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### McNaughton: Secret Sculptures of Komo: Art and Power in Bamana (Bambara) Initiation Associations

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**McNaughton: Secret Sculptures of Komo: Art and Power in Bamana (Bambara)  
Initiation Associations**

and cultures, and they too may syndetically accrete within a work—thus a sculptural array may have all these postural icons present, either flanking or surmounting one another. Thus postural icons are no less real than “ephebeism,” “mid-plane mimesis,” “percussive attack,” or, for that matter, than ancestors, divinatory instruments, flexed knees, hornedness, or horizontal masks. Whether one wishes to argue from the wide distribution of such icons the existence of a strongly Africanized version of the collective unconscious or, alternatively, to think in historical terms is a matter of individual preference that has little to do with the present discussion.

*Icon*, in brief, seems not to be precisely the same sort of phenomenon I have in mind when I write of “work of affecting presence,” which is, rather, an iconic complex. *Icon* seems rather to denominate aesthetic motifs of marked, immanent power which constellate into works as culturally validated concatenations. Icons exist primarily in the aesthetic of invocation—a syndetic aesthetic—rather than in the aesthetic of perception.

If there are both motional and postural icons which travel independently from one African culture to another, syndetically accreting into aesthetic traditions, one might wonder why it is that other dynamics which are also so characterized ought not to be thought icons as well. Thus we might see (in addition to the corporeal and attitudinal icons I have already mentioned) thematic icons (e.g., witchcraft), substantive icons (e.g., ancestors), stylistic icons (“cool,” percussive), and processive icons (syndetism, “suspending and preserving the beat,” etc.).

I wish to take this discussion of the iconic one step further, hoping Professor Thompson will forgive me, for one reads and merely “reviews” only the ordinary book; a good book one co-thinks. Thus my variations upon his themes are intended to compliment—and perhaps to complement as well. *Icon*, he says, is act; act, we see, is motion; and motion (we note especially in his excursion into masking and dancing in his last chapter) is performance. Performance, in its turn, is on the one hand enactment—as when dancer enacts gelede (antiwitchcraft) or egungun (ancestors) masks—and on the other invocation; sometimes, syndetically, it is both. In this latter sense of invocation, performance escapes the boundaries of particularity and becomes released into mythic time. Invocation is bent knees and thrust shoulders; it is dancing; it is also the summoning of the piece into presence through sacrifice, cosmetics, praise-names, music, costume, personality displacement—the *toute ensemble*. We thus, I believe, perceive here another and quintessential African icon (indeed, is it not an icon of much of man’s art, the world over?)—the icon of invocation itself.

Invocation is metaphor. It posits the immortal upon the mortal—the timeless upon the temporal, the temporal upon the spatial. For the metaphoric is of necessity the bondage (in a culture of synthesis) or the linkage (in a syndetic culture) of two or more sources of power. The icon of invocation is a temporal icon, for the urgency of the syndetic work is to become time just as the urgency

of the synthetic one is to become space (a mask in invocation transfiguring versus a Monet in a gallery—or a Berlioz in a music hall—making architectures in the eye and in the ear). Thus, wherever one seeks his point of departure in inquiry, he is bound to end up facing *time*. “Tiv multi-metric dancing restores music to muscular notation in which ‘notes’ are written in flesh . . .” (p. 16). Space is a distillation of time in the arts of sub-Saharan Africa, and the icon is the spatial distillate mythicized. The drum’s soul is its sound. Beating, it is soul metaphorized upon body. If one studies the body of space deeply, therefore, one cuts to the quick where the blood of time wells. What we approach with Professor Thompson are the premetaphoric fonts—the icons—of power under which time-beating and time-living root the experienced world.

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**Patrick R. McNaughton.** *Secret Sculptures of Komo: Art and Power in Bamana (Bambara) Initiation Associations. Working Papers in the Traditional Arts: 4 ISHI, 1979.* 56 pp., 1 map, 12 black-and-white illustrations. \$3.95.

**Reviewed by Jean M. Borgatti**  
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In an authoritative study of Komo and its associated sculpture, Patrick McNaughton indicates that the Komo mask, fraught with ambiguous visual references, remains the least understood of Bamana art forms, its manufacture and use shrouded in secrecy. The mask, an accumulation of animal and vegetal materials around a carved wooden core, functions as an instrument of divination and justice. It is worn by a high-ranking Komo association official—a sculptor-smith by right of birth and often the maker of the mask—who has spent the greater part of his life developing the capability to dance the mask and harness its energy on behalf of the community.

The study is divided into two main sections: the context of the sculpture, focusing on Bamana initiation associations, and the sculpture of the Komo association specifically, with emphasis resting on the mask, its construction, symbolism, and aesthetic. The author begins with a clear description of the initiation associations and a brief review of the literature, which attempts to rationalize the



discrepancies in the data reported by Monteil and Tauxier writing in the first decades of this century, the Griaule school of anthropologists active in the 1940s and 1950s, and the independent French scholar, D. Zahan, whose most recent publication on Bamana religion appeared in 1974. Both description and review are most valuable for the non-Bamana specialist who seeks to use Bamana cultural data in other contexts.

Within the group of initiation associations maintained by the Bamana, McNaughton distinguishes four—Nya, Nama, Kono, and Komo—on the basis of their members' possession and use of power. The power associations utilize sculpture as tools, the types differing in both form and meaning from that sculpture used by other initiation associations and deriving its impact from a transgression of Bamana aesthetic canons. Significantly, sculpture falls into the generic category covering all constructions of supernatural import and includes the vaguely animal-shaped accumulative sculpture called Boli(w), horns which carry charged materials, and masks with costumes. The author reviews the sculptural forms of each association, subject to the limitations of the data, and looks at the structure, function, and distribution of the power societies—commenting specifically on their overlapping functions—as a background for his consideration of the Komo association.

Komo has the largest membership and the most complex structure of the four power associations. It is widely distributed among the Bamana and others in Mali and elsewhere under the name of Komo, and it further bears structural similarities to the comprehensive and pervasive initiation societies among the Senufo and a number of peripheral Mande groups. The long history implied by its distribution is reinforced by oral traditions which suggest that it predates Sunjata, the Mandinka leader who founded the Mali empire in A.D. 1230. The association's structure, the hierarchy of its leadership, the patterns of membership, its functions and associated ceremonial, and its penetration into community life are detailed by the author as a preface to his examining Komo sculpture.

Komo sculpture is multimedia in construction and based on the belief that materials can be orchestrated via secret techniques of assemblage to generate energy. McNaughton discusses the concepts which underlie Komo sculpture—knowledge, power/energy, and darkness—to explicate the forms. He suggests that Komo masks in particular embody as well as portray the concept of power and proceeds to do an exegesis of the mask in terms of Bamana beliefs, discussing the significance of horns, birds, hyenas, and the notions of "mouth" and "speech" specifically. He interprets the image as one of generalized animality—potent, dangerous, and evasive—and controlled energy created for the Bamana by "discordant organic elements assembled in a

body of visual non-sequiturs" (p. 35). The author utilizes performance structure, drawing on elements of ritual, drama, song, and dance as well as oral tradition to support his interpretation.

Of particular interest to the readers of this journal is McNaughton's discussion placing Komo masks in the context of other Bamana sculpture and Bamana aesthetics. He notes that the Bamana value clarity, purity, straightforwardness, and discernability. Classic Bamana sculpture reflects these values in the rendition of forms as geometric elements, in balanced and harmonious composition, in vertical orientation, and in the crisp shapes and clear volumes which lend monumentality to the smallest sculpture. In Bamana terms, to be a good sculptor is to convey what is essential about a subject, to exercise the greatest economy of means. Decoration for its own sake or excessive decoration is described by the word "commerce"—and it is interesting to note that excessive decoration is a key feature of Bamana sculpture made for sale to tourists.

Excess is the key to Komo masquerade sculpture as well, for Komo sculpture constitutes a deliberate transgression of the aesthetic canons for expressive purposes. The aesthetic of Komo is linked to power; power takes on a visual form as the sculptural form becomes increasingly obscured by the addition of animal and vegetal elements over time.

These masks convey cross-culturally a message of danger in their bristling forms and coated surfaces which resist casual handling. In providing us with an excellent study of Komo masks in context, Patrick McNaughton adds both depth and cultural credence to our Western response.

I would like to conclude with a comment about the reproduction of images in the working paper series. Good illustrations are essential in the discussion of artworks. Illustrations here are poorly reproduced, unnecessarily it seems, since other organizations offer comparable series at the same prices as the working papers and still provide excellent photographic reproduction (UCLA's Museum of Cultural History pamphlet series, for example). A better solution to what is a technical problem would improve the series considerably.