

# Textual and Contextual Analysis in African Art Studies

DANIEL P. BIEBUYCK

The number of scholars involved with the study of African sculpture and related aspects such as painting, decoration, architecture, oral literature, dance, music, costume, gestural symbolism and drama, is still very small.<sup>1</sup> Within the total body of scientists who place the study of African cultures and societies in the center of their scholarly analyses, students of the African arts constitute a minute group. Within the disciplines of art history, anthropology, comparative literature, and so on, they represent an even smaller fraction. The amount of primary scientific materials and documents available to these few scholars in libraries, archives, museums, private collections, and in the field, is immense. Although uneven in quality and coverage, the materials at our disposal are extremely rich and diverse in scope and content.<sup>2</sup>

The primary documents are not easy to handle, for they are scattered in many places. Published and unpublished sources, extending over a long period of time, are written in several European languages and, increasingly, in some African ones as well. A substantial number of these sources are hard to identify and locate. Many published studies occur in older, rare, and lesser-known serials and books; a considerable amount of unpublished manuscripts are not properly catalogued or correctly described. Moreover, a large set of valuable data forms an intrinsic part of ethnographical studies, travelogues, reports, and so on, that do not primarily aim at the analysis of the arts. And, of course, many of the facts are approached in an unsystematic and random manner; and a lot of significant aspects are left unexplored. The art objects themselves, uncountable in numbers and diversity, are not always easily located and identified in the collections, partly because of inadequate inventories, groupings, and catalog descriptions. Thus, dispersal of sources, the difficulty of accessibility, and the inadequacy or unevenness of documentation, together with language barriers, pose formidable obstacles.

Obviously many achievements have been made toward the understanding and interpretation of African art since von Sydow, Kjersmeier, Griaule, Herskovits, and Olbrechts made the first attempts at classification and interpretation. Advances in field research and more detailed museum work have certainly contributed much to this better understanding. However, we have not yet made the best possible usage of the vast amount of ethnographical and iconographical materials that are actually available to us in the libraries, archives, museums, and private collections. These offer plenty of scope for more comprehensive and detailed work, for better surveys and minute analyses, for careful comparisons within and across ethnic groups and regions, and

for advanced stylistic and cultural interpretations. One of the general tasks before us, then, is to enhance the scholarly quality of general and specialized works on African art by means of a more sophisticated, comprehensive, and critical analysis of available bibliographical and iconographical resources. At the same time, a fuller usage should be made of various older and newer concepts and methods developed in certain fields of the social sciences and the humanities. This applies to our need for advanced introductory textbooks for better readers, for specific geographical and ethnic surveys, for the comparative study of particular art-using institutions, and for studies on the total artistic output of an ethnic group or a cluster. By using the widest possible range of available documentation, we should also achieve a more complete coverage of the art-producing ethnic groups, and of the range and variety of art-using institutions within and across those groups.

To illustrate this point, I want to briefly examine a case from the Bambara (or Bamana) of the Mali Republic. Compared to many other ethnic groups of Africa, this is ethnographically and artistically a very well-documented population. Aspects of their ethnography, their language, their history, and their art have been widely discussed in many books, such as H. P. Henry, *L'âme d'un peuple africain* (1910); Ch. Monteil, *Les Bambara du Ségou et du Kaarta* (1924); L. Tauxier, *La religion Bambara* (1927); H. Labouret, *Les Manding et leur langue* (1934); G. Dieterlen, *Essai sur la religion Bambara* (1951); V. Paques, *Les Bambara* (1954); R. Goldwater, *Bambara Sculpture from the Western Sudan* (1960); D. Zahan, *Sociétés d'initiation Bambara: le n'domo, le kore* (1960); D. Zahan, "Signification et fonction de l'art dans la vie d'une communauté africaine" (1967); and G. Dieterlen and Y. Cissé, *Les fondements de la société d'initiation du Komo* (1972). A significant number of articles by such authors as M. Travele, G. Dieterlen, D. Zahan, S. de Ganay, and P. J. Imperato deal with various other aspects of Bambara culture.

Since C. Kjersmeier's *Centres de style de la sculpture nègre africaine* (1935), there has barely been a book on African art that does not include some discussion of Bambara art. It is well known that among the Bambara there exist a great many art-using institutions, the most important of which are the *dyow*-associations. Kjersmeier (*op. cit.*, vol. 1, pp. 13-17; Plates, 1-17) briefly discussed the figurines and the masks, concentrating mainly on the *ntomo* masks and the *tyiwara* antelope headdresses of the *nama koro ku* association, and illustrated several examples of these. Since Kjersmeier, most books on African art have tended to reduce the Bambara artistic output to a general



8 AND 9. ZIRI SANOU (LEFT) AND SULEIMANA BAMBARA (RIGHT) AT WORK ON THE KOKORO MASK TO BE CARRIED IN THE MEMORY OF MOUSSA SANOU OF KOUNIMA.

10. SULEIMANA WORKING ON THE FACIAL FEATURES OF THE KOKORO IN AN ATTEMPT TO VISUALLY SEPARATE, CLARIFY AND BALANCE THE EYES, NOSE, BEAK, MOUTH, AND SCARIFICATION MARKS OF THE MASK.

attend, and even the sick drag themselves to this meeting, which is described by the phrase *kafige sigi gweridana*, "hold fast to tradition." Elders from surrounding villages, related to the people of Kounima who lost family members, will also attend and are welcome to offer their thoughts on the nature and importance of the great funeral. Drossin Sanou, chief of the blacksmiths of Kounima, the oldest and most respected of the *Kolo*, was particularly eloquent on this occasion, reminding everyone present that the *Sakon Kwyie* was not only the time when the living were once again exposed to the presence of the ancestors, but also the time when the people of Kounima had to carry out their obligations to those who died, to their spirits, and to their families. He spoke of the importance of absolute cooperation between people of the quartier and the need to admit strangers to the public aspects of the funeral: *hale samoru bekan tongo, bedama sabare*, "even if a stranger steps upon you, excuse yourself."<sup>16</sup> Drossin concluded his discourse with two thoughts: *Kire-vo kuni foga*, "support the waist of your chief with firmness"; and *mepane sale unka mangberi da towa*, "although I pray [he is a Muslim] I will never let my traditions fall." This is an occasion when the elders vie with one another for attention, but the theme of their comments is constant.

In the compound of Ouyiaga Sanou, a middle-aged blacksmith deeply steeped in the arts of the masquerade who served in the French army during the Algerian war, two young men are hard at work. Ziri Sanou and Suleimana Bambara are making the *Kokoro* mask to be danced with in honor of the death of Ouyiaga's

uncle, Moussa Sanou, one of the finest carvers of his generation in Kounima (Figs. 8, 9). The two artisans are a study in contrasts: they represent the poles of tradition and modernity at Kounima, but they are friends and are equally knowledgeable and adept in the art of making the *Kokoro* mask. Suleimana, the son of a Bobo woman from Satiri (a small Bobo village 15 miles north of Bobo-Dioulasso), and a Bussanga father who is a member of the city's police force, is 23 years old, has six years of schooling, is a Muslim, and has just taken the National Civil Service examination in the hopes of obtaining a post within the Voltaic postal system. Ziri, a farmer of 27, worked for two years as a laundry boy for a French doctor at the hospital, has had no formal education, and is contemplating the growing of cotton, which has become an important cash crop in the Bobo and Bwa regions of Upper Volta. Both are experts at producing the *Kokoro* and are acknowledged as such by all the elders of Kounima and in surrounding villages. Ziri learned the art from his older brother Bakari, who instructed him during his initiation; Suleimana, who has not undergone the *Ti-ma-sa*, picked up his skills through his friendship with Ziri and an informal apprenticeship with him.

The two men are hard core traditionalists with respect to the manufacture of the *Kokoro*, creating these impressive ancestral masks with *nyena toba*, "eyes of fire." The eyes of their *Kokoro* are clearly rimmed with thick local cotton, separating the orbits of the eyes from the other details of the face such as the nose, beak, and scarification marks (Fig. 10). The eyes of their masks never reveal

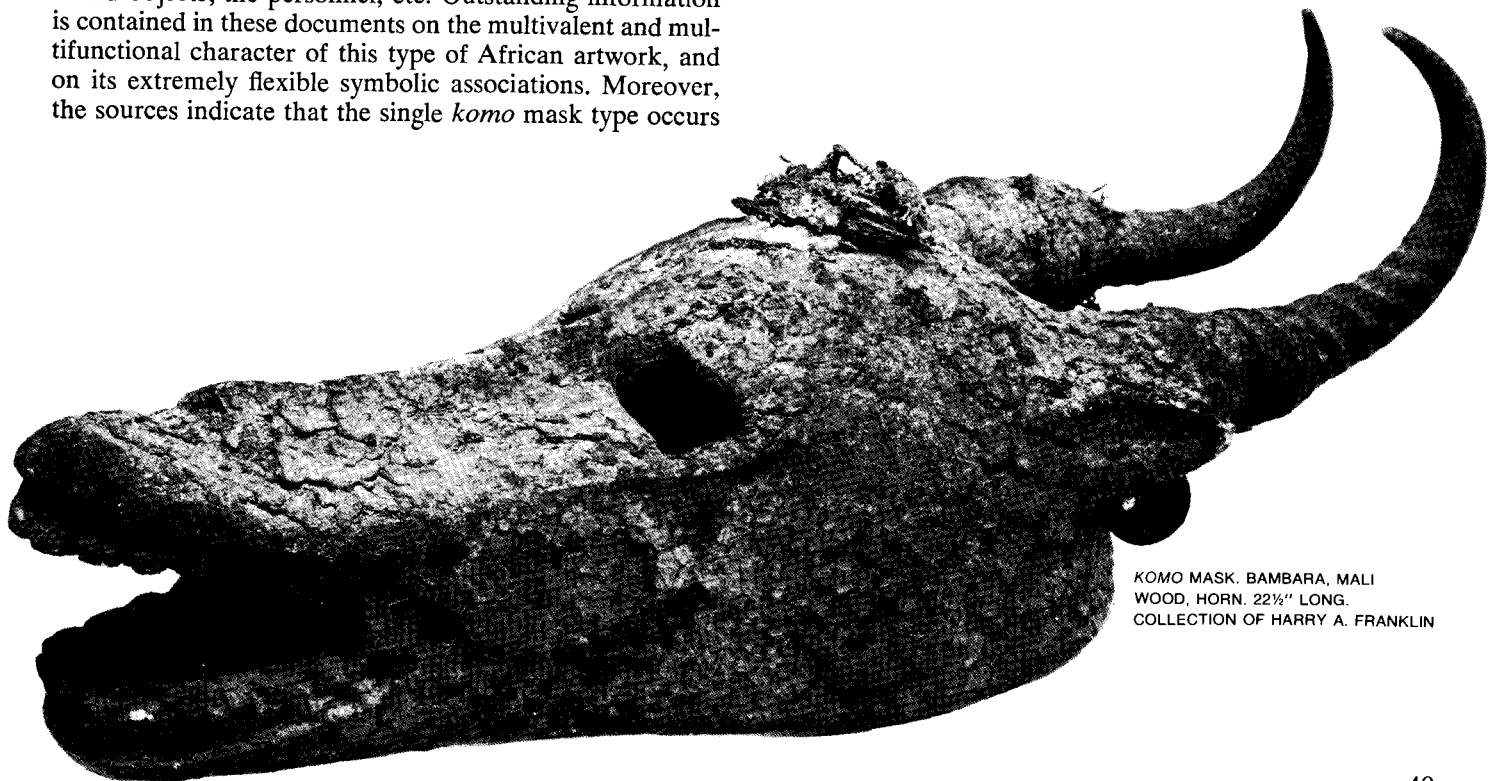
more than the whites of the dancers' eyes, whereas less skillfully sewn *Kokoro* generally allow the audience a glimpse of cheeks or part of the forehead. On this afternoon Suleimana and Ziri were sewing the *vogho*, the cape of fiber which is sewn to the head of *Kokoro* and fringes the face like a parenthetical statement marking the hair-line and cheek planes, so that the face of the rooster is visually clarified for all to see during the dance (Fig. 2). The *vogho* was dyed with the traditional ochre and potassium mixture, the color being perfect—*fapene ben ben*—a deep matte blood red which contrasts well with the black cloth face and crisp white facial features of *Kokoro*. These two young artisans severely criticized the workmanship of others in the compound who were working on other fiber and cloth ancestors, for they had taken the easy way out by purchasing the cheap and far too iridescent French dyes easily found at the market in the city. Ziri referred to the others' work as *Ngwontulu-yororo*, "all mixed up," and said that the end result would be masks whose effect would be a riot of uncontrolled color (Fig. 3). Purple, green, red, and yellow fibers, he claimed, could not be successfully combined to produce a clearly visible costume and the elders would most certainly shout *Ngwontulu-yororo*, in this case, "heads of confusion," during the masquerade. Suleimana prolonged the criticism by pointing out that by donning such a costume one

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discussion of some stylistic and cultural aspects and to focus mainly on ancestral figurines, *ntomo* and *kore* masks, and *tyiwara* headdress masks at the expense of the other artistic materials. There is, for example, a quasi total neglect of the mask of the *komo* association. Kjersmeier (*op. cit.*, p. 15) limited his discussion of *komo* to two lines: "The Komo association is charged with the detection and punishment of thieves and unfaithful women; its symbol is an articulated mask with horns."

Goldwater (*op. cit.*, p. 11), basing his information essentially on Dieterlen (*op. cit.*, 1951) and on notes provided by Zahan (Musée Guimet, *Le Masque*, 1959), understandably offers more information on *komo* than any one of the other general books on African art. Even in this source, however, the information is heavily reduced in contrast with his interpretation of other Bambara art forms. Although *komo* is referred to as "the most widespread and important of the Bambara secret societies" and as "a constant presence in the life of its members" (life-cycle events, agricultural rites, judgment of all major crimes), the actual analysis only provides a small glimpse into the complex usages, meanings, functions, and forms of the mask that is linked with this association. Various more recent general works on African art either ignore the *komo* material altogether or give a sketchy, and sometimes imprecise, characterization of it. This is astonishing because the earlier-mentioned primary sources on Bambara contain exceptionally interesting, diversified, and complete data on *komo*. Obviously, the French language sources are sometimes difficult, apparently conflicting, and somewhat confusing; and the relevant information is heavily dispersed, which makes a sound heuristic and close, critical scrutiny even more imperative. However, each of the first-hand ethnographical sources contains precious and complementary types of information on such aspects as the association itself; the form, the function, the meanings, the terminology, the usage in different ritual contexts, and the symbolic associations of the *komo* mask; the shrines, the altars, the associated objects; the personnel, etc. Outstanding information is contained in these documents on the multivalent and multifunctional character of this type of African artwork, and on its extremely flexible symbolic associations. Moreover, the sources indicate that the single *komo* mask type occurs

in a great many variations and that the *komo* association itself is found not only in most villages inhabited by the Bambara properly speaking, but also among such other groups as Malinke, Kagoro, certain Fulani, Kokoroko, Minianka, and certain Senufo. Certainly, there are lacunae in the records concerning, for example, the manufacturing, acquisition, transfer, custody, the linguistic and textual interpretation, the personnel, and the relationships with other masks. However, this does not alter the fact that there is a wealth of largely untapped primary information available on the *komo* mask and association. The totality of these data offers unique insight into the cultural significance of the *komo* mask and many fresh concepts about the diverse nature of African art: the spectrum of symbolic associations of an artwork; the levels of meanings; the manifest and covert usages and functions; the intimate relationships between sculptures and other objects (costumes, musical instruments, paraphernalia); between sculptures and places (altars, sanctuaries, shrines); between sculptures, dance and dramatic action; between sculpture and total setting (time period, architectural background, light and sound effects); between sculpture, oral literature, and verbal behavior. For a better understanding of the art, we can no longer afford to ignore these various pieces of scattered information and interpretation. How can we continue talking about Bambara art if we do not take fully into account the entire range of art objects and associated products that they produce, and study them in all their ramifications and interrelationships? There is a definite danger of narrowness and imprecision of viewpoint and threat of scholarly stagnation if we pursue the method of arbitrary selection of cases and artworks to illustrate narrowly conceived topics. We must, therefore, go back to the primary sources, examine all available ethnographical and artistic data, cease uncritically rehashing secondary and derived sources, re-examine and question the conventional explanations and interpretations, and inject into the analysis more and better, undated and broadened cultural and linguistic data.



KOMO MASK. BAMBARA, MALI  
WOOD, HORN. 22½" LONG.  
COLLECTION OF HARRY A. FRANKLIN

Various forms of field research have obviously much to add to our general understanding of African art. There is plenty of need and much scope for different types of field investigations, ranging from the intensive survey of partially known or largely unknown ethnic groups and geographical areas to the more intensive types of field research. The latter, again, could range from the comprehensive study of the entire spectrum of artistic activities in a particular ethnic group or in a well-defined social framework (e.g., an association or a cult at the ethnic, infra- and supra-ethnic levels) to highly detailed analyses of specific categories of artworks within a circumscribed social and ritual setting.

I want to address myself to a certain type of field investigation which is perhaps the most important and most urgent of all, and which although commonsensical, is difficult to carry out to its fullest possible extent. I refer to contextual analysis.

It is one thing to build up information about a particular object or set of objects through a technique of inquiry that is based on a number of more or less judiciously asked questions bearing on diverse aspects of the objects. This mode of inquiry evolves in a kind of artificially created vacuum. It can provide, however, vitally significant information on many aspects and is probably irreplaceable as a means for getting at certain "invisible" properties of the artwork. This can be completed somewhat by piecemeal and casual observation of bits and pieces of behavior that surround the artwork and by case studies.

It is another thing to build up the information within the framework of the actual contexts of usage of the artworks by means of intensive observation, involving participation and acquisition of unsolicited information. In such a context, full attention can be directed to the various types of action that surround the actual usages of a particular artwork in different ritual and social circumstances, in different associations and configurations, and at different stages of an initiation or a cult practice. Of great importance here are the various ways in which an object is handled and manipulated; the songs, dances, gestures, adornments, costumes, and other select objects that accompany the artwork on different occasions; the physical and social settings in which the objects occur; and the social personalities connected with them.

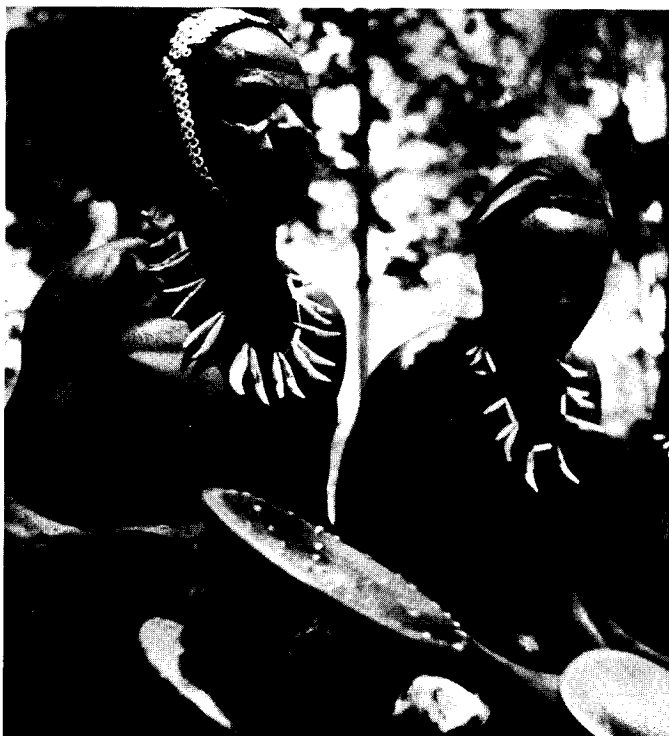
It must be constantly kept in mind that an artwork, which we have tended to sever from its totality, is part of a system. As Mauss (*Manuel d'ethnographie*, 1947, 71 and 73) so astutely remarked, "Un objet esthétique est toujours un ensemble," and "il conviendra d'étudier chaque art, chaque système d'art, chaque mélange d'arts, à tous les points de vue possibles." An art object has a physical existence; it has a general form, which can be broken down into distinguishable parts; it is made in a certain style; it follows a certain canon of representation and schematization. It can be colored or patinated, and adorned with various separate objects. It occupies a physical niche. Whether it is in actual usage or not, the place where it occurs may be the village or the bush or forest; a house; a men's house; a shrine, an altar, a cave, or a sacred wood; a bag or a basket, etc. As a form, the art object is created by one or more individuals, and there are basic materials, tools, techniques, processes of working, circumstances, and the makers themselves that enter into consideration.

As a movable item of property, the artwork is linked with a system of commissioning, acquisition, transmission, custody, ownership, possession, replacement, substitution, abandonment, loss, and destruction. The artwork also occupies a conceptual niche in the minds of the people who create and use it. There is a specialized linguistic terminology that applies to the work as a whole and to certain of its parts and aspects. The artwork is part of a system of linguistic taxonomy. There is a certain oral tradition connected with it: formal and informal statements can be made about it; formal texts (from formulas to proverbs, from legends to myths, praises, and prayers) are recited or sung in conjunction with the object. The object reflects, but also stimulates and produces, thought.

The individual artwork is part of a whole or of a set of wholes. Here, it may be possible to distinguish between fixed and fluctuating wholes. In the former category fall those objects and activities that are inseparably linked with the artwork in narrow and broad senses. Thus, the earlier-mentioned *komo* mask of the Bambara is associated with a frame, a robe, a cap, a bamboo pole, a whistle, a bull roarer, a stylet, a particular wearer, a set of dances and other behavior patterns. In the broader sense, "the head of the *komo*" as described above is linked with a sacred wood, a mud sanctuary, a circular grass-roofed house, altars, a treasure (cowries, precious materials), boards with signs, a mallet, a chain, a mortar, and musical instruments. The fluctuating wholes are made up by each of the various rites and other circumstances in which the mask is used. These rites and circumstances may considerably differ in nature and scope. For example, there is eventually a fundamental difference between a rite of initiation (during which a new member or devotee is inducted into an association or a cult and learns about the secrets and ultimate meanings of an object), a rite of consecration of a new object, and a set of regularly or irregularly recurring ritual events and *ad hoc* actions. The already-mentioned *komo* mask is interpreted in initiation ceremonies to "the class of the children of the true cult." A number of special usages of the mask occur on this occasion (e.g., swearing an oath, placing the hand in the mouth of the mask and the head on the ground, and licking the mask). It occurs in a number of annual and septennial rites that reenact the great stages of the genesis of the people, commemorate historical and mythical events, and aim at the renewal of beings and things. Actual usages differ with various stages of the ceremonies, when the mask is cleaned, immersed in mud, placed on altars, propitiated, or used to entertain, to warn, to scare, to police, to judge, to purify, or to teach.<sup>3</sup>

It is quite clear that a single art object does occur in different rites, events, and circumstances. The objects are multivalent in usage and function; and as symbols, they can express many meanings. The actual contexts in which the art object occurs differ considerably. These differences are reflected in the particular associations of objects; the texts, the dances, the music, the dramatic action; the time, place and setting; the mood of the situation; the actual handling and manipulation; and the actual composition of the group of users and participants. It is here that obviously the actual observation of, and participation in, the various ritual contexts in which a single art object or a particular set of artworks occurs, become so very important. There is no way in which this contextual analysis could be replaced by other modes of inquiry.

The wooden stools and the wooden *lukwakongo* masquettes of the Lega offer a case in point (Biebuyck, *Lega Culture*, 1973, pp. 181-184; 186-188; 211-213, and *passim*). The fairly uniformly sculptured monoxyle stools become, as initiation objects in the hands of the higher initiates, the vehicles of many symbolically conveyed meanings in the context of various initiation rites in which they are used singly, in varying quantities as a central symbol, or as subsidiary symbols in conjunction with central symbols of different types. The stools consist of spherically carved bottom and top seats which are connected by four bent legs in the middle of which there are two opposing protuberances. The stools have smooth, shiny, dark-brown and black surfaces; they are sometimes adorned with copper nails. The initiates can obviously sit on these stools; but during the initiations themselves they dance with the stools, carrying them with strings on the back, holding them in the hand or under the armpit, rubbing the seat or smelling it, placing them against the buttocks, pointing at them, swinging them around, raising them into the air, etc. The cluster of interpretations provided in aphorisms sung during the initiation and in the correlated dramatic action are focused on different things: the general form of the object and its component parts; its qualities of smoothness and glossiness; the wood of which it is made, the tools used to make it, and the process of carving; the tree from which the wood is derived and its place in the forest; its association with human and animal activities; the name of the object; the general use for which it is destined (an object to sit on and one that comes into contact with the genitalia) and the specific usages that are made of it during the rites; and its quality as an enduring artwork in contrast to the putrescible wood of which it is made. In one context the carving is no longer seen as a stool with all its possible associations, but as an object with which people may be threatened and beaten. In another context it symbolically replaces a shield. In still another context, it sustains a set of binary oppositions and linkages. In other configurations the carving is no longer an object but a concept: a concept of hospitality, a concept



of cleanliness. And, finally, the generic appellation of the stool (*kisumbi*) becomes the name of a character (Kisumbi). The sum total of intricate, and to us surprising, symbolic associations, which are stimulated and formulated by means of the stool-form in conjunction with verbal formulations and dramatic actions can be constructed only through the analysis of the various contexts of usage as they are created in the ongoing processes of initiation. This sum total of meanings and usages cannot adequately be constructed and understood in the vacuum of non-involved inquiry launched by the field worker. This type of investigation is also different from the quasi-contextual study whereby as much information as possible about an object is built up by the field worker from bits and pieces.

The danger here lies in the juxtaposition of ethnographical and artistic data which are then more or less successfully pieced together in an effort to integrate them. Much work lies ahead of us in this matter of genuine contextual analysis. It is a matter of time, patience, care, full acceptance by the art-users, and sheer luck. Obviously, this type of research cannot answer all the questions. As was already pointed out, the data thus obtained must be complemented and completed by appropriate linguistic research on modes of classification; by detailed studies on the methods of commissioning, acquisition, transfer, inheritance, and ownership; by an analysis of the social background of the users, owners, and makers of the artworks; and by a study of the actual processes involved in the making of an artwork. Much pioneering work in all these fields is still to be undertaken in order to lift our understanding of the cultural significance of African art to a higher level. □

Notes, page 90.



LEGA, ZAÏRE. AN INITIATE OF THE SECOND HIGHEST GRADE (*LUTUMBO LWA YANANIO*) OF THE *BWAMI* ASSOCIATION, AND HIS INITIATED WIFE. BOTH ARE SEATED ON A STOOL, WHILE ATTENDING ONE OF THE RITES.

LEGA, ZAÏRE. TWO INITIATES OF THE SECOND HIGHEST GRADE DANCING WITH STOOLS IN THE "RITE OF THE STOOL." IN THIS SEQUENCE THEY CELEBRATE THE STOOL AS A BEAUTIFUL AND LASTING WORK THAT IS MADE FROM PERISHABLE WOOD, BUT SHAPED BY THE ADZ INTO "SOMETHING THAT CANNOT DECAY."