

THE VISUAL ARTS AS AN EXPRESSION OF CHANGE AMONG THE BAULE OF CÔTE D'IVOIRE

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While traveling in Côte d'Ivoire² in 2000, I was struck by a conversation with an elderly Baule weaver, Kouassi Mia. He had been performing his craft for more than fifty years, and at his advanced age—he estimated 70—he likely knew more about Baule textiles and symbolism than anyone else in the region, making him an attractive informant. We had already discussed proverb motifs at length and were moving to conclude the interview, when, almost as an after-thought, noticing how enthusiastically I beheld his cloth made from homespun thread (he also wove with factory-spun), he assured me he would make more from it in the future, even though it was not his preference. As he put it, “Factory-spun thread is just more beautiful” (24/07/00)³.

For a long time, this statement gnawed at me. Had an *African* weaver really told me that he preferred to employ *European* factory-produced thread to manufacture “traditional” Baule craftsmanship? Such a comment flew sharply in the face of a student who had come to believe, albeit falsely, that Africa represented an abundant treasury of immutable cultural tradition. For Kouassi, the issue was much clearer. He did not perceive the authenticity of Baule culture at stake. Quite simply, the regularity of factory-produced thread facilitates the weaving process and allows for a tighter weave, permitting the production of more elaborate patterns.

This situation and others presented a radical departure from both my original perception and frequent anthropological assumptions about Africa and its artwork. In anthropology, there has traditionally existed a disparity in conceptions of Western vs.

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2 On October 14, 1985, President Félix Houphouët-Boigny issued a decree requesting that his country's name not be translated into English. Out of respect, I will thus opt for the French “Côte d'Ivoire” vs. the English “Ivory Coast.”

3 Date of the interview. Henceforth, references to field notes will be cited by date.

African art. Anthropological discussions invariably become tangled up in definitions of culture, and the works of African art-ists, especially those making traditional works, tend to be categorized under the broad headings of “craft” and “tradition,” rendering them as immutable material culture rather than the creative expression of an individual artist. This view represents a certain degree of ideological comfort for outsiders. In her discussion of totem poles on the Northwest Coast, Jonaitis maintains that such objects maintain popularity by directly supporting existing beliefs about Native Americans and by presenting an “intriguing combination of exoticism and familiarity” (1999:116). Steiner likewise asserts that imageries—in his case African—are appropriated to entice while still confirming a comfortable ideological closeness for outsiders (1999).

Generally lacking in many anthropological studies of African art (and for this reason, it is debatable whether there have been real anthropological studies of art), is the recognition that African “traditional” artists may still operate as individuals and that culture only provides forms of expression that are commonly understood. As Westerners, we are accustomed to mystifying art and the artist, emphasizing his or her individuality and view him or her as separate or even beyond society. With Africans, on the other hand, we emphasize social and cultural cohesion, and objects of art are invariably classified as religious implements or traditional crafts. It is no coincidence, however, that in most major art institutions the same typical media are represented, and that similar themes reappear frequently. In other words, Western art is to the canvas as per-haps African art is to the wood sculpture. It is conceivable then that as outsiders, we often fail to recognize subtle nuances in meaning and innovation in African art, just as a total outsider to our artistic aesthetics might not see the difference between a Monet and a Picasso, instead viewing them as variations of paint on canvas. Similarly, our often exclusively functional interpretations of African art might not capture the entire picture. Masks are often seen strictly as ritual hard-ware; however, the same anthropologists making this assertion would clearly identify the artistic significance of Da Vinci’s *The Last Supper* despite its spiritual theme.

Following my discussion with Kouassi Mia, I soon discovered that Baule territory over-flowed with non-“traditional” artistic innovations. A group of potters in one village fashioned purely decorative sculpture alongside the usual medicine and serving bowls. In another, carvers sculpted “traditional” Baule statuary wearing bell bottoms and disco hair. Reflection has led me to believe that much like Western artists strive to express their ideas and identities within their social milieu and often do so via the media provided to them by Western culture, Baule artists are also struggling to identify their position in a changing world and this effort to understand is reflected in

their artwork (also done in the media provided to them by their culture). In addition, because due to its functionality African artwork is generally also lived, other Baule experience and assimilate the interpretations supplied to them by their artists, which helps them to mediate an overall Baule identity as well in light of changing social conditions. What follows in this essay is a discussion of examples of this phenomenon occurring in modern-day Baule culture. It is first necessary to briefly examine the present-day situation in Côte d'Ivoire as well as some aspects of Baule culture and religion to provide a backdrop for our discussion; these will follow in the next sections. Also, it is worth mentioning that this analysis will restrict itself to the social aspects of Baule art rather than its aesthetic components.

The Ivoirian Situation

The current state of affairs in West Africa is shaky at best and currently, most governments find themselves battling consistently against instability as their paramount difficulty (McNulty 1995). In the case of Côte d'Ivoire, the government's struggle to generate a feeling of national unity constitutes its most trouble issue. Visitors to Africa are often struck by its size and diversity; however, when Europe, hungry for conquest and industrial domination, carved up West Africa at the Conference of Berlin in 1884, little attention was paid to indigenous concepts of space, borders becoming instead rivers and straight lines on a map (McNulty 1995; Gellar 1995). As a result, when the French came into possession of Côte d'Ivoire colony, the territory included more than 70 ethnic groups and nearly as many native languages, most having little in common as the region historically served as a meeting point for migrating cultures.

However, the arrival of the French did not imply a slow process of cultural borrowing as had been occurring in the region for centuries. Instead, this encounter was characterized by the intent to suppress traditional cultural values and more importantly, the conscious imposition of a new, foreign set of social rules, norms and organization. French colonial policy, unlike that of their British neighbors who utilized preexisting African organizational systems (albeit loosely) to develop a system of governance, insisted upon the deliberate assimilation of its colonies with the hope of effecting a stronger unity and firmer connection with mother France. They insisted on French education, managed the colony with French-style law, and restructured the social hierarchy according to French precepts (Gellar 1995). Vogel emphasizes that, in the end, this strong insistence did indeed impose a certain "patina of French culture" throughout the colony, which, aided by French-educated Africans, was converted into the country's post-colonial government. Still, by independence, most had little more in

common than several decades of French colonization and had had little time to adapt to this new situation (Vogel 1991).

At the time of independence, Côte d'Ivoire's newly formed government ambitiously sought to develop a sense of national identity and carve an economic niche in the growing world market (Kellar 1995; Vogel 1991). However, the exploitative policies of the colonial regime left the nation with little developed infrastructure, aside from what had been required for resource extraction,⁴ and it had insufficient funds for internal development. Thus, it instead was forced to center the majority of its national economy in a handful of cash crops (McNulty 1995). A period of growth followed immediately in the 1960s and 70s and Côte d'Ivoire's economy rose to the forefront of West Africa in what is known as the "Ivorian miracle" (Vogel 1991). However, when prices for tropical products plummeted in the 1980s and 1990s, the government found itself trying to revive a dying economy. To subsidize national operations, the country resorted to international lending organizations such as the IMF and the World Bank, which in turn induced cycles of debt, dependency and the apparition of internal friction between those who wanted to solve the crisis (Ndegwa et al. 1995). Now, Côte d'Ivoire is struggling to find a new balance after suffering a coup d'état in December 1999 (Smith 2000) and intermittent civil war. Economic problems have fostered considerable disunity, and coupled with ethnic heterogeneity, national politics have fizzled down to divisions along cultural lines.

Caught up in this political-economic situation are the native peoples of Côte d'Ivoire still living in their village contexts. In pre-conquest times, these people maintained active contact with European powers both directly and indirectly in a living market trade, but with the entrance of colonial regimes in their region their participation increased with unprecedented consequences. For example, many Baule men were obliged to abandon their own fields and accept wage-labor on cotton plantations in order to pay colonial taxes (Etienne 1980). Ironically, officers determined the fees on the basis of being "Baule," an identity which did not even exist among people who thought little beyond the village level. When the country later became independent, their involvement increased still more and the meaning of Baule ethnicity changed when Félix Houphouët-Boigny, a Baule man, became the nation's first president, and the people found that in the new government it was convenient to have Baule origin.

4 For example, when the French government left Côte d'Ivoire, the only railroad streaked directly across the country from Abidjan to Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, and was used to port hinterland resources directly to the coast and French ships.

After independence, the culture experienced extraordinary demographic growth (Vogel 1991).

In other words, despite having individual cultures with their own systems of organization, perceptions and methods of relating with neighbors, the native peoples of Côte d'Ivoire now belong to a modern nation-state, trying to clamber its way into the "modern" world and form part of a Western dominated world market. Moreover, in spite of the continued existence of vibrant pre-colonial traditions in the village environment, incorporation into a modern nation nonetheless necessitates conformance to a marked variety of outside influences. The importance of an economic system based on currency exchange emerges, which may subvert traditional economic structures (Etienne 1980), and, indeed, be little understood. Ivoirian cocoa prices are usually set in London by people who may never have even been to West Africa. Similarly, the imposition of a national government obliges allegiance to an outside set of laws, which may have little to do with cultural ideas of right and wrong and, as recent history attests, have often originated from the outside. In one particular situation, the Ivoirian government banned polygamy, a practice held by *all* its native peoples (Vogel 1991).

Colonialism introduces a completely new social hierarchy to the milieu of the colonized. In his treatment of Baule *blolo* sculpture, Ravenhill notes the appearance of new otherworld spouse statues carved with European-style clothing and fashions alongside the use of more customary Baule motifs. After considerable analysis, he concludes that these statues "demonstrate a desire that the Baule otherworld mate exhibit those signs of success or status that characterize a white-oriented or -dominated society" (1996:15). Otherwise explained, they exhibit the trappings of Ivoirian society's highest rung *often not reflected by rural Baule themselves*. As a result, these statues can be seen as mediating the class inequalities reflected in Ivoirian society. This hypothesis provides an important key for understanding the changes first brought to my attention by Kouassi Mia's passing comment. The colonial presence in Côte d'Ivoire commenced little more than one hundred years ago, a decidedly short time to effect a complete cultural overhaul, not to mention that the current breakneck pace of change worldwide demands nearly immediate change. Any financial issues aside, superficial modifications can be accomplished relatively easily, but ideological change requires considerably more time. In this case, there has been little time to adjust.

Because Côte d'Ivoire has elected European-style modernity as its goal (or was swayed by historical circumstance), it attempts to enter a world defined mostly by Western ideas, Western interests, and Western principles (Vogel 1991:444). Similarly, its people find themselves immersed in an outside political, economic and social realms, and as Africans, they must adjust to systems not designed for Africans, by

Africans and not based on African precepts, regardless of whether or not they conflict with their own particular explanation of the world. It seems logical to infer that many of the changes I observed among Baule society—particularly among art—are reactions to this transition.

It results important to understand that few African societies have a concept of “art” (Wilkin 1999). Baule statuary, for instance, is not only carved to be exceptionally beautiful but also to entice a bush spirit to reside within it (Vogel 1973). That is to say, in Africa, art is not only important for how it looks (feels, tastes, smells, etc.) but for what it *does*. Vogel offers an extensive discussion regarding how Baule language conspicuously avoids references to “look-ing” at art, but rather emphasizes qualities it may possess (1997). Thus, if art can act and convey, it can also serve as a medium of communication. Innovations in Baule art may actually be perceived as *an ideological dialogue* between the global system which now surrounds them and their own traditional culture. It reflects compromise and a degree of agreement and/or synthesis between these two (not necessarily competing) systems and *mediates* the Baule reception, access and integration into the Westernizing world while simultaneously seeking to teach this system to accommodate them as well. To treat this idea, the dialogue can be seen as occurring in on three distinct horizons: political, economic and cultural, all environments directly influencing and relevant to Baule experience.

The Baule People

Approximately one million people living in central Côte d’Ivoire claim Baule heritage (Vogel 1997). Primarily agriculturalists, they inhabit an area of wooded savanna roughly marked by the city of Bouaké in the north and the crossing of the Comoé and Bamana rivers in the south—the so-called “Baule-V” (see map in Appendix A)—far enough inland to have minimal contact with early European seafarers but southward enough to avoid the Islamic penetration from the north (Etienne 1980). According to myth, they settled the region after a spectacular flight from Ashanti oppressors in Ghana; however, most evidence points to a gradual migration and assimilation into the area over the course of at least 1500 years (Vogel 1997).

This slow history of assimilation may explain several features of Baule culture. Baule society is completely decentralized, the village serving as the largest social unit, and there is a noticeable lack of larger, unifying social institutions, such as initiation, common throughout much of Africa. Kinship is organized matrilineally but, in reality, is very flexible; individuals choose one family over the other according to need and convenience. Most people also have many inter-village connections and relationships,

and it is not uncommon for a Baule to spend an extended amount of time with friends and relatives in other villages (Guerry 1972).

Among the Baule, human beings are by far the most interesting things in nature, and invariably, any conversation will drift towards people, what they do, and why (Vogel 1997). Social life is of paramount importance. Not only do the Baule constantly discuss and attempt to codify their relationships with others, they also are possessed by a continual desire to be in the company of others. Vincent Guerry, a priest who lived more than a decade with the Baule, observed that “the Baoulé...lives always with others, it would be quite inconceivable to him to be cut off from the group, even for a few minutes” (1972). He also describes village interaction as their very life blood, for “should [one] cast himself off from the village he would be but a dead branch⁵” (1972). Indeed, this need for others is so fundamental, that the mere concept of solitude takes on an evil dimension, tantamount to sorcery, and when someone dies, the grief in the village is said to be so much, that the family of the deceased must go from home to home in order to beg for pardon for not providing sufficient care for the person during life (Guerry 1972).

Nonetheless, the flexibility of Baule society allows for many opportunities to develop individualism; in fact, most Baule relish the chance “to present themselves as striking, idio-syncratic, and highly independent,” (Vogel 1997) traits mirrored across other aspects of Baule creative and religious life. Furthermore, “peculiar or flamboyant behavior is nobody’s business; people notice it but barely talk about it...Baule society tolerates a wide latitude of eccentric behavior” (Vogel 1997). In the end, most allow for this degree of freedom because they acknowledge the impossibility of controlling other people. Children are relatively free to follow most places and seldom scolded—they will mold to society, when they realize its importance. Even, although it raised curiosity, it was accepted when one man decided to cook for himself, a task wholly in the women’s sphere (Vogel 1997).

The dichotomy of social vs. independent also plays out in other realities of the social world. By and large, Baule society is organized on the basis of an all-encompassing binary opposition: man/bush vs. woman/village—i.e. wild vs. civilized. The bush represents the wild world, filled with dangerous animals and harsh spirits, and it is the domain of men, who are said to have the spiritual might to withstand such forces. As such, Baule men are responsible for most all artistic and decorative creations, which in themselves embody a sort of spiritual power, and nearly all sacred (read: dangerous) religious implements, such as masks, are stored in the bush. In line with the wild, men

5 The translation is mine.

must also tackle any destructive tasks. They turn the fields at the beginning of the planting season (considered a grave offense to the Earth), plant them, and occasionally hunt. They further take charge of all necessary killing, especially for sacrifices, making women highly dependent on them in that respect. On the contrary, the village is the woman's sphere and represents comfort, hearth, home and society. All that is social belongs in the village,⁶ and women take charge of all social tasks. They must care for and raise the children, cook, and tend the fields once planted. Women also solely responsible for the production of pottery for their family, generally cooking or medicine pots, and the spinning of thread (Vogel 1997).

Baule Religion

"The Baule do not make a distinction between a visible and an invisible world. Everyone knows that just beneath the surface of the visible world are powers that affect everything you see" (Vogel 1997:52). Spirits figure into nearly every aspect of Baule life, and most Baule expend a great deal of effort to maintain relations with them. Not only must one respond to their whims but also often anticipate them to enlist their cooperation. "Prudent Baule recognize that it would be folly to undertake a journey, a cure, the cultivation of a field, or even one's usual daily work without their approval" (Vogel 1997:52). Spirits that decide to attach themselves to individuals also demand specific interdictions to maintain their favor, and the Baule attribute misfortune and death to unsatisfied spirits; indeed, "Baule people tend to discuss these forces in terms of their power...to interfere with human life, especially to kill people" (Vogel 1997:52).

Because the Baule perceive their society as made of highly individualistic persons, they extend this belief to the spirit realm. Spirits possess their own personalities and have their own whims and aspirations. They may have good and bad days,⁷ and to perform consultations and/or resolve problems, most of spirit realm may be accessed through divination and influenced by sacrifices, both big and small.

The most powerful—and perhaps most unimportant—force in the Baule cosmology is the sky, *Nyamien*. Nyamien created the world but now rests above it, remaining aloof (Guerry 1972). More important is the god, *Aye*, literally the earth, who supplies the lifeblood of Baule existence: children, crops and game. At least one day per week is set aside in its honor (often Wednesday) and religious activity (Vogel

6 Thus, for example, while sexual intercourse is forbidden outside of village boundaries, no Baule would ever consider suicide anywhere but in the bush.

7 Woe on the unlucky person who kicks by accident a stone where a crabby bush spirit has decided to rest.

1997). The primacy of Nyamien or Asye often serves as a subject of debate amongst the Baule (Guerry 1972).

More troublesome are the *umien*, ancestors, who are considered the most frequent cause of death and misfortune. Unlike the English connotation of the word, Baule ancestors tend to be immediate relatives with whom the Baule have had intimate relations in life, and who though having passed on, still exhibit considerable influence over the comings and goings of this world. Their personalities, likes and dislikes persist after death, and particularly cantankerous ancestors will make life a constant struggle for their predecessors, while happier individuals may bring wonderful blessings or needed protection. Most all ancestors are commemorated and placated by a shrine in the family house—usually a carved wooden stool, but may range from a hole in the wall, a corner, a statue, or nearly any location which can be used as the locus for sacrifices. Generally, after a few generations, as the people who knew them die, most ancestors are forgotten and their influence fades (Vogel 1997:53-58).

Another formidable power in Baule cosmology are the *amuin*, which conveys, loosely translated, the idea of “god” (one of many) but for the Westerner invariably becomes entwined with the abstract idea of art. Amuin exist both within and beyond sculpture, but for all practical purposes, they require a physical locus of power, almost always sculpture, to make them accessible to ordinary men and women; indeed, the French/Baule dictionary defines them as “a power, supernatural spirit who can be beneficent or malevolent and who is the object of a cult; god; object that represents this power, sometimes called a ‘fetish’” (Timyan 1990). For example, no distinction is made between one form, the *sanun amuin*, or personal shrines which protect their owner, rooted in the medicines assembled in them, and the power accessed through it; indeed, a distinction is irrelevant. All amuin share the ability to kill and all require blood offerings, to “activate” a shrine for the first time (Vogel 1997).

The most important types of amuin divide themselves along sex lines. *Bo nun amuin*, or the men’s masks, are the premiere symbols of male power in Baule society, and the mere sight of them is believed enough to strike a woman dead. When they enter the village—wild powers naturally reside in the bush—women and children lock themselves up in their homes, closing all windows.⁸ These helmet-shaped masks represent mythical creatures, mixtures of the strongest bush animals, and serve as sort of native police force, passing judgment and empowering men by virtue of the incredible courage summoned in their presence. (It is generally accepted that the *bo nun amuin* are terrifying and it takes considerable effort not to flee at their appearance.) Most

8 Women still vividly describe their experiences with *bo nun amuin*, based on sounds heard from within the home.

often, they are danced at times of need, such as during epidemics, village conflict, or recently, during the French colonial invasion (Vogel 1997).

Still, even men concede that the strongest amuin, *Adyanun*, both a dance and the female sex organs, belongs to women and that without this power, the bo nun amuin could not exist, for women are the source of birth and life. Both Guerry (1972) and Vogel (1997) argue that Adya-nun is the strongest active force in all of Baule society, and women dance it, often at the request of men, in times of impending calamity, when not even the men's masks would be of assistance.

The dance may only be performed at night, and as with bo nun amuin appearances, all men must hide in their homes, as the women dance naked to expose their vaginas, the locus of power. If he sees them, a woman's sexual organs can kill a man point blank, and even a husband may not look directly upon his wife's sex during intercourse, lest he risk a sure death (Vogel 1997)⁹.

Finally, the Baule recognize that nature is filled with many minor bush spirits, *asye usu*. "They are everywhere in nature and then can (and often do) interfere in human affairs at any time in painful ways" (Vogel 1997:67). Often, they will attach themselves to a particular individual and oblige him or her to establish a personal cult, and choose him or her to become a *komien*, a diviner. When a person is first "sat upon" by the spirit, he or she may not realize it, forcing it to manifest itself in troublesome ways until it is acknowledged. Awareness usually comes at the hands of another diviner, who often recommends the commissioning of an beautiful, human-like statue a place where the spirit may reside and receive offerings, when not possessing the individual. The statues are only beautiful to attract the spirits presence; in no way do they resemble the spirits themselves, rather they serve as a form of flattery for spirits which are generally perceived to be hideously ugly¹². *Asye usu* may bring their "victims" considerable fame as diviners, who "speak" in dramatic public performances, but most people would rather avoid them as they exact many difficult interdictions (Vogel 1997). The Baule use identical statues to represent another category of beautiful spiritual beings, this time in their image. The only spirits not living on earth, these forces live in the *blolo*, literally "praised other," but commonly known in English as the "otherworld" (Ravenhill 1996). The blolo was our home before our time on Earth, and when we die, we return to the family we left behind there. It resembles Earth almost completely; people live in villages and engage in everyday activities. Beliefs connected to the *blolo* will be handled more thoroughly in a coming section.

9 The Baule are so convinced of the vagina's power that, during the French conquest, a group of women marched on the colonial capital and raised their skirts in front of French military officers, certain that this would result in their death and end the conflict. The actual result can only be described as a case of inter-cultural misunderstanding.

Baule Art and Change

Ettawageshik describes art as “a reflection of culture as well as one of the forms of interaction with other cultures” (1999:29), and for anthropological studies of social change as the result of intercultural contact, art offers an attractive starting point, because the dialogue it reflects is not only a significant part of material culture, but also assumes a very visual format. In the specific case of the Baule, the study of art is particularly advantageous, as it constitutes the largest body of existing literature on the culture. It is well-known fact that few West African cultures were isolated from European influence prior to colonialism, and it is entirely conceivable that the Baule had some interaction before the arrival of the French in the late 19th century. Nonetheless, due to their relatively interior position, we have little recorded pre-colonial contact with the Baule aside from the art forms they created (Etienne 1980), which were eagerly gobbled up by early explorers and conquerors. Baule art became intensely popular in Europe at the beginning of the last century; while obviously foreign, the taste at the time, its forms were “comfortable” and did not represent too radical a departure for European sensibilities (Wilkin 1999).

Most collections of African art contain a sizeable component of Baule sculpture, considered one of the most significant carving traditions of the world (Vogel 1997). This fascination continues today. Consider the recent studies by Susan Vogel (1997) and Phillip Ravenhill (1996), some of the most current Baule scholarship. Baule art emerges as the locus of both studies, which in many ways seems surprising, considering the relative lack of importance the Baule place on art and taking into account that both are trained ethnographers. Susan Vogel indeed notes:

“The fact that the focus of my own work was of relatively minor importance to the people who owned it has been hard for me to accept. In my older publications, I may have unconsciously suppressed the fact that sculptures occupied a secondary role in Baule culture...but now I recognize that Baule art is part of a value system in which spiritual or social values, as well as non-visual forms of aesthetic expression, have—and probably always have had—a greater importance than visual art” (1997:90-91).

While other scholars in art history have even lamented change in Baule art as a tragic loss to the world, Vogel hits on the key point: “Baule art is *part* of a value system” (1997:91), in other words, it reflects the fundamental concepts of this system and serves the function of providing interaction or representation within this system. Individual Baule artists may aesthetically interpret this system in different ways,

based on their personal experiences and their understanding of its operative factors. As this system changes, the revision in values should filter down into its consistent parts, including art. Thus, an examination of Baule art may help us to better understand cultural development as a whole.

Before continuing our discussion of change in the Baule context, it is necessary to offer a (slightly wider than conventional) definition of the word “art.” More reflective of Baule ideas about art and quite prevalent—though largely unstated—in the field of Africanist art history, is the meaning suggested by Ember and Ember’s definition of *expressive culture*: “Those activities such as art, music, dance and folklore that express human thoughts, emotions and feelings” (1999:505), that is, those activities which reflect value system. Because the Baule consider sculpture, dances, and ideas about spirits as related concepts—often using the same word for all three (Vogel 1997)—it only make sense to examine the recent developments along these lines.

Ideological Change

When the French entered the area that has since become Côte d’Ivoire, they colonized with the belief that only an iron fist could bring development to the area; African peoples needed to be “pacified”—saved from their own savage state—a task that only the French could, or rather, should execute. They came with armies and weapons and subjected the region’s native peoples to their awesome might until they caved, surrendering to save their own people or in the French perspective, realizing the “truth” (Gellar 1995). The Baule were the last to capitulate, fighting until 1912, when they were no longer able to resist (Etienne 1980).

At that time, the Baule probably instinctively sensed what was to come—that the most dangerous weapons were not the French guns but the French themselves: their ideas, beliefs and ways. Immediately after conquest, the French founded a new colonial government, “organized within a highly centralized federal framework headed by a governor-general who supervised and headed the activities of the territorial colonial governors” (Gellar 1995:144). Thus, the new government clearly established a new social hierarchy for the region. The native peoples were controlled by French territorial officers, who in turn were lead by France itself. The Baule were far below the French in the social hierarchy.

Colonial politics also alter social relations among Africans themselves. French colonial development was marked by the intent to create fully acculturated, albeit inferior, members of French society; therefore, along with the larger political structure, they also implemented a wide variety of social policies, designed to facilitate this process.

A socialized people needs money to cover its own management expenses, so first of all, a system of taxation was developed. Following French ideas, taxes would be collected from households by the male "head of house." Among cultures like the Baule, where women exerted particular power and influence, women took a step backward in the social totem, no longer being able to interact with its highest ranks (Etienne 1980). Similarly, when French schooling was introduced, only African boys were permitted to attend, and those that did acquired both the French language and French ideas, further elevating them socially. Among Africans, the highest still were those actually educated in France, and in at the time of independence, it was these individuals who came to rule the Côte d'Ivoire's government and industry (Kellar 1985).

As pointed out by Steiner and Phillips (1999), change to indigenous constructions often increased after the demise of colonialism, fueled by economic needs and the desire for self-identification as a nation. European-educated Africans, heading their new governments, saw Westernization and modernization and the key for building successful countries and eagerly supported European systems, installing them in their constitution and directing them among their peoples (Kellar 1995). Also, as later need for outside economic assistance became clear, this process was further booted by the "structural adjustment policies," imposed by outside lending agencies (Ndegwa et al. 1995). The Baule, with a pre-existing culture of flexibility, have readily adapted their artistic traditions to such situations. For example, Vogel (1997) mentions that the *Adyanun* was danced in the cases of most extreme need, most often threats from the outside.¹⁰ In today's society, the dance still flourishes but the crises have changed. Women now dance the *Adyanun* to influence local elections, when the children are getting bad grades in school, and in 1993, it was danced after the death of Houphouët-Boigny, a time of considerable uncertainty throughout the country (Vogel 1997).

A similar change has emerged with respect to the *blolo*, the other world, from which the Baule believe we have all come and to which we will return someday. When it comes to details, information about the *blolo* is sketchy. Most important is that people live in villages like in this world; however, everyone is exceptionally beautiful, highly successful, and there we all have a family of our own. Of this family, an individual's spouse is the most important person and the only one who ever bothers to contact this world (Ravenhill 1996; Vogel 1997).

10 Men's masks tend to be danced for threats and difficulties within the village and Baule society itself. Since women dance the *Adyanun* in times of greater need, I conjecture that the Baule associate this with outside events over which they have less control. Contrarily, village events are readily within their grasp.

Some Baule experience a time when crucial things seem to go awry; for example, they have trouble finding a spouse, are unable to conceive, are plagued by financial difficulties, or have fields that fail to produce. Such problems may advance to the point where they hinder an individual's ability to live as a productive member of society. In this case, a diviner may be consulted, and with reasonable frequency, it is revealed that one's otherworld spouse, angered by a lack of attention or jealous of their earthly activities, has decided to interfere and demand the needed care. In this case, a carving of the otherworld spouse must be made, in which he or she can reside, and which the Baule in question can care for tenderly, rubbing it with oils and offering it food sacrifices. Also, from that point onward, one night per week must be reserved to sleep alone "with" one's otherworld spouse, i.e. to dream of this first and true mate. Most Baule who have need of such a statue describe very intimate relationships with their spouse, and their dreams usually assume a highly sexual nature (Ravenhill 1996; Vogel 1973). The relationship is taken quite seriously and may even be perceived as threatening by real-world spouses, who by virtue of only knowing their mate in this world are referred to as "second wives" (Vogel 1997).

Since the blole is modeled on this world, like Baule people, spirit spouses also possess their own distinct personalities, desires and wishes. Thus, they will not accept just any likeness; a statue must adequately convey their beauty and material success. Not relying on chance, most spirit spouses communicate their physical appearance directly to the carver of the statue, most frequently in the form of a dream. Ravenhill writes: "A Baule carver of images of otherworld mates is somewhat like a portraitist in the Western tradition of art in that his task is to present a faithful portrayal of the character of an individual" (1996:20-21).

In the past, Baule spirit spouse sculpture exactly resembled *asye usu* statues. Museum experts could only determine their function by inspecting their patterns of use. Encrustations of blood and feathers from many sacrifices generally cover *asye usu* statues, while spirit spouses often exhibit a light patina from the considerable care devoted to them (Vogel 1973). In these sculptures, Baule carvers depicted idealized notions of beauty in terms of societal modifications: the addition of decorative scarifications, musculature adapted precisely for field labor, and elaborate coiffures, demonstrating exceptionally fantastic hair designs. To some extent, these "success symbols" indicated achievement by representing highly socialized individuals and underscoring deliberate attention to one's own physical condition (Ravenhill 1996). Among the Baule, natural beauty tends to hold little importance. Unlike Westerners, who may be inclined to describe a beautiful woman as being "like a flower," the Baule emphasize beauty through deliberate effort. This is reflected in the expression "...as beautiful as a statue" (Vogel 1997:91).

During the colonial years, newer statue designs slowly began to appear, depicting colonial officers wearing pith helmets and typical officer uniforms. Soon after, similar figures evolved wearing a wider variety of Western-style clothing and performing Western activities and/or professions. New spirit husbands wore three-piece suits, while maintaining typical Baule facial expressions and postures; spirit wives became teachers and nurses (Ravenhill 1996). This development continues today, and now in the most seemingly of traditional Baule villages, one can find sculpted women in string bikinis, rock stars with microphones and even boy scouts.

What incited this change? We have already discussed the colonial regime as an engine which usurped the more traditional, pre-colonial social hierarchy among the Baule, replacing it with a eurocentric system in which the French represented the pinnacle of civilization and the high rank of the new social structure. These changes then are representative of the wider cultural change initiated by the crisis of colonialism. Traditionally, Baule otherworld spouse sculptures displayed the idealized conception of beauty and success in Baule culture. In that respect, nothing has changed. Spirit spouses still convey these Baule ideals; however, the Baule now exist in a changed class system, where different symbols now represent the epitome of success. Whereas scarification once appeared, in the colonial age, pith helmets served as the mediator between the reality and the goal to be achieved. Ravenhill insightfully pointed out that these sculptures are not intended to replicate Europeans, nor do they express the desire for a European otherworld mate (1996). Indeed, the base form remains distinctly Baule. I have also seen newer forms representing urban Africans, as the trend across the continent causes more and more to move towards cities—most often the domain of the European educated and wealthy as well.

At the same time, other types of Baule art have declined or been supplanted by similar European implements. Since traditional Baule religious sculpture contains considerable spiritual power, it is generally not sanctioned to look upon it.¹¹ Therefore, to showcase skills and provide sculpture that the people could access, Baule carvers also produced a plethora of purely decorative carvings for implements with everyday uses. Their carved wooden doors, loom pulleys, and spoons earned the Baule a reputation in Europe as one of Africa's most artistic societies, the only one that would make "art for art's sake" (Vogel 270). However, the making of these objects waned near the beginning of the 20th century, as European objects began to enter the project "market." Now they are virtually not made. "Today, aesthetically pleasing objects

11 The Baule regard sight as a supreme sense, more dangerous even than touch, and it is not safe to look at something powerful or unfamiliar.

that are machine-made far from the village, and that are associated with modernity and money, have come into favor, replacing the handmade ones that exemplify Baule style" (Vogel 1997:270). I did not once see the traditional Baule carvings, so typical of museum displays, in a Baule village. Today's Baule prefer to showcase beauty imported from the outside.

Economic Change

Although the Baule were likely connected to the European trade indirectly through neighboring peoples in the past (Etienne 1980), they were plunged full-scale into the world market with the arrival of the French. Côte d'Ivoire's status as a colony implied the movement of West African raw materials and goods towards Europe and opened its people up to a currency-based exchange system with irreversible economic and cultural consequences. Aside from the development of cash-crop agriculture, which now employs many Baule men, in terms of their culture, the world African art market has been particularly impactful (Steiner 1994).

Europe first encountered traditional Baule art as curiosities brought home by the early sailors and explorers, and initially, only scholars were truly interested in such "treasures," approaching them as cultural relics. With reason as the prevailing paradigm of the day, unilineal evolutionist anthropologists, for example, used such "primitive" artifacts to underscore their belief that African societies represented a lower level of cultural evolution than that of Western Europe (Erickson 1998). However, before long, important European artists of the early 20th century began to take note of such works. Picasso was particularly fascinated by Baule sculpture and its creative distance from Western aesthetic norms, particularly for its freedom in depicting the human form, and worked many of its concepts into his own work. Later the Modernists too demonstrated the value of African art by incorporating it into their art (Wilkin 1999).

From then on, Europe was hooked. With colonialism well underway, it became increasingly popular to collect African curiosities as a link with a more primitive world or based on curiosity with the peoples of "new France" or "new England." Colonial officers began to purchase or commission African sculpture from villages to bring home as souvenirs of their tours on the continent, and as interest grew, by the 1920s and 1930s, one can see the first professional dealers moving into the Côte d'Ivoire region from Europe and establishing galleries in Paris (Steiner 1994).

The new educational system also played a role. As generations of Ivoirian children were educated in French schools—both pre- and post-independence—they learned the French language and European concepts (Vogel 1991). Coupled with these came the

Western notion of creating pictures, statues, textiles, etc. purely for aesthetic purposes. French provided the word, *l'art*, and thus planted the seeds for a new division of differently integrated cultural works. Baule craftspeople eagerly assumed these new ideas, noted the steadily increasing interest in their traditional "artwork," and soon began making objects simply for Western trade and outside consumption. For them, it offered a reasonable source of revenue, and a method of resolving financial difficulties. The interest only grew in the post-independence years with increased tourism, the development of improved communications technology, the "Peace Corps Boom," etc. and West African art had its especially strong heyday in the 1970s and early 1980s (Steiner 1994).

Ravenhill now points out that "each natural and cultural product found in the Baule world can be seen in terms of its potential economic value" (1996:64). The Baule are extremely aware of this fact, which can be useful knowledge for a people still trying to adapt their culture to accommodate outside systems, such as taxation. Knowing that they can fetch fair sums for village religious artwork—the authenticity of which is more "valid" for being used, a discussion all its own—now it is not uncommon for village members to sell their most important masks and statues to provide a small cash subvention in a time of need. Often they will offer the excuse that the mask may be re-carved to be used again. Vogel notes one case where one man sold an entire series of village masks, without the others' knowledge (Vogel 1997). Sadly enough, most village people never receive anywhere near the value of their works, which are generally degraded terribly by traders who then re-sell them at a considerable margin of profit (Steiner 1994).

Bo nun amuin masks, large and ferocious, spectacular displays of religious power and energy, are especially popular in the gallery setting and are highly sought as parts of collections. Traditionally, the Baule stored these masks outside of the village grounds—consistent with their separation of the village and bush—normally in a small grove of trees nearby. Formerly, these masks were guarded by their own power. Women always avoided the sacred forest, and even most Baule men consistently stayed clear as well, for fear of not meeting the specific interdictions required by the masks, which could result in death. Now, however, the masks are locked up to prevent theft by outsiders, who are unaffected by their powers (Vogel 1997). Thus, the strength of the *bo nun amuin* retreats a step, as they lose their "natural" efficacy in a world where they simply constitute a commercial—albeit valuable—resource. It says volumes to a people, when an outside woman may look upon, touch, hold, and even wear a sacred mask, a god, that would kill a Baule woman for even glimpsing it.

The Baule now generally acknowledge that the spirits refuse to inhabit the white world and flee land cultivated industrially. They also lack presence in *blofwe ninge*,

white man's things, such as factory made goods, which are by and large not considered products of nature. Many Baule now see this as an attractive alternative to a world overrun by demanding spirits. Because the Western market economy necessitates cash, a particularly troubling *asye usu* may supply an individual with just the appropriate amount of additional incentive to escape by taking up work on a nearby plantation (Vogel 1997). The supernatural powers have no effect in such a spiritual no-man's-land; thus, Western arrival now offers the Baule with a non-traditionally sanctioned escape from the *asye usu*, which was formerly mediated by statuary. Similarly, some people find it simpler to utilize Western-made products, which do not have their respective natural components, which imply the need for a degree of respect to be shown.

It is also possible to witness occurrences completely to the contrary. As French officers began to notice Baule carvers sculpting spirit spouse statues with Western trappings, they found themselves fascinated, and many, upon leaving, commissioned their own likeness carved into statue form as a souvenir. The popularity of this custom quickly exploded among the colonials and interest expanded to incoming tourists in the region as well. At some point, sculptors realized the profit potential of these statues, and directly commenced carving large quantities of European figures. This custom raced throughout West Africa, where they are now carved by Wolof traders in Dakar to Yoruba artists in Lagos. Over time, a regional stylistic uniformity developed, replacing the obvious Baule features, until what finally emerged was a completely new genre of African statuary, known as *colon* figures after the people they were intended to represent (Ravenhill 1996; Steiner 1994). Phillips and Steiner note that worldwide one can encounter such hybrid-constructions, originally designed for outside use. Moreover, they argued that these creations may also often find their way into cultural use (1999), which indeed has been occurring among the Baule. It is possible to find distinctive *colon* figures being used as spirit spouses, ironic but suiting as being the original genre from which they emerged.

In his study of Sepik River cultures in Papua New Guinea, Silverman (1999) found similar changes in art forms initiated by tourist and market processes; however, he also identified that such changes work to alter regional and village sociocultural processes, a trend readily visible among Baule country as well. The potters of Tano Sakassou exemplify this phenomenon. Among the Baule, pot-making traditionally fell under the broad heading of women's activities. In the past, all Baule women crafted the pot needed by their families, and potters were married women who learned the craft out of necessity. However, because of the new, expanding market, they have adapted, and in the early 1980s, a cooperative was established by Koua Aya for the full-time production of ceramics. Now twenty potters work side by side daily solely as an economic

venture.¹² Choosing not to bother with local markets as an outlet for their goods, these potters now sell their work on site to other Baule women, who no longer make them as the need is supplied by skilled “professionals,” or transport it to regional craft fairs and the large markets in Abidjan.

This specific group of potters also highlights another obvious change in social realities. As Ivoirians adopted the French economic system of the early twentieth century, they also accepted one in which women took a secondary role to men who were in control. We have already noted that this runs contrary to traditional Baule principles, which held women in relative equality. However, in Tano Sakassou, as women have specialized in a women-controlled industry, which incidentally has proved quite lucrative, several men have taken up positions within the cooperative. When I asked them why, one male potter responded: “If women can do men’s activities, we can do theirs too” (07/17/2000); any original teasing from the male community has been quelled by their relative wealth in the community.

Similarly, Mona Etienne (1980) has described how the rise of the colonial regime and its continuance in independence furnished men with the resources to control the formerly women-run cloth industry. Traditional Baule marriage consisted more of an economic pact and a method of sharing resources than any particular emotional bond; women relied on men to provide them with food, for example, whereas men needed women to cook it. This relationship also served as a way to organize the societies perhaps two most important industries: yam production and cloth production. Neither were necessary Baule products, but nonetheless considered extremely important. No Baule would choose to live on cassava alone; it is thought to be a worthless existence. Cloth equally is unnecessary, but serves important social functions such as measuring a family’s wealth in funeral displays, gift giving, and ceremonial dress. Both women and men contribute to each industry but the end product is said to be controlled by the one that offers the more fundamental “base” work with only some of the surplus being destined for the other party. Men owned the yam crop, because they performed the exhausting labor of tilling the fields, even though women were responsible for tending the plants and weeding the beds. However, every man was obliged to prepare his wife a small field, where she could grow additional food of her own for her family. Most women also interspersed their crop with cotton, which they later spun into thread. Only Baule men wove this thread, weaving being their domain, but despite the need for this process, women still controlled the woven cloth. “What they perceived was that without the original cotton, without the spun thread, no weaving, no woven

12 A group of carvers in the village of Ndjebonua have done the same.

cloth, splendid or ordinary, was possible" (Etienne 1980:225). To the pre-conquest Baule, the durability of cloth made it a more valuable industry than that of yams, and in other words, an industry that men wanted to control.

When the French established the government of Côte d'Ivoire colony, they established a head tax to meet the costs of administration. According to French custom, taxes must be paid by the *male* family head for his family, *including* his wife. "To be the primary target of taxation made the acquisition of cash a vital need for men, rather for women" (Etienne 1980:227) and most men started to cultivate cotton as a cash crop to supply this demand. The cotton was then sold to textile and thread-making factories. Within Baule territory, one factory was established in Gonfreville, which soon became the largest supplier of thread in all of Côte d'Ivoire. With the cash they received from selling their cotton, men usually had sufficient money to purchase some ready-made thread from the factory itself, allowing them to both amass more than their wives could produce by intercropping and to circumvent them to gain control of the product. This practice has now become so ingrained that men control Baule cloth across the extent of the territory (Etienne 1980).

Political Change

With independence, Côte d'Ivoire's first president, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, was determined to convert his country into the model African success story (Vogel 1991). He faced a considerable challenge, however. The nation's borders held (and still hold) a multitude of different ethnic groups, a strong Muslim north, and an equally strong Catholic presence in the south. Aside from French conquest, most of these peoples had little in common; indeed, some were even mortal enemies. As such, Houphouët-Boigny emphasized the importance of creating national unity as his primary political goal. He believed this was only possible by creating a Côte d'Ivoire which people could feel proud of, and to achieve this end, he proposed a combined set of economic-boosting and cultural strategies. Surely no one would complain in the light of an elevated standard of living (Vogel 1991).

As the country generally lacked a developed internal infrastructure, one of the new government's first programs was to develop a system of roads, highways and railroads within the nation. However, while making complete sense in their respective cultural contexts, the networks of small villages scattered around the country provided an insurmountable challenge for a new government bent on creating a national transportation system with little money. Thus, a plan was quickly drafted to consolidate villages and move them to more convenient locations along major transportation routes, where they could be more easily administered (Vogel 1997). Also, being Baule himself,

Houphouët-Boigny placed many of his major "improvement" projects directly in his home region. One of the most major involved building a dam near Koussou, which would create a lake flooding much of Baule territory. This required the construction of many new villages by the government (Vogel 1997). As incentive, villages received special government benefits such as hospitals or clinics.

The new government villages scarcely resembled traditional Baule communities, despite being built by Africans. In traditional Baule villages, houses are grouped together in tight clusters, forming small courtyards. Houses are also very small, usually only for sleeping, and most activity takes place outside among others. On the other hand, the government-built communities were designed more with European standards in mind, Houphouët-Boigny's "gift" to his people. Houses were much larger, planned for activities inside, and were separated by wide, organized streets, making a traditional social life very difficult. Often they were much larger as well, being the composite of several different villages. In the end, those forced to inhabit these newer villages often found it difficult to rebuild a normal experience after the move (Vogel 1997).

Over the course of her studies, Vogel researched in both Old and New Kami. While in Old Kami, she learned of a special type of Baule masquerade, called *Mblolo*, an entertainment dance performed solely for the pleasure and enjoyment of the village. Taking on the atmosphere of a play, it contains its own cast of characters, all represented by masked dancers, and a general "script" which can be modified over the course of the performance. The dialogue consists mostly of jokes and humorous references to Baule life, and most "skits" depict that which might be most enjoyable to a Baule individual. Traditionally, *Mblolo* was initiated by a group of the village's best dancers, who collect the masks and determine the text. Once created, it will usually be danced with frequency, but eventually dies down as its dancers grow older and weaker and retire from dancing. Normally, after a short lapse, the next generation of dancers will decide to create its predecessor (Vogel 1997).

At the time of this early research, the *Mblolo* tradition was fading across Baule culture and viewed as old fashioned, was no longer danced in Kami. However, after forced relocation, a number of social problems plagued the new village, and most of its residents found it difficult to reestablish the unity that had once existed. Around this time, a group of young people decided to revive the *Mblolo* dance, which they performed in New Kami. In this incarnation, the masks had themes representing ideas of unity: a ram for "President",¹³ an elephant for "Côte d'Ivoire," a dove for

13 In Baule culture, the ram connotes strength, ability and determination. After coming to power, Félix Houphouët added the Baule word for ram, "Boigny," to his name to send a clear message to his followers.

“peace,” and a male figure representing “union.” Throughout the dance, interactions attempted to divert attention away from intra-village difficulties and stressed the need for unity in the face of a changing cultural symbol (Vogel 1997). Hardly subtle, this use of art directly demonstrates how the Baule use it to mediate and understand their position in a new Côte d’Ivoire.

The *Goli* masquerade cycle seems to supply a similar function. “Goli is a day-long spectacle that normally involves the whole village and includes the appearance of four pairs of masks, music played on special instruments, and ideally, the joyous consumption of a great deal of palm wine” (Vogel 1997). Purchased only around 100 years ago from the neighboring Wan peoples, Goli quickly developed into the most beloved Baule masquerade, and now in many villages it may be danced as much as twice a month. Its popularity may stem from both its openness and flexibility. Danced during the day, the Goli cycle remains open to the entire village, yet includes both beautiful entertainment-type masks, including serene but powerful women’s faces, as well as fierce-looking helmet type masks, characteristic of the *bo nun amuin* but something entirely different. Women can experience normally forbidden mask forms without danger, and it is one dance where the entire village may come together. Goli also has manifold uses; it is often danced at the funerals of important people or may simply be danced for pleasure.

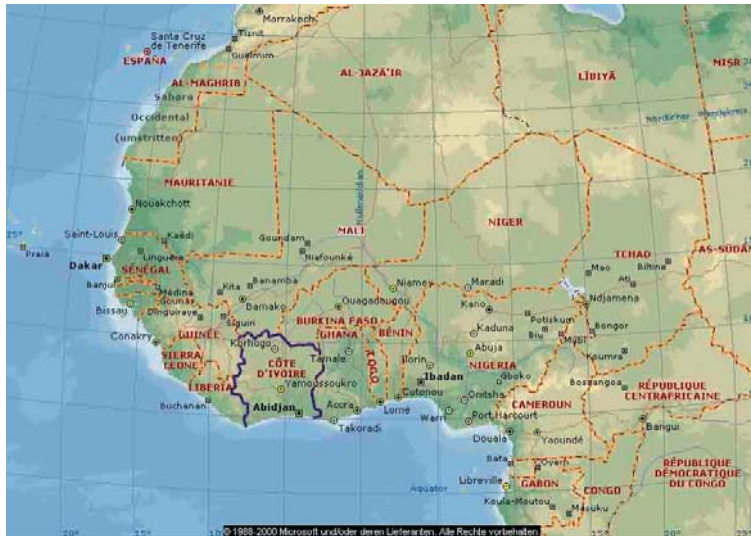
So charismatic is the dance that the Baule presentation has also become decidedly popular outside of their culture. One professor insisted, “People like the Goli, because it is so spectacular to watch” (22/07/2000). Banking on its instant natural appeal, Houphouët-Boigny appropriated this particular masquerade for use in his cultural unification policies; Goli dances were to represent the ethnic component of any state function. In a short period of time, it has emerged as one of Côte d’Ivoire’s national symbols and often represents the nation as a whole. One can now just as easily see Goli masqueraders dancing on Ivoirian—and world—television and state funerals or political events as in Baule village settings, something which brings many Baule great pride (Vogel 1991). Such has the popularity of this symbol grown, that it has been compared to the American bald eagle, and some Baule will travel worldwide to present this dance in the name of their country. I was fortunate enough to see the Goli masquerade while in the village of Bendekouassikro (see appendix B for photos), and all of the male performers, aside from the masked dancers themselves, proudly wore their matching “Goli World Tour” t-shirts indicating performances in Germany, France and the United States. Goli also served as the focus performances for later national dance festivals, *Festimask*, designed to unite Ivoirians, by showcasing the treasury (diversity yet similarity) of dance possessed by its peoples, and tourists alike (Steiner 1994).

Conclusion

The so-called “crisis of colonialism” earns its name through the way in which conquering cultures crash over the conquered like a wave on the beach, an interaction that does not result in a slow process of diffusion, sharing ideas slowly over time. Rather, the conquered is forced to “update” at a breakneck speed or become obsolete in a changing society—but not ultimately. In the end, the conqueror too finds itself a change beast, as much a hybrid of the cultures it thought to dominate as a product of its own. In the process, it is not easy to achieve such an accord. Communication takes place along many fronts, as each side systematically reacts to the multiple facets of their interaction.

In West Africa, art can be seen as one of many methods of describing societal change and feelings in a societal position. For example, Baule spirit spouse sculptures lend us a closer view of how a changing social hierarchy is perceived; Goli masks offer a visible method in which Baule people can display their participation in a national system; and cloth represents the evolving roles of men and women in a new society. In turn, these arts may assist those who create them to better position themselves in their dynamic world. Phillips offers that in situations of (colonial/postcolonial) cultural collision, artworks work “as visual texts that produc[e] ethnicity...by actively negotiating and contesting [imposed stereotypes]” (1999:33-34). Currently, the Baule are in the process of forming their new identity in light of their own changing social milieu.

APPENDIX A: Location of Côte d'Ivoire and Baule Territory.



Source: Microsoft Weltatlas (2001).



Source: Microsoft Weltatlas (2001). Baule territory shaded slightly in blue.

APPENDIX B: Photos of Goli Masquerade



The Goli musicians sporting their
“Goli World Tour” t-shirts.
(Photo: Shawn Volesky)



Left: Kplé, Klpé, a mischievous goat-spirit
which appears in the dance’s first cycle.
Right: Kplé Plan, an ultimate representation
of feminine grace and beauty, from the second cycle.
(Photos: Shawn Volesky)

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