LAYERS OF TIME: THE USE OF SECRECY AND CONSTRUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE IN DOGON ART

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Introduction

The following portion of writing is an excerpt from the work I have produced towards the completion of my Senior Honors Thesis in Anthropology. The focus of my thesis involves the art of the Dogon people of Central Mali and the role that it plays in their culture. In particular, I examine Dogon art as it relates to knowledge, secrecy, and the structure of society. My belief is that limited accessibility to the knowledge associated with certain categories of art defines the social roles that comprise Dogon society. However, the art does not represent absolute knowledge and is instead related to the interpretations of its creators and the individuals who use the art in ritual.

The section of work represented below explores three different categories of Dogon art: statuary, granary doors, and masks. For each category, I examine the ritual function of the art as well as its connection to knowledge. This portion will be used in my larger work to provide examples for how the use of art and its association with knowledge and secrecy define the structure of Dogon society.

Three Examples: Statuary, Granary Doors, and Masks

To provide a more in-depth view on the role of art in the structure of Dogon society, three specific categories will be examined in relation to their connection with Dogon knowledge. Dogon statuary, granary doors, and masks, like all of Dogon art, serve an important role in Dogon ritual and religious beliefs. However, each of these categories, when examined in more detail, serve their own separate functions within a specific facet of Dogon society. The ritual context and various interpretations of each category provide insight into the nature of the connection between Dogon art and knowledge as they relate to the structure of Dogon society.
Statuary

Statuary is one of the most enigmatic and diverse forms of art in Dogon society. An examination of the ritual context, theme, and the interpretation of meaning behind Dogon statuary provides a picture of its connection to knowledge and the overall structure of society. The ritual context in which statuary functions occupies a predominately private place in society with very limited public visibility. For example, while it is not uncommon for some statuary to be placed on publicly visible altars, they are more likely to be found on altars in households or shrines, where they are hidden from public view. Themes in statuary consist of a nebulous variety of gestures that do little to define the actual meaning of the statuary. For instance, one of the most common and iconic themes in Dogon statuary includes that of figures with raised arms; while there have been many speculations on what this represents, there are so many different depictions of this gesture in statuary that it is difficult to associate one meaning with every example. However, the ambiguity and looseness in theme reveals a larger insight into the function of Dogon sculpture that will be discussed in a later portion of this paper. The connection between Dogon knowledge and statuary is also discussed as a conclusion to these investigations.

Dogon statuary is typically created from a single piece of wood that is carved by the village blacksmith. The blacksmith has the traditional responsibility of carving the statues for his village based on the obligations of his caste role. Jean Laude describes the creation of Dogon statuary, explaining that "different peoples making sculpture with the same purpose, with identical materials and similar techniques, produce works that are stylistically diverse" (Laude, 1973:32). While all blacksmiths carve sculptures based on the same ritual obligation to do so and for the purpose of creating objects that have the same ritual function across all of Dogon culture, each produces his own unique depiction of a common statuary theme.

Although Dogon statuary exhibits incredible diversity in its depiction of common themes, the iconic gestures expressed in each still distinguish one theme from another. For instance, even if there are hundreds of different depictions in statuary of a man on a
horse, this theme is going to be discernable from the equally numerous depictions of a mother with children, an entirely different theme. Therefore, themes are usually identified according to similarities in gesture. Some of the more common themes include women with children or babies, men on horses, twin figures, hermaphrodites, figures with one or both arms raised, figures on stools, squatting or kneeling figures, and a number of other less frequent and more ambiguous gestures. The scholars evaluated in this paper reference these themes as an organizational guideline for their own methods of interpretation.

The ritual context in which Dogon statuary functions is interwoven into a system of altars and sacrifice that serves as a medium between the human and the spiritual realm. In this context, statuary enables the Dogon to perform the rituals necessary to ensure an active and positive relationship with the spirit realm (DeMott, 1979; Van Beek, 1988). Statues are used on the numerous altars that occupy both private and public spaces. There is an altar for every social unit, including village, village half, ward, clan, lineage, age group, household, and individual (Van Beek, 1988). Regardless of the variety in location, function, and name, every altar in Dogon society is also a place to invoke the main creator god, Amma.

Statuary is most commonly found on the altars within the ward shrines and on individual and household altars, where it is used in sacrifice. The Ward shrine is connected to the supernatural world through the binu cult, one of the four major Dogon religious cults. For every Ward shrine, there is a priest or priestess who was chosen by binu spirits to erect the shrine in dedication to them. Individual and household altars are usually located either within the home or behind the family granary. While many earlier scholars attribute Dogon statuary to ancestor worship or fertility figures, this is an oversimplification of their meaning as well as a generalization that does not accurately describe or apply to their function (DeMott, 1979). Although the Dogon do acknowledge the importance of ancestors, their prevalence in religious ritual is scarce because "the Dogon validate all of their ritual practices and beliefs with assertions of their origin in the
mythic past of their primordial ancestors" (DeMott, 1979:19). That being said, Dogon statues are not connected in any way to deceased ancestors; in fact, they are representatives of the living (Van Beek 1988).

Dogon statues are representative of individual people or the collective desire of a larger group of humans, such as a village. Because the Dogon recognize that the spirit world is dangerously unpredictable, bestowing great blessing one moment and devastating change the next, statues act as a form of buffer in the interaction between the human and spirit worlds. Once properly placed on its designated altar, the statue summons the attention of the spirit world by praying on behalf of the individual it represents. Because the spirits are known to have short attention spans (Van Beek, 1988), the prayer of the statues refreshes their memory of the wishes or problems of the human world. As Van Beek records the Dogon as saying, "'One cannot always pray and kneel at the altar, but the statue can!'"(Van Beek, 1988:60).

Along with representing individual humans, statues also double as altars. Statues are therefore subject to the same ritual processes that govern the altars they are placed upon (Van Beek, 1988:62). As with any altar, in order for statues to have any power in drawing the attention of the spirit realm, the proper sacrifice and corresponding ritual words must be performed. Without sacrifice, the statue is merely a chunk of wood. The installation of a new statue involves an elaborate sacrifice that is accompanied by a ritual ceremony. The sacrifice itself usually first involves a reading from the toro, the ritual text that is used in many religious rites. This invites all spiritual beings to recognize the installation. Once this is complete, a representative of a staple grain, such as millet paste or gruel, is applied to the statues, followed by the slaughtering of one or more animals, usually chickens. Depending on the scale of the statue being installed, elders of the village will gather to perform a benediction and demand the blessings of the gods. Afterwards, the sacrificed animals are cooked and eaten in a corresponding ceremonial feast. Oftentimes, if the installment is that of a small household or individual altar, the feast is only shared amongst the family. Once a statue is properly installed, it earns the title of dege, which defines it as an object of ritual potency (Van Beek, 1988). An
important detail to mention about the power of statue in ritual is the haste in which they are used as altars and then retired from their ritual action. Once a statue has been installed to pray and gain the attention of the spirit world, the power of the statue increases rapidly. With each sacrifice that is performed over the statue altar, it retains a layer of "spiritual patina." While this does increase the statue's ability to attract positive spiritual forces, the negative forces present in the spirit world are attracted as well. In order to prevent the negative from outweighing the positive and causing harm, the statue must be gradually weaned from sacrificial use and tucked away in a storage granary. Once the statue has been retired for a number of years, it is not uncommon for it to be re-used in the ritual cycle by the descendants of its previous owner.

It is my belief that the “spiritual patina” the Dogon feel results from a statue’s interaction with the spirit realm reflects how art relates to power in their society. Because the Dogon perceive the amount of time a Dogon statue is in use as a factor in the growth of its spiritual power, this power could be viewed as accumulating in layers of time. In other words, the growth in a statue’s power is achieved in layers; with every passing day, a new layer forms.

The identification of meaning and the role of symbolism in Dogon statuary have been subject to several approaches in interpretation. While some turn to the connection of theme with mythological narrative and iconography (Griaule, 1946; Laude, 1973), others associate theme with meaning that is not directly related to the Dogon creation myth (DeMott, 1988, Van Beek, 1979). For Griaule, Dogon statuary, like all of Dogon art, is an embodiment of religious knowledge. While he does acknowledge theme, it does not play a pivotal role in his method of interpretation. Griaule focuses more on dissecting each piece into a system of symbols, which he then interprets as containing religious knowledge that is decipherable in varying degrees of depth. His method therefore ignores thematic organization of meaning, focusing instead on the degrees of knowledge contained in the various symbols that comprise a single piece of art. Anthropologist Jean Laude also interprets the meaning of Dogon statuary according to its connection with the Dogon creation myth. However, his method differs from Griaule's in that instead of
breaking down each piece into a system of symbols, he relies on deciphering statuary themes according to their representation of mythological narratives or figures. Laude's method of interpretation therefore relies on a system of thematic classification that connects common themes in Dogon statuary with aspects of the creation myth.

While Griaule and Laude have developed methods of interpretation based on the concept that Dogon creation mythology lies at the root of all society, other scholars have developed other methods. For instance, Walter Van Beek believes that all postures expressed in statuary themes are used in addressing God on behalf of the humans they represent. He explains that some gestures are depictions of prayer, such as raised arms or kneeling, while others are related to some other demand directed at the gods, such as one for rain or protection. Gestures can also reflect the state of being that the owner of the statue wishes to achieve. For example, a statue depicting a man on a horse could be an indication that the owner wishes to hold a place of prominence and dignity in society, as the ownership of a horse is a sign of wealth and rank. Likewise, statues representing women with infants or children could be an expression of the owner’s desire for greater abundance, whether it is of children, crops, or game for hunting. Van Beek also explains that statues exhibiting specific detail, such as scarification patterns, do so to identify with the appearance of the individual it depicts. Details are also commonly used to indicate a problem that needs to be brought to the attention of the gods. For instance, a statue depicting a man with an irregular, curved back is likely to be an indication that the owner has a back problem. Other examples include statues depicting clubbed feet or badly grown beards that require a remedy from the gods.

Barbara DeMott views statuary in terms of its relation to statements about the nature of human beings, their roles in society, and how these relate to the overall order of existence. DeMott writes that "sculpture seems to represent the order of the human world and to portray statements about fertility and symbolic references to male and female archetypes, sexual unity, and androgyny” (DeMott, 1988: 21) Overall, she feels that statuary themes reflect order as a method in begetting and maintaining order.
It is my belief that Van Beek and DeMott have produced the most accurate interpretation of Dogon statuary in assuming that it does not relate to any specific element of the creation myth, pertaining instead to a broad range of human affairs and the order of existence. Although some statuary themes can be related to ideas expressed in the creation myth, the use of any one theme for a variety of ritual functions suggests that they are not attached to one, concrete element of a creation story. For example, it does not seem likely that every statue depicting twins is strictly representative of the primordial twin ancestors, the *nommo*. If this were the case, then all of the statues placed on the many different varieties of altars in Dogon society would only serve the purpose of ancestor worship. It is more probable that statues such as the ones depicting twins have a variety of meanings that make their ritual use much more versatile.

For instance, while statues depicting twins are, in part, representative of the *nommo*, they are more so representative of the ideas connected with these mythic characters. According to Dogon creation myth, Amma created the *nommo* as hermaphrodite twins in accordance with the order of the universe. Before man was created, the *nommo* were only complete beings in sets of two. Although both twins were hermaphrodites, one embodied a predominately female force and the other a predominately male. Together, the *nommo* pair formed what was considered at the time of the creation myth to be a complete being. Therefore, twin statues can be used on altars to promote order and balance, as it was first represented by the *nommo*. Overall, the various Dogon statuary themes represent the desire of the Dogon to receive and maintain order in their world.

The association of knowledge with statuary seems to relate to the ability to create the statue and to perform the proper ritual actions and recitations that activate its ritual power. However, the flexibility in the use of statues as representative of many things in ritual suggests that they are also tools in the creation of new meaning. Because no statuary theme corresponds to a concrete set of meanings or specifications for its ritual use, it is up to the user of the statue to decide what it represents in ritual use. For example, while a statue depicting a woman holding three infants might be placed on an
individual altar to beseech the gods for fertility, the same statue could be placed on the public hunting altar in the village square to promote a greater abundance of game. For every statue, there is an endless possibility for interpretation of its meaning, in turn creating new knowledge of how it is to be used in ritual.

**Granary Doors**

Granary doors fit into a category of Dogon art that serves the dual function of a practical as well as ritually significant item. However, out of all categories of Dogon art, granary doors seem to have received the least amount of scholarly attention. The interpretation of granary doors has been largely based on studies of the complex iconography in this category of art. In my opinion, there are many other aspects of the granary door and its position in Dogon ritual that require further exploration and scholarly attention. For instance, what determines the iconography that will be carved on the surface of the doors? Or, why is it that doors, in particular, are so intricately carved when no other wooden art in Dogon society receives as much complex detail? Despite the many potential questions pertaining to granary doors, they have yet to receive a thorough scholarly investigation.

Granary doors are constructed of one or two pieces of wood, are square in shape, and typically no larger than two by two feet. Every family has at least one granary that serves as a storage unit for food and other objects of importance. While granary exteriors are publicly visible, their interiors represent a private family realm. The surfaces of these doors are usually covered in intricate carvings. Every door has a sculpted iron lock, which also depicts many different themes.

Because a single door is capable of containing any combination of iconographic signs, granary doors cannot be divided up and organized into specific thematic categories according to their carvings. For example, while the carvings on one door might only depict rows of masked figures, another door may contain images of snakes, scorpions and two rows of masked figures. While there are symbols common to granary door carvings,
such as crocodiles, snakes, tortoises, and rows of masked figures, every door is likely to contain a different combination or depiction of these symbols.

Because the granary is, on the whole, an important symbol relating to the Dogon creation myth, the symbolic function of the granary door depends upon the symbolic context of the granary. Because the whole granary is a symbol in itself, the granary door is a component of this symbol. When a granary door is removed from its granary, its symbolic meaning is no longer whole. It is meaningful so long as it retains its position as a component in a larger symbolic framework.

All granaries in Dogon society are symbolic representations of the original granary of Dogon myth, referred to as the “Granary of Pure Earth” (Griaule, 1946). According to myth, the Granary of Pure Earth functioned as an ark in the deliverance of all life on earth. It is on the first granary that the eight original Dogon ancestors, known in some versions of the myth as nommo, descended from heaven, bringing with them all categories of insect, plant, animal, and the eight original seeds of agriculture. On earth, the granary is said represent the system of order in the universe as well as the body of a woman (Griaule, 1946).

Griaule has recorded every architectural aspect of the granary as corresponding to the symbolic representation of the female body, which, according to myth, relates to the creation and maintenance of order in the universe. For example, the four corners of the square roof represent arms and legs, the support beams, the skeleton, the exterior the skin, and the ground the back. In this context, the granary door can either represent the vagina or the heart, whose pumping in and out of blood is compared to the opening and closing of the granary door (Griaule, 1946). Granary doors therefore serve an integral part in the entire system of granary symbolism. This fulfills the function of imitating the system that Amma gave to man as a means of maintaining balance between man and the spirit world.

While the location of granary doors within the granary itself defines their symbolic purpose, the symbols carved on their surface convey meanings that relate to the
power that this position bestows upon the door. For instance, anthropologist Jack Flam believes that the numerous graphic signs depicted in granary door carvings "comprise a system of references to the numerous and often similar sequences of mythic events upon which all ritual is based" (Flam, 1976:36). He does not feel that the symbols are direct references to specific mythic personae or narratives; instead, they express the ideologies that are also represented in myth. Flam views even the simplest sign, such as a zigzag, as representative of many different meanings relating to events or elements of myth. He therefore interprets the iconography expressed in Dogon granary doors as archives of the beliefs that are inherent in myth that so heavily influences the structure of Dogon ritual.

Another theory is that the symbolism on granary doors bestows them with the power to fulfill the purpose of protecting the contents of the family granary. Jean Laude theorizes that such physical protection "is elaborated through magical protection symbolized in the sculpture forms of locks and doors. Rows of ancestors march through time across the facade of a door symbolizing their enormous collective magical strength, a strength which the Dogon believe is then imparted to the door" (Imperato, 1978:31-32). Laude also believes that some of the symbols also reference fertility and abundance, such as the image of breasts, a common theme in granary door iconography.

My own analysis suggests that the symbolism present in granary doors is used to express recognition of the origins of life and the abundance of life-giving properties, such as the harvests stored within the granaries. The symbols that depict references to the creation myth also reference the continuation of the life that originated from the events of this myth. The symbolic recognition of life and abundance expressed in granary doors perpetuates these blessings, as if the door were by itself in a constant state of ritual performance. For example, Griaule’s interpretation of the granary door as representative of the beating heart associates the door with the symbolic recognition of life-sustaining forces—just as blood in the heart is pumped out to sustain life, the harvest stored in the granary is eventually removed to produce the food that is necessary to live.
The symbolism depicted on granary doors relates to the knowledge of the origins of life as well as a source of new knowledge. The symbols that pertain to the creation myth are not direct codes for portions of mythic narrative; instead they express the same knowledge of the origin of all life as a means of recognizing and maintaining it in the present. Doors play a role in the creation of knowledge through new combinations of symbols that the producers of the doors have interpreted as meaningful expressions of knowledge. Just as it is up to the owner of a statue to assign its meaning in ritual, it is up to the creator to determine which combinations of symbol express meanings that enable the granary door to serve its ritual function.

**Masks**

Dogon masks hold a position of ritual significance unlike any other form of art in Dogon society. While statues and granary doors are placed in fixed locations, such as on an altar or attached to a building, masks are used in the ritual dance performances of the Awa society. The Awa society is a powerful ritual body comprised of all circumcised males in Dogon society. The primary responsibility of this society is to perform public funerary rites that ensure the proper passage of the deceased into the supernatural world (DeMott, 1979). The centerpiece of these rites is the masked dances, accompanied by ritual oration and rhythmic drums. It is important to first understand the details of how these masks are used in ritual in order to better understand how the Dogon perceive their value and power. The remainder of this section will examine the ritual use of masks in order to illustrate the important spiritual role that they play in Dogon society.

The Awa society is responsible for conducting three major sets of public rites. These include funerary ceremonies, the Dama ceremony, a post-funerary ritual, and the Sigui, the largest ritual ceremony in Dogon society. All three of these ceremonies involve masked dances in which the dancers act as the supernatural forces that drive the ritual function of the ceremony. While the funerary and Dama ceremonies are associated with guiding the spirit of deceased individuals into the supernatural realm, the Sigui occurs only every 65 years to commemorate the replacement of one generation with the next as well as the replenishing cycle of life and death (Imperato, 1978). For each of these
ceremonies, there is generally a large variety of masks involved in the ritual dances, each representing a specific meaning and function within the context of the ritual.

Because the Dama ceremony involves a variety of ritual details, it is the best example of the use of masks in Awa ceremony. Dama ceremonies function as rites of expulsion that lead the spirits of the deceased to the supernatural realm (DeMott, 1979). The Dama ceremonies are split into the three categories, the Great Dama (Dama Na), the ordinary Dama (Dama Ana), and the small Dama (Dama Dobu). Typically, a Great Dama is reserved for an individual of great importance, in which case over 400 masked dancers have been known to perform. The other two Dama ceremonies are generally held for more than one individual and the number of masked dancers and guests is much fewer. Because of the expenses associated with paying the masked performers in millet beer and providing food for the guests, it is not uncommon to hold the ceremony in honor of several deceased individuals every 2-3 years. Prior to the performance of a Dama ceremony, members of the Awa society retreat to the bush to perform a series of rituals involving sacrifices at their altar, the carving and painting of new masks, and the dying of costume fibers (Imperato, 1978). Traditionally, all paints, dyes, wood, and fibers are derived from the bush in order to maintain the supernatural integrity of the costumes and masks. Because the bush represents a realm separate from the village, one that is associated with impurity, spirits and the supernatural, the Awa members are thought to undergo a symbolic "death" while secluded in the bush. This symbolic death allows for the members to transform into the supernatural personae expressed in their costumes and masks. When the masks and costumes are complete, fully costumed Awa members emerge from the bush as masked supernaturals.

The Dama ceremony traditionally lasts six days. On the first day, the ceremony begins on the outskirts of the village with a benediction in the secret language of the bush, sigi so. The procession of masked dancers then enters the village public square where they perform a series dances and rituals. On the second day, the masked dancers travel to the house of the deceased where they climb on the roof and dance before sunrise. After the performance, the dancers remove their masks before joining the village
elders in the public square to share *sadi*, a ritual millet beer. Once the Awa members have re-dressed, the rest of the day is spent performing ritual dances in the public square and on the roof of the deceased’s house. On the third day, the masked dancers assemble on the field of the Hogon, the spiritual leader and eldest member of the village. Here, they dance around a clay pot, filled with millet beer made by the family of the deceased, and the handle of a hoe used by the deceased (Imperato, 1978). The hoe and the pot are then carried by the procession of dancers into the bush, where they are destroyed to symbolize that the deceased will no longer cultivate or drink. The three remaining days of the ceremony are filled with dancing on the village square before the Dama is closed with the exit of the dance procession into the bush. Once the Dama is complete, the masks are stored in a cave or rock shelter in the bush and the dancers return to their villages as mortals.

The wooden masks that are used in ceremonies such as the Dama come in over 75 recorded varieties. These masks can be classified into categories, representing birds, mammals, insects, Dogon personages, non-Dogon personages, and objects (Imperato, 1978). Each category of mask represents a multiplicity of meanings associated with Dogon mythology, history, and levels of social organization. For instance, the *Walu*, or the "antelope" mask, represents the animal pursued by Dogon hunters in real life. However, the *Walu* depicted by the mask also corresponds to the mythical antelope and her role in the events of Dogon mythology. Another example is the *Dyonune*, or "healer" mask, which represents the healers in Dogon society as well as the original healer of Dogon myth. There are numerous other examples, including the "old woman" mask, with grey fiber hair and two oblong boards signifying her deflated breasts (Dieterlen, 1989), the *Pullo* mask, representing a Fulani man, or even a representation of a European doctor or anthropologist. All examples of Dogon masks pertain to the role that the subject of the mask plays in the present day Dogon world as well as their role, if any, in the creation myth. Together, masks represent a pantheon of the elements and origins of Dogon life.

An important thing to note about the variety in masks is that, although there are some that have remained permanent fixtures in performance, the variety of masks is
always changing. While a large portion of the traditional masks remain fixtures in the masked performances, there have been less permanent varieties of mask representing an element of Dogon life at the time it was created. For instance, Pascal Imperato, who conducted fieldwork amongst the Dogon in the 1960s and 70s, witnessed varieties representing everything from cars to tourists (Imperato, 1978). It is my belief that themes in Dogon masks are not only reflections of mythology, social roles and history but of all that the Dogon feel have impacted the order of their existence in some fashion. The masks, costumes, music, and movement that go into a ceremonial performance seem to be a symbolic reflection, or theatrical document, of the world around them.

The knowledge associated with Dogon masks is vast and often esoteric in nature. Because the creation and ritual function of the Dogon masks are situated within the context of the Awa society, the knowledge associated with them is only revealed to members. Therefore, much of the knowledge surrounding the special techniques required to properly create and perform with masks is rendered esoteric, or secretive. For example, an important ritual component of the masked ceremonies is the recitation of sigi so, the secret language of the bush spirits, by the Olubaro, the leader of the Awa society. It is the responsibility of the Olubaro to become a master of sigi so, as knowledge of this language is the source of his power. When members become initiated into the Awa society, the Olubaro instructs them on the basics of the sigi so and the masking rituals (DeMott, 1979). The human identities of the masked dancers are also kept secret from the public spectators of the ritual performances. One of the biggest secrets of the Awa society is the fact that the members are the ones driving the masked ceremonies, not the supernatural beings represented in their masks (DeMott, 1979). While Awa members have the knowledge that they are merely imitating the supernatural beings represented in their masks, the power of the masked ceremonies depends upon the audience's belief that the dancers are actually channeling supernatural beings (DeMott, 1979).

Overall, the knowledge that is exclusive to members of the Awa society enables them to maintain the belief that their performances bear supernatural weight and power in maintaining order and balance in their society. Even though the masked dancers and the
audience probably know that, in reality, they are all human, it is the participation of both sides in maintaining the secrecy of the dancer's human identity that enables them to suspend their belief, giving the ritual its true power in Dogon society.
Works Cited


