

THE MUSEUM OF PRIMITIVE ART

SCULPTURE FROM THREE AFRICAN TRIBES



SCULPTURE FROM THREE AFRICAN TRIBES SENUFO BAGA DOGON

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INTRODUCTION

"Recent discoveries" are more usually associated with archaeology than with anthropology; they bring to mind past peoples and buried civilizations. For Africa, one is reminded of Nigeria, of the metal and clay objects only recently excavated at Ife, of the other figures and heads found at Tada and Jeba, of the Nok and Sao cultures. Objects brought out of the ground in these, and other places, have extended our knowledge of African art, and begun to give it a deeper historical perspective.

Among the more recent, still extant cultures and tribes of Africa, it seemed for a while as if there were little possibility of the discovery of unfamiliar kinds of objects, much less of new styles. No longer the dark continent, Africa appeared to have revealed the variety of its art, especially since in a great many areas the traditional carver no longer practiced his sculpture. Happily this has proven not to be the case. Of the three tribes whose works are shown here, some work was known (more from the Senúfo than from either the Baga or the Dogon), enough so that there was an image of their art. But in each case recent discoveries have enlarged that image, and for the Dogon have given us material for tentative historical hypotheses.

The discoveries were brought about by a variety of circumstances: among the Baga the decay, among the Senúfo the temporary overthrow, of the traditional religion helped to bring these sculptures to light. No longer needed as cult objects, freed from powers associated with them (which were particularly strong since many of them belonged to powerful secret societies), they no longer had to be hidden from unbelievers. For the Dogon, the way had been prepared by the researches of Marcel Griaule, who had himself brought back a limited number of objects (some of them of great importance) and done exhaustive work on the symbolism, and social function and philosophical meaning of

their masks and figures. His work suggested further exploration and discovery.

Baga art was long represented by a few fine pieces in the Musée de l'Homme, in Paris, and a very small number of private collections. Then the penetration of Islam brought others to light, adding to the number, but not to the type, of works already known: these included examples of the monumental "Nimba" mask of the Simo secret society, seemingly too large to be carried by the single dancer who did wear it on the occasion of the rites for the rice harvest (fig. 1). There were also added examples of the "Banda", with its human nose and eyes that mediate between the jaws of the crocodile and the horns of the antelope, (the complementary principles, suitable to this bayou topography, of water and earth); of human figures, short and stocky, with heads resembling the "Nimba" masks; and of highly colored birds—"the bird who lives in the marshes."

To these types of Baga sculpture we can now add the sinuous, upright, janiform snakes illustrated here, of which a small number is now known. In their coloring (originally bright) and triangular decoration they have certain similarities with the decorated canoe prows of the Baga, but otherwise seem to bear little resemblance to the other kinds of sculpture from this area.

The Senúfo have been best known by their wooden face masks, horned, and sometimes crested at the top, and with what appear to be short, stylized legs below (fig. 2). Within the last few years, especially during a relatively brief period when a local inspirational cult of iconoclastic tendencies replaced the traditional religious forms, examples of other types, rare until then, have come out of the region. Notable among these are the helmet masks (of the Korubla society), single with long horns, or double with two animal jaws, and often with a small bird or other



fig. 1.



fig. 2.

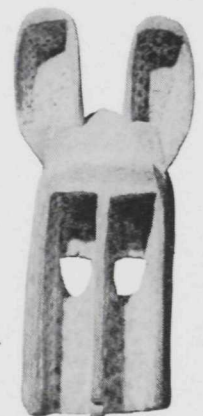


fig. 3.

creature decorating the crown. Even more striking are the "rhythm-markers", figures set atop a post and also used in the secret society dances. One is tempted to see in these, with their combination of elegance, finely decorated surface (in many of those that are unweathered), and elongated severity a parallel to the geographical position of the Senufo, set in the upper Ivory Coast, between the Baule to the south (and their sophisticated art), and the Bambara and the Dogon to the north (and their thinner, more geometric style). But the Korubla society masks give pause, for here is a powerful, even brutal and independent style.

Of all the tribes of this area, we know most about the Dogon. Recently, too, a great deal of their sculpture has been brought out of Africa, revealing works of a remarkable coherence of both type and use. Put together, this ethnological and visual information should tell us a great deal about Dogon art—and it does. But its very abundance (itself relative) also poses many problems, which we are, so to speak, able to avoid elsewhere. What might be called the classic type (in the sense of an accepted image) of Dogon sculpture, is an upright figure with flexed legs, severe silhouette, strong contrast of verticals and horizontals, and the repeated use of slim, conical shapes for the forms of breasts, heads, eyes and other details. The staccato relation of the parts of body includes a sense of intervening spaces rare in African art, and the surface is often worked with a finely incised pattern of triangular shapes. Not many of these figures were known, and Dogon art was more usually associated with the simple rectangular masks, further inset with rectangles for the eyes, and often surmounted by the figure or the sign (ears or horns) of an animal, usually a rabbit or an antelope (fig. 3).

In the caves of the cliff-like plateaus within the bend of the Niger River where the Dogon live, Griaule found objects which the Dogon associated with the "Tellem"—a people they said

had previously populated the region and since fled. These figures were generally small, the bodies were short and compact, and one or both arms were often raised in a rain-imploring gesture. They gave every appearance of considerable age, since the features and extremities were either worn away, or the whole body was covered with a coating of a sacrificial substance (animal blood and/or millet juice), which, dried, had crackled like the surface of an old painting.

The question of age immediately arises. Although the Dogon separate themselves from the "Tellem" these figures appear to be of the same general style, especially in the rhythmic relation of their parts. Are they then ancestral to the Dogon style? The simple appearance of age is hardly to be trusted since it depends on so many accidents of preservation (in and out of Africa). Some of these figures may indeed be two hundred years old, as Dogon tradition maintains; others may be older. But by itself, surface condition is an unreliable test. Careful comparison suggests that the problem is further complicated by variations within the overall Dogon style, so that we cannot place all the figures in a single linear dimension in time: to single out but one feature, there appears to be both an "aquiline" and a "snub-nosed" style, and these may very easily have persisted side by side in different local centers. Thus, until more data has been collected, more works analyzed, and age-tests are carried out on a number of figures, it is not possible sharply to separate "Tellem" from "Dogon", nor to assign exact dates to these fascinating new finds. But to discover a body of sculpture which promises to reveal something of the stylistic evolution of a recent style of wood-carving (comparable to what we know of the clay and metal of Ife and Benin), is in itself an exciting development in the history of African art.

ROBERT GOLDWATER

SENUFO



1. "Firespitter" Mask (Warthog-Antelope). Sudan: Senoufo. 35⁵/₈" high. (57.248)





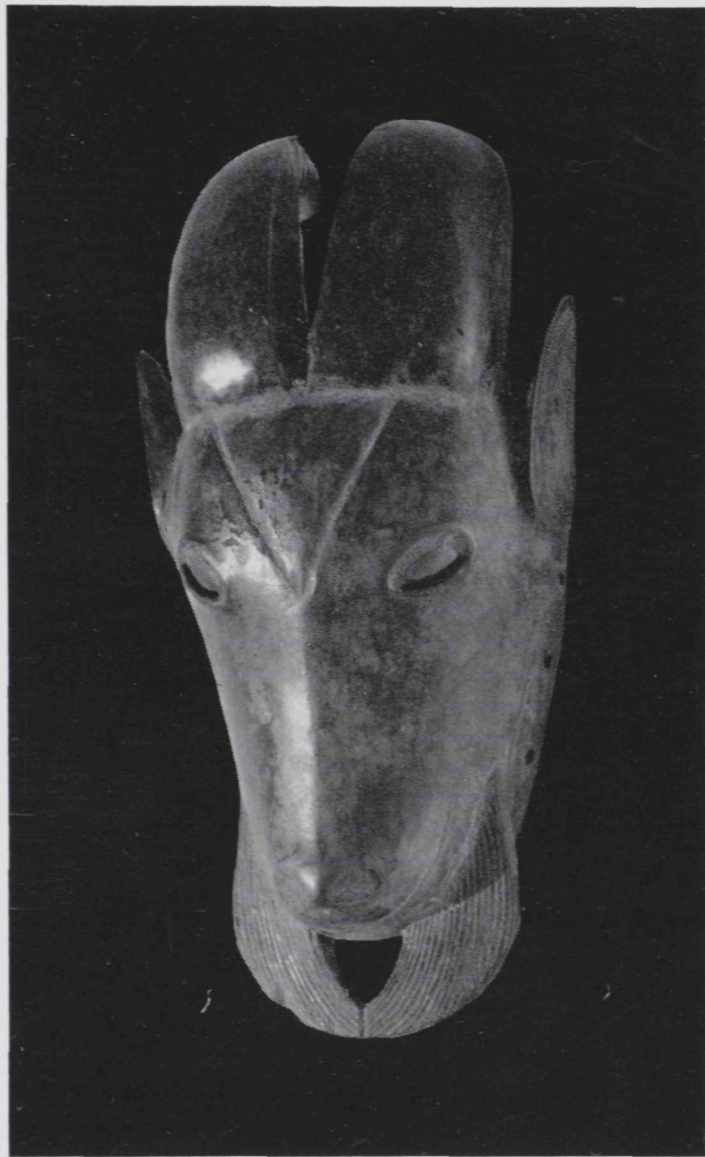
2. *Ancestor Figure, Rhythm-Marker.*
Sudan, Korhogo,
Lataha village: Senufo.
42½" high. (58.7)



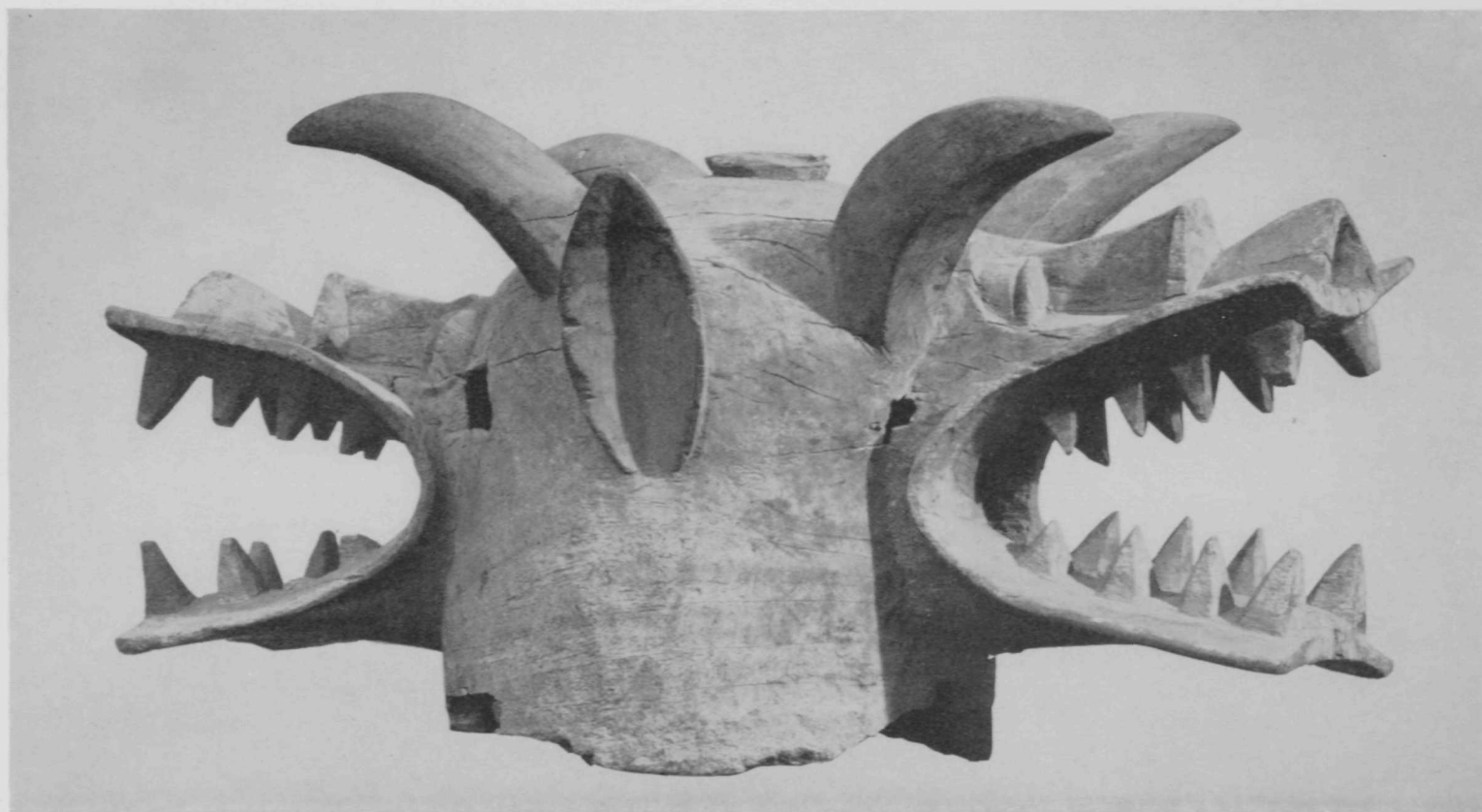
3. "Firespitter" Mask. Sudan: Senufo. Painted wood, $30\frac{1}{2}$ " long. (59.2)

4. "Firespitter" Mask (Hyena). Sudan, found Ladiokaha village, Ivory Coast: Senufo. Painted wood, $25\frac{3}{8}$ " long. (57.266)





5. *Dance Mask (Goat)*. Sudan: Senufo. 12 $\frac{1}{4}$ " high. (56.258)



6. "Firespitter" Mask (Boar). Sudan: Senufo. $23\frac{1}{8}$ " long. (56.342)



BAGA

7. Snake. French Guinea: Baga, Landouman sub-tribe. Painted wood, 54½" high. (58.336)



8. Snake. French Guinea: Baga, Landouman sub-tribe. Painted wood, 68½" high. (58.335)





9. Dance Mask (Banda).
French Guinea: Baga.
Painted wood, 52½" high.
(57.181)

DOGON



*10. Double Figure.
Sudan: Dogon.
29 $\frac{1}{4}$ " high. (56.54)*





11. *Granary Door*. Sudan: Dogon. 36½" high. (58.65)

12. *Ancestor Figure*. Sudan: Dogon. 17⅝" high. (57.221)





13. Horseman. Sudan: Dogon.
27 $\frac{1}{8}$ " high. (58.176)



14. Ancestor Figure.
Sudan: Dogon.
82 $\frac{7}{8}$ " high. (58.97)







14.

15. Housepost.
Sudan: Dogon.
74 $\frac{1}{4}$ " high. (58.328)







16. *Leg of a Stool. Sudan, from rock shelter near Ibi village: Dogon. 17½" high. (56.340)*

17. *Ancestor Head. Sudan: Dogon. 6¾" high. (57.102)*

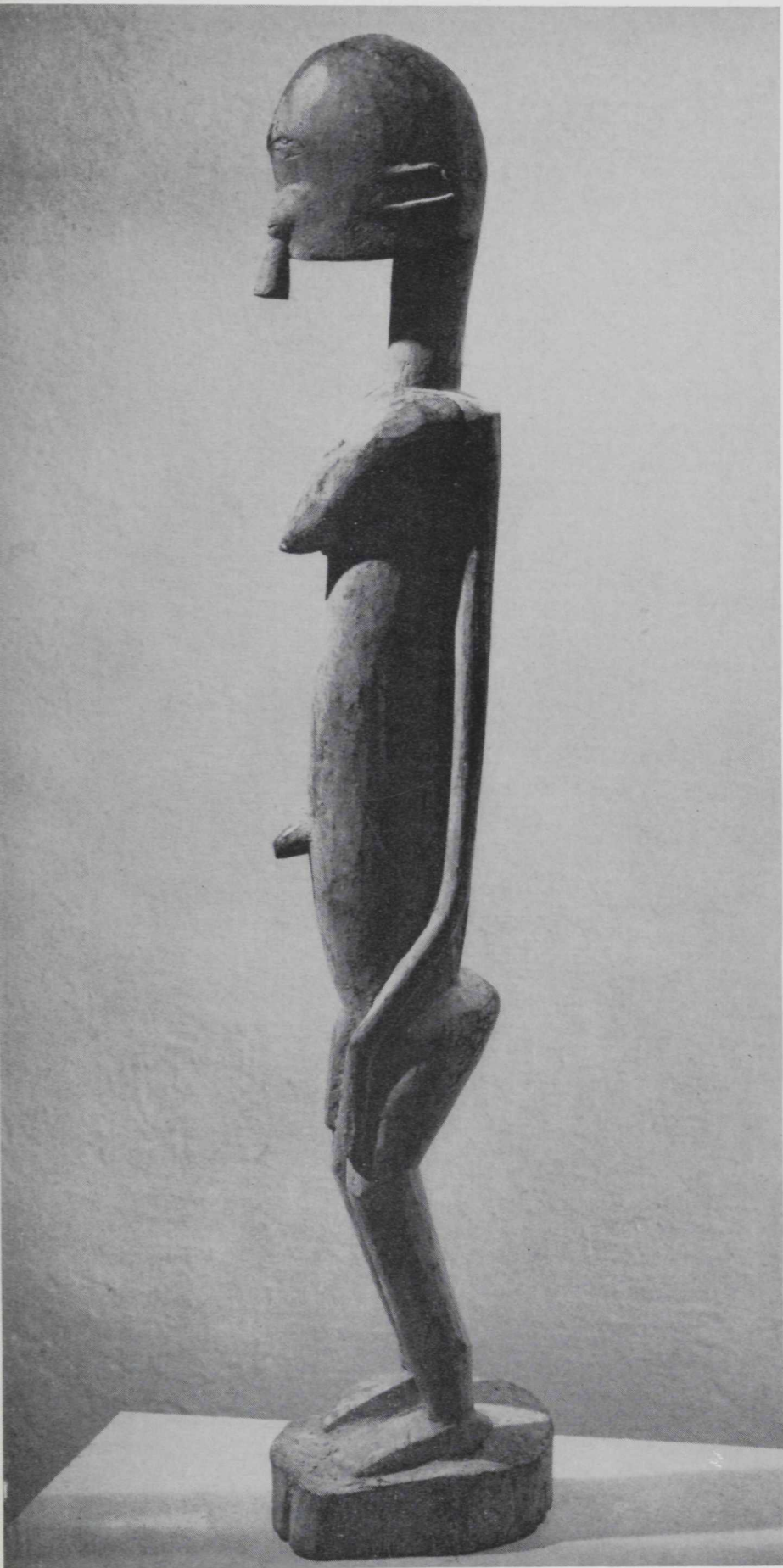




18. *Maternity Figure*. Sudan: Dogon. 24 $\frac{1}{4}$ " high. (58.66)



19. *Ancestor Figure*. Sudan: Dogon. 22 $\frac{3}{4}$ " high. (58.67)



20. *Ancestor Figure. Sudan. Dogon. 28" high. (58.340)*



21. *Maternity Figure. Sudan: Dogon. Wood, metal, 21 $\frac{7}{8}$ " high. (57.222 a,b)*



22. Dance Mask (Hornbill). Sudan: Dogon. Painted wood, 26 $\frac{1}{4}$ " long. (58.339)

CATALOGUE

1. "FIRESPIITTER" MASK (WARTHOG-ANTELOPE). *Sudan: Senufo*. 35 $\frac{5}{8}$ " high. (57.248)

These large masks, showing a synthesis of human and animal forms, always have wide-open, sharp-toothed jaws. Worn in the ritual dances of the Korubla society, they were used as protection against witches, soul-stealers, and sorcerers of all kinds. The wearer, with the mask placed horizontally on top of his head, looked out through the jaws. His body was covered with strands of hemp. The name "firespitter" comes from the practice of burning tinder in the mouth of the mask. The dances took place at night, when the tinder was placed in the mouth and ignited, so that the wearer blew out smoke and flames and the mask appeared to be breathing fire.

2. ANCESTOR FIGURE, RHYTHM-MARKER. *Sudan, Korhogo, Lataha village: Senufo*. 42 $\frac{1}{2}$ " high. (58.7)

Ancestor figures with heavy bases are said to have been used in dances of the men's initiation society, called Lo. The figures were lifted by the arms and struck against the ground with a thumping sound to mark the rhythm of the dance. This male figure is a rare example, since most of the rhythm-markers represent women. It was acquired from the Senufo in 1953, along with two others now in Swiss collections. It was possible to obtain them only because the Senufo were at that time in a state of revolt against their traditional religion, and no longer considered the figures sacred. A short time later they returned to their old beliefs, but most of the ancestral figures had been burned at the time of the upheaval.

3. "FIRESPIITTER" MASK. *Sudan. Senufo*. Painted wood, 30 $\frac{1}{2}$ " long. (59.2)

4. "FIRESPIITTER" MASK (HYENA). *Sudan, found in Ladiokaha village, Ivory Coast: Senufo*. Painted wood, 25 $\frac{3}{8}$ " long. (57.266)
See note on no. 1.

5. DANCE MASK (GOAT). *Sudan: Senufo*. 12 $\frac{1}{4}$ " high. (56.258)
The goat is one of the totemic symbols of Senufo clans. Goats, dogs, and chickens were often sacrificed at funeral and expiatory rites. This mask may have been worn at initiation ceremonies or at funerals.

6. "FIRESPIITTER" MASK (BOAR). *Sudan: Senufo*. 23 $\frac{1}{8}$ " long. (56.342)
See note on no. 1

7. SNAKE. *French Guinea: Baga, Landouman sub-tribe*. Painted wood, 54 $\frac{1}{2}$ " high. (58.336)

The snake is an important religious symbol for many tribes in this area of Africa. However, the myths or legends connected with them vary greatly. These huge Baga representations of pythons were unknown until very recently; consequently little information about them is available. Since most Baga sculpture is connected with the Simo society, it is likely that these may be also. However, one authority states that they represent the goddess, Nini-ganni, the "dispenser of riches."

8. SNAKE. *French Guinea: Baga, Landouman sub-tribe*. Painted wood, 68 $\frac{1}{2}$ " high. (58.335)
See note on no. 7.

9. DANCE MASK (BANDA). *French Guinea: Baga*. Painted wood, 52 $\frac{1}{2}$ " high. (57.181)

This mask, worn in Simo society fertility rites, had a raffia skirt attached to it to hide the body of the wearer. It was worn on top of the head at an oblique angle. The fusion of human, crocodile, and antelope features are characteristic of this type of mask, called "banda". It was thought by the Baga that these masks were so powerful that anybody not initiated into the Simo society who should happen to see one, would surely die.

10. DOUBLE FIGURE. *Sudan: Dogon*. 29 $\frac{1}{4}$ " high. (56.54)

Such hieratic figures frequently formed part of the architectural decoration of quarters assigned to the high priests of the Dogon. The weathered surface suggests its possible use as an exterior ornament near the entrance to a priest's house.

11. GRANARY DOOR. *Sudan: Dogon*. 36 $\frac{1}{2}$ " high. (58.65)

This door probably comes from the house of a Hogon, or chief priest. These men were always treated with special veneration, and only privileged people were allowed to approach them personally. The wooden objects made for Hogons were finely sculptured, in contrast to those in the rest of the village. The figures carved on the door represent ancestors.

12. ANCESTOR FIGURE. *Sudan: Dogon*. 17 $\frac{5}{8}$ " high. (57.221)

The encrusted condition of this figure indicates its sacred character. The thick patina may have been formed from the blood of slain animals, or perhaps by repeated libations of crushed-millet juice. The Dogon consider millet to be a sacred plant, important in many ceremonies. Many of these figures have been found in cliff-side sanctuaries, and are ascribed by the Dogon to the "Tellem" people.

13. HORSEMAN. *Sudan: Dogon*. 27 $\frac{1}{8}$ " high. (58.176)

This figure may represent an equestrian warrior. His raised arm and closed hand indicate that he originally held some object, perhaps a spear. Carved figures such as this are also sometimes seen on the tops of large urns used in agricultural rites.

14. ANCESTOR FIGURE. *Sudan: Dogon*. 82 $\frac{7}{8}$ " high. (58.97)

The significance of this figure is unknown. The upstretched arms (which appear frequently on "Tellem" figures and on door reliefs) are said to represent a gesture imploring rain, but this is problematical.

This is probably the largest figure sculpture yet known from the Dogon area and is indeed of exceptional size for all Africa. When found it was in four pieces: the head, the right arm and shoulder, a fragment of the right thigh, and the rest of the figure. Surface erosions on the neck, abdomen, right buttock, right thigh, and other smaller areas have been patched with plaster.

15. HOUSEPOST. *Sudan: Dogon*. 74 $\frac{1}{4}$ " high. (58.328)

Only a few examples of these house-posts have been collected, the others being similarly carved with figures of a man or a bird. See photograph on following page.

16. LEG OF A STOOL. *Sudan, from rock shelter near Ibi village: Dogon*. 17 $\frac{1}{2}$ " high. (56.340)

This carved leg may have been part of a stool belonging to a Hogon. The figures represent a man with upstretched arms, and a crocodile which is probably a totemic symbol.

17. ANCESTOR HEAD. *Sudan: Dogon*. 6 $\frac{3}{4}$ " high. (57.102)

This head is, perhaps, from one of the statuettes used by the Dogon in their funerary rites, and believed by them to house the spirit of the family's founder. Its close approach to realism is shared by nos. 13 and 14.

18. MATERNITY FIGURE. *Sudan: Dogon*. 24¼" high. (58.66)

The ritual meaning of Dogon maternity figures is unknown. Among other African tribes in this area, figures of mothers with children may be used as charms to insure fertility or protection during childbirth. These Dogon figures may have a similar function, or may simply represent female ancestors.

19. ANCESTOR FIGURE. *Sudan Dogon*. 22¾" high. (58.67)

This seated woman is supported by four caryatid-figures. The object she holds in her hands is probably a musical instrument. The beard-like appendage represents a lip-plug commonly worn by Dogon women.

20. ANCESTOR FIGURE. *Sudan: Dogon*. 28" high. (58.340)

Images were made as memorials and soul-receptacles for the dead. They were kept by the family and passed down from one generation to the next. When a member of the family died the figure was placed in a rock cave beside the body for a few days to encourage the soul of the deceased to enter it and not wander around the village.

21. MATERNITY FIGURE. *Sudan: Dogon*. Wood and metal, 21⅞" high. (57.222 a,b)

See note on no. 18.

22. DANCE MASK (HORNBILL). *Sudan: Dogon*. Painted wood, 26¼" long. (58.339)

Dogon masks were used primarily in funeral rites to expel the souls of the dead and in memorial ceremonies. There are a great number of types representing various animals or birds. Each has its own name, special song and dance, and refers to a particular myth. This example represents the hornbill, a bird which the Dogon consider a marauder. Some such masks are surmounted by a human figure.

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Photo by H. Kamer.



