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GENESIS
Ideas of Origin in African Sculpture

ALISA LAGAMMA

"...a fortunate blend of myth and history, penetrates even deeper into that area of man's cosmogonic hunger, one which leads him to the profounder forms of art as retrieval vehicles for, or assertive links with, a lost sense of origin."

Wole Soyinka,
Myth, Literature and the African World (1976:54)

In the beginning, there was Africa. It is the place where humankind began, between five and seven million years ago, and the drama of its development unfolded. Africa is also the fount of all artistic traditions. Until recently it was widely assumed that a "creative explosion" originated with the arrival of modern humans, *Homo sapiens*, in Europe approximately 40,000 years ago, about 60,000–110,000 years after they began their evolution in Africa. This long-held assumption has been disputed by new discoveries in South Africa, two hundred miles east of Cape Town. At the site of Blombos Cave, researchers have unearthed ochre engravings, finely made bone tools, and symmetrical stone spear points created more than 70,000 years ago. These aesthetic refinements served no utilitarian purpose. At present they are the earliest evidence of human creativity and the first known visual manifestations of abstract thought.

Blombos Cave at the southern tip of the continent and the Egyptian pyramids in the north represent a span of 5,000 miles and some 5,000 years about which little is known of the African traditions that have been formative of the world's art. We are obliged to deal with the tip of the iceberg, as our knowledge of the continent derives from some archaeological sites and several centuries of historical contact with the Western and Islamic worlds. The exhibition "Genesis" explores beliefs of origin as they are embodied in African sculpture. The examples on display make manifest the traditions that are the foundation of conceptions of origin and have profoundly informed a people's sense of identity.

The Greeks gave Western civilization the word most closely associated with Judeo-Christian concepts of the origin of the world: "genesis," derived from *genesis kosmou*, or

This exhibition was organized by Alisa LaGamma, Associate Curator in the Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. It follows another exhibition at the Metropolitan dealing with a fundamental theme in African art: "Art and Oracle" (spring 2000), also curated by LaGamma. Featuring approximately eighty objects from private and public collections, "Genesis" opens on November 19, 2002, in the Metropolitan's Michael C. Rockefeller Wing, and closes on April 13, 2003.

A catalogue by LaGamma, published by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and distributed by Yale University Press (128 pp., 12 b/w & 77 color photos; $30 softcover), accompanies the exhibition. The sectional headings in this preview follow those in the catalogue and in the Metropolitan's installation.

1. Primordial couple. Senufo peoples, Côte d'Ivoire or Mali. 19th/20th century. Wood, pigment; male 115.9cm (45⅝"), female 96.8cm (38⅛"). Collection of Frieda and Milton F. Rosenthal.

According to the Senufo account of genesis, Kolotyolo, the Creator, gave life to the first man and woman, the first human couple (Glaze 1981:72). The woman conceived and gave birth to twins, a girl and a boy. In Senufo society twins are thus thought to have supernatural power that they may exert to positive or negative effect. In order for them to fulfill their potential to be a force for good, twins must be male and female, the ideal gender balance of the creation myth. Large-scale sculptural pairs commemorate the original couple of the genesis myth and celebrate their enduring beauty and idealized complementarity.

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2. Harp-lute player. Dogon peoples, Mali. 16th–19th century. Wood; approx. 71.1cm (28"). Collection of Drs. Daniel and Marian Malcolm.

Dominique Zahan suggests that in Dogon society the playing of the harp-lute is a sort of "sonorous synthesis of all the elements of creation dispersed in time and space" (1950:205). Its music is said to have the power to move the human spirit on a creative and divine level. Throughout the Western Sudan, music is an essential part of devotion and prayer as well as the predominant means of recounting and preserving a people's history and origins. The individual immortalized through this sculpture may thus be seen as a bard who sang the tale of his people's origins.

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3. Head. Yoruba peoples, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. 12th–14th century. Terracotta, mica, quartz, pigment; 22.2cm (8¾"). Private collection.

According to Yoruba conceptions, the city of Ile-Ife is the cradle of all human existence and social institutions. This sacred center, which oral traditions situate so prominently within the Yoruba cultural and spiritual imagination, is also the locus of their artistic tradition, one of the most distinguished in Africa and one that flourishes to this day. The Reverend Samuel Johnson, a twentieth-century chronicler of Yoruba history, notes: "[A]ll the various tribes of the Yoruba nation trace their origin from Oduduwa and the city Ile-Ife. In fact Ile-Ife is fabled as the spot where God created man, white and black, from whence they dispersed all over the earth" (1921:15). In this terracotta head, the use of clay to give shape to the human form resonates profoundly with Obatala's role as the divine artist in the Yoruba account of human origins.

"origin of the cosmos." All human societies define their identity through accounts of their origin that interweave elements of spiritual belief, myth, and historical fact. These accounts are invariably related to contemporary experience and circumstances. A people's aspirations concerning their place in the world develop out of such an understanding of their past. The historian Jan Vansina has noted that a worldview "is a representation of ultimate reality in all its aspects, visible and invisible" (1985:133). As such it is often intuitive to its proponents but difficult for outsiders to comprehend. Vansina suggests that one key to grasping a culture's worldview is to examine its religious system and its traditions of origin—"how the world began, how people were created, and how they became as they are now." These "mythical charters" complement the social structure that is in place, but they are subject to continual revision. They have in turn inspired visual forms of expression that are among the most celebrated monuments in the history of art.

How did the world begin? What is our ancestry? What is the source of agriculture, of kingship, of other societal institutions? African cultures have sought to provide answers to

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4. Bwoom mask. Kuba peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo. 19th/20th century. Wood, shells, beads; 29.2cm (11½"). Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York.

The mythical drama of Kuba origins involves a triad of protagonists: Woot, the larger-than-life culture hero (see Cover); Ngaady A Mwash (Fig. 5); and Bwoom. The drama is often reenacted in performances at public ceremonies, initiations, and funerals. Bwoom is perhaps the oldest of the Kuba royal masquerade triumvirate. Oral traditions suggest that the genre may date back to about the middle of the eighteenth century (Vansina 1978:216). As a character, Bwoom has been interpreted variously as a prince (the king's younger brother), a commoner, a pygmy, even a subversive element at the royal court. There are many differences among regional stylistic interpretations of the Bwoom mask, but the form's most pronounced features invariably are its bulging forehead and broad nose.

Opposite page:

5. Ngaady A Mwash mask. Kuba peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo. 19th/20th century. Wood, beads, pigment, cowries, and cloth; 34.3cm (13½"). Collection of James J. Ross.

Ngaady A Mwash, an idealized female figure, assumes a number of roles in these performances, including that of Woot's consort, the king's sister and wife, and women in general (Blier 1998:240).

these questions through elaborate, interwoven traditions of oral history, poetry, and art. There is a danger of oversimplifying the 70,000 years of African art history and the thousands of distinct cultures found on the continent. Therefore, this exhibition includes an analysis of how artists in a broad spectrum of African cultures have interpreted ideas of origin and sought answers to questions central to their identities. Through comparative sculptures, the exhibition explores a range of cultural perspectives and their related local traditions. These outstanding artistic achievements serve as visual documents for considering several aspects of genesis and origins: theories about the creation of humankind; the source of precepts and social values fundamental to a culture's well-being; the origins of a collective heritage and common identity; genealogies that situate individuals within an extended history of descent; and the origins of a political system. Against this backdrop, the exhibition examines in depth the nuanced complexity of one noteworthy sculptural form, the *ci wara* antelope headdress of the Bamana people of Mali. In doing so it considers all the distinct regional and individual interpretations that have come to be associated with that form over the course of the last century.

Part I: Ideas of Origin in African Sculpture

Vansina has noted that "every community in the world has a representation of the origin of the world, the creation of mankind, and the appearance of its own particular society and community" (1985:21). In *The Religion, Spirituality, and Thought of Traditional Africa,* the anthropologist Dominique Zahan suggests that the quest for an explanation of the creation of man "constitutes the supreme effort of the mind desirous of situating man in terms of certain coordinates—inorganic world, vegetable world, animal world, spiritual universe—and affirming thereby both his attachment to all these domains and his transcendent position rel-

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Left: 6. Bow stand. Warua Master. Luba-Hemba peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo. Ca. 1820–70. Wood, metal, beads; 66cm (26"). Private collection.

The Luba elite conduct ritual and performative reenactments of the Luba epic during which a state of spirit possession is induced, transforming them into incarnations of their mythical progenitors (Nooter 1991:272). Their connection to the dawn of dynastic leadership is reinforced through the ownership of precious artifacts. The bow stand, for example, is a treasured emblem of Mbidi's legacy as a renowned hunter and the bearer of Luba kingship (Nooter, p. 69). Elegantly designed, exquisitely carved bow stands, with their three projecting wood branches and iron shaft, were conceived as functional supports for bows and arrows but were actually a form of sacred regalia. Bow stands were kept in the shrine along with relics of past rulers and were the focus of elaborate rituals, prayers, and sacrifices (Nooter, p. 20).

Right: 7. Ceremonial vessel. Luba peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo. 19th/20th century. Wood; 12.3cm (4⁷/₈"). Collection of Jeff Soref.

At the center of the Luba genesis myth is the prolonged conflict between Kalala Ilunga, the founder of the Luba royal dynasty, and Nkongolo, his tyrannical uncle. Their struggle climaxed when Kalala decapitated his despotic uncle. Nkongolo's head was wrapped in a cloth and placed in a basket, referred to as *dikumbo,* which was then guarded in a special house. Kalala's triumph marked the beginning of a new era of enlightened leadership; he was ceremonially invested with Nkongolo's blood as the first Luba sacral king, and the *dikumbo* became a symbol of political authority and legitimate succession (Nooter 1991:26). Subsequent Luba royal investiture rites have been conceived as reenactments of this and other episodes of the origin myth (Nooter, pp. 19, 139).

A carved wood vessel such as this example might have been created to replace the actual human cranium used as a sacred vessel. Although a great deal of secrecy surrounds the use of vessels of this kind, their almost life-size scale suggests this was the case. The elaborate female coiffure may refer to the fact that kings wore female hairstyles on the day of their investiture (Roberts & Roberts 1996:18).

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8. Female vessel bearer. Buli Master. Luba-Hemba peoples, Kunda, Democratic Republic of the Congo. 19th century. Wood; 37.1cm (14 5/8"). Private collection.

In the Luba epic, the wisdom of the healer-diviner Mijibu'a Kalenga ultimately ensures a new era of leadership. Entrusted with the care and upbringing of Mbidi Kiluwe's son, Kalala Ilunga, Mijibu'a counseled the future king in his struggle to overthrow his despotic uncle, Nkongolo. Mijibu'a's guidance established a precedent for a complex form of divination whose practitioners are called *bilumbu* (Nooter 1991:187–88).

Vessel bearers, originally the strict prerogative of *bilumbu,* were ultimately appropriated by Luba kings and chiefs as part of their royal insignia (Nooter, p. 198). Collections of royal insignia are bestowed upon a leader at the time of his investiture and kept within *mubu,* a small sanctuary within the royal compound (Nooter, p. 131). Although a Luba sovereign's insignia are the identifying marks of his chieftaincy, they are considered imitations of the original set that Mbidi Kiluwe bestowed upon Kalala Ilunga at the time of his investiture. That prototypical set is said to have included the memory board *(lukasa),* stool (or throne, *lupona*), spear *(mulumbu),* staff *(kibango),* adze *(kafundishi),* and the relic basket *(dikumbo)* containing the remains of past rulers (Nooter, p. 131).

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9. Chibinda Ilunga figure. Chokwe peoples, Angola. 19th/20th century. Wood; 39.7cm (15⅝"). Collection of James J. Ross.

In Chokwe culture the archetypal hunter, or *yaga,* is the mythical hero Chibinda Ilunga. As a result of this strong identification with Chibinda's vocation and the appeal of his legacy as a civilizing agent, Chokwe chiefs commissioned depictions of him as a princely hunter. Chibinda figures are generally nude except for a hunter's belt, implements held in either hand, and one of the two distinctive headdresses associated with the title held by Chokwe chiefs: *mwanangana,* or "lord of the land." In this version, the figure's head is crowned by the flaring, trilobed *cipanya mutwe* headdress, whose design is said to evoke the black stork, or *khumbi (Sphenorhynchus abdimii),* a symbol of life, fecundity, and dynastic continuity (Bastin 1982:13).

Opposite page:

Left: 10. Serpent mask. Bwa/Boni peoples, Burkina Faso. 19th/20th century. Wood, pigment; 457.2cm (180"). Collection of Thomas G. B. Wheelock.

The awesome vertical extension of the serpent mask, whose undulations project high into the sky, is unparalleled among Bwa masquerade genres. The serpentine rippling effect of the form is dramatized in performance as the dancer twists his head rapidly from side to side (Roy 1987:293). The myth describing the origins of this mask, which was documented by Christopher Roy, relates that many years ago the men of Dossi raided a neighboring village and were routed in the attempt. An elder member of the raiding party hid from his vengeful pursuers in the burrow of a great serpent. He reassured the serpent that he was not there to harm it but to save his own life, and the serpent fed him during the two market weeks he was forced to hide there. Upon his return to Dossi, the man consulted a diviner, who told him to carve a mask and to respect the serpent as a protective spirit (Roy, p. 268).

Right: 11. Headdress (a-Mantsho-na-Tshol). Baga peoples, Guinea. 19th/20th century. Wood, pigment; 166.4cm (65½"). Collection of Shelly Mehlman Dinhofer.

All Baga migration histories trace their artistic traditions back to Fouta Djallon, in the interior of Guinea, and affirm that they brought sacred masks with them to the coast (Lamp 1996:52). Among these was a headdress called a-Mantsho-na-Tshol, which is credited with guiding the ancestors toward new lands and protecting them by inspiring fear in outsiders (Lamp, p. 76). A-Mantsho-na-Tshol was carved to resemble a mystical serpent entity whom the Baga refer to as Nininanka, a spirit common to the beliefs of many peoples in the region.

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ative to them" (1970:7). Vansina has further noted that stories of creation are by nature "reflexive, the product of thought about existing situations—they represent a stage in the elaboration of historical consciousness and are among the main wellsprings of what we often call culture" (1985:21). Those responsible for creating related works of art give individual expression to their culture's most profound collective ideas about its origins and identity.

In the 1940s the French ethnologist Marcel Griaule pioneered research on the Dogon people of Mali, publishing what was then, and still remains, the most extensive existing literature on an African belief system. Beginning with his landmark *Conversations with Ogotemmeli* (1948), Griaule uncovered the worldview, cosmology, and philosophical system of the Dogon, analyzing his findings with an unprecedented sophistication and complexity. Additional versions of the Dogon creation myth were presented in his subsequent works. Scholars drew on these creation stories to interpret the imagery of Dogon sculptures (Fig. 2).

Griaule meant to demonstrate that African belief systems and theories of human experience parallel those of other civilizations, but his project has triggered major scholarly debate (Bedaux et al. 1991). Walter van Beek contends that Griaule attributed to the Dogon a cosmology and genesis that are unrecognizable in their contemporary society and resemble nothing else in African religions. He is critical of the alacrity with which these interpretations have been grafted onto an understanding of Dogon material culture. In his recent monograph that pays tribute to contemporary Dogon experience, van Beek dismisses Griaule's legacy:

> The Dogon have no creation myth, no deep story relating how the world came into being. (An anthropologist some decades ago probed his informants for creation myths so insistently that the Dogon, polite as ever, obligingly produced them. Some of his publications still in print as tourist guides perpetuate this mistake).
>
> (van Beek 2001:103)

It is difficult not to feel a certain ambivalence at this juncture in our understanding of Africa's heritage. Clearly the involved cosmogony that Griaule developed in his writings has little relevance to the lives of contemporary Dogon in Mali today. But did such a cosmology ever exist, perhaps as knowledge that was preserved orally by cultural elites and thus was vulnerable to loss? One is reminded of a saying attributed to Amadou Hampate Ba, a diplomat, historian, and writer who spent much of his life translating and transcribing African oral traditions, which laments, "When an old man dies, it's as if a library burns."

The Genesis of Humanity

In Senufo society, divine creation is commemorated by large, sculpted figural pairs that depict a timeless and ideally balanced archetype of humanity (Fig. 1). Such representations give material form to the idea of the primordial couple and emphasize the importance of the role that women play as the matrix of life, intermediaries with the supernatural world, and the founding members of extended families used to trace descent in Senufo communities.

The concrete, somewhat literal portrayal of genesis contrasts with the more abstract modes employed by other African societies. For example, in some cultures the artistic transformation of certain inert matter is a metaphor for divine creation. This significance is reflected in ideas underlying the humanism of the ancient terracotta heads and figures unearthed at the ancient Yoruba center of Ile-Ife (Fig. 3) as well as in the schematic reed, grass, and beaded fertility figures from southern Africa designed to enhance fertility. In yet another case, the actions of the creator are invoked ephemerally through the powerful movements of Bobo sacred masks. Those monumental sculptures make the ultimate force of creation tangible in performance. They require Bobo artists to mine their imaginations to create exalted forms. The highly abstract works are unrelated to anything known to their authors through their senses.

Foundations of Kingdoms

The foundations upon which precolonial African states were built are invariably recalled in important oral narratives that may be retold countless times and complemented by

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12. Reliquary figure. Fang peoples (Ngumba); Cameroon. 19th century. Wood; 55.8cm (22"). Collection of Sheldon Solow.

Within northern Fang patrilineages, the house family, or *ndebot*, is the primary social group that traces its key parentage back to the woman "out of whose womb it was born." The Fang ancestor cult, Bieri, was responsible for clearing lines of communication between men and their ancestors (Fernandez 1982:255). Bieri rites focused on the initiation of new members, the reestablishment of protective benevolence in village affairs, and the according of vitality and honor to the ancestors. The rituals were organized around sacred relics of lineage ancestors—eight to ten crania assembled over several generations of a *ndebot*—along with other related sculptural artifacts. The relics were kept in a bark container, and carved wood figures were placed on top of the container lids to warn off women and children and to provide focus for periodic offerings (Fernandez, p. 256). This work's primary protagonist may depict the female ancestor associated with the origins of a *ndebot*.

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13. Ancestral figure. Tabwa peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo. 19th/20th century. Wood, oil; 55.9cm (22"). Collection of Drs. Daniel and Marian Malcolm.

The story of the origins of Tabwa society varies according to the identity and perspective of the narrator. In most versions, however, a progenitor, or "father of clans," emerges from a body of water to set familial relations in motion (Maurer & Roberts 1985:25). He becomes the model for Tabwa chieftaincy and is credited with the introduction of fire and iron smelting. The Tabwa system of descent is matrilineal. A man's heirs are not his biological children (who are considered to be in the lineage of his wife's family) but rather his sister's sons. Allen F. Roberts has noted that in Luba society, which is patrilineal, ancestral veneration focuses on female figures, whereas male ancestral depictions dominate among the Tabwa. Roberts suggests that both approaches reflect the interdependence of men and women in their respective descent systems (Roberts & Roberts 1996:214). In this two-tiered arrangement of figures, the dominant male protagonist is seated on the shoulders of a diminutive female figure, who grasps his knees.

visual forms of expression. Such works articulate a polity's distinctive ideology and play an important role in reinforcing an individual leader's ties to sources of legitimization. At the court of the Kuba people of the Congo, the king may participate in a royal masquerade performance in which he assumes the role of Woot, the first man and original leader of his people. On such occasions, members of the court reenact the drama that unfolded at the beginning of time to set Kuba history in motion and inform its political dynamics (Cover; Figs. 5, 6).

In Luba society, investiture rites transform a leader into a reincarnation of the first Luba king, Kalala Ilunga, who reigned during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries

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14. Male *ci wara* headdress. Bamana peoples, Kénédougou region, Mali. 19th/20th century. Wood, metal, fiber, hide, cowrie shells; 113.7cm (44¾"). National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; Bequest of Eliot Elisofon, 1973 (73.7.56).

Collected by the photographer Eliot Elisofon, this male headdress was likely carved by the same Baninko carver or workshop who made a pair in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago (Figs. 15, 16) and a work published by Hans Himmelheber in 1960 (1960:88). These headdresses share an unusually graceful fluidity that suggests a single template or an individual author's sensibility.

Opposite page:

15–16. Pair of male and female *ci wara* headdresses. Bamana peoples, Baninko region, Mali. 19th/20th century. Wood, brass tacks, metal, quills; male 97.8cm (38½"), female 79.4cm (31¼"). Art Institute of Chicago, Ada Turnbull Hurtle Endowment, 1965 (1965.6-7).

In Bamana culture, these male and female personages serve as multifaceted metaphors for the elemental forces upon which all humanity depends. The infant on the female's back, for example, is a visual treatise on the relationship between the sun—the powerful male—and the gentle, nurturing earth—the female. The male's majestic upward extension and the quivering energy and movement suggested by the openwork zigzag carving of his neck and mane invoke the sun's corona and the full force of its radiance. At the same time it makes subtle reference to the sun's arced trajectory between the two solstices and to the darting movements of the roan antelope as it runs. Although we now see these two sculptural elements divorced from the dance arena, it is not difficult to imagine how they once converged in performance to evoke the elemental union of fire, earth, and, through the rivulets of the raffia costume, water.

FRANKO KHOURY

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and whose enlightened political order differed radically from the primitive, despotic regime it replaced. The instigator of this cultural revolution was a hunter-hero prince from the east, Mbidi Kiluwe, who introduced a noble reign of sacred kingship. This transfer of power is marked by the treasury of artifacts given to Kalala Ilunga that was emblematic of divine kingship (Figs. 6–8). While the treasury ensembles conferred upon subsequent Luba leaders are original creations of great power and beauty, they were conceived as reproductions of Kalala Ilunga's prototypes.

As Chokwe leaders nearby accrued regional power and influence during the nineteenth century, they adopted the Lunda hunter-prince Chibinda Ilunga as their role model and adopted his persona in a remarkable tradition of royal portraiture (Fig. 9). By conflating their identity with this larger-than-life mythical figure, they meant to enhance their prestige as temporal rulers and spiritual intermediaries.

Family Origins

Throughout the continent, extended families derive a sense of cohesion from accounts that commemorate and honor their founding ancestors. Preservation of this precious knowledge is often accompanied by sculptural representations designed to impress both

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the ancestors and rival families. Works like these are the focal point of a community's spiritual life, prayers, and invocations for ancestral intervention. In some cultures a family's well-being and origins are linked to a nature spirit that is a carved mask. This type of relationship accounts for a rich corpus of masquerades sponsored by Bwa (Fig. 10), Mossi, and Kurumba families in Burkina Faso, as well as the awesome, monolithic serpent headdresses of the Baga peoples, who live in Guinea along the Atlantic coast (Fig. 11).

In central Africa, the importance placed on preserving family genealogies is reflected in a range of figurative traditions that idealize the human form according to local aesthetic conventions. Represented in the exhibition by works created by Fang (Fig. 12), Bwende, Tabwa (Fig. 13), Hemba, and Boyo sculptors, these sculptures straddle the boundary between history and myth and document their owners' connection to the past. At one end of the spectrum are the powerful and intense miniature depictions of Bwende founding ancestors. At the other are the monumental series of Boyo ancestor figures that honor a chief's collective forebears. The representation of one founding ancestor is the largest and most dominant, and the prototype for the likenesses of his successors.

Part II: The Invention of Agriculture: Ci Wara's Divine Gift

The world began and so it will end with farming.
—Bamana proverb

Westerners have been apt to see African art as formulaic, as restricted by static convention. In reality, each generation of African peoples has had its own artistic response to ideas about origins and has participated in a constant dynamic process of evolution. The tendency to consider African art as relatively immutable is exemplified by perceptions of one particular classic form often considered emblematic: the Bamana antelope headdresses generically referred to as "*ci wara.*"

Ci wara headdresses are among the most widely known and admired of all the continent's art forms (Figs. 14–24). The genre derives from a region in Mali that has for a millennium been the wellspring of some of Africa's most outstanding artistic traditions. It is characterized by an elegant abstraction that is valued both in Bamana society and in the West, where it has inspired such artists as Brancusi, de Zayas, and Léger. In this exhibition a careful analysis of forty well-known and especially accomplished examples of the genre makes apparent that what in the scholarly literature is generally conceived to be a monolithic tradition is in fact a heterogeneous set of regional traditions and individual interpretations that respond to an overarching cultural ideal. Moreover, the analysis demonstrates how the term *ci wara* encompasses several distinct but related performative genres that developed in response to significant changes in Bamana cultural and spiritual experience.

Among the Bamana, the invention of agriculture and the understanding of earth, animals, and plants were at one time attributed to a mythical cultural hero, Ci Wara. In the last century, this knowledge was shared by members of a men's agricultural association of the same name. The association performs ceremonial dances that celebrate the skills and talents of exceptional farmers as well as the benevolent giver of agriculture. The term *ci wara* is literally translated as "farming animal" and is also used as a praise name for individuals who distinguished themselves as outstanding farmers (McNaughton 1988:39; Imperato 1970:8). The outstanding feature of *ci wara* dances was the appearance of a pair of gracefully designed sculpted headdresses in the form of antelopes (Figs. 15, 16).

Several Bamana accounts of creation have been recorded. The central protagonist of one documented by Dominique Zahan in the northern Bamana region is a supreme deity referred to variously as N'gala or Pemba (Imperato 2001:13). According to that version, at the time the earth was once devoid of living things, and God then manifested himself as a grain known as Pemba. This seed grew into a *balanza* tree *(Acacia albida)* that eventually withered and fell to the ground, becoming a wood beam known as Pembélé. Pembélé secreted mildew that he mixed with his saliva to create a new female being, Mouso Koroni Koundyé, who is conceived as one of a series of divine manifestations that set about creating all manner of life, from plants to animals to human beings. Her creative endeavors extend to every aspect of existence, including the fostering of ideas that develop along with human consciousness.

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Opposite page:

17. Male *ci wara* headdress. Bamana peoples, Banimounitié region, Mali. 1840–60. Wood; 76.8cm (30 1/4"). Private collection.

A departure from convention, this striking headdress suggests a symphony of concave and convex elements. The horns, for example, with their powerful outward and upward thrust, harmonize with the elongated and hollowed triangular ears. Negative spaces are distributed throughout as visual highlights, and the sculptural form is an essentialized, skeletal structure that frames empty volumes in the area of the head, neck, and lower body. In this interpretation, the antelope's transparent being appears as an empty vessel waiting to be filled with life force.

This page:

18. Female *ci wara* headdress. Bamana peoples, Kénédougou region (Kinian), Mali. 19th/20th century. Wood, fiber; 85.1cm (33 1/2"). Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, State University of New York.

In this relatively abstract representation, from the eastern Bamana region, the only sculpturally articulated facial features are the pronounced triangular ears that project from the base of the horns. Pascal James Imperato comments that hearing was of significant practical and symbolic value to *ci wara* initiates; it was the sense through which they were motivated and inspired to achieve extraordinary accomplishments. Through their ears they were informed of the achievements of their ancestors, "...of their exceptional ability as farmers, of their total dedication to the land and to farming. On hearing of these exploits," Imperato emphasizes that "present generations are stimulated to do as well as their forebears" (Imperato 1970:72).

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Mouso Koroni's union with a cobra resulted in the birth of Ci Wara, a divine being half human and half animal, who taught the Bamana how to cultivate the land. According to myth, by tilling the earth with his claws and a stick of the sunsun tree *(Diospyros mespiliformis)*, Ci Wara was able to transform weeds into corn and millet (Imperato 1970:8). Mortals became able and prosperous farmers under his tutelage, but gradually they turned careless and wasteful. In his disappointment, Ci wara is said to have buried himself in the earth. To honor his memory and lament his departure, men created a power object, *boli*, in which his spirit could reside, and they carved headdresses to represent him.

Pascal James Imperato notes that in recent times *ci wara* has become the least secretive of all the Bamana religious, political, judicial, and philosophical fraternities (*dyow*, sing. *dyo*) concerned with the maintenance of social, spiritual, and economic harmony (Imperato 2001:10). By 1970 *dyow* no longer existed in most villages, and as a result, the metaphysical and religious ideas they once promulgated were dying out (Imperato, p. 13). The demise of these institutions has been attributed to the spread of Islam, the shift to a cash economy, and the many significant social developments that followed colonial rule, including migrant labor and urbanization.

The *dyow* imparted esoteric and ritual knowledge to its adult initiates. In addition, a community's circumcised youth were grouped together in associations known as *ton* (Imperato 2001:8–11). The *ton* were a source of both collective labor and entertainment.

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Male members farmed the fields of families that lacked the necessary manpower or resources. The *ton* was compensated through payments of cash, food, or livestock, which would be used to sponsor secular communal celebrations. In some places charitable communal work was also performed by men's voluntary associations known as *gonzon* (Imperato, p. 72). Because of their involvement with agricultural projects, *ton* and *gonzon* commissioned antelope headdresses that appear in the theatrical dances that they sponsor. Those headdresses take their inspiration from the *ci wara* association. Without contextual documentation it is often difficult to distinguish which of these three entities—*ci wara, ton,* or *gonzon*—originally performed a particular headdress.

The poetic eloquence and seemingly infinite variety of the *ci wara* headdress are described by Zahan in his celebrated monograph *Antilopes du soleil* (1980); the study, devoted to examining the full extent of this sculptural genre, includes a catalogue raisonné of more than five hundred examples. Zahan also explores the headdress's iconography, significance in Bamana myth and spirituality, its relation to agricultural practices, and its role in the initiation association. One of the limitations of his study, however, is his failure to address regional stylistic differences or the development of distinct but related sculptural genres that came to either coexist with or replace *ci wara*. Zahan's somewhat ahistorical approach to this material stands in contrast to the more empirical documentation provided by Imperato, which suggests a tradition continually responsive to changes in Bamana society.

Imperato observes that "like all other dances of the Bamana that of *[ci wara]* was never static....the development and change took place somewhat independently in each region and indeed in each village, finally leading to local differences which...one finds considerable" (1970:13). By the time of the earliest documented *ci wara* performances, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the dance apparently still had a ritual dimension; however, it was no longer exclusively performed in the company of *dyo* members but rather included audiences outside the association.

With the disintegration of the *dyow* and the increased influence of Islam, some of the ritual dances and masks once associated with the initiation societies, including *ci wara*, were gradually passed to the *ton*. In that context their religious content was de-emphasized in favor of encouraging the younger *ton* members to be good farmers and to serve as popular entertainers (Imperato 1970:13). Imperato suggests that these transformations first occurred in the eastern Bamana region in the district of Segou, where the influence of Islam was most intense (p. 72). Subsequently the relevance of the *ton* also diminished in certain regions: the increasing migration of young men to cash labor markets affected the timing of their festivals, which in some communities were abandoned entirely.

The *ton*'s appropriation of the *ci wara* headdress is one example of how *ci wara* came to be integrated into other distinct performative traditions. Part II of this exhibition examines several of the individual, regional, and historical influences that informed the different contexts in which *"ci wara"* headdresses appeared. Works that have previously been identified as examples of the *ci wara* genre are identified and discussed as representatives of discrete subgenres, including *sogoni koun* (Figs. 19–21), *n'gonzon koun* (Figs. 22, 23), and *nama tyétyé* (Fig. 24). It is useful to consider some of the sequences of events that have informed the different contexts in which these antelope headdresses have appeared. While recognizing that every performance is a unique event in its own right and that no single description of a particular dance can ever reflect an entire tradition, one must rely to a certain extent on the limited number of published accounts.

The earliest surviving visual documents of such performances date from the first quarter of the twentieth century (Geary 1995:116–17). In 1970, drawn by the reputation of the antelope headdress as African art's most familiar icon, the celebrated American photographer and African-art amateur Eliot Elisofon photographed *ci wara* performances in Mali (Geary, pp. 104–13). Christraud Geary notes that the tens of thousands of images of African art and culture taken by Elisofon from the late 1940s to the early 1970s profoundly informed attitudes and perceptions of the continent. However, in his quest to capture the elegant forms of the headdresses associated with the eastern Bamana region, which were carved in a vertical rather than horizontal style, he was driven to subvert contemporary reality. By that time, such works were performed only rarely in a few villages. As a consequence, during his visit to the region Elisofon was obliged to stage re-enactments.

Left: 19. Female *sogoni koun* headdress. Bamana peoples, Bougouni region, Mali. 19th/20th century. Wood, cotton; 40.6cm (16"). The Clyman Collection.

Unlike *ci wara* headdresses, which were designed for use by one of the six Bamana initiation societies, *sogoni koun* were part of secular entertainments performed by age-set associations, or *ton.* The playful presence of the figural element in this example—she looks as if she's about to be thrown off—is a conventional *sogoni koun* form. It also serves to denote the gender of the headdress (Imperato 1981:72), heighten the visual drama of the work, and demonstrate the talent of the artist. In her study of Bamana figurative traditions, Kate Ezra notes that the blacksmiths who made *sogoni koun* antelope headdresses were inspired to add figurative elements as a *masiri*, or decoration, because "not only were they wonderful to look at...they demonstrated the carvers' tremendous skill. In this sense they were virtuoso works" (Ezra 1983:44).

Right: 20. Pair of male and female *sogoni koun* headdresses. Bamana peoples, Bougouni region, Mali. 19th/20th century. Wood, fiber; 55.2 cm (21 3/4"); 57.2cm (22 1/2"). Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Pascal James Imperato.

Pascal James Imperato collected this pair of relatively abstract headdresses in the Bougouni region. Zahan put them in his category of "vertical" *ci wara*, but Imperato has identified them more specifically as examples of the *sogoni koun* genre. Although inspired by the Bamana mythical ancestor Ci Wara, these headdresses represent the convergence of the *ci wara* genre with important elements of another distinct regional performance tradition—*sogoni koun.*

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21. *Sogoni koun* headdress. Bamana peoples, Bougouni region, Mali. 19th/20th century. Wood, fiber; 58.4cm (23"). The Clyman Collection.

This work, typical of the *ci wara/sogoni koun* hybrid form, embodies perfect balance and harmonious symmetry. It is distinctive even among exceptional examples of Bougouni-style *sogoni koun* for its degree of graphic unity. Although it is possible to read the composition as a series of discrete tiers, the features are so gracefully integrated that the dominant impression is one of a single zoomorphic being.

Opposite page:

22. Pair of male and female *n'gonzon koun* headdresses. Bamana peoples, Djitoumou region, Mali. 19th/20th century. Wood, iron, cotton; Length 53.3cm (21") each. National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; Gift of Ernst Anspach and museum purchase, 1991 (91.8.1.1-2).

These headdresses, which have survived intact as a pair, pay tribute to Bamana conceptions of the ideally harmonious union of male and female. They are defined by a strong series of horizontals: the horns and muzzle in the upper portion of the composition, and the parallel axis of the lower body beneath. Zahan attributes this corpus to the Bélédougou region, which is north of the Niger River, but Imperato situates the style slightly farther south in the adjacent Djitoumou region. Imperato notes that some villages there sponsored performances of abstract vertical *sogoni koun* headdresses but also possessed horizontal *ci wara,* which they referred to as *n'gonzon koun.*

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FRANKO KHOURY

As described by Imperato and Geary, on one occasion he editorially removed any trappings of modernity from his photographs. On another, he insisted on photographing vertical headdresses in a village in the western Bamana region, where they had never been performed. In doing so he created his own myth (Geary, p. 116).

While at the beginning of the twentieth century, many of Europe's gifted young artists were powerfully influenced by the formal vocabulary of African art traditions, the second half of the century saw the first generation of Western-trained African artists. Young students from across the continent left home to develop their talents in the art schools of Europe's capitals. There they mastered many different technical processes that afforded them new means of giving expression to both their personal experiences and the traditional forms associated with their African heritage. One example is Paul Ahyi, a Togolese artist who received his degree from the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts in Paris in 1959. His achievements as an artist and teacher working in a rich range of media, including sculpture, painting, ceramics, and tapestry design, have earned him many awards in France and Africa.

Ahyi is one of many contemporary African artists who have drawn upon seminal forms like the Bamana *ci wara* that evoke the Western ideal of African culture and that transcend ethnic boundaries because of their iconic stature. In doing so, these artists make reference, in ways not dissimilar to those of their Western counterparts, to a collective African past. As artists at a crossroads between two artistic traditions, however, their point of reference is unique. Some see themselves as responsible for imbuing traditional forms of African expression with new life. Ahyi speaks to this point:

> The modern Africa should be the continuation of the ancient Africa without there being a disjunction, rupture, or relinquishing of values that belong to us. It is according to this concept that I embark upon my artistic research and hope that the aesthetic or the message that follows can contribute in some way to the development of modern African culture.
>
> ("Paul Ahyi," n.d.; my translation)

In his monotype *Adoratrice*, or "worshiper," of 1981 (Fig. 25), Ahyi pays tribute to the powerful and monumental idea of the *ci wara* by conflating the notion of it as a venerable sculptural representation with his response to it as a contemporary African artist. Ahyi, like a Bamana viewer, is moved by the spiritual essence of the *ci wara* and a sense of the creative force behind the sculpture. In his interpretation he translates the sculpted

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23. Double-headed *n'gonzon koun* headdress. Bamana peoples, Banimounitié region, Mali. Early 20th century. Wood, patina, smoke; 61.5cm (24¼"). Private collection.

This work gives compelling evidence that horizontal headdresses were not modeled on a single animal found in nature but rather represent an abstract force expressed in an amalgam of zoomorphic features. In this example, the animal in the lower half, which appears to be an anteater, is more fully realized than usual because of the inclusion of its head. However, the syncretic approach that appears to inform this and related works is made all the more overt here because of the fantastical nature of the double-headed creature. It is as if the headdress captures the moment when the two entities were fused together.

Opposite page:

Left: 24. *Nama tyétyé* headdress. Bamana peoples, Djitoumou region, Mali. 19th/20th century. Wood, string; 69.2cm (27¼"). Private collection.

This headdress relates formally to several works Zahan illustrated in his survey as examples of vertical *ci wara*. Those comparative headdresses share the same vertical zigzag configuration as this one, but with a solid column and more compressed angles. Like this example, they lack antelope horns, which has led Imperato to suggest, convincingly, that they were created for a *nama tyétyé* dance (personal communication with the author, Oct. 25, 2001). According to his research in the region, such headdresses express the deviousness of the hyena *(nama)* and its inclination "to follow a twisted path rather than a straight one" (Imperato 1980:82). When worn in performance, the headdress is attached to a basketry cap that sits on the performer's head.

Right: 25. Paul Ahyi (Togolese, b. 1930). *Adoratrice*, 1981. Monotype; 168.9cm x 44.5cm (66½" x 17½"). Collection of A Vitacolonna.

The artist has translated the *ci wara* headdress into a two-dimensional medium, invoking its essence in a way that is both concrete and impressionistic.

object into a two-dimensional medium and thus plays on its flatness and abstraction by designing a work in which the iconic configuration has been impressed onto a fiber surface. Ahyi emphasizes the antelope's verticality by fitting it into an especially narrow, elongated format. His block strokes, rolled onto the surface to re-create the *ci wara*'s architectural structure, are at once concrete and impressionistic. The image invokes the essence of the *ci wara*, while Ahyi's artistic approach—to create a work of elegance, strength, and beauty through an assemblage of features—harmonizes conceptually with the artistic process used by Bamana sculptors.

A generation ago, scholars suggested that the role of *ci wara* in Bamana society appeared to be in decline. However, more recent research indicates that its relevance to Bamana culture and its resilience as an art form endure. It is also important to recognize the fact that spiritual and secular genres of these antelope performances continue to coexist in contemporary Mali. Stephen Wooten (2000) documented recent performances in agrarian communities in the region of the Mande plateau around thirty kilometers from Bamako. His account of the three distinct performances he observed emphasizes three local interpretations of *ci wara*. The Bamana maintained distinctions between performances that they considered to have "underlying force" or reference to religious practices; performances known as *cekorobawfen*, or "old men's things," and performances known as *tulonkefen*, or "playthings," that had theatrical aims used to amuse children (Wooten 2000:21). Wooten concludes his account by emphasizing the ongoing relevance of this tradition to contemporary Bamana experience:

> Whether or not the actors or observers involved in the cases I have presented know the agricultural origin myth, make explicit connections to the mythic inventor of this way of life when they perform, or participate in a *ciwara jo*, their links to an agricultural way of life are affirmed and strengthened in the activities involving *[ci wara]*. Farming is at the core of their identity.
>
> (Wooten 2000:31)

"Genesis: Ideas of Origins in African Sculpture" seeks to shed light on the act of human creation as a broad and recurrent theme of African art. Seventeen forms of artistic expression that relate to their cultures' ideas about their origins have been selected to embody this concept. These works of art constitute points of reference that allow individuals to conceive of their place within an expansive history. While the sculptures on display relate to a panoply of social perspectives and traditions, they all share a desire to give tangible form to the abstract forces that have shaped the course of human experience. The artists who executed them have responded to their societies' most exalted challenge, and in doing so have provided insight into their distinctive worldviews. □

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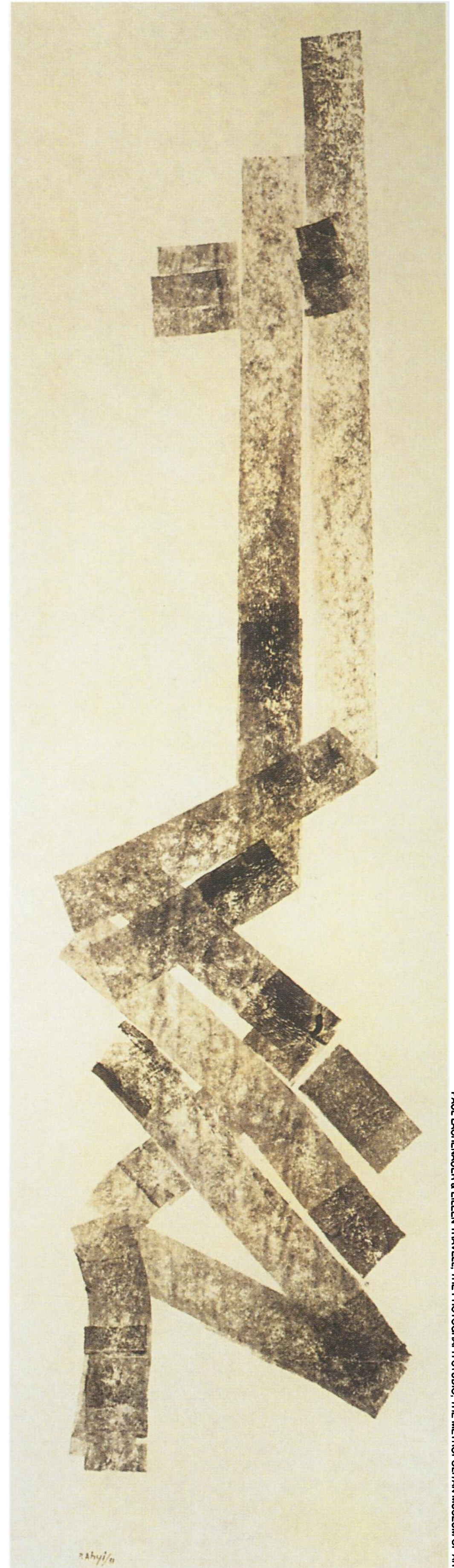

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1. For more on this event, see *Dak'Art 98* and Okeke 1998.
2. For more problematized discussions of Africanity, see Figueroa 1995, Grabski 2001, and Oguibe 1999.

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NIDA: Notes, from page 82

1. This cathedral is famous for its large cultural holdings such as parchments, crosses, icons, and paintings, as well as for "hosting" the Lost Ark of the Covenant.
2. This effort was undertaken by the Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Organization of the Ministry of Culture, in collaboration with St. John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota. The archives are housed in both Addis Ababa and St. John's University (see Quirin 1982).

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HART: Notes, from page 88

1. J. Vansina, *Art History in Africa* (London, 1984), p. 40.
2. "Oeuvres d'art et objets africains dans l'Europe du XVIIe siècle," in *Ouverture sur l'art africain* (Paris, 1986), pp. 64–86.
3. Although some will welcome the CD-ROM, I found that a database of the material would have been more useful. The facility to enlarge illustrations, which sounded promising, simply exposed the limitations of the original digital images.
4. These groupings in the catalogue itself correspond to four groups of items listed in the foreword ("documented and located," "documented and unlocated," "unidentified," and "undocumented"); but it is not easy to square the numbers given there—534, 118, 165, and 119 respectively—with the total of 818 items actually listed in the text.
5. Other figures, it seems, were taken to Europe but have not survived, such as the "idols" and "other different instruments of superstition" (*"idoli con altri varii instrumenti superstitiosi"*) that Father Andrea da Pavia brought from Angola to Rome in 1692 (no. 519).
6. *A particular and descriptive Catalogue of the Curiosities natural and artificial in the Lichfield Museum collected (in the space of 46 years) by Richard Greene* (Lichfield, 1786).
7. *A Catalogue of the Rarities to be seen at Adams's at the Royal Swan in Kingsland Road* (3rd ed., London, 1756). The objects listed include "a Tomahawk, or Ethiopian's, or Hottentot Man's Suit of Cloaths"; "Purses of Guinea Grass"; "Queen of Whiddah's Caps of her own making"; and "King of Angola's Scepter."

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