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Dancing a New Face: Contemporary Sala Mpasu Masquerades

Author(s): Elisabeth L. Cameron

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Dancing a New Face

Contemporary Sala Mpasu Masquerades

ELISABETH L. CAMERON

The Sala Mpasu are a people who have repeatedly reinvented themselves during the twentieth century. The last of the peoples in the Congo¹ to be conquered by the Belgians, the Sala Mpasu had succeeded in keeping outsiders away by combining outstanding fighting skill with a reputation of being savage "cannibals."² This carefully developed reputation backfired in the second half of the twentieth century, acting as a barrier to the aspirations of ambitious Sala Mpasu who attempted to break into social, political, and economic positions in a wider arena than the small Sala Mpasu area itself.

The Sala Mpasu reputation, made concrete by their men's society and their masquerades, served to protect their independence for perhaps as long as 200 years. For centuries, art played a part in protecting the Sala Mpasu from outside incursions and helped to preserve cultural, political, and economic institutions. Toward the end of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, the Sala Mpasu and their neighbors met outside forces that they could not overcome.

Before Belgian conquest, individual and group independence had been a hallmark of the Sala Mpasu society. Each man strove to achieve prominence by generating personal wealth and reputation through membership in a men's society, community leadership, and clan affiliation. Group independence proved more of a challenge since the Sala Mpasu area was rich in both natural resources, such as large iron deposits and fertile agricultural areas, and human resources, including a sophisticated blacksmithing tradition. The combination of these natural and human resources attracted the attention of neighboring peoples such as the Lunda, to the south, who strove to absorb this area into their own domain. The men's society, therefore, also served as a militia to fight off forceful attacks from the outside. The Sala Mpasu's cultivation of a reputation as fierce, cannibalistic warriors aided their bid to retain independence

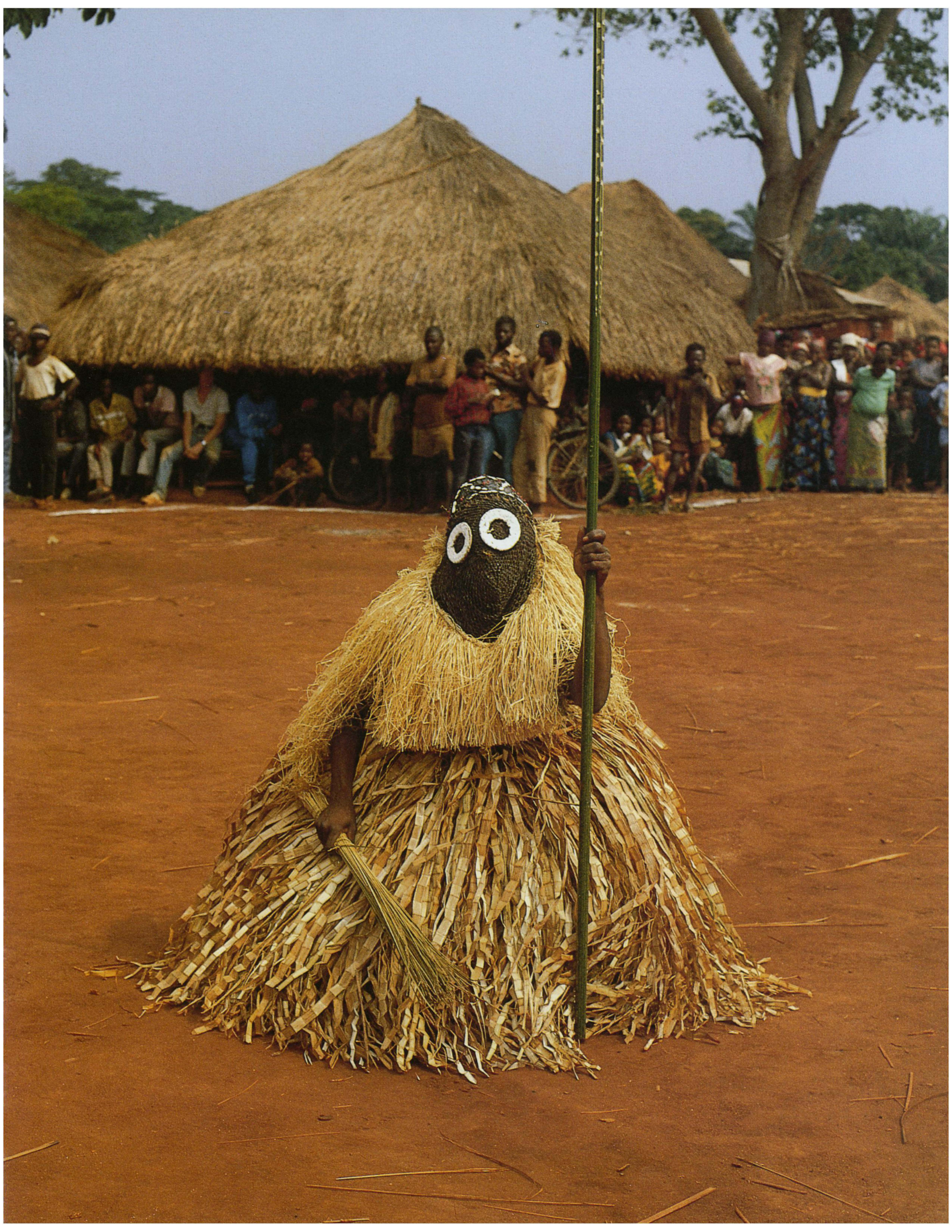
by keeping their enemies off balance. Any potential interloper would think twice before putting himself at risk of being eaten and thus not receiving proper funeral rites.

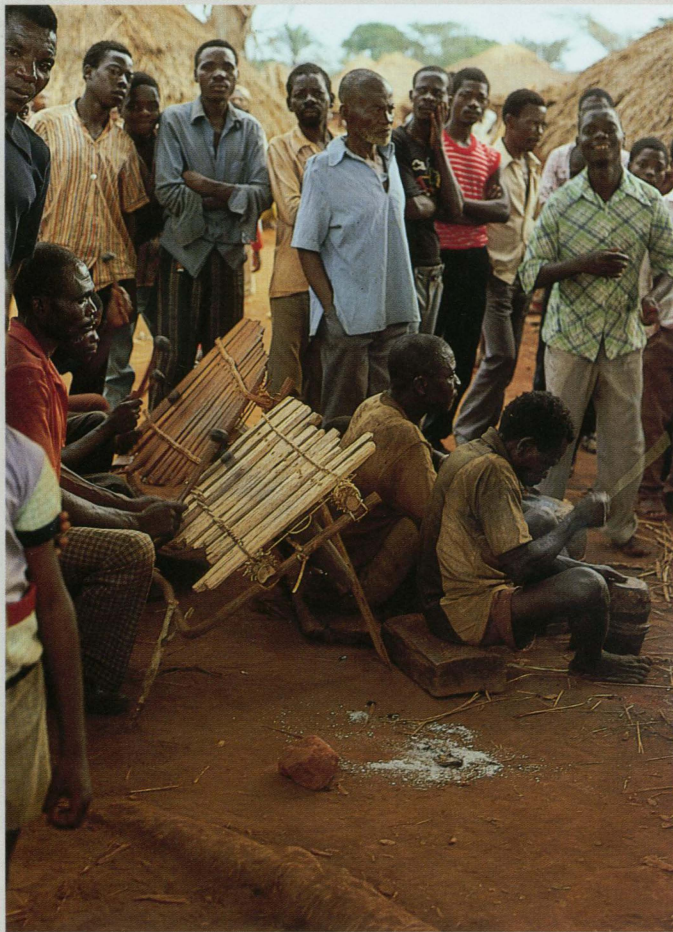
Early accounts report that masqueraders participated in generating this reputation by joining battles and terrorizing encroaching communities by night. Not only did militia groups use masquerades in fighting, organized masquerades also played an integral role in marking individual Sala Mpasu men's positions in society and in generating personal wealth. Each man had to both perform certain feats and pay expensive fees to the men who already had the right to perform a specific masquerade. Once a man had bought the right to a mask, other men would have to pay him for that privilege.

The Sala Mpasu applied the same techniques of image management to their encounters with Europeans that they had already used successfully with their neighbors. Taking advantage of the Belgians' own stereotypes about Africans, Sala Mpasu men regaled many early missionaries and colonial officials with tales of human feasts, complete with large iron pots, and claimed that Belgians listed as missing had been served up as appetizers. The Belgians, in one of their few colonial retreats, withdrew. They assigned one officer to the area who, for over twenty years, concentrated all his efforts on subduing the Sala Mpasu. They finally surrendered in the mid-1930s, making this area the last in the Congo to be occupied by the Belgians.

The Sala Mpasu, in spite of this subjugation to colonial forces, retained their ideals of individual initiative and wealth, although concepts of what constituted wealth changed. Rather than control of iron, blacksmiths, and oil palm groves, men now computed their wealth in bicycles, fired-brick houses, and wax-dyed cloth. As the focus of

1. *Ndumbu*, a character wearing a fiber mask with a full, dried-fiber skirt, poses in the center of the performance space. Sambuyi, 1989.





economic possibilities moved from the men's society to the new regional marketplaces, the Sala Mpasu turned to agriculture and regional trade. Their savage reputation, however, became an impediment to personal economic advancement and to the economic stability and growth of the entire area. For example, although in the late 1980s the Sala Mpasu spent their own money to repair their ferries and worked independently to fix the roads, most people were still afraid to go into the area to trade or attend weekly markets. It was said that people who went into the area never returned. The Sala Mpasu who went to the city to seek his fortune was shunned as a backward, dangerous cannibal. To avoid this fate, he would claim a different ethnicity.

Faced with such dilemmas, the Sala Mpasu took active steps to rehabilitate their image. For instance, through iconoclastic purges in 1962 and 1988, Sala Mpasu men publicly broadcast an end to the men's society and its associated masquerading. Instead, Sala Mpasu masquerade in the late 1980s and early 1990s cultivated a connection with *le Scouts*, a nationally recognized and government-sponsored organization similar to the Boy Scouts. In September, 1989, I was present when the village of Sambuyi publicly celebrated the return of newly circumcised and initiated "Scouts" with masquerade performance. Privately, the men involved with the camp stressed to me that this represented a re-formation of the men's society.

I was unaware of the upcoming events at Sambuyi until the day before, when a man approached me at a Saturday market and told me that if I was interested in masquerades, I should be at Sambuyi at noon the next day. I arrived just as the church service was letting out and all the people moved from the church to the performance area





just outside. I was welcomed and told I could photograph the events. The musicians began to play (Fig. 2) and the masquerades to arrive.

This performance was vastly different from those reported in the limited literature in both the location of the performance space and the make-up of the audience. In the past, the masquerades were only performed in a specially prepared and protected space in a nearby forest and only before initiated eyes. The Sambuyi performance, on the other hand, was in the center of the village and before the eyes of the entire community. As I observed and photographed the event, I noticed that I did not see many women along the edge of the dance arena. I turned around and found all the women directly behind me. They were very nervous about seeing the masqueraders and perhaps felt that the presence of the foreign female photographer would somehow protect them from what, in the past, had been dangerous and forbidden. My presence also made other differences, as the

Opposite page:

Top: 2. Musicians play for the festivities welcoming newly initiated boys back into the community. Sambuyi, 1989.

Bottom: 3. *Mukungu-a-nkilli*, a masquerade constructed from banana tree fibers and a green raffia skirt and only worn once, spins in the center of the performance space while Ndumbu, a character wearing a fiber mask with a full, dried fiber skirt, performs around the edge of the space. Usually, each masquerade performs alone. Sambuyi, 1989.

This page, clockwise from top left:

4. *Mukungu-a-nkilli* performs in the dance arena by spinning to make his skirt fly out. The dancer cannot see where he is going as he moves and often spins into the audience. Since sharpened sticks project from the masquerade, this intrusion into the audience causes disruption as the spectators flee rather than be impaled. Sambuyi, 1989.

5. *Ndumbu* performs by running at full speed around the edge of the dance arena, clearly demarcated with white powder or cassava flour. Sambuyi, 1989.

6. The newly initiated boys return to the village in the care of the older boys who have guided them through the initiation. They move in military formation, carrying long sticks rather than weapons. On arrival in the village common area, they dance until their mothers pay the older boys enough money so that they can be released back into the family's care. Sambuyi, 1989.





masqueraders occasionally stopped in their performance to pose for my camera (Fig. 1). As the boys approached and the masqueraders disappeared, the women behind me informed me that these were Scouts returning from training camps. During the next week I was able to interview the men involved in the camp and tried to unravel the layers of meaning behind this event.

In the 1989 initiation, the boys were first circumcised at a public health clinic, and then the initiated men removed them to a secluded camp away from town where they learned the esoteric and practical knowledge necessary for manhood and for membership in the society. Before the newly initiated boys returned to the village, five masks danced in the center of the village next to a Protestant church (Figs. 3–5). As in the past, Sala Mpasu men still paid those who already had the rights for permission to wear the masks.

In preparation for the performance, a dance area was marked off with white flour. Both men and women strictly observed this restricted area, crowding to the edge but not going over the line. Each masquerade performed in turn with little interaction with the audience. Most simply ran around the edge of the dance arena (Figs. 3 and 5), occasionally stopping to have their picture taken (Fig. 1). *Mukungu-a-nkilili* twirled blindly, occasionally stepping over the white line with a resulting scattering of the audience (Fig. 4). *Mukungu-a-nkilili* was one of the more prestigious masks³ and was therefore one of the final masks to perform. After the final masquerader was in the dance arena, the gathered community spotted the boys approaching and attention shifted from the arena to the road.

The boys returned to the village in military formation. Once they arrived in the village, they performed maneuvers and danced with staffs. These staffs were appropriate for Scouts but also could be interpreted as covert references to the swords and guns previously carried by the men's society militia. Each newly initiated boy continued to dance until his mother turned over the required amount of money and he was released to return to his family.

This 1989 performance demonstrates the Sala Mpasu's continued reinvention and manipulation of their own identity and reputation, remaking the feared men's society into widely accepted Scouts. It also shows that while the Sala Mpasu's reputation and outside identity may be stage-managed—both now and in the past—the underlying values of the society have not changed. Prestige is still evaluated by individually gained wealth, however that may be socially defined at the moment, and expressed in control of masquerades. ■

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Opposite page:

7. A Sala Mpasu man and his wives exhibit their stock of masks for sale. This commercial endeavor demonstrates a newer form of wealth associated with masquerades, an art and tourist market for both old and new masks. The movement of these objects to the art market was facilitated by a network of stores run by the Catholic Church. Mazala II, 1989.

This page:

Top: 8. While in the past masquerades were seen only by Sala Mpasu men initiated into the men's society, innovative entrepreneurs have created new masquerades that perform for parties and church events such as wedding and baptisms. These masquerades are centered on entertainment and profit. Kapende II, 1989.

Bottom: 9. A Sala Mpasu man holding a *naundumbwa* mask. Reportedly no longer performed, this mask honored women and was danced by a man at women's initiations. Mazala II, 1989.

pictures, and even loaded words, it conveys its message far and wide" (Stoetzer 1953:1).

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ADEDZE: Notes, from page 73

[This article was accepted for publication in December 2003.]

1. I am grateful to Dr. Ato Quayson for insisting that I seriously examine postage stamps, as they should have some bearing on chieftaincy studies. I also would like to thank Prof. Merrick Posnansky for his ideas and, more importantly, for finding those rare stamps showing chiefs from dealers all over the world. Likewise, my thanks to Prof. John Freed for his comments and suggestions. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference on "Chieftaincy in Africa: Culture, Governance, and Development," Accra, Ghana, in January, 2003. I would also like to thank Ebenezer Odeku Mensah (premier stamp designer for Ghana Postal Company) and Peter Tagoe (philatelic agent, Ghana Postal Company) for their invaluable insight and assistance.
2. It was agreed by Universal Postal Union convention that England would be the only country to use the bust of the queen to represent the country on its postage stamps. The first British colonial stamp was issued in 1847 on Mauritius Island but the first stamp on the continent of Africa was the stamp of Cape of Good Hope in 1855.
3. Earlier, in 1955, a stamp was issued in the Upper Volta with the text "Mossi Railway" (French West Africa Scott 65). Later, in 1980, a set of three stamps was issued depicting *Gourmantche Chief Initiation*; *Moro Naba, Mossi Emperor*; and *Princess Guimbe Ouattara* (Burkina Faso Scott 541-3).
4. It is ironic, however, to remark that over 99% of those post-independence leaders who put their images on postage stamps were either overthrown in military coups or were forced to quit the government.
5. Many opponents of Sekou Toure allege that his claims to Samori Toure are dubious, but Kake's (1987) research has proved that he was indeed a great-grandchild of Samori Toure.
6. It was the same oracle that allegedly predicted Nkrumah's victory over the British in the Gold Coast.
7. See Suret-Canale 1988 for a detailed debate on the European opinions of Samori Toure; however, one should be cognizant of the fact that European colonizers persistently demonized any African leader that resisted their conquest.
8. El Hadj Omar was head of the Tukulor empire in the mid-nineteenth century, waging wars against perceived infidels and encouraging his followers to fight the French along the coast. Although he was unable to defeat the French, he signed a treaty with them, which left him free to attack other non-Muslim states.
9. The giant statue was made in North Korea. It was inaugurated on April 9, 1979, in Abomey with an anti-imperialist speech given by Kerekou. The text at the foot of the statue, placed mainly for local pride, reads "Je n'accepterai jamais de signer aucun traité susceptible d'aliéner l'indépendance de la terre de mes aïeux."
10. Thanks to Christelle Debrimou for the information on the legend of Queen Abla Pokou. For the historical reference, see Boahen 1992.
11. Note that the Baule, Abron, and Agni belong to the Akan language group.
12. Did Houphouët Boigny appoint him to repeat the miracle of his ancestor? This is pure conjecture because I have not come across any document that justifies this assertion but since he is from the north, I would not be surprised if Ouattara was not a descendant of King Sekou Watara (note that the spelling alternates between English and French). It is also public knowledge that a certain segment of the Ivorian population claims that Ouattara is from Burkina Faso whereas his supporters think otherwise. If he is related to King Sekou Ouattara, whose kingdom saddles both countries, then

he might as well claim the nationality of both countries.

13. Mr. E. O. Mensah, who has been designing Ghana stamps for almost four decades, designed this stamp and those of the *Asantehene's* silver jubilee. He is indeed a great artist, one of the best in Ghana but yet to be recognized.
14. Current political developments in Ghana only reinforce this assertion. King Tackie Tawiah now has a giant statue in central Accra and a major overpass named after him.

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CAMERON: Notes, from page 79

1. Currently, the country name is the Democratic Republic of the Congo.
2. Debate continues about the difference between Sala Mpasu reputation and reality. No physical evidence proves that the Sala Mpasu were indeed cannibals. One school of thought contends that cannibalism is the ultimate insult and threat and never really existed. Other scholars hesitate to discuss issues like cannibalism that seem to denigrate African peoples who were already slandered through colonialism. As time separates us from the early twentieth century, we may never know the reality of the situation, but an understanding of the events in this area cannot avoid a discussion of cannibalism.
3. Prestige of masquerades is reflected in the cost to the performer.

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KERKHAM: Notes, from page 83

- I would like to thank Friday Tembo's family for allowing me to attend the "beer of the funeral" ceremony (*ubwawwa bwamailo*). I also thank Geoffrey Phiri and Rabson Phiri for helping me to understand *ubwawwa bwamailo* and for generously discussing both their own work and the work of Friday Tembo with me.
1. Exhibition brochure for "Mwamenezili."
 2. Personal conversation with Geoffrey Phiri, Lusaka, March, 2004.
 3. Ibid.
 4. Ibid.
 5. Personal correspondence with Mulenga Chafilwa, Lusaka, March, 2004.
 6. Paraphrased by Rabson Phiri, personal conversation, Lusaka, April, 2004.

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