



25-1 Finial of a spokesperson's staff (*okyeame poma*), from Ghana. Ashanti culture, 20th century. Wood and gold, height 11 ¼ inches. Musee Barbier-Mueller, Geneva.

Political power is like an egg, says an Ashanti proverb. Grasp it too tightly and it will shatter in your hand; hold it too loosely and it will slip from your fingers. Whenever the *okyeame*, or spokesperson, for one 20th-century Ashanti ruler was conferring with that ruler or communicating the ruler's words to others, he held before their eyes a staff with this symbolic caution on the use and abuse of power prominently displayed on the gold-leaf-covered finial.

LEADERSHIP

As in societies throughout the world, art in Africa is also used to identify those who hold power, to validate their right to kingship or their authority as representatives of the family or community and to communicate the rules for moral behavior that must be obeyed by all members of the society.

The gold-and-wood spokesperson's staff is an example of the art of leadership (see fig. 25-1). It belongs to the culture of the Ashanti peoples of Ghana, in West Africa, and was probably carved in the 1960s or 1970s by Kojo Bonsu. The son of Osei Bonsu, a famous carver who died in 1977, Kojo Bonsu lives in the Ashanti city of Kumasi and continues to carve prolifically. Gold was a major source of power for the Ashanti, who traded it first via intermediaries across the Sahara to the Mediterranean world, then later directly to Europeans on the West African coast. Along with other peoples of the

region, the Ashanti have used gold for jewelry as well as for objects reserved for the use of rulers, such as the staff.

25-11. *Kente* cloth, from Ghana. Ashanti culture, 20th century. Silk, 6'109/16" x 4'39/16" (2.09 x 1.30 m). National Museum of African Art and National Museum of Natural History, Washington, D.C. Purchased with funds provided by the Smithsonian Collections Acquisition Program, 1983-85, EJ 10583



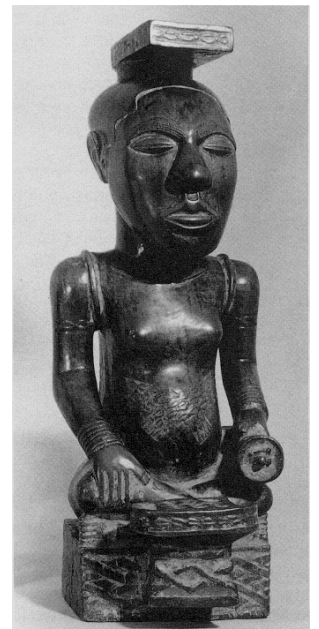
The Ashanti are also renowned for the beauty of their woven textiles, called *kente* (fig. 25-11). Ashanti weavers work on small, light, horizontal looms that produce long, narrow strips of cloth. They begin by laying out the long **warp** threads in a brightly colored pattern. Today the threads are likely to be rayon. Formerly, however, they were silk; which the Ashanti produced by unraveling Chinese cloth obtained through European trade. **Weft** threads are woven through the warp to produce complex patterns, including double weaves in which the front and back of the cloth display different patterns. The long strips produced by the loom are then cut to size and sewn together to form large rectangles of finished *kente* cloth.

The *kente* cloth here began with a warp pattern that alternates red, green, and yellow. The pattern is known as *oyokoman ogya da mu*, meaning "there is a fire between two factions of the Oyoko clan," and refers to the civil war that followed the death of the Ashanti king Osai Tutu in about 1730. Traditionally, only the king of the Ashanti was allowed to wear this pattern. Other complex patterns were reserved for the royal family or members of the court. Commoners who dared to wear a restricted pattern were severely punished. In present-day Ghana the wearing of *kente* and other traditional textiles has been encouraged, and patterns are no longer restricted to a particular person or group.

25-12. Portrait figure (*ndop*) of Shyaam a-Mbul a-Ngwoong, from Zaire. Kuba culture, mid-17th century. Wood, height 21 3/8" (54.5 cm). Museum of Mankind, London

The Kuba people of central Zaire have produced elaborate and sophisticated political art since at least the seventeenth century. Kuba kings were memorialized by portrait sculpture called *ndop* (fig. 25-12). While the king was alive, his *ndop* was believed to house his double, a counterpart of his soul. After his death the portrait was believed to embody his spirit, which was felt to have power over the fertility both of the land and of his subjects. Together, the twenty-two known *ndop* span almost 400 years of Kuba history.

Kuba sculptors did not try to capture a physical likeness of each king. Indeed, several of the portraits seem interchangeable. Rather, each king is identified by an icon, called *ibol*, carved as part of the dais on which he is seated. The *ibol* refers to a skill for which the king was noted or an important event that took place during his lifetime. The *ndop* in figure 25-12 portrays the seventeenth-century king Shyaam a-Mbul a-Ngwoong, founder of the Kuba kingdom. Carved on the front of his dais is a board for playing mancala, a game he is said to have



introduced to the Kuba. Icons of other kings include an anvil for a king who was a skilled blacksmith, a slave girl for a king who married beneath his rank, and a rooster for a twentieth-century king who was exceptionally vigilant.

Kuba *ndop* figures also feature carved representations of royal regalia, including a wide belt of cowrie shells crossing the torso. Below the cowries is a braided belt that can never be untied, symbolizing the ability of the wearer to keep the secrets of the kingdom. Cowrie-shell bands worn on the biceps are called *mabiim*. Commoners are allowed to wear two bands; the royal family wear nine. The brass rings depicted on the forearms may be worn only by the king and his mother. The ornaments over each shoulder are made of cloth-covered cane. They represent hippopotamus teeth, and they reflect the prestige that accrues to a hunter of that large animal. Finally, all of the Kuba king figures wear a distinctive cap with a projecting bill. The bill reminds the Kuba of the story of a dispute that arose between the sons of their creator god in which members of one faction identified themselves by wearing the blade of a hoe balanced on their heads.

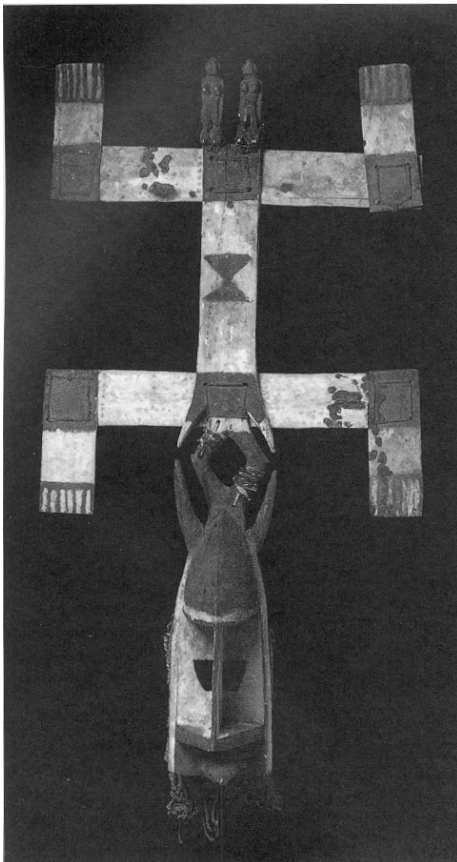


25-13. Ekpo mask, from Nigeria. Anang Ibibio culture, late 1930s. Wood, height 23 5/8" (60 cm). Musee Barbier, Mueller, Geneva

This mask embodies many characteristics the Ibibio find repulsive or frightening, such as swollen features, matte black skin, and large, uneven teeth. The pair of skulls atop the head are potent death imagery. The circular scar on the forehead and the ropelike head-band indicate membership in the diviner's cult, *idiong*, whose members were particularly feared for their supernatural power. The mask is in the style of the Otoro clan from the Ikot Abia Osom area near the city of Ikot Ekpene.

Not all African peoples centralized power in a single ruler. Most of the peoples of southeastern Nigeria, for example, depended on a council of male elders or on a men's voluntary association to provide order in the life of the community. The Anang Ibibio people of Nigeria were formerly ruled by a men's society called Ekpo. Ekpo expressed its power in part through art, especially large, dark, purposely frightening masks (fig. 25-13). In most rituals involving masks, it is "the mask," not the person wearing it, who takes the action. Such masks were worn by the younger members of the society when they were sent out to punish transgressors. Accompanied by assistants bearing torches, the mask would emerge from the Ekpo meetinghouse at night and proceed directly to the guilty person's house, where a punishment of beating or even execution might be meted out. The identity of the executioner was concealed by the mask, which identified him as an impersonal representative of Ekpo in much the same way that a uniform makes it clear that a police officer represents the authority of the state.

DEATH AND ANCESTORS



In the traditional African view, death is not an end but a transition--the leaving behind of one phase of life and the beginning of another. Just as ceremonies marked the initiation of young men and women into the community of adults, so they mark the initiation of the newly dead into the community of spirits. Like the rites of initiation into adulthood, death begins with a separation from the community, in this case the community of the living. A period of isolation and trial follows, during which the newly dead spirit may, for example, journey to the land of ancestors. Finally, the deceased is reintegrated into a community, this time the community of ancestral spirits. The memory of the deceased may be preserved among the living, and his or her spirit may be appealed to for intercession on their behalf with nature spirits or to prevent the spirits of the dead from using their powers to harm.

Among the Dogon people of Mali, in West Africa, the period of mourning following the death of an elder is brought to an end by a ceremony called *dama*, meaning "forbidden" or "dangerous." During *dama*, masks perform in the public square to the sound of gunfire to drive the soul of the deceased from the village. Among the most common masks is the *kanaga*, whose rectangular face supports a superstructure of planks that depict a crocodile or lizard with splayed legs (fig. 25-14).

If the deceased was a man, men from the community later engage in a mock battle on the roof of his home and participate in ritual hunts; if the deceased was a woman, the women of the community smash her cooking vessels on the threshold of her home. These portions of *dama* are reminders of human activities the deceased will no longer engage in. An elaborate *dama* commissioned by a wealthy family may last as long as six days and include the performance of as many as 100 masks. Because a *dama* is so costly, it may be performed for several deceased elders, both male and female, at the same time.

25-14. Kanaga mask, from Mali. Dogon culture, early 20th century. Wood, height 45 inches. Musee Barbier-Mueller, Geneva.



25-15. Reliquary guardian (*nlo byeri*), from Gabon. Fang culture, 19th century. Wood, height 16 7/8" (43 cm) Musée Dapper, Paris.

The Fang people, who live near the Atlantic coast from southern Cameroon through Rio Muni and into northern Gabon, follow an ancestral religion in which the long bones and skulls of ancestors who have performed great deeds are collected after burial and placed together in a cylindrical bark container called *nsekh o byeri*. Deeds thus honored include killing an elephant, being the first to trade with Europeans, bearing an especially large number of children, or founding a particular lineage or community. On top of the container the Fang place a wooden figure called *nlo byeri*, which represents the ancestors and guards their relics from malevolent spirits (fig. 25-15). *Nlo byeri* are carved in a naturalistic style, with carefully arranged hairstyles, fully rounded torsos, and heavily muscled legs and arms. Frequent applications of cleansing and purifying palm oil produce a rich, glossy black surface.

The strong symmetry of the statue is especially notable. The layout of Fang villages is also symmetrical, with pairs of houses facing each other across a single long street. At each end of the street is a large public meetinghouse. The Fang immigrated into the area they now occupy during the early nineteenth century. The experience was disruptive and disorienting, and Fang culture thus emphasizes the necessity of imposing order in a disorderly world. Many civilizations have recognized the power of symmetry to express permanence and stability (see, for example, the Forbidden City in Beijing, China, fig. 21-8).

Internally, the Fang strive to achieve a balance between the opposing forces of chaos and order, male and female, pure and impure, powerful and weak. They value an attitude of quiet composure, of reflection and tranquility. These qualities are embodied in the powerful symmetry of the *nlo byeri* here, which communicates the calm and wisdom of the ancestor while also instilling awe and fear in those not initiated into the Fang religion.

25-16. Ancestor screen (*duen fobara*), from Abonnema village, Nigeria. Kalabari group, Ijo culture, 19th century. The Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

Among the most complex funerary art in Africa are the memorial ancestral screens made during the nineteenth century by the Ijo people of southeast Nigeria (fig. -16). The Ijo live on the Atlantic coast, and with their great canoes formerly mediated the trade between European ships anchored offshore and communities in the interior of Nigeria. During that time groups of Ijo men organized themselves into economic associations called canoe houses, and the heads of canoe houses had much power and status in the community. When the head of a canoe house died, a screen such as the one in figure 25-16 was made in his memory. The Ijo call these screens *duen fobara*, meaning "foreheads of the dead." (The forehead was believed to be the seat of power and the source of success.) The screens are made of wood and cane that were joined, nailed, bound, and pegged together. The assembly technique is unusual, because most African sculpture is carved from a single piece of wood.

Although each screen commemorates a specific individual, the central figure was not intended as a physical likeness. Instead, as is common in Africa, identity was communicated through attributes of status, such as masks, weapons, or headdresses that the deceased had the right to wear or display. The central figure of the example here wears a hat that distinguishes him as a member of an important men's society called *peri*. He is flanked by assistants, followers, or supporters of the canoe house, who are portrayed on a smaller scale. All three figures originally held weapons or other symbols of aggressiveness and status. Other extant screens include smaller heads attached to the top of the frame, perhaps wearing masks that the deceased had commissioned and representation of the severed heads of defeated enemies at the feet of the figures.



Memorial screens were placed in the ancestral altars of the canoe house, where they provided a dwelling for the spirit of the dead, who was believed to continue to participate in the affairs of the house after his death, ensuring its success in trade and war.

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