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The body as metaphor is an all-important concept in the art south of the Sahara. Combine that metaphor with metaphors of motion and, in the words of an African American rap group of the 1980s, one “steps

into the cipher.” We enter, in other words, a code, a stylized form of consciousness, involving all in deep and primary vitality.

Tropical Africa has elaborated a different art history, a history of danced art, art danced by multimetric sound and multipart motion. Danced art completes things, returns them to themselves by immersion in stylized motion. It was in the village of Oshielle, not far from the Egba metropolis of Abeokuta in southwestern Nigeria, in the winter of 1962, that I began to notice how African statuary, not only masks, could be involved in motion, how icons called for corresponding actions. For as the women gathered their twin images, they cradled them in their arms and danced them, singing, to a special mat and placed them there to be photographed. And then they danced them back to their shrine, tenderly nestled them in special cloths, and closed the door.

Years before, intellectual ancestors, Fernando Ortiz working in Cuba and Frances and Melville J. Herskovits working in Trinidad, had noted the same phenomenon—that dance in black Atlantic contexts moved objects beyond the more obvious extensions, like headdresses for a sacred dance, or knitted costumes, or other forms of straightforwardly choreographic paraphernalia.

For the Herskovitses witnessed an Afro-Trinidadian, overcome by the spirit, swinging his body on his knees, “dancing” in his hands a candle and a glass filled with flowers before an altar. Ortiz, similarly, saw objects that one would not ordinarily associate with the dance turned into special emblems for higher service and sacred meaning when taken in hand or hoist upon the body. The tradition leads, in the black Americas, to the dancing of paintings: Haitians once celebrated the completion of an important commission by dancing the canvas through the streets of Port-au-Prince. In these instances, African and African American dance overcomes material, re-creates it, extending the aliveness that an object must embody to function as a work of art.

## African Art in Motion

Pl. 13 (detail)



Fig. 1. *The Old Plantation*, 1800, watercolor, H. 45.7 cm (18 in.). Courtesy of the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum, Williamsburg, Virginia.

The semantic range of the concept “dance” appears therefore broader in Africa and African-influenced regions than within the West. As to the last point, compare the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*:

*dance* 1. Move with rhythmic steps, glides, leaps, revolutions, gestures, etc. usua. to music, alone or with a partner or set (~ to one’s tune or pipe, follow his lead); jump about, skip, move in a lively way (of heart, blood, etc.) (~ upon nothing, be hanged); perform (minuet, waltz, etc.)... cause to dance

However full these definitions—built around the core concept of enacting rhythmic motions, patterns, gestures to music—they nevertheless do not include sharing the motion with objects. Yet “causing to dance” is an English idiom that prepares the way for grasping the African phenomenon. For if Westerners “dance” an infant with affection, then an equation for understanding danced sculpture stands before us. We have only to fill in, or insert, the following—[objects, cloths, and other things activated by love, ecstasy, and respect for higher force]—to move within the wider, inherently spiritual, sub-Saharan domain of meaning. An immediate example of danced art: among the Tiv of Nigeria the verb *vine* means to dance. But one can also dance a top, imparting a spin to the object, or dance a cutlass, twirling the metal, causing the blade to glitter as it bites into the wood.

Without my realizing it, black Puerto Rican mambo dancers culturally prepared me for African dancing of cloth, to impart special motion to an object, as early as 1955, six years before I went south of the Sahara. In the early spring of 1955, in the southwest corner of the Palladium ballroom on Broadway at Fifty-third Street in New York, connoisseurs tacitly reserved space for the hottest and most inventive black and Puerto Rican mambo dancers. Enter Anibal Vasquez, star *mamboista*. He danced part of his clothing as he moved in ways I had never seen before, let alone imagined. He tugged on his jacket with thumb and forefinger, causing the cloth to fan

in and out, mirroring the mambo eighth notes, sounding on the offbeat all around us. Vasquez was not only dancing as Westerners would understand it, making his body move to the beat; he was simultaneously breaking up a part of his dress into rhythmic fragments, alive pulsations, pattern on pattern, beat on beat, as if he were personally reinventing cubism right then and there. I stared, taken and compelled. Then I looked at the band. Men on saxophones and trumpets were swaying from side to side while playing mambo. They were dancing their instruments.

Centuries earlier a painter in South Carolina documented a woman of African ancestry “dancing” a strip of cloth held before her body (fig. 1). I was to see this very action many times in Yorubaland in the 1960s and 1970s: women dancing, swinging suddenly close to the earth, showing off youth and flexibility, dancing a strip of cloth held before their bodies as a final fillip of design. They were dancing a cloth while dancing the dance. They were, in the terms of Zora Neale Hurston, decorating the decoration.

If love of an infant makes you want to rock the tender body, love of the spirit, caught in an object, makes you want to give spirit back its motion. Here is part of the rationale for dancing a coffin to its grave in numerous African civilizations. This overlaps a portion of the New Orleans black jazz funeral, pallbearers “dip-stepping” and followers “second-lining” on the casket’s way to glory. If dance includes the ritual twirling of a sword in Edo, or the transformation of hammer on anvil into a sonic means of salutation among the blacksmiths of Efon-Alaiye, among the Ekiti-Yoruba it reminds us that objects can, conversely, embody an aliveness and vitality of their own.

The fact that Basinjom, the famous witch-finding gowned figure among the Ejagham and Ejagham-influenced civilizations, must be spiritually moored with two crossed rifles when at rest (fig. 2) is a measure of its believed visual aliveness. In Kongo, ritual experts are famously skilled for making and elaborating “medicines of God” (*minkisi*), the aliveness of which is enhanced by all sorts of astonishing touches of feathers, earths, buttons, and beads. Some spirits dwelling in such spectacularly caparisoned objects must be specially arrested or controlled. The image is, accordingly, bound up with ties of string or cord or cloth.

Handling superlative images by binding is a tradition that carries over directly into the myriad tied charms and figures on the Petwo, or largely Kongoizing side, of Haitian vodun worship in the West Indies as well as among the Fon of Benin and the Fon-influenced Rada side of vodun. I shall never forget a life-size human figure shrouded in red literally chained to a wall in a Petwo shrine near Gressier in the spring of 1970.

Jackson Pollock’s concentration on bodily gesture daringly oscillographed upon the canvas (fig. 3) and Duane Hanson’s unsettlingly alive image of his own son as doctor (fig. 4) remind us that modern art, as well as African, in its own powerful

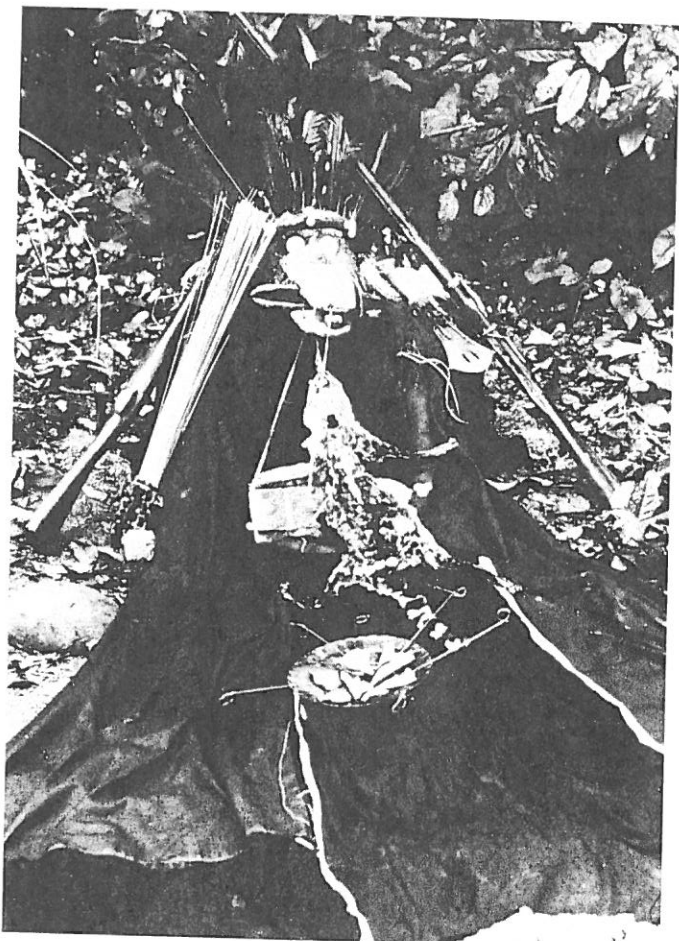


Fig. 2. Basinjom costume displayed in grove, Cameroon, 1973.



Fig. 3. Jackson Pollock, *Sea Change*, 1947, oil and pebbles on canvas, H. 147 cm (57 7/8 in.). Gift of Signora Peggy Guggenheim, Seattle Art Museum, 58.55. © 2002 The Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Fig. 4. Duane Hanson, *Medical Doctor*, 1992, life-size figure and chair, mixed media. Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Craig Hanson, Bainbridge Island, Washington. © Estate of Duane Hanson/Licensed by VAGA, New York.

ways builds the riddle, How do we distinguish art from life? Or, as Yeats voiced the matter in a celebrated line, “How can we know the dancer from the dance?”

All art that is truly physical, as David Anfam argues, has an organic life beyond words. What, then, is the difference between modernist vitality in painting and sculpture and the active potentiality of the sculptural image south of the Sahara? Provisionally, I would suggest: contexts of ancestoristic reverence and spiritual reembodiment. Pollock and Hanson were operating as free spirits, avatars of self-expression in a world outside religious patterns of belief. Their art went into strange, agnostic temples, often characterized by white walls, polished floors, and indirect lighting. True, there is such a thing as mixed-media installation art in the West, but it is a far cry from the famed unity of the arts in African performance, a democratic opera without divas, a people’s orchestra without conductor, all graced with lickety-split cameo leaps into the dancing ring, enabling anyone, anyone with confidence and courage, to share the limelight for a moment.

What all this leads to, in understanding African danced art, is not to emphasize motion over sculpture, or painting at the expense of music. Sculpture is not the central art south of the Sahara, but neither is the dance. For both depend on words and music, and even dreams and divination, sources indicating the very sanction of the other world. Music, dance, and visual objects are all important, separate or together, and if motion gives body to music or special zest to art, sculpture deepens the understanding of time and motion by freezing aspectual unfoldment into a single text for comprehension. This strong interrelationship—sound, motion, vision—obviously stems from a combined aesthetic. Shared norms of quality structure the media. Shared organizing principles, in turn, underlie the confidence and quality in African act and icon.



We study icons and we look at attitudes, defined as positions of the body. Ritual reenactments of important attitudes, it is said, restore ancient modes of self-presentation to modern contexts. A Yoruba priest of Egungun from Ouidah in the Republic of Benin told me in the summer of 1972 that a person who stands well is born with that power. He said this apropos of a photograph of a Montol image of a standing woman, knees and arms richly inflected with readiness for the dance (pl. 1). Africans in other places have similarly observed that commanding attitude and commanding presence are gifts of the spirit. In fact, Bernard de Grunne has shown how ancient Malian images set in different postures of reverence and worship are placed on altars expressly to show the supplicant the way to move and gesture within his worship. Taking on the attitudes of the ancestors and the gods turns the person into sculpture, in ultimate relation to the goddesses and the gods.

Sculptural icons in African art therefore take their radiance in part from important attitudes of the body. These, in turn, appear in groupings that suggest a grand equation of spiritual stability and response. Thus icons of command (standing, being enthroned, riding on horseback) correspond to icons of service or submission (kneeling, supporting objects with both hands, and balancing loads upon the head).

There are many things to learn, but one seems paramount: if spirits can challenge gravity by moving on stilts twelve feet in the air (fig. 5) to stirring slit-gong percussion and hocketed singing in the forest villages of the Dan of northeastern Liberia; if athletes in northeastern Yorubaland can shoulder nearly a hundred pounds of carved wood sculpture for a quarter of an hour while dancing before their king (fig. 6); if initiates honoring the collective moral dead can spin and spin and spin and spin and spin

Fig. 5. Dan Gle Gbee stilt masquerade, Liberia, 1967.

Fig. 6. Oloko (Lord of the Farm) masquerade, Epa festival, Otun, Ekiti, Nigeria, 1977.



Fig. 7. Yoruba Egungun performance, 1994.

(fig. 7) until the very concept of human dizziness begins to lose its meaning—then anything is possible.

Ideally, the reader of such phenomena will emerge with respect for what happens when hard work combines with discipline and the spirit in traditionalist villages and barrios of modern Africa. African danced art, in all its spiritual complexity, invokes an ideal future. Women dance cloths held before their bodies, honoring themselves, honoring their guests, honoring God, teaching us to live, strongly and well.

### Icon and Attitude

There is in the African a latent lyricism which tends to express itself in movement, so that every gesture, every attitude of the body takes on a special significance which belongs to a language of which I caught only a few words.

—Richard Wright, 1954<sup>1</sup>

Traditionalist Yoruba believe that the founders of their civilization created the styles of proper bodily address and dance.<sup>2</sup> To adopt them, in the deepest spiritual outlook or belief, is to align oneself with the best of the past, with the Great Time of the ancestors. Elsewhere in Africa traditionalists similarly believe that when they perform ritual dances, or strike an honorific pose, they are standing or moving in the image of their ancestors.<sup>3</sup> Ritual forms of flexibility and communal strength therefore take on an aura of reincarnation.

Ancestorism, the belief that the highest experience reflects the closest harmony with the ancient way, shapes stance, attitude, and gesture in the art of Africa. “Stance” refers to standing. “Attitude” refers to stylized positions of the body or self-carriage, indicative of mood and status. “Gesture” refers to motions of the body and the limbs, communicating thought or emphasis.<sup>4</sup> The stylized positions of the body considered in this text are strongly present in known collections—standing, sitting, riding, kneeling, supporting, and balancing. The close relation between art and the dance in African aesthetics causes us to reread Marcel Griaule with a pointed interest:

The dance only repeats essential gestures. It is accompanied by a staccato rhythm and a few words alluding to the events which determined the creation of the personage in question. [This] simplification should teach us to study every detail.<sup>5</sup>

Griaule’s point, intensification of the icon through simplification of its formal means, is important. Listen to traditionalist Africans hinting of such matters when remarking just the single attitude of standing:

Yoruba in Benin: “One who is standing like that is born with that stance.”

Banyang (Cameroon): “He stands like a person,” that is, in a principled manner.

Suku (Democratic Republic of the Congo): “I have seen that pose. It reminds me of what I was told: long ago at the feast for our ancestors, they calculated, ‘what was the image of our grandfather’ . . . and they remembered their grandfather when he was standing. [And then] they began to make standing images of the ancestors.”<sup>6</sup>

Tradition selects. Bodily positions defining lordliness and command come to predominate: standing, being enthroned, riding on a horse. Tradition also underscores postures set at levels of respect: kneeling, supporting, and balancing things upon the head without the use of hands. Service confirms command and vice versa. Reading the details of the icon at rest, we sometimes discern split-second freezing

Pl. 1  
**Standing figure**  
Montol, Nigeria  
19th–20th century  
Wood  
H. 32 cm (12½ in.)  
Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,  
B1.17.541

Pl. 2  
**Mother and child**  
Osei Bonsu (1900–1977)  
Asante, Ghana  
1930s  
Wood, gold leaf, silver  
H. 45 cm (17¼ in.)  
Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,  
B1.17.323



of a complex of actions. Implied condensation of vital enactments makes it seem almost inevitable that statuettes and icons and even monolithic sculptures like the *aguru epa* headdresses of the Ekiti-Yoruba area would be danced, would be pulled into motion. Part of the marvel has to do with what one distinguished ethnomusicologist calls “polycentrality” in the dance of Africa and another calls “the two-part body system”: the torso divides both icon and dancer into two related parts. A twist at the waist, in dance, often underscores the division. Upper and lower portions of the body engage in different motions and directions, not only in African hip-swinging dances but even in some forms of work.

Such icons blur into the Yeatsian vision, confounding dancer with the dance. This is splendidly true with respect to the Montol figure of a standing woman (see pl. 1). Unheard dance music divides her body at the waist into two different axes of expression. Head, spool-like neck, and upper torso align in shared, assertive verticality. But precisely at the waist, already emphasized by concentric cicatrization about the navel, she surges forward with a countervailing, forward accent. This thrust, in turn, is simultaneously mirrored by a surging backward of the hips. The line of the torso thus zigs back to the buttocks, then forward and down, legs flashing facets. Her body turns into lightning. The Montol figure does more than stand. With arms akimbo, she challenges the world. In the ballet of African iconography, head erect, lips back, feet flat upon the ground, she performs on her own terms the first position.

Being seated is also outwardly simple but inwardly rich. It can conceal the spiritual electricity of several ideal actions coming together as one. This was made clear to me by a young Mu-Suku named Piluka Ladi, in the city of Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo, March 1973. I showed him a photograph of a sculpture attributed to a master carver of Kumasi, Ghana, Osei Bonsu (pl. 2), and asked him to comment. What he said was extraordinary:

She is purely there. She gives milk to the child. She secures his body with the other hand. She is sitting well, like a person of character.

He caught three verbs in sculptural allusion—sitting, giving, securing. And since her position blends generosity, the highest form of morality in many of the religions of the black Atlantic world, with the inherent dignity of the enthroned position, she emerges, as Piluka Ladi says, being purely there. That purity of presence becomes the subject matter of this book.





Pl. 3  
**Standing figures**  
Kulango, Ghana  
19th–20th century  
Wood, chalk, metal  
Left: H. 81.9 cm (32¼ in.); right: H. 96.5 cm (38 in.)  
Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,  
81.17.225.1+2

Pl. 4  
**Twin statuette (*flanitokole*)**  
Bamana, Mali  
19th–20th century  
Wood  
H. 48.3 cm (19 in.)  
Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,  
81.17.27

## Standing

The perpendicular is an opposition. —Bruce Glaser, 1964<sup>7</sup>

Standing is a task. The remorseless pull of gravity makes it so. To stand against magnetic earth is to intervene in a decisive way, keeping vertical and maintaining balance. Engaging the whole of the person, standing is a complex of energy and strength as distinguished from a simple species of immobilization, like fixing an iron bar within the earth. A person, unlike an object, stands with affect and expression. The way a person stands ultimately communicates lived relation with the world. Standing embodies vitalized persistence and becomes an icon of ideal righteous being.

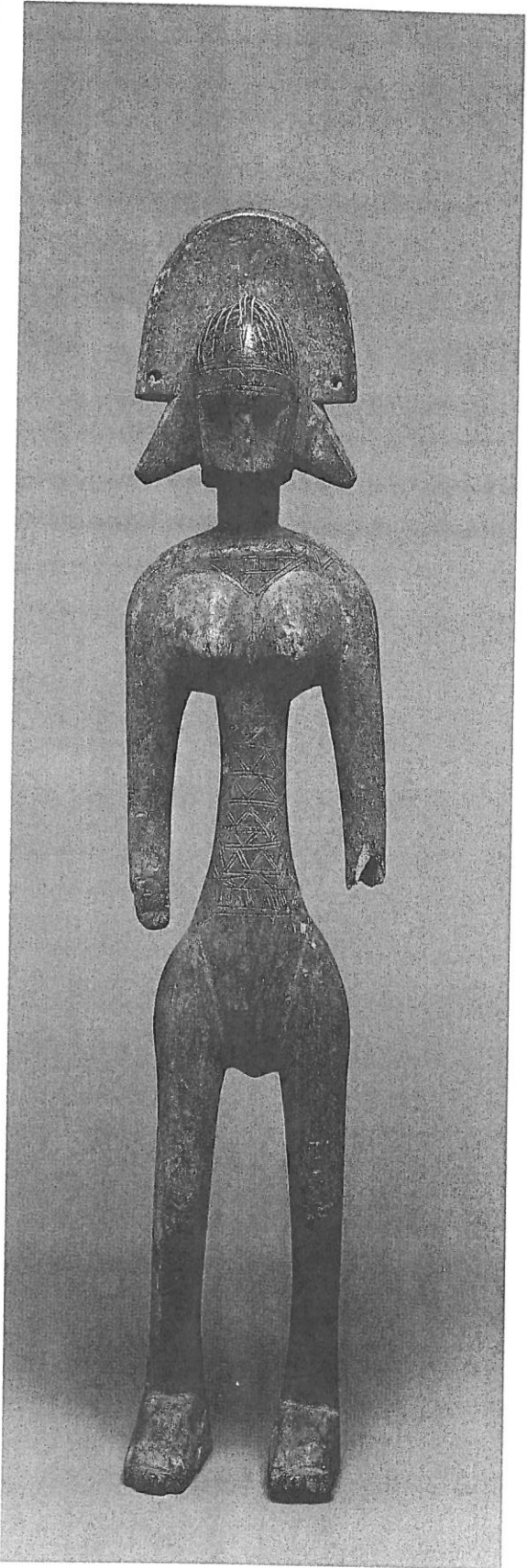
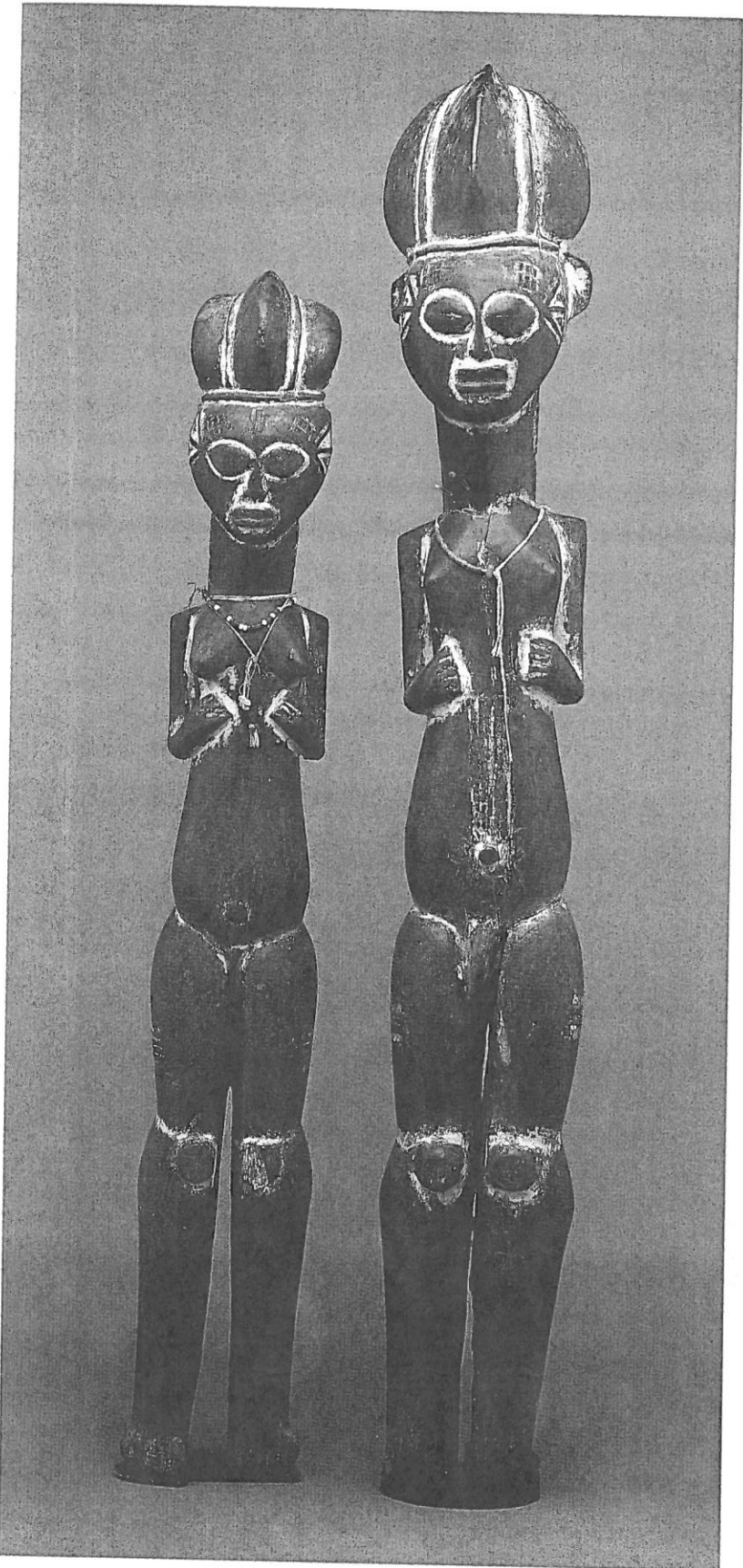
Begin with the Akan of Ghana, who see the twelve hours of the day, dominated by the light of heaven, as that time when women and men are “standing up alive.”<sup>8</sup> Standing up thus corresponds to light and life. It is the stance of daytime, the time of morality. So we assume two standing figures, attributed to the Akan-related Kulango civilization of Ghana, were meant to have their touches of spiritualized white clay (*hyire*) gleam with implications of purity and the light of day (pl. 3). These images are definitely standing up alive. The positive associations of their stance are deepened by the quality of their gesture. Both place their hands near the heart. Their purity of presence is already secured by application of the sacred white porcelain clay. But hands extend that purity by pointing out the heart:

If he wants to refer to the person's goodness . . . the Adjukur [an ethnic group in southern Côte d'Ivoire affiliated culturally with the Akan] will localize it within two central organs of the body: the stomach and the heart. The heart is a source of life, in that it is the literal headquarters of respiration or breath, thought, sentiments [and] will. . . . Goodness comes from the heart and stomach and is an internal realization.<sup>9</sup>

The Kulango figures embody assertion in their verticality. But, with their hands, they also indicate mind and internal goodness.

A Bamana twin statuette (*flanitokole*, literally, “the double who remains”) evidences another form of ideal standing (pl. 4). Elaborate coiffure alludes to life lived well, for such a crest could be made only through the cooperation of others, sympathetic sisters or co-wives. There is great subtlety to the gentle bending of her knees, creating the slightest modulation to the uprightness of her noble posture. Against that axis, buttocks and breasts form strong assertions of vitality. She lends, in turn, an ordering, vital posture to the world.

The famous twin statuettes of the Yoruba (*awon ere ibeji*) present a fascinating instance of nuanced iconic standing (pls. 5, 6). First of all, twins are traditionally described as “standing straight and tall” (*aduro gangan*). According to Araba Eko of Lagos, “their position, hands at the sides, arms parallel to the body, is a sign of alertness, being ready to do everything. They do not relax. They are standing, either to hear a prayer or to act.”<sup>10</sup> God himself stands this way, as envisioned in the Yoruba saying, “Great God almighty, standing upright behind the power to make things happen truly” (*olodumare aduro gangan lehin ashe otito*).<sup>11</sup>







Pl. 5  
Commemorative twin figures (*awon ere ibeji*)  
Yoruba, Nigeria  
19th–20th century  
Wood, pigment, beads, encrustations  
Left: H. 32.4 cm (12 $\frac{1}{4}$  in.); right: H. 34.9 cm (13 $\frac{3}{4}$  in.)  
Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,  
81.17.610.1+2

Pl. 6  
Commemorative twin figures (*awon ere ibeji*)  
Yoruba, Nigeria  
19th–20th century  
Wood, beads, nails  
Each: H. 24.5 cm (9 $\frac{1}{2}$  in.)  
Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,  
81.17.611.1+2



In his study of human motion, F. J. J. Buytendijk argues that “however the final phase or the initial moment of a movement are characterized, the standing position is always the first phase of a new activity.”<sup>12</sup> That power, to initiate or begin things standing, becomes a setting for further strengths. The exorbitant eyes hint that the images take power from above, the power to make things happen, even as the eyes of an actual devotee of the Yoruba gods in Brazil, when taken and compelled by the force of a god, faces the world with a laserlike stare that sees across worlds. The constant placing of the arms of the twin statuettes by the sides is more than a sign of spiritual alertness. Dejo Afolayan, the distinguished Yoruba linguist, in the process of translating a long string of praise epithets for the twins, shows how the very presence of these beings attests a life well lived, for God gives twin children specially to the generous and the upright:

Let she who fantasizes having twins adopt a gentle character  
Let him remain transparently honest.<sup>13</sup>

Blessings become truth. The advent of twins magnetizes the luck of heaven to the family of the double child. That gift from above is written into their stance—that is, holding their arms tightly parallel to their sides:

Stand, o twins, with anus straight and parallel  
That earth might touch the sky.<sup>14</sup>

From the Yoruba we come now to the Guro of Côte d’Ivoire. We contemplate a standing image of a woman, possibly carved for a Dan patron to the west (pl. 7). She projects a handsome verticality. Her eyes narrow down. This wreaks erotic havoc on the young men of the Dan, who border on Guro country. The image fulfills another Dan canon of fine standing: “It is not good for a beautiful person to be stiff in body when standing” (*me sa ba do kpei da sy ka sa*).<sup>15</sup> Relaxed arms and relaxed legs fulfill this demand. And the outstretched arms are seen as positive, “as if to embrace [a person].”

A woman standing naked with her breasts exposed communicates, in Africa, far more than is dreamt of in the philosophy of Freud or other theorists. She stands thus to give life to the righteous—or death to the evil. Among the western Dan, a mother swears on her breasts, or upon life itself, when sealing a vow. But when confronted with an enemy, she can squeeze, in righteous anger, a droplet of milk from her left breast and slap her thigh. This unleashes a curse of unfathomable dimension. By standing naked, and using the breasts as instruments of grace or punishment—far removed from ordinary contexts of lactation or sexual arousal—women are exalted. They empower themselves, they empower their family, in the depths of their femininity. This is the case with the famous Dan *wunkirmian*, or “feast-making spoon,” a “spoon woman” object, bringing together handsome legs (or a handsome head) with a symbolically generous ladle (pl. 8). Dan carve such spoons for Wunkirle (Feast-Making Woman), the most hospitable woman of the village. The spoon is her badge of honor, symbolizing her acts of generosity. Only Wunkirle can carry *wunkirmian*. She and her kin are by definition enterprising cultivators. They have plenty of rice.

Pl. 7  
**Standing figure**  
Guro, Côte d’Ivoire  
19th–20th century  
Wood  
H. 42 cm (16½ in.)  
Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,  
B1.17.257





They share it. On feast days Wunkirle swings and dances the spoon-emblem before her, in the midst of a chorus of hocketing women. They back their sister with call-and-response. Other women follow, carrying bowls brimming with rice. When all have arrived at the village square, Wunkirle dips into the bowls and begins a distribution, dancing out ideal largesse.

The spoon compacts the ceremony. Beautifully inflected legs allude to a lovely woman and her readiness to dance. The ladle is generosity. The lizard on its back alludes to prayer: reptiles move on the earth, where the dead are hidden, indicating the place where calls for children ultimately are heard. The extraordinary fusion of object and person in the making of the *wunkirmian* matches the marvel of the dress of Wunkirle. Blasting away ordinary differences of gender, Wunkirle appears at her feast wearing a flowing male robe and a striking male helmet.

Further examples of heraldic standing grace the collection. For brevity I now incorporate them, lawyer-like, by reference (pls. 9, 10). All illustrate the insight of Guido von Kaschnitz-Weinberg, namely, that the standing position represents a world that is intelligible and clear. Mind and body, in expression of strength, align with the vertical axis. Women and men standing in life, standing as sculpture, standing as dancers, contest the laws of gravity. In so doing, they memorably establish a principle of assertion.



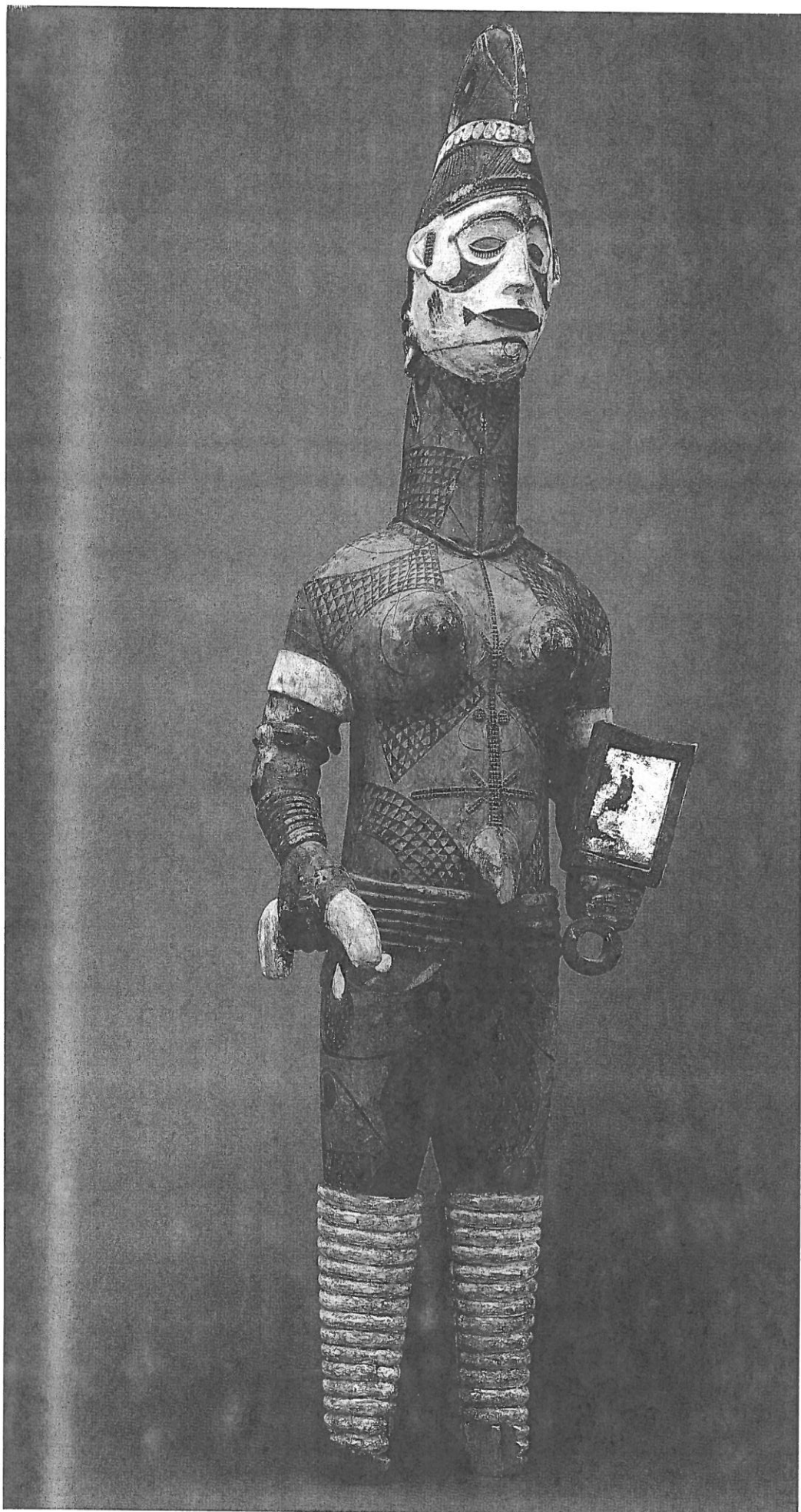
Pl. 8  
Feast-making spoon (*wunkirmian*)  
Dan, Côte d'Ivoire  
20th century  
Wood, iron  
H. 61.4 cm (24¼ in.)  
Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,  
81.17.204



Pl. 9  
Figure of Akua's child (*akua-ba*)  
Asante, Ghana  
20th century  
Wood, beads, polychrome  
H. 25.1 cm (9 7/8 in.)  
Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,  
81.17.329

Pl. 11  
Seated figure  
Baule, Côte d'Ivoire  
19th–20th century  
Wood  
H. 77.5 cm (30½ in.)  
Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,  
81.17.233





Pl. 10  
**Display figure (*ugonachomma*)**  
Igbo, Nigeria  
19th–20th century  
Wood, pigment, mirror  
H. 127 cm (50 in.)  
Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,  
81.17.525

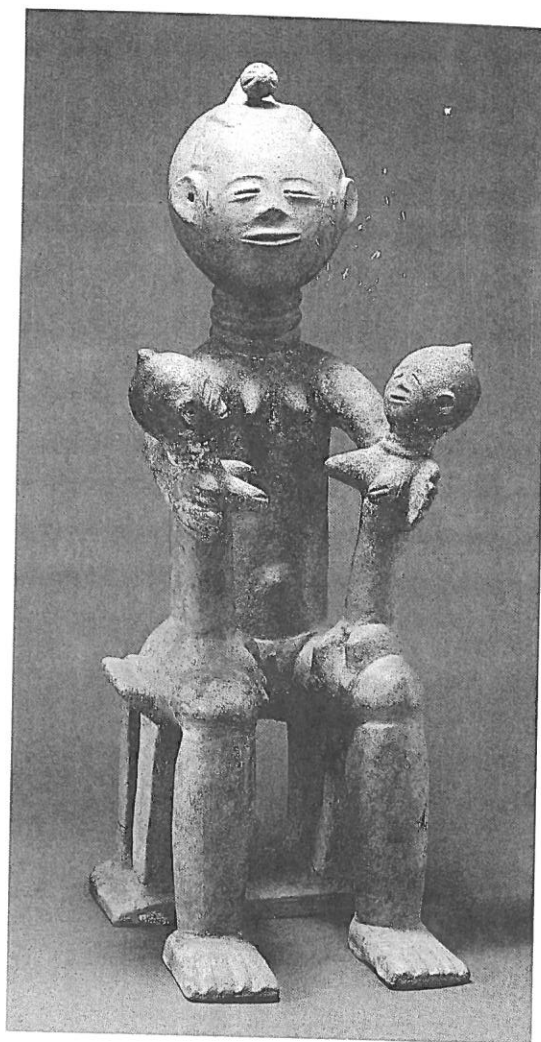
### Sitting

When an actual ruler dies, the incident is referred to as  
"the stool has fallen" [*akonnwa ato*]. —Peter Sarpong, 1971<sup>16</sup>

The enthroned position in African art communicates a complex aura of cultural permanence and fineness of character. Calm emerges in the easing of standing; the privilege of enthronement provides a frame for concentration upon important matters. Permanence or important residence are idiomatic meanings embedded in African verbs of being seated. Thus in Yoruba the phrase for place of enthronement also means place of residence. Restlessness (*aijoko*) literally means lacking a place where one can sit down. The Efik of eastern Nigeria have an expression of permanence cognate with the Yoruba. They say "that town is seated by the river," as opposed to temporary settlements of farmers in the forest.<sup>17</sup> In faraway Suriname, among members of African-descended Saamaka civilization, the phrase *sidon muyee*, literally "a sit-down woman," honors a woman a man can trust. In tropical Africa, the seated person, conscious of the privilege of her position, must show awareness of herself as an object of perception. The seated dignitary, in other words, must present a fitting image to the world. One instructs by enthroned composure.

This ideal lights up Akan seated statuary. Their order of seating honors the old. It begins with the eldest person present and ends with the youngest. The Akan ideally sits on a chair or stool. Failing that, he sits on animal skins or mats. Failing that, he crouches. But he must never, ever sit on the ground, as if he were an animal.<sup>18</sup> In this civilization sitting completes the presentation of the self. The rules that govern this bodily position are strict. A person should not cross his legs.<sup>19</sup> Head and torso remain erect. The gaze is frontal. Looking down communicates sadness, evil, or heavy unwillingness. The person enthroned becomes an ideal frontal pattern of perfection, symmetrically disposed and focused. He embodies, ideally, the power of the throne to counter chaos and disorder. We sense all that, and more, in a noble image of a seated Baule male dignitary (pl. 11). His flesh is hard and muscular, denoting virility and strength. His luminous body exudes an ideal: "a state of well-being, bathed, shining with pomade."<sup>20</sup> Hands evenly rest on either thigh, fingers strictly parallel, in self-conscious precision. When we study this image in the flesh, we see how carefully the sculptor fused his royal subject with an upright axis. There is an incredible rightness to the way the center line of the coiffure is picked up by the beard, then continued by the line of cicatrization leading to the navel, then to the membrum, seal of manhood, and then straight on down to the earth. The canon of enthronement here unfolds in complexity and richness. With pursed lips and lidded eyes, the figure seems conscious of his impact on the people, of the imperative of communicating order, down to the smallest nuance of the fingers and the styling of his narrow beard.

Consider also a terracotta depicting an Akan queen mother with a child seated on either knee (pl. 12). This image, first of all, extends the idea of the main duties of



Pl. 12  
Seated figure with children  
Akan, Ghana  
19th–20th century  
Terracotta  
H. 46.4 cm (18¼ in.)  
Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,  
81.17.442



Pl. 13  
**Mother and child figure for Sango**  
 Yoruba, Oshogbo, Nigeria  
 19th century  
 Wood, glass beads  
 H. 43 cm (17 in.)  
 Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,  
 81.17.594

the queen mother: giving life, to clan or state, as its foundation and maintaining this vitality. Here queen mother and two children, wonderfully heraldic, transform being seated into a shorthand disclosure of character and continuity. Her spiritualized calm, magnified by enthronement, involves the children in a superior influence. Queen mother supports her children with consummate impartiality. More than that, she positions them on either thigh so that they must face one another, preparing the way for dialogue and acceptance. This is appropriate to a real life role as judge and counsel. In cases of minor offenses, women may rush into her presence, crying out, "Mother save me!"<sup>21</sup>

Very exciting, as an example of just how far the Yoruba master carver can take the theme of enthronement, is a mother-and-child ensemble for the thunder god, Sango Alado (pl. 13). A priestess sits upon a modified object, possibly a mudfish, alluding to the famed high voltage of that creature, which restates the presence of the lightning of Sango. A child sits upon the priestess. And, most dramatically, Sango's thunderstone is seated upon her head. All this rewards devotion—as instanced in the presentation of a bowl for sacrifice. And so she receives the ultimate seating, the descent of the lord in the form of his flaming meteorites, alighting upon her head. Fire, life, and continuity seal themselves within her bodily position. This complex presentation of truth and miracle intimates what happens when a person undergoes initiation into the service of the gods (*isin orisa*). When the postulant, like this carved woman, receives such protection, initiators paint upon her head powerful patterns, including the spots of the leopard, king of the forest, thereby exalting her by allusion to nobility. Seated on a throne, the initiate, as Drewal and Abiodun show, is "painted with substances, colors, and patterns to attract and direct the spirits that will be important in the life of the person."<sup>22</sup>

Finally, there is another beginning stated in this sitting—enthronement at the moment of initiation, as in the creolized Yoruba worship in Afro-Cuban New York and New Jersey. This gives rise to structures that rebuild a place for the descent of the spirit: cloth-emblazoned thrones, which express an ancient idea in a different way.

We turn now to the world of Bantu, starting with the Fang of Gabon. The *eyema bieri*, or reliquary guardian figure, sits to block passage to the place where the bones of the ancestors are gathered in honor (pl. 14). This is being seated to keep away the unauthorized. But the body of the guardian is so vertically poised and brilliantly muscled it is hard to perceive that he is sitting instead of standing. His face is a cryptic skull, his musculature reflects, it is said, not merely a healthy vitality and athleticism but a mysterious mirroring of the fatty passages on the body of an infant.<sup>23</sup> Skull, athlete, infant—a mysterious continuum is seated here to block the way to the ancestors and their resting place. The gist of the *eyema bieri* is therefore vigilant enthronement.



Pl. 14  
Reliquary guardian figure (*eyema bieri*)  
Fang, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and Cameroon  
Late 19th–early 20th century  
Wood  
H. 51.1 cm (20 $\frac{1}{4}$  in.)  
Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,  
81.17.783



Pl. 15  
**Horse and rider**  
 Yoruba, Nigeria  
 19th century  
 Wood  
 H. 66.6 cm (26¼ in.)  
 Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,  
 81.17.606

Pl. 16  
**Horse and rider**  
 Senufo, Mali  
 19th–20th century  
 Wood  
 H. 28.5 cm (11¼ in.)  
 Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,  
 81.17.267

## Riding

In front of the great dais the Keke-Tigui, or war chiefs, made their horses perform dance steps under the eyes of the Mansa. The horses whinnied and reared, then, overmastered by the spurs, knelt, got up and cut little capers, or else scraped the ground with their hooves.

—Djibril T. Niane, 1965<sup>24</sup>

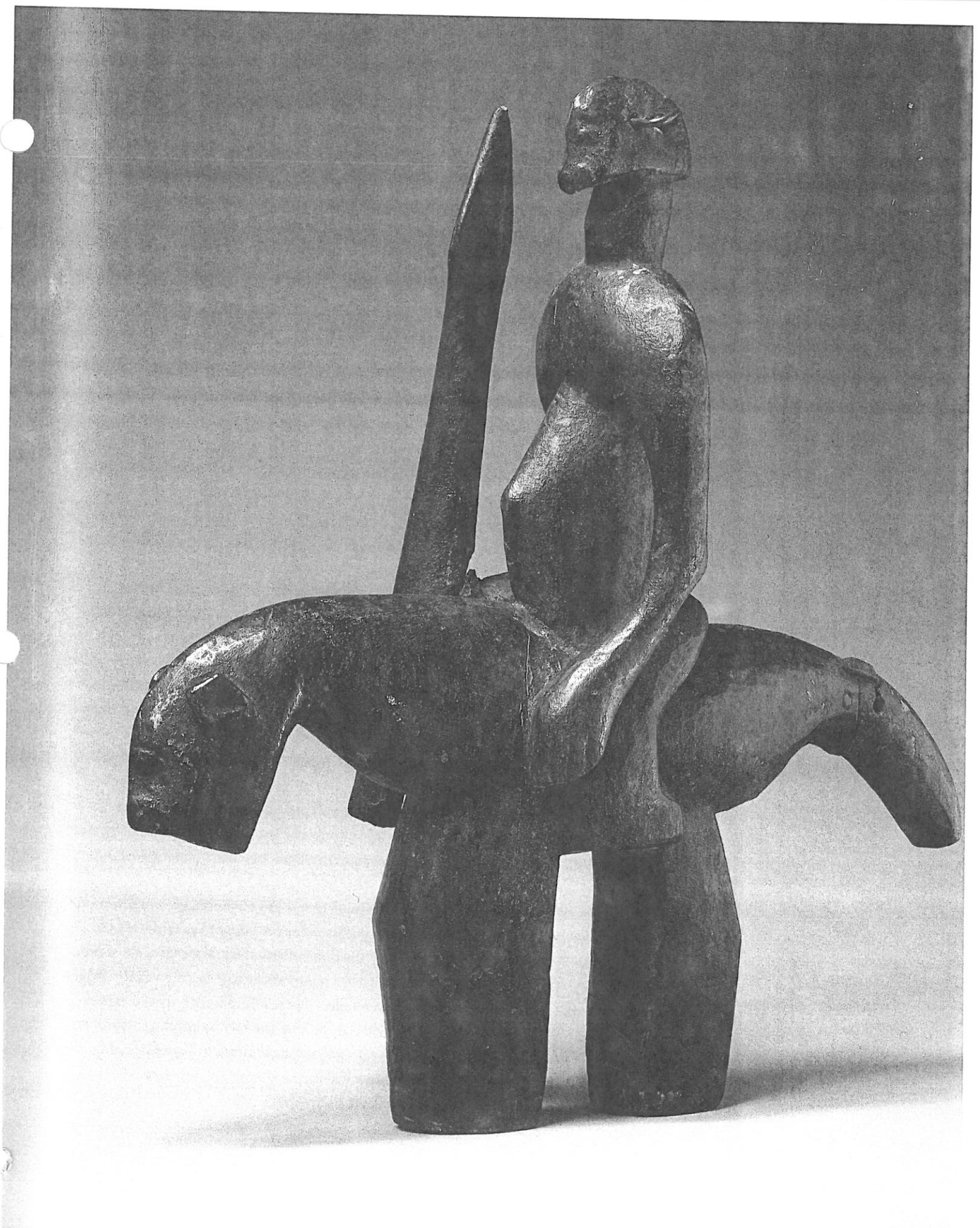
Riding embodies arrogant enthronement. Speed, motion, and elevation combine when one is seated on a horse. “You see [a rider],” a traditional leader once told me in western Cameroon, “you think—war!”<sup>25</sup> In the West the image of the horseman similarly invoked a martial order, “so much so [that] in Rome during the reign of Marcus Aurelius equestrian figures were the prerogative of the emperor.”<sup>26</sup> The mounted person in Africa acquires special power and resonance because the horse is rare, expensively imported, and in some instances mystically associated with the rider. The horse is not indigenous to Africa. It was not until the Hyksos invasion of Egypt, circa mid-second millennium B.C., that the species was introduced to the continent. Thereafter horses and horsemanship spread to the west of black Africa, fully developed there by the rise of the Mali Empire in the Middle Ages. Yet the cultivation of horsemanship remains problematic in tropical Africa. The climate, areas of dense rainforest, and the bite of the tsetse fly are deadly to horses. Nevertheless, horsemen in Africa have exerted power and supremacy all out of proportion to their numbers. It is said that certain states arose in West Africa on the backs of horses and their intrepid riders: Mali, Bornu, Songhai, Hausa, Bariba, Gurman, Gonja, Mossi-Dagomba.<sup>27</sup>

Africans south of the Sahara never used the horse for agricultural labor, but reserved the animal for the transport of important persons. In addition, horsemanship was sometimes charged with mystical beliefs. Viewing a photograph of an equestrian figure (pl. 15) triggered an immediate response from a priest of Egungun near Ouidah: “That rider sits with force [*joko pelu agbara*], the force of the horse [*agbara esin*]. He has the speed and the power of the horse within his body.”<sup>28</sup> Some riders are thus believed to absorb the physicality of their mount.

Reviewing other horse and rider figures, we sometimes note a blurring together of animal and human, unlike the straightforward realism of the equestrian theme within the West. Our first rider comes from the northern Senufo in southern Mali (pl. 16). Frontally viewed, the horseman seems anchored in the flesh and muscle of his mount. The legs of the beast are carved to resemble a metal apron protecting the horseman’s legs. Seen from the side, the highly stylized body of the rider is countered by an enormous spear, as big as his body, held in his right hand. The vertical warrior is brilliantly countered by the horizontal massing of the horse. The legs of the animal, made human by reduction to two columns, complete the body of the rider as well as the body of the mount. Strong and streamlined, this virtuoso piece of sculpture brings alive its subject by interplay of diagonal and curve.

Still in the Sudan, we consider a Dogon horseman from Mali (pl. 17). The relaxed legs of the rider reveal how lightly seated on his horse he is. It is as if the animal were







Pl. 17  
**Horse and rider**  
 Dogon, Mali  
 19th–20th century  
 Wood  
 H. 36.5 cm (14½ in.)  
 Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,  
 81.17.46

Pl. 18  
**Epa mask**  
 Alaga of Odo-Owa (ca. 1895–1978)  
 Yoruba, Nigeria  
 19th–20th century  
 Wood, pigment  
 H. 124 cm (48¾ in.)  
 Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,  
 81.17.579

a figured piece of furniture, a bench with head and tail both pointed down. The nonchalance of the position might mean that the rider cannot fall because his journey is mystically imbued. Griaule and Dieterlen argue that mounted figures in Dogon art symbolize the god Amma, and that in such cases the animal symbolizes one of the original eight genies of the Dogon, extraordinary water spirits.<sup>29</sup> The same scholars assert that the horse in Dogon lore associates with descent from the sky. Perhaps this is why the horseman's visage seems somnambulistic, eyes half-shut. The aura is quiet rather than alert. The gentle zigzag traversing the body of the animal could suggest the descent of the Dogon ark of creation, but this is far from certain.

Riding has been a theme in Nigerian art history since the Igbo-Ukwu culture, dated to around the ninth century. The image of the mounted warrior, god, or ruler is important in the world of Yoruba sculpture. Carved wooden figures of horsemen abound and usually honor, according to Robert Smith, an actual warrior.<sup>30</sup> Such images were kept in the house of a commander of the veteran warriors, or in the house of other military leaders in the last century. The commander kept them with his divination tray, thus linking past to future. In visual exposition, the mounted lord often becomes a master and entourage, as in a work attributed to the Alaga of Odo-Owa (pl. 18), the formal title by which the artist wished to be remembered (other art historians perversely persist in calling him by his prechiefly name of Bamgboye). Here, balance between man and beast is richly established. The leader is amazing. His towering headgear with

frontal sash combines indications of knowledge of the Western helmet with the world of the square-sided phylacteries (*tira*) of Islam. He suavely pulls together sword and spear in his right hand while (again in Yoruba fashion) taking the reins in his left, but combining that gesture with the grasping, too, of a rifle. He calls with mastery of weapons and motions; his entourage responds with the sounding of flute and pressure drumming and, given other Muslim touches, perhaps even that ultimate Islamism in the field of sound—rifle music, the firing of a weapon for prestige and effect. Below the circular platform over which all this action unfolds there appears another level of drama and response. We witness the enormous eyes and exaggerated open mouth of an ancestor, so heightened as to remind us that in the earliest days the gods, the founding fathers, walked the earth as giants.

The richness of phrasing of the horseman theme can be sensed even in this modest survey. Riding is an activity that demands gestural asymmetry, sharply angled positionings of the arms and hands, as functions of an essential arrogance of action. Senufo and Yoruba riders take firm seats and maintain verticality, whereas the Dogon image rides with an air of dreamy detachment. This surely reflects a special expression of Dogon religious thought. And yet, at the end, the Yoruba submit this imperious icon to the social leavening of the call-and-response context. That forces all, leader and led, entourage and master, to recall the revelatory proverb: one tree cannot make a forest.



## Kneeling

The kings are worshiped by their subjects, who believe that they come from heaven, at a distance and on bended knees.

—G. B. Ramusio, *Navigazione e viaggi*, 1550<sup>31</sup>

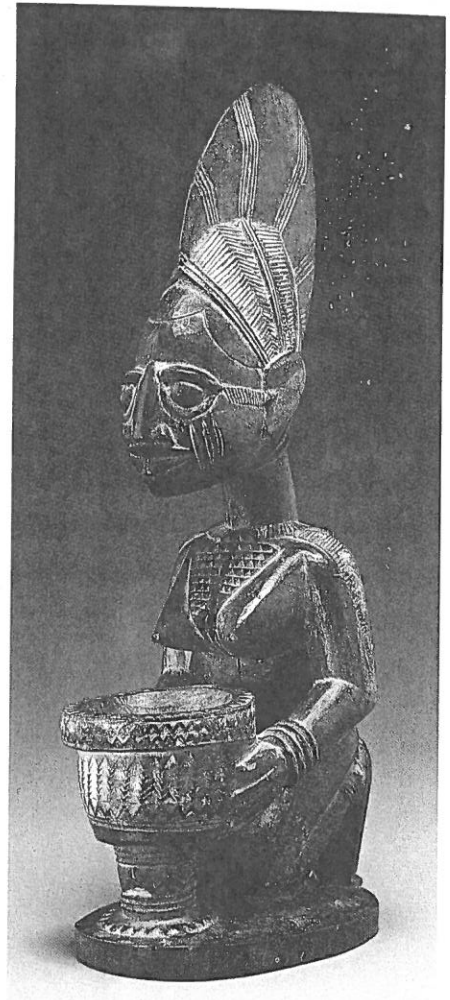
To kneel relates the person to a higher force. Celine Baduel-Mathon enumerates some of the enactments of the position in the cultures of West Africa: fiancé in the presence of the father, plaintiff before the court, son approaching father, youths before elders, the court before the king, person praying to the ancestors or the gods.<sup>32</sup> Such are the public manifestations of resting on the knees in prayer or reverence. The king kneels in private. In every instance, to fall upon one's knees indicates dependent relationship. And that relationship triggers an ideal: the person only fully exists when set in communication with a transcendental source of authority and action; otherwise one wanders in a maze of endless subjectivity. But should a ruler before whom we kneel turn evil or corrupt, submission can change to revolution and the followers of an unworthy king can bring him to his knees. Myriad are the contexts of this act of supplication. Among the Bamana of Mali, when a man accidentally ate food that was tabooed, the woman who had served the repast in error asked forgiveness on her knees, holding her hands at the back. The latter gesture signified humiliation. She knelt to mend a ruined situation.<sup>33</sup>

Among the Agni, an Akan civilization of Côte d'Ivoire, a young man during a formal occasion involving drinking untied his cloth, knelt before his father, and drank from the goblet that the patriarch held carefully in the hollow of his hand. Farther east along the coast, coreligionists of the traditional faith of the Ga people, in the region of Accra, Ghana, knelt to offer to the spirits sacrificial fowls. These were given in twos, held in both hands, in symbolically balanced double presentations.

Among Egba-Yoruba of the region of Abeokuta, every morning each member of a traditional compound had to pay his or her respects to the head of the extended family and his senior wife. A man would prostrate himself (*dobale*) before the leader. A woman would kneel (*kunle*) or lie upon her right side (*yinrinka*).<sup>34</sup> All three gender-coded gestures—*dobale*, *kunle*, *yinrinka*—traveled the Atlantic to the black Americas. Here they remain vividly alive in Afro-Cuban *lucumi* worship and Afro-Brazilian *candomble nago*.

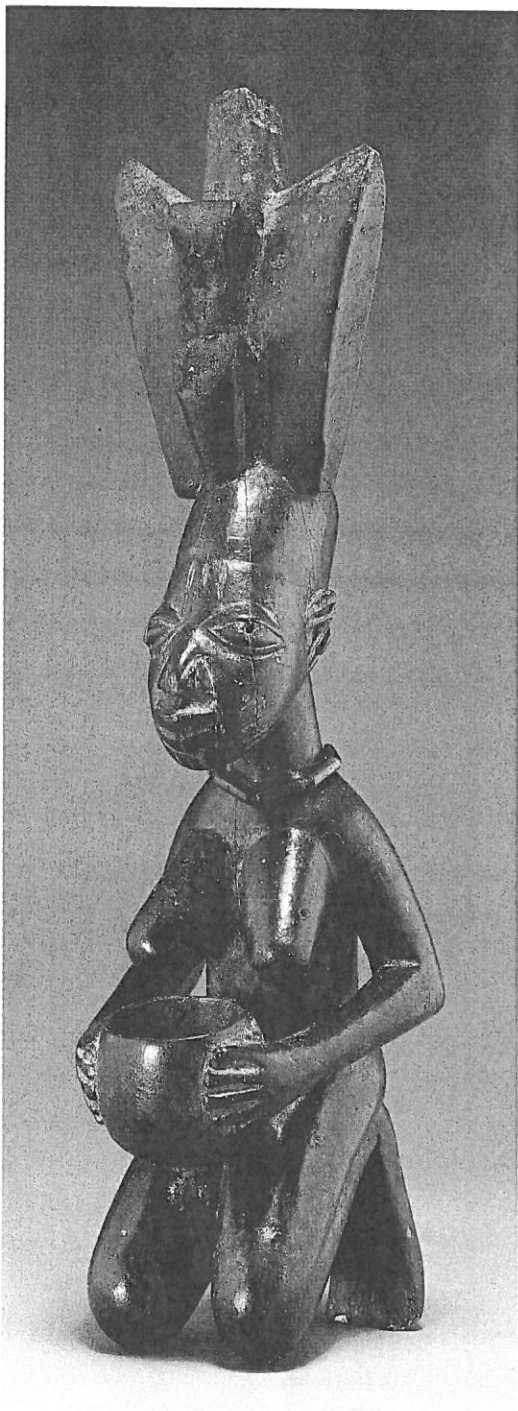
Certain situations calling for kneeling were of such moment that they blasted away the normal boundaries of gender and entourage, not unlike the amazing pith helmet and Mande male robe worn by Wunkirle with her honorific spoon. Even the king of the Oyo Yoruba, the *alafin*, was expected to kneel before a powerful, titled woman known as *lyamode*:

The king looks upon her as his father, and addresses her as such, being the worshipper of the spirits of his ancestors. He kneels in saluting her, and she also returns the salutation kneeling, never reclining on her elbow as is the custom of the women in saluting their superiors. The king kneels for no one else but her, and prostrates before the god Sango, and before those possessed [with the spirit of] the deity, calling them father.<sup>35</sup>



Pl. 19  
**Kneeling figure**  
Luba, Democratic Republic of the Congo  
19th–20th century  
Wood  
H. 30.9 cm (12¼ in.)  
Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,  
81.17.871

Pl. 20  
**Female figure (*olumeye*)**  
Yoruba, Nigeria  
19th–20th century  
Wood  
H. 33.8 cm (14 in.)  
Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,  
81.17.604



Pl. 21  
**Female figure with bowl for Sango**  
 Yoruba, Nigeria  
 19th–20th century  
 Wood  
 H. 42.6 cm (16 7/8 in.)  
 Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,  
 81.17.595

There is, moreover, a special manifestation of kneeling position that emerges in the Yoruba funeral ceremony known as *ikunle* (literally “the kneeling”). In this vigil members of a recently departed person’s family were supposed to spend an entire evening on their knees.

Such exercises, in the greater black Atlantic world, become ritual ordeals or tests of commitment. I remember the night in August 1988 when I was initiated into Palo Mayombe, the strongly Kongo-influenced traditional religion of black Cuba. A young black fellow initiate and I were kept on our knees in an anteroom for more than an hour before being led into the shrine. The pain, after a while, for me at least, became severe. This was a passage of the initiation known as *penitencia* (penance). A priest explained the challenge inscribed within the kneeling: *ponte duro*, roughly, “hang tough”; that is, show you can endure discomfort, if you wish to be one of us. There were other tests that night, all in the kneeling position. At one point a heavy iron kettle with a load of sacred medicine was lowered onto my head while I was blindfolded, kneeling at the altar. As the great weight pressed against my skull, a priest standing somewhere near kept whispering “Aguantalo, Roberto, aguantalo” (Take it, Bob, take it), by way of encouragement.

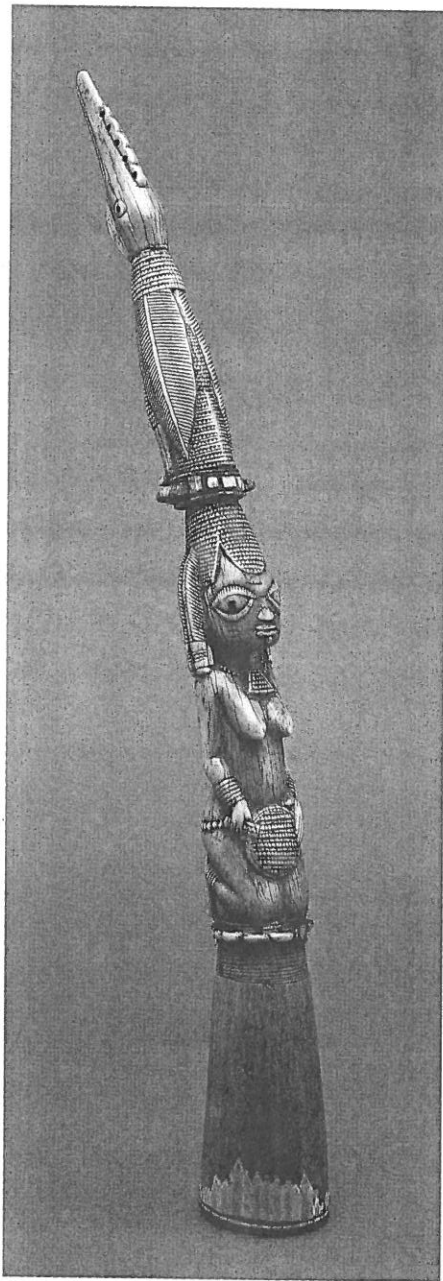
So important is resting upon one’s knees, or bowing low, as a sign of fully respecting the moral imperatives of Earth in Yoruba Ogboni ritual, that the doors in Ogboni shrine architecture are deliberately dwarfed. Everyone who enters is forced to bow to the spirits. A colleague reminds us that the roof to the Dogon *toguna*, or male meeting house, is similarly designed deliberately low, leveling everyone, keeping them seated and bent over. This is done so that “no one can stand up in anger.” Saturating the field of African sculpture, kneeling icons are almost always idealized: The face is impassive. The limbs are strong but calmly disposed. Such icons not only impart to a shrine an aura of respect but, in the region of Djenné, Mali, indicate to the postulant what gestures to adopt within the shrine.

Turning to the Luba, we find the motif of the kneeling woman once again a sign of social allegiance and respect. The kneeling woman as icon among the Luba expresses moral rightness deepened with a timeless certainty. Consider as illustration a kneeling figure of a Luba woman with formal coiffure, holding both her breasts (pl. 19). From this stabilizing gesture of respect emerge powerful breasts and shoulders, quietude of mien, and crowning coiffure. Hauteur blends with reverence.

In further kneeling figures (pls. 20–24), we strongly sense how kneeling remains an icon of respect, a test of endurance, and above all, a seal of commitment to the way of the ancestors. To rest on one’s knees is to voice with the body a prayerful ideal: every perfect gift is from above.



Pl. 22  
**Thunder god dance wand (*ose sango*)**  
 Yoruba, Nigeria  
 19th–20th century  
 Wood  
 H. 50.5 cm (19 7/8 in.)  
 Eugene Fuller Memorial Collection, 67.91



Pl. 23  
**Divination tapper (*iroke ifa*)**  
 Yoruba, Nigeria  
 19th–20th century  
 Ivory  
 H. 39.3 cm (15 1/2 in.)  
 Nasli and Alice Heermaneck Collection, 68.26



Pl. 24  
**Tusk with relief carving**  
 Loango coast, Kongo, Democratic Republic of the Congo  
 and Angola  
 19th–20th century  
 Ivory  
 H. 15.6 cm (6 1/4 in.)  
 Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,  
 81.17.832





### Supporting

"Supporting" refers to carrying an object balanced on the head, steadied by both hands. The term also includes carrying a person on the shoulders or upon the back. Balancing requires more poise, for in this case the object rests upon the head of the person without the use of the hands. Supporting is often manifested in African statuary with a cold impassive stare, the seal of nonchalance or "cool." The canon of supporting bears various meanings according to place and culture. Different vernacular observers will see slightly different things even in a single piece of sculpture. Thus three Africans, from widely separated civilizations, were asked to comment on a double caryatid Luba-Songye stool for a leader (pl. 25):

Ejagham (Nigeria and Cameroon): "They seem to carry something for an important person. The way they carry it is beautiful. They hold it with both hands. The load can never fall."

Banyang (Cameroon): "This is a heavy load which cannot be carried without both hands, to reduce the weight."

Suku (Democratic Republic of the Congo): "Our ancestors carried things like that. This pleases me because I have seen my own mother carry things like that, with both hands, taking care that the water in the vessel did not spill."<sup>36</sup>

These views from the inside are instructive, reminding us that weight and delicacy are involved in transporting and that there can be beauty to its unfolding, a beauty that ultimately resonates to the time of the ancestors. Africans also read into the theme of the person supporting a load with both hands upon his head a kind of stop-time rendering of the motion of the body traveling from one point to the next. This is not unlike the ancient Greek interpretation of the caryatid figures of the Erechthem on the Acropolis in Athens: processioners, maidens who carried sacred objects in the Panathenaic celebration. Supporting is not only drenched with visions of the arrest of important motion but also displays, once again, the idealized flexibility of the human frame. Across tropical Africa women absorb the undulations of the earth in their springlike hips and knees to maintain the absolute stillness of their heads. In addition, the ability to rise with a heavy load on the head is yet another manifestation of the beauty that comes from the stronger power of the youth:

Let us bend down to work  
We're only young once  
Old age will arrive  
Then when we place a burden on our heads  
We'll find that we cannot manage.  
It is muscular vitality that marks the youth.<sup>37</sup>

But supporting is not just athleticism. It can be a metaphor for responsibility and mind. In the Cameroon Grassfields we witness artistic phrasing of the mystic support of the king by his leopard counterpart in many forms of royal seating. Here the support is figurative and playful, not literal, for we are dealing with thrones that

Pl. 25

Stool

Luba-Songye, Democratic Republic of the Congo  
19th–20th century

Wood, metal, pigment, glass  
H. 50.6 cm (20 in.)

Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,  
81.17.907



Pl. 26  
**Stool**  
Babanki, Bamenda, Cameroon  
19th–20th century  
Wood  
H. 30 cm (11¾ in.)  
Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,  
81.17.723



Pl. 27  
**Throne**  
Kom-Tikar area, Cameroon  
19th–20th century  
Wood  
H. 82.6 cm (32½ in.)  
Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,  
81.17.722

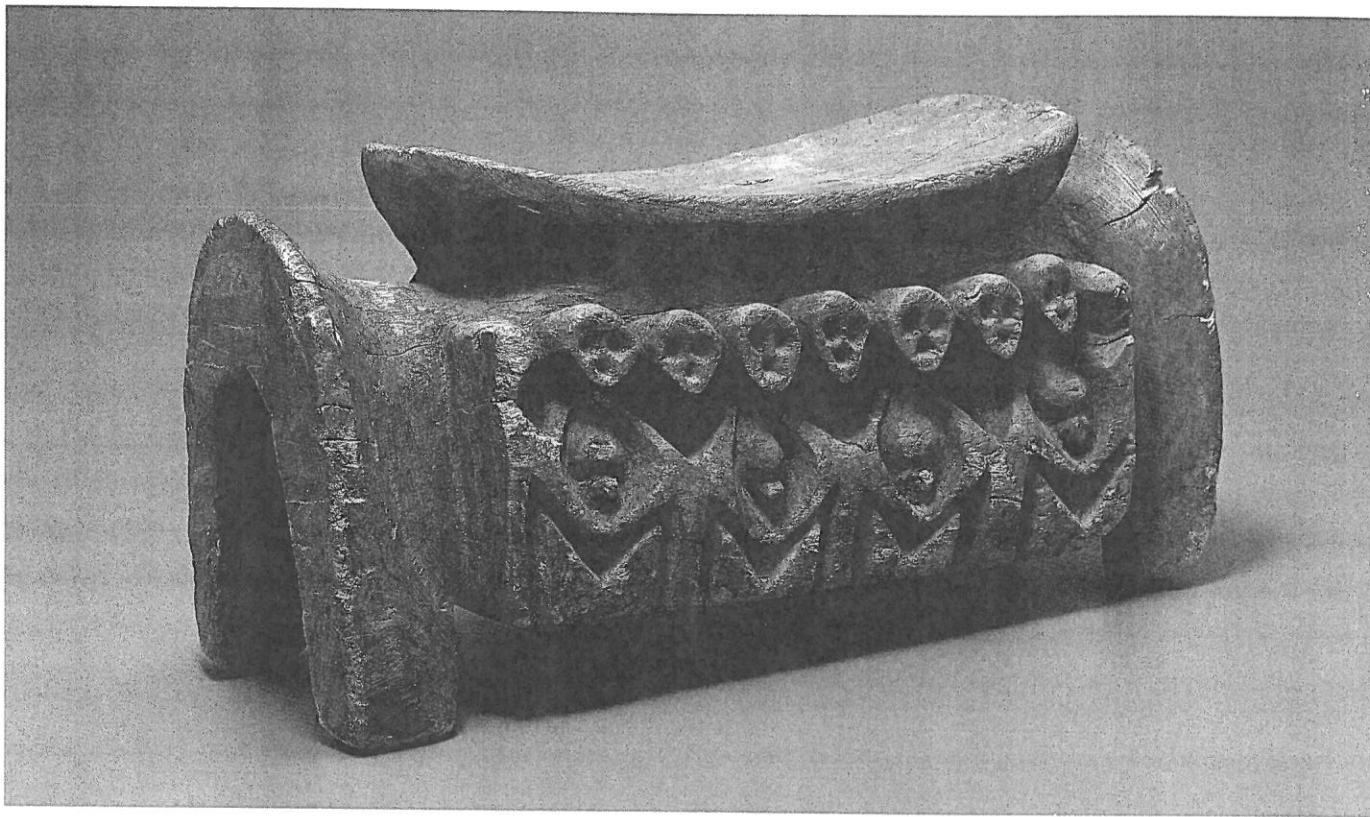


rest on the backs of moving royal leopards. How is this virtually pan-African icon of royalty locally nuanced in Cameroon? Among the chiefs of one western Grassfields culture, every leader of consequence is believed to be backed by a secret leopard counterpart. If the ruler dances brilliantly, with striking strength and grace, Bangwa people may say, "Oh ho, he takes his leopard out to dance!" Across the Grassfields and into the Cross River region the leopard connotes daring, physical prowess, impressive running, fighting or dancing. The crosscuts between the impressive athlete-ruler and the power of the leopard are quick and charming in a Babanki stool that is held up by the head of a human and, more playfully, by the ears of a dashing leopard (pl. 26).

Metaphorically resting the body of a seated king on the backs of moving leopards, themselves swarming playfully with their telltale spots, makes the seated king seem protected by countless numbers of the royal denizens of the forest (pl. 27). This is sculptural support by allusion to circles of mystic assistance. Flanking kings on leopardback, royal horns held in right hand, restate the resting of the king on untold reserves of mystic power (pl. 28).

A moving manifestation of literal and spiritual support is a figured stool that once belonged to a Mambila patriarch in Cameroon (pl. 29). When women experienced difficulty in childbirth, they were brought to this stool and told to sit upon it

Pl. 28  
**Throne**  
 Kom-Tikar area, Cameroon  
 19th–20th century  
 Wood  
 H. 92.7 cm (36½ in.)  
 Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,  
 81.17.721



Pl. 29  
**Stool**  
 Mambila, Cameroon  
 19th–20th century  
 Wood  
 L. 46.2 cm (18¼ in.)  
 Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,  
 81.17.724

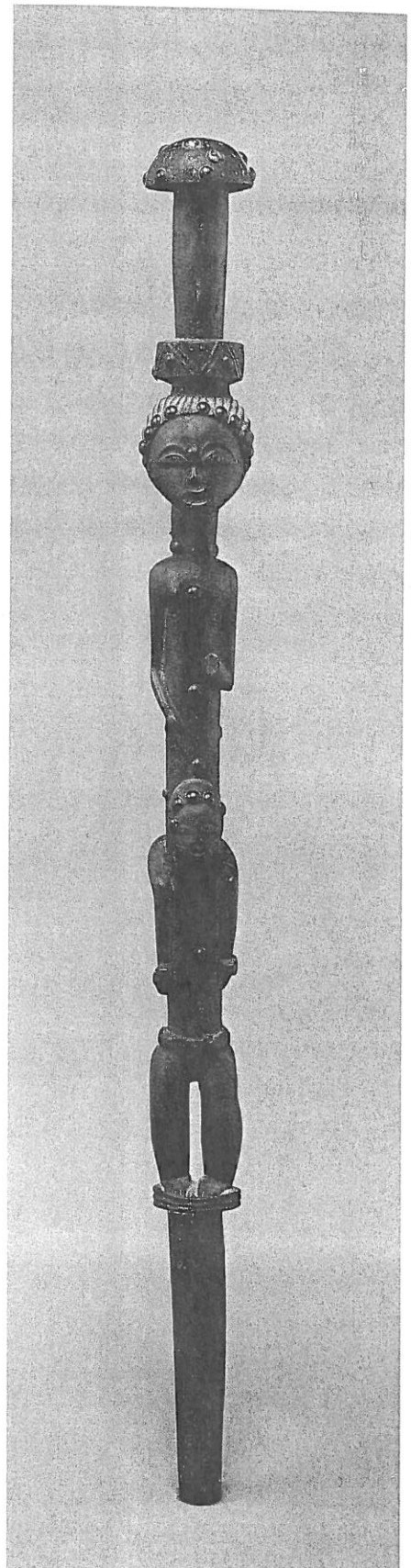
Pl. 30  
**Farming-animal crest mask (*tyi wara*)**  
 Bamana, Mali  
 19th century  
 Wood, brass, wool  
 H. 87.6 cm (34½ in.)  
 Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company, 81.17.23

Pl. 31  
**Staff**  
 Akye, Côte d'Ivoire  
 19th–20th century  
 Wood  
 H. 93.9 cm (37 in.)  
 Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,  
 81.17.235

and confess whatever sins they might have committed. The release of tension after admission of guilt by this belief unlocks a difficult delivery.<sup>38</sup> When the woman in labor confesses and tells exactly what she has done, figurations on the stool support, in witnessing her action, the healing efficacy of the truth. Two figures, meanwhile—male and female—on one side of the stool physically support the person seated with upraised arms.

The carrying of weight and responsibility blends with the spirit in numerous gems of sculpture. A baby antelope carried on the body of its mother automatically identifies the female of a pair of *Tyi Wara* maskers among the Bamana (pl. 30). Whereas the victorious shouldering of a chief on the shoulders of a retainer on an Akye “linguist’s staff” is nuanced by gestures to the heart and stomach—to inward sources of nobility of mind (pl. 31).

We close among masters of the theme of allegorical support, the Luba. Joseph Cornet compares Luba to Baule art in shared nobility and calm, with “no exaggerated attitude or awkward gestures break[ing] the inner serenity of the faces of the ancestor statues.”<sup>39</sup> It is certainly true that the Baule chieftain being carried in triumph on the shoulders of his follower, the follower himself, and the Luba woman supporting a bowl become advocates for submission of self to authority (pl. 32). The Luba caryatid theme can be placed in perspective of time with a number of documents. An engraving from the end of the last century shows the king of the Luba seated on a large, handsomely carved caryatid stool while at the same time resting his feet on





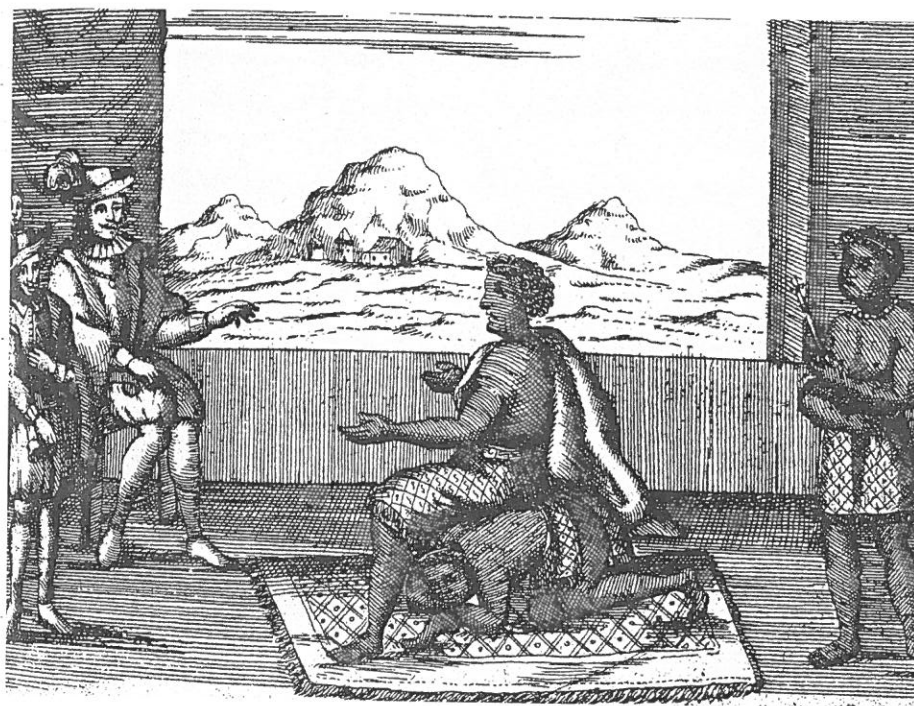


Fig. 8. "Queen Djinga Bandi Sitting before Portuguese Governor," from Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi, *Istoria descrizione de tre regni, Congo, Matamba e Angola* (Bologna, 1687), British Library, London.

the thigh of his wife, thus supported by both statuary and a living person. Availing ourselves of the rich cultural cognation of the Bantu area, one can adduce an even earlier illustration of the living caryatid, dated 1687.<sup>40</sup> I refer to an illustration of Queen Djinga Bandi, received by the Portuguese governor of Angola (fig. 8). She rests upon the body of a follower, who serves as a living caryatid. Granting strength and meaning to the icon of support is the abiding presence of the spirit. Speaking of the Luba, but with insight of far wider application, Jack Flam, novelist and art historian, made this point forever clear:

The effortless grace with which [the Luba images] carry their burden, the serenity of their countenance (so close to other Luba ancestor figures) and the hierarchy of importance in their body parts, all infer that the caryatid image is meant to be interpreted as a spiritual representation.<sup>41</sup>

Pl. 32

**Figure supporting bowl**

Luba, Democratic Republic of the Congo

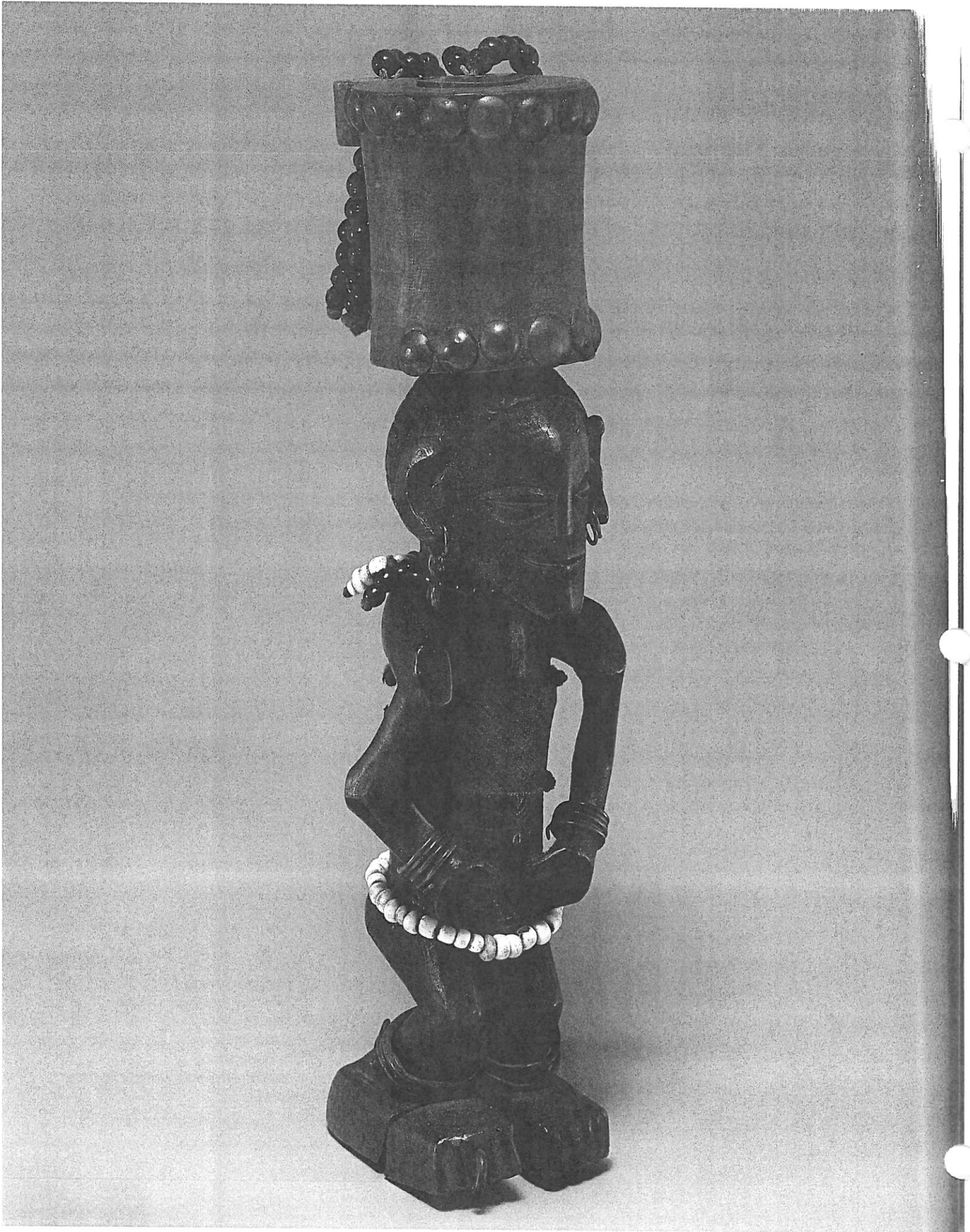
19th–20th century

Wood

H. 49.5 cm (19½ in.)

Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,

81.17.875





## Balancing

Pride resides in having the load rest easily on the head with an insouciant countenance that reveals no sign of pressure or strain, [while walking] smoothly with the arms swinging free.

—Sylvia Boone, 1986<sup>42</sup>

To move in utter confidence with an object balanced on the head is one of the accomplishments of traditional Africa. On my first trip to tropical Africa in 1961, I was amazed to see a young man bring sheets and pillowcases balanced on his head into a resthouse room. That summer I observed schoolchildren carrying ink and writing paper casually stashed atop their heads. I saw how balancing was a gift cultivated early in childhood and onward as part of the arsenal of African bodily grace into maturity.

Children in Benin master this talent as they learn to play games:

*Adigba*, “woman with the burden,” is a game played by all small [Beninois]. The children fix twelve wooden sticks in a pile of sand. Then each child, by turns, carries on his knees, with his hands tied behind his back, a cushion balanced on his head, for a distance of about twelve meters....

As he approaches the area where sticks are, he is supposed to pick them up with his lips, never allowing the pillow on his head to fall. The game is very difficult, ventured only by children adept in carrying things on their heads.<sup>43</sup>

This is a beginning level of the skill. The highest levels refer to transcendental equilibrium, ultimately enabling a person to communicate mind itself by the quality of his composure and the importance of the object balanced on his head (pl. 33). Transporting objects on the head without using one’s hands occurs with formalized repetitiveness in the sculpture of Africa. There is every reason therefore to sense iconic import.

As to the mystical dimensions involved, one might start off by mentioning that at Akan funerals women sometimes dance with a vessel filled with water balanced on their heads. If the vessel should fall, it is a sign that death was brought by witchcraft. In the same portion of West Africa, priests (*okomfo*) may dance with a shrine—a vessel filled with blessed substances—balanced upon their heads. The association of mind and balance is hinted at in the invocation by which they gloss this act: “Oh tree... we are calling on you that we place in this shrine the thoughts that are in our head.”<sup>44</sup> The spiritual head, filled with fluid and symbolic objects, goes over the literal head. Mind emerges triumphantly redoubled.

Equally dramatic extensions of balancing objects on the head of a moving person occur in the worship of the *orisha*, the deities of the Yoruba people. Just as kneeling can become an ordeal, so transporting on the head without using hands becomes a test of spiritual training and aliveness. Followers of the thunder god, Sango, both in Nigerian Yorubaland and in certain Yoruba-oriented compounds in Bahia in Brazil, must dance upon initiation with a living flame balanced in a vessel on their heads. This logically leads into sculptural renderings of the balancing of the fiery

Pl. 33  
**Tobacco mortar**  
Chokwe, Angola  
19th–20th century  
Wood, brass, beads, string  
H. 21.6 cm (8½ in.)  
Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,  
81.17.913



meteorites or thunderstones of Sango (*edun ara*) upon the brow or head of the devotee. The act of balancing puns on architectural support in the traditional Yoruba mind. This leads us to accomplished examples of figured columns. Witness a carved housepost (*opo fie*) from Efon-Alaiye (pl. 34). It boasts a richly textured base, is covered with interlace, and a central portion depicts a seated wife of an important man (*iyawo oloye*), identified by the double strand of beads about her neck. A strong shaft of wood rests impressively upon her head. This is a senior woman who supports her compound with inherent goodness.

Another column enters into the realm of balancing (pl. 35). It is again from that splendid epicenter of style and grace in Yoruba carving, Efon-Alaiye. A woman with the specially lidded Efon eye supports with her head none other than a fully caparisoned warrior-chief with follower (now sadly reduced to a fragment). Because this striking column comes from Efon-Alaiye, where I did considerable fieldwork, I am able to match this piece to its meaning:

The mounted figure represents a warrior who fought the enemies of Efon-Alaiye at the time of the Kiriji War [in 1880]. Under him [appears] his wife. This woman was brave too. When her husband went to war, she would be somewhere else, working magic to save him and bring him back alive.<sup>45</sup>

She keeps a world intact. The ruler of Agogo sleeps over his sword, so that his head is always supported by the throne. The legitimacy provided by the sword is here provided by the woman. This is iconic balancing. It is brought to a point of dramatized equilibrium. Yeats himself could be describing this woman who supported her husband and the world that they shared:

Her eyes  
Gazed upon all things known, all things unknown  
In triumph of intellect  
With motionless head held erect.<sup>46</sup>

Pl. 34

**Housepost (*opo*)**

Efon-Alaiye, Nigeria  
19th–20th century

Wood

H. 110 cm (43 $\frac{3}{4}$  in.)

Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,  
81.17.625

Pl. 35

**Housepost (*opo*)**

Efon-Alaiye, Nigeria  
19th–20th century

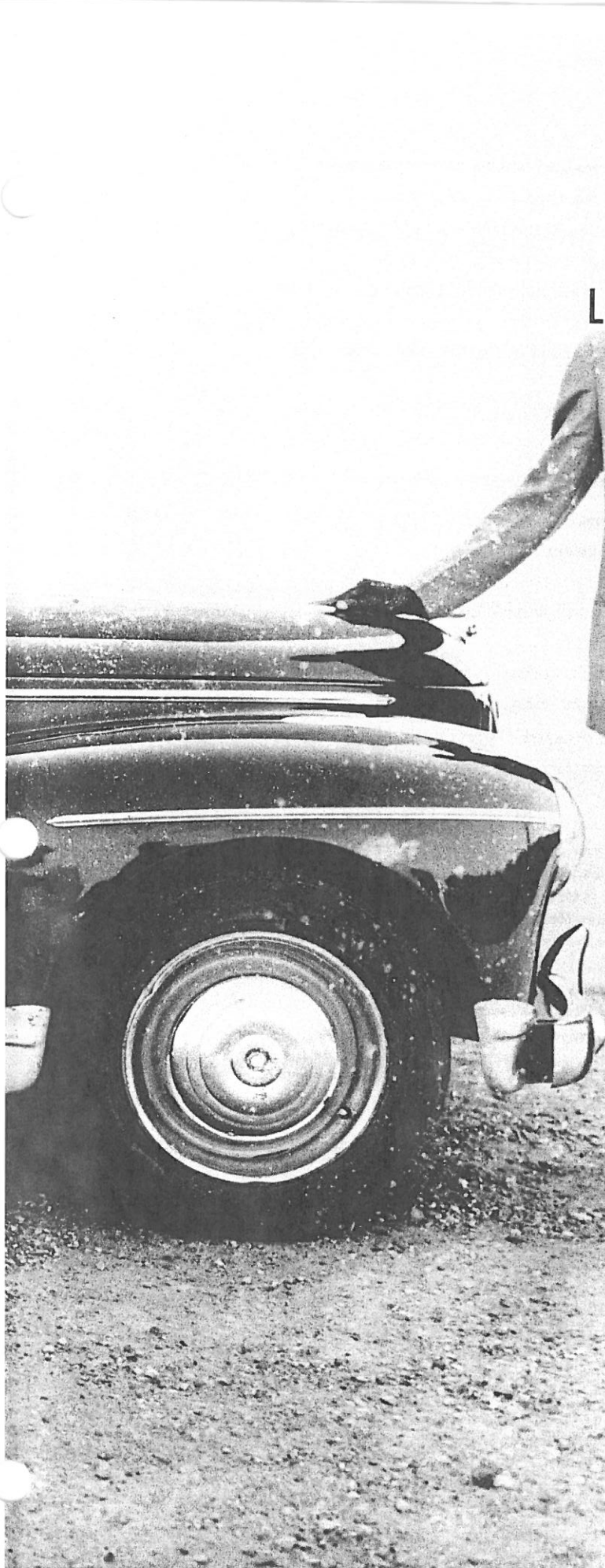
Wood

H. 56.5 cm (22 $\frac{1}{4}$  in.)

Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company,  
81.17.624

## Notes

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2. The late Araba Eko, Isale-Eko, Lagos, Nigeria, January 1972. It is believed that the gods established the correct manner of formal presentation in standing, sitting, and other activities. See G. Gosselin, "Pour une anthropologie du travail rural en Afrique noire," *CÉA* 12 (1963), 521. Proper decorum in work gestures are sanctioned in West Africa frequently by reference to tradition and to the world of the sacred: "One thinks specially of the repetition of archetypal gestures mentioned in origin myths."
3. Alade Benhoufewe, Cotonou, Benin, June 4, 1973; Ako Nsemayu, Mamfe, Cameroon, June 8, 1973; Piluka Ladi, Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo, June 13, 1973.
4. *The American Heritage Dictionary*, 85, 554, 1256.
5. Marcel Griaule, *Folk Art of Black Africa* (New York: Tudor, 1950), 100.
6. Alade Banhoufewe, Cotonou, June 4, 1973; Ako Nsemayu, Mamfe, June 8, 1973; Piluka Ladi, Kinshasa, June 13, 1973.
7. Bruce Glaser, *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1964), 155.
8. Kofi Antubam, *Ghana's Heritage of Culture* (Leipzig: Koehler and Amelang, 1963), 71.
9. Harris Memel-Fote, "The Perception of Beauty in Negro-African Culture," *Colloquium on Negro Art* (Paris: Presence Africain, 1968), 58.
10. Araba Eko, Lagos, January 1972.
11. *Ibid.*
12. F. J. J. Buytendijk, *Attitudes et mouvements* (Bruges: Desclée de Brouwer, 1957), 125.
13. Dejo Afolayan, Nigeria, 1988.
14. *Ibid.*
15. George Tabmen, Monrovia, Liberia, March 25, 1967.
16. Peter Sarpong, *The Sacred Stools of the Akan* (Accra: Ghana Publishing, 1971), 8.
17. Hugh Goldie, *Dictionary of the Efik Language* (Ridgewood, N.J.: The Gregg Press, 1964), 290.
18. "Atenase: The Manner of Sitting," in Antubam, *Ghana's Heritage of Culture*, 114.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Susan Vogel, "Yoruba and Baoule Art Criticism," unpublished paper, 1971, 5. Vogel cites Pierre Etienne, "Les Baoule et le temps," *Cahiers Orstom ser. sciences humaines* (Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire), nos. 3, 5 (1968), 1–37. Etienne finds that Baoule expend unusual time, labor, and money on bathing and rank this pleasure high among the good things of life.
21. Eva Meyerowitz, *The Akan of Ghana* (London: Faber and Faber, 1958), 31. In addition, Thomas Akyea, on behalf of the Agogohene, added the following information about the queen mother during fieldwork at Agogo, Ghana, on May 19, 1969: "The queen mother is either the sister, niece, or even mother of the king. She is a member of the court panel, and without her presence the court is not full. Any pronouncement or judgment given without her confirmation will not be binding. In her absence no authority can enstool a chief."
22. Henry Drewal, John Pemberton, and Roland Abiodun, *Yoruba: Nine Countries of African Art and Thought* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989), 33.
23. James W. Fernandez, *Fang Architectories* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1977).
24. Djibril T. Niane, *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* (London: Longman, 1965).
25. Ako Nsemayu, Mamfe, June 8, 1973.
26. From Babatunde Lawal, *Yoruba Sango Sculpture in Historical Retrospect* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms, 1971), 113.
27. Jochen Kohler, "Das Pferd in den Gur-sprachen," *Africa und Übersee* 37 (1953–54), cited in Jack Goody, *Technology, Tradition and the State in Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 71.
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34. E. A. Ajisafe Moore, *The Laws and Customs of the Yoruba People* (Abeokuta, Nigeria: Fola Bookshops), 7.
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37. Kwabena Nketia, "Yoruba Musicians in Accra," *Odu*, no. 6 (June 1958), 40, retranslation by author.
38. Gilbert Schneider, correspondence with author, Katherine White Archives, Seattle Art Museum.
39. Joseph Cornet, *Art of Africa* (London: Phaidon, 1971), 192.
40. Jack Flam, "The Symbolic Structure of Baluba Caryatid Stools," *African Arts* 4, no. 2 (winter 1971), 56.
41. *Ibid.*, 57.
42. Sylvia Boone, *Radiance from the Waters* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986), 126.
43. Charles Béart, *Jeux et jouets de l'ouest africain*, vol. 1 (Dakar, Senegal: IFAN, 1955), 264, "Equilibres avec objet sur la tête," translation by author.
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46. *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 168.



# **Art from Africa**

Long Steps Never Broke a Back

**Pamela McClusky**

With a contribution by Robert Farris Thompson

**Seattle Art Museum**

**Princeton University Press**

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Frontispiece: pl. 98, Seydou Keita, *Untitled (Family with Car  
no. 266)*, 1951–1952