

CURE OR CAPITALISM: AN EXAMINATION OF A 1960s YORÙBÁ SAPONA FIGURE

BY

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To my family

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I thank my committee member Robin Poynor, and my adviser, Victoria Rovine. I thank my family, who never doubted me.

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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
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In the late 1960s, numerous employees of the Center for Disease Control purchased wooden figures of Sapona, the Yorùbá god of smallpox, during the organization's campaign to eradicate the disease in Nigeria. This thesis examines a Shapona figure donated by a CDC employee to the Harn Museum of Art. It aims to determine whether the figure was originally used by those who adhere to Yorùbá religion. Ms. Morris argues that the Yorùbá began producing these anthropomorphic Shapona figures to capitalize on a new market of foreign medical workers. The project begins with a discussion of the role of visual arts in Yorùbá healing techniques, and concludes with a survey of contemporary African artists whose work incorporates references to healing.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the late 1960s, Center for Disease Control (CDC) employees stationed in Nigeria to eradicate smallpox collected over fifty wooden Sapona figures like the one in the Harn Museum's collection [Fig. 1-1]. The Yorùbá who adhere to the indigenous religion rarely utter the name Sapona, who is the *orisa* or god of smallpox. There are certainly no known anthropomorphic representations of him in the literature on Yoruba art. What were these objects used for then? Were they used in a religious ceremony or made to sell to a new market? My project attempts to answer these questions by providing a detailed visual analysis of the object and by placing the object in a cultural and historical context. Clarifying the object's past is important both for the museum's records and more broadly to scholarship of African visual culture in order to avoid falsely assigning spiritual relevance to a trade piece.

To inform my understanding of Yorùbá healing techniques I begin with a chapter on classical Yorùbá healing methods. I closely examine the Harn Museum's Sapona figure in the second chapter, and I end my project with a survey of contemporary artists whose work makes reference to healing. It is important to note that not all Yorùbá adhere to the indigenous religion. Today, as in the 1960s when the Sapona figures were collected, many Nigerians are Christian and Muslim. When I speak of the Yorùbá then, I refer specifically to those practicing the indigenous religion.

In the first chapter I examine the visual culture surrounding four Yorùbá healing practices in Nigeria including *Gèlèdé*, *Egúngún*, and *ààlè*. I begin by acknowledging Yorùbá deities who are pivotal in healing practices. These deities include Osanyin, Orunmila, and Eshu. I focus my research on three publications, one for each healing

practice, taking a similar approach to analyzing each. I use *The Gèlèdé Spectacle: Art, Gender, and Social Harmony in African Culture* by Babatunde Lawal to examine the Gèlèdé masquerade performed by the Yorùbá. I provide a visual analysis of ààlè which David Doris writes about in his book *Vigilant Things*. I explain who creates ààlè in Yorùbá society and provide a brief history of the objects. To examine Egúngún I rely on S.O. Babayemi's publication *Egúngún Among the Oyo Yoruba*.

Diseases, including HIV/AIDS, are a prevalent subject in contemporary art produced in Africa. In chapter three, I shift gears and consider artists from three countries who reference healing in their work. I compare the way that each artist, Abdoulaye Konate, Gera, and Zwelethu Mthethwa, uses his work to comment on health. Malian artist Abdoulaye Konate began working with large-scale textiles to comment on economic and social challenges in the early 1990s. I examine works such as *Gris-gris blancs pour Israël et la Palestine*, created in 2006, in which he alludes to health and epidemics. I also examine the talismans of Ethiopian artist, Gera. After Jacques Mercier "discovered" and collected Gera's paintings, Gera became an artist in addition to a healer. Lastly, I consider the works of Zwelethu Mthethwa, an internationally known South African artist interested in medicine. Mthethwa uses photography to document Sangoma healers from rural towns in South Africa who migrated to cities in the 1980s. I examine this body of photographs and attempt to determine how viewers use these images.



Figure 1-1. Saponá figure

CHAPTER 2

POWER IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER: VISUAL EFFICACY IN YORUBA HEALING CEREMONIES

Yorùbá *Gelede* ceremonies often last for well over a week and consist of performers who dance jovially to appease *Iya Nla* (Big Mother). Ààlè, objects which any Yorùbá person can place in their home or on their land, serve as preventative medicine by deterring potential thieves. Egúngún ceremonies cure the community of physical and social ills such as disease and witchcraft. I will survey these three Yorùbá practices in order to illustrate the healing powers that ceremonies and objects gain through their visual, not only medicinal, characteristics. The common threads that weave through the literature on Gelede, ààlè, and Egúngún, illuminate the role of visual efficacy in Yorùbá concepts of healing. The power of each medicinal ceremony and object is held not only in their literal medicine, such as *oogun* or medicine stored in ààlè, but also in their visual impact. In this survey of Yorùbá ceremonies, I will also elaborate on three important aspects of Yorùbá culture relevant to the three healing techniques: ancestors, power of women, and medicinal power.

It is important to note here the importance of other Yorùbá orisa in the healing process. Robert Farris Thompson describes the orisa of healing, “Osanyin is the crippled king who, crushed to half his size, gained insight into the human condition.”¹ In the beginning, Olorun decided to provide earth with an orisa who could provide healing and Osanyin posses that knowledge. Osanyin, orisa of medicine and healing is represented with a bird-topped iron staff.² The birds on top of the staff refer to both the

¹ James Lindroth, “Images of Subversion: Ishmael Reed and the Hoodoo Trickster,” *African American Review* 30.2 (1996): 109.

² Robert Farris Thompson, “Face of the Gods: The Artists and Their Altars,” *African Arts* 28.1 (1995): 52.

power of the orisa and the power of women who can be witches, on which I will elaborate in the Gelede section.³ Witches in Yorùbá belief are powerful and can use that power for good or evil. At night they transform themselves into birds, “a white bird with a long red beak and red claws... a brown bird like a bush fowl with a long red beak.”⁴ Both are images of hot-colored birds, and thus hot-tempered witches. The long beak refers to the witch bird pecking the head of its target at night to suck out blood which causes the person to become ill and even die. The witch may also render a victim impotent by eating his soul while he sleeps. Yorùbá herbalists follow the orisa Osanyin, and a large part of their duty is to protect the community from the witches’ wrath. Herbalists can counter witches using their iron staff which often shows one dominant bird on top of the staff, with sixteen smaller birds surrounding the staff below him. One herbalist said of the staff,

The witches are so terrible. Someone who holds the position of native herbalist must have the bird on his staff. The birds that kill people and cause sickness and make people afraid—when they see that the herbalist has the bird in iron on his staff they will love the man and fear him.⁵

Another Yourba herbalist Agbekeke Asoko, who is a priestess of another healing deity Erinle, associated the bird on the top of her staff to Sapona, the orisa of smallpox that I discuss in Chapter 2. She said that her staff was made of iron because the god of iron, Ogun, clears the path for all other orisa to complete their duties.⁶

³ I use “witch” here because it is widely used in scholarship about Africa. The term, however, is loaded. In the United States it can imply a fictional character.

⁴ Thompson, *Black Gods and Kings*, 11/2.

⁵ Thompson, *Black Gods and Kings*, 11/3.

⁶ Thompson, *Black Gods and Kings*, 11/3.

Several other orisa are pivotal in the healing process. Orunmila is the oldest son of Olorun, the sky deity, and is in charge of divination.⁷ Without him no healing, which often involves divination, would be possible. Able to read the future and understand the secret of existence, he descended to earth to teach humans how to be diviners.⁸ He was the orisa who initially created a plan, with Eshu's help, to appease the witches. He created a concoction of leaves and offered it to the women who in turn learned to respect and pity him. He posses the insight and an intelligence to converse with the witches. These women posses ase, or spirit, which is neither good nor bad and Orunmila uses symbols such as bells and leaves to translate their powers into positive energy.⁹ Eshu, the trickster god in the Yorùbá religious pantheon, not only plays a role in divination but is also visually relevant to the Saponá figure that is the focus of Chapter 2. This orisa plays the opposite role of Orunmila, who is considered a cool god who can control fate. Eshu turns fate around and is the cause of random acts.¹⁰ In the same way that Orunmila acts as a liaison between humans and the gods, carrying messages from Olorun to the earth, Eshu carries messages from the earth to Olorun.¹¹ This hot god can destroy anyone who offends him, so his devotees are careful to show him respect.¹² It is also important to note that Nigerians do not solely rely on ceremonial medicines and also have at their disposal medicines that have been called "western

⁷ Horace G. Courlander, *Tales of Yoruba Gods and Heroes* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1973), 6.

⁸ Courlander, *Tales of Yoruba Gods and Heroes*, 15-22.

⁹ Thompson, *Black Gods and Kings*, 11/2.

¹⁰ Courlander, *Tales of Yoruba Gods and Heroes*, 6.

¹¹ Courlander, *Tales of Yoruba Gods and Heroes*, 10.

¹² Courlander, *Tales of Yoruba Gods and Heroes*, 28.

medicines.” Here, I have chosen to focus on the medicinal techniques of gelede, egungun, and ààlè.

In 1985, Anthony D. Buckley published the book *Yorùbá Medicine*, in which he considers herbal healing in Nigeria, stressing the importance of secrecy in healing processes.¹³ The same is true of many aspects of Nigerian ceremonial healing and for individual objects associated with healing. Although secrecy is important in Nigerian healing, objects such as ààlè and ceremonies such as Gelede and Egúngún derive the power to heal through their visual performance for the community, which bolsters the efficacy of Yorùbá ceremonies and objects.

For my analysis, I rely primarily on three publications, one per ceremony and object. I consulted S.O. Babayemi’s *Egúngún Among the Oyo Yoruba* (1980) to examine Egúngún ceremonies from a Yorùbá point of view. Babatunde Lawal provides detailed insight into the Gelede performance in his book *The Gelede Spectacle: Art Gender and Social Harmony in Yorùbá Culture* (1996). For the third and final case study I used David Doris’s *Vigilant Things: On Thieves, Yoruba Anti-Aesthetics, and the Strange Fates of Ordinary Objects in Nigeria* (2011) to explore ààlè. Unless otherwise noted, all information is from these sources.

Egúngún

Egúngún is important in all Yoruba communities because of Yoruba beliefs in reincarnation and life after death. During Egúngún ceremonies which are used to honor and appease ancestors, ancestral spirits manifest in the ceremonies as the Egúngún masqueraders. The Egúngún masqueraders are the representatives of ancestors on

¹³ Anthony D. Buckley, *Yorùbá Medicine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985)

earth and so they are highly regarded in public and are believed to be able to solve the community's problems if proper rituals are upheld. When the ancestors are appeased, they solve problems such as sickness, poverty, infertility, and poor harvests.¹⁴ During the ceremonies—which take place at least annually, more often if the need arises—masqueraders wear a variety of costumes. The colors of these costumes are chosen because they are the preferred colors of the ancestors, whom they aim to please with the ceremony. The clothing is meant to draw the community near to the ancestors by commemorating them. One Yoruba who was interviewed about Egungun dress replied, 'These costumes are the visible emblems of the ancestors on earth, they are the only thing we see when they appear.' Costumers therefore remain entirely clothed by their costumes when they appear in public.¹⁵

Egúngún ceremonies gain effectiveness through the community's visual engagement. They vary in purpose and style, some performed by single families calling on their ancestors and others involving the whole community at funerals or annual Egúngún ceremonies. Diviners decide on the performance date and announce it publicly. Although the ceremonies honor the deceased ancestors, the masks do not depict the deceased or the living, but rather the entire lineage. Egúngún performances can travel all through a town, becoming visually available to many members of the community. Masqueraders often imitate women by wearing costumes that exaggerate female qualities such as large hips and bosoms. They also adorn themselves with

¹⁴ P.S.O. Aremu, "Between Myth and Reality: Yoruba Egúngún Costumes as Commemorative Clothes," *Journal of Black Studies* 22.1. (1991): 6-10.

¹⁵ Aremu, "Between Myth and Reality, 10-14.

elaborately plaited hair, gold jewelry and purses in order to acknowledge the potentially dangerous *aje* and to capture and use her power.¹⁶

Egúngún serves as a form of theatre during which the dancers depict problems in the past in order to improve the community's future. Their visual impact is important: the community members must witness the performers' lesson in order to enact its message. As with other Yorùbá ceremonies such as agemo and jugbo, men and women cross dress during Egúngún performances. Like the aforementioned men who dressed in costumes padded on the hips and breasts to look like women, women also perform as men, although far less frequently.¹⁷

Margaret Thompson Drewal recalls a ceremony that she witnessed in 1968 in which a woman emerged from the crowd and joined the ceremony dancing like a man with full, forceful motions and rapid spinning. As soon as she began, a man quickly cloaked her in his garment "to make the dance look fine" because he believed Egúngún is most aesthetically pleasing when danced in men's clothing.¹⁸ This illuminates the visual importance of ceremonial healing. When the men and women represent each other, the community believes them to be the gender that they outwardly represent. The woman who danced as a man, moved as a man, and was dressed as a man, therefore was a man. The man dressed as a woman was therefore able to generate a woman's power for the ceremony. It is the way they appear to the public, their visual qualities, that identify them.

¹⁶ Margaret Thompson Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

¹⁷ Margaret Thompson Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual*

¹⁸ Margaret Thompson Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual*

Gelede

Belief in women's powers is pan-Yoruba but Gelede, unlike Egúngún, is only performed in western Yoruba land from Sabe in the north, down the coast bordered on the west by Ohori and east by Egbado.¹⁹ Gelede varies widely in different communities but in each the ceremony is associated with a deified founding foremother. The fundamental purpose of these ceremonies is to pay tribute to female mythical powers and therefore derive their benefits. The ceremony celebrates powerful women such as elders, ancestors, and deities and together, these women are referred to as orisa egbe. The term egbe refers to the Yoruba community as a whole and specifically the secret society of powerful women elders who can transform into birds at night and hold meetings. They are mortals who have access to the world of the living and the world of the dead. These women can be destructive but community members do not call them that, they only refer to them "mother" to acknowledge their importance and not upset them.²⁰

One participant described the ceremony:

The gods of Gelede are so called the great ancestral mothers. The power of The Great Mother is manifold. The ancestors, when they had a problem, would assemble to determine the cause and the remedy... and, if it is found that Gelede should be done to bring about rain or the birth of children, it should be done and it will be so. The Great Mother has power in many things... [She] is the owner of everything in the world. She owns you.²¹

¹⁹ The ceremony also spread to Sierra Leone, Cuba, Brazil.

²⁰ Henry J. Drewal and Margaret Thompson Drewal, *Gelede: Art and Female Power among the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 7-8.

²¹ Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede: Art and Female Power*, 8.

Another member said “If they did not exist, we could not come into the world.” This quote implies that the mothers understand the secrets of the world and posses the ability to bring people into the world, and removed them. Women’s knowledge of life is evident to Yoruba people by their longevity of life, often outliving men. Because they are so knowledgeable, herbalists must seek their support when they made medicines. If the mothers are displeased with the herbalists, it is believed that she can “turn the world upside down.” If the herbalist tries to dig up a root, she will move the root to the sky, and if he climbs up to remove a leaf, she will move the leaf to the ground.²²

Their power is equal or superior to the orisa, whom some believe the mothers control. One way that an *aje*, or witch, receives that which she requests from community members is by hiding under an orisa’s idol. She is then fighting a person through that orisa. If something is offered to that orisa, the mother takes it for herself and will be appeased. If there is an epidemic, the community members offer sacrifices to the orisa so that they will relieve suffering. Because the mothers are the owners of these gods, they know that the community is also begging for their assistance as well and will be satisfied and help end the epidemic.²³

An example of a powerful female orisa is Nana Bukuu (or Nana Buruku), who is especially relevant to this paper because she is Sapona’s mother. In life, Nana Bukuu was a fearless warrior and aided kings in battle. She represents the courage and accomplishments of all living women and she, like the ancestors, posses secrets about life. She and her son, Sapona, share the symbol of a staff made of palm fronds. Her

²² Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede: Art and Female Power*, 8-10

²³ Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede: Art and Female Power*, 9-11.

primary icon is the *ileeshin* which is a term originating in Ketu. The ileeshin is a staff shaped object made from the same material of as the broom that represents her son, but it is entirely covered in camwood paste and wound in leather strips which can be dyed a deep blue. The top of the staff curls over resembling a leopard's tail and is thought to contain the woman's ase or spirit. On earth, only women can hold the ileeshin and can use it to harm cruel people in her presence.²⁴

The Yorùbá of Southwest Nigeria who adhere to indigenous religion perform Gelede masquerades [Fig. 2-1] in order to assuage women and female ancestors by appearing in front of the community.²⁵ During this ceremony, women, some of whom possess strong and potentially destructive powers, are praised for holding powerful secrets and providing life to the entire community. An effective performance must engage and please these women, therefore participants spend days without sleep and exert maximum energy to publically demonstrate their devotion and gratitude.²⁶

The visually striking ceremony takes place in two parts: the Efe performance held at night and the Gelede dance during the day. The Efe's twin figure, who is immune from punishment, precedes him, enticing the eager crowd with his witty and often inappropriate comments and excited gestures. Viewer energy peaks with the appearance of the Efe mask, who immediately entrances the crowd with his undulating calls and swirling arms. His movements articulate masculine power derived from the

²⁴ Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, New York: Random House, Inc., 1983, 68-72.

²⁵ Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede: Art and Female Power*, xv.

²⁶ Drewal and Drewal. *Gelede: Art and Female Power Among the Yoruba*, ?.

support of community women. Excitement persists after Efe's exit, at which time the crowd sings and dances.²⁷

The following day performers show their power through the display of Gelede masks and costumes. The dancers perform maleness and femaleness through their costume, which consists of women's head ties secured around their waists [Fig. 2-2]. They execute fast sharp motions with their arms and legs, and appear masculine because of their large size as the fabric flares out when they swirl [Fig. 2-3]. However, the costume is made possible by female participation. In this way, the dancer simultaneously demonstrates physical strength through his maleness and honors community women through his femaleness. The dancers' masks also present male and female roles. Knives, guns and caps symbolize the males. Bowls, head wraps, trays and birds symbolize the women [Fig. 2-4]. *Aje* embody birds to travel to secret meetings at night. It is this duality between night and day, male and female that the community must witness in order to draw power from the other worlds and honor the women in their own world.

In order to comprehend the intended effects of the Yorùbá Gelede performance one must more fully understand *aje*. Witches are a pan-African source of social tension and are often blamed for inexplicable diseases, epidemics, and sudden deaths.²⁸ The Yoruba claim that *aje* have an unstable and ambiguous nature, characteristics generally attributed to women. "Good *aje*" represent women in their role as loving and protective mothers. More often though witches are associated with the *ajogun* or warriors against

²⁷ Drewal and Drewal. *Gelede: Art and Female Power*, ?.

²⁸ Babatunde Lawal, *The Gelede Spectacle: Art, Gender, and Social Harmony in an African Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), xv.

humanity, which the Yoruba sometimes consider to be more powerful than *orisa*, the pantheon of Yoruba deities.

Because of their potentially fatal power, Yoruba men and women avoid looking at a suspected *aje* in the eye or even saying the word. Instead, they refer to her in euphemisms such as *awon iya wa* (our mother). When the *aje* is provoked, the community relies on the power of the punitive Egúngún society to subdue her.²⁹ The Gelede society's role is to deflect the anti-social behavior of the Mothers with love and praise³⁰

Because the Gelede society's role is to protect the community against the *aje*'s devastation, we are able to categorize the ceremony as medicine. Babatunde Lawal links the ceremony to health. In his introduction, he explains Gelede rituals as they relate to art and Yoruba belief systems. He links art and healing in Yorubaland by claiming that the role of art is to promote spiritual wellness and social harmony within the community.³¹ The health of the individual is therefore linked to the harmony of the entire community. The author elaborates on this observation in a section of his book titled to "Using Art to Dissolve Tension" in which he explains Gelede as a ceremony performed to non-aggressively promote social harmony.³² Gelede works to protect the society from the *aje*'s destruction. The society forms a community identity while

²⁹ Lawal, *The Gelede Spectacle*, 31-33.

³⁰ Drewal and Drewal. *Gelede: Art and Female Power*, xv.

³¹ Lawal, *The Gelede Spectacle*, xvii.

³² Lawal, *The Gelede Spectacle*, 79.

illustrating the necessity of fellowship and community to human survival. In this way, Gelede serves as a medicine used to heal the entire community.³³

The Yoruba proverb, “*Oju to ba ri gelede ti de opin iron*” or “The eyes that have seen Gelede have seen the ultimate spectacle.” illustrates the visual impact of Gelede.³⁴ The word *iron*, or spectacle, has numerous implications. Most broadly, it refers to a transitory phenomenon—one that always exists in the world of the ancestors but is only visible to and affects humans when performed in Gelede ceremonies, illustrating the importance of the ceremony’s visual revelation. The word also refers to the masquerade as a display for the gods, ancestors, or Mothers.³⁵ Because the performance is for the Mothers, it derives its effectiveness from its visual availability to the community, specifically to the Mothers.

According to Lawal, the Gelede society employs aesthetics to neutralize evil and stimulate warm affection at the same time. Individual ceremonies, performed by families experiencing difficult health or economic troubles, gain efficacy based on their level of elaboration. If the Mothers witness an intricate ceremony, they are more likely to be appeased and ease the family’s misfortunes. Communal Gelede ceremonies, which are more common, also rely on intricate displays to ancestors and Mothers in order to benefit from the women’s ability to heal. Often these communal ceremonies are held to give thanks to *Iya Nla*, and they rely on the participation of all community members to appease her.³⁶

³³ Lawal, *The Gelede Spectacle*, 97.

³⁴ Drewal and Drewal. *Gelede: Art and Female Power*, 1.

³⁵ Drewal and Drewal. *Gelede: Art and Female Power*, 1.

³⁶ Lawal, *The Gelede Spectacle*, 93-95.

Occasionally the lines are blurred between medicinal power and visual power. For example, the Efe mask, performed the first night of the Gelede festival, incorporates a carved blade motif. Some believe the blade is an aesthetic elaboration, but according to Henry and Margaret Drewal it is a medicinal camwood blade. Gelede performers have identified the blades as miniature bull roarers. These multiple interpretations indicate that the mask's visual qualities are relevant.³⁷

In Nigeria, Yorùbá communities use art to improve people's lives and to promote social well being.³⁸ Gelede, serving as ceremonial healing, protects societies from the potentially fatal effects of *aje*, women who transform into cats or birds at night and ravage the city. This ceremony's effectiveness depends on its visual availability.

Ààlè

Medicinal power can be manifested in a variety of visual forms. In her article "The Use of Human Images in Yoruba Medicines," Norma Wolff discusses the use of anthropomorphic images in Yorùbá healing, which can be produced from wood, bone, ivory, or molded from clay. These figures vary visually based on their particular ethnic style and evoke emotions from the person using them. Medicinal figures are produced and viewed as art but also serve as practical medicine in Yorubaland. According to Wolff, African sculpture serves two purposes, power and display. Displayed objects, which have various symbolic meanings, are made visible to the public in a religious or political context in order to enhance the prestige of the owner and to display the owner's

³⁷ Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede: Art and Female Power*, xix.

³⁸ Lawal, *The Gelede Spectacle*, xv-xvii.

strength. Conversely, power sculpture is created to garner the support of supernatural beings to aid in the social health of a community.³⁹

The author argues that medicinal figures always serve as power objects, kept out of view of the public. Created and activated during ritual practice, these figures are usually hidden and sometimes even destroyed after use. Yorùbá healers make use of all materials in the natural world for their sources of power drawing on the powerful aspects of animals such as the bird's beak, talons, or feathers, antelope horns, shells of the snail or tortoise. Human figures, however, are more than symbolic, they actually embody the materials from which they are created. Wolff states, "The creation of the medicine figure is an act of embodiment with the intention of concentrating powers of nature for social goals."⁴⁰ Healers must empower these anthropomorphic medicinal figures by adding supplementary medicinal substances like leaves, or by calling them to action with an incantation.⁴¹

Medicinal figures appear infrequently in scholarship for a number of reasons. First, they lack the refinement of other Yorùbá carvings such as *ere ibeji*, or twin figures, and various types of masks. The *ere are* designed and delicately executed for display on altars and are more refined because they are meant to prove the devotion and admiration for the orisa. Medicinal objects, not intended for public view, are usually not carved by artists and tend to be crudely executed. For this reason, they are not often collected by foreign tourists or collectors. If they are collected, they may not be

³⁹ Norma H. Wolff, "The Use of Human Images in Yoruba Medicines," *Ethnology*, 39.3 (Summer, 2000) 205-207.

⁴⁰ Wolff, "The Use of Human Images," 208.

⁴¹ Wolff, "The Use of Human Images," 207-208.

correctly identified in museum collections. More simply, researchers know little about them and do not often see them in the field because they are private objects, not meant for public display.⁴²

Aworan is the most common example of a medicinal figure used in Yorùbáland. These are small human shaped wooden figures used as ingredients in various Yorùbá medicines. They can represent a male or female and are carved in a recognizable Yorùbá style. Aworan are depicted with over sized heads, eyes, and mouths. Their arms are carved by their sides and they have shortened legs with large feet. Both male and female figures are represented nude. The females have exaggerated breasts and braided hair and the males have exaggerated genitals and a bald head.⁴³

Medical practitioners use aworan in *oogun ika*, or evil medicine, and in *oogun*, medicine used for healing purposes. Aworan used in *oogun ika* can cause a victim to fall ill or to have bad luck. Used for good, aworan can protect the user, bring him or her a partner, improve fertility, fight witchcraft, heal the sick, and prevent thieves from stealing. These figures can be made by the person in need but are often commissioned from a professional wood carver, who determines how refined the aworan will look based on the amount of money he is paid. Any aworan, regardless of its quality can be identified by the cord wrapped around the body, binding the arms. This string “fastens” a person to prevent them from moving until the cord is released. One form of aworan is the *aworan ibeji* which is often mistaken for *ere ibeji*, or twin figure but differs in that the *aworan ibeji* is only powerful when the carver applies medicine to it. This *oogun*, or

⁴² Wolff, “The Use of Human Images,” 209-210.

⁴³ Wolff, “The Use of Human Images,” 211-213.

medicine can be applied directly to the body of the figure or to incised patterns on the bottom of the figure.⁴⁴

Other types of Yorùbá medicine manifested in visual form is entirely non-representational like ààlè, objects used to prevent thieves from entering the house or stealing property outside. David Doris begins his book *Vigilant Things* with a personal story about his encounter with ààlè in a town called Modakeke in Nigeria. Passing a pile of green wood, he saw a black plastic bag, filled with an unknown substance, tied to a protruding stick [Fig. 2-5]. He asked its creator why he placed the object in his bundle of wood and learned that the object was, as he suspected, ààlè. The man would not tell him whether or not the object contained *oogun* or medicine, claiming that either way, the ààlè would prove effective.⁴⁵

Ààlè are made of virtually any material, although some media are more common than others, such as brooms and palm fronds. They are used to prevent thieves from stealing. An ààlè can be as simple as two palm fronds joined with string. The viewer needs only to see that the materials have been manipulated for the ààlè to be effective. The creator may use them inside the home or outside on farms to protect their crops from thieves or as Doris notes, on any property that a person is not able to supervise. Ààlè can be split into two main categories: ààlè *ami* and ààlè *oogun*. The latter contains medicinal herbs and oils which literally impregnate the object with ase, or power. Ààlè àmì, often called “sign ààlè”, gain their power through the very act of being seen.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Wolff, “The Use of Human Images,” 211-213.

⁴⁵ David Doris, *Vigilant Things*, (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2011), 3-5.

⁴⁶ Doris, *Vigilant Things*, 16.

Those who employ ààlè do so to protect themselves and their property, creating social harmony. Ridding the community of thieves serves as a metaphor for ridding the body of illness, making ààlè a metaphorical type of social medicine, used with great frequency during the political turmoil in Nigeria in the 1990s.⁴⁷ After the death of General Sani Abacha in 1998, who was a despot, murderer, and thief, the Nigerian people hoped for economic improvement and a decline in crime, but the changes never came. Crime increased with the death of MKO Abiólá, the popular winner of the annulled 1993 democratic election. During these dark years, crime skyrocketed and in an attempt to heal their deeply wounded society, and with little available governmental help, Yorùbá men and women increased their use of ààlè.⁴⁸

The man who Doris encountered in Modakeke, F. F. Afolabi, was confident in the efficacy of his ààlè àmì, because like the Gelede masquerade, its power was in its visual relationship with the potential thief, not in the literal medicine that may or may not have been inside. Therefore, what the ààlè contained was irrelevant to Mr. Afolabi. The punitive effects of the ààlè are set in motion as soon as the would-be thief encounters it.⁴⁹

Ààlè are effective because the would-be thief recognizes the object and understands that he or she will reap the consequences represented by that object. For instance, if the owner of a field hangs an old shoe from a tree at the entrance of his property, the potential criminal will know that if he steals he will suffer like a used shoe. Likewise, he may suffer as *sùkù àgbàdò* or maize cob, picked at and emaciated, or he

⁴⁷ Doris, *Vigilant Things*, ?.

⁴⁸ Doris, *Vigilant Things*, 8-9.

⁴⁹ Doris, *Vigilant Things*, 16.

may suffer as an old spoon that for centuries has been used in fires and boiling liquids⁵⁰. Babaláwo Ifáriwálé Ògúndíran provides a list of common motifs and their meanings such as the red flag that should be used outside of the house to protect farm products. If the potential thief ignores this ààlè, smallpox will kill him or her. If the thief sees a stone hung from a load of wood, the would-be thief knows that they will live a hard life with much burden if they steal the wood. Rags threaten a generally bad life with affliction and untimely death, and the midrib of the oil palm, *owa ope*, placed on property such as a pile of wood promises epilepsy. A person who steals in the presence of a hanging snail shell, will become very sick and sell all of their property for medicine that will prove ineffective. Later, the perpetrator will die of hypertension.⁵¹

The colors used in ààlè also provide visual messages for the potential thief. Of the three colors generally found in ààlè--red, white, and black--red has the strongest negative associations. Red, dangerous and unambiguous, is the very image of suffering and debilitation. Red ààlè tend to have the most serious effects. Because red is concealed within the healthy human body and deep in the earth during the fertile season, redness is associated with infertility and illness. Likewise, when red is displayed on ààlè it is a sign that danger is present.⁵²

Used less often in ààlè, black bears many meaning ranging from appreciation to “something sinister.”⁵³ According to Babaláwo Ifátóògùn, an ààlè that he made by attaching black cloth, black feathers, and black thread to a corncob was used to protect

⁵⁰ Doris, *Vigilant Things*, 240.

⁵¹ Doris, *Vigilant Things*, 241-2.

⁵² Doris, *Vigilant Things*, 198-201.

⁵³ Doris, *Vigilant Things*, ?.

harvested crops against thieves. The black feather protects the crops the way a chicken protects its chicks with its feathers. The black cloth held to the corn cob with black thread tells all who encounter it that if they steal from the granary, their lives will be enveloped in darkness and they will lose their way. White ààlè promotes transparency, allowing the creator to see the transgressor in the day and night. Creators employ white in ààlè in the form of cloth, feathers, thread , snail shells, cowries, beads, chalk, and water. White is the cooling color of water and chalk, complimenting and cooling the hot redness of blood and disease. For this reason, the creator of white ààlè can also use them to heal a thief who has been punished.⁵⁴

Because the members of a community understand these visual motifs, the ààlè are effective. Ààlè also creates a shared identity for the community through the common knowledge of these visual motifs. The Yorùbá use ààlè as medicine to rid the community potential thieves, especially during times of political unrest. The visual impact of the ààlè on the passerby deters them from committing malicious acts. Creators of ààlè, like the one Doris encountered on his return trip to Modakeke, know that leaving *oogun*, or medicine out of the medicinal object will not reduce its efficacy.

Gelede, Egúngún, and ààlè, three Yorùbá methods that encourage community health, gain efficacy through their visual engagement with the community. Each of these healing techniques illustrates an important aspect of Yorùbá culture: ancestors, power of women and medicinal figures. My analysis is not meant to dispute Buckley's assertion that privacy and secrecy are integral to Yorùbá medicine, but rather to prove

⁵⁴ Doris, *Vigilant Things*, 203-6.

that the visual characteristics are also necessary in creating an effective means of healing.



Figure 2-1. Gelede masquerade. Photo credit: Henry and Margaret Drewal



Figure 2-2. Gelede, Woman's head ties fly outward. Photo credit: Henry and Margaret Drewal

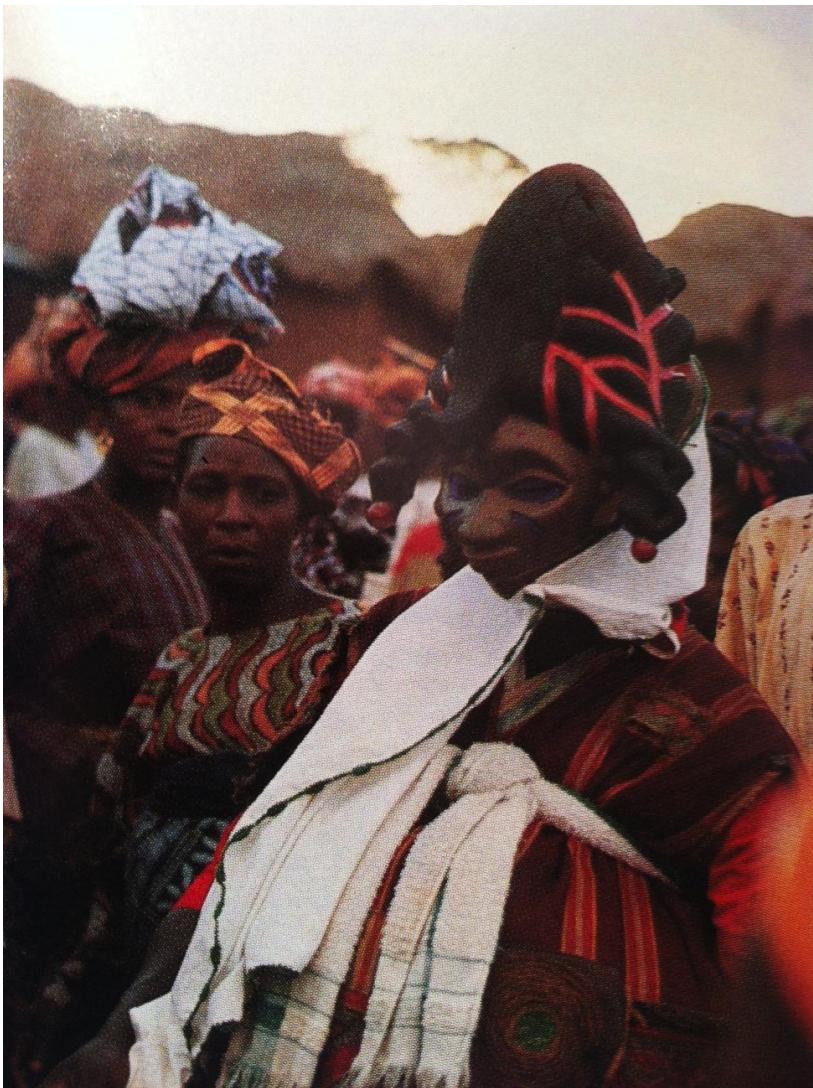


Figure 2-3. A Gelede dancer wearing a hoop around his chest with head ties . Photo Credit: Henry and Margaret Drewal

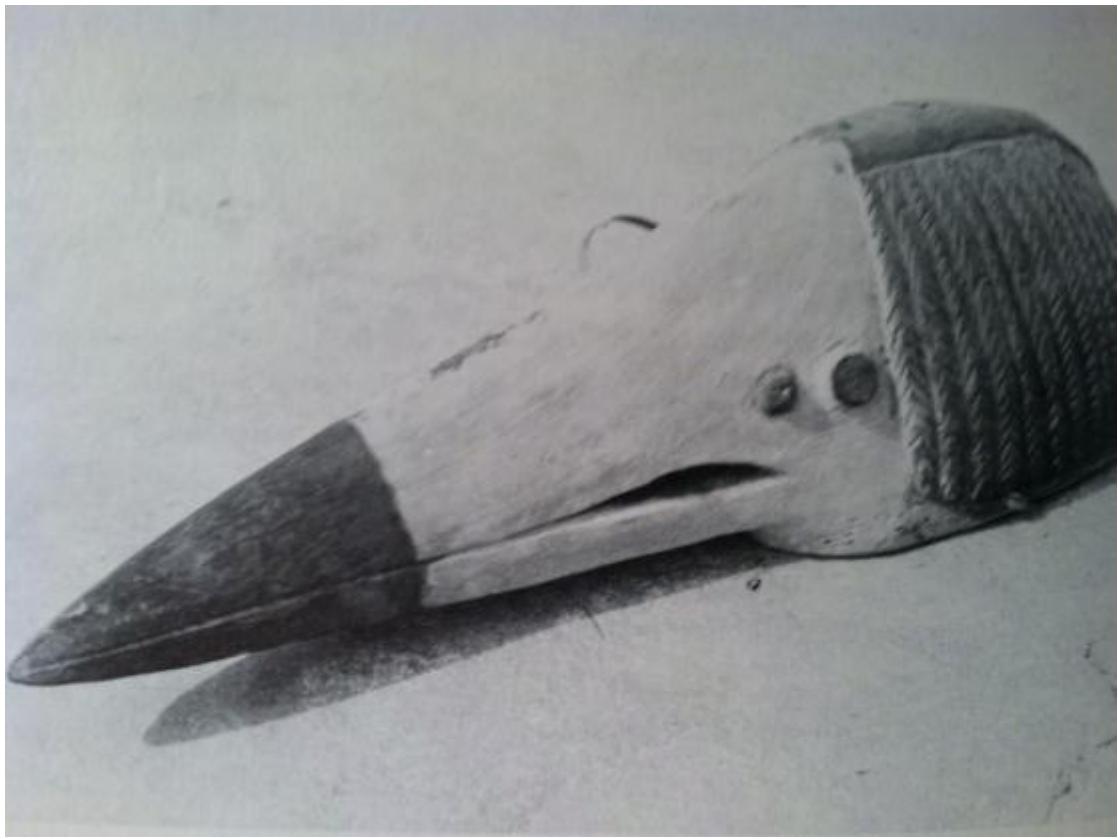


Figure 2-4. Spirit bird Photo Credit: Henry and Margaret Drewal



Figure 2-5. Mr. F.F. Afolabi and his ààlè Photo Credit: David T. Doris

CHAPTER 3

AN EXAMINATION OF A YORÙBÁ SAPONA FIGURE

Over fifty members of the Center for Disease Control (CDC), and multiple researchers present in Nigeria in the late 1960s, own Sapona figures much like the one in the collection of the Harn Museum of Art [Fig 3-1]. The wooden figure representing the orisa of smallpox is approximately twelve inches tall and made of a dark wood that seems to be stained a coal color. Its body is adorned with four strands of cowry shells, a monkey skull is attached to its core with cords, and a kola nut is attached to each shoulder. The figure holds a wooden club in each hand. From the left side of its body hangs a net containing a conglomerate of shells and feathers. Its back is covered with burlap and a strand of red, white, and green beads of varying size and shape drapes over the fabric. In addition, a metal chain hangs from the back of the right side of his head and continues to the front of his body. At the end of the chain hangs a conical metal bell that rests next to an orange gourd on a slightly raised base. An additional strand of cowrie shells adorns his neck.

Its face bears three lines which are carved almost vertically into each cheek. Two patches of rough material protrude from the front of the figure's tall, narrow headdress. Another strand of cowry shells reach from the figure's left ear, across the top of his headdress and down to the top of his right ear. A set of small white and tan beads wrap loosely around the back of the figure's head. The entire figure, including the base, headdress, hands, clubs, and part of the monkey skull, is spotted with blue and white pigment.

Bob Boyde purchased this figure in 1969 while he was stationed in Lagos, Nigeria, with the CDC during the Global Smallpox Eradication Campaign. In an

interview, Boyde told me that a Nigerian trader brought the piece from northeast of Lagos, south of Kaduna [Fig. 3-2], to sell to the Americans working with the smallpox program. According to Boyde, that same trader made regular trips from his Yoruba city in the north, where he gathered items he knew were in demand and that he could easily sell, and returned to Lagos to make a profit. The members of the CDC who owned these figures thought that the traders stole or provided very little monetary compensation to Sapona priests for the objects. They were under the impression that those relinquishing the figures did so because they so desperately needed the money because Nigeria's economy was crippled during the smallpox epidemic. Boyde also pointed out the prolific reproduction market saying, "They knew what people would buy. There was a huge market in reproductions of items that they know people wanted." He assured me, however, that he was careful to only purchase "authentic" items, meaning objects previously used in a ritual.¹

By researching this figure, I hoped first to confirm its identity as Sapona, the orisa of smallpox, and to determine where the figure was created and by which cultural group. These initial facts were quickly elucidated by speaking with Boyde, who became familiar with Nigeria's cultures during his work with the CDC. Boyde vaccinated in every state in the country and spent over half of his time in Nigeria in very small villages. Subsequently, I hoped to discover whether Sapona figures, like the one in the Harn collection, were used in any ritual activities or if they were solely created for the tourist trade to support the local economy.

¹ Boyde, Bob. Interview by author. Telephone. November 30, 2011.

In my research, questions arise of authenticity, a contested subject in contemporary scholarship. In his article “Authenticity and Commoditization in Tourism,” Erik Cohen criticizes the search for the authentic as a concept totally based on perceptions of the tourist. He explains that when the “alienated modern tourist” visits a foreign region, he does so in search of the primitive, pristine, and natural, which he is lacking at home. This does not, however, take into consideration what the “tourees” as Cohen calls them, consider authentic or real. Authenticity becomes a product of pre-modern life which alienates the “authentic” other.² In this chapter I explain why I believe the Sapona figure in the Harn Museum’s collection was not made for ritual purpose. It is important to note, however, that I am not placing it into a category of “inauthentic” art which would effectively make “other” the responsible artist. This work of art is equally as “real” and as important to study as those created for ritual purposes.

Little information exists about Sapona in the literature on Yorùbá religion. This dearth of attention may reflect Yorùbá attitudes—Yorùbá people in Nigeria rarely speak his name to make sure they do not bring his attention to their home. In following pages I will consider formal analyses and iconography in an attempt to determine the use of the Sapona figure in the Harn Museum’s collection.

Sapona was introduced into the Yorùbá religious pantheon in Nigeria by the 17th century, probably from the Nupa and Tapa people in the north of the country.³ Some

² Erik Cohen, “Authenticity and Commoditization in Tourism,” *Annals of Tourism Research*, 15 (1988): 371-376

³ Donald R. Hopkins, *The Greatest Killer: Smallpox in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 200.

trace the deity to the Hausa people, also in the north, and ultimately to Islam.⁴ In an early Yoruba folktale, the orisa gathered for a harvesting festival where they ate game, crops from their fields, and drank palm wine. They all dined, but when they rose to dance, Sapona stayed behind because he had a wooden leg and used a stick to walk. Soon, one of the deities noticed that Sapona was not participating and, offended, urged the god to join the others. Sapona, who had consumed much palm wine during their absence, covered the wooden leg he was so ashamed of and stumbled into the crowd. When someone bumped into him, causing him to fall, his leg was exposed and the other orisa erupted into laughter and began to tease. Sapona was so offended that he beat the other orisa on the back with his walking stick and when they returned home they all felt ill, their eyes became sore, and their bodies erupted with sores. The orisa of smallpox had infected them with his secret disease. When Obatala, father of the gods, discovered what Sapona had done he rushed to Sapona's house to judge him for his actions but Sapona saw him coming and absconded into the forest where he was supposed to stay, though he emerges at intervals to proliferate his disease.⁵ From then on Sapona was feared by the other gods and later by humans.

Polls show that during the time of the global eradication program in the 1960s, over 90% of Nigerians, especially those in small towns, did not understand smallpox as a disease or even as something to be cured. Rather, most believed that Sapona's vengeance was supposed to be accepted with gratitude and even celebrated to prevent

⁴ Robert W. Morgan, *The Sopono Cult and Smallpox Vaccination in Lagos* (Boston: African Studies Center Boston University, 1979), 2.

⁵Courlander, *Tales of Yoruba Gods and Heroes*, 40-42.

further scourge from the god.⁶ While many Nigerians did not seem to understand the physiological nature of smallpox, they did understand the communicability of the disease. Nigerians knew that smallpox occurred more often during the dry season. They attributed this to the god dwelling in the forests during the wet season and coming to the towns in the dry season to prowl in the sun under certain trees. These trees and locations were therefore avoided during that time of year.⁷

Because Sapona is easily offended, people often refuse to use his name and speak about him indirectly through the names Omolu or Obaoluaye to avoid attracting his attention. Sapona is angered by various actions including the burning of corncobs and palm kernel oil and by sweeping the house with a type of broom that is often used to represent him. He is attracted to music, dancing, and whistling but driven away by cigarette and pipe smoke. If a person contracted smallpox from any of these offenses, there was a possibility of recovery. However, contracting the disease as a result of offending a Sapona priest, priestess, or devotee, was believed to be fatal.⁸

Some scholarship paints a portrait of manipulative Sapona priests capitalizing on the fear of smallpox. Priests probably performed *Variolation* which is the process of infecting oneself with smallpox (*Variola*) in a controlled manner to minimize the effects of the disease and provide subsequent immunization. For this reason, the priests appeared “special” because they could not get the disease that was affecting their community. They promised members of the community that for gifts and monetary compensation, they would protect their families from the disease of their patron orisa

⁶ Morgan, *The Sopono Cult*, 3.

⁷ Morgan, *The Sopono Cult*, 5.

⁸ Morgan, *The Sopono Cult*, 52.

and that if the disease did infect them and was fatal, that they would protect their spirit in the afterlife. Because Saponá priests “inherited” the clothes of the deceased, some Europeans believed that they were not motivated to keep the members of their community alive.⁹ According to some sources, priests hung the bodies of the deceased from trees to collect the infected fluids that dripped from the smallpox scabs in order to concoct lethal substances to use as punishment. Other accounts tell us that the devotees demanded “protection money” from families and spread the disease to their household if they were unable or unwilling to pay.¹⁰

These stories do not account for the fact that many Yorùbá understood the fatal disease. When the physician William H. Foege spent a day with a Saponá priest he noted that he was, in fact, extremely knowledgeable about smallpox and able to discuss the epidemiology, seasonality, and age distribution of the disease. Foege also noted that the head priests led a three-year residency program for incoming priests, which shows how seriously the position was regarded in Yoruba communities.¹¹

While we cannot ignore the corruption stories, we should take into consideration their source: Europeans and Americans unfamiliar with Yorùbá culture. Specifically they were medical experts who may have entered the country with feelings of medical superiority to Yorùbá medical practitioners. It is likely that the Europeans were simply not familiar with the rituals of Saponá devotees and mistook the occurrences for

⁹ Hopkins, *The Greatest Killer*, 202.

¹⁰ Morgan, *The Sopono Cult*, 5.

¹¹ Horace, G. Ogden, *CDC and the Smallpox Crusade* (Atlanta: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1987).

misdeeds. What the Europeans understood as corrupt behavior by some Sapona priests might have reflected their misunderstandings of prejudices

A “hot” or “hard” god, Sapona is often grouped with other hot deities such as Shango, orisa of thunder, and Ogun, orisa of iron. Both of these orisa elicit fear from the community in much the same manner as Sapona.¹² Shango is a harsh and stern leader, sometimes hungry for power. Because he has control of thunder bolts, people fear him and are very careful to please him. Like Sapona, he is often called praise names instead of his name, Shango, to demonstrate respect.¹³ Ogun is the orisa of war and lives in the all things made of iron, including bullets. He can exhibit the rage and destructiveness of a warrior. His devotees and other community members are careful not to elicit such responses from the powerful deity.¹⁴

Like Sapona, these two orisa are not represented anthropomorphically. If human figures are seen in association with the deities, it is to represent their devotees. Shango is usually represented by the double-headed axe to convey strength that cuts in all directions, meaning that nobody can escape his wrath should he be provoked. Images of Shango shrine figures and staffs are readily available [Figs. 3-3 and 3-4]. Machetes and swords often represent Ogun. His devotees adorn themselves in his colors of red and white. It is also easy to find images of ritual objects, like axes, used by Ogun devotees [Fig. 3-5]. These two orisa, both feared and respected like Sapona, have

¹² Donald Cosentino, “Who Is That Fellow in the Many-Colored Cap? Transformations of Eshu in Old and New World Mythologies,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 100 (1987): 261-175.

¹³ Courlander, *Tales of Yoruba Gods and Heroes*, 79-82.

¹⁴ Courlander, *Tales of Yoruba Gods and Heroes*, 33-37.

active shrines and many devotees, which leads me to believe that the same is true of Sapona, regardless of the lack of many known representations of the orisa.

Sapona appears in many parts of the Yorùbá region. In Benin in the 1970s, at the same time the Bob Boyde collected the Sapona figure in the Harn Museum's collection, those who adhered to Yorùbá religion built shrines to honor the deity, whom they call Sakpata [Fig. 3-6].¹⁵ The shrines were placed on the ground and their physical contact with the earth allowed the orisa to more quickly absorb them.¹⁶ They were conical in shape and rose to a narrowed point alluding to the powerful spirit inside.¹⁷ *Apaadi*, a shard of pottery that people in Benin sometimes use to transport hot coals, rose "flame-like" out of the shrine and represented fever.¹⁸ The altars' crowns were made from clay pots with pox-like holes and represented the devotees' willingness to please and cool the hot god.¹⁹ Some devotees believe that Sakpata began the smallpox epidemic by sweeping grains and seeds which left pox like marks on the people the debris touched. For this reason, devotees scattered both at his alter.²⁰

In Nigeria, there are four documented genres of representations in Nigeria and almost no images to support these descriptions.²¹ One abstract depiction of the deity is the laterite stone that has pitted surfaces alluding to the scars left from smallpox.

¹⁵ Robert F Thompson, *Face of the Gods: Art and Alters of Africa and the African Americas*. (New York: Museum for African Art, 1993) 218.

¹⁶ Thompson, *Face of the Gods*, 146.

¹⁷ Thompson, *Face of the Gods*, 218.

¹⁸ Thompson, *Face of the Gods*, 218.

¹⁹ Thompson, *Face of the Gods*, 146, 218.

²⁰ Thompson, *Face of the Gods*, 222.

²¹ Hopkins, *The Greatest Killer*, 201.

Another is the broom made of bamboo palm branches smeared with cam wood used to depict the orisa [Fig. 3-7]. Another image of Sapona is a five-foot tall clay figure with cowry shells embedded in the body to represent the pox.²² The fourth representation style of Sapona is the figure in the Harn Museum's Collection. I have located only one account of a Sapona shrine, which was mentioned by the wife of a CDC physician. She briefly mentions seeing a figure in the shrine along with a “smallpox pot” and bottles of gin and vodka.²³

Today in Nigeria, devotees paint half of their body in black pigment with white spots and the other half white with black spots, possibly referencing the symptoms of smallpox. This dichotomy of colors could also refer to Sapona's fight against another orisa. With the eradication of smallpox, Sapona is now associated with HIV/AIDS.²⁴

Smallpox deities play a role in religious practices in other parts of the world. In India and China, shrines were erected for their gods and devoted worshipers regularly attended. Represented as a woman on a donkey, cross-legged, carrying a broom and urn, Shitala mata is the Hindu goddess of smallpox who is the cause for and the relief from the disease. She evolved from minor to major deity in the 18th century and like Sapona, she is worshiped with a mix of apprehension and reverence. People regularly

²² Hopkins, *The Greatest Killer*, 201.

²³ Henderson, Ilze. Interview with Alicia Decker, July 13, 2006.
<http://globalhealthchronicles.org/smallpox/record/view/pid/emory:158jd>

²⁴ Tobie Nathan, Anne Stamm and Pierre Saulnier, *African Gods: Contemporary Rituals and Beliefs*, trans., Susan Picford, (Paris: Flammarion, 2007).

attend temples devoted to her worship throughout India. Devotees prayed for her to stay out of their homes or to come gently if she must.²⁵

T'ou Sheng Niang Niang, the Chinese goddess of smallpox, emerged in the 11th century and was a major deity by the 19th century. She was feared more than she was loved, much like Sapona. When a member of the community was infected, a family member was supposed to go to T'ou Sheng Niang Niang's shrine to bring her an offering. Shrines were also erected for her in the homes of those with the disease. If the person lived, the shrine was burned. Despite the proliferation of shrines dedicated to this deity and the community's obvious reverence, only two images are known of the goddess, one of which is a mere sketch.²⁶

A formal comparison between the Sapona figure in the Harn Museum and two figures presented to the CDC in 1969, the same year Boyde purchased his figure, indicate formal consistency and also may indicate that these figures were made for sale and not for ritual purpose [Figs. 3-8a and 3-8b]. Each of the elements of the Harn Museum's figure are evident on one of the two figures in the CDC's collection. The CDC figures have the same body, base, and head shape as the Harn figure with a thick trunk, small base, and pinched conical headdress atop a similarly proportioned head. The objects attached to the two CDC figures are almost identical to those that appear on the Harn figure. Three strands of cowry shells hang from the top of the torso of one of the CDC figures and monkey skulls spotted with pigment rests in the center of both of the figures' mid-sections. A kola nut is nailed to each shoulder, precisely like the Harn

²⁵ David A. Koplow, *Smallpox: The Fight to Eliminate a Global Scourge* (California: University of California Press, 2003), 159.

²⁶ Hopkins, *The Greatest Killer*, 136.

Museum's figure. One CDC figure grips a club in one hand and the same burlap is attached to the back of the other. A metal chain runs from the top of one figure's right ear to the bottom of its torso. A gourd hangs at the bottom of both CDC figures. Resting on the base of one is a conical metal bell, and a strand of large multi-colored beads, similar in shape and size to those hanging from the back of the Harn figure, falls from its back. An additional strand of cowrie shells is wrapped around the necks of both CDC figures.

The faces of all three Sapona figures bear an identical facial expression. Both of the CDC figures have deeply carved, downturned eyes, and roughly carved mouths. They also both have the same three vertical indentations in their cheeks. The same patch of material appears on the front of both figures' headdresses. The strand of small white and tan beads that we see draped along the back of the head of the Harn's figure reappears on the front of the CDC figures' heads, just below the headdress. Cowry shells line the top of all three headdresses.

The figures differ in the pigments that adorn them. While the main pigment on the Harn's figure is a dark gray beneath white and blue dots on the Harn's figure, the CDC figures vary between a light-red and a deep-blue base pigment with red, white, and blue spots. Also, a thin, light-brown fiber cascades from the back of the CDC figures, but is absent from the figure in the Harn's collection. These differences could be the result of two factors. First, the difference in colors could simply be for variation. If the CDC's web site is correct, and the same unidentified person made all of the fifty figures for gifts for the CDC and World Health Association employees, they might have

incorporated slight differences, if only to please the recipients.²⁷ The fiber added to these Sapona figures could demonstrate extra effort on behalf of the creator. The CDC figures were, after all, made as commemorative gifts.

Clearly, the Harn Museum's object and those in the collection of the CDC are very similar. It is unlikely that artists from two different cities would produce objects with such similar details. Other aspects of Sapona practice are very localized, so we can expect representations of the deity to reflect local styles. In his article, "The God of Smallpox: Aspects of Yoruba Religious Knowledge," Anthony Buckley points out that different Yoruba towns, and even different individuals, have very different religious dogma. There are disagreements between towns on topics as broad as the gender affiliation of certain gods.²⁸

The organization of worshipers of Sapona also varies widely. Only one group of devotees exists in Ibadan, just northeast of Lagos, and they hold one annual festival. In Okuku, on the southeast coast of the country, however, there are seventeen distinct groups of devotees. Each group recognizes a certain personality trait of Sapona.²⁹

The Sapona images in question here, however, are so similar that they were likely created by the same artist or group of artists. Since religious devotees practice such individualized forms of the Yoruba religion and often have different understandings of their orisa, they would produce localized images of Sapona for worship. I therefore

²⁷ "Public Health Image Library," Center for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed March 4, 2013, <http://phil.cdc.gov/phil/details.asp>

²⁸ Anthony D. Buckley, "The God of Smallpox: Aspects of Yoruba Religious Knowledge," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 55 (1985): 187-200.

²⁹ Koplow, *Smallpox: The Fight to Eliminate a Global Scourge*, 159.

believe that the Sapona figure in the Harn Museum's collection was produced as one of a group.

A survey of Yorùbá style and aesthetics further suggests production for a new foreign market. In *Black Gods and Kings*, Thompson lists the criteria for a sculpture to be considered "good" by Yorùbá standards. According to Thompson, "most aesthetic criteria embody moral associations."³⁰ The first standard is *jijora* or relative mimesis, which does not mean an exact physical likeness to the subject, rather that the sculpture shows the subject's moral character. The best objects are not too real, meaning the artist does not depict old age or warts, but is also not too abstract. The second criterion is relative visibility or *ifarahon* which translates as "important details are obvious". Thompson breaks this concept down further into visibility of mass and visibility of line. When the artist blocks out the wood and begins to shape a figure, he is focusing on the visibility of the mass. According to Yorùbá aesthetic, it is important for the artist to create a upright (not crooked), smooth, and precise forms. A polished surface allows the artist to achieve visibility of line. These lines, or more intricate details, should appear delicate and not too conspicuous.³¹ Facial features such as eyes and scarification should be symmetrical. Successful features are evidence of a skilled and dexterous Yorùbá artist.³² The third standard necessary for a "good" Yorùbá sculpture is ephebism from the Greek *ephebos*, the ancient term for youth eighteen to twenty years old. Sculptors should give their works young features like strong cheeks, and muscular,

³⁰ Robert Farris Thompson, *Black Gods and Kings: Yoruba Art and UCLA* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976) 3/1-3/2.

³¹ Thompson, *Black Gods and Kings*, 3/1-3/2.

³² Rozaq Olatunde Rom Kalilu, ed, *Powers of Expression and Expression of Power in Yoruba Art* (Lagos: Bisdol and Associates, 1995) 28.

firm chins. The objects should exhibit strong and upright shoulders and a firm chest and stomach.³³

Thompson provides detailed comparisons of “good” and “lesser” Yorùbá anthropomorphic carvings. In his first comparison he compares Figures 3-9a and 3-9b, claiming that Figure 3-9a is the more impressive sculpture. The artist responsible for Figure 3-9a provides his figure with a more detailed head and chest therefore paying closer attention to the detail of mass than the artist of Figure 3-9b. The first sculpture forms symmetrical triangles with the negative space between the arms and the body. The eyes on the lesser sculpture are different positions and are different sizes. He also compares Figures 3-9c and 3-9d, the former proving superior. Abogunde of Ede, the artist of Figure 3-9c, created a smooth and balanced figure with muscular arms and delicate small facial details. Figure 3-9d conversely exhibits harsh, sharply carved facial features without subtlety in the eyes, lashes, or lineage markings. The figure’s lack of fineness creates an unintentional grimace.³⁴

By carefully studying the visual qualities of the figure in the Harn Museum and those in the CDC’s collection, it is apparent that these works fall in the category of “lesser” sculptures according to Thompson’s list of aesthetic criteria. The qualities of these three objects according to the Yorùbá standards that Thompson enumerated, seem to indicate that they were carved crudely because they were not intended for ritual purpose, or because they were used in medicinal ceremonies like the *aworan* described in Chapter 1, and therefore not meant for public consumption. The figure at the Harn

³³ Thompson, *Black Gods and Kings*, 3/3.

³⁴ Thompson, *Black Gods and Kings*, 3/4.

Museum is especially unbalanced, in form and detail. The object leans sharply to the left and the ears are of different shapes. The left side of the mouth turns down, giving the illusion of a grimace. The figure's eyes, lips, and nose are carved harshly and lack the delicacy of a dexterous hand. It is likely that the carvers of each of these three Sapona figures, made them specifically for sale, not ritual.

The last step in confirming my belief that the Harn's Sapona figure was created for the tourist trade or as *aworan* was to determine whether or not the attached objects were too expensive and rare to use on an object not meant for ritual use. The two objects I was most concerned with were the cowry shells and the kola nuts, because cowries served as currency for centuries and that kola nuts are used in countless ritual ceremonies. The other attached objects may also be relevant to Yorùbá beliefs. The conical bell may refer to Osanyin, the Yorùbá orisa of healing and medicine.³⁵ The monkey's skull that appears on the Sapona figure could refer to Egúngún, one of the healing ceremonies discussed in the Chapter 2, because similar skulls are often tied to Egungun costumes.³⁶ The artists could therefore have been referencing healing in the Sapona figures.

Cowry shells were imported and used as currency in West Africa as early as the 17th century when the slave trade first reached large proportions.³⁷ Cowry shell importation declined in the 19th century when the cost of carriage rose more than their value. Cowries always worked better in local commerce than between markets for this

³⁵ Thompson, *Black Gods and Kings*, 11/3.

³⁶ Aremu, "Between Myth and Reality, 7.

³⁷ Jan Hogendorn and Marion Johnson, *The Shell Money of the Slave Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 101-102.

reason. British silver replaced the shells shortly after 1900 on the coast of Nigeria, but the shells were still occasionally used locally. In southern Nigeria, cowries were still being used into the 1920s with people storing them in abundance since they were no longer imported. By the 1950s, though the stock piles still existed, the shells were only occasionally used as money to buy inexpensive foods like peanuts at local markets. Some southern Nigerians even wanted to eliminate the currency calling it “primitive” and viewing it as a painful relic of a history of trading shells for their people.³⁸ My purpose in recounting the history of the cowry in West Africa is to demonstrate that the shells may have been cheaply used on the Sapona figures because they were abundant in southern Nigeria and retained very little, if any, monetary value.

It is more likely that the shells are a reference to Eshu, the trickster orisa associated with the market and economic matters. Because cowries were used a currency at the market, representations of Eshu and the deity’s shrines often involve the shell.³⁹ It is possible that the artists intentionally made the Sapona figures reflect Eshu in order to evoke the idea of ritual objects in the minds of Europeans. In his essay in the 1974 exhibition catalogue *African Accumulative Sculpture* Arnold Ruben states that Americans and Europeans tend to consider a work of art a singular structure but African sculptures are often made of an accumulation of objects. Foreign aid workers in the late 1960s and early 1970, the decades that the Sapona figures were collected, could have held similar views of the way African art objects should appear. The Yorùbá

³⁸ Hogendorn, *The Shell Money*, 148-154.

³⁹ Joan Wescott, “The Sculpture and Myths of Eshu-Elegba, the Yoruba Trickster: Definition and Interpretation in Yoruba Iconography” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*. 32.4 (1962): 346-347.

artists may have been aware that the aid workers would be more likely to buy art from them if it fit neatly into their category of African style.⁴⁰

Like the figures in question, representations of Eshu often incorporate calabashes, which some Yorùbá use to contain medicines. Representations of Eshu, like the three Sapona figures, are often shown with clubs to indicate their destruction and vengeful nature.⁴¹ The two deities share personality traits as well. Both are hot or hard gods and both are vain and for this reason are contrasting colors such as the deep blue and blacks painted onto the bodies of the Sapona figures.⁴² These Sapona figures could be based off of representations of Eshu.

Oji, or kola nuts, grow on trees commonly found in southern Nigeria. Some types of kola nuts have religious value, but other types are grown strictly to eat and is not attached to any religious beliefs. This type of kola nut is traded to the south.⁴³ Thus, the attached objects, which traditionally held high monetary or spiritual value, were not used in ritual ceremonies. This seems to indicate that the figure and those like it could have, in fact, been used strictly for the tourist trade.

The incorporation of cowry shells, snail shells, and beads may reflect influences from the neighboring Fon people. In Benin and Togo, some Fon create *bocio*, which

⁴⁰ Arnold Rubin, *African Accumulative Sculpture*. Pace Editions, Inc. 1974.

⁴¹ Joan Wescott, "The Sculpture and Myths of Eshu-Elegba, the Yoruba Trickster: Definition and Interpretation in Yoruba Iconography" *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*. 32.4 (1962): 346-347.

⁴² Wescott, "The Sculpture and Myths of Eshu-Elegba," 334, 346.

⁴³ Benedict N. Oparaugo, *Igbo Kola-Nut Ritual and The Eucharistic Liturgy Inculturation*, (Nigeria: Asumpta Press, 2004), 1-4.

are anthropomorphic figures placed in yards to protect the owner's home.⁴⁴ Like the Sapona figures, bocio come in the form of assemblages of powerful objects added to an anthropomorphic figure or as non-figural representations. In the latter instance, bocio can be represented by bells, another object attached to the Sapona figure.⁴⁵ One category of bocio is used to prevent illness and appear to have life threatening illnesses such as elephantiasis. Some also bear spots, which allude to illness and are similar to those found on the Sapona figure in the Harn Museum.⁴⁶ It is possible that the Yorùbá who carved these Sapona figures drew stylistically from the bocio.

Buckley mentions owning a similar Sapona figure in his article, which makes three sets of accounts of westerners owning representation of Sapona in the same form as the one at the Harn Museum.⁴⁷ It may be that traders ingeniously invented this type of figure to fill a marketing need. The CDC workers may have wanted a commemorative object to bring home with them, but they most likely did not understand the iconography associated with very abstracted figures such as the laterite stone or the broom figures and could not easily bring home a five-foot tall statue.

Changes in artistic practices due to political reorganization in Yorùbá cities serve as further evidence that the Sapona figure at the Harn Museum was created for sale. As Yorùbá *obas*, or kings, lost political, social, spiritual, and economic power, there was less need for royal arts. Artists who previously created art court art responded to the

⁴⁴ Suzanne Preston Blier, *African Vodun: Art, Psychology, and Power*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1995) 98.

⁴⁵ Blier, *African Vodun*, 115-116.

⁴⁶ Blier, *African Vodun*, 128.

⁴⁷ Anthony D. Buckley "The God of Smallpox: Aspects of Yoruba Religious Knowledge." *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*. 55 (1985):187-200.

lack of demand by creating a new lucrative art market. In the early 20th century, this new market manifested in illustrations documenting events, most of which demonstrated colonial power.⁴⁸ Because 20th century artists were no longer motivated to create works exclusively for court, they were able to expand their production, and could very well have, by the 1960s, begun selling the Saponi figures to the new market of CDC workers eager to commemorate their experience in Nigeria.

Norma H. Wolff cites an example of this phenomenon in her chapter “A Matters of Must: Continuities and Change in the Adugbologe Woodcarving Workshop in Abeokuta, Nigeria. She describes the shift from the production of ritual objects to objects created primarily for economic advancement in the Adugbologe kin-based workshop. She argues that the changes she observed from 1972 to 1974 in production and product were motivated almost entirely by a new outside market of patrons. Changes in product included the artists depicting new styles of hair and dress and incorporating new iconographic elements because they could now disregard ritual accommodations.

In his *African Art in Transit* Christopher B. Steiner also sites an example of commoditization similar to the story of Saponi figures. In 1987, a coffee-table sized book of Baule slingshots was published.⁴⁹ In the following years, African art traders noticed the rise in the demand for the object and set prices higher. Some traders even began to make their own slingshots from branches or broken trade objects. Like the Saponi figure traders in Nigeria, Baule traders in Cote d’Ivoire used language that

⁴⁸ Powers of Expression and Expression of Power

⁴⁹ Christopher Steiner, *African Art in Transit* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 144-147.

appealed to Western buyers, language that implied the objects was “authentic” because it was made without European influence.⁵⁰

My research pertaining to the Sapona figure in the Harn Museum’s collection led me to a series of conclusions. I believe that the figure that Boyde bought in Nigeria in 1969 and donated to the Harn Museum was not used in a ritual manner. Its similarity to other objects purchased the same year and by different groups, in either the same town or even different regions, leads me to believe that these figures were probably not used in a religious context, although it is possible that they served as *aworan*, the figural medicine that Norma H. Wolff writes about in “The Use of Human Images in Yorùbá Medicine.”

Steiner states, “Regardless of whether an object dates from this century or the last, it is always judged inauthentic by Western evaluations if it has not been used in a traditional manner.”⁵¹ Whether or not the Sapona object in the Harn Museum’s collection communicates actual concepts of Yoruba religion, it may have much to say about the ingenuity of artists and traders in southern Nigeria. I believe this Sapona figure was made for trade purposes but I do not think that devalues the object. In fact, it may indicate that in an economy crippled by smallpox epidemics, traders in southern Nigeria were able to sustain their livelihood by creating a new market.

⁵⁰ Steiner, *African Art in Transit*, 115.

⁵¹ Steiner, *African Art and Transit*, 101.



Figure 3-1 Sapona figure Harn Museum My own photograph

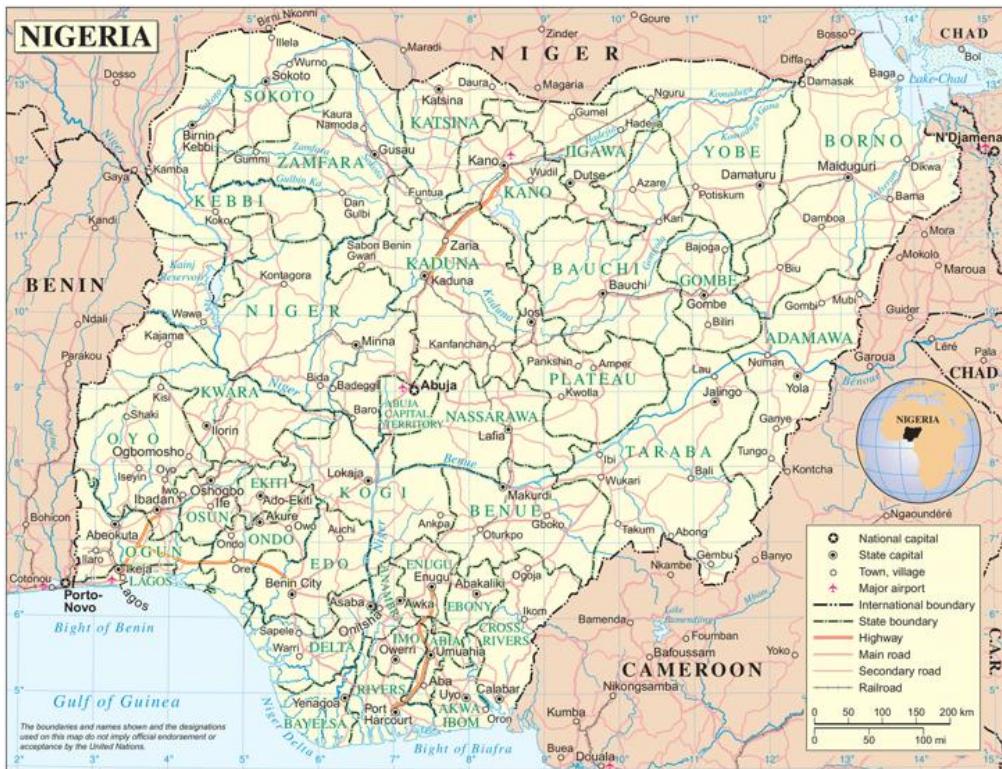


Figure 3-2. Map of Nigeria, Vidiani.com



Figure 3-3. Yorùbá shrine couple Dallas Museum of Art



Figure 3-4. Staff for Shango Dallas Museum of Art



Figure 3-5. Ceremonial weapon for the Ogun cult. University of California, San Diego



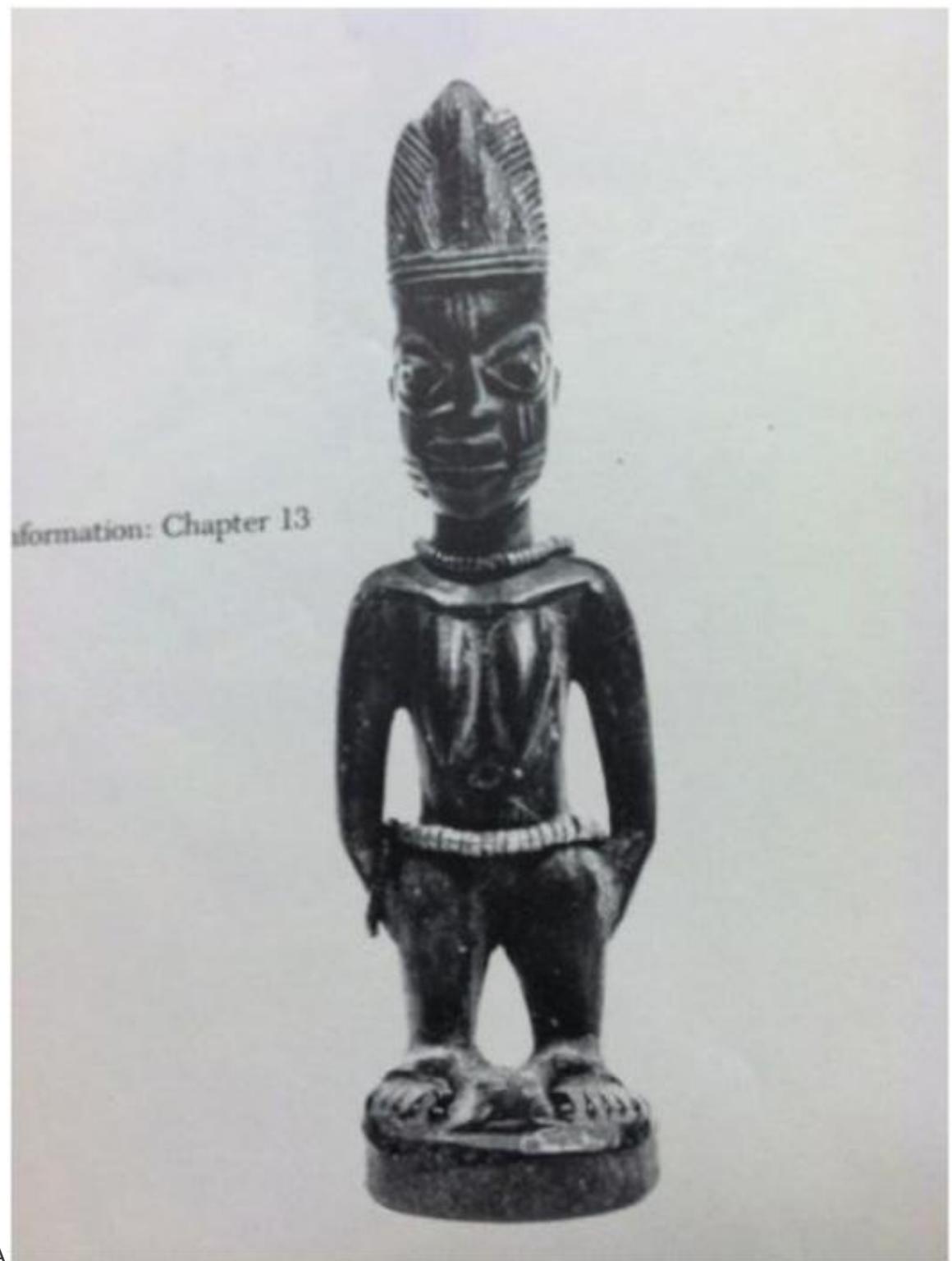
Figure 3-6. Sakpata altar, Benin, Photographed by Robert Farris Thompson, 1970s



Figure 3-7. Beaded broom, Fowler Museum at UCLA



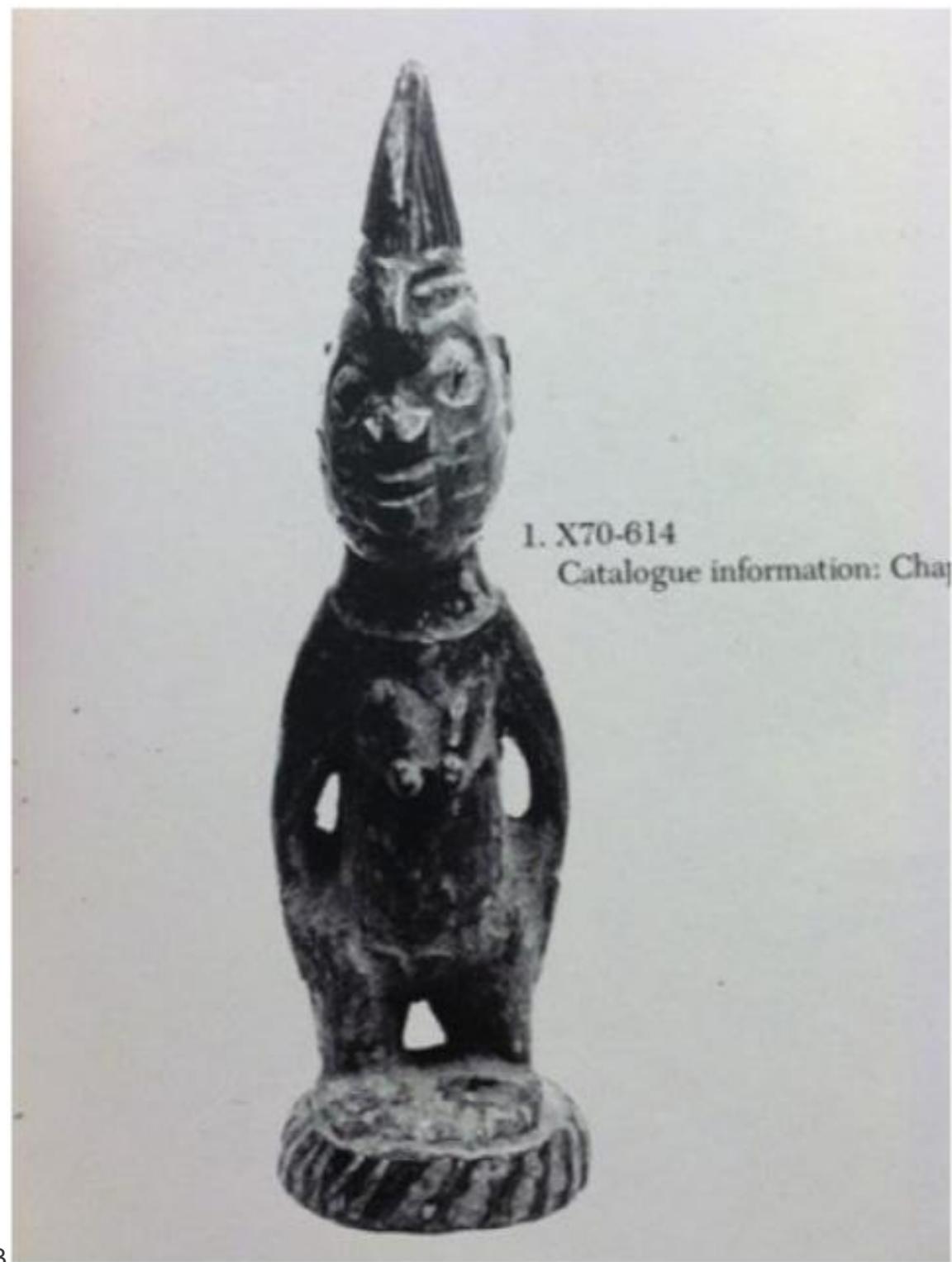
Figure 3-8. Center for Disease Control Saponi figure, Public Health Image Library,
A) Red Figure, B) Blue Figure. DC.gov Photo credit: James Gathany



information: Chapter 13

A

Figure 3-9. Twin figure A) Exemplar 1, B) Non-Exemplar 1, C) Exemplar 2, D)
Exemplar 2. Photographed by Robert Farris Thompson

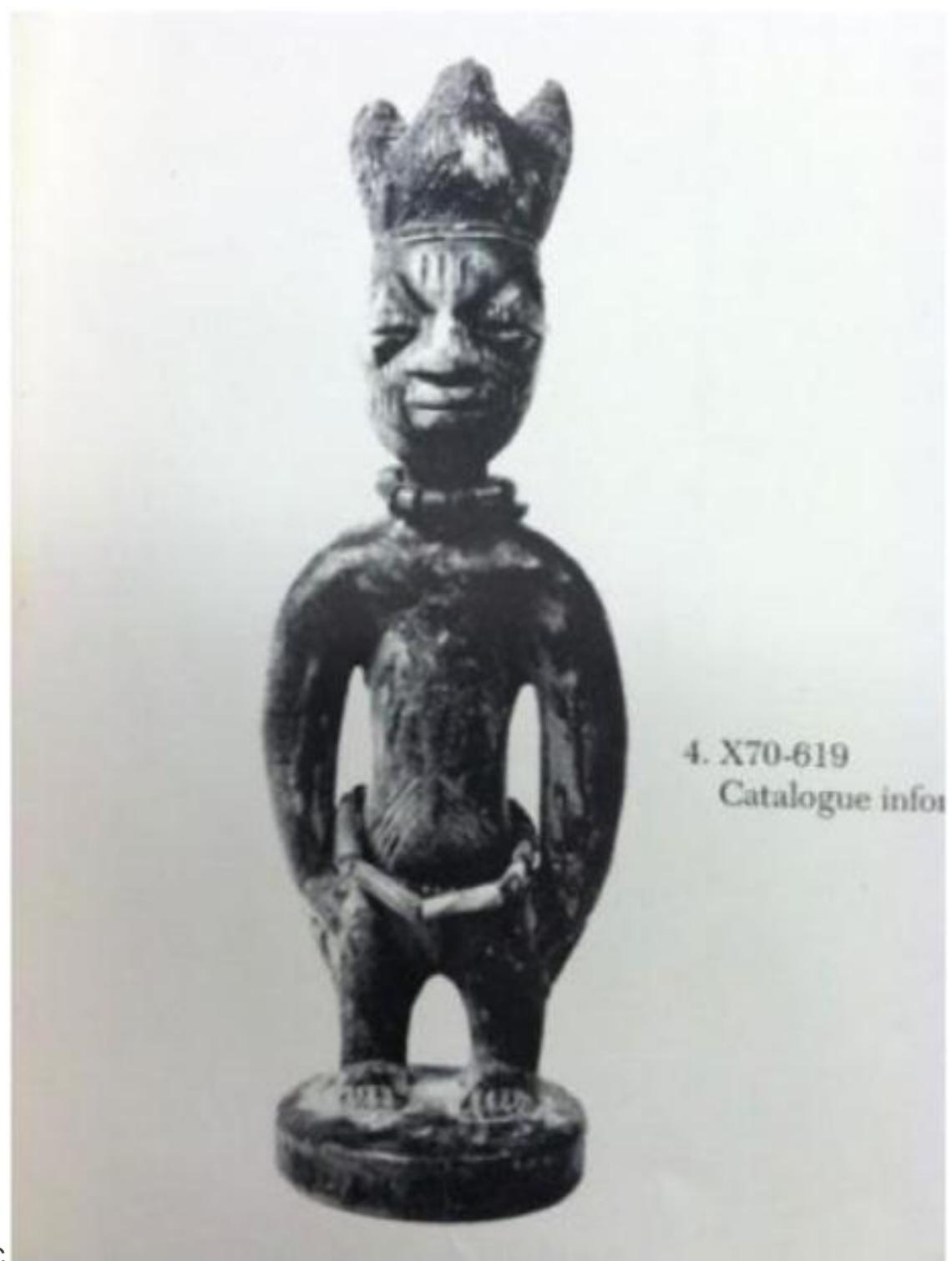


1. X70-614

Catalogue information: Cha

B

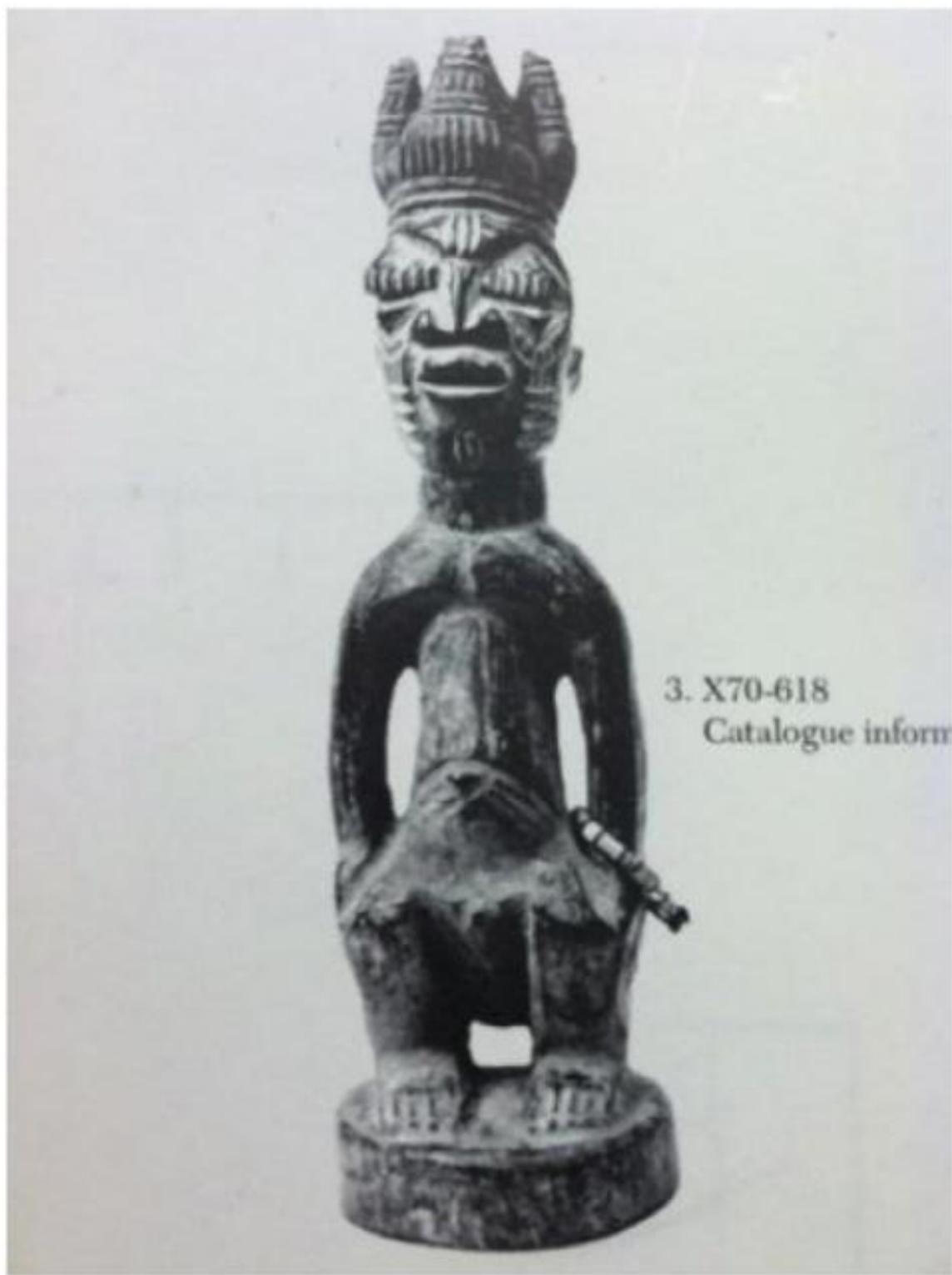
Figure 3-9. Continued.



4. X70-619
Catalogue info

C

Figure 3-9. Continued



D

Figure 3-9. Continued

CHAPTER 4

A SURVEY OF HEALING IMAGERY IN THE WORKS OF THREE CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS

Changing gears in Chapter 3, I will explore how contemporary African artists make reference to healing in their work. I believe it is important to consider the ways healing plays a part in contemporary art. I will survey the works of three artists, from Ethiopia, and South Africa, and Mali to demonstrate how they engage with diseases, both physical and social, in their artworks. The works I will discuss in this chapter differ in their aims from the Yoruba works discussed in Chapter 1, which are associated with Egúngún ceremonies, Gelede ceremonies, and ààlè for specific ritual purposes. They are each made to serve a specific purpose by aiding in physical or societal health. I believe the Sapona figures from chapter two were created either for the tourist trade or as medicinal objects. In each of these contexts, the work was made for specific consumers who physically interacted with the pieces. The artists that I will discuss here all create works of art for museum display and international audiences.

The artists connect with healing in a range of ways. Gera, originally a actual healer who worked with medicinal plants and healing scrolls, considers himself both an artist and healer, creating work for patients and for the art market. Zwelethu Mthethwa of South Africa, who began his studies in medicine before his interests shifted to art, photographs Zulu healers known as Sangoma in order to complicate the public's perception of traditional healing methods. Lastly, Malian artist Abdoulaye Konaté began his artistic career responding to environmental struggles and soon turned his attention to community ailments such as disease and political conflict, as viewed through a social lens. He currently creates large-scale textiles that incorporate *grisgris*, West African healing amulets.

Gera

Ethiopian artist and healer Gera, who once used medicinal plants to heal his patients, now uses his art as medicine.¹ He began his studies by memorizing basic liturgical texts of the Ethiopian church and then music, and later poetry and history. After his studies, he became a professor at a religious school in Ethiopia, simultaneously teaching himself about medicinal plants. He remembers a monk glancing at one of the copies he had written and telling him that to write a prayer without drawing the accompanying talisman was pointless. This is something Gera only understood later when he began creating intricate talismans. Finally, Gera became a *dabtara*, or priest figure.²

Gera first considered an artistic career in the 1970s, when Jacques Mercier collected many of his talismans and brought them to Europe to display them as art. He and another well known Ethiopian healer, Gedewon, began declaring themselves artists as well as doctors.³ By allowing his work to be displayed as art and producing talismans for galleries and museums, Gera, like Abdoulaye Konaté, has brought his form of healing into the contemporary art world.⁴

Fitting neatly into the category of art with their extraordinarily intricate and vivid colors, Ethiopian talismans often take the form of scrolls, used to heal and protect the patients who carry them for protection against physical and spiritual afflictions.⁵ These

¹ "Art that Heals," Apexart Curatorial Program. New York, New York.

² Jacques Mercier, *Art that Heals: the Images as Medicine in Ethiopia*, (New York: Museum for African Art, 1997), 41-2.

³ "Art that Heals," Apexart Curatorial Program. New York, New York.

⁴ "Art that Heals," Apexart Curatorial Program. New York, New York.

⁵ "The Healers", London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. London, England..

talismans, once purely abstract in design, now include figural representations.

Talismans exist for a variety of purposes, from preventing nightmares to assuring a safe childbirth. Ethiopian women sometimes carry their scrolls with them when menstruating to protect them from excessive bleeding and from demons searching for blood.⁶ In the province of Tigray, invalids hang them by their beds so that they can read them the entire time they are ill.⁷ When they recover, patients put their scrolls away. In Wello, the patient puts the scroll containing the talisman in its case and under their pillow or under the affected body part until it heals. Some bury their scrolls on the last night of the year to preserve its effectiveness.⁸

Talismanic images are patient – and disease – specific, though they can contain more general prayers protecting the wearer from headache, fever, pain in the side or stomach, rheumatism of the hands and of the feet, and malaria.⁹ Historically, a cleric determined which prayers and images to produce on the scroll. Today, most clerics choose based on client's symptoms. Some Ethiopians believe that all illnesses are hereditary, so they bring an ancestor's scroll to the cleric so that he may change the name of the patient on the talisman.¹⁰

It is important to note that talismans specifically serve healing purposes. Figurative images included in the talismans are based on legends, but the talisman

⁶ Mercier, *Art that Heals*, 46.

⁷ Mercier, *Art that Heals*, 46

⁸ Mercier, *Art that Heals*, 46.

⁹ "The Healers", London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. London, England.

¹⁰ Mercier, *Art that Heals*, 46.

itself, is not.¹¹ Mercer identifies one medicinal scroll from the 18th century [Fig. 4-1] with a typically intricate talismanic figure encompassing two eyes that stare out from the center.¹² The words “powerful medicine” stretch across the scroll above the talisman.¹³ We do not know who the scroll was for or for what type of disease it was intended to heal, but it does confirm that these images are used as literal medicine.

Gera’s talismans have changed in style, but they continue to reference healing, even when they are hanging in a museum. Gera’s 1974 talisman *Solomon’s seal* [Fig. 4.2] is composed in black ball point pen and marker on paper. At this early stage of his career, Gera did not yet consider himself an artist. He was working only in line and pattern.¹⁴ The talisman contains intricate patterns around the border with lines that continue into the center and form representational faces and two eyes, two ears, and a nose. In the very center, isolated by a hollow rectangular border is a white diamond. It is important to note the various motifs in this particular image, because like all other talismans, Gera indicates that this one should not be read as a sum of its elements or as having one inherent, static meaning. Because figurative images and talismanic patterns change meaning, to understand the purpose of the talisman, one must be aware of title, elements, and the use of the scroll on which the talisman is drawn.¹⁵

Here, the title, use, and stylistic elements are semantically linked. King Solomon was a wealthy king, so this talisman drives away demons that interfere with business,

¹¹ Mercier, *Art that Heals*, 57.

¹² Mercier, *Art that Heals*, 41.

¹³ Mercier, *Art that Heals*, 41.

¹⁴ Mercier, *Art that Heals*, 103.

¹⁵ Mercier, *Art that Heals*, 59.

such as the demon referred to as “the shadow of the eye.” Gera labels each element in this talisman with a corresponding key below the image. The starburst in the center is to provide light, the vertical walls of the outermost border represent a belt or rainbow, and the horizontal borders are ramparts and fortifications.¹⁶ Lastly, the rectangle separating the starburst from the rest of the image is a curtain. The four ears symbolize the four directions of a compass representing prosperity as they listen to proclamations of wealth. The curtains serve as a barrier, protecting the wearer, and the belt supports the waist, giving the wearer strength. This talisman as a whole, based on its name, elements, and intention, protects the owner’s wealth.¹⁷

While these scrolls are used for their healing powers, artists take their aesthetic appeal seriously.¹⁸ In 1976, Gera abandoned freehand drawing for ruler straight lines, and the following year abandoned line altogether for the use of colored planes, and at the time began to consider himself an artist. Today, the artist continues predominately in this innovative, contemporary style, though his works continue to originate in visions.

Gera’s 1996 painting, *The Seal of Glory* [Fig. 4-3], made with colored inks on canvas, most clearly exemplifies his use of colored planes. Multi-colored cords wind tightly through the surface of this talisman. Colored panes fill the cords’ negative space and white details fill those panes, creating an extraordinary intricate and vividly colored pattern.¹⁹ Five faces at the center of the canvas stare fixedly at the viewer. Clerics often incorporate faces in this style as a means of expelling a demon from the body.

¹⁶ Mercier, *Art that Heals*, 59.

¹⁷ Mercier, *Art that Heals*, 59

¹⁸ Mercier, *Art that Heals*, 99.

¹⁹ Mercier, *Art that Heals*, 103.

When the patient sees the scroll for the first time, he or she will see the faces and scream, which will scare the demons away. Gera believes that the demon is also able to see through the eyes of person whose body he has taken over, thus when he sees his own image he becomes so frightened that he flees on his own.²⁰

Throughout the intricate talisman, eyes fill the spaces within the pattern. Artists and healers typically present eyes in pairs, though here they are uncharacteristically singularly and in pairs. Whether or not the viewer reads these contrasting white and black images as eyes, they produce a jarring effect. Generally speaking, the eye represents power, sometimes death, and beauty.²¹ This emphasizes both the strength of the images and the aesthetic choices clerics so carefully make. In *The Seal of Glory*, the eyes represent light, which he presents in his earlier works as well.²²

Gera transformed talismans, which have existed for thousands of years, into a fine art. The now healer/artist was raised by a father with a traditional career, began his education in the traditional Ethiopian manner and taught himself about medicinal plants until he knew enough to practice medicine. After becoming a cleric, Gera initially ignored the efficacy of the talisman drawings, writing only the prayers on the scrolls. Gera knows that many doctors practice western medicine in his area and that he takes his daughter to one such doctor when she is ill.²³ That does not deter him from practicing local medical techniques, such as herbal medicine and scroll healing.

²⁰ Mercier, *Art that Heals*, 57-59.

²¹ Mercier, *Art that Heals*, 94.

²² Mercier, *Art that Heals*, 94.

²³ Mercier, *Art that Heals*, 94.

Zwelethu Mthethwa

Born and raised in South Africa, Zwelethu Mthethwa began his studies in medicine but switched to art after discovering his talent. Mthethwa has trained in South Africa and the United States, has won many high status awards, and has shown at prestigious venues such as the Venice Biennale. The artist now works mainly in photography, focusing on themes such as gender, dowry, marriage, aging, and initiation practices.²⁴

Using styles and techniques that set his work apart from photojournalism, Mthethwa chronicles marginalized populations in South Africa. Unlike the black and white format often used to communicate objectivity in journalism, Mthethwa's colored photographs allow a more personal look at the sitters, presenting them as subjects and not victims.²⁵ Mthethwa says that black and white photographs are linked to a "political angle of desertion and emptiness" reminiscent of a politically tumultuous past.²⁶ He believes that "color restores the people's dignity" allowing them to embrace their identity.²⁷ His subjects, project dignity inhabiting their own space, be it outside in the field in which they work or inside in their homes with magazine covered walls. By showing the sitters in their own space, Mthethwa hopes to inform the viewer of the landscape of Cape Town and rural towns as well as the interior decorations that citizens

²⁴ "The Healers", London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. London, England.

²⁵ Michael Godby, "The Drama of Color: Zwelethu Mthethwa Portraits." *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, (1999): 46.

²⁶ Wu, Cassie J. "What is this Place? Transformations of the Home in Zwelethu Mthethwa's Portrait Photographs." *African Arts* 43.2 (2010) 68.

²⁷ Carol Magee, "Spatial Stories: Photographs, Practices, and Urban Belonging," *Africa Today* 54.2 (2008): 109.

employ in their homes and workspaces. More importantly, Mthethwa shows us the vitality of the city's poorest citizens.²⁸

Mthethwa employs the same artistic decisions in his 2011 series of photographs of Sangoma healers. Originally from the Nguni regions of South Africa, sangomas heal physical and psychological maladies using herbal medicine and divination. This series was made a decade after the end of the apartheid, a period of racialized oppression in South Africa that made many citizens question their national belonging as they were relocated to the fringes of the city.²⁹ Through the use of color and by photographing the subjects in their own space, the healers exude dignity and self-confidence.

On a trip through rural Somkhele, Mthethwa wanted to find the one person or thing that would most effectively represent health. He considered images such as active children, a health clinic, gym, or sports field, but ultimately determined that in a rural town such as Somkhele, health is an issue too complicated to express in any of these images. In the image of a sangoma in her interior space, we see a close-up of the healer herself as well as intricate details of the interior to her medicinal practice.³⁰ Mthethwa says that he restores their dignity of his sitter by "...acknowledging the spaces in which they live as a home worth regarding."³¹ The woman, dressed in a long intricate gown and matching head piece, stares confidently into the camera lens. Sitting on the immaculate mat, leaning calm but alert on her left palm, her gaze is one of

²⁸ "The Healers", London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. London, England.

²⁹ Magee, Spatial Stories: Photographs, Practices, and Urban Belonging, 109.

³⁰ Lungani Ndwandwe and Astrid Treffry-Goatley, "Capturing Health in One Photo: A Personal Reflection." WellcomeCollection.org.

³¹ Magee, "Spatial Stories: Photographs, Practices, and Urban Belonging," 109.

assertive confidence. Two cloths hang behind her on the wall serving as a backdrop. Three pots line the wall to her right. To her left is a row of candles and filled containers, neatly organized in the corner. This subject is empowered, proud of her space and confident in her role there.

Mthethwa photographs the same woman outside, in an expansive field. She stands in a dignified pose on a brown and orange mat, which contrasts with the entirely green earth, another intentional tactic Mthethwa uses in his photography. Wearing the same robes that she wore in her interior space, she holds an instrument used in healing practices. The woman appears even more confident standing than she did sitting, with her gaze boldly facing the sun.

In this series of photographs, Zwelethu Mthethwa is concerned with the subject's character and knowledge of healing, not dry facts.³² Mthethwa's photographs of this Sangoma healer present a respected woman, confident in the efficacy of her medicinal power. Like his previous portrait series, he uses these photographs to inform the viewer about interior space of the Sangoma and her physical attributes, but more importantly about the sitter's dignity.

Abdoulaye Konaté

Abdoulaye Konaté, born in Diré, Mali in 1953, began his artistic studies in Bamako. He later studied in Havana, Cuba for seven years at the Instituto de Superior de Arte.³³ When he returned to Bamako, he worked as a graphic designer and, in 1998, was appointed to the director position of Rencontres de la Photographie Africaine.

³² Michael Godby, "The Drama of Color: Zwelethu Mthethwa Portraits," 46.

³³ Davis, Paul. "A Social History of Painting in Bamako, Mali, 1930s – 1980s" (PhD Diss., Indiana University, 2012).

Today, Konate is now the director of the Conservatoire des Arts. Konaté began his artistic career as a painter, occasionally experimenting with installations. Eventually he focused his energies on installations that he completes with a team of assistants.³⁴

Konaté's early works commented on environmental and political issues. In the early 1970s and again in the 1990s, he focused on the encroachment of the Sahel, the area between the Sahara Desert and tropical, fertile sub-Saharan Africa. One of these works is called *Drame au Sahel*.³⁵ In the 1970s the Sahel region, which includes Mali, experienced a decrease in rainfall resulting in desertification and 100,000 deaths. Commercial crops and livestock also suffered. The drought drew international attention and aid to Mali, which presented Malian artists with new subject matter.³⁶

In 1976, Konaté commented on the sociopolitical ramifications of the drought in his *Drame au Sahel*. The location of this work is unknown but in 1990 he completed a similar painting and included it in an installation that he also titled *Drame au Sahel* [Fig. 4-4].³⁷ In the painting, five emaciated figures – father, mother, and children – surround a dying, leafless tree. One child lies, lifeless, before her father and behind them the mother stands holding one child and supporting another who leans on her. The mother and the child that she holds stare directly out at the viewer. The installation at the Musee national du Mali, in which Konate situated his painting, incorporated a full skeleton standing at the back, dried wood and a mirror on the floor that reflects the painting that hangs directly above on the ceiling. In this installation, Konate draws

³⁴ "The Healers", London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. London, England.

³⁵ Andre Magnin and Jacques Soullou, ed., *Contemporary Art of Africa* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1996).

³⁶ Davis, "A Social History of Painting in Bamako, Mali."

³⁷ Davis, "A Social History of Painting in Bamako, Mali."

attention to human and environmental tragedies.³⁸ By informing his viewers of environmental problems, he calls them to action, hoping to heal this environmental crisis.

He redirected his concerns a few years later to issues like HIV/AIDS, dictatorship, and war and its effects on society. About this work, Konate states, “I would not say that I am a committed artist but I am interested in social problems. I see human suffering. Generally, people treat it as a political angle, I always use a social perspective.”³⁹ His current body of work takes the form of large-scale textiles that he employs to inform his viewers about these social ills, calling them to action.⁴⁰

In his artworks, Konaté distorts the line that scholars in the past inappropriately drew between traditional/modern and local/international in African art. The artist began using indigenous Malian materials like raw or dyed woven cloth when he did not have access to paints and canvases.⁴¹ More importantly, Konaté notes that artists on each continent have developed a unique form of art based on what is available to them, finding his desired textures and color palate by utilizing indigenous Malian cotton.⁴²

Konaté buys his materials locally, supporting the local economy, while the subject matter of his works reference global issues.⁴³ In this way, he is able to engage locally and internationally in a single artwork. He bases his textile works loosely on

³⁸ Davis, “A Social History of Painting in Bamako, Mali.”

³⁹ Julie Crenn, “Abdoulaye Konate: Resonances Textiles” *Inferno Magazine*, 2012.

⁴⁰ “The Healers”, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. London, England.

⁴¹ N/A, *We Face Forward: Art and Music from West Africa Today*, 2012.

⁴² Julie Crenn, “Abdoulaye Konate: Resonances Textiles” *Inferno Magazine*, 2012.

⁴³ N/A, *We Face Forward: Art and Music from West Africa Today*, 2012.

Bogolan, Mande hunters' clothing, Fulani weaving, and Mande textiles.⁴⁴ This brings long-standing textile styles that exist today in local contexts into the international contemporary art scene.

Konaté speaks about the loss of culture in Africa, specifically of Mali. He believes his home country's culture exists in the shadow of its past culture so he strives to create art that transcends the dichotomy of past and present culture to show the value that still resides in contemporary African art and culture.⁴⁵ By combining current political turmoil regarding international wars and local artistic elements in his work such as the locally produced fabric, Konaté reflects a Malian, African, and universal consciousness in his works of art.⁴⁶

Konaté's recent textiles address issues of the human condition.⁴⁷ Often the artist uses *grisgris* in his works. Grisgris are pouches filled with various objects that serve as amulets to protect the wearer.⁴⁸ In these cases the work is meant to symbolically heal the community that the textile references. The artist uses his tapestries to inform viewers of the social implications of diseases such as HIV/AIDS, urging the community to take action. Konaté expresses his interest in fighting against human injustices when he says, In the following survey of Abdoulaye Konaté's artwork, I will elucidate the artist's attempt to draw attention to social ailments with his large-scale hanging tapestries.

⁴⁴ Julie Crenn, "Abdoulaye Konate: Resonances Textiles" *Inferno Magazine*, 2012.

⁴⁵ N/A, *Tentures – Teintures Exhibition at Revue Noire gallery*, 2012.

⁴⁶ N/A, *Tentures – Teintures Exhibition at Revue Noire gallery*, 2012.

⁴⁷ Julie Crenn, "Abdoulaye Konate: Resonances Textiles" *Inferno Magazine*, 2012.

⁴⁸ Diane Gillespie, "From Senegal, powerful blessings for American students." *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 46.7 (1999): B9. *U.S. History In Context*.

Bosnie, Angola, Rwanda [Fig. 4-5], a tapestry that Konaté completed in 2005, hangs in four vertical white panels that pop out of a blood-red background. Konaté uses strips woven on strip looms, the characteristic weaving technology in many parts of West Africa, which entails stitching together four- or five-inch wide strips. Large, jarring pieces of red cloth representative of blood cover each panel. In the upper left corner of the third panel, we see a menacing machine gun image.⁴⁹ The work continues onto the floor where it flows into a collage of children's clothes, which symbolizes the children who died in wars.⁵⁰ This piece comments on the genocides that took place in Bosnia, Angola, and Rwanda in the mid-to-late 1990s.⁵¹ This image of genocide urges us to consider the human condition and the impact it has on a community. He makes this point especially emotional through the use of children's clothes instead of those of adults.

In 2006, Abdoulaye Konaté created a healing tapestry series for Israel and Palestine, a region affected by territorial disputes. In his four-panel tapestry entitled *Gris-gris pour Israel et le Palestine* [Fig. 4-6], Konaté comments specifically on suicide bombings in the Palestinian territory. The panels are stacked two on two, each on a white background with a thin red pool at the bottom that mirrors the blood from *Bosnie, Angola, Rwanda*. The top two panels incorporate a series of Israeli flags and Palestinian *kaffiyeh* headscarves in unequal quantities; the top left shows three head scarves and one flag while its counterpart contains three flags and one headscarf.⁵² In

⁴⁹ Julie Crenn, "Abdoulaye Konate: Resonances Textiles" *Inferno Magazine*, 2012.

⁵⁰ Julie Crenn, "Abdoulaye Konate: Resonances Textiles" *Inferno Magazine*, 2012.

⁵¹ Julie Crenn, "Abdoulaye Konate: Resonances Textiles" *Inferno Magazine*, 2012.

⁵² Julie Crenn, "Abdoulaye Konate: Resonances Textiles" *Inferno Magazine*, 2012.

the bottom register, Konaté presents one flag and one headscarf per panel. The uneven combinations in the top two registers and the aggressively opposing flags in the bottom two appear to ask us to consider the future of Israelis and Palestinians if these violent disputes continue. Konaté may also be suggesting the peaceful coexistence he hopes for in the balanced images on two bottom frames of the tapestry. The three dimensional gris-gris that Konaté uses to fill the background of each of the four panels make a direct reference to healing.

In his 1996 large-scale tapestry, *Les Artistes Africains et le SIDA* [Fig. 4-7], Konaté depicts a man walking away from the viewer with blue and brown patchwork robes. Here, the artist uses a deep red circle in the center of his figure. Surrounded by cool blues and brown, the red seems to pop and force us to consider the sometimes difficult human condition. The somber figure walks away from a three-dimensional box that Konaté has positioned at the base of the tapestry. Today in some south African countries, HIV-positive parents leave boxes like these for the children they leave behind as a way of continuing history.⁵³

Abdoulaye Konaté's works seem to communicate what is essential to communities: health and social justice. He uses his tapestries as a reference to the need for healing the consequences of war and disease. Konaté hopes that his textile legacy will spread throughout his country and beyond.⁵⁴

Contemporary artists are commenting on healing in new and diverse ways. Abdoulaye Konaté uses his installations to symbolically heal the emotional state of

⁵³ "The Healers", London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. London, England.

⁵⁴ Julie Crenn, "Abdoulaye Konate: Resonances Textiles" *Inferno Magazine*, 2012.

communities effected by war and disease. Gera uses his works to heal physical illness. Zwelethu Mthethwa's photographs encourage the viewer to consider the efficacy of traditional South African forms of healing by showing the confidence of the healers in his authorial portraits. His photographs indicate that these traditional sangoma healers are contemporary and their practices withstood changes that took place during colonialism. In this way, the artist is metaphorically healing a society. In this pan-African survey of contemporary art, artists are complicating the definitions of "contemporary," "art" and they are blurring the line between local and international.

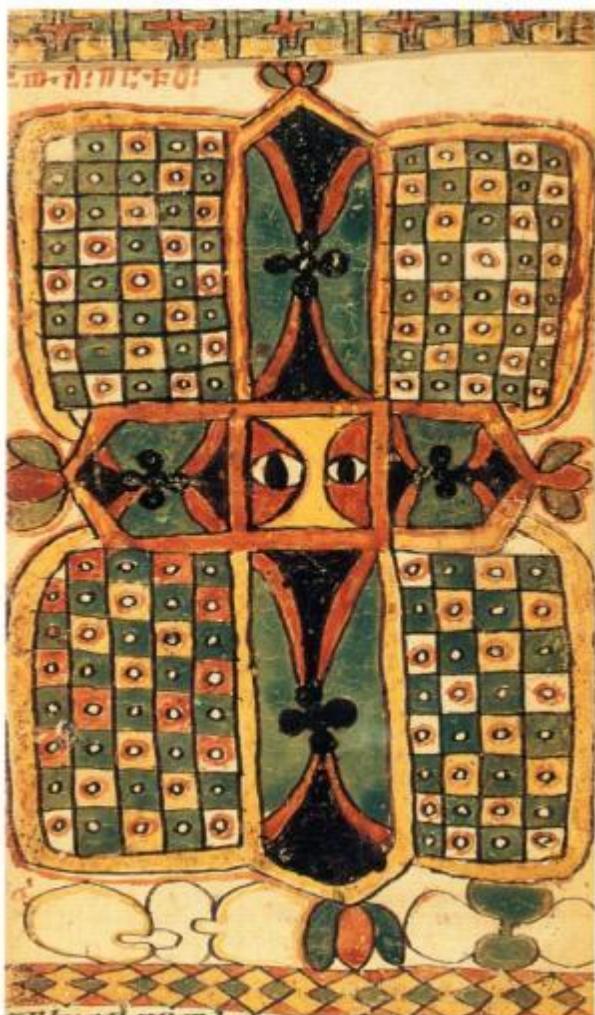
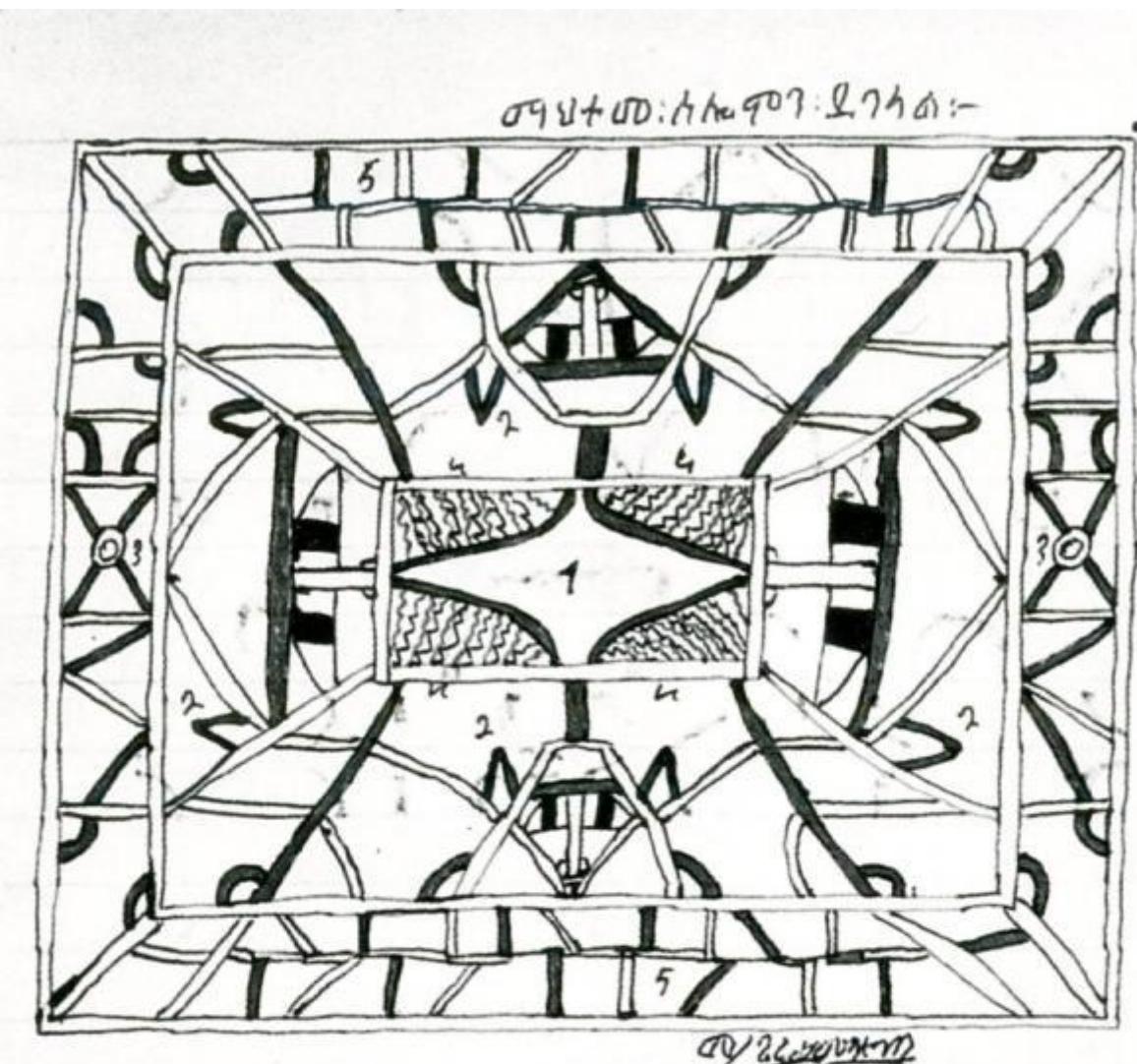


Figure 4-1. *Powerful Medicine*, Protective scroll (detail), eighteenth century



መዕስቱ፡ ከንፃ፡ ዘኅ፡ የሰውድ፡ እሁን፡
 1ኛ፡ ሂደ፡ ~~ሙሉ~~ አገልግሎት (ሙሉ) ተገናለ፡
 2ኛ፡ የሰውድ፡ ዘኅ፡ ተገናለ፡
 3ኛ፡ ይወጋለ፡ መቀኑት (ቀነት፡ የሰውድ) ተገናለ፡
 4ኛ፡ የሰውድ፡ መጠናከርት፡ ተገናለ፡
 5ኛ፡ አዘጋጅ፡ ወጥቅም (የርክና፡ አጥጋጅ) ተገናለ፡

Figure 4-2. *Solomon's Seal*, 1974



Figure 4-3. Gera, *The Seal of Glory*, 1996



Figure 4-4. Close up of painting in *Drame au Sahel* and installation *Drame au Sahel*



Figure 4-5. Abdoulaye Konaté, *Bosnie Rwanda Angola*, 2005

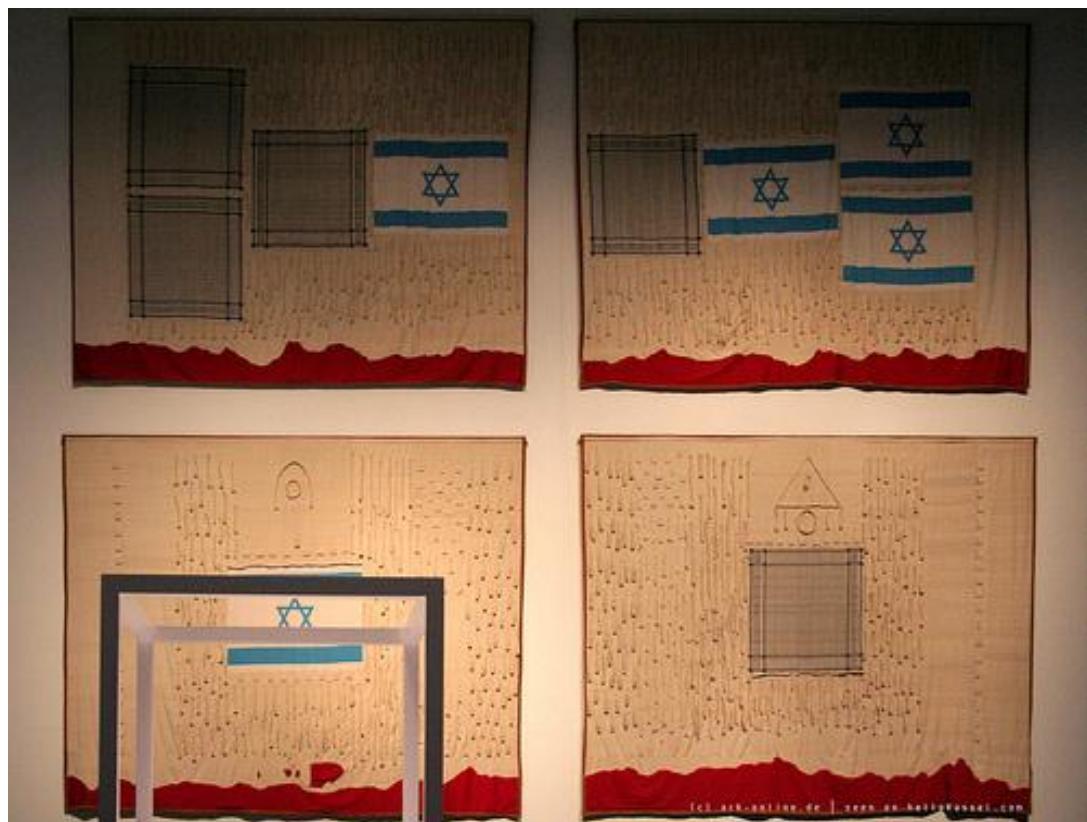


Figure 4-6. Abdoulayé Konaté, Gris-gris pour Israel et le Palestine, 2006



Figure 4-7. Abdoulaye Konate, *Les Artistes Africains et le SIDA*, 2006

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

In Chapter 1, I examine three indigenous Yoruba healing techniques: Gelede, ààlè and Egúngún in order to better understand ceremonies and objects used in Yorùbá ritual practice. Using this analysis helps us to determine the original purpose of the Saponá figures addressed in Chapter 2, which were purchased by CDC workers in Nigeria during the fight to eradicate smallpox. In Chapter 3 we consider contemporary artist's references to healing in their work. In each chapter we consider important visual aspects of each healing technique.

The men who perform Egungun masquerades, which represent ancestors, reenact the community's past to determine healing strategies for the future. It is imperative that the community witness the performance for it to serve as effective medicine. The visual importance of Gelede lies in the ceremony's visual presentation to the community. The Yorùbá who adhere to indigenous religion believe that some women possess the ability to turn into *aje* or witches at night, taking the physical form of a cat or bird. *Aje* are dangerous and can impair the physical health of one person or the social health of an entire community. The Gelede ceremony serves to appease these women to avoid their wrath. It is ààlè's visual availability to potential thieves that warns them off. Furthermore, specific symbols included in the ààlè explain the consequence of stealing to a thief. David Doris explains that ààlè is the anti-aesthetic, visually representing undesirable qualities. Here, it is what the symbol represents that is important.

My research indicates that smallpox healing does not take place through an anthropomorphic figure. That is not to say, however, that Yorùbá priests do not engage

with the orisa of smallpox, Saponá, to cure the disease. Even when priests call on an orisa to aid or protect a person, Yorùbá artists rarely depict the figure of the deity. This leads me to believe that the anthropomorphic representation of Saponá that Bob Boyde collected in Nigeria in the late 1960s was created for profit, not for a healing ceremony. It is also possible that these crude figures were produced as medicinal figures.

Contemporary artists also make reference to healing, as illustrated by the work of Gera, Zwelethu Mthethwa, and Abdoulaye Konate. Gera, an artist from Ethiopia who began his career as a healer, uses talismanic scrolls to heal a patient's physical illness. The patient must visually engage with the scroll for the medicine to be effective. Zwelethu Mthethwa photographs sangomas to restore dignity to the impoverished healers. He uses color and location to emphasize the sitter's confidence. Malian artist Konate uses large scale tapestries to reference wars and epidemics and to urge communities to take action to prevent further violence and disease.

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