NOTE FROM THE WEBSITE COORDINATION:
The present text is the first of a series of proposals, to be published in this website, which scrutinize definitions of 'African art' and the ways in which these are associated with histories of (neo)colonial power. The same applies to such distinctions as the ones between 'modern' and 'traditional', 'authentic' and 'artificial, which apparently cannot be avoided, even in 'postcolonial' times, thus ultimately reproducing the assumptions that are supposed to be questioned.
"Africa´s Art of Resistance" – a chapter from the book *In Search of Africa*, published by Harvard University Press in 1998 – thus maintains its relevance, as it intertwines the questioning of the historical, aesthetic and epistemological groundings that marked the reception of 'African art' in the West with other founding narratives, other histories, on a local level. Using different registers that oscillate between the autobiographical and the academic, Diawara's reading suggests other ways of understanding what 'African art' can, or should, be beyond reductive binarisms.

Africa's Art of Resistance

Manthia Diawara

That night, Sidimé Laye and I walked back to my hotel surrounded by the loss of our childhood innocence, the loss of lives during Sékou Touré's revolution, the loss of friends and lovers. We were quiet as we made our way through the darkness that claimed most of Conakry. The sound of our footsteps competed with that of the ocean waves tumbling against the black rocks. Sidimé Laye left me in front of the hotel, promising to meet me in the morning at ten.

When Sékou Touré had expelled my parents and me from Guinea, I had imagined all the tragedies of the world to be mine alone. I had loved Sékou Touré and the revolution he was leading. By sending me to school against my parents' will, and against the odds in favor of illiteracy among the Soninke, Sékou Touré seemed to have made available to me the role of the modern hero. I could learn to speak French, write letters for my people, and become the equal of my lettered Guinean friends. I could even become a doctor or a teacher for the new nation-state. I had felt then that the expulsion was taking all of this from me and sending me hack to my tribe and its customs. I had envied my friends who, unlike me, would continue to enlarge their roles as actors in the Guinea revolution. I confess that the main reason for coming back to Guinea after all these years was so that I could recapture some of what the expulsion had taken away from me—so that I could be a part of Guinea again. But how could I have known that Sidimé Laye, of all my friends the object of my greatest envy, had been losing something to the revolution? I had seen only his unwrinkled school uniform, his perfect scores in dictation and math, and his dignified comportment, unusual for a kid our age.

I remember one time we'd been playing soccer and Bangaly had kicked the ball over the wall and into the yard of Musa Diakité, a mean old man with a whip made out of camel hide. We all knew the rule laid down by Musa Diakité for getting the ball back: whoever went into the yard to retrieve it would receive ten lashes from the old man. Sometimes, the bravest among us would quickly climb the wall and bring the ball back before Musa Diakité could get his whip and run after them, hurling foul words at them, their fathers, and their mothers. Musa Diakité had more than four wives. Whenever he was beating one of them with the camel-

hide whip, no one dared to interrupt him lest he accuse the meddler of sleeping with his wife and start whipping him, too.

That time, when Bangaly had kicked the ball into the yard, the mean old man, who by then knew how to outsmart us, had gone after it first. When he'd retrieved it, he'd gone inside his *ce-so* (thehead male's room in a compound), brought out his whip, and sat by the door. Sidimé Laye had said then that he was going in to get the ball back. What about the whip? I'd asked him. He’d replied simply that it was only a beating and that it would pass. For some reason, Musa Diakité had not whipped him. He'd given the ball back and we'd never kicked it into his yard again.

I had always thought that Sidimé Laye's nobility was inviolable, that no one could touch him, that no one could take anything from him. I had always thought him luckier than I was. He'd been ahead of me in school, and he'd had perfect parents who never embarrassed him in public, unlike mine, who could not even speak good Mandinka. Everyone had wanted to be friends with Sidimé Laye, boys and girls alike. How could I have thought him vulnerable to anything, especially to the revolution that was making heroes out of us? Was it possible that I'd been so involved in my own loss that I'd been unable to see his? My loss had blinded me. I'd thought that, compared to mine, everyone else's life was without suffering.

But in fact I was more fortunate in having left Guinea when I did. My father had escaped Sékou Touré's prisons, and I had continued my schooling in Bamako, Mali. After a short time there, I had made new friends who had taken the place of most of my friends in Guinea. But I'd continued to admire Sékou Touré and to hold on to the memory of my childhood with Sidimé Laye, Bangaly Sidibé, Lamine Diakité, and Antoine Mitterrand. I left Guinea at a time when the revolution had begun to run out of steam, so I can say that I left Guinea during the good old days. I'd had the good fortune to live in Guinea when Sékou Touré had demystified white people, and I'd been personally touched by him. I'd been lucky, too, to have carried with me to Bamako a feeling of myself, created by Sékou Touré, as a new man who could shape the destiny of my Africa.

I can still remember as if it were yesterday the voyage that took us back to Mali. There were more than 350 of us in a boat that they said was designed to hold 150. It was January and the river waters were receding. The boat often ran aground, and we had to camp on shore so that the men could remove the sand that was obstructing the passage. I would take out my Swiss army knife and carve my name on trees next to those of Sékou Touré, Patrice Lumumba, and Kwame Nkrumah. Sometimes we camped near a village, where we would spend the night. There were always policemen and soldiers, who counted us and made sure we returned to the boat in the morning. I used to imagine then that I was Moses, searching for the land that Sékou Touré, Lumumba, and Nkrumah had promised us.

Sidimé Laye had remained in Guinea through the nightmarish years when brother turned against brother, and children sent their own mothers to die in prison. I had lost my childhood to the fantasies of new manhood and decolonization, and Sidimé Laye had lost his to violence, political conspiracies, and betrayals. I still live and am sustained by these fantasies of African liberation, and I returned to Guinea to revisit the birthplace of the dream, the place where I had been born again as a new man. Sidimé Laye had lost his uncle to the incessant political conspiracies, which had also torn his family apart and interrupted his

education in Sékou Touré's revolutionary schools. I had left Guinea believing in the revolution, not realizing that the expulsion of Africans like my parents was the first sign of its failure. Sidimé Laye had seen the revolution turn into a nightmare and had struggled to endure it every day until he was old enough to run from it. He had started over in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, and had later moved to Lagos, Nigeria, where he had done well with his carvings. He had now returned to Guinea to win his wife back and to rebuild the life shattered by the legacy of Sékou Touré. It is clear to me now that my Guinea is different from Sidimé Laye's. His is where things went wrong, where dreams were betrayed, and where people were trapped in constant fear. Mine still bears the patina of innocence, beauty, and exuberance.

His father's dream about sculpting masks began to have relevance to me not only because Laye had lost his wife, which in itself is no small matter, but because a mask discovered on a plane had led to the arrest of Laye's uncle and to Laye's leaving school before even completing eighth grade. How could it be that Sidimé Laye now found peace in sculpting masks and statues, when his father's dream was an unmistakable warning of the restlessness they could cause the soul? His uncle's arrest and death under torture, the sudden manner in which he himself had been snatched out of school, his wanderings in West Africa as a Guinean exile, and the loss of his wife—all made it clear that the masks had placed a curse on Sidimé Laye.

In the initial years after independence, Sékou Touré had changed the object of the revolution: he'd turned his rage toward other African ethnic groups and traditions in Guinea. On the one hand, the expulsion of people like my father might have been justified because of their petty-bourgeois values, which undermined the collectivizing efforts of socialism and the efficient and corruption-free management of the nation-state. On the other hand, the expulsion of West Africans from another West African country with a common historical and cultural heritage cast doubt on the meaning of independence and Sékou Touré's belief in Pan-Africanism. I remember how my father used to say that Sékou Touré had gotten rid of the French so that he could be free to kick us around: he wanted to make sure there was no one around to see him when he turned his rage against his own people. My father had never accepted the label of counterrevolutionary as a justification for turning Guinea into a police state. He wanted Sékou Touré to adjust his revolutionary government so that it would include the majority of the population, even if that meant including the counterrevolutionaries.

Another tragic flaw of the Guinean revolution was the way it had continually attacked traditional institutions as reactionary practices. The revolution, Sékou Touré often said, was anchored in African communal systems; it was different from other socialisms because it I was an African socialism. Yet Sékou Touré had banned such institutions as tribal masked dances, idol worship, and the clan structure, all of which held communities together. So even as he was asserting the difference between European socialism and his own, he was continuing to judge African traditions with narrow Marxist lenses. Consequently, he had failed to transform the traditional rules and customs of the clans into something dynamic and modern. Like most African leaders, he had succeeded only in temporarily and brutally driving them underground.

The Curse of the Masks

Today, ten years after Sékou Touré's death and the fall of most of the first nationalist regimes in Africa, the masks, statues, and oral traditions—the main supports of tribalism in Africa—have returned with a vengeance. When exhibited in the market by the skilled hands of merchandising experts, masks and statues give an uncanny impression that is the property of kitsch. They look alive, yet derisory and clownish. It is as if at the moment the fact of being alive becomes dramatic, they lose all capacity for seriousness, becoming childish imitations, banal because they appear in such large numbers. It is the very ubiquity of the masks and statues as merchandise that stops one from taking them seriously.

In one corner, there may be fifteen masks, all with horns. Next to them will be fifteen more that represent dangerous animals. There may also be carved faces with nails in their eyes; others with tonguesprotruding; abstract ones with flat heads, bulging foreheads, elongated jaws, and impossibly long noses; and of course, the obligatory Chiwara (antelope) masks. The statues are usually arranged behind the masks. There are tall ones brandishing rusty knives, with their penises hanging down to their knees, and pot-bellied ones covered all over with tribal scars. There are statues with snakes on their heads; others with lifted arms, with one leg, with three legs; others riding horses or serving as stool bases; others that are part animal and part human, or part man and part woman. Arranged in this way, the masks and statues become the property of the market. Like every other piece of merchandise, they compete for a buyer who alone can restore to them their uniqueness as a Battle mask, a Fang mask, or a Dogon ancestor figure. As they compete aesthetically among themselves, they acquire a dramatic air, as if to say: Buy me, I am more authentic than the rest of them. Buy me, I'm the prettiest mask here. Buy me as a souvenir of this place. Buy me, I'll make a good present.

My father and all the people of my tribe believed in the transformative power of the market. Even those who did not have merchandise to sell would take a shower every morning and put on clean clothes to go to the market. They believed that markets brought good luck to people. My father used to force me to spend my weekends there. I would sell kola nuts from a big tray that I carried on my head between stands, or perhaps sugar cubes, which people needed when they ate food or drank tea in the market. Sometimes I would just sit around and listen to the stories of tribal men.

The merchants always arranged their wares neatly and strategically to attract customers. In the front, they placed the most colorful and least expensive fabrics, hats, shoes, and bags. The fabrics were designed with portraits of Africa's emerging political leaders, such as Lumumba, Nkrumah, and Sékou Touré, or soccer players like Pelé, or with slogans like "Long Live African Unity!" or the independence date of Guinea. The more expensive fabrics, the so-called "Super wax" from Holland, were in the back.

Like the masks, the Super wax fabrics have succeeded in maintaining their symbolic capital in spite of the revolution. People move past the material with big portraits of Sékou Touré and Nkrumah to buy their Super wax from the back of the display. When I was little, I never could understand why Mother, who bought cloth every week, had never bought the kind with Sékou Touré's picture on it. Everybody wore such cloth at political rallies, and to me it

seemed the very latest thing because it depicted the major figures of the African revolution. I liked the fabrics with our own African images—the map of the continent, the national currencies, the presidents' faces. My father, on the other hand, hated everything with Sékou Touré's picture or ideas on it. He said Sékou Touré was destroying the market, along with everything that made people happy and free.

By insisting on carving masks for the market, Sidimé Laye showed a certain similarity to my father: they both used the market to say no to the revolution. In a way, the surrender of the masks' dramatic appearance to the market system, which turns them into objects for sale, is not so much a sign of the mortification of the masks' spirit as it is an illustration of Sékou Touré's failure to absorb them into the Guinean revolution, to transform their role in the nation-building effort.

The vengeful return of masks, statues, and oral traditions is also apparent in the survival of secret societies and masquerades in Guinea. Some of these rituals had already been driven underground by the Muslims in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From the early days of his regime, Sékou Touré banned masked rituals and secret societies on the grounds that they were counterrevolutionary reactions against African movements toward progress and unity. Insofar as every leader in Africa needs a religion or a mythic origin to consolidate his image, Sékou Touré chose Islamic mysticism over the masks' magical powers. He added "Ahmed," a shortened version of the prophet's name "Muhammad," to his own name. In this way, Ahmed Sékou Touré became the sworn enemy of clans that worshiped masks and statues.

Sékou Touré's alleged grandfather Almamy Samory Touré had used Islam to unite several tribes across West Africa in a long and bitter resistance to French colonization. Ahmed Sékou Touré himself deployed a blend of Islam and Marxism-Leninism, not only against France but also against those fanatical devotees of masks and tribal idols that posed a threat to the revolution. Many marabouts also saw the revolution as a chance to increase their power beyond the mosque to the rest of their village or even their province, by denouncing the powerful founders and local leaders whom they could not entirely convert to Islam during the colonial era. Their whistle blowing led to corruption and bribery, as the same marabouts soon became rich traders of African masks and statues in New York, Paris, and Geneva. The revolution then banned the masks, both for use in ritual performances and for export to foreign markets. Many innocent people were caught in the net and suffered—even died, like Sidimé Laye's uncle.

Today, like born-again movements, the masked rituals are returning to many villages. And with the zeal and fundamentalism typical of such movements, the villagers look nostalgically to the past, when such rituals were pure, complete, and manly. Senior citizens are asked to remember how the rituals were performed: how many masks were used, what dance steps corresponded to which masks, who was allowed to take part, and how the rituals differed from one another. In reality, some of the rituals died out at the beginning of the twentieth century, and the memory of them survives only through oral traditions. But they are being reconstituted everywhere in Guinea today, as in other parts of Africa, by tribal minorities in search of their ethnic identity.

These minorities are aided in their search by anthropologists, tourists, and historians from the West who are disinclined to look favorably on the nation-state in Africa. Masks have therefore entered global political conflicts as organizers of markets, ethnic identities, and cultures against the nation-states and African unity. In Guinea, for example, the Baga mask performance is an expression of the Baga identity that Sékou Touré's regime repressed. Similarly, the authenticity of Benin traditional art in Nigeria, of Dogon art in Mali, and of Ashanti art in Ghana sets those ethnic groups apart from others as more authentically and originally African.

In fact, ethnicity is in vogue today in Africa, and everyone from the intellectual to the businessman is claiming it against the unity proposed by the nation-state. Some African intellectuals see the new democratic wind blowing in Africa as bringing hope for the future: recognition of ethnic difference within the nation-state. According to this logic, elections are not sufficient in themselves; the winner must, in addition, act like South Africa's Nelson Mandela and appoint tribal representatives to posts in his government.

Masks, even in their kitschiest manifestations in the marketplace, represent the persistence of tribal Africa. Masks are the symbols of clans and therefore the negation of the new nation-state that has tried to suppress them. Soon after independence, the marabouts, Sékou Touré's Marxist ideological advisors, and the educated elites joined forces to eradicate the practice of tribal religions and masked rituals which were continuing to control lives. For this reason, it has proven difficult for Africans, modern intellectuals included, to abandon tribal practices in order to respond to the call of a revolutionary and nationalist identity. When I was growing up, the revolution taught me that clinging to tribal ways was reactionary. I must have believed it because my relatives and I were foreigners in Guinea: we had already moved on, already changed. I was looking for something to belong to, and the revolution held within it the promise of equality. Sidimé Laye and my other friends, in contrast, were in their own element. Change for them entailed a more wrenching effort.

Laye's father had said that the masks place a curse on people who are always around them. This reminds me of the snake god Biida, who put a curse on the people of the Wagadu Empire. When Muslim merchants and slave drivers reached our area, in the early eighteenth century, they declared our gods inappropriate and our customs paganistic. The erosion of our customs and religions by Islam led to the destruction of the Soninke empire of Ghana and its capital, Wagadu.

Ghana was the largest and most powerful empire in West Africa, until Arab traders arrived there at the end of the sixth century and the beginning of the seventh. In those days, it was customary to make an annual sacrifice—the most beautiful maiden of the realm—to Biida, the snake god hiding in the well of wealth. In return, Biida made Ghana the most powerful and fearsome empire, with plenty of gold and silver and abundant harvests.

Then, one year after the Muslims had arrived and had converted the king and the powerful African merchants, a young man by the name of Mamadu Séfé Dokoté—Mamadu the Taciturn—challenged the annual ritual. The chosen maiden that year was named Sira; she was Mamadu's fiancée and the most beautiful girl in Wagadu, even in all of Ghana. When Sira learned of Mamadu's objection to her selection as Biida's maiden, she was deeply embarrassed and hurt. She did not want people to think that she was less beautiful or less

dignified than the other young women, or that she was less deserving of being Biida's choice, or that she was afraid of dying. What a dishonor it would be for her if another girl were chosen in her place! And what honor and esteem it would bring her if she could appease Biida's hunger for a maiden, and be the cause of his generosity and love toward the whole empire!

But Mamadu, whose name indicates that he had converted to Islam, was blinded by love and his new religion. He refused to listen to Sira. He sharpened his saber, mounted his horse, and rode to the well of wealth, where he hid himself in the bush until the ritual that brought Sira to the mouth of the well had ended. After everyone had dispersed and left Sira to her fate, Mamadu came out of the bush. Sira was enveloped from head to toe in a white wedding gown, and she did not see Mamadu coming. How could she? This was a sacred place, and no human was supposed to be present when Biida emerged from the well of wealth. Whatever noise she heard, she would have attributed to Biida himself.

Mamadu waited by the well, his saber ready for Biida. From morning till evening, Sira and Mamadu waited in silence. Biida came out at midnight. He emitted a deafening sound, warning the people of Wagadu to stay in their homes and lock their doors. The sound was also a sign of his acceptance of the sacrifice. But Mamadu, too, had taken up his position. As soon as Biida's head emerged, Mamadu slashed at it with his saber and sent it flying off to the north of the empire. To Mamadu's surprise, another head emerged. He chopped that one off, too, this time sending it toward the south. Another followed, which was sent toward the east. Another was flung toward the west. Thus, Mamadu repeated the saber movement four times. Each time a head flew off, it put a curse on Ghana. And ever since that night, gold, silver, salt, rain—all vanished from Ghana. The empire was destroyed, and the people became the slaves of the Moors. Those Soninkes who escaped slavery scattered in search of gold, silver, salt, water, and other forms of wealth. Even today, the Soninke are known for traveling long distances in search of wealth. Perhaps it was the curse of Biida, the snake god, that took my parents to Guinea in the first place and drove them out, too.

After the Muslims came Christian missionaries and colonial expeditions. They raided entire towns and villages, burned masks and statues, and shackled men and women for the Atlantic slave trade. The story has become known through its tellings and retellings by historians, writers, and artists. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is an important account of the way in which Christian missionaries, accompanied by colonial armies, destroyed African shrines and burned the masks and statues which served as symbols of the gods. By telling the story of the fictional lgbo village of Umuofia, Achebe shows how easily people abandoned their resistance to colonization once their gods and customs had been desacralized and dismissed. Like the Muslims in Wagadu, the white missionaries knew that the best way to conquer Africans was to conquer their gods, and that the best way to possess them was to possess their masks and statues. As one village after another fell in Africa, the missionaries burned some of the masks and saved other as trophies to be placed in museums in Europe.

The victory of the Muslims and the Christian missionaries over our gods left the gods angry with us. We had exposed them to foreign judgment and blasphemy. We had been unable to protect them against doubt coming from outside. We had let the Muslims and Christians kill our totems like Biida, and burn and kidnap the masks and statues containing the spirits of the gods. Now we are left with a religious void that neither Islam nor Christianity can fill.

The Fang Byeri Statue as Primitive Art

But the masks, statues, and oral traditions refused to die. They resurfaced in Marseilles, Paris, Berlin, Brussels, and London with former colonial administrators, anthropological expeditions, and artists—allheirs to and beneficiaries of the same enlightenment that had fired its cannons against innocent African cultures. The masks and statues served as raw material for the refined primitivist art of Picasso, Derain, Vlaminck, Lhote, and Magnelli. These modernists treated the masks and statues as a child does its mother's breast milk. They used them not only as a source of nourishment and inspiration, but also as protection against the anxieties of modernity and its grand narratives. The masks and statues found new altars in the homes of these artists, as well as in museums, next to the paintings and sculptures of the same artists.

But as the masks and statues became detribalized and ceased to be the property of a clan or a village, they began to owe their symbolic value to the European artists with whom they were associated. As if by proxy, they carried the signatures of the modernist artists, and therefore were modernist works of art themselves.

In retrospect, I understand Sidimé Laye's reluctance to sign his carvings, for no contemporary African artist is in a position to compete with the primitive and anonymous African art which is associated with the likes of Vlaminck, Derain, and Picasso. Here is another way in which masks and statues have taken their revenge on Africans: they have blocked the recognition of contemporary African artists in the West, and have deprived artists like Sidimé Laye of the ability to sign their artwork. Laye himself said that the masks and statues represent Africa better than African intellectuals and artists. The West likes the masks and statues because intermediaries like Derain and Picasso— who are Westerners themselves, and endowed with a symbolic power to define art—have declared them to be *objets d'art.* Ironically, the more Africans themselves continue to take Picasso as a witness to the aesthetic quality of the masks and statues, the more they help render invisible the contemporary artists who take modern Africa as their aesthetic point-of-reference. Thus, as long as the West holds a monopoly on defining African art, Sidimé Laye's interest lies in carving masks and statues from which he withholds his signature.

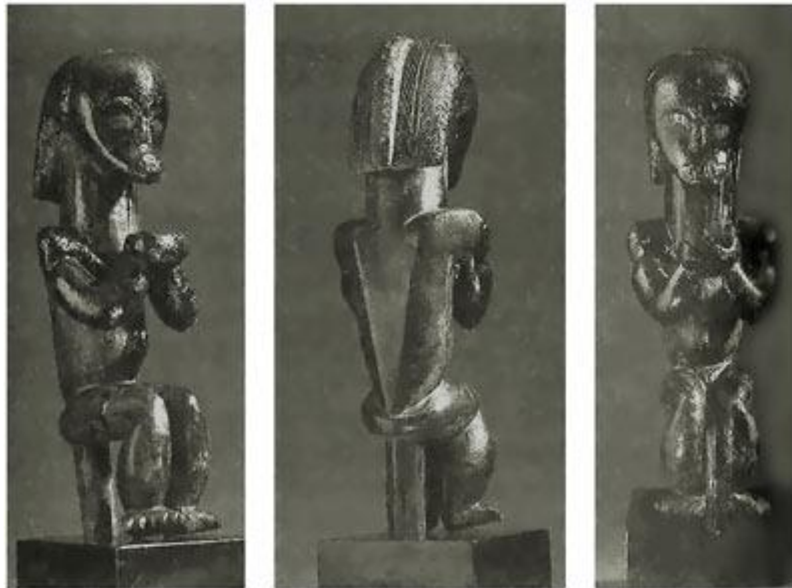
The masks and statues serve another strong clientele in the West which has nothing but contempt for African artists and their signatures. This clientele is constituted by powerful art dealers, collectors, merchants, and museums. Like artists in the West, they became interested in African masks and statues in the early twentieth century. Some of the first collectors, such as Pierre Guerre from Marseilles and Jean-Pierre Jernander from Belgium, came from families with colonial experience in Africa. Jernander, for example, used his former colonial contacts in the Belgian Congo to smuggle out masks and statues, which were sold to museums and collectors in North America (de Roux, 1996). Charles Ratton, an important French collector and dealer, collaborated with the Nazis during World War II. His tainted reputation forced the Louvre to decline important gifts—masks and statues that he wanted to donate to the museum in 1986. The best part of Ratton's collection can be found today in a new museum of African art called the Musée Dapper, in Paris.

Like Western artists, dealers and collectors in the West usurp the authorship of African masks and statues. They themselves have become the most important sources of valorization for African objects. They set the terms of authentication and aesthetic judgment. Thus, when African masks and statues are auctioned at Christie's and Sotheby's in New York, or at Drouot-Montaigne and Drouot-Richelieu in Paris, it has become the convention to list their previous European owners and the museums that have exhibited them in the West. The fact that a mask or statue once formed part of the collection of a Charles Ratton, a Van Bussel, or a Pierre Guerre is a stronger confirmation of authenticity than the statement of any African clan member.

In 1996, a Fang statue was auctioned for more than a million dollars at Drouot-Montaigne, an event that inspired *Le Monde* to hail Paris the new European capital of primitive art (de Roux, 1996). The originality of the statue was confirmed not by the signature of the Fang artist but by the fact that it had once belonged to a Doctor Bergier (who had acquired it from a sailor in 1846) and had then joined the collection of Pierre Guerre. The statue's provenance was deemed all the more distinguished as it had been displayed in numerous Western exhibitions, including the *Exposition Internationale des arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie* (Palais Miramar, Cannes, 1957), *Arts Africains* (Musée Caution, Marseilles, 1970), and *Art Fang* (Musée Dapper, Paris, 1991). It was also a feather in its cap to have been the subject of analyses and appreciations by such Western Africanists as Michel Leiris, Louis Perrois, and Raoul Lehuard. Fang masks and statues in general are famous in the West for having been in the collections of Leo Frobenius, Jacob Epstein, Pablo Picasso, Raoul Guillaume, and Charles Ratton.

The statue that was auctioned in Paris is a Fang reliquary figure, about forty centimeters tall and made of hardwood. It is naked and brown, with the face, parts of the neck, the anus, and the navel painted with a black patina that causes it to gleam and sweat like a human being. The face is carved in the shape of a heart beneath a large round forehead. The eyebrows join the line that forms the nose and divides the left side of the face front the right. The eyelids are closed and painted over, connoting blindness caused by old age. The statue must have been an ancestor figure; its shiny forehead is bare, like a skull. Similar family reliquary statues have wide-open eyes which seem to be gazing intensely at someone or something. Some even have round metal plates, beads, or nails in the eye sockets to make their gaze more fearsome. But in spite of its closed eyes, this statue seems to return the viewer's gaze and creates an aura of omniscience.

In contrast to the eyes and the nose, over which hang the rounded forehead and long eyebrows. the mouth protrudes, occupying most of the chin and suggesting a resemblance to an oval-faced Neanderthal man. The statue is also notable because of the remarkable coiffure neatly arranged at the back of the head in symmetrical patterns, like palm fronds. Indeed, the hairdo of this Byeri statue, like that of many statues from Gabon, Angola, and the Congo, is so perfect that it forms an entity separate from the face. Compared to the face, which is geometric in its primitive simplicity, the coiffure exhibits a complexity of design that calls attention to its aesthetic autonomy. The face is as primitive—connotative of religion and vital forces front the ancestors—as the hairdo is beautiful and self-referential.



Three views of the Fang statue that was sold in Paris in June 1996 (Phto courtesy of Gérard Bonnet, Marseilles, France.)

The neck not only supports the head but forms a smooth cylinder joining the face, which terminates in a pointed mouth with chiseled teeth, and the hairdo, which seems to be attached to the spine. The long, powerful neck also links the head to the square shoulders and the rest of the body, setting up a rhythmic movement between the face and the hands, which hold a bowl underneath the chin. Thus, the neck delineates the spatial configuration of this sculpture by establishing a relation between the shoulders, which form right-angled lines below, and the face and hairdo, which form a triangle above.

The statue rhythmically marks space and time in other ways as well. The lowered face with its closed eyes, the hands holding up the bowl between shoulders and chin, and the bent knees indicate three movements of the body that mark contrasting rhythms: downward, upward, and downward. The distended navel protruding like a small erection is typical of Fang statues, in which the navel often accentuates the sexual ambiguity of the female breast and the male genitals.

Fang statues are also known for their oversized buttocks, which form a circle around the waist and enhance the roundness of the thighs. What is distinctive about this statue is the fine taste with which the artist carved every part of the body. In most other Fang figures, the wide-open eyes, the interlocking sharp teeth, the three large cornrows forming the hairdo, and the exaggeratedly muscular arms, buttocks, and legs serve to reinforce the statue's role as a reliquary object and to characterize it as an ethnological artifact. But here, these canonical parts are tamed by the artist's hand and subjected to an aesthetic law that elevates the statue beyond ritual and ethnology.

To be in the presence of this statue—which gleams, and seems aware like a human being—is more than a religious experience or a discovery of tribal culture. The viewer is awed by the sense of artistic proportion and interplay between the different parts of the body. As one can see from the back, the shoulder blades extend all the way down to the waist, where they meet in a perfect V. This statue is like an architectural work that creates rhythmic relations

among its various parts: in some places it harmonizes the movements, and in others it contrasts them. For example, there is a symmetrical relationship linking the circular waist, the triangular back with its broad shoulders, and the strong cylindrical neck which supports the beautiful coiffure. The symmetry and harmony denote a perfectly shaped and therefore superior body.

The Fang statue is thus an interlocutor with modernist art—that is, art from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which was preoccupied with geometric shapes and physical power. The statue also exhibits a classic modernist trait: it establishes contrasts among these geometric shapes in order to define space. The oval face, with its finely delineated features, is admirable; whereas the plain, cylindrical neck is aesthetically unremarkable, except for the fact that it helps to reveal the stable spatial relationship between the head and shoulders. One can understand why modernists like Picasso and Braque placed African art in their ateliers, not only as inspiration but as models.

My concern with the maker's signature and with the aesthetic qualities of African art obliges me here to cite the artistic movement called modernist primitivism as a corroborating reference: its proponents were among the first admirers of African masks and statues. But whereas I stress aesthetics and authorship, critics of modernism stress the important role that African art played in such avant-garde movements as Expressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, and Surrealism.

According to Meyer Schapiro, modernist primitivism was responsive to African masks and statues because they were believed to be "charged with the new valuations of the instinctive, the natural, the mythical as the essentially human ... The very fact that they were arts of primitive peoples without a recorded history now made them all the more attractive. They acquired the special prestige of the timeless and indistinctive, on the level of spontaneous animal activity, self-contained, unreflective, private, without dates and signatures, without origins or consequences except in the emotions" (Schapiro, 1978: 200-201).

Rosalind Krauss, in contrast, sees in the image of the primitive a "ritual of transgression," and therefore a theory of modern art. Building on Georges Bataille's notion of alteration, Krauss claims that primitive art illustrates the contradictions embedded in language—the transgression of the meanings which human reason wants to insist are unequivocal, univocal, but which the words themselves betray as irresolvably diffuse. According to Krauss, and to many historians of modernity, this conception of the primitive as a theory of our modern condition became a powerful shaping tool, a way of rethinking all of the human sciences. And it is not just a historical phenomenon, since it appears in the work of such writers as Foucault, Lacan, and Derrida and their followers (Krauss, 1984).

From these perspectives on modernist primitivism, it is clear that African art, and Africans themselves, are interesting to the West only if they can supply a theory of how the West sees itself – in other words, if they can he timelessly primitive and thereby a compelling exception to the Western teleological narrative. Two widely reviewed exhibitions held in New York City—the show entitled "Primitivism" organized by the Museum of Modern Art in 1984, and the one entitled "African Art" organized by the Guggenheim Museum in 1996—both took this ahistorical approach to African art. They saw the displayed objects as important only insofar as they bore a resemblance to the modernist art of the late nineteenth and early

twentieth centuries, or exerted an influence on it, or made an impression on Western artists. In the words of William Rubin, primitive art was valued because it had "an expressive force deemed missing from the final phases of Western realism, which late nineteenth-century vanguard artists considered over-attenuated and bloodless" (Rubin, 1984: 2).

In each of these considerations of primitivist modernism, the African artist remains invisible. All the praise goes to Western artists for discovering in primitivist modernism a way out of what José Ortega y Gasset called the "dehumanizing" effect of industrialization on the arts. While the aesthetics of African statues and masks supposedly helped modernist artists to counter the alienation of the individual in industrial modernism, the role of African artists in shaping the masks and statues is passed over in silence, and the aesthetic intentions of these artists are devalued in favor of the ritualistic function of the objects. What is emphasized in both primitivist modernism and the statues and masks is their ability to redeem the individual within the community—in other words, to make art into ritual, and ritual into art. Both make present at the same time the beautiful and the ugly, the exotic and the ordinary, the traditional and the innovative. Rubin notes that the Dan people of Côte d'Ivoire "not only explicitly appreciated diversity [in their masks] but recognized the value of a certain originality" (3).

But although we know plenty about why modernists like Picasso, Nolde, and Kandinsky favored inventiveness and multiformity in their art, we are less inclined to accord an artistic temperament to African sculptors. It is in this sense that Rubin arrogantly dismisses the majority of the African pieces in Picasso's collection for their "poor-quality carving": they are "unauthentic 'tourist' works" that were "made by tribal artists for sale rather than for ritual purposes" (14). The fact that Picasso himself turned out numerous works *en série* specifically for the market is, in contrast, of little consequence to their aesthetic evaluation. Clearly for Rubin, as for many other critics, production for the market indicates the separation of African artists from their works, so that these works can better serve the artists and art world of Europe.

The primitivist modernists, by valorizing African statues and masks as inspirers of their movement, also froze them in time. Simultaneously, they condemned in the work of African artists the very inventiveness and diversity that constituted its originality. Rubin both praises and damns African art when he finds modernist style in the variety of Dan masks, and at the same time snubs African carvers for feeding the tourist market. Most of the world's artists work to satisfy a certain demand. It seems to me that the African artist, too, achieves innovation through a response to market demands, the most important of which today happens to be tourism. Unlike Picasso, who collected "unauthentic" African art made for tourists, Rubin reveals his disregard for innovation on the part of African artists by insisting on ritual authenticity as the only criterion for judging their work.

Marcel Griaule, in an important article entitled "Gunshot," has criticized this desire for authenticity in African art, noting "the white's absurdity in declaring a Baule drum impure under the pretext that it's decorated with a man bearing a rifle." (Griaule, 1992: 41). Since the rifle is considered European, its presence in African art spoils its authenticity. For Griaule, it is the height of absurdity "when the other party refuses the African the right to 'make art' with a European motif, claiming first that it is European—a somewhat amusingly self-castrating remark—and, second, that it looks 'modern'" (41). When European artists borrow from

Africa, this does not detract from the originality of their work, whereas African artists cannot borrow from Europe without being considered inauthentic. In other words, in Western artists can depict Africa exotically, why can't Africans represent Europe exotically—that is, with rifles?

The fact remains that, as absurd as Rubin's depiction of authentic African art may seem, it is the standard by which African art continues to be judged. African artists like Sidimé Laye must remain anonymous in order to give to their works a chance in the "primitive" marketplace. Modern painters, sculptors, and even some filmmakers and musicians from Africa and its diaspora must completely accept the stereotype of themselves as "primitive" to stand a chance of being considered artists.

This fact is often obscured by the Negritude movement's characterization of African art as the bearer of vital force. Léopold Senghor, in his fatuous essay "L'esprit de la civilisation ou les lois de la culture négro-africaine" ("The Spirit of Civilization or the Laws of Negro-African Culture"), is more interested in the symbolic interpretation of the images represented by African masks and statues. He is trapped in an ethnological reading of African art which considers only its functional role in society. For Senghor, rhythm and movement in African art can be understood only in terms of ritual—that is, the collective participation of musicians, dancers, elders, and ancestors in masquerade. In such a context, it is inconceivable for the masks and statues to have an autonomous identity as works of art. Senghor fails to note that the works' color and symmetry of design can reveal the artists' preoccupation with space and tulle.

The Fang statue discussed above is a classic modern sculpture with more textual similarities to Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* or Joyce's *Ulysses* than to ethnological texts. Contrary to the Negritude view that African art is complete only in performance, this statue has an autonomy that is challenged only by the assertiveness of some of its constitutive parts. One of the characteristics of the modern text is its tendency to fragment—the ability of its components to form narrative entities separate from the whole. This is obvious not only in modern painting and sculpture, where different parts of a work may compete for the observer's attention and analysis, but also in literary texts like *Ulysses,* in which different characters play with time and space to make themselves the center of localizations that digress from the main narrative.

From the shoulders up, the Fang statue looks like the bust of an Egyptian pharaoh with a dynastic hairstyle. A narrative enigma is also evident when the statue is considered as a whole, with its downcast eyes, hands holding up a bowl underneath the chin, and bent knees. What action is being denoted here? The downcast eyes suggest that this reliquary figure is getting ready to drink front the howl. The bent knees participate in this narrative by connoting the statue's submission to the contents of the bowl: water, milk, or some potion with a supernatural power. The bowl, in this sense, becomes the most powerful locus of interpretation in the sculpture, forcing the whole body to obey it and creating unfulfilled curiosity on the part of the spectator as to its contents and significance.

It is also possible to read the Fang statue's posture as a gesture of offering: the bowl and its contents are being proffered to someone or something outside the field occupied by the sculpture. From this perspective, the downcast eyes and bent knees signify the reliquary

figure's submission to a separate entity that is clearly in a position of power—a god, a king, an audience, or the artist. One of the qualities of the Fang statue is its ability to create by this gesture an off-field that is as pregnant with meaning as what is represented in its own field. In the absence of a signature by a Fang artist, the position off-field is represented by Western artists like Picasso and Braque, who appropriate for themselves the ideal spectator-position vis-à-vis African art.

By inscribing in the design of the statue an off-field audience, or a relation between the statue and an unseen presence, the sculptor anticipated an aesthetic judgment of the object by the beholder. It is true that most Fang reliquary figures seem to act as if they are in communication with an unseen presence. While many Fang statues, like the one under scrutiny here, seem to be holding out a bowl to this presence, others are proffering a horn in lieu of the howl or brandishing a knife in the right hand as if ready to attack. A few keep their arms down by their side. The intensity of the energy in all of them seems to partake of both submission and resistance. The ones with wide-open eyes and grinding teeth give the impression that they would rather attack the force giving the order than execute its dictates. The ones with closed eyes and the bowl or horn in their hands, like this one, register a "negative" energy that defines the quality of their resistance to submission. Their tense faces and muscles embody contradictory attitudes of surrender and resistance, gentleness and revolt.

Among colonial chroniclers, the Fang tribes had a reputation for cannibalism. The aesthetic features of Fang reliquary figures—their fixed gaze, their sharp teeth, their fists clenching rusted knives, their bulging bare foreheads symbolizing the skulls of the ancestors—were used to support the tribes' cannibalistic rituals. But, as I have shown, the resistance that is implied in the statues' gestures, and their seeming gentleness even when they are holding a knife, contradict the ethnological discourse on the Fang as warmongers and cannibals. This is not to deny that the Fang were cannibals, or to say that they did not like war; for as Ouologuem says, who among us can declare that his or her teeth are not red with "tomatoes"? Who among us, whether European or African, can sincerely say that he or she hates war? The point is that anthropological discourse has fixed the interpretation of Fang statues, masks, and oral traditions, as it has fixed the meaning of life and art in other African societies.

It becomes necessary, therefore, to remove African reliquary figures from their ritual space and function in order to reveal the marks of the hands of the artists who created them. The "negative" energy that I called the quality of resistance in the Fang statues constitutes the expression of the carver's subversion of their original ritual function. By being beautiful and discreet, in contrast to other Fang reliquary figures with their exaggerated organs, a statue such as the one examined here enables the artistic genius of the carver to interfere with the performance of the ritual. It calls attention to itself and mirrors the presence of the artist off-field, instead of participating submissively in the ritual, be it ancestor worship, war, or cannibalism.

The modern African elite, reacting to the confinement of reliquary figures in Western museums, invokes the role of the statues and masks in their original cultist setting, and claims that without this setting they lose their aesthetic value. While this argument decries the pillage and rape of African traditions by the West, it precludes any serious discussion of

the embedded signatures of individual carvers on the reliquary figures, or any consideration of the real nature of the indebtedness of modernist artists such as Picasso to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century African carvers. As we have noted, the presence of these reliquary figures in the studios of European artists indicated more than just artistic influence, or an infusion of the vital force of African religious objects into Western art. The geometric lines and abstract renderings of Fang, Dan, and Dogon statues and masks formed the basis of a range of modern artistic revolutions.

In addition to manifesting interethnic relations and influences, African carvers, in their encounters with European slave traders and colonial expeditions, must have, of necessity, sought to surpass the aesthetics of local rituals and their binding conventions. It goes without saying that African carvings bear the imprint of myriad changes that have taken place in Africa over the centuries, from the beginning of the slave trade to the present. Jean Rouch's film documentary *Les maîtres fous* (1955) presents obvious examples: reliquary figures on an altar and actors in a ritual performance are intended to represent colonial administrators; elsewhere, reliquary figures are holding rifles or riding bicycles, or are painted white with long hair to represent white people. What is important here is that these works indicate the readiness of African carvers earlier in the twentieth century, as now, to reflect social changes in their art and to break away front tradition. Western anthropological discourse and the apologists of colonialism ignore the African artist's openness to change when they emphasize only tribal autonomy and authenticity. When African elites insist that African art is not art because it has been taken out of its original context, mightn't they be internationalizing the stereotype of themselves as people who view art as functional? It seems to me that a concept of art criticism which stresses the artistic changes in the history of Fang, Dan and Dogon statues and masks is more important than one that seeks an understanding of the original rituals for which they were created. By following the artistic changes, we learn more about the artists and the societies in which they lived.

The removal of the work of art from its original ritual space raises a "Benjaminian" question that, I believe, is partially answered by the Fang statue discussed above. In his well-known essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin argues that a work of art finds its expression in the service of ritual, whether religious or magical. For Benjamin, the artistic object loses its aura when it is divorced from ritual practice. Even though Benjamin's argument refers to the mechanical reproduction of images—as exists in the relation between original prints and their photocopies, between theater and film, and between other art objects and the industrial means of (re)producing them—it is relevant to the issues that concern us here. Benjamin's nostalgic view of art, similar to the view of the hero and heroic acts in Romantic literature, relies too heavily on tradition and its axes of originality and authenticity, to the detriment of change and innovation. Like Benjamin, collectors and dealers of African art, and even some African artists, argue that authenticity and originality areexpressions of artistic aura, and inveigh against the copying of statues and masks, which diminishes their aura.

What African artworks achieve in this respect is the aura of artifice. Their carvers, like Sidimé Laye, allowed their hands to be possessed not only by tradition but also by the love of artifice. They can thus be said to have subverted the idea of an unchanging Africa and the West's monopoly on the universal tenets of modernity. By following the changing patterns of African art, we discover a new aesthetic and an artistic aura proper to its history. We are

reminded of the artists that tradition attempted to render invisible: we uncover the role of the individual talent in reshaping tradition. Finally, we discover artists like Sidimé Laye and their signatures.

There is some urgency in this matter. As African artists move away from ritual practice and accumulate artifice around the value of the ritual work, they must deal with profound tensions. The energy brooding behind the closed eyes and raised arms of the Fang statue is an expression of two forces coming into conflict.

It is in this sense that Benjamin's claim for the superiority of the original over the copy reveals its Platonic limitations. Neither the quantity of copies reproduced nor the identity of the object in its ritual context suffices as a basis for a concept of aesthetic criticism. In order for the original and the ritual to maintain their integrity, every copy made of the original would have to be canonically ugly—that is, undistinctive. The minute the artist secretly enhances the copy, he or she risks subverting the original. Tradition thus attempts to prevent material and historical change by rendering the artist anonymous and by denying a particular identity to the copy.

The African artist is particularly vulnerable to the tyranny of ritual in tradition. Whereas in the West the mechanical reproduction of the work of art threatens the aura of the individual artist and the symbolic capital of the work, in Africa the reproduction of masks and statues valorizes the carvers by focusing attention on the artistic signature. It is clear not only that artistic signatures operate to the detriment of the authenticity of traditional ritual, and of the Western collectors who have invested so much in the objects attached to this ritual, but that they are also the precondition for the emergence of African modernity and individual genius in tradition.

Chéri Samba: The Stereotype Strikes Back

In the summer of 1997, I had the opportunity to see an exhibition of Chéri Samba's works at the Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie in Paris. Ever since the show entitled "Magiciens de la terre" ("Magicians of the Earth") had been held in Paris in 1989, Chéri Samba—a painter from Kinshasa—had continued to surprise Westerners and to tease their imagination with his "naive" paintings. The timing of the recent show could not have been better for him, his clients, the art dealers, and the Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie. One of my filmmaker friends said to me enviously that Samba had become the new "chouchou de la ville" ("darling of the city"). Paris brags about being the capital of African art, ahead of London, Tokyo, and New York, and about its role as arbiter of taste for the rest of the world. The Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie had simultaneously mounted an immense display of traditional arts front Nigeria. African art was also flourishing on the Left Bank, with a show of Ouatara's work at the Galerie Boulakia on the rue Bonaparte, an exhibition of masks and photography entitled "Les Dogons" on the rue des Beaux-Arts, and many artifacts for sale in the antique shops on the rue de la Seine. Never mind the fact that the French have shut the door on African immigration, or that the image of undesirable Africans disembarking at French airports is one of the themes of Chéri Samba's narrative paintings. Chéri Samba emerged as a street artist in Kinshasa in the late 1970s, painting market scenes, prostitutes, and anecdotes about power and corruption. In

1982 Ngangura Mweze made a short film, *Kin Kiesé (Kinshasa the Beautiful),* in which he used Chéri Samba and his works to reveal the contradictory colors of the city. The music of Papa Wemba, another icon of popular culture in Kinshasa, was also used in the film.

In fact, market artists like Chéri Samba abound in such cities as Dakar, Lagos, and Kinshasa. Basing their art on the *faits divers* ofmodernity and its humorous impact on life in Africa, they combine aform of narrative prose with images that are accessible to a wide audience. Chéri Samba's paintings incorporate words from Lingala and from colloquial French. Like signs in advertising, they combine and multiply meanings through allusions and puns. For example, a popular term like *conjoncture* means at the same time economic crisis, belt tightening, and being resourceful. The audience for these paintings consists of the African elite and of tourists and anthropologists in search of the *mot jute* or the right image to describe Africa. It is also important to distinguish popular market artists who are influenced by the narrative techniques of comic books, movie posters, and cartoons from university-trained artists who want to make it in the modernist and post modernist canons.

Chéri Samba's art, particularly the paintings included in the 1997 exhibition, contain the secret of how he made it to the top as the most popular African artist. To begin with, for the Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie, African art had previously consisted only of primitive masks, statues, and traditional batik. Chéri Samba was the first "modern" African artist to have an entire room of the museum devoted to his art. Even so, one had to go to the second floor and traverse an arresting and stunning exhibition of Nigerian masks and statues before reaching the Chéri Samba room. The 276 pieces in that Nigerian show included some of the most beautiful Igbo masks I have ever seen, as well as Benin, Yoruba, and Ogoni statues and masks. The exhibition's size and quality alone made one realize why some people felt that the Guggenheim's 1996 Africa show had been inadequate.

I could not help taking with me impressions of the primitive Nigerian art into the Chéri Samba room. It had always seemed to me that modern African art contained no equivalent of the beautiful, terrifying, abstract symbolism of the tribal Nigerian art; modern artists merely depicted for the West what they thought was within the confines of Western *bienséance* and verisimilitude. But upon entering the Chéri Samba room, I was pleased to find that his art was concerned with the same questions of power, fear, morality, and overt sexuality that were represented in the tribal Nigerian art. The Chéri Samba room was loud and hot with reds and yellows, which contrasted with life-giving greens, sea blues, and flowery violets. I found myself transported to Africa through these strong colors and the primacy of their rich and exotic associations. Human beings were rendered in such a dark chocolate hue that they seemed to melt under the light. And I said to myself: This guy is the stereotype who strikes back. Chéri Samba is the Amos Tutuola of African art. Ever since Tutuola wrote *The Palm-Wine Drinkard,* his fantastic tale of the underworld, no other African artist has so strongly and cunningly embraced the African stereotype as Chéri Samba.

It is highly fitting that Chéri Samba's art be exhibited side by side with traditional African masks and statues. One clue to Chéri Samba's success is his reappropriation and affirmation of the stereotype of Africa in the modern imagination. Chéri Samba works within such tribal concepts as witchcraft, ancestor worship, and magic. In *L'espoir fait vivre (Hope Allows for Life;* 1989), a painting about the story of his success, he explains that he made it to the top without resorting to witchcraft, through hard work, patience, and the blessing of the ances-

tors. *Autoportrait (Self-Portrait)* is similarly about creativity. Chéri Samba tells his competitors and those artists who accuse hint of casting a spell on them that his success is due not to incantations or to witchcraft, but to living simply and working hard. But of course Chéri Samba is not a simple artist. He raises the question of witchcraft in his paintings not only because power in contemporary Zaire is inextricably linked to it, but also because witchcraft fits in the West's way of knowing Africa. This is, in my opinion, why Chéri Samba's work exerts both local and international appeal. "I am not a witch doctor," he says, yet in his paintings he depicts himself bigger than life, and bragging about his power. He appears stereotypical and literal to Western eyes, yet every one of his paintings is reflexive and narrated from a point of view which is often arrogant. In *Hommage aux anciens créateurs (Hommage to last Creators:* 1995), he paints a large portrait of himself behind tribal carvings on a table. The portrait seems to be repossessing the masks and statues, which are now locked up in a Swiss museum in Zurich. Chéri Samba criticizes the museum for isolating the objects, which still have their supernatural powers, from people such as himself who are the reincarnation of the tribal sculptors.

Chéri Samba's strategy also involves artists' reappropriation of their own works. *L'agriculteur sans cerveau (The Brainless Planter;* 1990) depicts a banana planter sitting on a hoe with his hands and feet tied together. He is framed by two banana trees laden with ripe fruit, and holds a half-peeled banana which he is unable to eat. Behind him is the man with whom he signed acontract; the man is walking away, eating the planter's bananas. Chéri Samba tells the disgruntled planter to read the contract carefully and not to blame the man. Chéri Samba takes up this metaphor of exploitation in several of his paintings. In *Oreilles au ventre (Ears on the Belly;* 1991), it is the artist who is famished, while the dealer has a big stomach with ears. In *Pourquoi ai-je signé un contrat? (Why Did I Sign a Contract?* 1990), Chéri Samba, in an elegant blue suit, sits on a red couch by a cliff, with a padlock around his knees and a rope around his neck, which is being pulled on either side by critics, artists, curators, collectors, and dealers. Here, the artist declares himself a winner because the contract seemed a necessary step in his career. Thus, the rope and the padlock, as well as the blue suit and red couch, are part of his style rather than constraints that alienate him from his work.

Finally, in *Une peinture à défendre (A Painting To Be Defended;* 1993)—Chéri Samba's masterpiece, in my opinion—the artist raises the ante in the relations between politics and the arts, by using a painting as a metaphor for Africa, which he must defend. The composition bears witness to Chéri Samba's reflexive approach to art, which has won him the esteem of both local and international audiences. Space and movement are delineated by an insertion of frames within frames, repetition of actions, contrasts in colors and gestures. Chéri Samba himself is positioned in the middle, facing the spectator, with a brush in one hand and a can of paint in the other. Around his waist is a red rope which is being pulled on the left by two hands; around his leg is a green rope which is being pulled on the right by two more hands. Two men, one wearing a violet jacket and the other a green one, appear in the foreground. The man with the violet jacket is grabbing the artist by the waist, and the one in the green jacket grasps him by the leg. They all say, "I must defend this painting." In the background is a traditional popular painting, which the artist is trying to protect from the assailants. The painting shows a woman with a baby tied on her back; she is braiding another woman's hair. They are surrounded by houses, a child bathing in a tub, and a

wagon. This tableau-within-atableau bears the caption: "Ekomi popular painting, a few years later." The background of this busy, well-lit scene shows a still night with trees, overshadowed by a dark sky.

Clearly, Chéri Samba is first of all commenting on the recent demand for his own art, which only a few years ago was just another type of market art in Kinshasa. Now, white critics and dealers are fighting for control of it. They all claim ownership, and force the artist to stand up and defend it with his life. But to me, the most important thing in this image is the way it articulates the artist's vision of his painting, which coincides with his vision of Africa. In other words, Chéri Samba takes his painting for Africa, and proposes a militant action through art to reappropriate it. The same reflexiveness runs through all of Chéri Samba's works, whether they address the planter's relation to his produce, the artist and his art, or Africans and Africa. In the triptych *Grand tort de la colonisation et grosse erreur de l'Afrique indépendante (The Great Wrong of Colonization and the Grave* Error *of Independent Africa;* 1994), Chéri Samba represents precolonial Africa as Edenic, and the colonizers as greedy and evil men who divided up the continent among themselves, with no regard for kinship or tribal unity. The last panel of the triptych shows the error of "independent Africans," who fail to recognize that nation-states are an inheritance from the former colonizers, and that they continue to divide ethnic groups and create a false sense of alliance among people. The Africa which Chéri Samba defends in this triptych is the same as that in the "Ekomi popular painting" described above. It is an Africa beyond nation-states, yet also a stereotypical and romantic Africa without boundaries, and without history. As always, Chéri Samba has the last laugh: he has signed a contract, and everyone worries about him. But by the time we find him, he is elsewhere.

Sidime Laye's Song of Resistance

The fear of masks and statues that Sidimé Laye's father felt constitutes a desire to repress them and the paganistic drive they represent. In his dream, Laye's father was able to see clearly the danger that the return of masks in the public sphere could pose to the Muslim order. The Christian areas in Africa are still afraid of the eruption of the masks' authority in daily life. After all, religious conflict in Africa is not between Islam and Christianity, but between these faiths and the masks that rule the African's unconscious. Thus, carving masks can bring nothing but trouble to Sidimé Laye and all those like him who submit to their power, because the very presence of masks in the modern world is an indication of the failure of Islam and Christianity to conquer pagan Africa.

Sidimé Laye's insistence on carving masks, and his claim that he is possessed by them as he works, manifest the resistance of such pagan forms to repressive orders put in place not only by monotheistic religions but also by monolithic dictatorial regimes.

Sidimé Laye has continued to carve masks in spite of the warning in his father's dream, his uncle's death in the dungeons of Camp Boiro, and his own perils during his years in exile. Could it be that he was resisting Sékou Touré's oppressive regime through his prolific creation of masks and statues? How could the masks' presence have constituted a threat to Sékou Touré's revolution?

Looking back now, I believe that the revolution dealt too harshly with masks, statues, and oral traditions. They should have been placed in national museums instead of being banned. The revolution should have injected itself into the masked rituals and celebrated them as newer expressions of national identity—that is, it should have brought the rituals to the center of society for everyone to participate in, instead of marginalizing them as backward secret societies. This form of valorization not only would have elevated rituals to the status of national ceremonies, but also would have changed their backward orientation into a forward and more inclusive one. Most traditions change by opening up to the outside world and by looking toward the future. The masks, statues, and oral traditions, treated as they were, prevented the revolution from submitting conservative social and religious forms to openness and change.

Sidimé Laye left school and carved masks and statues throughout the revolution, strengthening the resistance of the margins against the center. In this sense, his actions resembled those of many educated Africans, who gave up on the revolution because it lacked the ingredients of traditional structures of feeling. It became commonplace to point to the repression of masks, statues, and tribal ways as evidence of the revolution's un-African and inauthentic modes of thought. Ways of reclaiming tradition became symbols of resistance to Sékou Touré's attempt to homogenize society. For example, some people in the middle class began to wear hunter-style mud-cloth outfits in public, rather than the short white-percale *doloki* that Sékou Touré popularized at the beginning of the revolution. Masks, carved elephant tusks, and statues, previously intended solely for foreign export, made their appearance in the living rooms of the African middle class. The postcolonial era also saw the revalorization of witchcraft, magic, and amulets as traditional means to protect one from the revolution or endear one to Sékou Touré. I find it difficult to imagine Sidimé Laye as a sorcerer or magician whose art numbed the effect of the revolution on people.

The middle class's resistance to the revolution, it seems to me, is much like its reluctance to go along with the new democratic wind in Africa today. The last time I was in West Africa, in January 1997, I had an interesting conversation about African democracies with a Senegalese colleague, whom I'll call Clarence Delgado. I lamented the poor judgment of General Sani Abacha's regime in hanging the writer-activist Ken Saro Wiwa, and expected Delgado to agree with me. Instead, he admonished me for looking at everything through American ethnocentric lenses. People in America, he said, expected the whole world to see life their way, to accept their definition of democracy, human rights, and culture. But Africans had their own ways of doing things, and they had traditions and cultures older than America's to support them in their behavior. Delgado pointed to the empires of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai, which had built world-class civilizations long before America had been born. Who were Americans to think they could teach the world about democracy and human rights? In Delgado's opinion, the main thing wrong with the current democratic movement in Africa was that it was being imposed from outside. Democracy was not an African concept; too much freedom in Africa was bound to create disorder and even anarchy. Take Ken Saro Wiwa, for example: he had had no respect for the Nigerian government, which he'd continually tried to malign in front of the international community, human rights organizations, and environmentalists. How would Americans feel if Africans meddled in their internal affairs, such as their racist treatment of Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam?

Delgado said that Ken Saro Wiwa had broken the laws of his own country and had been tried and sentenced to death. Capital punishment existed not only in Nigeria, but in America too.

But—I replied—how about the exploitation of the Nigerian people by Shell Oil, the situation that Ken Saro Wiwa had been protesting? Delgado answered that Shell was English and American and French. How could Americans accept Shell as a household name and make a pariah out of Nigeria? I told Delgado that he was ignoring the responsibility of African leaders to their people by putting the blame on the West alone. We Africans could not waver from our commitment to fundamental democratic values, such as open electoral participation, freedom of expression, and the right to civil education and a safe environment.

For me, the fact that globalization, like a totalitarian regime, continues to obliterate cultural differences in favor of the market's hegemony justifies a form of vigilance and resistance that leads us to protest undemocratic treatment of our own people. It is also too easy to dismiss democracy and multiparty systems as un-African. Lest we forget, the concept is not native to America either. But it is behind Americans' drive to win more equality for blacks and other people who are the victims of oppression and discrimination. Africans, too, must seize democracy, as a tool both for demanding equal treatment in world institutions and market systems, and for eliminating their own archaic practices such as one-party rule and the oppression of women through polygamy and clitoridectomy. No amount of hiding behind tradition can provide sufficient excuse for blocking the new wave of democracy in Africa. Finally, as forms of art, Africa's masks, statues, and oral traditions made another kind of demand on the revolution. They set in motion dreams and aspirations that the revolution could not satisfy. They encouraged people to identify with models that lay in a realm denied by the revolution, and challenged Sékou Touré to deal with his people's needs and desires. Sidimé Laye's masks and statues were telling the truth to the revolution: they were saying that people were uncomfortable with it and that the regime had turned against its own population. The artist's masks and statues were banned because their very presence in the nation-state constituted an implicit criticism of the regime. When conceived as art that challenged the repressiveness of the revolution, the masks, statues, and oral traditions exhibited a new energy and magic that empowered people against their oppressors. In this sense, resistance became a transformative ritual, a renewal of the revolution by means of these positive energies.

Moreover, escaping Sékou Touré's revolution was another way of escaping the twentieth century and its record of ineptitude, cruelty, and human suffering. We cannot be complacent about the main themes that have characterized power relations in the twentieth century. As the new century approaches, we need to forge new languages and methods with which to replace decolonization, alienation, racial oppression, primitivism, Afro-pessimism, Francophony, tribalism, narrow nationalism, deconstruction, and other poststructuralist approaches to Africa and the black diaspora. We cannot afford to enter the new millennium as unprepared as our predecessors were when they made the transition from colonialism to independence. Many of them never even realized that the white man had left. Consequently, they did not know how to make adjustments, so as to become autonomous citizens. The Soninke of the Empire of Ghana experienced the same misery and longing for change at the end of the sixth century that Africans are feeling now. One man, a prince named Gassire, was more impatient than the others. According to legend, his longing for change was so strong that he felt as if a jackal were constantly gnawing at his heart. The tradition in those

days was war. Every day Gassire went to war and slaughtered fifty men all by himself. He was the strongest and bravest warrior in the empire. In the evening, other warriors praised him for his courage and strength. But Gassire was always unhappy. He wondered when his father would die and leave him the crown. But the king refused to die. Gassire was getting older and older. He now had seven sons, who joined him on the battlefield. They, too, had become brave warriors and were growing older and older. Yet the king was still alive. One day, Gassire went to see a wise old man who lived at the gates of Wagadu, the capital of Ghana. He explained his predicament to the wise man, who was a sort of prophet. Gassire said that he was tired of fighting and killing, and that he wanted his father to die so he could become king. The wise man, after thinking about Gassire's problem, informed him that his father was not going to die anytime soon. He told Gassire that he had to choose: either be a warrior for the rest of his life, or change his world. "But how?" asked Gassire. The wise man told him to make himself a ngoni, a lute-like instrument, and play it. At first Gassire was angry with the wise man for failing to predict his future as a king. He was disappointed, because he wanted so much to replace his father.

Gassire went to a blacksmith and asked him to make the ngoni for him. When the instrument was ready he played it, but the ngoni produced no sound. Gassire was angry. He went back to the wise man and said, "Look, wise man, the ngoni does not sing!" The wise man said to him, "You have to give it a heart. The ngoni cannot sing without a heart."

Gassire went back to fighting and killing his enemies—fifty a day. Gassire's seven sons died one by one on the battlefield. Each time, Gassire wept and carried his son home. Each time, the victim's blood dripped onto the ngoni. After the seventh son was slain, Gassire no longer had the heart for battle. But he nonetheless rose early the next morning to go to war. On the way, he saw a parrot perched on a baobab tree, singing. Gassire stopped and listened to the parrot's songs, which were about wars and the heroes who had fought them thousands of years before, about lovers whose stories survived long after their own death, and about the deeds of revolutionaries who created great societies and cultures that outlived them.

Gassire then took out his ngoni from its goatskin pouch and began to play and sing. He sang his own praise and the praise of the Empire of Ghana. At that moment, he realized his own immortality and the immortality of Ghana. His story would live on in songs and in people's hearts long after his death. I understand what Sidimé Laye means when he says that masks, statues, and oral traditions represent Africa abroad better than intellectuals and politicians. Art lives forever, while men and women come and go. Art transcends history, while men and women are bound to the passions of the moment. Art makes visible the need for change and social transformation. That is why Sidimé Laye, like Gassire, trusts art to redeem him, trusts it to carve a way out of the ineptitude of the twentieth century and Sékou Touré's revolution.

Among the Mande, there is a traditional song called "Baninde," which means being in the mood to say no to oppression, to refuse categorically, to defy the oppressor. Griot women sing this song to exhort young people to resist injustice the way their forebears did, in order to make the world a better place. The song keeps returning to the refrain, "Ban ye dunya la dyala," or "Resistance brings joy to the world." Then come the names of heroes whose resistance transformed Africans' lives for the better. A modern version of the song would go like this: "Say no! Martin Luther King said no! And he brought joy to the world. Say no! Malcolm X said no! And it brought joy to the world. Say no! Mandela said no! And it brought

joy to the world. Say no! The African people said no! And it brought joy to the world. Say no! Black women said no to sexism and racism! And it brought joy to the world."

In Mande cultures, we refer to this form of resistance as negation with a positive value—as, for example, when Sékou Touré said no to General de Gaulle, thus transforming Guinea into the first independent country in Francophone Africa; or when Samory Touré said no to French colonial penetration, uniting West Africa against European racism and fascism; or when Sundiata Kéita said no to Sumanguru Kante, leading to the creation of the Empire of Mali; or when Malian women said no to the dictatorship of Moussa Traoré, thus laying the groundwork for the rise of democracy in Mali. I say to myself: May the rest of the world be inspired by these heroic acts. Sidimé Laye has given me wisdom through his vigilant and fragile art.

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