TEN

Action in Form: African Art as Voiced Engagements

Suzanne Blier

Fon native and historian Paul Hazoumé, from what is today the Republic of Benin, authored not only the first Fon novel, Doguicimi, but also a groundbreaking 1937 ethnography, *Le pacte de sang au Dahomey* (The blood oath in Dahomey), on local oath-swearing rituals.[1] The pact in question employs the skull of a named enemy king, into which earth and other materials are placed. The participants consume the contents therein, elements ordinarily and in real terms polluting, dangerous, and vile, enhanced by the most potent symbol of death. This skull rite unified all those who drank the powerful solution placed in the skull to empower the oath, thus sharing a both common identity and allegiance through the act itself. The ritual engages an array of fundamental concerns, among these a striking carnivalesque of reversal (a head, which is normally fed, serves as the source to nourish others, and dirt, which is usually stepped on, is placed in a head and consumed). The skull rite also suggests a social ritual of transition (a threshold-marking event of both mediation and transposition). The skull at the same time serves as a rich engagement of the primacy of the "real thing," in which a decomposed head represents society more generally.

Detail of fig. 10.10.

One could further argue that the motif evokes a marriage of many theoretical frames—class, psychology, and aesthetics among others.[2] The *pacte de sang* is also, and even more importantly, a uniquely localized African theoretical model of the world in which death generates life; death is by its nature not only disruptive but also fertile and productive; death is transformative.

Similar to these powerful *pactes*, votives in Africa can best be understood as a visual idiom linked to the domestication of desire. The blood oath is as an act of communal bonding and transformation, the larger goal of which is mutual well-being and "increase." It has come to stand for both power and the means to this end. For a powerful kingdom whose capital population probably was no larger than twenty thousand individuals, barely a quarter of whom perhaps were of native Fon birth and blood, the question of both power and transformation was critical to effectively maintaining control over regional powers much older and larger, notably the Yoruba and Asante.

This chapter explores central aspects of votive forms found in Fon and other examples of African art: speech and sacrifice, communal rituals, and divination practices. I take up an array of different African arts from West Africa, including works from the Fon (Benin Republic), Yoruba (Nigeria), Dogon and Bamana (Mali), and Guere (Côte d'Ivoire), and from Central Africa, with objects from Bamun (Cameroon) as well as Kongo and Kuba (both Republic of Congo). Broadly defined, these are all votive offerings, in the sense that they relate to the importance of vows—their initiation, their support, and their reinforcement—through an array of ritual acts, performances, or other engagements with these art works. Offered or consecrated in anticipation or fulfillment of a vow, these striking art works also show the divergent ways in which actions and beliefs are given form. In these works and others in African art, there is no distinction between broader practices, such as offerings and communication with the gods, and the narrower sense of votive (involving personal vows) because in key respects the two are seen as conjoined.

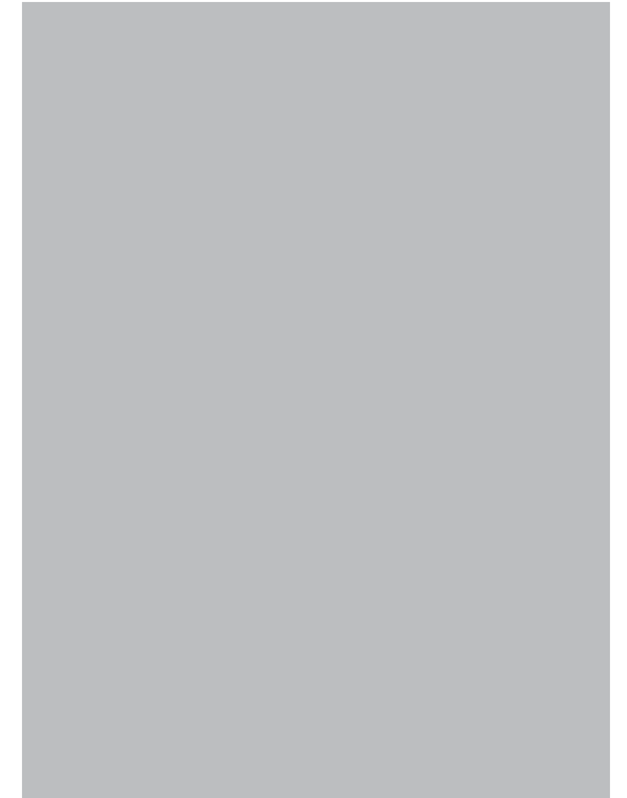
SPEECH AND SACRIFICE

No work invokes the primacy of votives in Africa more clearly than power figures from the Kongo kingdom (Republic of Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Angola) known locally as *nkisi* (*nkisi nkonde*, pl. *minkisi*) (figs. 10.01 [EX-524] and 10.02 [EX-753]). Broadly translated, *nkisi* refers to a spirit, but more specifically, the spirit force itself and the container of potent materials activated by these supernatural forces. Kongo scholar Wyatt MacGaffey, in his study of Kongo political culture, subtitled The Conceptual Challenge of the Particular, invites us to look closely at "the relationship between the words used and the nature of experience they report." As he explains, *nkisi* "refers simultaneously to an object, the animate force it embodies, the ritual in which it is addressed (with music, dance, alcohol), and the effect it has on the lives of individuals and groups. The object, as apprehended by its name, leads the mind away from the wooden thing itself both toward a cosmological domain of spirits and toward the physiological experience of disease."[3] MacGaffey explains the complexity of *nkisi*:

> The reference of the term is thus to at least four analytically distinct domains, in each of which it contrasts with other terms: 1) the set of spirit classes, including ancestors and bisimbi, among which the diviner chooses; 2) the set of *minkisi*, each with its particular features, such as drum rhythms, food taboos, myths and procedures; 3) the social relations of the afflicted individual or group, with their tensions and alliances; and 4) the catalogue of diseases. . . . To see, recognize, and name the elements of an nkisi is to rehearse a theory in the broadest sense, of experience. The multi-dimensionality of key terms enriches the language and by the same effect renders it untranslatable.[4]

Votive forms elsewhere in Africa exhibit the same complexity. Both among the Fon and other African societies, the connections between the ritual objects and votives constitute as much a verb (a course of action) as a noun (the form that action evokes).

10.1 (EX-524) Male figure with strips of hide (*nkisi*), Kongo, 19th century. Wood, hide, glass mirror. Brooklyn Museum, Museum Expedition 1922, Robert B. Woodward Memorial Fund, 22.1455. Cat. X.



10.2 (EX-753)

One other especially important aspect of the Kongo *nkisi* form is the primacy of speech in its very activation. The surface of the *nkisi* is often peppered with materials (leather or iron nails) that are pressed into the wooden surface of the figure, pushpin style, after an individual has spoken a specific vow onto it. An extended tongue on some *nkisi* further evokes speech, and the frequent presence of a mirror serves simultaneously to distance danger and to more potently attract the eye—and attention—of the individual who is engaging with the work. Saliva (from deep within the human) intermixes with the whispered words themselves, transmitting key elements of the vow from one living subject (the speaker) to the other (the spirit-empowered figure) in a bond of mutual engagement. In key ways the *nkisi* evokes the long history of harnessed speech, through which the object and the many participant artists who have created its striking surface share a core bond both in the present and in perpetuity. Like votives elsewhere, such surface elements indicate a specific vow and the intention to fulfill it, as the Latin phrase *ex voto suscepto* (from the vow made) suggests. The mirror or shell fastened to the belly of many *nkisi* helps secure sacred materials placed within the core of the figure, while also both distancing danger and affixing the eye of the beholder on the problem at hand, drawing our attention to local values of speech, affiliation, and action in conveying the primacy of both words and actions (fig. 10.03 [EX-657]).

Sacrifice is an implicit part of many of the objects this chapter explores. Two examples in particular foreground the idea of sacrifice in the context of vow consecration and fulfillment in a particularly striking way. One is a horn for royal Bamum palm

10.3 (EX-657) Power figure (*nkisi nkondi*), Kongo (Solongo or Woyo subgroup), late 19th–early 20th centuries. Wood, iron, glass, fiber, pigment, bone. Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Arturo and Paul Peralta-Ramos, 56.6.98. Cat. X.

10.4 (EX-522) Ceremonial drinking horn, Bamum, 19th–20th centuries. Buffalo horn, camwood powder. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Fletcher Fund, 1972, 1972.4.63.

wine drinking rituals in the Cameroon Grasslands; the other is a Dogon (Mali) ritual vessel in form of a horse. Together they indicate the importance of the material forms that often accompany vows; the offerings are as vital a part of vows as the spoken words themselves or the spoken contexts in which they are used. During key rites among the Bamum, the *fon* (king) will fill his mouth with the mildly intoxicating palm wine from a buffalo-horn drinking vessel (fig. 10.04 [EX-522]) and then spray the substance over the assembled audience in a ritual that is said to encourage prosperity and increase. The figures carved into the surface of this vessel represent those in the service of the king in this notably hierarchical society. In bathing the attending people with this royal saliva-imbued wine, the king is also bringing into play the power and primacy of ancestry.[5] A handsome offering trough used by the village hogon (priest) among the Dogon people of Mali serves a similar purpose (fig. 10.05 [EX-523]). The trough contains a mixture of millet flour and beer, which is offered during the millet harvest to important family and community altars in honor of the ancestors. The horse is not only an animal of prestige but also represents ideas of transition. The paired figures on each side evoke the eight mythic Nommo (human precursors) who settled on earth, bringing key elements of civilization from the sky with them. In the same way that the saliva (and speech) of the Bamum king empowers his actions, speech is the vital element that empowers the millet offerings and conjoins the present with the past.[6]

THE ROLE OF RITUALS IN FORGING COMMUNAL BONDS

Whatever their form or uses, votive objects in Africa, like those elsewhere, express an array of beliefs within the societies in which they are made and used. In the context of African societies, this set of beliefs involves not only living communities but also communities of the dead—deceased family members (the "ancestors") and those who once occupied or defined the region, including animals. Local spirit forces are important as well. A miniature wooden mask from Côte d'Ivoire is a power

10.5 (EX-523) Horse with figures (*aduno koro*) ritual vessel, Dogon, 16th–19th centuries. Wood. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979, 1979.206.255.

object, packed tightly with clay, cloth, feathers, fur, hair, and other materials—a panoply of elements collected from the local environment, each in turn pulling into place a myriad of real and metaphoric associations and powers (fig. 10.06 [EX-525]).

Miniature masks such as the one from Côte d'Ivoire, at one time known as "passport masks," constitute small-scale family masks that were sometimes offered libations along with prayers and vows linked to specific desires and actions. Among the Guere people of Côte d'Ivoire and nearby Liberia, these personal objects serve as objects of protection and are sometimes given to children.[7] Other loosely allied regional groups used similar forms in both political and ritual contexts, linked in some cases to community and regional disputes and mediations. Objects such as the miniature masks contain spiritual powers linked to forces within nature, such as river gods (called *dwin*, *tien*, or *nitien*), that help promote healing, increase fertility, protection, and fostering peace in exchange for prescribed sacrifices, such as planting a new agricultural field or embarking on a trip out of the area.[8] The spirits sometimes communicated with humans through dreams, encouraging them to create a specific mask or related form. Living outside human society, they help knit society together both narrowly, in the sense of internal

10.6 (EX-525) Figure (*boli*), Guere, 19th–20th centuries. Wood, metal, fur, cloth, clay, feather, rice pods. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of William W. Brill, 1977, 1977.224.2.

10.7 (EX-526) Altar staff (*asen*), Fon, 19th–20th centuries. Iron, wood, pigment. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979,1979.206.95.

family dynamics, and broadly, in the context of the village, region, or society as a whole.

The Fon people, once part of the powerful Kingdom of Dahomey that Paul Hazoumé explores in his *Pacte de sang* and other works, create a number of ritual objects that also are of interest to this discussion.[9] Notable among these are *asen* (altar) staffs, which are secured in the ground in shrine houses dedicated to various male and female ancestors of the family. During annual rituals, when important individuals of the past are commemorated, a tiny token of the feast prepared for the gathered family is placed on the *asen*, or on the ground beneath it, as prayers invoke the help of the ancestors to safeguard the family and its various members and to promote their needs. In the context of vows of ancestral family remembrance, speech is central—both that offered in prayer and in the conversations of family members who have joined together for the combined thanksgiving and blessing. One of the first acts after an important family member has been buried is to commission an *asen*, often specifying elements of the deceased's life to be included in the tableau on top. The complexity of the scene depicted on the *asen* superstructure varies depending on the person's identity and status, which is reflected in the material (silver sheeting on wood, iron, cast brass, tin) from which it is made.

In a comparatively generic example of an *asen*, the person honored was likely a chief or priest, as indicated by the trifooted stool on top of the platform (fig. 10.07 [EX-526]). This motif is crafted of hammered brass; the pole, of iron. The pendant elements positioned just below share a heart-shaped form, a common motif evoking ideas of memory. Historically, the shapes do not represent the human heart but rather the kidneys, which have a similar shape and are the part of the body (near the stomach) that the Fon most closely associate with emotions. The spirals near the base are a common pattern that represents movement, circulation, and the cycle of life and death. The spiral is connected with the snake deity Dangbe Ayido Hwedo, the python god, controller of all movement on the earth (including the ocean currents). Dangling beneath these are several four-cornered forms that symbolize the four corners of *weke*, the universe. Thus, the fluidity and stability of the world are both conveyed. Whether represented with its tail in its mouth (an oroborus)—a shape also evoking ideas of political power and protection—or as a spiral (resembling a coiled snake), Ayido Hwedo is linked in vital ways to action and transition.

Yoruba figures honoring deceased twins function in a similar way, as artistic memorials (fig. 10.08 [EX-356]). Rather than being seen primarily in family shrines, these carvings are often carried within their mothers' wrappers as the women go about their daily activities. The twins are further honored in various local festivals by the addition of special clothing and offerings to the figures. The twin figures are always portrayed as adults in these sculptures, regardless of the age at which the individuals being honored died. The mother of the twin or twins, identified as a parent of gods, also assumes a unique status and benefits as she displays her children. For example, she may receive gifts of food or other items from the local market women, who through this action perform a symbolic gift exchange with the gods.

In some African societies, including the Bamana of Mali, a special place is accorded to those who lived in the area in earlier eras. This tradition commemorates not only families that have long

10.8 (EX-356) Workshop of Ibueke Compound. Female twin figures (*ibeji*), Yoruba, Oyo group, 19th–20th centuries. Wood, beads, camwood powder. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of F. Peter Rose, 1981, 1981.424.7, 1981.424.8. Cat. X.

10.9a (EX-527) Male antelope headdress (*ci wara*), Bamana, 19th–20th centuries. Wood, fibers. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Pascal James Imperato, 2010, 2010.322.

10.9b (EX-528) Female antelope headdress (*ci wara*), Bamana, 19th–20th centuries. Wood, metal bands. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1964, 1978.412.436.

resided in the region but also natural denizens, such as the antelopes that once roamed the land where fields are now cultivated. Bamana *ci wara* masks (figs. 10.09a,b [EX-527, EX-528]) honor these primordial ancestors from nature at the very time of the year when the heaviest agricultural labor is undertaken—plowing the still hard earth by hand into the furrows where seeds will be sown. In this seasonal ceremony, a pair of male performers wear a gendered pair of *ci wara*, which must not be separated during the performance (fig. 10.10 [EX-751]). The female *ci wara* carries her baby on her back, just as Bamana women carry their young. The *ci wara* headdresses are distinguished by the shape of the horns. While the male *ci wara*'s horns are strikingly curved and scythe-like, similar to those of a male roan antelope, hers are shorter, more pointed, and straighter, like the female roan antelope's horns, so that she can protect her young by goring any being that might attack. Both mask types were created to honor the original owners of the land, who are believed to have first taught humans how to cultivate the soil, and then to have brought about their own death by burying themselves when humans wasted their harvests, as recounted in a Bamana myth discussed in a number of sources.[10] The *ci wara* masks additionally highlight the importance of community solidarity in carrying out vital tasks for the well-being of all—men, women, and forces

10.10 (EX-751) François-Edmond Fortier. Afrique Occidentale—Danseurs "Miniankas"—Fétiches des Cultures, 1905–1906. Postcard. © Musée du Quai Branly–Jacques Chirac, Dist. RMN–Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY, 70.2015.15.1261.

of nature. The movements of the performers follow even beats as they combine the important element of rhythm with the vital component of human speech.[11] In the *ci wara* masks, the votive aspect is expressed through the forms and actions of the masks themselve, representing vows of community engagement that help recall the deaths of the primordial antelopes. The elegant dance movements of the maskers during their elaborate appearance on the bare, unplanted fields serve as vows of both remembrance and ongoing labor. The *ci wara* performance reinforces historic community vows for mutual sustainability and protection. In a sense, the actions of the maskers and those working alongside them become vows in their own right.

FORESIGHT / INSIGHT

Very little of critical importance in Africa can be understood without a deeper exploration of potential impacts and causes. Divination and knowledge (foresight and insight) are closely bound to vows because often in the course of divination key individual and community concerns are addressed, resulting in new vows for action and response. Although divination arts come in many forms, in most places they are the glue that holds much of the diverse societal, political, and religious fabric of a culture together. In most such contexts, the past is considered a vital piece of knowing what the future holds, whether it involves a marriage, the future of a young child, where to build a new home, what a journey might portend, or how to conduct war or foster peace. Related arts have multisensorial qualities, but speech (the voicing of thought) is often a vital part of divination arts. Kuba oracular devices (*itoom*) from the Democratic Republic of Congo are wooden figures that use friction as a means of divination (fig. 10.11 [EX-529]). The diviner and the person who has come to consult with him sit across from each other with the wooden *itoom* fig-

10.11 (EX-529) Crocodile friction oracle (*itoom*), Kuba, 19th–20th centuries. Wood. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of the Estate of Bryce P. Holcombe Jr., 1989, 1989.46.2.

ure positioned between them. Joining their hands on top of a small disk positioned over the *itoom*, they pull it back and forth across the back of the animal, which has been lubricated with a plant-enriched solution. When the disk stops gliding easily in the course of their questions and answers, it is interpreted as the response to the client's concerns. One of the animals from the natural world that helps to convey answers is the crocodile—at home both on land and in water—because it is believed to travel near the underground lakes where ancestors now live. Few objects convey this important element of the transition between life and death as clearly as the *itoom* does.

The Yoruba and nearby Fon have developed one of the most complex divination forms, known as Ifá, which takes decades of learning to gain enough skill to perform. A circular or square board carved of wood is positioned between the outstretched legs of the diviner, who faces the person who has come for consultation (fig. 10.12 [EX-530]). The head at the top of the Ifa divination board represents the messenger and trickster god, Eshu (Legba in Fon) (fig. 10.13 [EX-531]). The various animals carved around the perimeter of the board (*opon Ifá*) represent bird and animal species in the spoken verses that identify each divination sign (*odu*) and that often include not only stories of life in the broader human and natural world but also deep philosophical engagements and, in some cases, songs. During divination, one or another of the 256 *odu* verses will be singled out by cast-

10.12 (EX-530) Ifa divination tray (*opon Ifa*), Yoruba, 19th–20th centuries. Wood. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Dr. Jeffrey S. Hammer in memory of Milton Gross, M.D., 1978, 1978.437.

10.13 (EX-531) Staff with a figure representing the deity Eshu, Yoruba, late 19th–early 20th centuries. Wood, hide, glass beads, fiber, metal coins, and cowrie shells. Yale University Art Gallery, Charles B. Benenson, B.A. 1933, Collection, 2006.51.92.

10.14 (EX-532) Vessel, Republic of Benin (?), before 1950. Calabash, terracotta, palm nuts, cowrie shells, and beads. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Muriel Kallis Newman, 2007, 2007.215.7a,b.

ing palm nuts. Each verse is also linked to one or another of the core deities in the Yoruba and Fon pantheon. The messenger figure, Eshu, wears a long cap similar to the headdress of Yoruba royal messengers. Eshu, who has the power to both convey insights directly from the gods and to distort these messages seemingly on a whim, stands as an apt figure for the precariousness of speech and of life more generally. Carved wooden Eshu figures used in other ritual contexts often are draped in strands of cowrie shells, which are traditionally used as money. These figures recall the importance of offerings to Eshu as well as the primacy of speech—or vows—that accompany human action. The palm nuts and cowrie shells that cover a richly ornamented Fon calabash (fig. 10.14 [EX-532]) are linked with both Ifa divination and Eshu. The glass beads represent the gods and humans who are reengaged through the divination process. The colored beads are traditionally buried in the ground beneath altars and temples and are also worn by devotees and priests. Each color is a distinctive reminder of a specific deity and the vows (divination speech, prayers, offerings) that connect humans with the god.[12]

Whether we are talking about African art through engagements involving speech, sacrifice, society, or the apparatus and knowledge of divination (foresight/insight), many forms of African art are central to community belief systems. They find their basis in ongoing ritual actions with the objects themselves, including divination and subsequent ceremonies that are called for through this practice. These objects necessarily assume a performative role, one that is also part of a symbolic gift exchange with the gods. In Africa and elsewhere, art constitutes a form of action, a means through which the complexities of life are at once engaged and reenvisioned. The forms may vary strikingly from one society to the next, but the power of the image is everywhere present in the diverse histories of their use in the lives of community members. While some African art works, such as Kongo *nkisi*, Kuba friction oracles, and Yoruba or Fon divination objects, are identified with personal vows (recalling traditional ex-votos in the West), a larger number of African art forms call attention to broader community ideas about the ways in which artistic practice, including ceremonial offerings, constitute a community's ongoing communication with gods. Whether we are talking about form or speech or sacrifice, exploring family or communal rituals, or pointing to divination practices or requisite ceremonial actions that come out of divination, it is often impossible to separate the art from the oaths, commitments, affirmations, and attestations that permeate their creation and use.

1 Paul Hazoumé, *Le pacte du sang* (Paris: Institut d'Ethnologie, 1937), and *Doguimici* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1963).
2 On the kinds of dualisms addressed from structuralist perspectives, see Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1974); Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge, 2002); on the carnivalesque, see Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: University of Indiana University Press, 2009); on liminality, see Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Herndon, VA: Transaction, 1995); on class, see Karl Marx, *Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy* (New York: Anchor, 1959); on power and performance, see Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic, 1977); on the "real thing," see Martin Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, in *Basic Writings* (New York: Harper, 2008); on the Frankfurt School marriage of class, psychology, and aesthetics, see Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken, 1969).
3 Wyatt MacGaffey, *Kongo Political Culture: The Conceptual Challenge of the Particular* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 50.
4 Ibid.
5 On related art forms among the Bamum, see Christraud Geary, *Cameroon: Art and Kings* (Zurich: Rietberg Museum, 2008).
6 On the Dogon people, see, among others, Jean Laude, *African Art of the Dogon: The Myths of the Cliff* (New York: Brooklyn Museum, 1973).
7 The Guere people, linked also to the We, Wenion, and Gewo, are part of the larger Kran culture.
8 See William Siegmann, *Visions from the Forest* (Minneapolis: Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 2014).
9 On the Fon, see Suzanne Blier, *Royal Arts of Africa: The Majesty of Form* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1988); Edna Bay, *Asen, Ancestors, and Vodun: Tracing Change in African Art* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008).
10 See, for instance, Pascal Imperato, "The Dance of the Tyi Wara," *African Arts* 4, no.1 (Autumn 1970): 71–72.
11 On Bamana *ci wara* generally, see ibid., 8–13, 71–81; Stephen R. Wooten, "Antelope Headdresses and Champion Farmers: Negotiating Meaning and Identity through the Bamana Ciwara Compolex," *African Arts* 33, no. 2 (Summer 2000), 18–33, 89–90; Jean-Paul Colleyn, *Bamana: Visions of Africa* (Milan: Five Continents, 2008).
12 For a discussion of the use of beads in Fon (Dahomey) contexts, see Suzanne Preston Blier, *African Vodun: Art Psychology, and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).