

# **GESTURES** in **AFRICAN ART**

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african arts

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Gesture—the motion, stance, gaze, and dynamic of body presentation—is central to the form and meaning of African sculpture. From the Medieval Latin, *gestura* (mode of action), gesture includes any distinctive form of body movement, conscious as well as unconscious, meaningful as well as mundane. Hands are particularly important in this regard, but the head and other parts of the body have significant gestural attributes as well. In African art, some gestures are characteristically subtle as, for example, the slight tilt of the head of some Baule figures; other gestures are more obvious as the fistled left hand over right hand of Yoruba Ogboni staffs; a few gestures, such as an Ibo mother suckling her baby (figure 1) are essentially passive; other gestures, as a man raising his hands in the classic caryatid pose (figure 2) are active. Gesture is an implied feature of sculptures such as masks, musical instruments, staffs of office, and divination forms, for each is associated with a specific gestural choreography and manner of display. Even the lack of specific gesture gives a characteristic form and meaning to works such as dolls and bound power figures.

Several scholars have emphasized the importance of gesture in the diverse traditions of African art. William Fagg, for example, has frequently utilized gesture in African art connoisseurship and criticism (1965, 1970a). Robert Thompson has documented the importance of gesture in African aesthetics, positional and dance symbolism, and cosmological diagramming (1971, 1974, 1981). Specific studies in African art have similarly focused on one or another dimension of gesture in the context of Dogon, Lobi, Baule, Ashanti, Yoruba, Bini, Ibo, Bangwa, Bamum, Kongo, Pende, Chokwe, Yaka, and Lega sculptural dynamics.

This essay seeks to pursue a new avenue in the analysis of gesture, by examining the many kinds and levels of meaning conveyed by it and by investigating its significance as stylistic mode, formal device, language, social act, expressive cue, and ideational model. It will be suggested that a variety of factors influence the gestural form in a given artistic work.

Each of these components will be examined. First to be discussed are the stylistic, aesthetic, functional, and

material dimensions of gesture. Following this, the significance of gesture as language will be analyzed in the context of the hand motions represented in African sculptures. The role of gestures in everyday life will then be considered. Particular emphasis will be given to the importance of gestures in conveying the social identity of persons portrayed. In turn, the broader issue of the interactive quality of gesture will be examined, especially as it suggests specific kinds of response. Here the focus will be on the expressive role of gesture as a reflection of social-psychological attitudes and as a medium of dramatic emphasis. Physical deformities, postures assumed in worship and actions related to cosmology will be analyzed subsequently as specific examples within the corpus of gestural iconography.

Finally, the gestures seen in the art of the central Cameroon grasslands will be described in detail and an index of gestures frequently found in grasslands art compiled. Here, as elsewhere, each gesture must be understood as influenced by a multiplicity of factors each of which must be considered as important in understanding the work as a whole.

### **GESTURAL STYLES: The Impact of Artists and their Schools**

Style is one of the principle dimensions of gesture in African sculpture. Each artist's individual approach to form influences the gestural features of his work. Gesture conveys an essential part of the sculptor's unique way of handling a given subject. Consequently, works by many African sculptors can be identified, at least in part, on the basis of distinctive gestural components. That this is the case is clearly stated by the artists themselves. The Yoruba artist Onamosun of Iperu explained that "one of the things that people are talking about when they see my work is my carving of the hands without detaching them from the body with the outer side of the hand flat" (Thompson 1973, p.46). The famous Yoruba carver Bandle, similarly, noted the importance of gesture in his sculptures: "Don't we look at the face . . . and then we look at the hand? Those two places we first take notice of. The body is

not so difficult" (Carroll in Thompson 1973, p.37).

Gesture is a significant part of each artist's stylistic development. Interestingly, it is one of the last things which Yoruba apprentices learn to master. Many young Yoruba carvers begin by carving the small wooden "dolls" whose cylindrical torsos generally lack gestural articulation (Thompson 1971, Ch.13/1 pl.66). Not surprisingly, in the process of learning to carve, certain distinctive gestures are often passed down from master to apprentice (father to son) within a given school. In this way the nuances of gesture help to distinguish the work of a given master from that of his apprentice, a leading artist from his followers. Henry Drewal noted this phenomenon (1980, pl.64-65) in a pair of Yoruba *ibeji* (twin figures) by Akiode, ". . . the massive pierced hands carry over from his father, but the hands become smaller and narrower, and the torsos and limbs more attenuated."

Gestures are also important in identifying the more distinctive substyles (schools) of a group of artists working in a particular area. For this reason gesture is often essential in distinguishing geographical variants of particular sculptural forms. The *ibeji* of the Yoruba are a good example of this. Each major *ibeji* is associated with a distinctive gestural mode: large hands that touch the legs very close to the ground (figure 3) are a frequent feature of the *ibeji* figures from Ibadan; clenched hands detached from the torso are characteristic of *ibeji* from Illaro; long thin fingers joined to the thighs at a ninety degree angle predominate in northern Egbado *ibeji*; splayed fingers held away from the body are characteristic of *ibeji* from Oyo; arms which are extraordinarily long and point down towards the middle of the leg are distinctive of Ijebu *ibeji* sculptures (H. Drewal 1980, Stoll 1980). Gestures distinguish broader ethnic styles as well. The gestures portrayed in the arts of the Chokwe and their neighbors (figure 4) characteristically juxtapose distinctive angular and rigid hand gestures with a rubbery softness in the arms and buttocks. In contrast, Luba gestures (figure 5) often emphasize curving masses and balanced horizontals.

## AESTHETIC AND TEMPORAL DIMENSIONS OF GESTURE

Gestures in African sculpture are not only influenced by the styles of individual artists, schools, and regions but also by particular aesthetic canons incorporated into the design of each sculpture. Such aesthetic factors are culturally and temporally bound. Among the Yoruba, for example, the predominating aesthetic of symmetry (Thompson 1973, p.55) may be conveyed through the balancing of arms and other components within the composition. Yoruba sculptures often emphasize the even placement of hands on the breasts (figure 6), at the sides or on objects which are held. The value the Yoruba place on straightness is conveyed through the vertical alignments of these works. The gestures depicted in Baule sculptures suggest a different underlying aesthetic. Although Baule figures are primarily symmetrical, an element of asymmetry is also introduced. In figure 7 the jaw shifts subtly to the left. Susan Vogel states that in Baule art ". . . asymmetry is a widespread feature . . . appreciated by the critics and consciously produced by the artists. . . ." (1980, p.16).

Similar examples of the interplay of gesture and aesthetics are common among other African peoples. With the Senufo, for example, gestures often emphasize the combination of a precise symmetry of parts with the framing or replication of essential internal features. In figure 8 we see that the hands and torso are organized into a gestural whole which repeats the distinctive heart-shaped form of the head and face. According to Glaze (1981, p.48), the symmetrical pose of female figures on these champion cultivator staffs contrasts with the active, bending and angular movements of the young men working nearby. Dogon aesthetics (figure 9) emphasize a geometric and "analytic" organization of sculptural movement within a tight frame of repeated lines or angles, as when the gesture of the forearms and thighs repeats the line of the breast and chin. Ibo sculptures (figure 10), on the other hand, are often defined within a composition which emphasizes the equal alignment of arms and torso.

Because it derives so clearly from factors of local aesthetics and style, gesture offers an important insight into the historical development of African sculpture. Certain gestures in African art (the splayed fish-terminating legs in southwestern Nigeria, hands in orant position in Mali, hands drawn to the chin in Zaire) have considerable ancestry. These gestures have been documented in archeological artifacts, early cave paintings and works that entered museum collections at an early date (Willett 1967, Bassani 1978, Bontinck 1979, Thompson 1981). Most African gestures change, subtly or strikingly, over time. Within a cultural tradition, certain gestures are more characteristic of early sculptures, while other gestures are found more frequently in late ones. Early Senufo art, for example, is often marked by greater tautness and tension than is generally found in the more recent carvings (Fagg 1965, p.21). Baule figures of the earlier period, in turn, show a subtle but deliberate asymmetry which is rarely carried over in the later works (Vogel 1980). Earlier Ashanti and Fanti *akuaba* dolls are similarly characterized by limbs which are more fully carved than those found in many present examples of that genre (Fagg n.d., p.20).

The recent study by Bedaux among the Dogon (1977) demonstrated that gestures also reflect important temporal shifts in the artistic tradition, Bedaux affirms that the characteristic orant arm gestures and straight lines of certain Tellem style works can be dated to a pre-Dogon period of manufacture, i.e. the period from roughly the eleventh to the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries A.D. The more naturalistic Dogon figures, whose gestures are often those of specific activities, generally date to the later "Dogon" period of carving which flourished from the Fifteenth to Seventeenth centuries and later.

Gestures often reveal the significant influences and paths of an artist, school or tradition. The Mammy Wata figures of the Ogoni (figure 11), Ibibio and other Nigerian coastal peoples often display an extended outward, or upward, arm supporting an undulating neck-wrapping serpent. The form and iconography of this gesture ultimately reflects an

eastern Indian origin (Salmons 1977). Other foreign sources have influenced contemporary works from the coastal area. An Ibibio sculpture of the military-religious heroine Joan of Arc (figure 13; see also figure 12 a French warrior) incorporates the distinctive European-derived gesture and iconography of that saint. Henry Drewal notes (1980, p.68) that in certain Yoruba sculptures, the downward gaze and slight contraposto stance also suggest ties with European traditions. This is also the probable source for articulated arm and, occasionally, leg gestures of Ibibio puppets, Ijaw *duan fubara* screens and related images.

### THE MATERIAL AND FUNCTION OF GESTURE: Medium and Mannerism

One also must consider the importance of material (medium) as influencing gestures in African sculpture. Sculptures in ivory (or those stylistically drawn from this medium - figure 14) incorporate gestures which necessarily conform to the basic tusk form. Works in iron, likewise, show a distinctive resistant bend in their gestures. The influence of material on gesture in works in wood is considerably more varied (compare figures 15 and 17). The gestural dynamism and expression of Lobi sculptures often intentionally draw on the natural curves, bends and texture of the wood. Lobi artists effectively utilize the natural turn of a given branch to reinforce the angling of the upper torso (figure 15). Similarly, forks of a tree can be reshaped into an image with several torsos or a figure with an outstretched arm (figure 16).

Among the Tamberma, the living branch of the tree is considered an essential component of the gestural vitality of each sculpture. I have observed artists gazing up into the branches of a tree while discussing the virtues of a particular section as they mentally superimpose a figure on it, noting the placement of the head, hands, torso, and legs. After discussing several alternatives, one of the artists climbed up to secure the branch chosen for the carving. While such direct use of the form of the living tree is common among Lobi, Dogon and Tamberma sculptures, it is also an occasional feature in the more rigidly defined

works of people such as the Yoruba. In the verandah post from Osi discussed by H. Drewal (1980 p. 22), the sculptor clearly followed the natural curve of the tree in twisting the legs and feet away from the torso.

Certain other gestures are incorporated into African sculptures for functional reasons. Heddle pulleys, for example, frequently show a reshaping of the shoulder and arm in accordance with the working mechanics of these sculptures. Figures on Baule bell beaters (*lawle* or *dawle*) (figure 18) similarly incorporate gestures which conform to the work's functioning handle. It is said that certain Yoruba *ibeji* figures (figure 3) are expressly carved with large hands so that the strings of cowries can be attached to them (Fagg 1970a, pl. 26) Mende twin figures are carved with moveable arms because they can be more easily dressed (Hommel 1974, pl. 74). Functional aspects are also reflected in caryatid figures whose arms extend upwards to suggest support for additional weight or objects (figures 19, 20 and possible figure 2). This is also true of certain stools and possibly figure 2). This is also true of certain stools and headrests, such as those of the Luba and neighboring peoples in Zaire, which frequently show a distinctive hypertrophy of the feet. This stylization seems intended, at least in part, to suggest support for the increased weight. As Fagg and Plass point out (1964, pp. 48-49) "the explanations may sometimes be partly architectonic and in this case it becomes a or the form the stylization."

The various factors which determine how the work will eventually be displayed also influence the selection of certain gestural forms. The outstretched arms of Fanti and Ashanti *akuaba* figures, for example, serve as a means of support when such figures are worn tucked into a woman's wrapper against her back (Thompson 1974, p.53). In Fon and Kongo power figures whose torsos are bound, wrapped, or otherwise covered (figures 21 and 22), one frequently finds a minimalization or outright elimination of gestures because they would eventually be hidden from view. In Fon *gbo* sculptures of this type (figure 22), the body is covered with panels symbolizing the various divination *du* (*odu*) that identify this figure with the god of fate (Herskovits 1967 II, pl. 95).











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## GESTURAL MODES: Hands In Motion

Gestures in African sculptures also constitute a form of visual language. In many African societies the hands themselves are differentiated from each other in the meanings which they convey. Right and left, in other words, are not the same. While exceptions do exist, the right hand in Africa is generally identified with the male, the left with the female, the right hand with physical power (figure 23), the left with spiritual force; the right with clarity, and the left with secrets (Wieschoff 1938, pp.59-60, Zahan 1963, p.26). The essays published by Rodney Needham (1973) on the significance and symbolism of right and left make this clear. A number of the artworks discussed in the catalogue edited by Douglas Fraser (1974) offer further examples of this phenomenon.

In African sculpture the gestural distinctions made between the right and left hands vary considerably. In some Yoruba figures the left and right hands hold different objects or perform different actions (M. Drewal 1980). In Kongo sculpture the positions of hands are often differentiated with respect to height and movement. The Kongo gesture of raised left hand and extended right hand is defined as that of pressing down negative events while moving forward (Thompson 1981, p.123). Mossi sculptures are identified on the basis of their placement to the left or right side of the door (Roy in Vogel 1981, p.35). Occasionally, one hand is given more gestural importance than the other. In Yoruba *edan* Ogboni, for example, the left hand dominates over the right to suggest the primacy of the spirit (H. Drewal 1980, p.32). In "cult of the hand" sculptures of the Ibo, Bini, Igala, Urhobo, and others, the physical strength of the right hand is given primary importance (Vogel 1974, Boston 1977). In certain shrine figures, such as Urhobo spirit images (figure 23), the power of the hand is also emphasized.

Not only are left and right hands differentiated from each other in African art but often each of the fingers of the hand has its own unique symbolism.

Among the Bambara each finger is identified with a different philosophical principle and power (Zahan 1963, p.26). Thus the Bambara associate the thumb with force; it represents weight, speech, power, command, "inner life," and chiefs. Bambara initiation associations, many of which serve as important art patrons, also have distinctive finger gestures. That of the Komo is characterized by the right hand with raised index and little finger, a gesture which signifies both the numbers one and four and the values of "desire" and "judgement" (Zahan 1963, pp.53-54). In other African societies finger gestures are identified with the visual market languages used traditionally to provide a more universal means of communication during trade (Talbot 1912, Schmidl 1915, Zaslavsky 1973). The fisted hand stands for five in most of these systems. Such a gesture, which appears frequently in the art, may be linked conceptually with the ideas of completeness, weight, ownership, success, and wealth.

Carved sculptures of hands, each with a distinctive gesture, also have an important place in African art. The gestures incorporated in these carvings often reinforce the functional associations of these sculptures. The carved hands which support Bena Lulua pipe bowls, for example, incorporate a characteristic pipe cradling gesture. Carved hands of the Kuba grasp the handles of cups, beakers, drums, and ladles. In culture a carving of an arm and hand is intended to signify dispute (Biebuyck 1973, p.188). In the grasslands area of Cameroon a fisted hand was the subject of a Bamum gift to Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany (Krieger 1969 III, pl.96). A fisted hand is also an important motif in Benin royal *ukhurhe* rattle staffs: the thumb surmounting the fist signifies nobility; the hand itself is identified with the gathering of riches (Ben-Amos 1980, pl.58). The fisted hand appears, in turn, as an Ashanti, Fanti and Ewe royal emblem and is described accordingly as "the hand of Lega the king" (Krieger 1969 II, pl.44). An Ashanti painting of an open hand with splayed fingers on the temple of the god Tano is identified by Rattray (1923, p.173) as that of the craftsman: "that is my hand that

did the work." Among the nearby Baule the hand or, more specifically, the hand/arm (*sa*) is the symbol of human activity (Vogel 1980, p.39 note 27). In this, as in other examples cited above, the hand is closely identified with physical prowess, accomplishment and ability. In view of their importance as the subject of sculpture, it is apparent that hand gestures play an important role in the function and symbolism of the work as a whole. As Odugbesan suggests for Yoruba sculpture (1971, p.211) "it is difficult not to read meaning into the position of the hands. . ."

### LIFE IN ART: The Social Psychological Dimensions of Gesture

In order to understand the full significance of gesture in art, one must also consider the multiple roles it plays in everyday life. In daily activities gestures are essential both in clarifying social settings and in conveying attitudes and expressions of personal experience. Gestures help to identify unfamiliar persons and life circumstances. The importance of gestures in everyday action has been examined in detail by Erving Goffman (1959). Robert Hinde, in a similar vein, has observed that (1972, p. xi):

"When we meet a stranger, we form an immediate impression of the sort of man he is. Without thinking we take in small details of how he stands, the way he uses his hands, his eye movements and facial expressions. The conclusions we draw may or may not be correct but they certainly affect our actions. If we talk with him, our words are accompanied by other gestures which may elucidate, emphasize, enhance or even contradict what we say. At the beginning and end of our conversation we may use culturally determined signals such as hand-shaking or hand-waving, which symbolize our readiness to enter into friendly acquaintanceship or our impending departure."

Similarly, in African art, gestures define essential social ideas and situations. In Chowke thrones, for example, major phases and events of life are conveyed through the gestural imagery of the incorporated figures (Kauenhoven-Janzen 1981, p.71). Gestures in Ashanti gold weights similarly are used to identify

special social relationships. In these and other African works, gestures identify the specific roles of persons by their held objects (figure 24), postures and activities (figure 25). Gestures are used to show relationships between persons, such as a mother and child (figure 26), a couple (figure 27) or friends. Gestures also portray a group interaction through spacing, composition and activity. In addition, gestures convey status; they depict social situations (work, conversations, family gatherings), and they identify ceremonies (figure 28). Gestures furthermore incorporate rules of etiquette, courtesy, protocol. They serve as an accompaniment to words—louder, just right, don't enter (figure 29), over there—providing emphasis and focusing attention. They imply movement and define points of origin and direction of action (figure 30). They suggest age as well as alliances with other persons, animals (figure 31) and places. Finally, gestures reflect particular moods and attitudes—restful, tense (figure 32), meditative, curious, self-assured.

African art in this way employs a wide variety of gestures to reveal the social identities of persons and activities portrayed. A good example of this diversity can be seen in the sculptural representations of African elders and male leaders. Among the Chowke, for example, powerful men and elders are portrayed in the seated "hocker" position, with elbows resting on upraised knees (Lima 1971, pp.291-292). Teke sculptures representing doctor-judges (*ganga*) are defined by a modified version of this same gesture (Lehuard 1974, pp.62-64). When making an oath for important matters, Kongo ritual leaders are represented by the distinctive gesture of left hand on hip and right hand raised supporting a staff (Thompson 1981, p.89). Baule elders, in contrast, are identified by the gesture of touching their elegant, carefully carved beards (Ravenhill 1980, p.12). Lega sculptures representing elderly Bwami initiates are recognized instead through gestural caricature. In these sculptures a total body gesture of rounded back and stooped posture suggests the enormous weight of their years and responsibilities (Biebuyck 1973, pl.64). Lega figures with one or both arms raised portray per-

sons who serve as local arbiters in feuds or quarrels (Biebuyck 1973, pl.66).

Women's roles are also identified by gestural references. In Yoruba sculptures females with hands on the solar plexus may represent expectant women (Odugbesan 1971, p.211). Among the Dogon pregnancy is suggested by the gesture of arms resting against the abdomen (figure 9). Sculptures with this gesture are found on altars dedicated to women who died while pregnant (Dieterlen 1981, p.16). In Kongo art the female gesture of palms against the stomach suggests that she is in ". . . communication with the child within her womb" (Thompson 1981, p.76). One might hypothesize that related female gestures elsewhere in African art convey similar ideas (figures 33, 34, see also 7, 28).

Another important female gesture shows the placement of hands on the breast. For the Yoruba this gesture suggests the nursing mother (figure 6), and as an extension of this, the general idea of motherhood and generosity (Thompson 1974, p.73). Among the Baule and Ashanti hands supporting the breasts indicates the importance of maternal nurturing (Holas, n.d. p.28, McLeod 1981, p.176). In Yoruba Ifa tappers a woman kneeling is said to represent a woman giving birth (Rowland Abiodun, *Personal communication* 1982). Among the Yaka, the orant-display image (figure 35) suggests the idea of sexual provocation (Bourgeois 1982, p.480).

Courtesy and protocol are also shown in the gestures of certain African sculptures. Kneeling is considered to be a gesture of courtesy and respect when addressing elders or superiors in many African cultures (Thompson 1974, pp.80-82). A small Pende figure of three young women with arms raised, one less high than the others, suggests Pende protocol requiring that "the inferior must follow the superior and not precede it" (de Sousberghe 1959, p.109). The gesture associated with making requests of Ashanti nobles is that of cupping one hand inside the other (McLeod 1981, p.175). In carvings of Chowke chiefs such homage is characterized by placing the hands in front, one above the other, parallel to the ground (Bastin 1968, p.74).

In grasslands Cameroon sculpture the gesture of hands raised to the mouth is identified similarly as that used when approaching a king (see below). In Benin sculpture the gesture of holding the king's arms marks the traditional stance of deference towards royalty in that society (Ben-Amos 1980, p.48).

A number of sculptures used in initiation and divination by various Bantu groups of South and East Africa also incorporate gestures which define social norms and codes of conduct (Cory 1956, Turner 1961, Biebuyck 1973). Such figures often portray persons whose lives or character are less than ideal. One Ndembu divination figure resting his elbows on his knees and supporting his chin in his hands (a modified hocker pose) represents a man who is "irresolute" and "changeable" — "the person who is all things to all people" (Turner 1961, pp.9-10). Among the Chokwe sculptures of persons in coitus are intended to portray adultery and the concomitant problems of disease (Lima 1971, p.292). With the Lobi sculptures which portray sexual acts (figure 27) are identified with bachelors (Meyer 1981, p.108).

Figures with arms bound in front or in back of the body constitute another distinctive group. This gestural attribute denotes slaves or prisoners (figure 36). However, Tagliaferri and Hammacher (1974, p.24) point out that in Sierra Leone a new ruler is associated with a similar gesture which, in this case, shows submission to his people rather than servile status. In other contexts hands placed behind the back suggest difficulty and stress. Among the Lobi this gesture is associated with anguish as, for example, when one is faced with an enemy (Meyer 1980, p.104). Among the Bangwa and other Cameroon grasslands groups (see below) the placement of the arms behind the head suggests a brooding person, someone who is bothered by spirits, or a child who is contemplating. Among the Kongo the hands behind the back gesture is found on figures that are seen to protect one against poison (Krieger 1965 I, pl.197). This same gesture is frequently found on Kuba and Lele cups used to dispense poison as a test of guilt (Wassing 1968, pl.58).

Other gestures which convey personal emotions and

expressions are also important in African art. A clenched fist, for example (figure 32), often suggests a state of physical readiness and heightened feeling. The extended fistful arms of Urhobo *ivri* (cult of the hand) figures (figure 23), similarly reflect the importance of physical control, in this case as a distinctive attribute of household power (Vogel 1974, p.12). The gesture of extended arms in Kongo imagery defines both the pose of the guilty, begging person, and the judge's potential row and related expressions of hardship and distress. with generosity and good fortune (Thompson 1981, pp.115, 118-9).

Still other gestures are used to portray sadness, sorrow, and related expressions of hardship and distress. The standard image of mourning and sorrow in many cultures of Zaire (including the Kongo, Chokwe, Luba, Ndembu, among others) is that of drawing the hand upwards to clasp or support the head, neck (figure 4), cheek, or chest (compare figure 37), as if weeping or pondering in grief (Laman 1953 I, p.256, Turner 1961, pp.60-61, Lima 1971, p.256, Thompson 1974, p.72, Thompson 1981, pp.73, 99). There are multiple variations on this gestural theme among these groups. The Chowke gesture of the hand on the mouth signifies someone with no chance in life (Lima 1971, p.293). In Kongo sculptures both arms drawn upwards towards the mouth connotes enormous grief; arms held aloft indicate crying or lamentation; touching the chin or cupping it with one's hand suggests the state of pondering and sadness; wrapping one arm about the body portrays loneliness and self comfort; stretching one's arms shows that one is hungry; crossing one's arms before the chest communicates coldness and silence; placing one's hands on the stomach or in an akimbo position expresses idleness; and a hand hanging loosely by the side suggests shame (Laman 1953 I, pp.43-4, Thompson 1974, p.73, Thompson 1981, pp.87, 89, 121). The Lobi gestures of mourning and despair similarly show a diversity of forms. Figures with gestures of mourning are called *bateba yadawora* and are intended to assure that a person will not be consumed with self-pity (Meyer 1981, pp.104, 108). Variations include hands pointing straight upwards

(figure 39), towards the head or shoulder, towards the mouth or chin, or placed behind the back.

Gestures are also important in emphasizing particular expressions which are at base verbal. As Dominique Zahan explains for the Bambara (1963, p.25):

"The Bambara accompany their discourses with hand gestures. While a man talks, his hands react like antennae trying to direct the speech or to encircle it to put it where it is necessary . . . They follow closely the intonations of the voice, the affirmation, the interrogation, and the exclamations. Defenses and desires pass through them, as if the verb becomes more efficacious when carried by the ends of the fingers. To bind the hands of a person is to lessen his speech.

In African sculpture too, gestures often are used as an extension of speech. One of the most frequently seen of these gestures shows the hands being brought upwards toward the chin or mouth. This gesture is common in sculptures of the Bafo and Bakundu of southern Cameroon where it suggests the idea of swearing an oath (Fagg 1968, pl.165). A single finger drawn up to the mouth represents the same idea among the Kongo and Cameroon grasslands groups (Gebauer 1964, p.98). Pende sculptures which incorporate a hand gesturing towards the mouth define instead the moment of surprise when learning about some shocking news (de Sousberghe 1959, p.109). Similarly, the hand to the mouth gesture in Chokwe art is used to portray one who is startled, shocked or astonished on hearing secret information (Kauenhoven-Janzen 1981, p.72). Among the Luba four figures with this gesture are worn by women during delivery (Krieger 1965 II, pl.235), suggesting perhaps the newsworthiness and heightened excitement of this occasion.

In the Cameroon grasslands area (see below) distinctively angular and anguished gestures are used to represent persons suffering from the effects of serious illness, loneliness or witchcraft. Among the nearby Ibo, Ibibio and Yoruba (figures 40,41) distortions of the face are also common. Many of these distorted facial expressions are used to portray social outcasts

and "outsiders." These anguished facial gestures, like those discussed above, underscore the association of distortions and overt expression with situations and circumstances of stress.

### INTERACTION AND EMPHASIS IN GESTURAL SIGNALS

Gesture also plays an important role in social interaction. George Herbert Mead (1934) observed that gestures function as stimuli for specific forms of response. For example, a gesture of aggression may evoke in the observer a response of protection, aggression or subservience. Gestures in sculpture similarly call for particular forms of viewer response. The Mambila gesture of arms outstretched to the side is identified as a protective (guardianship) pose (Fagg 1968, pl.206) and may cause the viewer to respond with a sense of either security or fear depending on his or her role and relationship to the sculpture.

The gestures of certain Lobi sculptures can also be best understood in this way. This is particularly true of the so-called sorcerer figures (*bateba duntundara*) which are intended to protect Lobi houses from potential malevolence (i.e. witches, ghosts, intruders) (Meyer 1981. pp.56, 86, 88). Lobi gestures which fulfill this function include: figures turning the head to the side (a signal of attentiveness), figures raising one or both arms above the head (a gesture of protection and defense—figure 16, 29), a figure stretching out its arms horizontally (to bar enemies from entering the house), and a figure in a seated position with legs outstretched. While most "lame *bateba*" sit flat on the ground and call for help when threatened with danger, some seated figures also surmount staffs (figure 15). These sculptures draw their considerable power from an ability to convey to the viewer a sense of immediate danger and potential force.

The interactive role of gesture is also important in other African art. The image of a Yoruba Shango priest raising his double celt standards (figure 24) during a ceremony will no doubt evoke a different reaction in the viewer than that by the image of a young mother offering her breasts (figure 6). Gestures, in this

way, help to channel the viewer's emotional response to a work. Gestures also draw the viewer into the composition. Note how the carving of an exuberant mother presenting her child in public (figure 42) pulls us into the action through the vibrant gestures of the forward-thrusting child. The Ibo figure of a woman (figure 10) similarly draws us into the work through the gesture of her outstretched hands, a gesture which, according to Herbert Cole (in Drewal 1977, p.37), conveys both the idea of a deity's request for recognition and devotion and his or her generosity to faithful worshippers. Likewise, the small *asuman* figures of the Ashanti often incorporate a carved scoop or cup in place of an extended right hand (McLeod 1981, p.704). This gestural attribute is intended to suggest to the beholder that offerings to the sculpture are required. Other gestures in African art are identified with interaction within the sculptural grouping itself. A mother and child, for example, may show gestures which are primarily towards each other. Or, in larger sculptural groupings such as Gelede and Epa mask superstructures, certain figures are carved so that their gestures interact with those of other figures in the overall sculptural composition.

An additional role fulfilled by gesture is that of directing the viewer's attention to essential details in the whole. In art, as in life, our eye will generally follow the dominant gestural line. The gesture of a mother with hands reaching out towards her child (figure 42) directs one's attention to the child's face, reinforcing the maternal theme. The gesture of a hand raised to stroke an elegant beard, likewise, draws our eye to the beard, identifying both the masculinity of the figure and his status as elder. In sitting or kneeling figures, the depiction of hands resting on the knees reinforces the stability and seated quality of persons portrayed in these works.

Another important role of gesture in art is a dramaturgical one. Dramatic gestures give vibrancy, poignancy and affirmation to the central expressions and ideas being conveyed. In certain forms of drama (mime and dance) facial and body gestures are the principal means through which character, feelings



and interrelationships are expressed. In African sculptures which are intended for use in dramatic performance (figure 43) gestures take on a similar importance as through them specific persons and situations must be accurately portrayed to an audience. Often these figures are made with moving parts which further aid in the depiction of character and development of ideas. The dramaturgical role of gesture is also frequently seen in ceremonial contexts. The following description of a Fang judge makes the point:

“As he walks, he carries in his hands the symbol of his authority—the fly whisk (*akwa*)—for the disputants are but flies to him. As he examines the arguments of first one side and then another, he shifts the fly whisk back and forth to the appropriate hand. Finally at the conclusion when judgement is delivered the fly whisk is placed in the hand on the side of those who have greater cause. . .”  
(Fernandez 1973, p.208)

Elsewhere in Africa, fly whisks are also used to emphasize the drama of important occasions; at times such fly whisks appear in the art as well (figure 44).

For such studies of gesture and drama, the field of kinesics which investigates body movement and expression in minute detail is providing many new insights. Kinesic analysts such as Birdwhistell (1968) and his followers have used movie cameras and slow motion projections to isolate elements of gesture and to specify their relationships and grammar. Such studies are potentially of great importance for studies in African art in that they may help to clarify particularly complex gestures such as those of dance and ceremony. Margaret and Henry Drewal, Robert Thompson and others have effectively used such techniques in analyzing some of the more complex gestural forms of African sculpture and dance.

#### **GESTURES OF WORSHIP: Hands of the Divine**

Many gestures in African art are references to religious ceremonies, sacred greetings, priests, and divinities. In Yoruba sculpture the diversity of such gestures is particularly striking. Indeed, it is through gesture that many Yoruba sculptures can be identified with





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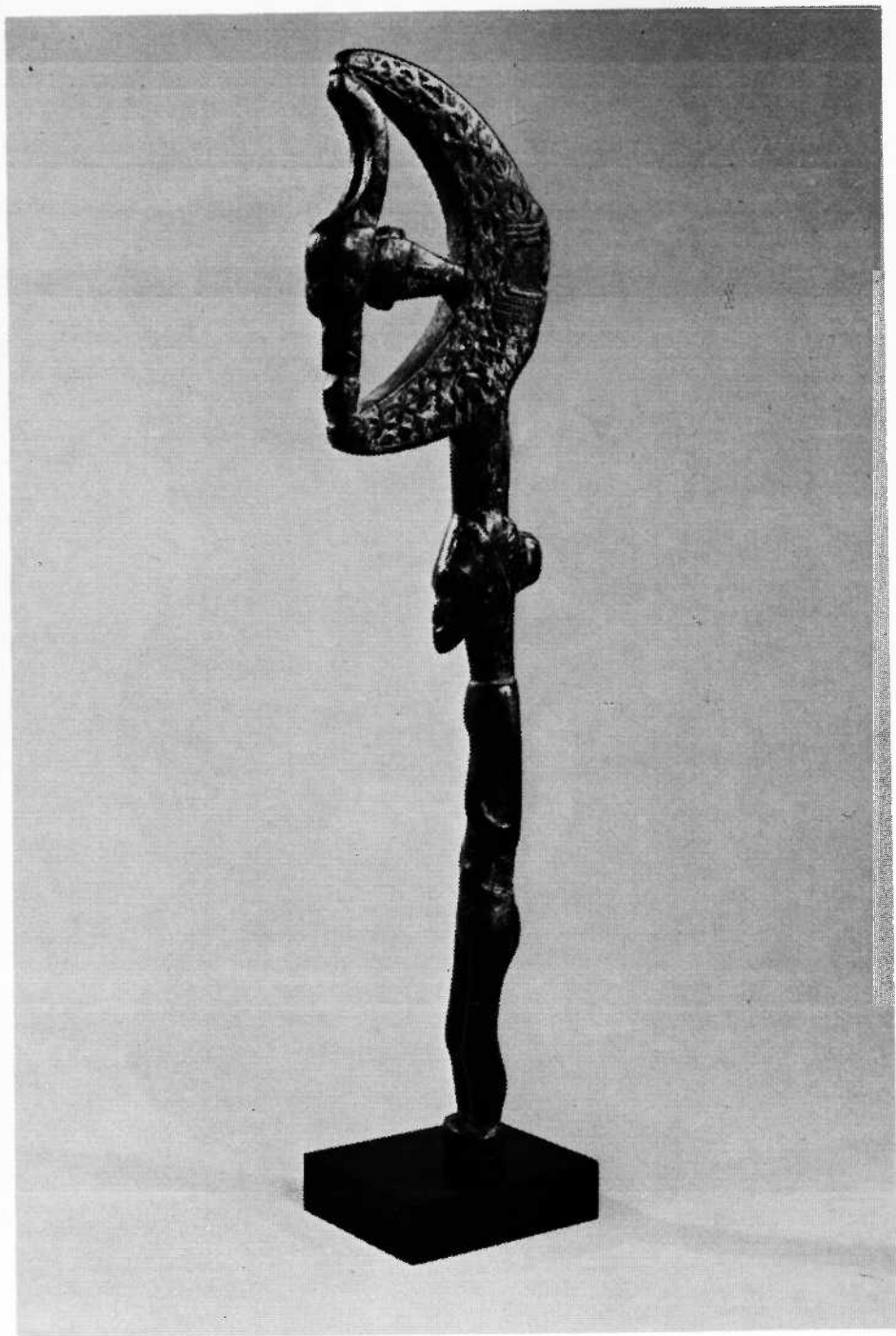


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religious themes (Williams 1964, Thompson 1971, H. Drewal 1980, Fagg and Pemberton 1982) Yoruba sculptures for Ogboni (Osugbo), the association dedicated to the Earth, are identified by the distinctive gesture of left hand fist over right hand to hide an extended right thumb. According to Henry Drewal (1980, p.32), this gesture alludes to both the primacy of spiritual matters over secular ones and the vital role of oaths of secrecy symbolized by the extended thumb. In contrast, the Yoruba Oro brotherhood is identified through the orant positioning of bull roarers and, in some cases, by depicting the figure suspended upside down, a reference to victims of Oro executions. The sculptures for Ogun, the god of iron and war, are characterized both by actions related to smithing and by the waving of fan-like Ogun insignia. Sculptures dedicated to Eshu, the trickster-messenger deity, are often associated with thumb-sucking or whistle-blowing gestures. Shango, god of lightning and thunder, is represented both by the action of balancing two celts on top of the head and by gestures in which rattles and Shango staffs are displayed (figure 24). Obalufon, the god of peace and weaving, is associated with the gesture of two fists closed side by side. Finally, *ibeji*, the memorial twin figures, are identified with a characteristic frontal pose, the hands held rigidly at the side (figure 3).

The association of gesture with religious ceremony is clear among other African groups as well. In Kongo art one sees a variety of such religious gestures (Thompson 1981, pp.75-76, 87, 89, 244, Thompson in Vogel 1981, pp. 209-210). The arms akimbo gesture, for example, denotes spiritual readiness; palms drawn to the stomach is the position of prayer (*simbidila*); the related gesture of one hand fixed above the other on the stomach suggests the dichotomy of clarity and mystery. Hands raised to heaven is used to portray a person who is invoking the power and authority of god. The gesture of touching the finger to the lips characterizes a ritual expert offering a blessing or invocation.

Ashanti standing figures with their legs crossed left over right (a reversal of the norm) represent *asuman* priests (McLeod 1981, p.126). Among the Kaka of

northern Cameroon a priest praying to the god Nwie, creator of Earth and sky, is identified by the gesture of right hand outstretched, palm up (Gebauer 1964, p.26). Mambila sculptures which depict a person praying to the spirits for life show arms held tightly to the chest (Gebauer 1979, p.209). Among the Baule several other gestures have been identified as important in religious ceremony (Guerry 1975, pp.162-165). The first of these, the right hand clasped in the palm of the left, is used in ceremonies to supplicate the Earth, particularly after a crime against the Earth has been committed. The second, the index finger placed in the left ear, is used in making sacrifices to the animal mask Dye. This gesture is employed while applying palm wine to the surface of the mask. Though the exact meaning is unknown, figure 45, with upraised arm and palm forward (second arm missing), is possibly a variant of a worshipper pose.

Dogon gestures also convey religious ideas and ceremonies. These are described in detail by Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen (1965, p.354). Sculptures with both arms raised and the hands joined are identified with prayers to Amma (god). The related gesture of arms raised with palms turned upward, toward the sky, is defined as a prayer for rain. A variant of this gesture, with one palm open and the other closed, asks for rain but only in moderation (Leuzinger 1960, pl.6). A kneeling figure covering his face has been identified as Dyougou Serou, the ancestor, the ancestor who brought death to the Dogon as a consequence of the act of incest. Dyougou Serou covers his face with his hands to show his shame (Laude 1973, pl.1-4). The hands in this gesture direct us to his mouth, the locus of his great gift to mankind—language. Dogon masks are also identified through particular gestural attributes. Yasinge, the Dogon mask representing the woman who discovered the red fibers associated with the first death (Zahan 1969, p.77), has a distinctive raised arm gesture (figure 46). According to Dieterlen (1960, p.851), the essentially abstract Kanaga mask of the Dogon incorporates a stylized gesture identified with the act of creating the heavens and Earth.

## GESTURES OF COSMOLOGY: Body Motion and The World

Other gestures portrayed in African sculpture serve as references to cosmologies. According to Bambara accounts (Zahan 1963, p.49), in the beginning humans lived in a golden era, expressing themselves exclusively through gestures. It is explained that gesture dominated this period which saw the creator's greatest cosmogonic work. As the Bambara view it, it was gesture that made creation possible. Among the nearby Dogon gestures similarly play an important role both in representing central ideas about the cosmos and in showing the place of man within it (Griaule and Dieterlen 1965, pp.353-355). In Dogon art the gesture of both arms raised vertically with the palms in front is intended to suggest the descent of the first humans (*nommo*). The gesture of arms drawn downward, nearly the length of the body, recalls the original descent of the *nommo* out of the primeval egg. One arm raised above the head denotes both the time before creation and the ultimate placement of man in the center of the cosmos; this gesture serves to indicate both the *nommo*'s future role as organizer and his place at the center of the universe. Two arms spread outward with the palms in front expresses the *nommo*'s role as guardian of space; the arms are spread to show that he is owner of the world. The related gesture of arms spread outward but with flattened hands represents the great descending rainbow. A sculpture of iron and copper incorporating a pair of branching "arms" (*tao*) without a body is seen as the balancing of Earth and Sky. Finally, the incorporation of straight legs, carved as if they were devoid of joints, is identified with the earth's solid foundation. The heavens find frequent representation in the gestures of other African sculptures as well. The *niombo* figures of the Kongo display a gesture—the raising of the right hand and the lowering of the left hand—identified both with the sun at its zenith and with the horizon (Thompson 1981, p.28). Gestures such as these offer evidence of the importance of gesture in conveying African ideational and metaphysical principles.

## BODY ALTERATIONS AS GESTURAL EXPRESSION

Some of the most interesting gestures in African art are those associated with body alterations and deformities, the one-legged, no-headed, no-armed images, and similar forms that deviate from nature. Not all African societies use such images. Susan Vogel notes (1980, p.40, note 41) that among the Baule "the idea of representing a cripple at all is an alien one. . ." Nonetheless, there are many cultures in which such figures frequently appear—Lobi, Mambila, Lega, Pende, Yaka, and Chowke being among the more common. What distinguishes these works is their association with social inadequacy and incompleteness. Because deformity figures generally show missing or distorted gestural attributes, such sculptures intrinsically suggest a stigmatized social role and identity. As Erving Goffman has suggested (1963) for similar circumstances in life, the stigma of deformity precludes full social acceptance.

Among the Pende, sculptures with a single arm and leg define the idea of extreme loneliness. As de Sousberghe describes these sculptures (1959, p.109), they represent the idea that "I am alone, I have neither relative nor friend (to defend me)." The one-armed sculpture of the Lega similarly portrays a man named Kuboko Kumozzi ("one arm"), a quarrelsome person whose disfigurement is the result of his aggressiveness (Biebuyck 1972, p.17). Wayinda, the Lega sculpture missing both arms, is also identified with anti-social behavior; in this case, adultery. Biebuyck suggests that such armless figures convey the aphorism "the little maiden used to be beautiful and good; adultery is the reason that she perished" (1973, pl.69). *Homoi* medicine figures from Sierra Leone which are carved with bent necks depict punishment for social transgression (Hommel 1974, fig.50). Grasslands Cameroon sculptures missing a major member represent criminals (see below).

Among the Yaka a grouping of sculptures showing disfigurements (one arm, one breast, one eye, etc.) are used to define distinctive forms of *mbwoolo* sickness



(Bourgeois 1979, p.60). Among the Nguu of Tanzania illness-causing sorcerers are shown turned on their heads (Cory 1956, pp.48-49). A Rotse figure whose head can be removed is said to be inhabited by a spirit (Reynolds 1963, fig. 3c). Another type of Rotse figure in which gestural features are articulated on only half the body represents a madness-causing, half-human creature called Mwenda-Njangula or Mwenda Lutaka (Reynolds 1963, pp.50 and 65). Bush spirits who cause similar illnesses are represented by the Senufo in figures with feet turned backwards or transformed into fins (Glaze 1978, p.65).

Among the many deformities in African art those created by Lobi artists are among the most diverse. Lobi figures of this type are said to represent *ti bala* ("extraordinary persons") and are viewed as especially dangerous because of their incompleteness and deformity (Meyer 1981, p.95). These figures protect the house by frightening away all who would do it harm. Lobi sculptures show horrific deformities such as a head surmounting a single leg, a person missing an arm or leg, a figure with three or more arms, a person with two or more heads, or a person with three or more legs supporting a single torso. Similar deformities also appear in sculptures of Northern Nigeria and Cameroon (figures 47 and 48).

Also of interest are those African dolls whose limbs are deliberately underdeveloped. Among the Ashanti, McLeod suggests (1981, p.174) this lack of gestural articulation "fits in with the *akuaba's* role as images of potential beings, children who cannot assume their own characters and roles until late in life." Robert Thompson notes similarly (1974, p.53) that the lack of feet on many of these figures reinforces the ideas of social dependency.

African sculptures that are characterized by the over-representation of gestures through their incorporation of multiple heads and supplementary members form an interesting corpus. What unites this group is the increased power, strength and presence that results from gestural surplus or abundance. The Benin figure of Ofoe has four legs so that it can travel between the earth and sky (Ben-Amos 1980, pl.49).

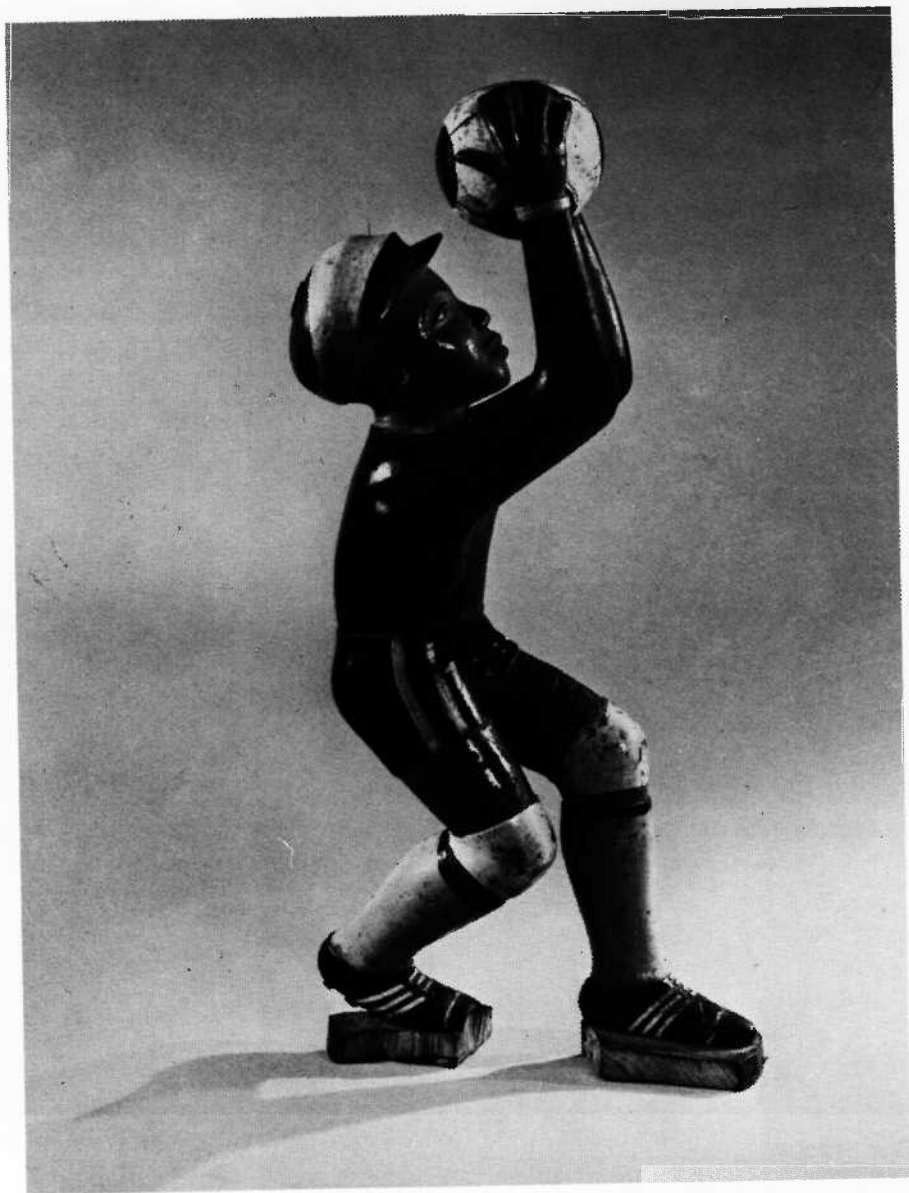
Among the Northern Mburi (Cameroon) a seven-legged palm-guarding figure is said to easily outrun thieves (Gebauer 1979, p.185).

Janus figures whose adorsed position doubles the gestural and directional possibilities also represents a distinct grouping of forms. Among the Teke such Janus figures are a special prerogative of great chiefs (Lehuard 1974, pl.37). With the Chowke Janus figures are said to have unique polyvalent functions (Lima 1971, p.266). Among the Fon to the west Janus Bochio sculptures are used as powerful house guardians capable of catching thieves in front and behind (Herskovits 1967 II, pl.78). With the Dogon Janus figures are associated with the increased power of the two sky *nommo* (Griaule and Dieterlen 1965, pl.18). Among the Ejagham, Eastern Ibo and related peoples of the Cross River, Janus masks convey the ideas of heightened power and protection, particularly in the context of warfare (Blier 1981a). Although figure 49 is not Janus, often masks of this type are.

Clearly these diverse examples of gestural deformities, deficiencies and overabundance share much in common. Some, like the Janus works, use their excess gestural powers to convey great strength, force and status. Others may suggest, through their absence or distortion of essential limbs or parts, the idea of stigmatized behavior or social incompleteness (figure 46 and 49). Piet Meyer explains this phenomenon most clearly for the deformity figures of the Lobi (1981, p.95):

"Naturally the janus *bateba* looking in different directions is a better watchman than an ordinary *bateba*. Naturally a *bateba* with four arms can slug faster than a *bateba* with two arms. What does one make of a *bateba* with one arm? . . . They, too, have special superhuman power and capability. . . In no case will the Lobi see these as the product of sickness or illness — but as extraordinarily strong and powerful. What we are seeing here is more the rule that among the Lobi a being is stronger in look and character the less it resembles a human."



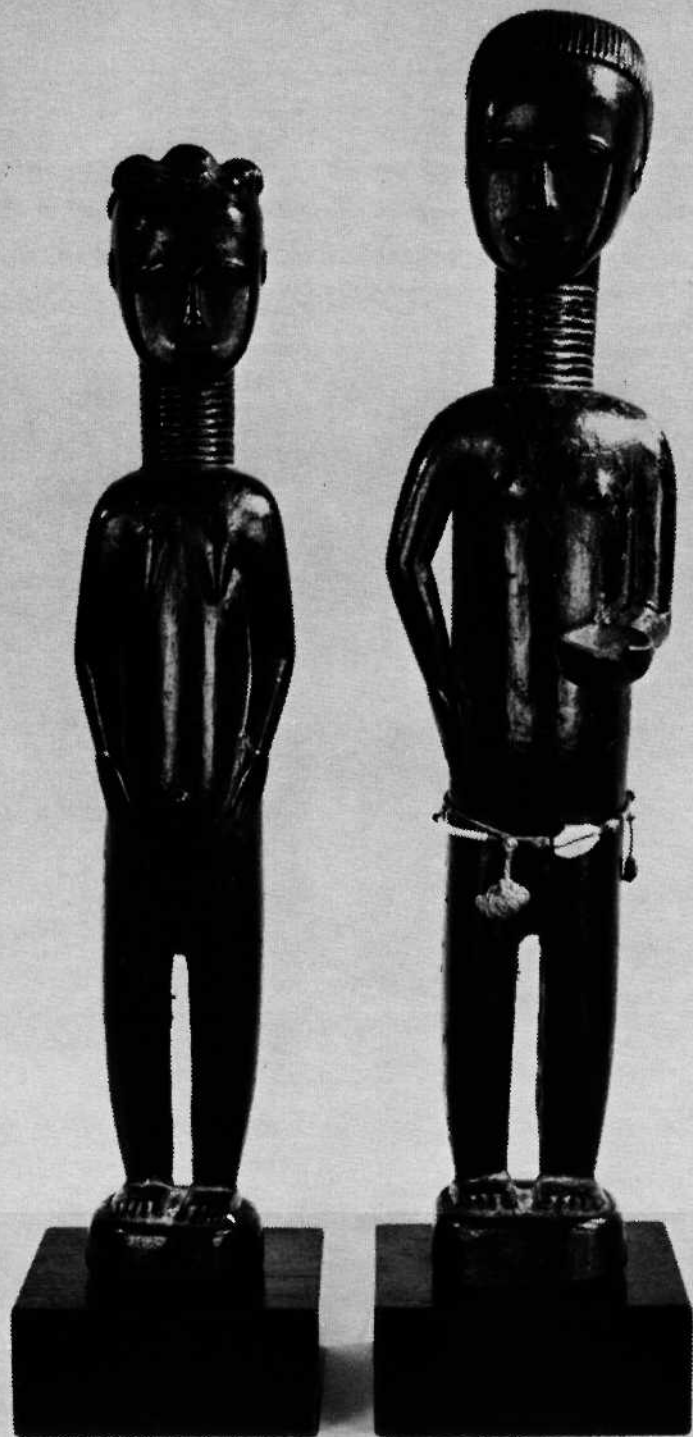


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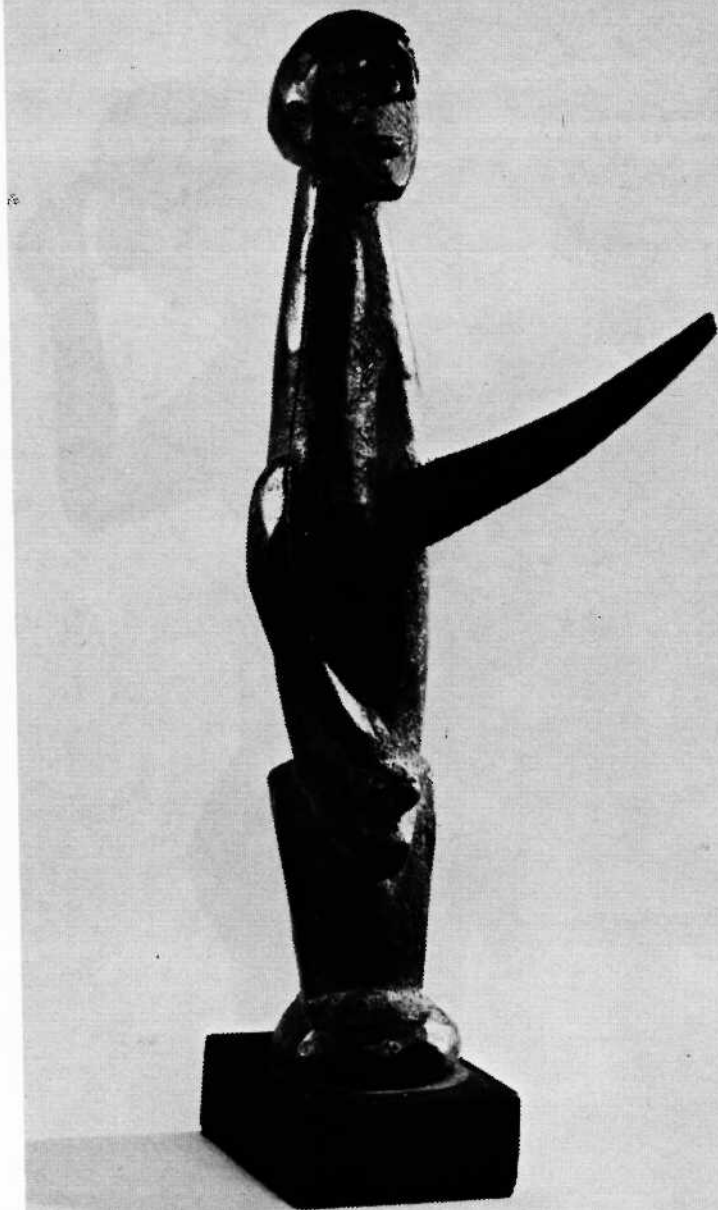




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### CAMEROON: The Meeting of Gesture, Meaning and Form

The Cameroon grasslands is one of the areas of African art richest in gestural form and meaning. Grasslands sculpture shows a vitality of movement which is present in few other works of African art. In these works, there is considerable concern for capturing the subtleties of situations and persons (figure 50). As Brian and Pollock explain (1971, p. 121),

. . . often a twisted head or a bent shoulder. . . is intended to betray the human (who served as model)  
. . . The important feature of these carvings is that they are intended to show likeness: the sitter's features, expression, and stance.

In one sculpture the artist represented the chief's distinctive lop-sided mouth (Brian and Pollock 1971 p.122) (compare figure 51). In another sculpture, the artist had seen a boy sitting by the roadside removing jiggers from his toes and incorporated this lively gesture into a carving (Egerton 1939, p.219, pl. 120).

Although most grasslands art incorporates the attributes of period, culture, styles, materials, and models, the language of gesture also reflects a broader basis of meaning and form relationships. Several sources for this gestural language have been defined. First, because a number of the figural sculptures were traditionally reserved for the king, one of the obvious sources of gesture is court life itself. Accounts and observations of life, ritual, courtesy, and custom in the palaces of the grasslands kings are particularly important in this light. Descriptions of the court by Ritzenhaler (1966, pp. 143 and 27) indicate the role of gesture in palace interactions. Here Ritzenhaler describes the interaction between a servant who is being honored and the Fon (chief):

Observing the proper way of addressing the Fon, this young man bows slightly and speaks through cupped hands. . . The young man knelt down before the chief holding his hands together. Aboumbi grinned. . . Dipping his fingers into a wooden bowl held by an *enchinda* (servant), a bowl Kimi had often clasped, the Fon rubbed the

young man's head with a red mixture of powdered camwood and water. . . The Fon raised Kimi to his feet, then motioned to another *enchinda* to bring up the gifts.

Other important sources for gestural iconography in grasslands sculpture are found in the system of "spider divination" (*ngam*) widely distributed throughout this area and described in detail by Paul Gebauer (1964) *Ngam* utilizes a series of carved chips, each cut or incised with symbols conveying ideas of Cameroon society. The symbolic codes on these chips frequently use gesture as a shorthand sign for specific problems, activities and emotions. A number of these gestures find references in grasslands art (see below). Even more than the gestural features of the palace, the *ngam*-defined gestures emphasize sculptural subtleties, deviations, abnormalities, and expressions.

The gestures employed in the grasslands area will be discussed in the following "lexicon" divided into several broad, but interrelated categories: rulership; occupation and rank; family; criminals and prisoners; and disease, witchcraft and outcasts. Each gesture is summarized below with its source abbreviated as follows: B & P (Brian and Pollock 1971- Bangwa), Geb a (Gebauer 1964); Geb. b (Gebauer 1979); Gea-a (Geary 1981a-Bamum); Gea-b (Geary 1981b Bamum); L (Lecoq 1953 - Bamileke); N (Northern 1973 - Kom); T (Thompson 1974 - Kom). Such a lexicon, drawn from field documented works of art, is of importance primarily for comparative purposes, both in Cameroon grasslands works not documented with field data and for discussions of gesture in Africa in general.

The largest category of grasslands images discussed here is associated with rulership. These sculptures portray chiefs, royal princes and princesses, and the wives and mothers of rulers.

#### RULER ENTHRONED

A man on an elaborately carved stool (B & P). This posture is assumed for formal state occasions, annual ceremonies, judgements, and the weekly display of court warriors (Gea-a).

#### RULER IN "SERENE" POSITION OF POWER

A man seated, one hand supporting his chin, the other resting on his knee (B & P).

#### RULER WITH ACCOUTREMENTS OF RANK

A man in court dress (royal hat, bracelets, loin-cloth) holding a drinking horn, calabash, or pipe (B & P). Figure often carries the "bag of the land" which contains the drinking horn and the most personal goods of the king (Gea-a).

#### RULER ON A TRIP

A man on a horse (L).

#### VICTORIOUS RULER

A man with a machete in one hand and a head in the other (L).

#### WARRIOR RULER

A man with a palm wine gourd in the right hand, a head in the left (L).

#### RULER'S MOTHER

Woman holding scepter or staff of office.  
Woman holding kola nuts in her hands (N).  
Woman clapping in salutation to the king (*Fon*) (T).

#### PRINCESS ROYAL

Woman in man's loin cloth carrying pipe or drinking horn (Geb. b).

#### RANKING WIFE OF RULER

Woman in royal jewelry, holding a calabash in one hand, a bamboo flute in the other (B & P). The calabash is used to fill her husband's drinking horn, the flute for dances reserved for royal wives (B & P).

The various gestures of rulership outlined above have several features in common. First, dominant postures are emphasized: the ruler is seated squarely on his throne; the ruler or royal family stand formally; their hands hold important accoutrements of power. These gestures indicate the authority, dignity and magnetism of the ruler and his family. They share his reliance on court regalia, accoutrements and postures to clarify the distinctively royal stature.



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The next grouping of gestures, those of occupation and rank, overlap with the above in their use of accoutrements of power. Most gestures in this category, however, are also differentiated through subtle shifts of props or positioning.

#### FUNERAL PARTICIPANT

A man shooting a rifle towards the ground (L).

#### HONOR GUARD

A man blowing a trumpet (L).

#### HEAD OF THE PALACE GUARD (figure 31)

Man mounted on leopard, often carrying weapons (Gea-b).

#### WARRIOR

Figure carrying a trophy head or rifle (in horizontal or vertical position) (Gea-b).

#### MUSICIAN

A man playing a flute (described by Geb-b as paying homage to the ruler seated above).

#### JUDGE

A man seated on a stool, knees apart, left hand supporting his chin (the pose assumed while reflecting on a case (B & P)). This is the same posture which is associated with the ruler and is in keeping with the fact that the ruler often serves as the community judge (Gea-a).

#### EARTH PRIESTESS

Female in a dancing posture (bent knees) with rattle in right hand and bamboo trumpet in left (B & P).

#### DIVINER

(same). The "mother of twins" often assumes the positions of diviner, witch finder and earth priestess in the community (B & P).

#### MAN OF AUTHORITY

Figure holding carved buffalo horn (his drinking vessel) (Geb. b).

#### PERSON OF GOOD SOCIAL STANDING

Gesture of hand patting stomach, implying: good social standing and economic success (Geb. b) "Whenever a man feels very sure and happy about his standing in the group he will pat his abdomen and say aloud to himself that he is a 'pretty good fellow'."

#### PROSPEROUS PERSON

Gesture of arms outstretched in process of gathering, grabbing. Implied: prosperity, industry (Geb. b).

#### SWEARER OF OATHS

Gesture of blowing over the outstretched finger of the right hand. This accompanies the act of swearing (*nfob*). "It is the custom to emphasize a public statement and routine court sayings with the act of *nfob*. The gesture also implies a secret court." (Geb. b).

#### ROYAL ENFORCER

Gesture of outstretched hand with whip. "The chiefs in earlier days kept at the courts a man who carried the chief's whip as a symbol of authority. He followed the chief at all times (Geb. b).

These gestures, like those associated with rulership, are quite diverse. Here, too, the primary emphasis is on the accoutrements of rank and occupation held by the figures. These include: flutes, trumpets, rifles, rattles, whips, trophy heads, and children. Certain distinctive gestures also appear in this category. These include: the bent knee dancing posture of the Earth Priestess, the stomach-patting sign of success and the outstretched gathering arms of prosperity.

Servers, retainers and persons of lesser status are also distinguished by their gestures and postures.

#### SUBSERVIENT PERSON (FEMALE)

Female figure with one hand in front of the mouth and the other in front of the pubic region (L).

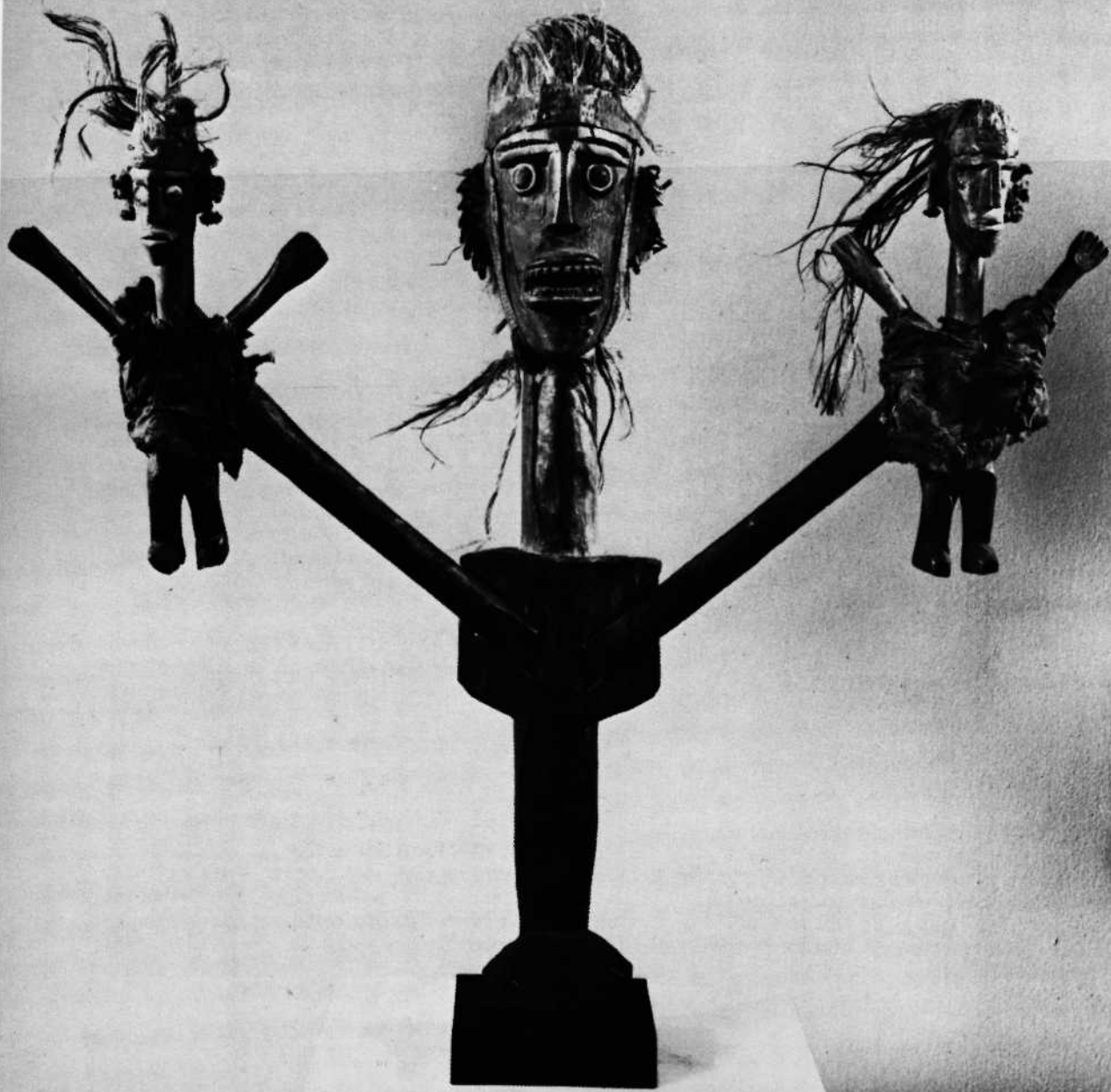
#### RETAINER WAITING FOR ORDERS OF THE RULER

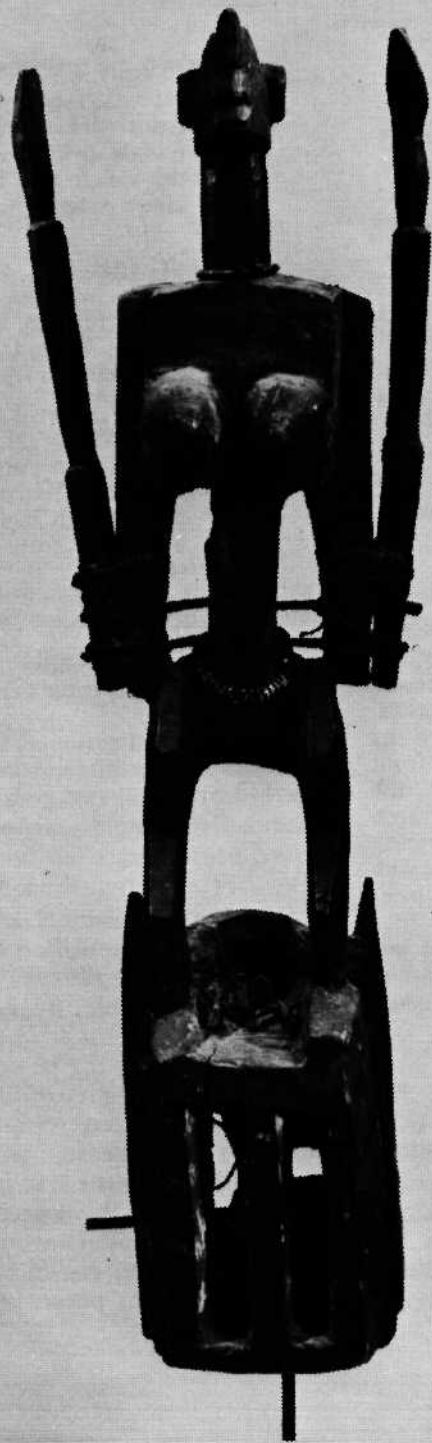
Man with hand in front of mouth (L).

#### RETAINER PRESENTING RULER WITH OBJECTS OF STATE AND RANK

Figure holding royal sword, pipe, drinking horn, calabashes, staffs (handed to the ruler at prescribed times during ceremony) (Gea-a). Frequently such figures also hold one hand in front of the mouth (L).







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#### RETAINER STANDING

Figure standing with arms crossed in front of his chest (B & P).

#### RETAINER OFFERING KOLA NUTS TO GUESTS

Figure holding large bowl (into which kola nuts are placed (Geb.b).

#### COMMONER

Man holding ordinary drinking gourd (Geb.b).

#### SLAVE

Figure in crouching position (B & P).

The gestures and postures associated with retainers and persons of lesser rank display certain formal similarities. While a few such figures are identified by gestures of presentation (holding a kola bowl, the ruler's pipe, the sword, etc.), the great majority of them are distinguished by gestures of propriety and subservience (i.e. the hand in front of the mouth, the arms crossed in front of the chest, the hand in front of the pubic area, the figure crouching). These features create a symbolic screen of gestural covering and suggest a degree of distancing. Similarly, the crouching position of some of these figures affects their height *vis-a-vis* the figures of nobility.

Still other grasslands sculptures portray members of important local families. Many of these persons are relatives either of the ruler's family or of other persons at the court (Brian and Pollock 1971, pp.123-4).

#### NEW MOTHER (figure 42)

Woman holding child in front of her, presenting child to public (L).

#### MOTHER OF TWINS

Woman holding child (sometimes two children) in front of her (i.e. same as above) (B & P).

#### FATHER OF TWINS

Man flanked by children (B & P). (Since male twins were often selected as palace servants, and female twins were favored as the king's wives, this image and the one above could portray the king's parents-in-law.)

#### YOUNG CHILD

Figure with hands held behind head (Geb.b). ". . . children have the habit of folding their hands behind their heads while observing something or while engaged in contemplation."

#### ELDERLY PERSON

Figure with cord around abdomen. Symbolizes emaciated body. "Very old people walk about in public with heavy cords fastened around their abdomen 'to keep them from falling apart.' " (Geb.b).

This group of gestures is united by certain distinctive features, especially those expressing the gestural dynamics of each age group.

Criminals and prisoners are also frequently portrayed in the arts of the Cameroon grasslands. Such figures are marked by extroverted gestures that contrast markedly with the much more rigidly composed gestures of royalty.

Criminals, prisoners and breakers of moral codes are in this way identified by postures that are less than honorific. These gestures are often anguished, angled and uncomfortable. Because gestures of this type often appear in the context of decidedly royal images, they serve to reinforce the power of the ruler.

The final category of Cameroon grasslands gestures includes those that represent social outcasts and the sufferers of disease, witchcraft ills and spiritual trauma. Among the Bangwa (Brain and Pollock 1971, p. 122) where this category of sculpture has been documented most thoroughly, two distinct types are carved: the first, called *njoo*, is used to protect one's compound from potential harm (thieves, adulterers,

witches); the second, called *lekat*, reflects a tradition originating in the Bamileke Kingang society (Brain and Pollock 1971, p. 127).

#### SUFFERER OF DROPSY

Figure with swollen stomach and bent knees (the disease afflicting witches and evil doers) (B & P).

#### SUFFERER OF SERIOUS ILLNESS

Person with a rope wrapped around his middle. "In extreme cases of illness a heavy rope is tied around the patient's body to hold him together." (Geb.b).

#### BROODING PERSON

Gesture of arms locked behind the head, in position of brooding, worrying, meditation. Typical pose of someone 'brooding over past experiences for wrongs done by someone else' (Geb.b).

#### FRIENDLESS PERSON

Crouched figure with hands raised upwards toward the shoulders (B & P). (n.b. his crouching posture is also identified with slaves and prisoners; the arm gesture is similar to that of the brooding person.)

#### BEGGING ORPHAN

Same as friendless person (B & P).

#### PERSON BOTHERED BY SPIRITS

Gesture of stretching the arms behind the head (same as "young child" and "brooding person" described above) (Geb.b).

The above group of figures is united by its stress on contorted, disfigured and pained gestures, a powerful contrast to the upright stances and proud display of accoutrements that predominated in the figures of royalty and persons of rank.

Grouping together the gestures of disease sufferers, outcasts, and prisoners, and comparing them with the gestures of both persons of royalty, rank, and honored occupation, we are struck by the dynamics of opposition between these two groups: expressive gestures contrast with restrained ones; physical strength contrasts with disease; wealth contrasts with poverty; accoutrements of prestige contrast with nudity; well-being contrasts with sorrow; affirmation contrasts with negation; societal standard bearers contrast with outcasts; upright positions contrast with crouched ones. We can see in these striking polarities the importance of gesture in portraying cultural norms and values.

#### CONCLUSIONS

Gesture is essential to the beauty, meaning and identity of African art. As we have seen in the arts of the grasslands Cameroon, gestures reflect the social reality of the community. The Bamileke mother and child, for example, (figure 42) is rich in gestural components that include style, material, aesthetics, function,

history, intonation, interaction, drama, and social setting. The multiple dimensions of gesture embodied in this work will be discussed here in order to highlight the broader implications of gesture for African arts as a whole.

Like most grasslands works, this mother and child figure is active and dynamic. The central vertical axis of the work is continually broken by the angled positioning of the child in front of the mother. Notice the mother's vibrant, outward-flaring fingers reaching out in all directions as she struggles to retain her hold on this active baby. Such dynamism is particularly prominent in sculptures of the Bamileke, Bangwa and other groups residing in the area towards the Western border of Cameroon with Nigeria.

The characteristic Western Cameroon emphasis on the upper torso and the neglect of the lower torso and legs is also found in this work. In addition, there is a concern for the carving out of the gestural features. This gives the sculpture a certain lightness and fragility despite its considerable size. The marked asymmetry of this work also conforms to the aesthetic canons of traditional sculptures of this area. In contrast to more recent examples of Cameroon tourist works which emphasize balance, symmetry and containment, traditional forms utilized motion and dynamic gestures to give the work greater drama and vitality. The sculptor has taken the hardwood medium to its limits of expression in his emphasis and articulation of the striking details of the hands and face. This is reinforced through the treatment of the surface which retains the faceting of the adze.

A great deal more can be understood about this work through closer analysis of its gesture. This figure, like similar ones published in Lecoq (1953) and Brain and Pollock (1971), represents a young mother displaying her child in public. It is the sculptural equivalent of a formal naming ceremony. In this work the baby is portrayed as active; his body is angled one way, while his head thrusts out in the opposite direction. Through deliberately differentiated smiles, glances and gestures, the child's surprise, nervousness and fright is made to contrast with the mother's pride, con-



fidence and delight. Such a contrast is rarely found in the themes of a mother nursing her child or a mother carrying her baby on her back, where harmony and unity are paramount. In addition to providing us with the social context of this work, the gestures also help to establish interaction between the sculpture and the viewer. The mother actively engages us by the forward thrust of the child. Glances are also important in this regard. While the mother's eyes are clearly focused downward on her active child, the baby stares out at us, eyes wide open. Like the mother's eyes, her hands draw our gaze to the child. The awkward movement of her hands gives additional emphasis to the twisting and turning motion of the child. In sum, the gestures of both mother and child create in this work a wonderfully dynamic vision, showing, on the one hand, the mother's great pride in her new child, and, on the other, the child's untamed vigor and anxiety.

In the above sculpture we have seen the importance of gesture in conveying essential elements of expression and meaning in a work. Gestural form and symbolism in this example are closely tied to a particular cultural-historical context. While all gesture in African art is similarly grounded in the distinctive culture and period of its manufacture and use, certain gestural themes in African sculpture recur frequently. Some of these common themes will be summarized here.

The hand upraised towards the chin or mouth is one of the most prevalent gestures in African sculpture. In certain figures, Baule, for example, this gesture is identified with the stroking of a beard - a sign of male elder status. In some contexts, the hand to the mouth or chin is used as a gesture of respect and distance when approaching the king as among the Bambara and in the Cameroon grasslands. It is, perhaps, a gestural equivalent in the subservient person of the symbolic "veiling" and distancing of the king. The gesture of hand to the mouth is identified with a wholly different idea in certain figures of the Chokwe, Kongo, Pende, and Dogon. In these examples, this gesture is associated with expressions of surprise or astonishment. Among the Bafé and Bakundu of southern Cameroon, the hands drawn to the chin represent

the act of ritual swearing. Among both the Kongo and grasslands Cameroon groups, a single finger drawn towards the mouth is used to indicate this same action.

The hand to the chin or mouth gesture in African art thus defines a number of distinct actions and ideas: 1) (through the beard) the importance of age and speech in works representing elderly men; 2) courtesy and respect; 3) it suggests the idea of shock and bewilderment; 4) it is associated with the making of oaths. Each of these gestural forms is based on particular associations with the chin or mouth. Placing the hand on the beard or chin suggests the importance of elderly men as family and community spokesmen. Covering the mouth as a sign of courtesy emphasizes differential rights to speech in the community. In the case of shock or surprise, covering of the mouth with the hand is identified with a cry of alarm. Pointing to the mouth as a sign of oath making reaffirms the importance of the spoken word.

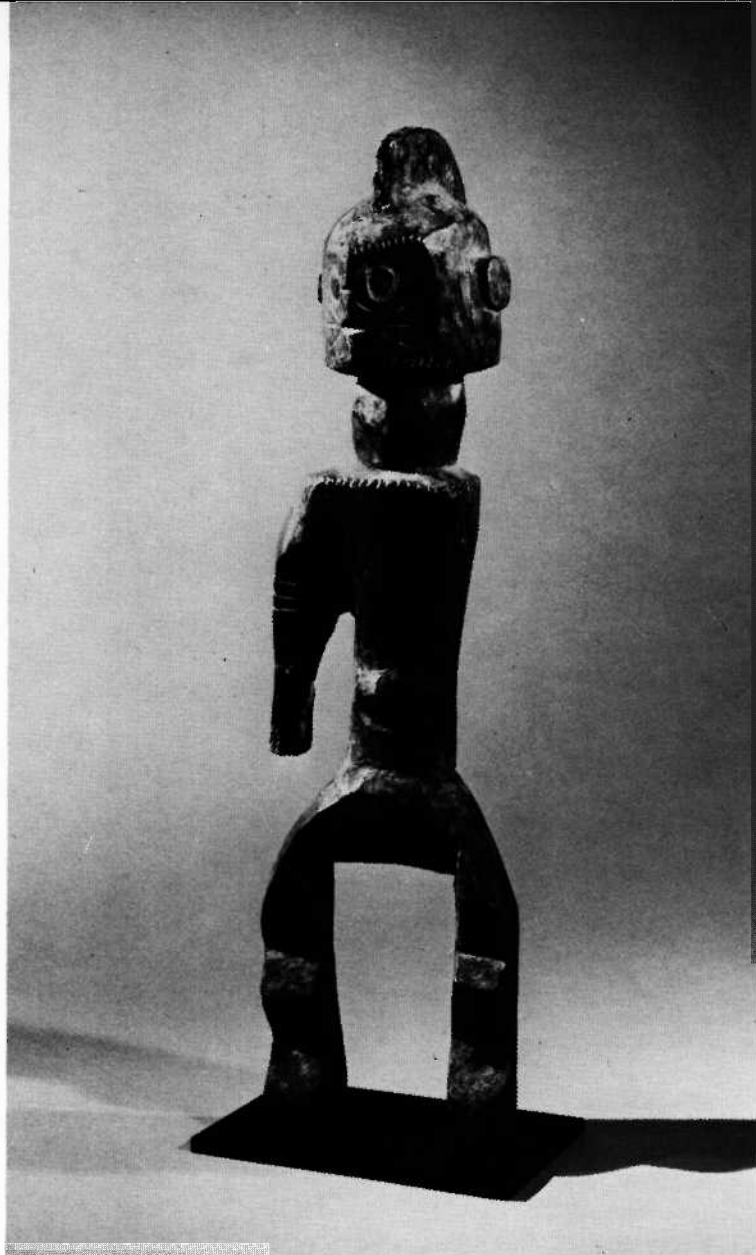
The gesture of clasping or supporting the head or body (and variations of this gesture with one or both hands holding or grasping the chin, neck or, occasionally, the chest) is also frequently seen in African sculpture. The most prevalent identification of this gesture is with someone distraught with grief, sorrow or death. Among the Kongo, Chokwe and Ndembu, the head-clasping gesture is associated with mourning. Among the Lobi, the related gesture of pointing towards the head or shoulders is identified with the same mourning theme. For the Bangwa, the drawing up of the hands towards the shoulders suggests the disequilibrium and anguish of a friendless person or beggar. Among the nearby Bamileke, the seated figure of a man supporting his chin portrays a judge (or king) laboring over a difficult case.

Another widely distributed gesture in African art is the seated hocker form with elbows resting on upraised knees. This pose can be found from Zaire, where it is prevalent among the Huana, Bena Lulua, Kuba, Yaka, Mbundu, Ndembu, Lega, and Chokwe, to the west coast of Africa, where variations of it are found in Cameroon, Sierra Leone and Mali. Hocker gestures are generally identified with male figures, especially



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with elders and persons of considerable accomplishment and status. The crouching position of the hocker depicts, in part, the curved posture of age. In grasslands Cameroon, such figures represent both judges and Kings; among the Teke, they are said to portray judges and ritual leaders (*nganga*); for the Chokwe, the hocker represents powerful men. Among the Lega the action of two men assuming hocker poses marks entry into the highest grade of Bwami. Exceptions are also interesting. Among the Ndembu, for example, hocker figures with hands drawn up to clasp the head are identified with mourning. The Dogon utilize the hocker position in images of Dyougou Serou; here the hands-covering-the-face gesture of shame is more pertinent than the hocker position *per se*.

The gesture of arms extended outward towards the sides is also found in many African works. Generally, this gesture conveys ideas of protection, guardianship, separation, or gathering. The idea of protection is particularly clear among the Lobi and Mambila where such figures serve to protect the house or palm groves. Among the Dogon, variants of this arms-extended-to-the-side gesture are associated with the rain-separating rainbow and the division of the earth and sky. Among the Lega and groups of the Cameroon grasslands, this gesture, when conveyed through action, is identified more with the idea of gathering -of calling people together- or accumulating riches and goods as a sign of prosperity and industry.

Figures with arms raised above the head form still another gestural group. Here, too, the meanings are varied. Sometimes, raised arms suggest a functional role in sculptures identified with caryatids, musical instruments and the like. In other examples, raised hands are used to suggest actions of prayer, mourning, arbitration, and creation. The use of raised arms to represent the action of prayer is found especially among the Dogon and Kongo. A Dogon variant of this gesture is used to indicate the descent of the first humans from the sky. In both cases, the gesture of raised arms draws our eyes upwards to the source of its meaning. Among the Lobi and Kongo further variants of the raised arm gesture are identified with lamenta-

tion and tears -perhaps in the context of prayers but possibly more as an expressive act. Among the Lega this gesture is identified instead with arbiters and overly expressive spokesmen.

The gesture of arms placed behind the back is found on sculptures of the Kongo, Lele, Bangwa, Lobi, Baule, Temne, among others. This gesture is frequently associated with forms of difficulty or stress. Among the Lobi, for example, this appears as a gesture of extreme anguish. In grasslands Cameroon, the placement of the arms behind the head suggests the brooding person, a person bothered by spirits, or a child contemplating. In the case of the Kongo, it is associated with figures which serve as protection against poison. Among the Kuba, it is a frequent feature of cups used for dispensing poison as a test of culpability. Finally, this is a pose frequently used to identify prisoners.

Still other figures show body deformities. Such figures may incorporate a single arm or leg, a missing head, or related forms of disfigurement. While there are exceptions, most of these figures represent social outcasts. Gestural incompleteness and abnormality in these sculptures suggests the stigma of social alienation and separateness. The Lega figure missing both arms refers to adultery. The Bamileke figure missing a limb represents a criminal. The one-legged or one-armed Lobi figure is identified as a "dangerous person". The group of African doll images which are missing essential parts suggest a certain social dependency.

Also interesting in this regard are those abnormalities which demonstrate a superabundance of gestures, as in figures with an excess of limbs. Many such works express the realization that extra arms or legs offer a distinct advantage in tasks requiring speed, maneuverability and power in roles such as defense, protection and mobility. The four-legged Ofoe figure of the Bini is able to travel from earth to sky; the multi-membered Lobi sculptures ably protect the house. Janus forms, those sculptures whose gestural potentialities are doubled both in quantity and in directional focus, often suggest heightened power and prestige. Thus, we note that Teke Janus figures are the

prerogatives of great chiefs; Chokwe Janus figures have increased powers in the hunt and other domains; Fon Janus sculptures are more effective house guards; Dogon Janus forms are identified with the heightened power of two sky deities.

Gestures, in sum, are central to the understanding of African sculpture. Each gesture is an integral part of the larger composition and aesthetic unity of the work. Gesture underscores the principal design components which are at play. In addition, gestures reflect important attributes of material, function, history, and style. Most gestures also represent particular social realities and milieu. Some gestures convey scenes of life, ceremony, courtesy, and interaction. Other gestures define specific social-psychological, religious, and ideational concepts and views. Most gestures simultaneously heighten the sculpture's overall impact, drama and communicative power. The role of gesture in African art, thus, is multiplex. Each gesture reflects a rich weave of inter-connected values, ideas and attributes which together form an essential part of the meaning and vitality of each work.

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