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# ARTS OF AFRICA, OCEANIA, AND THE AMERICAS

Selected Readings

Edited with critical introductory essays by

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**To our teachers,  
George Kubler and Douglas Fraser,  
and  
to our students**



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# Accumulation

## Power and Display In African Sculpture

*Arnold Rubin*

As an aspect of Western intellectual history, the systematic study of African art must be regarded as still in its infancy. A history of African art comparable in scope and depth to those achieved for the major Western and Oriental traditions lies in the future, although some promising beginnings have been made. There seems to be little question, however, that art-historical questions have received—and continue to receive—comparatively little scholarly attention. Students of the arts of Africa have also been reluctant to confront the aesthetic and artistic dimensions of their data; traditional art-historical and critical perspectives have been subordinated to the gathering and organization of masses of minutely particularized behavioral information. Some younger scholars have sought to approach African art as inseparable, for all practical purposes, from complexes of sound.

The predominance of these orientations in recent research—the “anthropological” on the one hand, and the “comprehensive/interdisciplinary” on the other—appears to be directly related to the circumstances surrounding the expansion of “area studies” curricula in American universities during the 1950s and 1960s. African area studies, in particular, were characterized by a strong interdisciplinary orientation, with especially heavy emphasis on the social sciences. Prior to the 1960s, information in any significant depth regarding the cultural and historical ramifications of particular African artistic traditions was neager where it was not altogether lacking. Discussions of African art or, indeed, of most aspects of traditional African culture depended heavily upon the usually biased reports of missionaries and colonial administrators, ethnocentric and

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racist culture-history theories and reconstructions, unwarranted extrapolations from the known to the unknown and other more-or-less imaginative inventions. Other writers, for the most part mainly interested in European art of the early 20th century, sought to make a virtue of ignorance. Cultural data associated with the objects were dismissed as irrelevant to their “understanding” or “appreciation” of what were acknowledged to be high artistic achievement.

A stereotyped image of Africa as culturally impoverished had been challenged only by a small group of skeptical—and dedicated—anthropologists. Their field researches showed the cultures of Africa to be rich, resonant and magnificently diverse, with deep and complex histories. Especially important for students of the arts, their findings indicated significant roles for the arts in the functioning of many African communities. In some areas, art was shown to impinge upon the exercise of political authority and other forms of social control. In other areas, or at other times, art served to organize rites of passage—birth, maturation, and death, for example—or to render visible and tangible key elements of subtle and highly articulated metaphysical systems of the sort usually described as religious.

The education of a number of Africanist art historians trained during the '50s and '60s culminated in an opportunity to investigate African art in Africa. This experience, previously rare, provided opportunities to verify firsthand the strength and vitality of African culture as reported by their anthropological predecessors. Since the methods and perspectives of anthropology had provided the only reliable guides to the realities of African culture which these students encountered in the field, it should not be surprising that their attempts to correct earlier distortions and misunderstandings regarding the nature and significance of African art should rely heavily upon these same methods and perspectives. I do not mean to deprecate the important results achieved in the study of African art within the frame of reference provided by these well-tested anthropological/ethnographical modes. Nevertheless, the fascination of exploring the interplay of art and other aspects of culture in Africa has tended to overshadow other dimensions of the material and other approaches to the subject.

In particular, what might be described as the *content* of African sculpture has clearly not received the attention it deserves. For present purposes, *content* is defined as one dimension of the affective power and complex of multiple meanings embodied in a work of art. It originates in the orchestration of materials and techniques, and transcends both purely formal qualities on the one hand and comparatively explicit iconographical or symbolic associations on the other. As one of several possible approaches to *content* in African sculpture, I propose to consider media—their nature, how they are used, and what they seem to mean. At the primary level, conceptions which seem to relate to principles of assemblage in recent Western art are frequently counted.<sup>1</sup> African assemblage, however, exhibits a number of distinctive features. One special subcategory—here designated accumulation—raises issues which transcend consideration of form, extending to the role of art in fostering social cohesion and cultural continuity.

The formal brilliance of much traditional African sculpture is by now generally acknowledged, and its impact on the history of 20th-century Western art well known. These facts have often provided an avenue of approach to the original African forms, emphasizing their often striking resemblances to comparatively familiar modern Western experiments in artistic structure, concept, and materials. The richness of African sculptural invention tends to obscure the limited range of formal categories in which the forms are realized. As one becomes familiar with the range of possible variations within each localized idiom, the latitude available to individual artists for "personal statements" is seen to be very restricted.

For traditional Africa, the accumulated wisdom of the past, represented by the "formulae" in all aspects of culture, provided an acculturative and cohesive mechanism of enormous potency, to be tampered with only at the risk of potentially grave consequences. Art, in particular, served to define and focus group identity and to reinforce the sense of community which provided the only context in which individual identity was meaningful or even conceivable. Far from stifling the artistic impulse, we must conclude that these fundamentally conservative systems of shared values, emphasizing continuity and stability rather than change and challenge, have imbued the forms of African sculpture with an uncompromising and unequivocal sense of conviction which is the source of their often extraordinary impact. This characterization of African sculpture as essentially conventional and conservative is not contravened by recent field research which has shown that African artists and critics also respond to formal qualities; or that in some communities, such specialists even possess a developed vocabulary for explicating their judgments as to aesthetic qualities—as if this should come as something of a surprise! The point, of course, is that social utility and aesthetic quality are not—and never have been—necessarily incompatible; for most cultures, the positive role of the artist in objectifying and reinforcing the values of his community has been resolved in terms of a delicate and complex balance of aesthetic and other priorities. Acceptance of and operation within conventional limits on "artistic freedom" usually carried compensation in the form of increased leverage in the social, political, and economic spheres.

At one level, practically all African sculpture could have entered into the discussion which follows, since a puristic "truth to materials" appears to have been infrequent in traditional African sculpture. Masks, for example, typically incorporate a variety of materials whose presence is primarily dictated by "engineering" problems connected with keeping them in place during the dance, or which serve to cover transitions from mask to body-covering or costume.

A partial inventory of the materials they employ include accumulations of dried blood, millet beer, palmwine, and other libations; fomentations of sheanut "butter" or any of several types of oil, sometimes mixed with powdered camwood or red ocher; the skulls of small animals or birds; fur, feathers, teeth, and claws; the skins of snakes and other reptiles; the horns of various antelopes; tortoise and other types of shells, especially cowries; strips, sheets, and bits of iron, brass, copper, and other metals; local and imported woven textiles and other types of

fiber constructions; glass beads, mirrors, bells, and oddments such as spent shotgun shells, all usually associated with a more-or-less elaborately carved wooden core element.

These substances and elements may provisionally be divided into two broad categories—POWER and DISPLAY—on the basis of their visual characteristics. (In particular instances, however, some types may belong to either category, or partake simultaneously of the qualities of both.) Often they are employed in what seems at first glance to be unorganized, overwhelming profusion.

Closer inspection of a reasonable number of examples of any particular African accumulative configuration invariably reveals that even those which seem most random and accidental in composition are actually developed in accordance with consistent principles wherein what is used, and how, varies within fairly narrow limits.

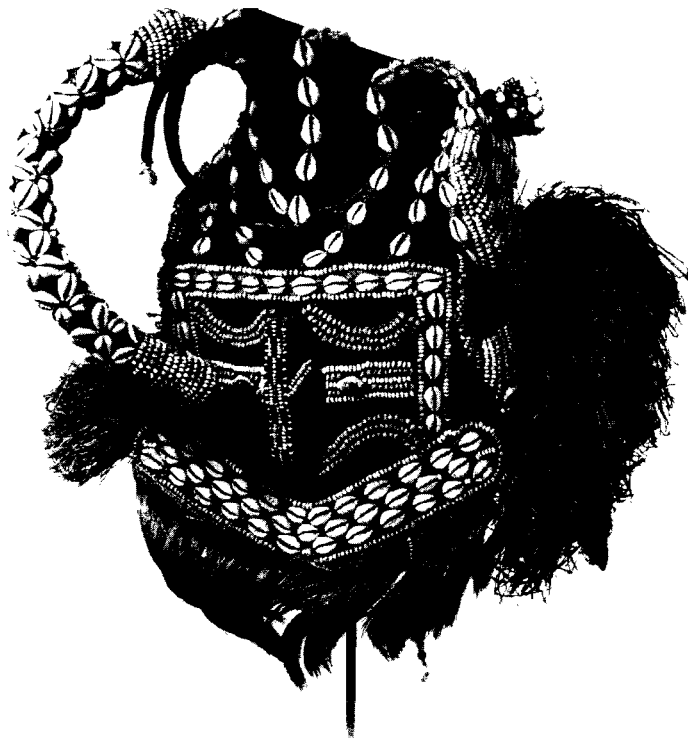
DISPLAY materials (beads, bells, fabrics, mirrors, etc.) are primarily oriented toward enhancement of the splendor of the objects to which they are attached. They usually carry associations of prosperity and cosmopolitan sophistication for the individual or group on whose behalf such sculpture is created. (Most DISPLAY materials had recognized exchange-values in traditional economies; cowries, in particular, were widely used as currency.) (Figure 1)

The second category of materials—horns, skulls, and sacrificial accumulations, for example—is connected with the organization and exploitation of POWER. (Figures 2-6)

Nowhere, in my opinion, have the special qualities of power materials been enunciated with more discernment than in Robert Goldwater's discussion of the Bambara *boli*:

The *boli* constitute one of three types of altars current among the Bambara (the others being tree stumps and stones), and are also a kind of symbolic fetish. Composed of a variety of materials—wood, bark, roots, horns, feet, claws, honey, precious metals, etc.—which symbolically represent the portions of the universe, they are covered with a thick black crust, in part the dried blood of the sacrificially offered animals. The *boli* have many forms, or almost no form at all, but some are shaped as hippopotami, others as human beings. Employed in all the important religious societies, the *boli*, Dieterlen explains, "occupy a signal place in the religious and cosmogenic representations of the society centered upon them. On the one hand, their composition makes of them a summary of the universe. On the other, they are a summary of the society, for all its members are included within them since, as a matter of fact, each of them has provided one portion of the elements that compose them after having impregnated it with his being by covering it with his saliva while pronouncing his name." The different *boli* are preserved in sanctuaries either within or on the outskirts of the village, and may be approached only by the chief of the village, or other qualified religious persons.

Opinions will differ as to whether the *boli* are "works of art." If conventional concepts of artisanal skill are the criteria of judgment, they would hardly seem to qualify, although it must be recognized these objects have a very definite "style," in the sense that the employment of traditional techniques produces controlled and expected results familiar to the Bambara and identifiable by a stranger as a Bambara artifact. Thus there is here at least a craft. But in a deeper sense too they are works of art, since they issue from an imagination that does more than



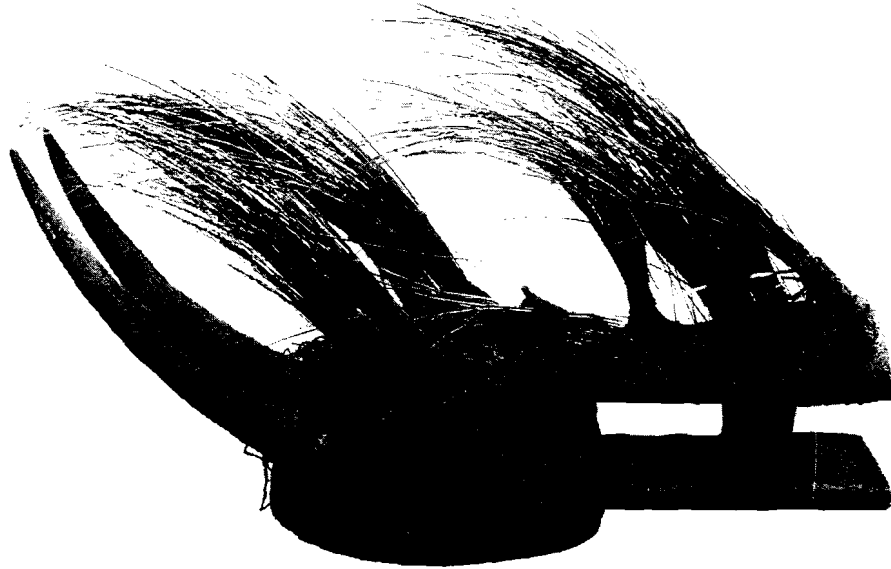
**Figure 1** Kuba mask, Zaire. Cloth, raffia, leather, cowrie shells, beads, hair.  
Fowler Museum of Cultural History, UCLA. X65-5400.

imitate appearance and so functions for the observer as an imaginative focus, mysterious yet real. A little reflection will admit that it is not entirely the materials of their manufacture that makes them “awful” objects and that their effect—which combines fascination and repugnance—is related to having once been objects of awe.<sup>2</sup>

## SURFACE

According to conventional Western attitudes, a work of art should ordinarily be the product of a single mind and its evolution should cease when it leaves the artist's studio. Accordingly, the main work of curators and conservators becomes that of returning the object as nearly as possible to this pristine condition (or some other more or less arbitrarily chosen state) at which point it is then carefully maintained. This enterprise may include repairing damage, restoring lost elements, and removing varnish, overpainting, or earlier repairs and restorations judged unsatisfactory. In other words, the restorer and his client value the appearance of an object at some early stage in its existence more highly than the record of its changing circumstances over time, especially as this record incorporates the more-or-less drastic design decisions affecting the object made by the succession of custodians through whose hands it had passed.





**Figure 2** Bamana Komo mask, Mali. Wood, horns, porcupine quills, mud.  
Fowler Museum of Cultural History, UCLA. X77-392.

These attitudes may be contrasted with that exhibited by the collector who cuts down a painting to fit a particular space on his wall, or a government which countenances the melting-down of gold or silver ornaments for coinage or bronze statuary for cannon. The first body of attitudes and activities are praiseworthy antiquarianism, the second vandalism. Another perspective would treat of both as reflecting design-decisions deriving from different sets of priorities. These divergent points of view seem to reflect a deeper dichotomy: in Western culture, a sensitivity to art, music, poetry, and other “exalted manifestations of the human spirit” which are appreciated essentially for their own intrinsic qualities, is opposed to more pragmatic “engineering” attitudes primarily oriented toward coping efficiently with the exigencies of daily life. It is customary to stress that the relative weighting given to each of these inclinations is internally defined by each culture and, within societal parameters, by each individual. Cultures and individuals tend to be ranked higher on the scale of “civilization” according to the extent to which transcendental aspirations take precedence over mundane pursuits.

Available evidence suggests that Africans perceive no such dialectical opposition. As noted earlier, aesthetic decisions are definitely made, but they are comprehensible only in terms of a much wider set of values. In general, African peoples manifest an exquisite sensitivity to objects and experiences, structures and relationships, but primarily as means to ends rather than as ends in themselves. For most African communities, the over-riding objective of all beliefs and practices is the survival, orderly and effective functioning, and prosperity of the community and of the individuals who make it up; in such a context, “usefulness” tends to be extremely broad of definition. Moreover, each

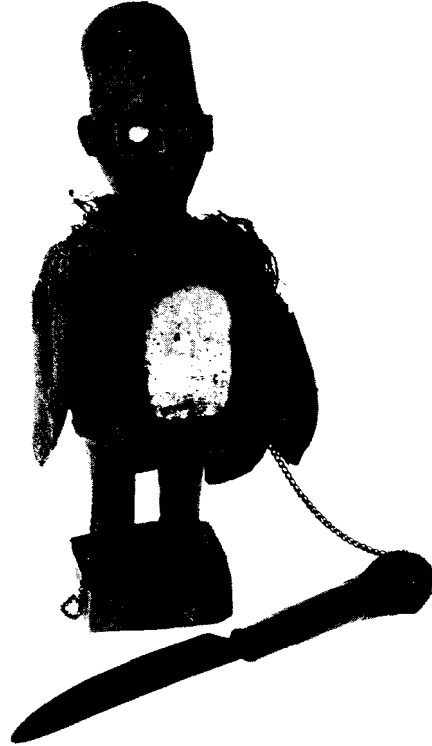


**Figure 3**

Kongo *Nkonde* figure, Zaire. Wood, cloth, rope, iron, beads, bells, shells, and activating materials. Fowler Museum of Cultural History, UCLA. X65-5837.

community typically relates to its natural, supernatural, and cultural environment with rigorous pragmatism and a notable lack of sentimentality. Rarely is there any compunction, for example, over melting down and recasting bronze ornaments or other configurations which have gone out of fashion or are otherwise no longer relevant to any particular functional context. Nor does any serious distress accompany acknowledgment of the fact that, despite reasonable care, most masks and figures eventually have to be replaced owing to breakage, weathering, insect damage, or fire. Many types of objects are made for one period of use—often quite brief—and then discarded. Far from representing a tragedy, the fairly high rate of attrition of monuments in most African communities has had the effect of providing work for relatively large numbers of artists in each generation, for whom the products of only the preceding two or three generations are available as models and standards. In a broader sense, the entire body of inherited cultural patterns, representing the accumulated experiences, accomplishments, and wisdom of the past is typically evaluated in each generation and reinterpreted or adjusted where deemed desirable in the light of available options and altered circumstances.

Such a pattern of perceived and implemented distinctions between ends and means, and of continuous cultural stock-taking, may help to clarify the difficulty which many Africans living in traditional societies have in understanding the Western collector's motivation and rationale. In a traditional



**Figure 4**  
Kongo figure, Zaire. Wood, cloth, raffia,  
metal, glass, activating materials. Fowler  
Museum of Cultural History, UCLA. X67-879.

context, whatever else objects may be and do, they are first of all perceived as making statements about the self-identification of their makers and users. Conceptions of what we call style, form, iconography, use and function—the total configurations of houses, pots, weapons, thrones, and images of ancestors, for example—represent entities intimately bound up with particular cultural and social systems bounded in space and time. Peremptory removal of an object whose presence sanctions crucial political, religious, or social functions may render the exercise of those functions difficult if not impossible, representing a grave threat to the orderly life of the community. Only an enemy would undertake to remove such an object. On the other hand, if a new structural component in the areas of juridical authority or enculturation of the young, for example, has supplanted an earlier one, objects associated with the supplanted system may be cast out.

More often, however, prudence will dictate that the earlier complex receive at least token maintenance for a period of time by virtue of its previous importance to the community (usually expressed in terms of the residue of power it will have accumulated through many sacrifices or other devotions), or as a reserve or “back-up” system in case the new system proves unsatisfactory. While the owners or custodians of such formerly important objects may agree to part with them, they often express puzzlement at what possible use members of another group could have for relics at the same time useless and intimately bound



**Figure 5**  
Touba Maou mask, Ivory Coast. Wood, horns, fur,  
sacrificial materials. Fowler Museum of Cultural History,  
UCLA. X73-632.

up with the identity and cumulative experience of an alien people; deprived of their functional roots, the formal appeal as well as the effective power of the objects wither away. As an even more important consideration, such objects will also be regarded as almost certainly hazardous to an outsider who is, by definition, ignorant of their proper use.

The French anthropologist Marcel Griaule reports traditions from the Dogon of Mali which poignantly illustrate the hazards of casual contact with such charged or contaminated objects and/or materials.<sup>3</sup> The traditions in question are lengthy and complex and deal with the origins of many features of the Dogon universe, including death. Initiated by an incident of cosmic incest, a chain of antisocial and sacrilegious acts introduced death into the world of mankind. A complex of red fiber costumes and associated carved wooden masks was developed as a means of preventing the souls of the recently dead from interfering in harmful ways in the world of the living:

Clothed in fibres, hoods and masks which they had woven and sculptured themselves, dancers in war-dress went to the terraces frequented by the souls. Against a background of funeral rhythms, they simulated, with their axes and lances, a battle against the invisible ones from which they emerged victorious; the souls fled and were guided by other rites to another place of repose where all tribulation ceased. From that time onwards, each death gave rise to this masked dance on the burial terrace which became the highlight of the ceremonies marking the close of the mourning period.



**Figure 6**  
Ibo mask, Nigeria. Wood, seeds, bone,  
cloth, horns, and mud. Fowler Museum of  
Cultural History, UCLA. X73-631.

But very soon, the masks were not content with gesticulations in this limited theatre; they betook themselves to the public square to enhance aesthetically their religious actions.

This therapeutic action, even if it alleviated the lot of those who had died, helped to spread the evil among the men who pursued their immortal destiny. For these spectacular ceremonies excited their curiosity and their envy. Some of them took masks and fibre costumes for their own use. Others, thinking they were precious objects, hid them in holes in the rocks. Still others, seeing the object which had caused the rites, bought a body to have a reason for sculpturing, painting, and showing themselves in the public square.

But the masks and fibres, being funeral material, transmitted their impurity to those who wore them and death, winning over one region after another, spread throughout the Dogon world.

Other sections of the Dogon traditions reported by Griaule, and data from a number of other African societies, support the principle implied here: that certain forms and materials brought into conjunction and activated through appropriate procedures have the capacity to organize and concentrate what might be called "available capability." For the most part, power materials embody "signature elements" for the creature from which they have been taken, amounting to the distinctive survival equipment which characterizes each: for birds, their beaks, talons, or feathers; for the various types of antelopes, their horns; for snails or tortoises, their shells, and so on. Imitations in carved wood or other materials may, it seems, also serve. By virtue of the magnificently articulated survival system

he represents, the leopard is typically accorded special significance in such transfers or borrowings; claws, fangs, and pelt may be utilized, or pelt-markings emulated through spotting with paint.

Incantations, blood sacrifices, and libations of “spiritous” liquors may be used to introduce additional essences. A tendency to multiply media in POWER contexts should probably be seen as intentional design redundancy, calculated to organize a wide spectrum of systematic responses to particular types of problems—health, prosperity, or social advancement, for example—through the employment of configurations and procedures which experience has indicated will receive a desired result. Thus, activation of objects through this process of transfer and concentration of energies or capabilities is cumulative in intent as well as accumulative in aspect. The effectiveness of the principles involved is corroborated by the multiplication of elements and attributes unified by the residue of many sacrifices (Figures 2, 3, 4).

The investment of spirit principles in objects by invocation and convention, also frequently encountered in Africa, has been stressed in the literature. The conceptions involved seem fundamentally different from systematic exploitation of qualitative phenomena in POWER contexts, however. Procedures followed (sacrifices, adjurations, etc.) and observable signs of their effectiveness (e.g., possession of devotees) may be similar in both cases; the spirit-principles in question are usually personalized in the form of deities or ancestors, however, and their symbolic presence in their particular ceremonial context usually implies invitation and some measure of willingness or volition. In contrast, POWER sculpture may be said to draw directly upon essences, its effects conceived as resulting automatically from proper procedures properly carried out.

## SUBSTANCE

William Fagg has argued that the principal of “increase” serves to organize life and art in African and other “tribal” societies.<sup>4</sup> He proposes that a special sensitivity to lifeforms characterizes such societies by virtue of their closeness to nature in connection with subsistence pursuits. This sensitivity, according to Fagg, is reflected in the frequency with which the exponential or “growth” curve appears in their arts—the helical spiral described by many types of germinating seeds, for example, or the tendrils of vines, or certain horns and shells.

There is certainly nothing to dispute in the proposition that enhanced security, reflected in the multiplication of children, food supplies, animals, or other types of wealth, represents a pervasive goal for members of the societies in question (and very likely a universal human goal as well). It seems to me, however, that the concepts of transfer and accumulation as outlined above may provide a more valid framework than “increase” for considering both the characteristics of design noted by Fagg and possibly other distinctive features of African (and other “tribal”) societies.

“Increase” as used by Fagg, implies the possibility of creation or generation of matter or energy, of potentially unlimited expansion of the “good things” of

life, however defined. This premise may be said to have dominated Western approaches to nature at least since the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution, amounting to a fantasy popularly epitomized in recent times by the liberation of atomic energy. Strikingly different conceptions are indicated by evidence from a number of African societies, however. Available matter and energy—the resources upon which an individual or group may be able to draw—are perceived as manifestly finite and invariably entailed, therefore inevitably the subject of contention and competition. On the whole, one individual or group can prosper only at the expense (or through the largesse) of others.

Frank Willett has recently discussed the stone *nomoli* figures of Sierra Leone which are set up by Mende farmers in their rice-fields “to protect the crop and make it prosper. Indeed, it is reported that the *nomoli* are expected to steal rice plants from the neighboring fields to this end, and that they are beaten if they do not do this successfully.”<sup>5</sup> A similar pattern of competition for resources seems to underlie the transfer of energy and vitality involved in headhunting, or in most reported instances of cannibalism, or conceptions of witchcraft. The most revealing data I have encountered in this regard are those reported by the anthropologists Laura and Paul Bohannan for the Tiv of north-central Nigeria.<sup>6</sup>

According to the Bohannans, the Tiv explain why some members of a community prosper more than others through reference to the exceedingly complex principle of *tsav*. Manifestations of *tsav* include charisma, skill or talent, and “capability” in general, and those who have it invariably prosper in all their undertakings.

Above all, *tsav* is mystically dangerous . . . and this aspect is undoubtedly the most vivid one. *Tsav* is witchcraft substance, though possession of *tsav* does not necessarily indicate a witch . . . *Tsav* renders both good and evil effective. That *tsav* will be used for evil purposes—at least sometimes—is confirmed by Tiv beliefs in human nature and human relationships. In itself, *tsav* merely endows a man with great potentialities; but it is the man himself who directs and controls the potentialities. In Tiv belief any sane man chooses to benefit “his own”; a good man extends the connotation of “his own” through a wide range of kinsmen. Nevertheless every benefit to “his own” is matched by someone’s loss and even “his own” are never sure that sometime it might not be theirs. A man of probity may never have taken anything from his kith and kin. Yet a man of ability has more wealth than his neighbors and more influence than his peers. One cannot make something out of nothing. . . .

The ramifications of these principles of Tiv belief are amplified and reinforced in an earlier passage from the same section:

That aspect of personality which enables a man to dominate a situation, to turn events the way he wishes them to go, to command obedience and attract loyalty—be it through charm, persuasion, bullying or whatever means—is evidence of *tsav*. *Tsav* then gives power over people, and in a furiously egalitarian society like that of the Tiv, such power sets a man apart; it is distrusted, for Tiv believe firmly that no one can rise above his fellows except at their expense. Furthermore, *tsav* in this sense of power can be kept at bay only by greater *tsav*. Thus all old people, by definition, have *tsav*; if they did not, they would have succumbed to the *tsav* of someone else at an earlier age.

The gerontocratic organization of most African societies is well known. As is so clearly stated for the Tiv, the factor of longevity, the demonstrated survival-capability of the elders, is the main source of their social leverage within the community. It elicits the deference of family members or other dependents or adherents, conferring an elevated status often acknowledged and institutionalized in the form of special political, religious, and social prerogatives. In the context of the redistributive economies which seem to predominate in traditional Africa, such prerogatives usually entail some measure of custodianship of the resources of the group, together with control of access to opportunities for individual advancement. All forms of wealth take on significance in terms of the networks of social relationships they may be used to forge.

For example, the priestly offices or high positions filled by elders in cults, "secret societies," and other associations usually entitle them to receive regular donations of various sorts, such as initiation dues or sacrificial offerings, which they consume or appropriate as a matter of course. Such sinecures amount to a kind of social security for elders who no longer hunt or farm, sanctioned by their control of access to the systems, procedures, and objects through which the deities, ancestors, and other spirit—and power—principles recognized by the group may be contacted. From the client's perspective, the premise seems to be that nothing significant ever comes free or even cheap, and that a desired improvement in one's circumstances will probably be proportionate to one's investment.

The anthropologist Daniel Biebuyck has described an instance of the operation of these principles in his report on the Bwami association of the Lega of eastern Zaire.<sup>7</sup> According to Biebuyck, the initiation process at each level of Bwami culminates in the revelation and explanation of examples of a wide range of natural and manufactured objects. Among many others, such objects may include carved ivory or wooden masks or figurative sculptures representing a variety of subjects, pangolin scales, warthog tusks, or the skulls of several types of monkeys or other small creatures. They serve simultaneously as didactic devices and as emblems of accomplishment, exemplifying through associated proverbs and aphorisms the Bwami ideals of intelligence, judgment, composure, moral virtue, and social responsibility. Access to progressively higher dimensions of knowledge—and the status such accomplishment carries within Lega society—depends upon the extent to which a member is judged to approach these expectations, along with his ability to furnish the increasingly heavy "dues" required for advancement. These dual requirements may seem mutually incongruous until it is realized that the novice is *not* expected to provide the necessary goods entirely on his own; rather, his ability to draw upon the network of social relationships he will have previously established to assemble the required donations is itself a test of his credentials for advancement. A lower level, more general network of familial and other ties serves as a basis for elevation to another, more profound and specialized network—that composed of the Lega moral and philosophical elite. Not least important, such higher status carries the right to share in future initiatory dues and to adopt the distinctive elements of costume and associated attributes which serve simultaneously to reinforce the cultural



ideals of Bwami and to advertise personal accomplishment. Among the many Bwami images mentioned by Biebuyck is a carved wooden human figure with bent back. It is used

... to represent the aphorism, "The Great-Old-One has seen many initiation objects; he goes bent under them," which refers to an old initiate who has helped many people go through the initiation and who, when some of them die, takes over the trusteeship and guardianship of their initiation objects. The display of the object in conjunction with other figurines tells the candidate that he should take good care of old, seemingly insignificant initiates because they are loaded with powerful things.

Among the Lega, then, high social standing is directly evident in the accumulation of important objects. Taking a broader frame of reference, my earlier observation that the appearance of powerful objects tends to reflect, at any given point in time, the record of their accumulating effectiveness and consequentiality is thus seen to be rooted in the real (or symbolic) aspect of powerful human beings. Complexes of regalia associated with important positions in African communities almost always incorporate POWER elements of some sort; in terms of visibility, however, materials described earlier as primarily oriented toward DISPLAY considerations are usually more prominent. Connotations of wealth and cosmopolitan sophistication ascribed to DISPLAY materials may thus plausibly be seen as references to accumulated POWER; rather than embodying trivial "dazzle" or shallow splendor, DISPLAY materials may be said to communicate information about *results* in contexts where POWER materials refer to *causes*. Finally, this special significance of DISPLAY materials is not usually confined to "self-design" complexes for high-status individuals; rather, such usages typically cut across social strata as declarations of individual and collective identity and as age-, sex-, role-, and status-markers within the group. On another level, arts of personal adornment serve to meter states of psychic vitality for the individual, projecting an external aspect which provides insights into internal realities. By extension, DISPLAY materials attached to objects thus enhance the status and prestige of their owners, custodians, or sponsoring groups. Moreover, the *ways* in which DISPLAY materials and techniques are used in African accumulative sculpture seem directly to parallel the ways in which comparable (or the same) materials and techniques are used in personal adornment. One of the compositional principles involved in both modes—that of profusion—has been touched upon earlier. Other shared characteristics may be elucidated through a brief discussion of the design implications of features as basic as the dark pigmentation and distinctive hair texture of African peoples.

Skin decoration among non-African peoples most commonly takes the form of tattoo—the injection of pigment to form designs in which line and/or color is emphasized; prominent scars are usually considered unattractive. In contrast, a wide range of types of what might be described as skin sculpture is known from Africa, characterized by patterns of relief decoration made up of raised keloids or depressed scars. The distinctive hair texture of most African peoples also lends itself to sculptural development through elaborate plaiting processes, impregna-

tion with various substances, and other techniques; the hair of most Europeans, on the other hand, usually requires complex appliances and chemical treatments for development of sculptural form. In Africa, most traditions of skin and hair sculpture emphasize aggregations of small, discrete units—plaits or keloids, for example—providing a richness of texture and complex detail which is often enhanced through the use of oil or other cosmetics. This tactile quality seems to be paralleled in the massing of large numbers of comparably small DISPLAY elements—beads, cowries, or bits of metal—on pieces of sculpture or people's bodies alike (Figure 1).

We may conclude this section with a final point which relates to the *qualities* of DISPLAY materials. Without question, the importation of large quantities of fluorescent plastic eardrops, cheap metal pendants, and other mass-produced ornaments into Africa has put many traditional craftsmen out of work, a loss which is unfortunate from many points of view. Yet, such goods are presently ubiquitous in Africa, and while the colors, textures, and materials involved might look garish and tawdry on a white skin, they usually “work” magnificently on a black one. This fact seems to have been responsible, indirectly, for great wailings and gnashings of teeth among Western connoisseurs of African art. I am unwilling to agree that present-day preferences among African peoples for intense aniline dyes, liberal use of files and graving tools in metalworking, and replacement of traditional finishes for sculpture by enamel paints represents a “breakdown of taste.” I suspect that connoisseurs who use such terms are primarily responding to the “subtle richness” and “dignity” of traditional materials—ivory, stone, wood, or patinated metal, for example—on the basis of their own criteria for self-design suitability. A consistent African preference for the most vivid and intense combinations of colors, textures, and patterns attainable, resolved in terms of the wider range of options made available by the conditions of modern life, seems a preferable explanation for present-day choices than does a decline in sensitivity or a “breakdown of taste.” As with POWER materials, then DISPLAY materials and the ways in which they are used, far from being naive and random, appear to be rooted in consistent and coherent systems of aesthetic—and ultimately cultural—values.

#### ASSEMBLAGE AND ACCUMULATION

Some general points of resemblance may be discerned between this analysis and Margaret Trowell's proposal that the art of Africa may be divided into “Spirit-regarding Art,” “Man-regarding Art,” and “Art of Ritual display.”<sup>8</sup> Among other differences, however, her categorizations seem to depend primarily upon stylistic judgments and interpretations of the sorts which are especially prone to ethnocentric distortions. In general, many of the words and concepts customarily used to deal with the phenomena discussed here are similarly compromised, or entail unfortunate associations. For example, the term *magic* figures prominently in the literature; despite attempts to qualify its meaning, *magic* seems to me to convey unavoidable implications of chicanery and triviality. Hence, the term does not appear in this discussion, since I consider that the beliefs and practices being

examined clearly do not partake of these qualities. POWER and DISPLAY have been proposed as core elements of what is intended as a more neutral frame of reference.

DISPLAY materials and techniques, as noted earlier, serve primarily to advertise the prosperity, vitality, and cosmopolitan sophistication of the sponsoring individual or group, representing the visible, tangible resolution of psychic vigor and strength. By virtue of their manifestly public function, masks and elements of costume comprise the majority of objects making up this category. Such objects usually participate in an ensemble which includes prescribed patterns of sound and movement; thus, they are usually difficult to appreciate in a museum context, stationary and stripped of their accouterments. Some DISPLAY configurations are realized almost entirely during the initial fabrication phase; others take shape through the accumulation of elements over time, a mode of development which is typical of POWER sculpture in general.

POWER sculpture is activated through the transfer and concentration of essential qualities in the form of a wide range of attributes derived from a variety of sources. The objective of these procedures is the organization and exploitation of the qualities inherent in such attributes for the benefit of an individual or group. Some of the larger, more awesome types of POWER sculpture are customarily maintained in shrines of limited access, with the intention of protecting the object from contamination (which would impair its capability), and of protecting the community from the effects of uncontrolled exposure to the power principles it embodies. Other POWER sculptures, usually smaller and somewhat less imposing, are the prerogatives of individuals or small groups (such as families), and are more closely bound up with the routine of daily life. They may be stationary—part of a domestic altar ensemble, for example—or portable, meant to be carried about or worn. While both stationary and portable POWER configurations are generally perceived as sharing functional qualities at some level, the relationships involved have been largely obscured by the abundance of terms traditionally applied to them: charm, amulet, talisman, “medicine,” and *fetish*, among others.

Until recently, much European literature regarding Africa used *fetish* as an omnibus term to denote all aspects of African religion, including associated sculpture. Leon Kochnitzky was referring to this latter use of the term in the following etymological demolition:

*Fetish* comes from the Portuguese *feitiço*, a fabricated object, a fake, equivalent to the Latin adjective *factitius*, the French *factice*, the Italian *fittizio*. It became popular after the publication of De Brosse's essay *Du Culte des Dieux Fétiches* (1750). It corresponds to nothing that exists in Africa. In his *Dictionnaire de la Langue Française*, Littré gives the following definition of a fetish: *idole grossiere qu'adorent les Nègres* (a coarse idol adored by the Negroes). Now, we know that an African statuette is not an idol, that it is seldom coarse, and that the Negroes do not adore it.<sup>9</sup>

Authors of some recent publications on African art have shown an unfortunate and regressive willingness to apply the term *fetish* to the body of material

which has here been designated POWER sculpture. Even leaving aside the psychiatric connotations of *fetish*, singularly unfortunate in the present context, the peculiar antecedents and associations of the term as sketched by Kochnitzky must seriously compromise attempts at rehabilitation. (Periodic revivals of the term *primitive* to refer to the arts of Africa, Oceania, and Native America must fail for many of the same reasons.)

In contrast to DISPLAY elements, which in one form or another seem to be represented in most traditions of African sculpture, applications of POWER principles seem more circumscribed in geographical distribution. Immediately apparent is the remarkable concentration of POWER configurations in the belt of rolling grasslands and scrub forest on the southern fringes of the Congo River Basin, extending from the mouth of the Congo to Lake Tanganyika. In this area, POWER materials are used in the form of implants, attached capsules, massive overmodelings (usually of the abdominal region), or additive elements (Figures 3, 4). Certain of these distinctive usages appear to be localized on a subregional basis: the Lower Congo River Basin to the west, and the area more or less between the upper reaches of the Sankuru and Lualaba Rivers in the east. More detailed studies of the distributions of particular conventions may yield insights into art-historical relationships.

Other concentrations of POWER sculpture are located in the Western Sudan (particularly in the area where Mali, Upper Volta, and the Ivory Coast share common borders), and in certain sections of the Guinea Coast, especially the "Poro" area of Sierra Leone, Liberia, and the western Ivory Coast (Figures 2, 5). The traditions involved tend to exhibit a wide range of additive elements associated with a thick, overall sacrificial patina. Isolated instances of POWER traditions are also found elsewhere in West Africa—the "blackened" ancestral stools and other heavily patinated objects of the Akan-speaking peoples of Ghana, for example, and certain Nigerian traditions (Figure 6).

The principle of *accumulation* has been proposed here as a distinctively African artistic convention, one which relates in significant ways to the phenomenon of assemblage in modern Western art as discussed by Seitz.<sup>10</sup> Since his analysis is extended to "folk" and "primitive" forms (pp. 72, 83), I conclude with a brief evaluation of the validity of this proposition, emphasizing points of similarity and difference between the two bodies of material. Seitz's definition of assemblage (p. 6) as referring to objects which are "assembled rather than painted, drawn, modelled, or carved," whose "constituent elements are preformed natural or manufactured objects or fragments not intended as art materials" seems broadly applicable—with minor reservations—to the African data.

In a number of particular respects, however, important differences are evident between African and modern Western forms, as in Seitz's emphasis (pp. 10, 38) on the artist's "ironic, perverse, anti-rational, even destructive" orientations and intentions, or the primacy (pp. 38-39, 83) of the artist's ego and unique vision in making choices and structuring juxtapositions, or Seitz's characterization (pp. 38, 73-76) of the materials of *assemblage* as predominantly the detritus of industrialized, intensely urbanized civilization. None of these associations apply to the African data, which emphasize consensus and consolidation,

and the affirmation and reinforcement of social values and cultural continuity. As noted earlier, DISPLAY configurations may be realized by a single artist in a single period of work, and perhaps conform most closely to the definition of *assemblage* offered by Seitz and quoted above. The majority of POWER sculptures, on the other hand, involve the participation of many hands over a considerable period of time; the evolution of such objects may thus be said to begin rather than end when the basic forms have been defined, and to these the term *accumulative* seems most validly applied. In a fundamental sense, the bulk of the creative energy invested in a work of *accumulative* sculpture, and quite possibly the source of its special fascination, resides precisely in the unique succession of gestures of commitment and involvement each records and embodies.

#### NOTES

1. William C. Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage*, Garden City, The Museum of Modern Art, 1961.
2. Robert Goldwater, *Bambara Sculpture from the Western Sudan*, New York, The Museum of Primitive Art, 1960, p. 10.
3. Marcel Griaule, *Folk Art of Black Africa*, New York, 1950, pp. 71-75.
4. E.g., William Fagg, "The Study of African Art," in Simon & Phoebe Ottenberg, eds., *Cultures and Societies of Africa*, New York, 1960, pp. 471-72; William Fagg & Margaret Plass, *African Sculpture: An Anthology*, London, 1964, pp. 148-58.
5. Frank Willett, *African Art: An Introduction*, New York, 1971, p. 98.
6. Laura & Paul Bohannan, *The Tiv of Central Nigeria* (Ethnographical Survey of Africa: Western Africa, part VIII), London, 1953; later quotations from pp. 84-85.
7. Daniel Biebuyck, *Lega Culture: Art, Initiation, and Moral Philosophy among a Central African People*, Berkeley, 1973; later quotation from caption, pl. 64.
8. Margaret Trowell, *Classical African Sculpture*, London, 1954.
9. Leon Kochnitzky, *Negro Art in the Belgian Congo*, New York, 1958, p. 2.
10. See footnote 1.