards, he dedicated a figure to the spirit and obeyed its orders. Since then when he hunts, he says, it is always behind him, enabling him to fell two or three animals with a single shot.

The Baule appear to attribute to the nature spirits’ malice much antisocial behavior, particularly that which interferes with economic production. *Asie usu* are believed to cause crop failures, hunting failures, sickness, as well as more dramatic disruptions. Nature spirits may sometimes violently possess someone, causing him or her to go into a trance, to speak in unknown languages, to dance for days, to tremble uncontrollably, or to run off into the bush as in the case of the elder mentioned.

A diviner then must identify the source of the problem (*asie usu* are not the only possibility) and prescribe a remedy. If a figure is needed, the diviner may specify to the sculptor details about its making such as its sex, posture, coiffure, kind of wood to be used, etc.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes he recommends that a pair of figures be made (Fig. 2). Often an *asie usu* that has had a single figure for some time, may request a partner. A mate is then carved, often by another sculptor, in a size and style unrelated to the first figure.

The *asie usu* spirit is transferred to the carved figure where it will accept sacrifices and can be expected to bring its owner success. The figure, the Baule say, is like the spirit's stool, he sometimes sits there, but he comes and goes. If the person is possessed by the spirit, and can prophesy while in a trance, he (or more often she) may become a professional diviner, a *komien* (spirit medium).<sup>7</sup>

The figure carved for an *asie usu* thus has a physical identity with the body of its owner, as the spirit may inhabit (possess) either one of them interchangeably. This physical identity is tacitly recognized in the Baule treatment of such figures after the owner's death; the cult is discontinued unless the spirit of the deceased refuses to accept sacrifices, like other ancestors, on the stool he used in life. In such a rare case, it is believed that an ancestor spirit has come to inhabit the wooden figure originally made for an *asie usu*.

My extensive questioning indicates the Baule never carved ancestor figures. Indeed, they expressed puzzlement at the idea of carving images of the dead. Ancestors are a very important part of the Baule cosmos, but their spirits are localized in the sacred family treasury, in unsculptured shrines on the courtyard wall, and in the family collection of ancestor stools. Among the ancestor stools, however, one may see old figures of *asie usu* serving a new function as described above or simply kept as heirlooms.

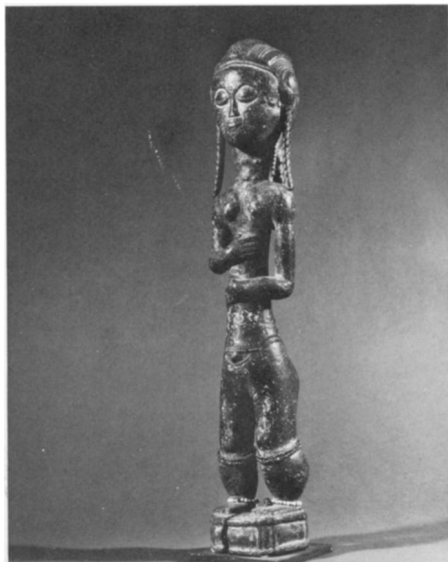
Though *asie usu* spirits are horrible looking and inhuman, the figures are carved in the form of beautiful human beings (Fig. 3). A sculptor explained that if he carved an ugly figure the spirit would be angered and would probably punish him. If the figure were unattractive, the spirit might refuse to "sit-on" it—it would be a failure. The aesthetic component is thus essential to the whole process of establishing an *asie usu* cult. It seems significant that a spirit representing the wilderness is given a civilized, human form. *Asie usu* figures have elaborate coiffures and scarifications, which signify that a person has become socialized or civilized. This expresses the fact that the

wild, uncontrolled bush spirit has been brought into the village and tamed: his once destructive energies will now work for the good of his host.

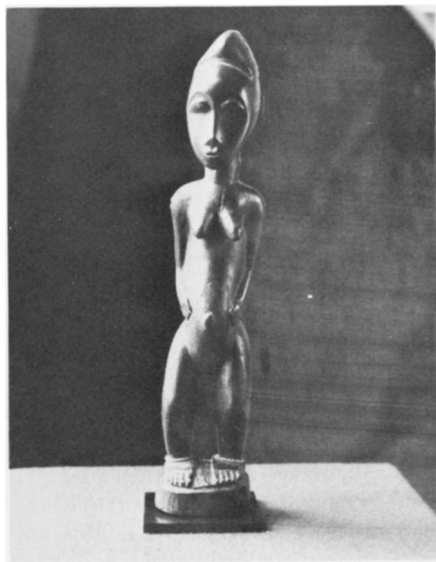
The antithesis of bush and village is expressed for the Baule by the contrast between a nature spirit and a person of the village. A common Baule phrase connoting approval is *klo snan*, or village person; it parallels the phrase for domestic animals, *klo nnen*, and signifies that the person is socialized, that he is a proper human being.<sup>8</sup> Nature spirits demonstrate man's ideal nature by negative contrast. Nature spirits are destructive—men should be productive and accumulate wealth through hard work; nature spirits are often malicious—man is respectful, orderly; nature spirits are deformed and filthy—man is ideally beautiful and clean.<sup>9</sup> Their inversion is graphically represented by their feet that point backwards.<sup>10</sup>

To some degree, the person who is diagnosed as being pursued by a nature spirit acts like one; he does not produce crops, game, or children like a proper village person. He behaves in an irrational and dangerous fashion, speaks unintelligibly or runs off into the bush. The idea that human nature includes an irrational, antisocial, bush side, though not expressed by the Baule, is implicit in the institution of nature spirit companions. In some individuals this becomes pronounced enough to warrant isolation in a carved figure. The notion that the *asie usu* is an aspect of the person he visits, threatens a foundation of Baule thinking: if the bush and the village, the inhuman and the human interpenetrate, chaos threatens. The creation of a figure corrects this dangerous situation, restoring the proper bush—village separation by isolating the bush aspect in the figure and turning the person into a "man of the village" again.

The other kind of Baule figure, *blolo biā* (Fig. 4) or *blolo bla* (Fig. 5)<sup>11</sup> is similar to the *asie usu* figures in that it too makes a statement about a great opposition in Baule thinking. Among the Baule as elsewhere in Africa, the male-female dichotomy is a fundamental way of classifying people. One's



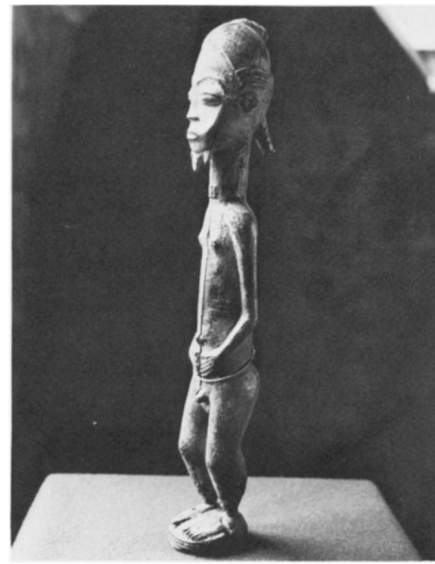
1 Female figure probably representing an *asie usu*, 18½ in. Collection Museum of Primitive Art, New York. Photo: Elisabeth Little



2 Female figure identified by the Baule as a *blolo bla*, 12¾ in. Collection Susan and Jerry Vogel, New York



3 Pair of figures identified by the Baule as *asie usu*, 12 in. These might have been used by a *komien*, a spirit medium. Collection Susan and Jerry Vogel, New York



4 Male figure identified by the Baule as a *blolo biã*. 14 in. Collection André Blandin, Abidjan

5 Male figure identified by the Baule as an *asie usu*. 14½ in. Collection Susan and Jerry Vogel, New York

sex determines an enormous number of things in traditional life, ranging from the type of house one lives in to the manner in which one drinks palm wine. Religious beliefs also distinguish sharply between the sexes (e.g. women are strictly forbidden, on pain of death, to see the men's masks; the most sacrosanct of all divinities is the vulva, and men who see it risk death).<sup>12</sup> *Blolo biã* and *blolo bla* figures explain the male-female opposition by providing a negative or inverted example.

The need for a *blolo biã* or *blolo bla* figure is signaled by misfortunes. Problems seem to follow a pattern: they tend to occur in late adolescence, and though virtually any kind of problem can be attributed to a *blolo biã*, troubles are almost always of a sexual nature. For men these are principally failure to marry or establish a stable sexual partnership, and, for women, a lack of children. The *blolo biã* often manifests itself in sexual dreams.

The term can be broken down into *blolo*—the other world, *bla*—woman, and *biã*—man, specifically a man of one's own generation with whom sexual relations are possible.<sup>13</sup>

The outstanding feature of these tutelary spirits is that a man has a female spirit and a woman has a male spirit.<sup>14</sup> Baule informants explain that prior to birth, each person has a spouse and children who remain in the other world when he is born into this world. These spirit husbands and wives are sometimes angry or jealous of earthly lovers, and they interfere maliciously. The Baule say, "It is as if you left without saying goodbye." On the recommendation of a diviner, a figure is carved for the spirit to inhabit. There the spirit can be contacted and appeased to bring good fortune.

Once the figure is consecrated, one sleeps alone on certain nights to have (dream of) sexual relations with the carved figure. The figure is kept in one's room and must be washed, dressed, and fed with food offerings. After the death of someone who had a *blolo biã* the figure is usually thrown out or abandoned; it is of no use to anyone else except as a keepsake of its former owner.

In a culture where parenthood is the most important role for most people, a woman who is not a mother does not

function as a woman, a man who is not the head of a family has failed to assume his proper role. A diviner explained to me that even if the ancestors and other spirits wished a woman to conceive, she could not unless her male spirit "unbound" her womb. That is, her maleness would have to be pushed aside into the *blolo biã* figure to allow her to become completely female. It may be significant that most Baule tribes do not practice circumcision or clitorrectomy. Elsewhere in Africa, these "corrective" operations are credited with removing the male element in women and the female element in men, often for the express purpose of furthering fertility.

Like *asie usu* figures, *blolo biã* figures express an opposite or inverted self. Both beliefs about nature spirits and those about *blolo biã* seem to blur basic distinctions and to express the subversive idea that humans are somehow bisexual. The figures express and remedy this by externalizing the male side of women and the female side of men.

*Asie usu* and *blolo biã* are identical in form when they leave the sculptor's hands, but their owner contributes to their ultimate appearance. His collaboration gives them a look expressive of their different natures; as he uses them, spirit lover figures become soft and approachable, while nature spirit figures become filthy and alien. Spirit lovers are offered food in a dish like people, are fondled and wiped, and eventually acquire a smooth, lustrous surface. On the other hand, food, raw eggs, or sacrificial blood is rubbed directly on the surfaces of nature spirit figures, and they are seldom handled. Any figure with an encrusted or dirty surface was identified by the Baule as an *asie usu* figure. The Baule considered such figures to be a frightful looking and unworthy of the aesthetic evaluations they accorded *blolo biã* figures.<sup>15</sup>

This example from the Baule affirms Goldwater's quote. The work of art *is* part of its function. The figures studied here are efficacious, and act as an essential element in the Baule cosmology. They are not adjuncts or illustrations. Their function *does* become part of the art object itself as we gradually modifies it. Goldwater's insight, that the aesthetic is an integral part of the culture is borne out by the Baule case. Art itself helps maintain order in the world. The aesthetic

element—the beauty of the figures themselves is one with their function since, if they are ugly, they are powerless.<sup>16</sup> ■

<sup>1</sup> Robert Goldwater, "Judgments of Primitive Art, 1905–1965" in ed., D. Biebuyck *Tradition and Creativity in Tribal Art*, Berkeley, 1969, p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> The observations presented here were made among the Baule in 1968, 1971, and 1972. I am grateful for a grant from the Ford Foundation that made the greater part of my field work possible.

<sup>3</sup> Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Ithaca—London, 1967, p. 33.

<sup>4</sup> The intermediate categories are discussed in Pierre Etienne, "Le Fait villageois baoulé," mimeographed, Abidjan, 1971, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> *Asie usu* (earth spirits) are the most frequently named of a whole class of nature spirits. Others are *bo usu* (forest spirits), *fie usu* (spirits of the fields), *nzue usu* (water spirits), and *blo ningé* (things, or creatures of the bush in general). I know of wooden figures for *asie usu* and *bo usu*; they may or may not exist for the others.

<sup>6</sup> In some cases the spirit cannot be transferred to a figure. A shrine is established in the bush where the spirit first showed itself.

<sup>7</sup> For further discussion see Fernand Lafargue, *Le Komien chez les Baoulé*, Abidjan, 1970.

<sup>8</sup> Michel Carteron, "Introduction à la Langue Baoulé," mimeographed, Bocardia, 1973.

<sup>9</sup> Donald Thurow, *A Case Study of Tribal Economy among the Baoule*. (unpublished ms.) 1958, appendix, pp. 194 ff.

<sup>10</sup> Among the Lugbara, the limits of social relations are defined by mythical inverted beings; I use the term in Middleton's sense. John Middleton, "Some social aspects of Lugbara myth," in *Africa* 24, 1954, pp. 192–93.

<sup>11</sup> For brevity, I shall use *biā* for both the male and female spirits.

<sup>12</sup> Vincent Guerry, *La vie quotidienne dans un village baoulé*, Abidjan 1970, pp. 45–6 has the clearest exposition of this. It was confirmed by my informants.

<sup>13</sup> For further discussion of the term *biā*, see Pierre and Mona Etienne, "Terminologie de la parenté et de l'alliance chez les Baoulé (Côte d'Ivoire)" in *L'Homme* (Paris) VII, no 4, p. 53. For his alternate interpretation of the compound as "husband or wife of the other world," see Etienne, "Le Fait villageois baoulé," p. V. As the Baule have other terms for "husband"

and "wife," I believe the proper translation should be simply what the words say: man/woman of the other world, or man/woman spirit, bearing in mind the sexual connotations of *biā*.

<sup>14</sup> The Gola concept of *neme* is similar to the Baule *blolo biā*. *Neme* are spirit companions of the opposite sex; d'Azevedo calls them "non human love objects." Unlike *blolo biā*, the *neme* require tremendous sacrifices, such as childlessness, often in exchange for artistic inspiration. *Neme* are not represented in sculpture. Warren d'Azevedo, *The Artist Archetype in Gola Culture*. (University of Nevada, Desert Research Institute. Preprint no 14, 1966, p. 18, 65.

<sup>15</sup> This and other Baule aesthetic values are treated in my "Baule and Yoruba Art Criticism, a Comparison." IX International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, Chicago, 1973.

<sup>16</sup> I believe that my observations can be reconciled with the most important early accounts: Maurice Delafosse's "Sur les traces probables de civilisation égyptienne et d'hommes de race blanche à la Côte d'Ivoire," in *L'Anthropologie*, vol. 11 1900, pp. 431–51, 543–68, 677–90; and Hans Himmelheber's *Negerkünstler*, Stuttgart, 1935. Both writers reported that many wooden figures were dolls. Adults, especially women were seen dressing and playing with them like European children. I believe that what they saw were *blolo biā* which are supposed to be fed, given gifts, etc. Delafosse and Himmelheber both described having seen "funerary figures;" the latter says he prefers to call them "ancestor figures," and adds that they were rare. These must be the rare *asie usu* figures which serve the second function I mention as a locus for the owner himself, become an ancestor spirit. Himmelheber also describes "fetish" figures which seem to be *asie usu* figures. His "demon" figures (most often portrayed in masks, he says), are probably the monkey figures which were not discussed here. Himmelheber's "commemorative statuettes," true portraits, that he says were rare, were unrecognizable to my informants. He may have observed an isolated case.

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Susan Mullin Vogel is assistant curator for Africa at The Museum of Primitive Art, New York. She began her dissertation on Baule art with Robert Goldwater and has made three research trips to the Ivory Coast.