H. Cole, 1989, ICONS: IDEAS & POWER in the Art of Africa

2 Useful Images
The Life of Art in Africa

A Fante chief, bedecked in rich cloth and jewelry, gestures to his people with a short sword as he is carried through the streets of his town (fig. 17). He magnetizes their attention from his commanding height, reassures them with gestures of support, entertains with the spectacle of which he is the catalyst and the crown. He is a living work of art, combining performance with visual panoply for an occasion of state.

Africans see their art in dynamic terms. About 1933, for example, a Kongo man, Nsemi Isaki, wrote about his peoples' various "fabricated charms," which include many anthropomorphic power images, *nkisi*, that are fine works of art (fig. 18).

> The *nkisi* has life; if it had not, how could it heal and help people? But the life of a *nkisi* is different from the life in people. It is such that one can damage its flesh, burn it, break it, or throw it away; but it will not bleed or cry out. Yet the magicians think that a *nkisi* possesses life because when it heals a person it sucks illness out. . . . The *nkisi* has medicines, they are its strength and its hands and feet and eyes; medicines are all these.[1] (MacGaffey 1977)

Even stationary, nonanthropomorphic objects have a vital place in human society. A Chokwe chair (fig. 19) "lives" in the company of a chief, where it betokens his wealth, stature, and discerning eye for quality. Its physical structure and iconography separate the chief from the people whom he serves, elevating him above them. The chair, which incorporates three of the icons,[2] helps make the man a leader. Masks "live" more dramatically, of course, as the faces of invented spirit characters that are activated by human agents. Masked performances provide entertainment and commentary. Egungun as a whole honors ancestors, though the specific maskers in figure 20 satirize strangers—white people—whose presence, power, and imported artifacts have had a strong transformative impact on African life.

FIG. 17. During festivals, some leaders ride in palanquins. This richly dressed Fante chief gestures to his people with a symbolic sword.

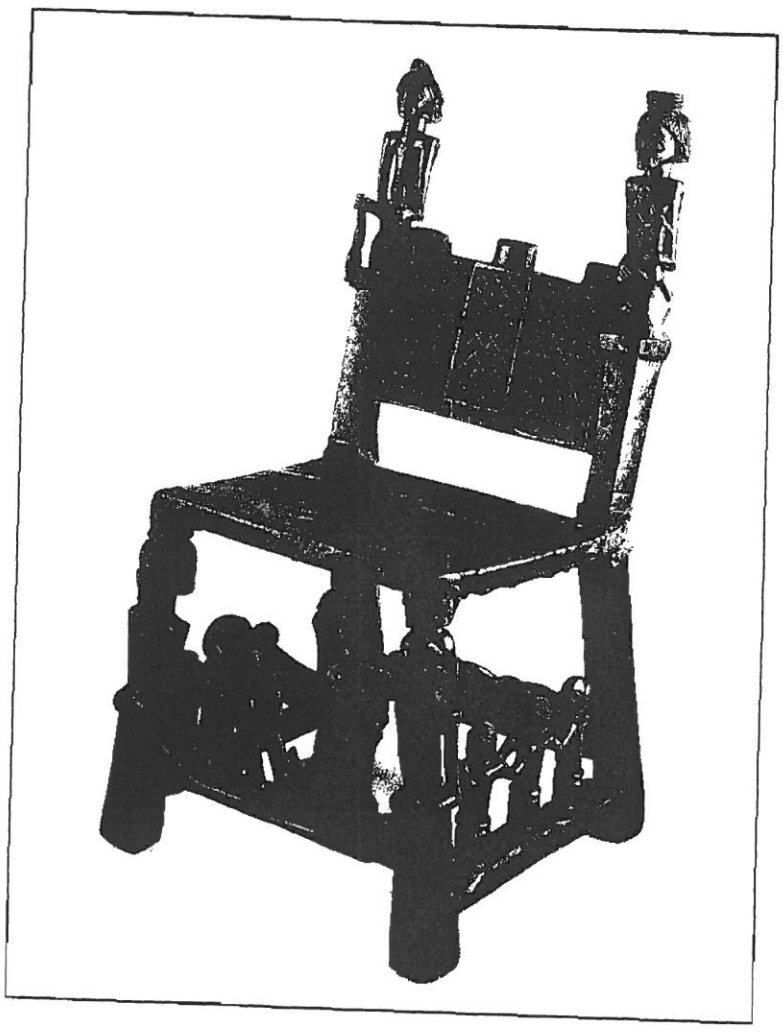


FIG. 19. Chokwe wooden chairs, though based on European prototypes, are imaginatively elaborated with carvings of actual or mythological persons central to history and ideology. H. 23 in.

FIG. 18. This Kongo power image, *nkisi*, of wood and magical materials represents the metaphorical riding of a spirit animal, perhaps by a diviner or priest. H. 13 in.

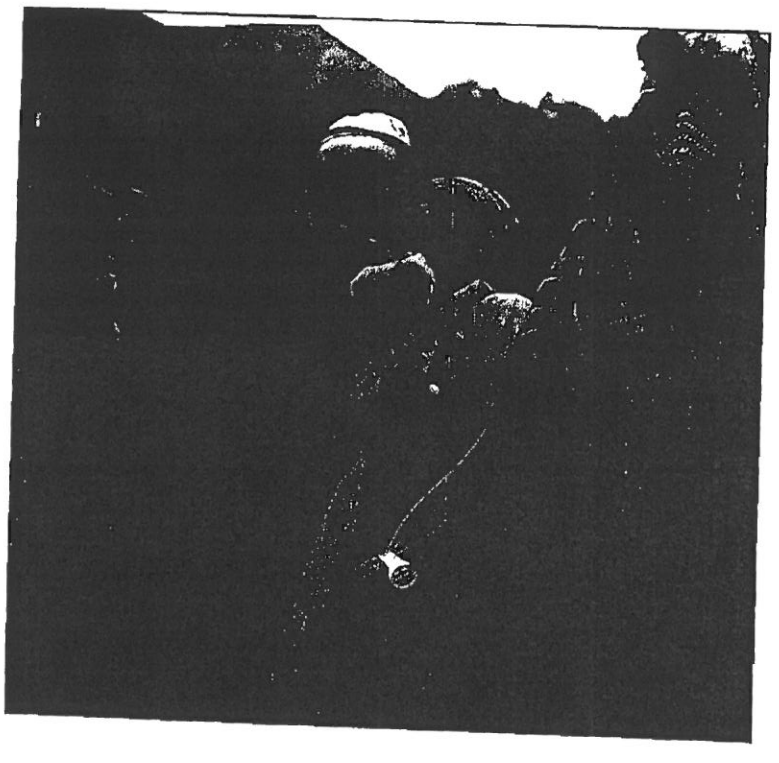


FIG. 20. Humorous masked impersonations of an overly affectionate European couple in a Yoruba celebration for ancestors. The man writes "I love you" on the woman's face with a pen.

FIG. 21. Finely carved wooden spoons were undoubtedly prestige objects for Bembe people. H. 5 1/4 in.

FIG. 22. Miniature ivory carvings of the Yoruba trickster god Eshu often watch over divination ceremonies. H. 2 3/16 in.

The Lives of Art

Art lives and works in complex ways in Africa. Although anthropologists and art historians tend to refer to the "functions" of art, that rather mechanistic term does not do justice to its vital, communicative role in culture. Its dimensions are social, political, economic, religious, psychological, and aesthetic, at least. In the daily and ceremonial round, these aspects of a given artwork all interrelate as different facets of an organic whole, though one may be dominant in a specific context or for a given observer. Thus an outsider might be most struck by the artistic character of the Fante chief's lofty dance, whereas a subchief might be intimidated by his confidence or a rival by his apparent wealth.

The social dimension is notable in art that indicates the age, affiliation, wealth, or status of its owner or user. Houses in a domestic compound, by their size, decoration, and appointment, communicate the social standing of the residents. Other objects of a social nature include household utensils and furniture, plus items of personal decoration and display: clothing, jewelry, walking sticks, pipes, and combs. A finely carved Bembe spoon (fig. 21) signals the prestige of its owner—perhaps his or her membership in an elite organization—since most Bembe people do not own embellished spoons.

Politically oriented objects, which belong to states, leaders and their advisers, help separate these offices from people at large. Numerous hand-held objects—staffs, weapons, fly whisks, long-stemmed pipes—are prerogatives of office. Furniture and architectural decoration dramatize the environment of leadership, helping to focus attention. Still other political objects can be regulators of behavior; in many cultures, for instance, masked spirits serve as police and judges. Relationships between art and leadership are elaborated below.

Most art also has economic dimensions. The artist is paid in money or in kind. Art is frequently wealth; objects are often made of valuable materials such as ivory (fig. 22), metals, or beads that were themselves actively exchanged currencies or were expensive to procure. Art serves the economy critically too when used in rituals to guarantee the food supply, whether hunted animals or harvested crops. Much art also concerns health, which affects the economy because healthy people, fields, and animals are productive and valuable. A shrine that helps cure disease or ensure the safe delivery of robust babies, for instance, contributes greatly to the economic and social order (fig. 23).

As in the case of the shrine just cited, a very large and diverse number of art objects have strong religious orientations. Two such examples are a Kongo wooden bell (fig. 173), owned by a diviner who used it to call spirits to ritual, and a tiny ivory horseman representing Eshu, the animated Yoruba trickster god (fig. 22), who in this form is believed to watch over the process of divination. A great number of the figural sculptures in Africa and in this book symbolize deities, spirits, or their messengers, while many other objects are vital to ritual process; their manifold lives are explored later in the chapter.

Although the psychological roles of art are difficult to document and prove, they are no less present. Art objects and their situations of use may arouse people to responses such as fear, devotion, guilt, or confusion that are not otherwise accessible. Consider, for example, the personal altars maintained by Igala and Igbo males for their own good fortune and success. Periodically, and certainly prior to any important undertaking, they pray and sacrifice to their personal gods at these altars, *okega* (fig. 24) or *ikenga*. A stroke of bad luck on occasion might trigger a man's anger toward his personal god; alternatively, should success exceed expectations, feelings of pride would not be unusual. Masks elicit more dramatic psychological responses. The almost exclusive use of masks in Africa by males, especially in view of recurring myths that women discovered and first danced them, suggests some interesting psychological

FIG. 23. This shrine was erected by the man in the picture when his young son almost died shortly after birth. It includes a mother-and-child carving, a ceramic vessel with medicinal waters, and medicinal plants.

questions. What anxieties caused men to usurp this right? What compensatory roles do women have? How do men feel when they embody female spirits? How do women respond seeing men impersonate and satirize them?

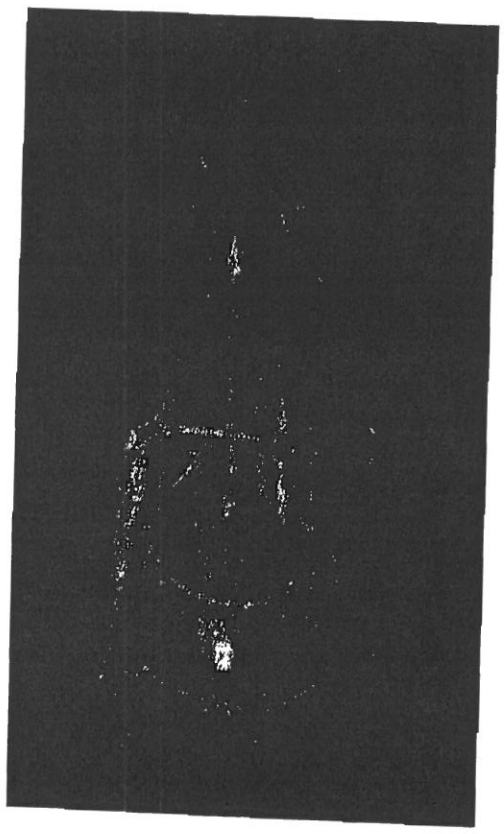
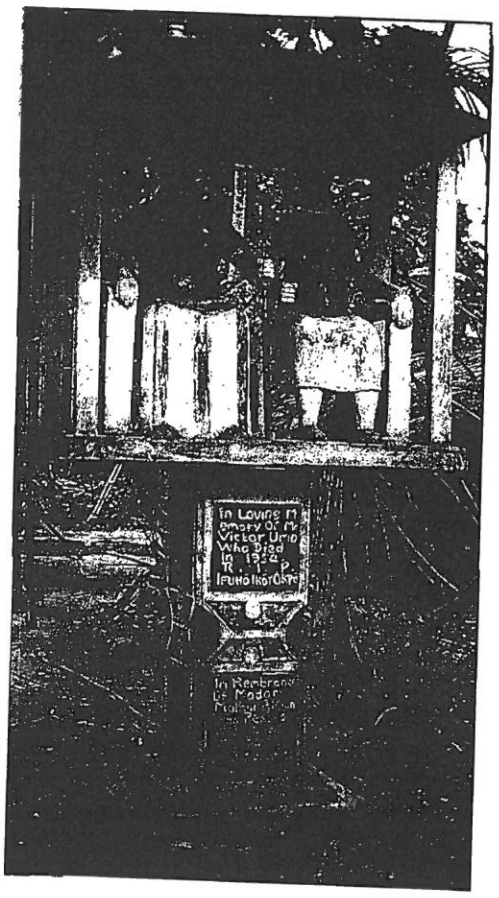


FIG. 24 (*far left*). *Okega* are shrines or altars owned by individual Igala men, who make prayers and sacrifices to them to ensure personal success. H. 24 1/2 in.

Aesthetic response too is an elusive yet important dimension, perhaps easier to grasp at a performance than in the silence of a shrine. The satirical European couple who continually embrace at Egungun festivals, striking postures both unseemly and ridiculous for their Yoruba audience, bring quick laughter (fig. 20). Finely tuned performances are appreciated everywhere on the continent; when especially fine, they elicit financial rewards. Local reactions to excellent painting and sculpture are poorly documented, but they too are certainly conditioned in part by artistic quality. A print by the artist Shilakoe (fig. 25) gains emotional impact from the poignant drawing and strong composition of the subject matter, a South African family group.

FIG. 25. Contemporary African artists use imported materials and techniques in their works. This etching of a South African family is by Cyprian Shilakoe. 13 x 14 1/2 in.

Fig. 26. The Ibibio started making cement grave memorials rather than cloth ones in the 1950s. Earlier styles in cement, like this, were generalized. Later, more naturalistic portraits began to be made (see fig. 191).



Visibility as an Index of Power

The relative visibility of an African work of art often gives viewers a clue to its charge of mystical, spiritual power. Secular, primarily socially important arts may be highly visible and accessible. In contrast, objects with great spiritual potency are normally hidden from view. This is evident, for example, in reports about divine kings. They were insulated by protective palace structures and vast ranks of counselors and servants, and when they did appear in public, it was only infrequently. On those rare occasions, clothing and regalia swathing the king created a striking collage: the art was visible, but the king's person was not (fig. 122). In fact, all art objects have relative degrees of visibility and accessibility; these can be pictured on a continuum (table 1).[3] Contrasting notions of power work at the ends of the visibility continuum, running from secular, emblematic display to spiritual, veiled instrumentality.

Modern public arts make direct, open statements intended to reach large numbers of people. In this category would be murals, signs, grave monuments (fig. 26), garden sculptures, decorated portals. Royal display pieces such as doorways and houseposts, although appearing on the surface to be different from written or pictorial advertisements, have analogous intentions: attention getting, persuasion, and propaganda. The king himself may not be accessible, but his powers can be and often are "advertised." Actual commercial signs, such as those by the artist called Middle Art, are of course prominently displayed (fig. 27). Combining as they do serial, cartoonlike drawings and written legends, his signs have special relevance to the largely literate urban audience in the bustling market city of Onitsha, Nigeria, one of the largest commercial centers in West Africa. In this painting, Middle Art, whose given name is Augustine Okoye, is showing off his talent as a graphic artist, a "sign writer."

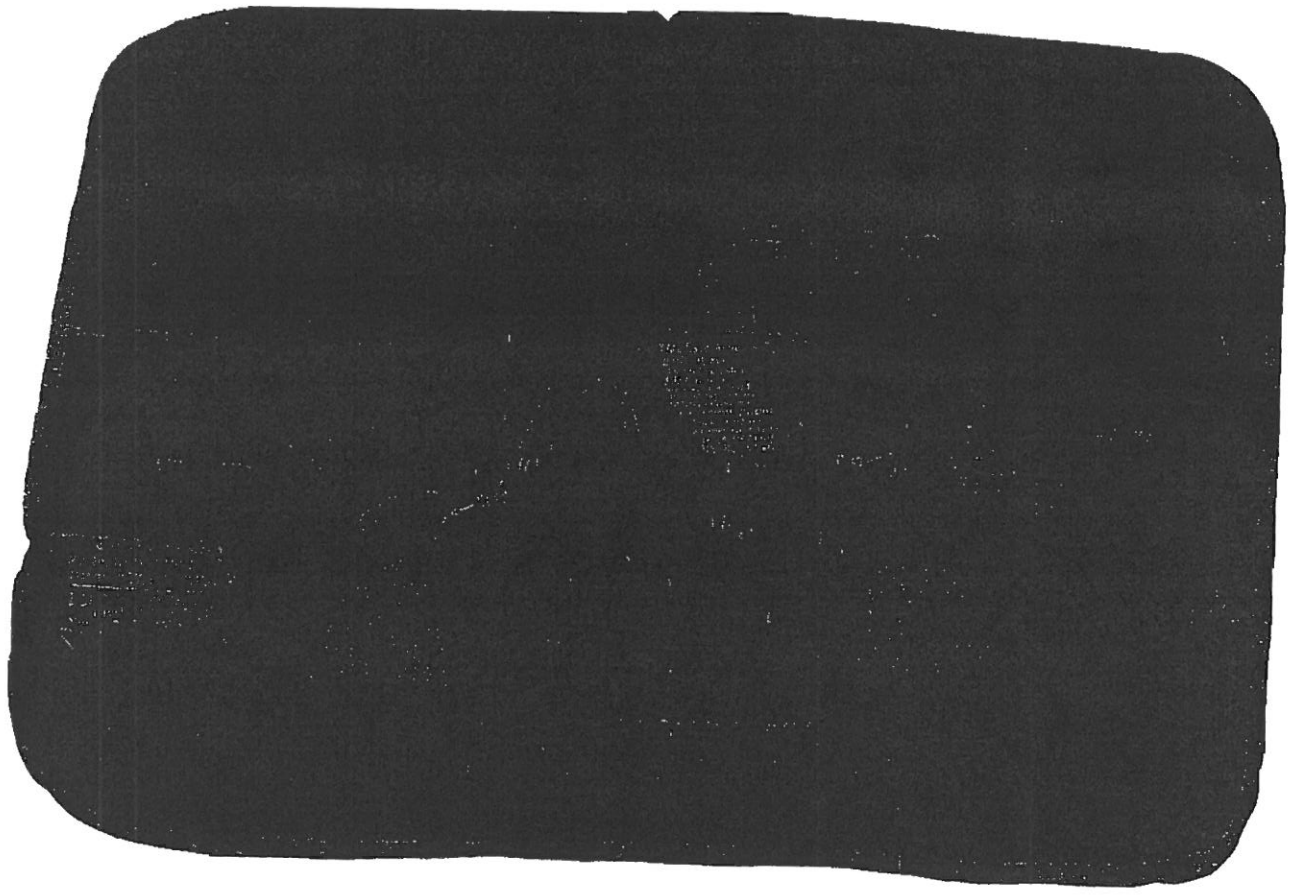
Art housed indoors, yet on open view, is less accessible than that on public view. Fur-

Table 1. Visibility Continuum

High Visibility/Public Display

Increasingly Secular	Commercial signs (fig. 27)
	Ibibio grave memorials (fig. 26)
	Fante *posuban* (fig. 1)
	Igbo *mbari* houses (fig. 14)
	Cameroon portal sculpture (fig. 12)
	Modern paintings, prints, drawings (figs. 25, 30)
	Entertainment masks (fig. 20)
	Regalia (jewelry, fly whisks, pipes)
	Akan linguist staffs (fig. 29)
	Cameroon display sculpture (fig. 82)
Increasingly Spiritual	Yoruba palace doors (fig. 200)
	Akan state swords (fig. 36)
	Igbo/Igala *ikenga* (fig. 108)
	Asante shrine figures (fig. 8)
	Senufo/Baule divination figures (fig. 73)
	Igbo deity figures (fig. 32)
	Benin ancestral altars (fig. 106)
	Bamana Gwan figures (fig. 115)
	Chamba/Verre shrine figures (fig. 74)
	Kongo *nkisi* (fig. 18)

Low Visibility/Spiritual Power



niture and nonpotent items of title regalia are examples, along with paintings, prints, and sculptures whose primary purpose is to decorate the home. All such works provide aesthetic pleasure and simultaneously make statements about social or political standing.

Still less visible—somewhere in the middle range of accessibility—are other objects that may have some spiritual or political potency calling for more restricted use. Entertaining masks are of this sort; although not powerful spirits, they are unlikely to perform often in public. Certain items of regalia such as staffs, fly whisks, pipes, and jewelry are also in this range. Examples are politically oriented staffs with ivory and gold-leafed finials, prerogatives of a Kongo chief and an Akan chief's spokesman, respectively (figs. 28, 29). In each case both the exclusive, noble materials and the motifs serve mainly emblematic purposes. The Kongo ivory female, seated upon a leopard, is probably a reference to chiefs, some of whom are women in this matrilineal society. The gold-leafed Akan linguist staff, on the other hand, signals its bearer as a chief's counselor. Its finial prompts the proverb "The hen knows well when it is dawn but leaves it to the cock to announce," a reference to decision-making processes and gender differences. This adage comments upon the overt declarative authority of the chief (or male) and the behind-the-scenes wisdom of his counselors (or his women). The staffs, though primarily metaphorical, are carried and gestured within ceremonies, giving them some instrumentality. Neither visible, emblematic values nor those of instrumental power, of course, need be seen as mutually exclusive.

At the low end of the continuum are those things (or people) of the highest spiritual potency: sacred personages, shrine figures, ritual masks, and implements of great power, such as those used as oracles, for sociopolitical control, or in judging disputes. Rarely are these openly displayed; instead they are veiled or hidden entirely lest people mitigate their spiritual efficacy or inadvertently suffer their hazardous effects. The Kongo power figure, *nkisi*, mentioned earlier (fig. 18), is such an object. Its indwelling spirit power, believed to heal disease,

FIG. 27. Painted and written advertisements, like this sign by Augustine Okoye (known as "Middle Art"), are relatively recent phenomena associated with the rise of urbanism and increasing rates of literacy. $27^{3}/16 \times 41^{3}/4$ in.

FIG. 29. Gold-leafed wooden staffs are carried by Akan linguists, major advisers to chiefs. Staff finials like this one encode wisdom about leadership, power, and wealth. H. of full staff 66 3/4 in.

weaken an enemy, or seal a contract, had to be well protected. An instrument of such enormity must be shielded from sight and access.

Many figures now on open view in museums or books were not freely visible in Africa but were kept in small bedrooms or diviners' chambers, partly hidden with cloth, or in shrines of limited access. Monumental Bamana figures (fig. 115) were removed from their shrines only occasionally. Some terra-cotta figures from the Inland Niger Delta were apparently made for interment with deceased persons; they were probably visible only for a short time. Statuary in several Cameroon kingdoms was brought out for temporary display, sometimes as centerpieces for state ceremonies, sometimes as backdrops for ritual. Even when figures are made primarily for display, as some Cameroon carvings were, their effectiveness depends in part on the fact that they are seen only infrequently.

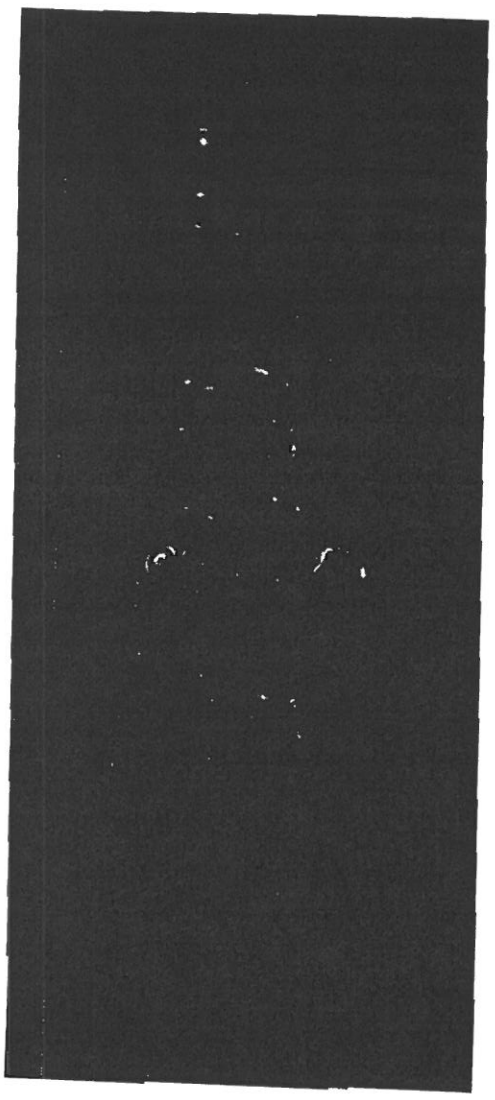


FIG. 28. Ivory and leopards are associated with leaders. This is a finial for a Kongo chief's staff of office. H. 7 1/2 in.

The clay images of powerful Igbo deities that are publicly visible for several years in *mbari* houses would seem to be exceptions to the foregoing. *Mbari* figures are self-consciously artistic to remind people of the strength of the gods and the need to honor them. Yet these display figures have less artistic wood counterparts, considered more spiritually potent, that are housed in far less accessible shrines.

The visibility continuum is also useful in charting change over time. Some objects start out on the visible-display-secular part of the continuum but gain spiritual efficacy with age and use. Examples of this process are masks of the Dan, Mano, and nearby peoples of Liberia and the Ebira of Nigeria. They start life in public masquerades of low potency and become progressively elevated over time to oracles, deities, or healing spir-

its (Harley [1950] 1975; Picton 1987, 14, 17). A few become (or became)[4] so dangerous that not only are they never worn again in dances, they are also closed away in shrines, being too potent even for priests to handle. Historically these works move to a lower zone on the continuum.

An opposite movement—from less visible to more visible—has also been occurring for several decades. Many masks and other once-powerful objects have been losing their spiritual charge, becoming more secular. Masquerades once involved in social regulation may be performed today only to entertain or to lure crowds to hear the speeches of modern politicians.[5] Larger numbers of publicly visible art objects in villages and towns disclose the growing influence of outsiders, especially Europeans and Americans. These include murals, signs, cement sculptures, and other forms in materials and styles introduced within the last few generations. A repoussé aluminum relief of hunters under a tree exemplifies such modern trends (fig. 30). Expanded trade, Western education, Christianity, and the increased availability of foreign ideas and images are among the many reasons for these changes.

Dominant Roles: Spiritual Authority and Human Leadership

It is difficult to overestimate the extent to which the "life" of African art is framed by beliefs in the supernatural and connected with the exercise of leadership. A large percentage of the art discussed in this book partakes of both. Leaders invoke spiritual sanctions in their efforts to govern, and powerful deities and the personnel that represent them are also effective leaders. In fact divisions between "sacred" and "secular" life in Africa can easily be overdrawn, as divine kings attest, for they have one foot each in temporal and spiritual realms. Yet as we have seen, objects may be oriented in one or another direction, and their separation for purposes of discussion and analysis can be useful.

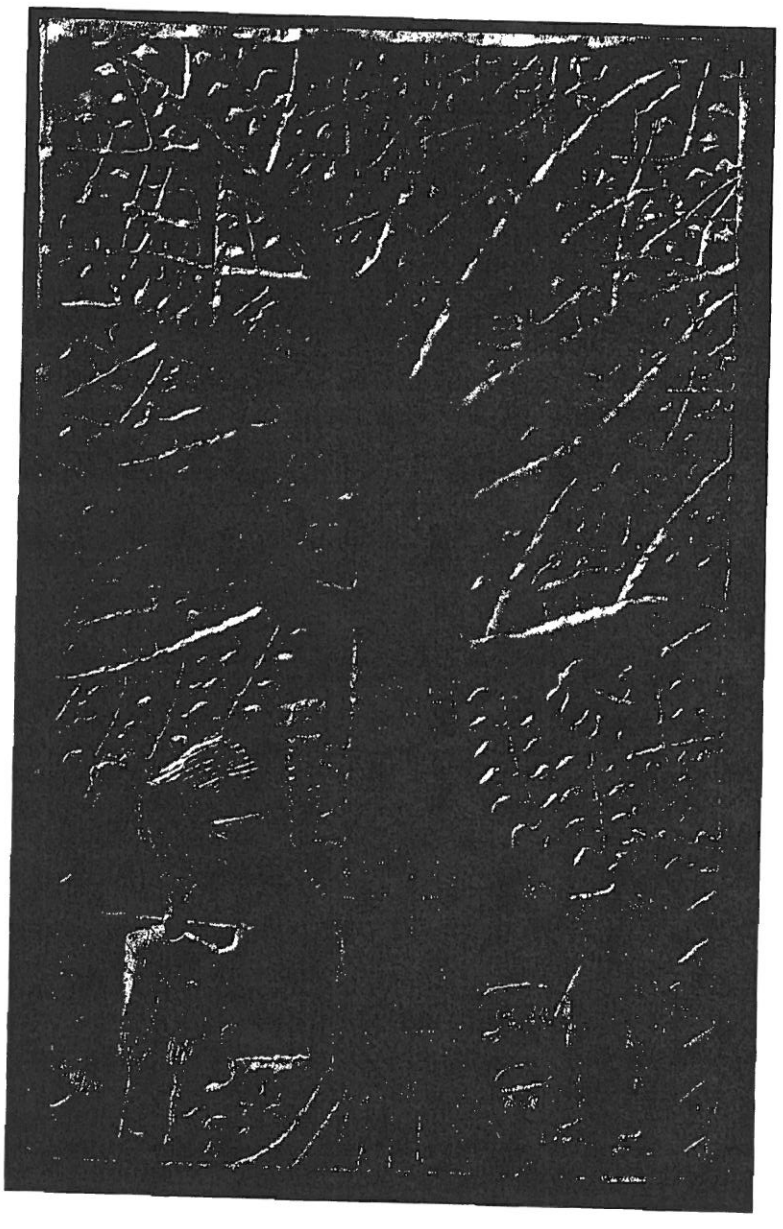


FIG. 30. The Yoruba artist Asiru Olatunde is one of several working in the town of Oshogbo, Nigeria, which under the encouragement of Europeans became a major art center in the 1960s. Asiru's panel, a hunting scene, is aluminum repoussé. 54 3/4 x 34 1/4 in.

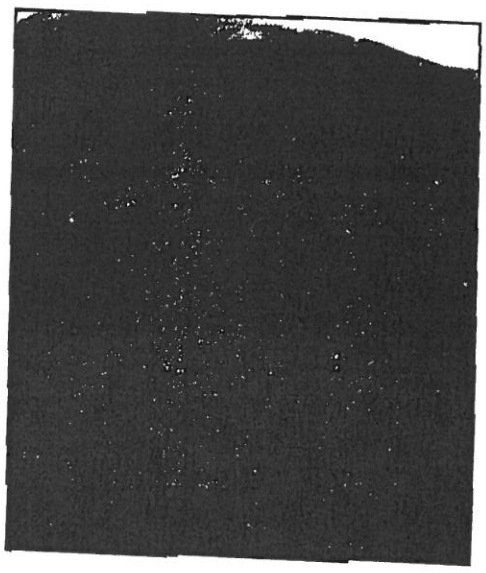


Fig. 31. Ancient schematic rock art images of human beings are found in many parts of Africa. These are from the now uninhabited Tassili region of the Sahara.

Art and the Supernatural

The visible materialization of unseen natural and supernatural forces is a basic African impulse, as it is in most parts of the world. Human imagery, a great deal of it realized artistically in the five icons, is a major focus for these powers.[6] Rarely, though, is a clay or wood figure itself considered a god or spirit. Rather it is a vehicle or symbol, a tangible indication of something ineffable that nevertheless compels belief. African art often exists to embody spirit forces, to augment the effectiveness and emotional impact of rituals, to remind people, through visual metaphor or allusion, that they are only in part responsible for their destiny.

Early Arts. The earliest African art tied to supernatural belief is doubtless that found on rock surfaces in the Sahara, followed by paintings and engravings in the southern and eastern parts of the continent. Although the dating of rock art is problematic, animal petroglyphs precede human imagery and seem to have been made first in the Late Stone Age, about the seventh and [illegible] millennia B.C. By about the fifth or [illegible] B.C., all the icons except [illegible] appeared, although their meanings are uncertain. Couples may refer to primordial ancestors, but we will never know their precise significance (fig. 31). Because hunting and gathering provided subsistence in that era, however, the specialists who interpret some rock-art imagery as relating to hunting rituals are probably correct, and images of armed hunters are common.

The earliest sculpture known, Nok terracottas, was made in the latter half of the first millennium B.C. and into the first centuries of the Christian Era, coeval with the agricultural revolution and the development of ironwork. Two woman-and-child images, numerous human heads and body fragments, a few complete humans, including some Janus images, and animal sculptures are known from the Nok corpus. They are presumed to be religious sculptures, perhaps related to ancestral remembrance and agricultural rites, but solid data on function and meaning are almost wholly lacking.

More data, or at least plausible interpretations,[7] accompany the even richer and more artistically spectacular terra-cottas and bronzes of the Inland Niger Delta region of Mali, where the first four icons, and probably the fifth (stranger), are known (for example, fig. 67). Objects dating from about A.D. 1000 to 1500 and have been recovered from burial mounds and ritual sanctuaries in an area of several thousand square miles. Funerary use suggests but does not prove the existence of ancestor veneration. Sacrifices to ancestors could well have been made at other altars containing terra-cotta images. Snake cults and other shrines in these areas also probably addressed agricultural, animal, and human productivity, still a major preoccupation in the region (de Grunne 1980, 1987).

Basic Beliefs and Rituals. The essential features of African belief systems that give rise to so much art among agricultural peoples are clear.[8] Basic beliefs were most likely in place by A.D. 500 to 1000 in West Africa and A.D. 1400 to 1600 in Central Africa.

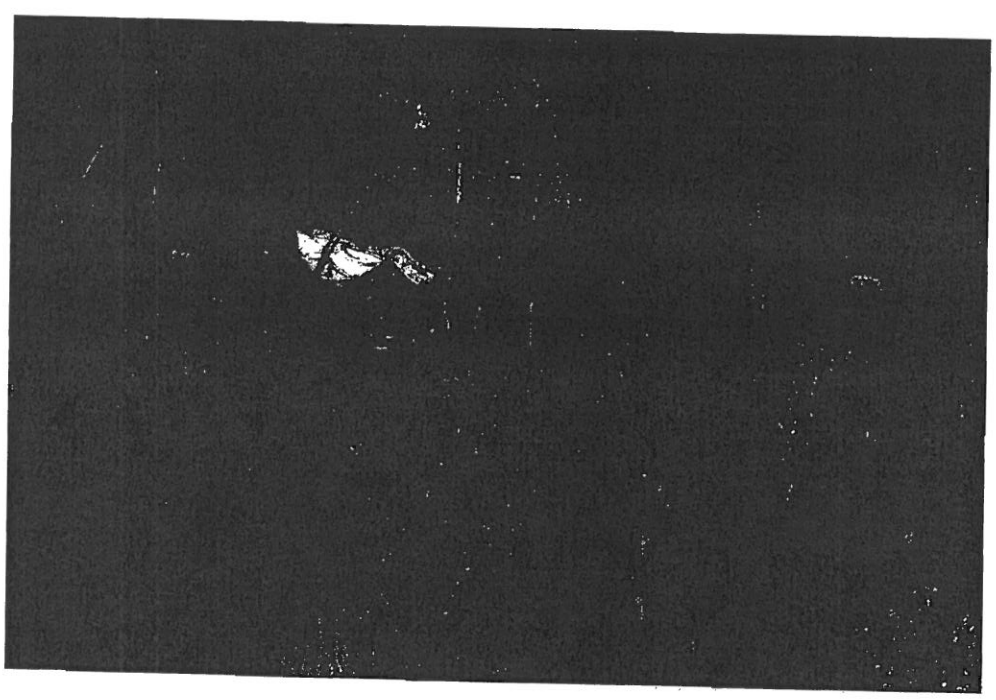


FIG. 32. Many shrines, like this one dedicated to gods that oversee the health, fertility, and prosperity of an entire Igbo community, have large "families" of images, as if to show off the gods' success.

Generally, these include the acknowledged existence of a remote "high god" who is the original creator; this god is almost never represented in art. Numerous nearer deities and spirits, somewhat like people, are more actively worshiped in prayer and sacrifice. These anthropomorphized supernaturals are often associated with aspects of nature such as earth, forests, watercourses, and other topographical features, as well as with aspects of culture such as markets and war. They are often symbolized in works of art (fig. 32). Animals, plants, and other natural phenomena are also spiritualized, sometimes as messengers of more powerful gods. African gods and spirits are considered neither inherently good nor bad. Their actions are dependent upon the behavior of human beings, who must honor the gods, uphold their moral laws, and make periodic offerings at a shrine or altar.

There are also widespread beliefs in a kind of power or energy in human beings, nature, and many special artifacts that are artfully embellished. In the human population, ancestors, elders, chiefs, and kings have the greatest charge of potency. Since most societies are ruled largely by elders, supernatural power strongly affects political and social authority. Believing in a human cycle from birth to adulthood to elderhood to ancestorhood—and often to reincarnation—most agricultural peoples venerate ancestral spirits. Ancestors influence both their living descendants and the world of nature, especially the ground, where departed people live.

Funerary celebrations and other rites of passage are strong magnets for artistic display and performance. Ancestors are commemorated by sculpture in some regions—especially in parts of Zaire (fig. 131)—but more often they are brought into the community as spirit masquerades. These masked apparitions of the "living dead" entertain the living, who offer prayers and sacrifices to assure ancestral aid in stimulating productivity: abundant food and many children. The cleverly fabricated mother-and-child masquerader (fig. 33), danced by a man, is part of the Yoruba ancestral festival called Egungun. This icon can be seen as a sculptural, performing prayer for continuing ancestral help.

Rituals that effect the transition of young people to adult status also invoke the arts, and through them, the gods. Masquerades are again frequently employed to materialize spirits that help initiate and socialize novices during their training period (fig. 88). Sometimes masked spirits are believed to swallow youths, killing them symbolically; novices are later reborn as adults. Initiates learn that human beings wear masks and costumes to embody spirits. In some places, they learn to make and dance masks, and they perform masquerades at their "graduation" ceremonies.

FIG. 33. Most African masquerades are performed by men, even when the characters are obviously female. The mask, wooden breast plate, and child create a convincing illusion for this Yoruba spirit character.

Shrine Arts. Of all the African art made in the service of religion, shrine art is the most plentiful, and it accounts for much of the art illustrated here. African shrines vary widely in purpose, place, and form. Shrines or the altars that compose them can be personal or communal. They exist to honor and invoke ancestors, founding heroes, or spirits of the mysterious wild (usually called "bush spirits"). There are antiwitchcraft shrines, shrines for war or medicine (fig. 23) or thunder, iron, or earth, for messenger spirits consulted by diviners, for personal guardians, oracles, and many other deities. Altars may be inside buildings or outdoors, public or obscure, simple or elaborate, at village centers and in every compound, in gardens, at crossroads, deep in forests, and on hilltops. A shrine is built wherever the gods are likely to dwell or call for sacrifice. Even some kinds of clothing, as well as amulets worn as jewelry, are in effect altars because they are material objects ordered by a spirit believed capable of exerting influence through them.

The lives of shrine objects—their histories—are as variable as the shrines that house them. A shrine sculpture may have been central in the assemblage of display and power materials representing, praising, or calling attention to a deity. It received the offerings destined for the god or stood in the background, a witness to these and other ritual activities.[9] Invariably art was more than simply decoration. Clearly, most ritual figures in Africa led active lives and were treated as vital, appreciated members of the community. They were sacrificed to or otherwise manipulated; caressed, worn, carried about, and danced; reactivated with nails, magical bundles, or applications of pigments; adorned with clothing and jewelry; and addressed with prayer, song, and gesture.

Northern Igbo shrines (fig. 32), for example, house families of deity figures that are regularly "fed"—recharged by being given sacrificial food and by being repainted and clothed. Once a year in some communities, all figures from several shrines are brought out for a festival of images. They are paraded by worshipers to the compound of the senior god and then arranged in a large semicircle. Embellished with camwood body paint and dressed up in cloth for public display, the dozen or more figures receive gifts of chalk, kola nuts, and coins (fig. 34). Libations are poured while prayers or petitions are offered. This assemblage occasions a large thanksgiving feast by devotees, who recall the year of blessings made possible by the tutelary gods represented by the carved figures.

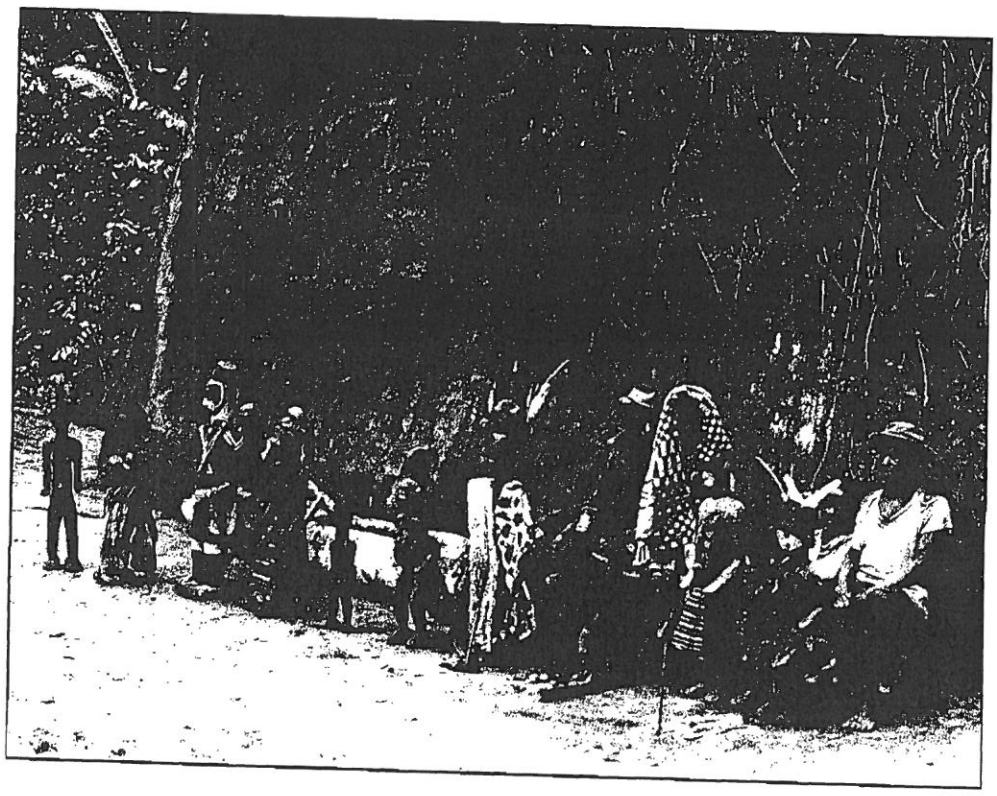


FIG. 34. Annual festivals in some Igbo communities call for assembling wooden deity figures from all the separate shrines at the compound of the most important god. The images are dressed up and given offerings.

Art and Leadership

Many African art forms have critical connections with the exercise of leadership. These derive in part from supernatural ties, since leaders invoke spiritual aid to buttress other forms of authority. Nevertheless, the political dimensions of the art can be considered separately from the spiritual ones.

There are as many kinds of leaders in Africa as there are types of sociopolitical organization. It is in centralized states, with single kings at the apex of a pyramid of titleholders, court officials, and servants, where relationships between art and leaders are clearest. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, before the imposition of colonial rule, such rulers presided in the Akan states, the Dahomey Kingdom, the Benin Kingdom, some Yoruba city-states, many Cameroon Grassfields kingdoms, the Kuba Kingdom, and elsewhere. These individuals controlled wealth and had the power to appoint officials, make war, and take human life. Gaining power from gods and dynastic ancestors, they defined morality and meted out justice, reward, and punishment. Many of these men had exclusive control of the services of artists. They ordered art, paid for it, and strongly influenced its character. Art was directed mainly to their glorification and the augmentation of royal strength in all spheres; then, through royal offices, it worked for the benefit of the people.

At significant festivals in the realm of a paramount leader, the arts of dress, architecture, and performance work together in a number of ways. They make authority visible. They commemorate events and people. They define roles. By contrast and aggrandizement, they identify various offices in royal hierarchies. In manipulating space, these arts separate noble and royal precincts from common ones.

The annual royal festivals, or "customs," celebrated in nineteenth-century Dahomey exemplify the political lives of art in such a context. These events drew people to the capital from outlying parts of the kingdom. A tall tentlike pavilion shielded the king; the chiefs were sheltered by huge umbrellas. These, as well as large showy banners, were appliquéd with motifs referring to the greatness and invincibility of the state and its leaders, who are aggrandized by their regalia (fig. 35). The visual motifs referred to complex verbal "strong names" and praises elaborating vaunted military and other powers. Some of the banners commemorated great events, particularly glorious victories in the history of the state itself and in the lives of specific chiefs. These festivals involved lavish spectacles at fixed sites and colorful pro-

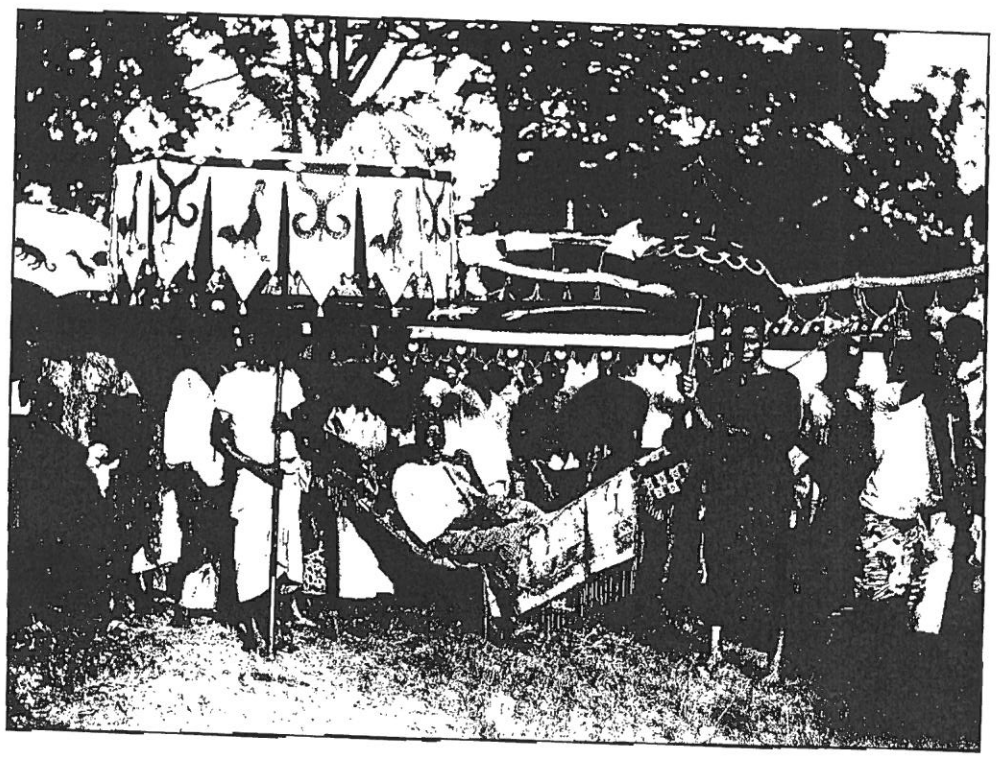


FIG. 35. Umbrellas of several kinds, litters, and cloth with appliquéd images figure prominently in the festive regalia of Dahomean chiefs.

cessions. The common people of the kingdom came to witness the might and majesty of the court and its wealth, yet the dramatic qualities of the celebration also intimidated some people and helped keep them at a certain distance. Dahomean royal treasures—some of them artworks of silver and other opulent, imported materials—were paraded on the heads of several thousand people. Some of this wealth was then given to soldiers and other loyal subjects as rewards for faithful service. "The kings and the court knew how to play on strong feelings of awe, fear, and pride by presenting themselves in splendor to the population" (Adams 1980, 31).

Overall, these festivals in Dahomey, with their declarative messages reinforcing an image of rulership already strongly stated by regalia and other forms, are parallel to the aggrandizing events recorded in Benin plaques and Cameroon architectural carvings. All of them have a passive quality in that they look back at the glories of the past or at the putative strength of leaders in the present. They are reflective arts rather than action-oriented ones.

Leaders also control art forms as active instruments of political policy, helping to effect change and create new relationships. Chiefs set art in motion to communicate among themselves and to mediate between the courts and the people. Leaders dispense art objects (or the right to them)—items of regalia to wear and hand-held implements—as identifying prerogatives of titles they have established and filled. Leaders cause judicial decisions to be executed by masqueraders; spiritual sanction and anonymity lend credibility to their actions. Weapons and staffs, by virtue of their shapes or sculptured motifs of known, conventional meaning, have been especially useful devices for communication (fig. 36). Some Akan state swords have cast gold or gold-leafed ornaments celebrating the military, financial, and spiritual strength of states and kings, along with the good character and wisdom of the latter. The messages are not simply boasts, for they are often addressed as warnings to a king's rivals. Other swords used in swearing allegiance, taking oaths of office, and purifying the souls of chiefs clearly have components of supernatural energy. Swords also provided safe conduct for Akan ambassadors in hostile territory. Each Dahomean king had many staffs with specific figurative "messages," often proverbs encoded in sculptural form; when such a staff was delivered by a messenger, its recipient was required to obey the communication. Akan linguist staffs also crystallized proverbial or emblematic statements in their carved, gold-leafed fini-

als (fig. 29), but these have little of the coercive force of Dahomean staffs. Such examples prove that art is definitely among the powers wielded by heads of state. Lesser chiefs in turn manipulated other kinds of art to inform and sometimes impel the people.

Less visible leaders in less centralized African polities also invoke works of art to further their goals and express their authority. They commission and deploy art as often as more evident leaders and according to many of the same principles. Such "smaller" leaders are also likely to use art for community welfare as much as for personal aggrandizement. The war captain who contributed funds to help build his military shrine, *posuban* (fig. 1), and the earth priest who led the building of an *mbari* house benefited large numbers of people while also advancing their own causes.

Councils of elders or associations of titled men, like war chiefs or priests, are leaders who collectively administer much of the art in their respective societies. Not only do they have some form of visible regalia, they also activate art for many purposes, including masquerades for initiation, social regulation, and commemoration and a host of religious statuary for cults exercising moral and spiritual authority. Because thousands of these leaders exercise their limited powers in many individual cultures, the art they control exists in great quantities and varieties. It is present and effective but less obviously tied to leadership than the arts of the great kingdoms.

What is clear for leaders in all African societies, regardless of sociopolitical structure, is that they are actively engaged in creating culture. Leaders cause art to be made, often dictating specific form and iconography. In conjunction with artists, chiefs and other patrons invent art. Then, in commanding its use, they have a strong hand in molding the events and the people for whom they are responsible. In short, African art has the power to move people, whether actually or figuratively.

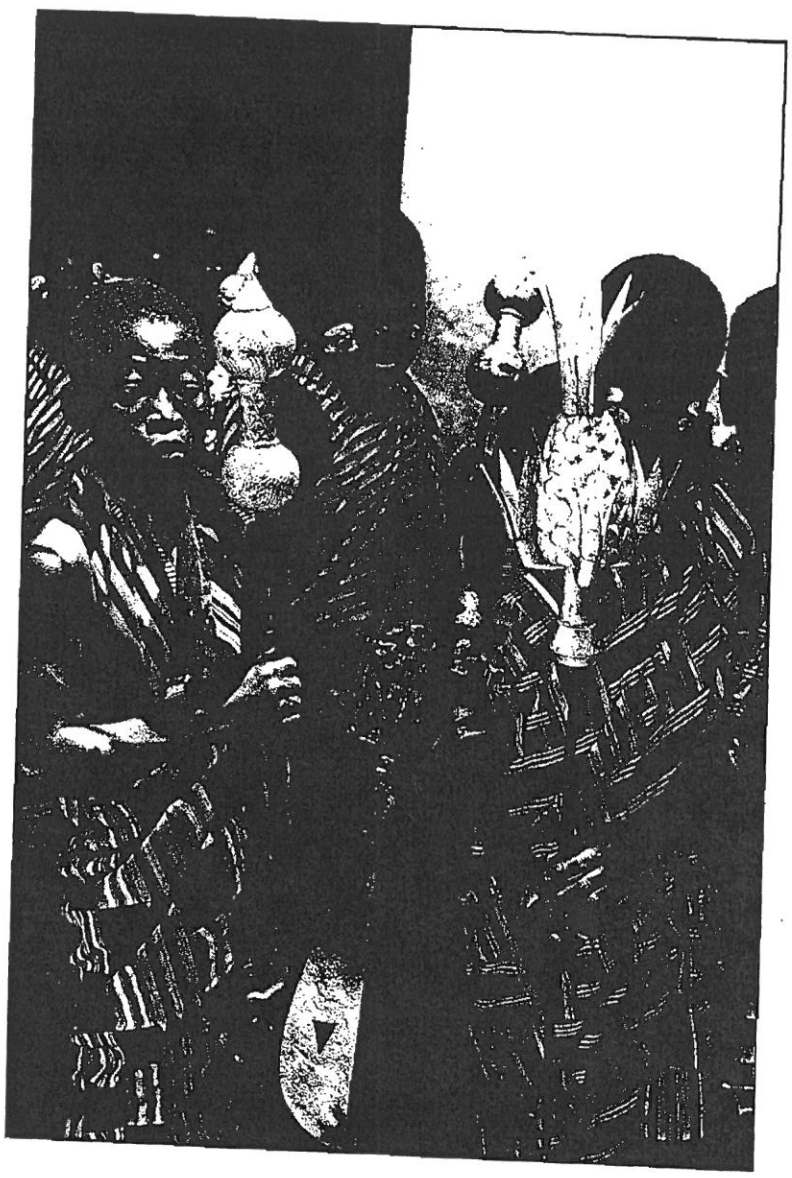


FIG. 36. State swords are often carried at festivals by young male members of a chief's entourage. They refer to maxims that reinforce the power and wisdom of the chief and his state.