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Liaising Between Visible and Invisible Realities:
A Ritual Gourd in the African Collection of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at
Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

LIASING BETWEEN VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE REALITIES: A RITUAL GOURD IN THE AFRICAN COLLECTION OF THE VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

By Ashley E. Holdsworth, M.A.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2014

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In 2010, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts accessioned a ritual gourd from Mambila peoples of Nigeria and Cameroon into their collection. Although ritual containers with similar configurations abound in different parts of the Cameroon Grasslands in Central Africa, the VMFA gourd presents particular difficulties due to the nature of its accumulation and the lack of scholarship on the Mambila peoples. Therefore, in this thesis, all the aspects of its accumulation have been considered in relation to the culture and belief system of the Mambila and their neighbors. Special attention has been paid to the interconnectedness of form, function, and meaning throughout the thesis in order to shed some light on the social, cosmic, and ritual significance of the gourd and its attachments.

Introduction

This thesis examines the nature of the relationship between form and function in a ritual gourd from Africa recently acquired by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA), Richmond, Virginia (Fig. 1). According to the Museum's file, the gourd is from Mambila culture (located on the Nigeria-Cameroon border)¹ and would seem to have been made in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. It is unique because of its size and visual impact. Mounted on a cylindrical wicker base, the gourd is approximately 24 inches high and 20 ½ inches wide. Attached to its body is an assortment of animal bones, skins, horns, shells, seed pods, carved human images, as well as medicine bags, all apparently intended to not only empower the gourd's content, but also mediate between visible and invisible realities.

Although ritual containers with similar configurations abound in different parts of the Cameroon Grasslands in Central Africa, a close examination of the carved human images on the VMFA gourd reveals that they are in the Mambila style, thus reinforcing its attribution to that culture.² Traditionally painted red, white, and black, a typical *tadep* has the left hand (or both hands) touching the chin. Most of them were stored in or displayed outside granaries and may be adorned with ritual paraphernalia similar to those worn by members of the Mambila healing

¹ For a map of Cameroon showing the location of the Mambila people see *A Cameroon World*. Bayside, NY: QCC Art Gallery, 2007. (p.16)

² For examples of Mambila *tadep* figures see Paul Gebauer. *Art of Cameroon*. Portland, OR: Portland Museum of Art, 1979. (p. 320, 321, 324)

association, known as *Sùàgà*.³ The latter takes a holistic approach to health care, in that it promotes the well-being of the community (rather than that of the individual) by maintaining law and order, as well as using rituals to cleanse the environment and its inhabitants. There are five carved *tadep* figures on the VMFA gourd: one on top and the other four deployed on its body as if to mark the cardinal directions, thus suggesting cosmic communication or surveillance.

In short, this thesis will examine all the motifs on the VMFA gourd with a view to relating them to the culture and belief system of the Mambila and their neighbors. In the process, I will pay special attention to the interconnectedness of form, function, and meaning in order to shed some light on the social, cosmic and ritual significance of the gourd and its attachments.

Justification

The literature on Mambila culture deals mainly with their history, religion, language, and kinship systems. Only a few publications focus on their art forms. Works published before 1940 include a study of the grammar of the Mambila language by E. Meyer. Starting in the early 1950s, some scholars conducted ethnographic surveys around the Nigerian-Cameroon border. Among them were Farnham Rehfisch (who did fieldwork in the Mambila village of Warwar in 1953/1954) and David Zeitlyn (who collected data in the village of Somié in 1985). Much of the art-historical literature deals with Mambila sculptures and masquerades. Paul Gebauer's posthumously published *Art of Cameroon* is a survey of artwork from various ethnic groups in

³ To see Mambila ritual paraphernalia in situ see Paul Gebauer. *Art of Cameroon*. Portland, OR: Portland Museum of Art, 1979. (p. 72) and David Zeitlyn. "Mambila Figurines and Masquerades: Problems of Interpretation." *African Arts* 27 (1994).

the country. Mambila art is not well represented in the book, only their figure sculpture and domestic architecture are mentioned. Mambila gourds have received even less attention.

Though the forms and functions of decorated and undecorated gourds vary from one African culture to another, their contexts are similar. For many of them are used for serving drinks and for storing sacred concoctions.⁴ Thus, as my iconographic analysis will demonstrate, the bones, skins, horns, and man-made bundles on the VMFA gourd convey much more than meets the eye, most especially in their roles as agents of metaphysical power during divination, healing, oath taking, and other rituals aimed at promoting the social and spiritual well-being of an individual, the family, and Mambila society as a whole. Needless to say, an awareness of the possible contexts and functions of the VMFA gourd is bound to enrich the spiritual and aesthetic experience of those museum visitors not familiar with the fundamentals of African art.

It is pertinent, at this juncture, to differentiate between the “gourd” and “calabash” in the literature on African art. Though the two terms are often used interchangeably (since they both refer to the plant of the *Cucurbitaceae* family), I use “gourd” in this thesis to designate the dried and hollowed-out shell with an opening at the top, like the VMFA example. Some gourds are shaped like a bottle.⁵ As a result, most gourds are used for storing and transporting liquids, seeds, grains and powdered substances. A typical “calabash,” on the other hand, is a hollowed-out shell shaped like a bowl. Certain ball-shaped examples may be cut into two halves, so that the top

⁴ Marla C. Berns and Barbara Rubin Hudson, *The Essential Gourd: Art and History in Northeastern Nigeria*, (Los Angeles: University of California, 1986), 34-35.

⁵ For an image of Bansa Palm Wine Jug see *A Cameroon World*. Bayside, NY: QCC Art Gallery, 2007. (p.129)

becomes the lid.⁶ Consequently, the calabash performs more functions than a typical gourd, being used for storing, transporting, and serving food and drinks, among others.

Notwithstanding, the calabash shares many of the symbolic attributes of the gourd, both featuring prominently in African rituals.

Literature Review

Major contributions to the scholarship on the Mambila include publications by Farnham Rehfisch and David Zeitlyn. Both scholars completed their fieldwork among the Mambila in the second half of the twentieth century. Farnham Rehfisch, in his master's thesis, examined the economy, ancestral traditions, marriage customs, and the residency patterns. While his research is silent on the exact functions of Mambila ritual calabashes, it nonetheless provides some insight into the possible uses of the VMFA gourd. David Zeitlyn's *Sua in Somié: Aspects of Mambila Traditional Religion* is a good introduction to the Cameroon's Mambila religion and ethnography. His text contains a lot of valuable information on art created specifically for ritual purposes. Equally relevant to my thesis is Nancy Beth A. Schwartz's *Mambilla—Art and Material Culture* which discusses the Schneider Collection of Mambilla Art at the Milwaukee Public Museum. Gilbert D. Schneider and his family collected the objects between 1947 and 1951, while living and working among the Mambila of northern Nigeria. Formerly placed under French Cameroon, this sub-group group opted to become part of Nigeria's Sardauna Province in 1961. At any rate, Schneider's collection represents the whole of Mambila material culture. The

⁶ For an image of a Hausa Calabash see Geoffrey Parrinder, *African Mythology*, London: Hamlyn, 1967. (p.24)

documentation identifies most of the items in use, frequently accompanied by contextual photographs and cultural terms to guide future researchers.

Major books and journal articles on Mambila art and aesthetics include Paul Gebauer's *Art of Cameroon* and David Zeitlyn's *Mambila Figurines and Masquerades: Problems of Interpretation*. Though Gebauer's book is virtually silent on Mambila gourds and calabashes, it offers insightful analyses of Mambila carved figures with an emphasis on form and function. According to him, carved figures are not objects of worship but repositories for spiritual powers intended to protect against evil forces. He asserts that the abstracted forms of the figures are intended to attract the attention of spirits. One of his illustrations depicts a stopper made of raffia cork or carved from wood, which might have been used to seal a large gourd for storing palm wine or corn beer. According to him, carved-wooden stoppers, like the one sealing the VMFA gourd, were used because they provided protection from evil spirits or hostile neighbors. David Zeitlyn's article analyzes the uses and significance of Mambila figurines, relating the *tadep* figure to masquerades of the healing society (*Sùàgà* or *Sua*). Much of the article references the contributions of Paul Gebauer but argues that the connections he made between carved sculpture and ancestor cults rest on assumptions that neither he nor Rehfisch could validate in their own fieldwork. Nonetheless, both Gebauer and Zeitlyn offer useful information germane to the focus of this thesis.

Scholars discussing animal symbolism in African art include Allen F. Roberts, Paula Ben-Amos, and Mary Douglas. Almost all of them draw attention to the prominence of creatures in images associated with rites of passage, warfare, healing, divination, leadership, and problem-solving, among others. Allen Roberts' *Animals in African Art: From the Familiar to the Marvelous* examines the use of animal motifs as metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche. In

addition, he offers a theoretical framework for understanding such motifs as polysemic tropes with visual, performative, and verbal significations. As a result, some creatures may be used to define group identity or emblemize what it means to be human by transforming ordinary objects into extraordinary symbols with metaphysical implications.

In her article, *Men and Animals in Benin Art*, Paula Ben-Amos looks at the function of animals in ancient Benin culture (in southwestern Nigeria), underscoring how artists use specific animals as metaphors for reinforcing political and supernatural powers. She argues that Benin culture's belief in the interdependence of cosmic forces is implicit in the way they compare and contrast animality and humanity. Her interpretations of pangolins and antelopes motifs in Benin art are particularly relevant to this thesis, given the appearance of similar elements on the VMFA gourd. In *Animals in Lele Religious Symbolism*, Mary Douglas addresses the Lele's perception of the pangolin and the relationship among humans, animals, and spiritual beings. Her article deals with many topics central to this thesis and her field observations provide useful descriptions of the relationship between the Lele and pangolins.

Major contributions to the scholarship on the use of gourds and calabashes in African societies include publications by Marla C. Berns, Barbara Rubin Hudson, Geoffrey Parrinder, Babatunde Lawal, and Roy Sieber. In their book entitled *The Essential Gourd: Art and History in Northeastern Nigeria*, Berns and Hudson, examine the production, decoration, and function of gourds in Northeastern Nigeria. The authors elaborate upon previous studies of gourd/calabash decorations in the region. Although the examples they analyzed are different from the VMFA gourd, their text nevertheless provides useful information on the use and significance of calabashes and gourds along the Nigeria-Cameroon border.

Another important contribution to the literature on the importance of gourds and calabashes in Africa can be found in Geoffrey Parrinder's book, *African Mythology* which examines their implications in African cosmologies. The Fon of the Republic of Benin (formerly Dahomey), for example, conceptualize the universe as a calabash with two halves, with the top alluding to the male-sky (Lisa) and the bottom, to the female-Earth (Mawu). Babatunde Lawal draws attention to the existence of a similar concept among the Western Yoruba of Nigeria in his chapter *Ayel' Oja; Orunn' Ile: Imaging and Performing Yoruba Cosmology* in the book *African Cosmos: Stellar Arts*. According to him, since the bottom half of the cosmic calabash supports the lid, the Yoruba sometimes liken the configuration to a Mother-and-Child figure, signifying how Mother-Nature sustains humankind. Besides, the Yoruba view the rainbow as a snake (Esumare) which connects heaven and earth in the same way the umbilical cord (equated with the rainbow snake) joins the placenta to the fetus inside a woman's womb. And since the serpent motif is associated with regeneration in many African cultures, Lawal's chapter offers some insight into some of the possible implications of the snake skins on the VMFA gourd. It may also explain why some African cultures associate gourds in general with the womb and consequently use them to incubate/revitalize curative medicine.

Barbara Rubin, in her article *Calabash Decoration in North East State, Nigeria*, discusses the preparation and various uses of the calabash. On the other hand, Roy Sieber's book *African Furniture and Household Objects*, looks at gourds as containers for drinking, storing, preparing, and serving food. One example (from the Cameroon) illustrated in the book has a shape similar to the VMFA gourd.⁷ In short, published materials on the forms, uses and significance of gourds

⁷ See Ewer Bamum Calabash in Roy Sieber. *African Furniture and Household Objects*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1980. (p. 205)

and calabashes along the Nigeria-Cameroon border shed considerable light on their ritual contexts among the Mambila.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Since the VMFA gourd is an assemblage, my approach in this thesis will be interdisciplinary in the sense that it will combine anthropological with iconographical and formal analyses to relate form, function and meaning.

As Arnold Rubin has observed, assemblages in African art are noted for their emphasis on the horns, skulls, jaws/teeth, claws, skins/shells, and feathers of different animals and birds as well as other accessories—all aimed at enhancing the *affecting presence* and power of the objects to which they are attached, in addition to reinforcing their functions.⁸ According to Martha Anderson and Christine Kreamer, these motifs often signify “the wilderness, a domain that evokes fear yet offers the potential to acquire power for those courageous enough to enter it.”⁹ No wonder “wilderness” motifs appear frequently in ritual assemblages exemplified by the Costumes of the Oku peoples,¹⁰ the *Bocio* images of the Fon of the Republic of Benin,¹¹ the *Ngbe* society panel of the Ejagham of Nigeria,¹² and *Minkisi/Mankisi* icons of the Kongo and

⁸ Arnold Rubin, “Accumulation: Power and Display in African Sculpture,” *Artforum* 13 (1975): 35-47.

⁹ Martha G. Anderson and Christine M. Kreamer, *Wild Spirits, Strong Medicine: African Art and the Wilderness*. (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press (In collaboration with The Center for African Art, New York, 1989)), 23.

¹⁰ See Costume and Hat with Magical Materials in *A Cameroon World*. Bayside, NY: QCC Art Gallery, 2007. (p.73)

¹¹ See *Bocio Figure. Power Figure (Nkisi)* in Jacques Kerchache, *Vodun: African Voodoo*, (Paris: Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain, 2011), 123.

¹² See *Ngbe-Society Emblem* in Jaschke, Karin. “An Ngbe-Society Emblem,” *Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University* 58 (1999): 70-76.

Songye of the Democratic Republic of Congo.¹³ Usually commissioned primarily by rulers, community leaders, priests, diviners, healers, and hunters, among others, such assemblages may be used to facilitate communication with the “otherworldly” and, in the process, control or manipulate the forces within it for the benefit of humanity.¹⁴

While plant motifs and herbal concoctions may be used for curative purposes, certain animal parts may have oath-taking, law-enforcement, and other social-control functions as well. Of course, such practices also obtain in other parts of the world, reflecting what some scholars regard as the Nature-Culture dialectic – the tendency by humans to perceive themselves as controlling the ecosystem, even though they completely depend on it.¹⁵ Besides, and as James Fernandez has noted, humans have transformed animals into a “primordial metaphor” with which to define and reinforce their own humanity.¹⁶ For they frequently employ the metaphor to establish what Paula Ben-Amos calls “the outer limits of humanity, that is, the non-human or uncivilized as well as the more-than-human or supernatural.” In short, I have used the “humanity-animality” paradigm, along with formal and iconographical analyses, to shed some light on the cultural and ritual significance of the VMFA gourd.

¹³ See Nkondi Figure from the Lower Congo in Monica Blackmun Visona and others, eds., *A History of African Art* Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2008. (p. 350)

¹⁴ See Monica B. Visona, Robin Poyner, and Herbert M. Cole, *A History of Art in Africa*. (New Jersey: Pearson/ Prentice Hall, 2008), 332; Suzanne P. Blier, *African Vodun: Art of Psychology, and Power*. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995).; and Wyatt MacGaffey and Michael Harris, *Astonishment and Power*. (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993.

¹⁵ David Greenwood J and William A. Stini. *Nature, Culture, and Human History*. New York: Harper and Row, 1977, 393–408.

¹⁶ James Fernandez, “Persuasions and Performances: Of the Beast in Every Body... And the Metaphors of Everyman,” *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 101 (1), 1972, 41.

Chapter Summaries

The first chapter introduces the reader to the Mambila, their geographical location, history, social organization, culture, cosmology, and religion. It also examines the forms, contexts, and functions of their principal art forms as well as the role of ritual specialists and how they manipulate symbols through the ritual process and secrecy to mediate between visible and invisible realities. The second chapter provides an iconographical analysis of the VMFA gourd and its attachments, highlighting their cosmological, folkloric, and cultural implications in relation to contexts of use. The third draws attention to how the ritual process transforms the VMFA gourd and its attachment from “ordinary” objects into “extraordinary” symbols, charging them with metaphysical powers and thus enabling them to work in concert to perform multiple functions, depending on how they are manipulated. The conclusion focuses on the historical factors that transitioned the VMFA gourd from a ritual icon into a museum exhibit.

Chapter One: The Mambila

The Mambila people are an agricultural group on both sides of the Nigeria-Cameroon border. Estimated to be approximately 43,000 in 1972, those in Nigeria inhabit the Mambila Plateau. The Cameroonian Mambila are smaller, numbering between 10,000 and 15,000.¹⁷ They occupy the Tikar Plain and are reported to have migrated there (over the last two centuries) from the Adamaoua (Adamawa) Province of the Mambila Plateau in Nigeria (i.e., from the villages of Atta (Ta), Sonkolong (Mbɔr), and Somié (Ndeba)).¹⁸ The name Mambila means “the men” and is said to derive from the Fulani (Fulfulde) language.¹⁹ The Cameroonian Mambila identify themselves as Bò Bà (The Bà) and speak the Jù Bà language; while those in Nigeria call themselves Nɔr bò (The people).²⁰ In addition to their original language, which has many dialects, most Mambila speak Fulani “Fulfulde,” especially in markets along the Nigerian-Cameroon border.²¹

¹⁷ David Zeitlyn. “Sua in Somié: Mambila Traditional Religion” (PhD thesis, Cambridge University, 1990), 10.

¹⁸ Zeitlyn. “Sua in Somié,” 10.

¹⁹ Nancy Beth A. Schwartz. *Mambilla—Art and Material Culture*. (Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee Public Museum, 1972), 9.

²⁰ David Zeitlyn. “Sua in Somié: Mambila Traditional Religion” (PhD thesis, Cambridge University, 1990), 10.

²¹ Zeitlyn. “Sua in Somié,” 15.

Although their social organization is fairly uniform, the leadership structure varies from one community to another. For example, the role of a chief among the Nigerian Mambila is primarily a ritual one, whereas it is much more complex among their counterparts in the Cameroon. Here, the leadership structure is highly institutionalized with political functions based on gerontocracy principles—a phenomenon that would seem to have been influenced by their Cameroonian neighbors.²²

The Mambila have two planting seasons: one during the early rains in March, April, and May, and the other, during the heavy rains in September, October, and November. The dry northeasterly winds, known as the Harmattan, distribute dust over West Africa during the months between November and March. The annual ‘feast of all souls’ happens during the dry season. Palm wine, porridge, and pieces of the flesh of game animals are offered inside shrines (*Kuru*) during this dry season festival.²³ These dusty winds deposit nutrients and greatly affect the productivity of this ecosystem.²⁴ The main staples are maize and guinea corn, which are often planted with ground nuts, pumpkins, okra, and beans. Secondary crops include bananas, cotton, tobacco, cassava, taro, sweet potatoes, and peppers.²⁵ Mambila farmers started growing coffee as a cash crop in the early 1960s.²⁶

²² David Zeitlyn. “Mambila Figurines and Masquerades: Problems of Interpretation,” in *African Arts* 27 (1994): 39.

²³ C.K. Meek. *Tribal Studies in Northern Nigeria*. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1931), 556.

²⁴ J.J. Stoorvogel, N. Van Breeman, and B.H. Janssen. “The Nutrient Input by Harmattan Dust to a Forest Ecosystem in Cote d’Ivoire, Africa,” in *Biogeochemistry* 37 (1997): 145-146.

²⁵ Nancy Beth A. Schwartz. *Mambilla—Art and Material Culture*. (Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee Public Museum, 1972), 9.

²⁶ David Zeitlyn, “Mambila Figurines and Masquerades: Problems of Interpretation,” in *African Arts*, 39.

Men and women share agricultural duties. By the age of twelve, children usually have farms of their own. The land traditionally belongs to the family head who (as the chief) assigns plots to members. *Kurum* is a mutual aid society that supplies labor for clearing or harvesting fields, building houses, and other large tasks. An individual might belong to one or more of these mutual aid societies, in addition to taking care of personal business. *Kurum* also provides important social contact for members through dancing and drinking. Notwithstanding the fact that family members work together in the fields, certain duties are gender specific.²⁷

Women are expected to cook the main meals, care for the children, and perform household chores. Apart from growing and preparing cotton for weaving, the men specialize in metal work, woodcarving, and mat making. They also build and maintain houses. A typical family compound usually consists of three or four structures, pens for chickens and goats, water storage containers as well as granaries—all enclosed by a fence. The distance between family compounds in a given hamlet reflects the relationship between their inhabitants. Important for ritual purposes,²⁸ each hamlet is headed by the oldest male resident, regardless of his profession or kinship affiliation.²⁹ As the administrative head (called *Kassala* in Warwar),³⁰ he settles disputes within the hamlet, in addition to representing members of his compounds in disputes involving others within the hamlet. The head also serves as the direct link to the local

²⁷ Nancy Beth A. Schwartz. *Mambilla—Art and Material Culture*. (Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee Public Museum, 1972), 9-10.

²⁸ Schwartz. *Mambilla—Art and Material Culture*, 9.

²⁹ Farnham Rehfisch. *The Social Structure of a Mambila Village* (London: University of London, 1956), 135.

³⁰ It has been suggested that the term *Kassala* probably derived from the Fulani word *Kachella* meaning “chief slave”. It is unknown if the office of *Kassala* was instituted among the Mambila by the Fulani or by the Colonial administration. See Farnham Rehfisch. *The Social Structure of a Mambila Village* (London: University of London, 1956), 153.

government administration. The term ‘government administration’ (as used here) is vague because the Mambila were colonized by the German, French, and British. Some of them also came under the descendants of Fulani *jihadists* such as the Emir of Adamawa. Several hamlets form a village. The latter is often named after its founder or an ancestor, and all the inhabitants come together at least twice a year to celebrate harvest festivals.

History

Little is known of the Mambila past, though some sections identify themselves as the aboriginal inhabitants of their respective areas. According to Farnham Rehfisch who did field research in the Nigerian village of Warwar between 1954 and 1955:

The Mambila have no origin myths....My question, “Where did the first Mambila come from?” was invariably met with blank stares.

All my informants said that they had no idea....Some of my informants said that comparatively recently, perhaps about a hundred years ago, some of the Mambila groups now on the plateau had emigrated from the lowlands in what today is the French Cameroons. The villages from which they came were located near settlements occupied today by Mambila-speaking people.³¹

As a result, Rehfisch suggests that the alleged migration or relocation might be due to the invasion of their villages by Fulani slave raiders, jihadists, or feudal lords. For example, the Fulani Emir of Banyo subjugated some Mambila villages in the latter half of the nineteenth century requiring them to send tributes of maize, guinea corn, and possibly slaves. In return,

³¹ Farnham Rehfisch. *The Social Structure of a Mambila Village* (London: University of London, 1956), 10.

Mambila chiefs received ceremonial robes from the Emir to confirm their appointments. Certain Mambila villages succeeded in resisting the Fulani.³²

Nonetheless, an examination of the Mambila language reveals strong affinities with Bantu and Bantoid languages of the Niger-Congo complex, connecting Western, Equatorial, and Southern Africa.³³ This linguistic relationship and the fact that many aspects of Mambila art, culture, and religion can also be found among other Bantu/Bantoid speakers strongly suggest that their ancestors might have occupied the Nigeria-Cameroon border or thereabouts from time immemorial, changing locations in response to the arrival of new forces in the area. Those with no other alternative apparently surrendered to a new political leadership such as that of the Fulani Emir of Banyo. The latter surrendered to the Germans in 1901 when they colonized the Nigeria-Cameroon border in the late nineteenth century.³⁴ Following the defeat of the Germans during World War I (1914-1918), the League of Nations divided the area into Northern and Southern Cameroon and placed the Mambila under French and British colonial administrations respectively. And by the time the two zones were united in 1961 (after political independence), the Mambila found themselves split between the Federal Republic of Nigeria and *Republique du Cameroun*.

³² For more information of the relationship between the Mambila and the Fulani, see Chapter one of Rehfisch's *The Social Structure of a Mambila Village*. Based on his research Rehfisch suspects that there was constant conflict between the Fulani and the Mambila. The Fulani attacked Mambila villages for the purpose of taking slaves while the Mambila retaliated whenever possible for vengeance and to obtain meat. Rehfisch wrote: "My informants told me that the pleasure derived from killing a Fulani was doubled by the fact that not only did they avenge their fellow-tribesmen by so doing but also, being at that cannibalistic, they enjoyed eating the Fulani."

³³ Paul Gebauer. *Art of Cameroon*. (Portland, OR: Portland Art Association, 1979), 40. See also Malcolm Guthrie, *The classification of the Bantu languages*. London: Oxford University Press for the International African Institute, 1948.

³⁴ Much of the information about the contact between the Mambila people and the Germans comes from an unpublished 1938 manuscript by D.A. Percival, summarized by Rehfisch in his 1972 book.

World View and Religion

Despite the fact that a good majority of the Mambila now profess to be Muslims and Christians, they have not totally abandoned their ancestral religion. The ancient belief in a Supreme Being has survived. Popularly called *Chàṅ*, this Deity is regarded as the originator of the universe and everything in it.³⁵ Being transcendental, *Chàṅ* has no physical manifestation.³⁶ Yet humanity is perceived as an aspect of *Chàṅ*; hence the soul or spirit of an individual is identified as *Chàṅ mo* (my *Chàṅ*). It generates the breath (*chúchú*) that enlivens the body (*yor*). Death occurs when the *Chàṅ* leaves the body for the wilderness (*tandalu*), becoming a “spirit in the bush” (*Chàṅ tandalu*).³⁷ In the course of his fieldwork among the Nigerian Mambila in the 1930s, the British anthropologist Charles Meek collected data on an ancient “cult of the dead” known as *Sho Kuru* through which the living communicated with the spirits of departed ancestors to ensure the well-being of living descendants.³⁸ This communication sometimes involved pouring beer on one’s father’s grave, as Farnham Rehfisch observed in 1953, to attract “the good” into the village and expel “the bad.”³⁹ In the 1980s, David Zeitlyn documented the existence of something similar (called “The Skull Cult of The Chief”) among the Cameroonian Mambila in Somié. As he puts it:

³⁵*Chàṅ* is also addressed as NAMA and LO. See also Charles K. Meek, *Tribal Studies in Northern Nigeria*. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & CO., LTD., 1931), 547 and David Zeitlyn. “Sua in Somié: Mambila Traditional Religion,” (PhD thesis, Cambridge University, 1990), 67-69.

³⁶ *Chàṅ* is now equated with the Islamic/Christian God.

³⁷ David Zeitlyn. “Sua in Somié: Mambila Traditional Religion,” (PhD thesis, Cambridge University, 1990), 69.

³⁸ Charles K. Meek, *Tribal Studies in Northern Nigeria*, (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & CO., LTD., 1931), 555.

³⁹ David Zeitlyn. “Sua in Somié: Mambila Traditional Religion” (PhD thesis, Cambridge University, 1990), 69.

Chiefs are buried sitting upright in a circular shaft grave. Approximately a month after the burial the head is removed and washed. The skull is placed in a small four-handled Mambila basket (*sogo ba*) in the skull house (*gua fā*) to the West of the Palace. I was not allowed access to the skull-house, nor were the sister's sons forthcoming about the rites performed there. In particular, the relationship between the current Chief and the skulls of his predecessors remains unclear. The rites described to me did not involve the Chief himself. Annually the heads are taken from their baskets and "washed", being sprayed with palm wine by the sister's sons. The day on which this takes ... it is forbidden to break the soil and to cut elephant grass, so no farm work is undertaken.⁴⁰

Chances are that (in ancient times) the vessel containing the palm-wine sprayed on the skulls during these rites had on them attachments similar to those on the VMFA gourd.

Ambivalent Perception of *Chàṅ*

In his book, *African Religions and Philosophy*, the eminent African theologian, John S. Mbiti, has drawn attention to a tendency in many African cultures to regard God as "the origins of all things."⁴¹ As the author aptly points out:

The majority of African peoples regard God as essentially good...[there] are, however, situations when calamities, misfortunes and sufferings come upon families or individuals, for which there is no clear explanation. Some societies would then consider these to be brought by God, generally through agents like spirits or magic workers, or as punishment for contravening certain customs or traditions. By so doing, they do not consider God to be intrinsically 'evil' as such: that is simply a rational explanation of what may otherwise be

⁴⁰ Zeitlyn, "Sua in Somié," 37. The tradition of burying the dead sitting upright also obtained in Ancient Igbo-Ukwu (Eastern Nigeria) as revealed at an archaeological site dated to the 9th century CE. For illustration, see Thurstan Shaw, *Igbo- Ukwu: An Account of Archaeological Discoveries in Eastern Nigeria*. Volume 1. (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), frontispiece.

⁴¹ John S. Mbiti. *African Religions and Philosophy* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1992), 29, 36.

hard to explain.⁴²

On the other hand, a good harvest or peaceful year is often perceived as a reward for conforming to God's will.⁴³ But when the opposite occurs, certain rituals may be prescribed by diviners to restore ontological balance.⁴⁴ A similar phenomenon occurs among the Mambila.

According to David Zeitlyn,

In principle all illness is held to be caused either by *Chàṅ* (the remote creator and supreme god) or by people (i.e. witches). To attribute the cause to *Chàṅ* is to say that it is "natural," so that investigation of its causation is unnecessary. The illness must simply be accepted and dealt with.... Many courses of action are available to treat illnesses, some or all of which may be assayed depending upon the seriousness of the ailment, and the speed of recovery. An illness will be regarded as "natural" (caused by *Chàṅ*) unless it is serious or persistent; in those circumstances divination will be consulted in order to determine the proper course of action.⁴⁵

In short, the treatment of illness often involves the use of herbal preparations stored in gourds and calabashes empowered by charms and animal parts like those attached to the VMFA example. Individuals accused of witchcraft may also be required to swear innocence after tasting concoctions often stored in ritual gourds.

⁴² Mbiti, *African Religions*, 36. For a related phenomenon among the Yoruba, see Babatunde Lawal, "Ejiwapo: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yoruba Art and Culture," *African Arts* 47 (1), 2008, 24-39.

⁴³ Mbiti. *African Religions* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1992), 36.

⁴⁴ Mbiti. *African Religions* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1992), 59.

⁴⁵ David Zeitlyn. "Sua in Somié: Mambila Traditional Religion" (PhD thesis, Cambridge University, 1990), 67.

The Visual Arts

Pottery, calabashes, basketry and textiles are common crafts among the Mambila. Women make most of the pots. The preparation of clay is hard work and time consuming. Two methods are commonly employed in pottery making—the lump and the coil/strap methods. In the lump technique, the wall and the rim of the vessel are built up, layer by layer. The more popular coil/strap method produces better quality pottery in less time.⁴⁶ As containers for various purposes, calabashes/gourds are usually produced by both men and women. A typical calabash/gourd is cut open to remove the seeds after which it is cleaned and then used as a container. Some may be painted with a colorful juice made from leaves; other may have patterns engraved on them with knives and other sharp tools. Smaller containers hold salt, pepper, groundnuts, or seeds while half gourds serve as ladles or cups.⁴⁷ Both men and women also produce baskets for various purposes. Women create most of the household baskets as well as those used for transporting farm produce, while some men specialize in the production of fish and hunting traps, warrior shields as well as unusually large and heavy-duty baskets.⁴⁸ Weaving is done by both sexes; the men usually work on the horizontal loom and the women on the vertical one.

As in many parts of the Nigeria/Cameroon border, much of the woodcarving among the Mambila is produced by the men.⁴⁹ Most of their sculptures are carved from soft/light wood and

⁴⁶ Paul Gebauer. *Art of Cameroon*. (Portland, OR: Portland Art Association, 1979), 98.

⁴⁷ Nancy Beth A. Schwartz. *Mambilla—Art and Material Culture*. (Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee Public Museum, 1972), 35-36.

⁴⁸ Paul Gebauer. *Art of Cameroon*. (Portland, OR: Portland Art Association, 1979), 96.

⁴⁹ Tamara Northern. *The Art of Cameroon* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1984), 61.

raffia palm pith. Carvers strip the outer, harder part of the wood and then transform the inner pith into *tadep* figures or human representations with multiple parts such as *kike*. Mambila sculptors use six tools—the chisel, a curved knife, a straight knife, and a multi-purpose knife—to complete their work. The carver finishes an object with a hot flat chisel, using it to chip and smoothen the piece until the desired surface is achieved.⁵⁰ Only three colors—red, black, and white—are used to paint a good majority of carvings. Red pigment is made from dried powdered camwood. Black is prepared from ashes, and white, from powdered kaolin or white clay. These powdered pigments are mixed with palm oil and applied with the fingers or little bundles of dried grass to figures and masks.⁵¹

Paul Gebauer believes that the “unique art style” of the Mambila may be attributed to their geographical isolation on a plateau. Figure sculptures made from clay, terracotta, pith, and wood decorate family shrines and their heart-shaped faces recall earlier artistic workings of the Megalithic tradition. The masks of the Mambila are stylized abstractions of birds, beasts, and human faces. Stools, patterned fiber-costumes, flutes, and whistles are among the cult sacra that decorated old Mambila shrines. The earth spider and the land crab feature prominently in the symbolism of Mambila art as a result of their importance in divination practices.⁵²

⁵⁰ Nancy Beth A. Schwartz. *Mambilla—Art and Material Culture*. (Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee Public Museum, 1972), 13-14.

⁵¹ Schwartz. *Mambilla*, 14.

⁵² Paul Gebauer. *Art of Cameroon*. (Portland, OR: Portland Art Association, 1979), 40.

Using Art to Mediate between the Worldly and Otherworldly

In many African cultures, the belief that God “shaped [all] things, like a woman fashioning pots that she makes out clay”⁵³ has resulted in the equation of the human body with a work of art intended to make the soul visible on earth. It also accounts for the frequent situation of sculptures on altars to signify the invisible presence of the spiritual or to serve as a bridge between the worldly and otherworldly. In view of the Mambila belief that the body (*yor*) makes an individualized or personal spirit (*Chàñ mo*) visible in the physical world, their tradition of placing carved images such as the *tadep* in shrines⁵⁴ seems to have similar implications, though with local variations. Moreover, the Mambila hang painted images of celestial beings on shrines or storehouse (*ndip so*) for ritual objects to emphasize the sacredness of such enclosures. In 1967, Nancy Beth Schwartz documented a painting (called *baltu*),⁵⁵ similar to the one in, featuring “two figures, a male on the right and a female on the left. Above the figures is a rainbow, to the left above the figure is the moon and to the right is the sun. The circle in the middle is said to represent the compound.”⁵⁶ Given the fact that a woman’s basket and man’s bag may be placed near the two figures, it is apparent (as Christine Mullen Kreamer has observed) that *baltu* paintings allude to the gendered nature of the Mambila cosmos.⁵⁷ Indeed, *tadep*

⁵³ Geoffrey Parrinder. *African Mythology*. (London: Hamlyn, 1967), 20.

⁵⁴ See David Zeitlyn. “Mambila Figurines and Masquerades: Problems of Interpretation,” in *African Arts* 27 (1994): figure 9.

⁵⁵ For photograph of *tadep* and *kiki* in situ see David Zeitlyn. “Mambila Figurines and Masquerades: Problems of Interpretation.” *African Arts* 27 (1994): 40.

⁵⁶ Christine Mullen Kreamer, *African Cosmos: Stellar Arts*. (New York: The Monacelli Press, 2012), 141; citing Nancy Beth Schwartz, *Mambilla Art and Material Culture*, 20.

⁵⁷ Kreamer. “African Cosmos,” 140-141.

figures are “usually male-female pairs, carved of low-density wood (silk-cotton tree: *Ceiba petandra*.)”⁵⁸ Red, white, and black—the favorite colors of the Mambila—may also appear on the *baltu*. A net, similar to those used for catching fish or birds, hangs in front of the *baltu* and is often used for keeping *tadep* and *kike* figures. Magical objects, such as a bird carcasses or duiker horns filled with medicine, may be included. A birdbath-like structure, where medicines are prepared, stands directly in front of the ancestral hut.⁵⁹ Note how the full bellies of the two figures in this *baltu* recall a pot or gourd, thus underscoring the ritual significance of the VMFA example as an “empowering” container.

It is worth mentioning at this point that scholars (such as Paul Gebauer and Gilbert Schneider) who did fieldwork among the Mambila in the first half of the twentieth century identified some of the *tadep* and *kike* sculptures with ancestor worship.⁶⁰ According to Schneider,

Many of the ...pith figures, the wooden *tadeps* and *kike* are all kept on the outside of the ancestral house. These two are always kept on the inside and women are not allowed to see them. They are also not labeled by any Mambila man's name.⁶¹

⁵⁸ David Zeitlyn. “Mambila Figurines and Masquerades: Problems of Interpretation,” in *African Arts* 27 (1994): 39.

⁵⁹ Nancy Beth A. Schwartz. *Mambilla—Art and Material Culture*. (Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee Public Museum, 1972), 22.

⁶⁰ Paul Gebauer, *Art of Cameroon*, Figures M25-7 and Gilbert Schneider, “Mambila Album,” *Nigerian Field* 20, 1955, 112-32. See also Tamara Northern. *Expressions of Cameroon Art: The Franklin Collection* (Los Angeles, CA: The Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History: 1986), 26.

⁶¹ From a tape transcript in the Milwaukee Public Museum (June 8/9, 1967) cited by David Zeitlyn, “Mambila Figurines and Masquerades,” in *African Arts* 27 (1994): 94.n.15.

However, David Zeitlyn, who began his own research in the area in the mid-1980s, has a different view. In his words,

Both Gebaeur and Schneider use the term “ancestor figure” to describe these figurines. I would suggest, however, that the association of these objects with ancestor cults rests on the assumption that all groups in the region have such cults. Rehfisch did not find one in Warwar, nor did Viviane Baeke in the village of Lus among the Wuli..., nor did I in Somie among the Cameroonian Mambila... It is unlikely that an ancestor cult, along with its shrines and the sculptures, could have vanished so completely that no traces have been discovered by my research.

It is possible that the objects did not belong to ancestor cults but were the sacra of associations concerned with illness and healing, as is the case in Lus, according to Baeke. This theory would account for the similarity between the granary-like storehouses and terracotta figures among the Mambilla and those described and illustrated by Baeke... among the Wuli. It also has the merit of explaining how the associations could vanish so completely since healing societies are notoriously vulnerable to fashion. [All the same] ...most *tadep* and *kike* were part of the *sùàgà* complex, which (in Somie at least) has replaced healing associations and become central to the traditional religion. *Sùàgà* has, however, also become simplified. Many of the ritual paraphernalia such as the statuary are no longer in use. Yet the essentials seem to have remained unchanged, maintained by a continuity of ritual practice.⁶²

I have cited David Zeitlyn at length here to draw attention to his previous mention of “The Skull Cult of The Chief” among the Cameroonian Mambila in Somié. Unfortunately, he “was not allowed access to the skull house” – which prevented him from confirming whether or

⁶² David Zeitlyn. “Mambila Figurines and Masquerades: Problems of Interpretation,” in *African Arts* 27 (1994): 40.

not it contained *tadep* and *kike* figurines. The question then arises: Does the fact that Zeitlyn has yet to find conclusive evidence necessarily negate the likelihood that the Mambila once associated the said figurines with ancestral veneration, as indicated by Gebauer and Schneider? Let us hope that future investigations will throw more light on this question.

Is it possible to trace the roots of the current disagreement to differences in the scholarly perception or interpretation of the ritual significance of the figurines? The answer probably lies in Gilbert Schneider's aforementioned remark that, notwithstanding the presence of *tadep* and *kike* inside one of the ancestral shrines he observed among the Nigerian Mambila in 1953, they are "not labeled by any Mambila man's name." This "generic" use suggests that the figures are neither literal portraits, nor objects of worship.⁶³ Then, what is their significance?

As Rosalind Hackett has observed:

the relationship between art works and spirit forces...is one of the most challenging to take on, but it is central to any consideration of the interrelationship of art and religion in Africa...In other words, there is a tendency by some scholars to proffer "short-circuited" interpretations by moving from an object's association with power, to presupposing that it is an image or representation of that power.⁶⁴

In short, most of the sculptures and masks used in African rituals are no more than signifiers whose stylized forms hint at their ritual potency when mediating between the worldly and otherworldly.

⁶³ Paul Gebauer. *Art of Cameroon*. (Portland, OR: Portland Art Association, 1979), 60.

⁶⁴ For more details, see Rosalind Hackett, *Art and Religion in Africa*. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 1998), 45-48.

From this perspective, therefore, David Zeitlyn may very well be right in identifying the *tadep* and *kike* figurines as visual constructs intended as “repository of protective spiritual power,”⁶⁵ protecting humanity “against evil forces, real or imaginary.”⁶⁶ I will return to this point when interpreting the *tadep* figures and other motifs on the VMFA gourd.

In addition, some scholars associate much of Mambila art with the seasonal cycles of planting and harvesting, while others relate it to spiritual protection, healing, and the quest for supernatural justice.⁶⁷

The Ritual Specialist in Mambila Culture

Here, I use the term “ritual specialist” to categorize herbalists, healers, diviners, occultists, and priests who are thought to have the power to pry into the secrets of nature. That power derives largely from the agency of the images, medicines, charms, and assorted objects which they manipulate meta-empirically to forge alliances with wild spirits, animals, and ancestors. The ultimate goal of such alliances is to enable ritual specialists to acquire superhuman capabilities with which to confront and solve human problems. In effect, most of the ritual gourds found along the Nigeria/Cameroon border were commissioned by these specialists to perform metaphysical functions, ranging from healing diseases to investing an individual with spiritual powers.

⁶⁵ Paul Gebauer. *Art of Cameroon*. (Portland, OR: Portland Art Association, 1979), 60.

⁶⁶ Gebauer. *Art of Cameroon*. (Portland, OR: Portland Art Association, 1979), 60; David Zeitlyn. “Mambila Figurines and Masquerades: Problems of Interpretation,” in *African Arts* 27 (1994): 40.

⁶⁷ It is important to note that more recent field data might have been influenced by conversion to Islam and Christianity.

The Mambila *Sùàgà* Society

It is significant at this juncture to note that most of the ritual specialists belong to the *Sùàgà*, the exclusive society at the center of Mambila social and spiritual life. The society is concerned with not only promoting the well-being, fertility and prosperity of the Mambila, but also healing the sick, maintaining law and order, resolving disputes, defending the community from hostile neighbors and protecting it from witchcraft and other forces of evil. In addition, it serves as a link between the living and the spirits of departed ancestors.⁶⁸ Such functions explain why the society wielded considerable spiritual and political powers in pre-colonial times.

Organized into male and female groups, admission to which was through initiations and administration of oaths, the *Sùàgà* dominated the Mambila landscape through masked performances as well as public and private rituals whose paraphernalia were kept in ancestral shrines or inside ritual storehouses (*ndip so*) such the one discussed above. Given the fact that the *tadep* figures on the VMFA gourd are smaller version of those found outside these *Sùàgà* storehouse, it is possible that the gourd might have been used in some of the association's rituals.

The Ritual Process and Secrecy

Unfortunately, most of the rituals performed by members of the *Sùàgà* society as well as diviners and healers are out of bounds to the general public except patients undergoing treatment, suspects being tried for certain offences and those individuals required to appear before a special tribunal for one reason or the other. As Hans-Joachim Koloss has observed,

⁶⁸ For more information on the Suaga society, see David Zeitlyn, "Sua in Somié: Mambila Traditional Religion" (PhD thesis, Cambridge University, 1990) and David Zeitlyn, "Mambila Figurines and Masquerades," in *African Arts* 27 (1994): 38-47.

In principle, all secret societies of the Cameroon Grasslands have medicine in their possession and are concerned with all matters in its relation. These medicine societies employ earthenware vessels, calabashes, grinding stones and sacred musical instruments... Their rituals... and... medicines are considered exceptionally strong and dangerous. This reputation is enhanced by the secrecy surrounding...their activities... Little is actually known about medicine societies, and it is not commonplace to speak about them publicly...⁶⁹

The point is that, as Mary Nooter observed (in the course of her field research in Africa,) “To own secret knowledge, and to show that one does, is a source of power. One function of art in Africa, then, is to act as a visual means for broadcasting secrecy – for publicly proclaiming the ownership of privileged information while protecting its contents.”⁷⁰ All the same, access to restricted sacred spaces by the uninitiated, especially a Western researcher, may vary from one Mambila village to another, depending on the disposition or mood of the ritual specialist in charge. Thus, while David Zeitlyn was denied access to some ancestral shrines in the Mambila village of Somié,⁷¹ Hans-Joachim Koloss was allowed to observe certain rituals performed by medicine societies in Oku town. That rare opportunity enabled him to photograph shrines, ritual assemblages (especially gourds, calabashes and masks).⁷² One of his photographs features a mask called *Kheghebcio* wearing a costume adorned with an array of amulets, animal skulls,

⁶⁹ Hans-Joachim Koloss. *World-View and Society in Oku (Cameroon)*. (Berlin, Verlag von Dietrich Reimer, 2000), 279.

⁷⁰ Mary H. Nooter, “The Aesthetics and Politics of Things Unseen.” In Mary H. Nooter (ed), *Secrecy: African Art that Conceals and Reveals*. (New York and Munich: The Museum for African Art and Prestel, 1993), 24.

⁷¹ David Zeitlyn, “Sua in Somié: Mambila Traditional Religion” (PhD thesis, Cambridge University, 1990), 37.

⁷² Hans-Joachim Koloss. *World-View and Society in Oku (Cameroon)*. (Berlin, Verlag von Dietrich Reimer, 2000), 295-317; 404-405; 427-431.

jaws, horns, pangolin skin, feathers, gourds, and other artifacts, thus inviting comparison with the VMFA gourd.⁷³ The “calabash” associated with this mask is said to contain “the strongest and most dangerous medicine.”⁷⁴ In February 1970, Arnold Rubin was also able to photograph a gourd-shaped pot in the Central Nigerian village of Biliri said to signify the spirit of the custodian’s father. The pot’s whole body “is enclosed by the accumulations of materials, each adding to the spirit’s power and authority.”⁷⁵ The similarity of this ritual pot to the VMFA gourd suggests that they both derive from the same belief system.

Suffice it to say that, given the secrecy surrounding the ritual process among the Mambila and the fact that the same container may be used for storing different herbal preparations for different purposes, this thesis will not attempt to identify the VMFA gourd with specific rituals. Rather, it will focus on the iconographical significance of the gourd as an assemblage with a view to shedding light on some of its previous contexts of use.

⁷³ Hans-Joachim Koloss. *World-View and Society in Oku (Cameroon)*. (Berlin, Verlag von Dietrich Reimer, 2000), Figs. 235-237.

⁷⁴ Koloss, *World-View and Society in Oku (Cameroon)*, 294.

⁷⁵ Marla C. Barnes, Richard Fardon and Sidney L. Kasfir (ed), *Central Nigeria Unmasked: Arts of the Benue Value River Valley*. (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum at UCLA, 2011), 493, fig. 16.29.

Chapter Two: Toward an Iconography of the VMFA Gourd

Acquisitions History

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts bought this gourd in 2010. Not much is known about where, how, and when it was collected in Africa. So far, the little information available on it comes from a 2008 correspondence between Richard Woodward (Curator of African art at the VMFA) and art dealer, Jacques Hautelet. According to the latter,

... this spectacular calabash (60 cm high) ... belonged to a Mambila witchdoctor. It was likely used to ensure success in the hunt... This ensemble is quite old and [has] some indigenous repairs. It was in a French collection since the 1970s.⁷⁶

Despite Hautelet's use of "witchdoctor" for a Mambila diviner or healer, he does not provide any other evidence to support his attribution. His suggestion that the gourd was used in a hunting ritual is based primarily on the animal bones on it. While not totally dismissing this possibility, this chapter hopes to throw more light not only on the iconographic significance of most of the motifs on the gourd, but also on some of its original functions. It is important to note that gourds with similar motifs abound along the Nigeria/Cameroon border.

⁷⁶ Hautelet, Jacques. Letter to Richard Woodward, 29 January 2008.

Creating and Composing a Ritual Gourd

Once the cause of a problem is determined through suspicion, intuition, vision, or divination, a ritual specialist prepares herbal medicines for finding solutions. If a container is needed for the medicine, the specialist or patient goes to a local market to purchase a drinking gourd or calabash. To facilitate portability and use, some containers are already enclosed in a fiber frame and fitted with a base, rope handle, and stopper, though they are more expensive. A set of drawings, created between 1915 and 1932 by the Cameroon/Bamum artist Ibrahim Njoya, depicts three men working on such containers, adorning some of them with beads because they would be used in the king's palace for drinking water and palm wine.⁷⁷ Identical, though less ornamented, gourds are used by the populace for similar purposes.⁷⁸ In short, after obtaining the right gourd from the local market, a ritual specialist would attach relevant articles to it and then consecrate the assemblage with certain ingredients and incantations. Though smaller than that of the VMFA (19 inches tall), an identical gourd (from the Bamum people) is in the African collection at the Ethnographic Museum in Geneva. It is enclosed in a net of delicately woven rattan, from which seventeen human mandibles are suspended.

Formal Description of the VMFA gourd

The VMFA gourd is approximately 24 inches high and 20 ½ inches wide. It has a bottle shape and is secured to a cylindrical base by four woven strips of wickerwork that come together

⁷⁷ Suzanne P. Blier, *Royal Arts of Africa: The Majesty of Form*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998), 196-197.

⁷⁸ For photographs, see Hans-Joachim Koloss. *World-View and Society in Oku (Cameroon)*. (Berlin, Verlag von Dietrich Reimer, 2000), 430-431. See also Donna Page. *A Cameroon World: Art and Artifacts from the Marshall and Caroline Mount Collection*. (New York City: QCC Art Gallery Press, 2007), 35.

around the neck of the gourd to form a woven handle. Mostly smooth, the surface of the gourd shows a yellow-brown color; the bottom is broken. A dark, dusty patina covers the surface of the gourd and its attachments (i.e. the *tadep* figures, assorted animal bones, plant materials, and talismans). The patina does not cover all surfaces evenly; areas underneath the attachments are lighter. Nonetheless, the patina suggests that the VMFA gourd is quite old and might have been created between fifty and a hundred years ago.⁷⁹

There are five *tadep* figures secured to the VMFA gourd (Fig. 2 A-E). The Mambila are known for these painted pith figures with conical heads and heart-shaped faces. All of the figure's features—a high-domed forehead and dominant, searching eyes expressing focused intensity—affirm notions of Mambila perfection and suggest insight.⁸⁰ The large, protruding eyes of the gourd stopper along with the watchful stares of the other four *tadep* figures powerfully embody notions of surveillance, protection, and guardianship. Moreover, their compact, spring-like bodies combined with their bent arms and legs impart a sense of dynamic movement and imminent action. The placement of four *tadep* figures around the belly of the gourd recalls the four cardinal directions. A fifth *tadep* fits snugly into the neck of the gourd, serving as a stopper protects and apparently protecting its contents from both physical and spiritual contamination.

Many of the articles on the gourd hang from the braided vegetable fiber wrapped around the base of the gourd's neck. Attached to the neck is a hornbill skull (Fig. 3). The skull of this

⁷⁹ Kathy Gillis (VMFA objects conservator). Email to author. 8 October 2013. Additive materials have blocked the surface of the gourd from becoming oxidized and subsequently darkened. Simply stated, oxidation darkens surfaces and is a fairly lengthy process.

⁸⁰ Tamara Northern. "Sotheby's: African, Oceanic, and Pre-Colombian Art" (New York: 16 May 2013), 126.

bird faces the opposite direction of the *tadep* gourd stopper and the wickerwork handle. Close to it are two Old World monkey skulls. (Figs. 4, 5).⁸¹ The smaller of these skulls is fastened at the base of the gourd's neck while the larger skull hangs from the belly. Their hollow-eyed gaze is straight on and direct, and perhaps, even confrontational. Lastly, among the animal skulls, is the skull of a canine (Fig. 6). It hangs from the belly of the gourd by a loop created by its zygomatic and temporal bones.

Also attached to the gourd are mandibles (lower jaw bones), skins, shells, horns, skins, pelts, and the bones of various animals, as well as snail shells and the foot of a chicken (Fig. 7). Equally noticeable are the bean pods and man-made packets containing medicines (Fig. 8).⁸² Mandibles from primates and bovids of various sizes are also present (Figs. 9, 10, 11). There are snail shells (Figs. 12, 13, 14); twisted horns, sealed and studded with red seeds; (Fig.15); as well as, snake skins and scale-covered pelts of pangolins (Fig. 16 A-B, 17). A single chicken foot (Fig. 18), hangs from the belly of the gourd. Close to it is a leather packet with a criss-cross pattern on it (Fig. 19). On the opposite side is a medicinal bundle with a porcupine quill and cowrie shells on it. A hay-like grass bursts from the medicine bundle, poking out from the seams and a hole.

Iconographical Analysis

The VMFA gourd, because of its attachments and the anthropomorphized stopper, looks like a mask intended to facilitate humanity's access to the liminal space between the known and

⁸¹ These skulls belonged to old world monkeys based on their dental formula and the location of their foramen magnum.

⁸² Elliot Picket. "The Animal Horn in African Art," in *African Arts* 4 (1971): 48.

unknown, the village and the bush. As an assemblage of power, it occupies, so to speak, a primordial threshold comparable to what Benjamin Ray identifies as, “the ritual sphere...where the world as lived and the world as imaged [in the human mind] fused together, transformed into one reality.”⁸³

In what follows, I will draw attention to the implications of the gourd and its attachments, as well as their interconnectedness in the mediation of metaphysical power for various purposes. Before doing so, it is important to note, as many scholars have observed, that almost all the cultures along the Nigeria/Cameroon border speak languages belonging to the Niger-Congo family. They also have similar cultural practices, in spite of certain variations within them.⁸⁴ For instance, the Ngam spider/crab divination technique is widespread in the area.⁸⁵ As a result, most of the myths underlying the ritual process cut across ethnic boundaries, enabling ritual specialists to operate from one culture to another. Similarly, most of the attachments, like those on the VMFA gourd, are available for sale in the local herbal market. Because of the time-honored metaphysical powers attributed to them that can only be unlocked and activated by those who have the keys, it suffices to say, much of the powers assigned to each motif derives from empirical evidence combined with mythical constructs and popular folktales which will be examined below.

⁸³ Benjamin Ray, *African Religions: Symbol Ritual and Community*. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1976), 17.

⁸⁴ Joseph h. Greenberg, “African as a Linguistic Area.” In *Continuity and Change in African Culture*. William R. Bascom and Melville J. Herskovits (ed), (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1959), 17-20; Northern, Tamara. *The Art of the Cameroon*. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1984), 17-25; John M. Mbaku, *Cultures and Customs of Cameroon*. (Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 2005), 109-110, and David Zeitlyn, “Sua in Somié: Mambila Traditional Religion” (PhD thesis, Cambridge University, 1990), 54.

⁸⁵ David Zeitlyn, “Sua in Somié: Mambila Traditional Religion” (PhD thesis, Cambridge University, 1990), 95-97.

The Gourd

As mentioned earlier, the terms ‘calabash’ and ‘gourd’ are often used interchangeably to refer to the hard-shelled fruits of the *Cucurbitaceae* family. Cucurbits are rapidly growing climbing annuals in tropical climates.⁸⁶ Here, I use the term ‘gourd’ to designate a bottle-shaped shell with an opening at the top, like the VMFA example, usually used for holding liquids and other materials. I use ‘calabash’ for the hollowed-out shells shaped like bowls, also used for drinking, in addition to storing various articles and personal possessions.

In many parts of Africa, gourds and calabashes are containers both literally and metaphorically. Literally, they are used for eating as well as drinking water, wine, tonic, medicines, and other fluids intended to nourish the body. And as David Zeitlyn observed in the course of his field research in Somié village, the Mambila consumed beer “by the gourdful” during meetings.⁸⁷

Metaphorically, gourds and calabashes are associated with the cosmos and sometimes the womb because of their spherical shape. For example, the Yoruba and Fon of Nigeria and Republic of Benin conceptualize the universe as a large calabash with two halves.⁸⁸ The top half symbolizes the male sky and the abode of spiritual beings and the bottom half, female-Earth containing the primordial waters from which the physical world was created.⁸⁹ In short, the two

⁸⁶ T.J.H Chappel. *Decorated Gourds in North-Eastern Nigeria* (Michigan, Ethnographica, 1977), 8.

⁸⁷ David Zeitlyn, “Sua in Somié: Mambila Traditional Religion” (PhD thesis, Cambridge University, 1990), 50.

⁸⁸ Babatunde Lawal, “Ayel’Oja; Orunn’ Ile,” in *African Cosmos: Stellar Stars*, ed. Christine Mullen Kreamer et al. (Washington: The Monacelli Press, 2012), 218-219; W. J. Argyle, *The Fon of Dahomey: A History and Ethnography of the Old Kingdom*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 179 and Melville and Frances Heskovits, “An Outline of Dahomean Religious Beliefs,” *Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association* 41 (1933): 11.

⁸⁹ Lawal, “Ayel’Oja; Orunn’ Ile,” 219-220.

halves signify the interrelationship of the terrestrial and celestial realms. By the same token, the bottle-shaped gourd represents the fusion of the two and their potentials for regeneration. Hence, parallels have been drawn between the calabash/ gourd and the womb in the ways that it protects and sustains its contents, just as a mother nurtures her child. It is this aspect of the gourd that popularizes its use in many parts of western and central Africa for storing and transporting liquids for refreshment and self-empowering purposes. As a matter of fact, a review of the domestic and ritual purposes of gourds and calabashes in northeastern Nigeria, especially near its border with the Cameroon, reveals a tendency to give them gender-laden meanings. According to Lisa Aronson, its domestic use for cattle-keeping, storing milk, feeding babies and as “ritual exchange at marriages and childbirth” has endowed the gourd with notions of female power and motherhood, thus making it a nurturing symbol. And when combined with certain male symbols such as iron rattles, it epitomizes the complementarity of gender in both visible and invisible realities—a complementarity on which human existence depends.⁹⁰ Little wonder, highly ornate ceremonial gourds, as potent containers, feature prominently in secular and religious events in many areas on the Nigeria/Cameroon border. Among the Bamum and Bamileke, as Suzanne Blier has observed:

Beaded [gourds] are among the most ritually important of the palace arts...Royal drinking containers of this sort were used not only during court audiences but also on ceremonial occasions such as harvest rituals, when lineage chiefs were called upon to swear allegiances to the king. Like tobacco smoking, drinking palm wine was viewed as a sacrosanct activity and was held to have life-giving properties for both the ruler and the populace...Reinforcing this use, as well as the king’s sacrosanct identity more generally,

⁹⁰ Lisa Aronson, “African Women in the Visual Arts,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 16 (1991): 559. See T.J.H. Chappel, *Decorated Gourds in North-Eastern Nigeria*. (Michigan, Ethnographica, 1977), 16 and Marla C. Berns and Barbara Rubin Hudson. *The Essential Gourd: Art and History in Northeastern Nigeria*. (Los Angeles: University of California, 1986), 60.

was the Bamileke tradition that certain bones from the ruler's predecessors were placed inside these container, thereby conveying sacral potency.⁹¹

Evidently, the various attachments on the VMFA gourd are expected to empower its content in various contexts of use, though it is uncertain if it once contained bones and other sacred articles.

Animal Motifs

As mentioned earlier, humans have transformed animals into a “primordial metaphor” with which to define and reinforce their own humanity,⁹² using the metaphor to not only access powers normally beyond the reach of mortals, but also control human behavior for the social and spiritual well-being of a given community. As Richard B. Woodward (the founding curator of the African art collection at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts) puts it:

Africa's marvelous animals often trigger the creative imagination as a source of expressive and symbolic images.

Some animals convey lessons from myth or concepts about the universe, such as the idea of division between the village – a safe, orderly place—and the bush—a dangerous, unpredictable place where troublesome spirits lurk. However, they recognize that the wilderness can enrich life, both through the mediators [or ritual specialists] who are able to channel its forces and through medicines that are made from its wealth of plants and animal substances. Works of art dealing with this duality are ways of mediating with the wilderness. They express what is hidden and unpredictable, and they help to strengthen a shared understanding of

⁹¹ Suzanne Blier, *Royal Arts of Africa: The Majesty of Form*. (Great Britain: Laurence King Publishing, 1998), 197.

⁹² James Fernandez, “Persuasions and Performances: Of the Beast in Every Body... And the Metaphors of Everyman,” *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 101 (1972): 41.

the universe.⁹³

Thus, the two monkey skulls (Figs. 4, 5) on the VMFA gourd would seem to convey much more than meets the eye. Because of the animal's phenomenal agility manifested in its effortless leaps from one tree branch to another, power figures (*nkisi*) from Kongo culture sometimes take the form of a monkey to convey two cryptic messages. The first pertains to the swiftness with which crimes are committed and the second, to the speed with which criminals would be brought to justice.⁹⁴ The monkey skin on the costume of the Great Mask of the Poro among the Mano of Liberia has a similar law-enforcement implication, given its association with divination and social justice.⁹⁵ In the Cameroon, especially among the Bangwa, a witch is believed to have the power to incarnate as a monkey in order to destroy the crops in an enemy's farm.⁹⁶ The frequency of the monkey motif on the carved headdresses of Tikar, Bikum, Bamum, Bamileke, and Oku masquerades (popularly called "runners") apparently alludes to their potential for dynamic motion and action, among others, in the process of countering evil forces for the public good.⁹⁷

The canine skull on the VMFA gourd (Fig. 6) complements the metaphysical use of the monkey motif to pursue and arrest evil doers. As in other parts of Africa, the Mambila associate

⁹³ Richard B. Woodward, *African Art: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts*. (Richmond, Virginia: Office of Publications, 2000), 64.

⁹⁴ Wyatt MacGaffey, "The Eyes of Understanding: Kongo Minkisi." In Wyatt MacGaffey and Michael D. Harris, *Astonishment and Power*. (Washington and London: The Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 93.

⁹⁵ Robert Brain, *Art and Society in Africa*. (London and New York: Longman, 1980), 153-154.

⁹⁶ Brain, *Art and Society in Africa*, 216-217.

⁹⁷ For example, see Hans-Joachim Koloss. *World-View and Society in Oku (Cameroon)*. (Berlin, Verlag von Dietrich Reimer, 2000), 236-237 and Paul Gebauer. *Art of Cameroon*. (Portland, OR: Portland Art Association, 1979), plates 11 and 14.

the dog with the hunt.⁹⁸ In addition, the animal assists in herding cattle and guarding the house evidently because of its unusual ability to detect what ordinary human senses cannot easily perceive. This may explain the frequent placement of human figurines with dog-like heads under many Mambila ritual storehouses (*ndip so*).⁹⁹ Moreover, some scholars have drawn attention to the similarity of their dog-like heads to those found on certain Mambila masquerades (*suah bvur*) which entertain and educate the public during the biannual dances in honor of ancestors,¹⁰⁰ apparently drawing attention to the virtues of the animal. Among the Tabwa of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the extra-sensory power of the dog (called *malosi*) is likened to a prophetic vision that enables the animal to penetrate the obscurity of darkness and distance. This partly explains the animal's association with divination in many parts of Africa—an association reinforced by its ability to “track” sources of difficulty and despair. Parallels have been drawn between a dog's ability to navigate the forest and the way a diviner seeks the truth. Tabwa hunters fasten iron bells to the collars of their dogs to keep track of them, the same iron bells are attached to the medicine horns that powerful healers use to direct them towards sorcerers harming either them or their clients.¹⁰¹ In short, the dog's skull on the VMFA gourd might have been used not only to empower its content, but also to navigate the metaphysical space between visible and invisible realities.

⁹⁸ Jacques Kerchache, Jean-Louis Paudrat and Lucien Padrat, *Art of Africa*. (New York: Harry A. Abrams, Inc., 1988), 548; quoting Schwartz, *Mambila Art and Material Culture*, 1972.

⁹⁹ David Zeitlyn. “Mambila Figurines and Masquerades: Problems of Interpretation.” *African Arts* 27 (1994): 42-43; fig. 11 and 13.

¹⁰⁰ Nancy Beth A. Schwartz. *Mambilla—Art and Material Culture*. (Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee Public Museum, 1972), 13-27. See also David Zeitlyn, “Mambila Figurines and Masquerades,” *African Arts* 27 (1994): 42-43; fig. 11 and 13.

¹⁰¹ Allen F. Roberts, *Animals in African Art: From the Familiar to the Marvelous*. (Munich: Prestel Publishing, 1997), 31-33.

To the Mambila, illnesses can be traced to three major agents—the Supreme Deity (*Chan*), ancestors, and witches.¹⁰² All of them can be explored through divination. There is a popular belief that crossing the path or stepping on the spittle of a mysterious snake called *cho* can result in leprosy. So dangerous is the snake that catching sight of it alone (some believe) can cause death.¹⁰³ Thus, one can only wonder whether the dry snake skin on the VMFA gourd (Fig. 17) alludes to the snake *cho*. Yet the fact that the Mambila associate other members of the snake family such as the python (*lamsua*) and Gaboon viper (*ngubu*) with royalty and leadership hints at the multivalent significance of the species.¹⁰⁴ One of the reasons for this is the belief that a leader possesses the ability to transform into a snake and then use its power to protect his subjects against enemies as well as to maintain law and order. In addition, especially in a ritual context, the creature's ability to burrow into the earth, dwell on land, climb trees, and glide through water provides humanity with a metaphoric tool with which to connect the terrestrial, chthonian, and aquatic realms. Besides, the popular interpretation of the rainbow as a mystical serpent connecting heaven and earth makes this motif one of the most powerful means of tapping into the forces concealed in the cosmos. Its ability to shed an old skin to reveal a new one hints at the regenerative process in nature and the human potential for eternal life through

¹⁰² Farnham Rehfisch, "Death, Dreams, and the Ancestors in Mambila Culture." In *Man in Africa*. M. Douglas and P.M. Kaberry (ed). (London: Tavistock Press, 1969), 307-315.

¹⁰³ David Zeitlyn, "Sua in Somié: Mambila Traditional Religion" (PhD thesis, Cambridge University, 1990), 63.

¹⁰⁴ Zeitlyn, "Sua in Somié," 33.

reincarnation.¹⁰⁵ In short, the power generated by the snake motif on the VMFA gourd depends on how it is invoked in a given context.¹⁰⁶

The mandibles (lower jaw bones) on the body of the VMFA gourd (Fig. 9, 10, 11) pose problems because of the difficulty in identifying them with specific creatures. Among the Bamum, warriors in the past attached the jaws of vanquished opponents to similar gourds¹⁰⁷ in an attempt to appropriate some aspects of their *mana* or life-force. In certain cases (as in the VMFA gourd), the jaw bones of horses, rams, buffalos and other powerful animals may be added to a ritual container so as to invest its owner with “oratorical power;” that is, with the capacity to subject others to one’s command or to make one’s prayers or blessings come to pass. Other commands may be intended to exorcise demons or mesmerize an enemy on the battle field. And given the Bamileke tradition of keeping the bones of dead ancestors inside a palm wine gourd for self-empowerment purposes,¹⁰⁸ one can only speculate whether any of the jaws on the VMFA gourd might have been attached to perform similar implications, thus enabling an individual to speak with the “voice” or “authority” of the ancestors.

The pangolin skin on the gourd (Figs. 16 A-B) suggests that it might also have been used for dispensing drugs intended to immune the body against diseases or serious injuries on the

¹⁰⁵ Allen F. Roberts, *Animals in African Art: From the Familiar to the Marvelous*. (Munich: Prestel Publishing, 1997), 62.

¹⁰⁶ Among the Fon-speaking peoples of southwestern Benin, serpents are linked with the continuity between the realm of the living and that of the ancestors. A snake mediates between heaven and earth similar to the way a diviner communicates with the spiritual world. Some scholars believe it recalls the umbilical cord that connects mother to child; and thus, the act of creation itself. The motif of a snake catching its tail transforms its linearity into a continuous cycle of unity and balance that holds the universe together. See Roberts, *Animals in African Art*, 62-64.

¹⁰⁷ Marguerite Dellenbach. “Une Calebasse-Trophée: Utilisée dans la magie guerrière chez les Bamouns,” *Ethnographie* 23 (1931): 7-8 and Fig. 1.

¹⁰⁸ Suzanne P. Blier, *Royal Arts of Africa: The Majesty of Form*. (Great Britain: Laurence King Publishing, 1998), 197.

battlefield. The symbolism derives from the fact that, on sensing danger, a typical pangolin curls into a ball and then uses the hard, scaly skin to protect its soft belly. Hence, warriors often add its skin to their armor. Among the Edo of Nigeria, important chiefs wear elaborate costumes with flannels cut “to imitate the scales of the pangolin or scaly anteater” partly because “the pangolin is the only animal the leopard cannot kill.”¹⁰⁹ Similarly, the Lega of the Democratic Republic of Congo draw parallels between the natural pattern of the pangolin scales and how they tile the roofs of their homes with large leaves. As the scales shield the pangolin from outside threat, so do the leaves protect the homes of the Lega from threatening weather.¹¹⁰ References to pangolins are also seen in other contexts of African artistic expressions. Some Gelede masks of the Yoruba portray pangolins in hunting scenes. These masks celebrate the hunter’s mastery over the pangolin, and perhaps, the human resolve to overcome that which exists beyond the village.¹¹¹ Among the Luba (of the Democratic Republic of Congo), triangular patterns called “pangolin” may be incised on a woman’s body both for aesthetic and immunity purposes. Similar motifs appear on Luba pottery carvings and royal regalia, all alluding to the ability of the pangolin to protect itself against predators as well as the human exploration of that ability for its own survival on earth and beyond.¹¹²

The snail shells and animal horns on the VMFA gourd (Figs.12, 13, 15) have protective significations as well; for their hardness recalls the scales of the pangolin. Not only does the snail

¹⁰⁹ Paula Girshich Ben-Amos, *The Art of Benin* (revised edition). (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 98.

¹¹⁰ Allen F. Roberts, *Animals in African Art: From the Familiar to the Marvelous*. (Munich: Prestel Publishing, 1997), 83.

¹¹¹ Roberts. *Animals in African Art*, 84.

¹¹² See also Roberts. *Animals in African Art*, 83-84.

retract completely into the shell upon sensing danger, the shell's spiral signifies cosmic motions manifested in the vortex of water and wind caused by cosmic/meta-empirical forces, which humanity desires to bring under its control through divination and other means. As a matter of fact, the Mambila use the snail shell in a special divination system called *Ngam ngofogo*.¹¹³

The horn (Fig.15), on the other hand, serves a given animal both as a weapon of offence and defense, enabling warriors to use it for similar purposes. And such is the metaphysical power believed to reside in horns that they are frequently used to store and preserve powerful charms and medicines for invoking the sublime. No wonder, and as noted earlier, duiker horns filled with medicines are kept in many Mambila shrines and sanctuaries (*ndip so*).¹¹⁴

Avian Motifs

Because they dwell in the sky, birds feature frequently in African rituals, being used symbolically to communicate between heaven/celestial and earth. As a result, the skulls, feathers, claws, and eggs of different birds are available for medicinal purposes in a typical African herbal market. Like the mandibles, the exact identity of the bird skull on the VMFA gourd (Fig. 3) is uncertain, though the long beak seems to identify it as that of a hornbill, a creature with both positive and negative implications. Depending on how its power is invoked, the hornbill can be used to inflict harm on enemies, attract good luck and repel or neutralize evil forces. Hence the bird is associated with divination, prophesy, rites of passage, and funerals in many parts of

¹¹³ David Zeitlyn, "Sua in Somié: Mambila Traditional Religion" (PhD thesis, Cambridge University, 1990), 101.

¹¹⁴ Nancy Beth A. Schwartz. *Mambilla—Art and Material Culture*. (Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee Public Museum, 1972), 22.

Africa.¹¹⁵ This is also the case among the Mambila. For instance, the initiation of a diviner sometimes requires the initiate to eat a weaver bird (*tetam*) cooked with certain herbs. One reason for this, as anthropologist David Zeitlyn has observed, is that the “bird calls incessantly, and is always busy, flying from place to place.”¹¹⁶ In other words, the weaver bird’s “meal” is expected to metaphorically impart a diviner with an aspect of the “ubiquitous” powers of the bird, thus placing him at a vantage point to find the root cause of a given problem.

Since the chicken has been described as the “universal sacrificial animal,”¹¹⁷ it is not surprising that the VMFA gourd has a chicken foot hanging from the belly, alluding to its involvement in many Mambila rituals. For instance, a Mambila woman who suddenly recovered after a long illness claimed that she had a dream during which some “ancestors had come to her and offered a choice morsel of chicken cooked in palm-oil and spiced with red peppers.”¹¹⁸ Chickens may also be slaughtered to facilitate the treatment of a disease.¹¹⁹ In other cases, the cooking and eating of a chicken by the teacher and student, in the presence of at least one witness, is considered an essential facet of the initiation process for a diviner.¹²⁰ The chicken’s use of its feet to search for food and for offense and defense has a parallel in an individual’s

¹¹⁵ Allen F. Roberts, *Animals in African Art: From the Familiar to the Marvelous*. (Munich: Prestel Publishing, 1997), 69.

¹¹⁶ David Zeitlyn, “Sua in Somié: Mambila Traditional Religion” (PhD thesis, Cambridge University, 1990), 106.

¹¹⁷ Allen F. Roberts, *Animals in African Art: From the Familiar to the Marvelous*. (Munich: Prestel Publishing, 1997), 40.

¹¹⁸ Farnham Rehfisch, “Death, Dreams, and the Ancestors in Mambila Culture.” In *Man in Africa*. M. Douglas and P.M. Kaberry (ed). (London: Tavistock Press, 1969), 307-315.

¹¹⁹ David Zeitlyn, “Sua in Somié: Mambila Traditional Religion” (PhD thesis, Cambridge University, 1990), 63.

¹²⁰ David Zeitlyn, “Mambila Figurines and Masquerades: Problems of Interpretation.” *African Arts* 27 (1994): 21-22.

quest for survival. One other question arises: is it possible that the chicken foot on the gourd is that of a cock? If so, the latter's association with time and alertness is relevant here. As Hope Werness succinctly explains:

Because the cock is generally the first bird to be heard in the morning all over the world, cocks are regarded as solar birds—actually, anyone who has lived in a farming community knows that they crow at night as well, and frequently throughout the day. Beyond the solar, dawn-herald symbolism, cocks also connote watchfulness, courage, virility, prescience, and reliability.¹²¹

Among the Fante of Ghana, to offer a chicken as a sacrifice is “to present oneself before the Invisible and to demonstrate the desire to match one's ‘time’ with the rhythms of the cosmos.”¹²² This partly explains why many Africa cultures link cocks ‘with precognition and prophecy.’¹²³ The chicken foot on the VMFA gourd thus proclaim the latter's capacity to connect the terrestrial to the celestial, given the Mambila practice of sacrificing “a pure white cock to the ancestors as a token of thanksgiving” at the beginning of the New Year.¹²⁴

Vegetal Matters

The plant substances in the sachets on the VMFA gourd (Fig. 7) are difficult to identify simply because they have deteriorated. Nonetheless, they must of have been attached to aid the

¹²¹ Hope B. Werness, *The Continuum Encyclopedia of Animal Symbolism in Art*. (New York and London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), 89.

¹²² Allen F. Roberts, *Animals in African Art: From the Familiar to the Marvelous*. (Munich: Prestel Publishing, 1997), 40.

¹²³ Hope B. Werness, *The Continuum Encyclopedia of Animal Symbolism in Art*. (New York and London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), 92 and Allen F. Roberts, *Animals in African Art: From the Familiar to the Marvelous*. (Munich: Prestel Publishing, 1997), 40.

¹²⁴ Farnham Rehfisch, “Death, Dreams, and the Ancestors in Mambila Culture.” In *Man in Africa*. M. Douglas and P.M. Kaberry (ed). (London: Tavistock Press, 1969), 307-315.

ritual process and help materialize prayers or incantations. An x-ray examination of the leather packets on the gourd reveals that they hold some form of papyrus. Papers with inscriptions from the Qu'ran or "magic squares" are known as *katemi*. These papers are usually in the form of a quadrangle divided into small squares, each containing a number, a script representing a numerical value, or a word from the Qu'ran with a numerical value, or some esoteric design with special virtues. Healers fold *katemi* into thumbnail-size and bind it tightly with cotton strings. *Katemi* might be sewn into leather pouches and other objects for use as talismans, amulets, and charms to access mystical powers for preventing misfortune, curing illness, healing wounds, or forecasting the future.¹²⁵

Carved Images

As mentioned earlier, the strategic location on the VMFA gourd of the carved figures (tadep) may be deliberate (Figs. 2 A-E). While some Mambila informants identify these figures as ancestors, others consider them as "protectors" of storage sheds.¹²⁶ Note how the four figures on the gourd's body face the cardinal directions, as if engaged in a kind of surveillance. The fifth figure on top (doubling as a stopper) has a mysterious faraway look in its eyes, seemingly ignoring and conscious of the viewer at the same time. Comparable but larger figures are often displayed in front of certain Mambila shrines¹²⁷ and granary-like storage houses surrounded by magical

¹²⁵ Robert E. Handloff, "Prayers, Amulets, and Charms: Heath and Social Control," *African Studies Review* 25 (1982): 186-187.

¹²⁶ James Y. Tong, "The Collection." In *African Art in the Mambila Collection of Gilbert T. Schneider Collection*. (Ohio: Author, 1967), 8.

¹²⁷ For illustrations, see George Nelson Preston, *Sets, Series and Ensembles in African Art*. (New York: The Center for African Art and Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1985), figs. 4-6.

objects—dead birds and duiker horns filled with medicine—thus inviting comparison with the VMFA gourd assemblage.

By and large, while these figures may not literally represent specific ancestors or nature spirits, they nonetheless give a human presence to a constellation of cosmic forces, thus facilitating the use of human language for communicating with what is otherwise intangible and invisible.

Assemblages with similar forms and functions can be found in other parts of Africa such as the Ngbe Society emblems of the Ejagham peoples, Bocio figures of the Fon, and Nkisi power figures of the Kongo.¹²⁸ Like the VMFA gourd, these ensembles were created to contain and generate cosmic forces through the accumulation of assorted materials—all acting in concert—and activated by libations and incantations to connect the seen with the unseen¹²⁹ and consequently produce specific results.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ See Monica B. Visona, Robin Poynor, and Herbert M. Cole, *A History of Art in Africa*. (New Jersey: Pearson/ Prentice Hall, 2008), 322; Suzanne Blier, *African Vodun: Art, Psychology, and Power*. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995); and Wyatt MacGaffey and Michael Harris, *Astonishment and Power*. (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993).

¹²⁹ Mary H. Nooter. "Introduction." In *Secrecy: African Art That Conceals and Reveals*. (New York: Museum for African Art, 1993), 24-25.

¹³⁰ Dana Rush. "Ephemerality and the "Unfinished" in Vodun Aesthetics." In *African Arts* 43 (2010): 127.

Chapter Three: The VMFA Gourd as a Ritual Ensemble of Material Metaphors with Metaphysical Powers

In order to fully understand the different contexts and functions of the VMFA gourd, we must be aware of the dualism in the world-views of many African cultures—a dualism manifested in the belief that reality is an interface of the physical and metaphysical—the visible and visible, the terrestrial and celestial. Conversely, the human body (*yor*) is frequently perceived as a work of art incarnating (and empowered by) a soul or personal spirit (*chan*).¹³¹ Hence, death is conceptualized as no more than a separation of soul from body, after which the soul (*chan*) departs for the wilderness or the here-after called *tandalu* (bush). The corpse (*kumu*) is then interred and the grave becomes a point of contact between mortals and the living dead. As mentioned earlier, the skull of an ancestor may be removed, placed in a basket and then enshrined in a skull-house (*sua so*). During the *damə* ceremony, beer (stored in gourds) may be poured on the skull accompanied by invocations aimed at attracting positive forces to a given community, repelling the negative ones and warning evil doers of dire consequences.¹³² As Farnham Rehfisch has noted, the Mambila “believe that the ancestors, both paternal and maternal, are very much concerned with the behavior of their descendants. Infractions of important rules of conduct are punished by illness and in some cases death. If a sick person

¹³¹ For a survey of the concept, see Geoffrey Parrinder, *African Mythology*. (London: Hamlyn, 1967) and John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*. (London: Heineman, 1969).

¹³² At death, the lifeless body becomes a corpse (*kúmu* in Mambila language). See David Zeitlyn, “Sua in Somié: Mambila Traditional Religion” (PhD thesis, Cambridge University, 1990), 68-69, 74-75.

publicly confesses his or her evil doings, the ancestors are satisfied and the patient will recover.”¹³³

Of special importance to us here are the ritual containers (such as the VMFA gourds) for pouring libations on graves and storing curative medicines as well as a variety of magical concoctions. The assemblage on such containers activates their contents, constituting a kind of conduit between the seen and unseen, releasing cosmic vibrations.¹³⁴ As Rosalind Hackett observes, “concept of powers—its source, its significance, and its control—is central to the understanding of embodying, symbolizing, or transformational capacities of art in Africa.”¹³⁵

Transforming the Ordinary into Extraordinary through Material Metaphors

The ancient African belief in the metaphysical capacities of symbols is reflected in the choice of certain materials for embodying, communicating with, or influencing the sublime. According to Herbert Cole:

Materials are bearers of values [in African art]. Most raw materials chosen by artists are meaningful. Wood, for example, may come from trees inhabited by spirits; masks or figures made from such wood have spiritual dimensions. The medicinal ingredients used to construct Kongo power images have wounding or healing or transforming capacities. Lustrous gold is precious, while ivory connotes the strength and endurance of elephants. White chalk

¹³³ Farnham Rehfisch, “Death, Dreams, and the Ancestors in Mambila Culture.” In *Man in Africa*. M. Douglas and P.M. Kaberry (ed). (London: Tavistock Press, 1969), 307-308.

¹³⁴ See also Mary H. Nooter, “Introduction.” In *Secrecy: African Art That Conceals and Reveals*. (New York: Museum for African Art, 1993), 24-25 and Dana Rush. “Ephemerality and the “Unfinished” in Vodun Aesthetics,” *African Arts* 43 (2010). 127.

¹³⁵ Rosalind I. J. Hackett. *Art and Religion in African Art* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 1998), 48.

is cool and pure in some places where red pigments stand for blood and danger. The use of varied ingredients, then, helps articulate the relationship between form and meaning in African art.¹³⁶

The fact that the VMFA gourd and its attachments have been “dislocated” from their original habitat enables the assemblage to perform new symbolic or ritual functions in an “afterlife” context that meta-empirically unites the constituent parts, placing them at the cross-roads of the *worldly* and *otherworldly*. This act of dislocation, relocation and unification transforms the VMFA gourd (and its attachments) from *ordinary* into *extraordinary* “things,”¹³⁷ transmuting them into what art historian George Nelson Preston, calls a ritual “ensemble.” In his words:

Ensembles [in African art] are made, used and viewed as unitary programs, not as amalgams of separate objects. The individual components of each ensemble form in concert an integrated design that is the expression of an idea.... Most express themes...[such as] social hierarchy as an extension of social and cosmic order; the interrelated boundaries of ethos, cosmos, and hierarchy; levels of godly revelation; and the accumulation of *mana*, or impersonal spiritual power.... Juxtaposed within ensembles, the component objects together have the capacity to articulate or implement concepts by defining hierarchical systems, ... mapping cosmic order, revealing tacit verities, not overtly acknowledged in daily life, legitimizing office, guiding transition between states of being, marking boundaries of ethos.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ Herbet M. Cole, *Icons: Ideals and Power in the Art of Africa*. (Washington, D.C. and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 48. For a comprehensive review of the relationship between material and meaning in Africa, see Frank Herreman and Herman Burssens (ed), *Material Differences: Art and Identity in Africa*. (New York and Gent: Museum for African Art and Snoeck-Ducaju & Zoon, 2003).

¹³⁷ Because of the complexity of visual metaphors, some scholars are beginning to conceptualize “art” in terms of “things” that humans create “to work out ideas” and, by extension, express/translate/convey the complexity of human thoughts. For more details, see Esther Pasztor, *Thinking with Things: Toward a New Vision of Art*. (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2005) and David T. Doris, *Vigilant Things: On thieves, Yoruba Anti-Aesthetics, and the Strange Fates of Ordinary Objects in Nigeria*. (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2011).

In effect, essences of nature can be harnessed to produce medicines—charms, amulets, and power objects—that ritual specialists use to navigate liminal terrains between the village and the wilderness.¹³⁹ Thus, the VMFA gourd and its attachments constitute a ritual ensemble of material metaphors, all resonating with metaphysical powers that enabled its former Mambila owner(s) to connect with cosmic forces otherwise inaccessible to mortals. According to anthropologist Allen Roberts, most ritual specialists in Africa employ such tropes (including synecdoches, irony and the like) to liaise with disparate realities in the pursuit of desired goals.¹⁴⁰ The French scholar Jean-Pierre Vernant uses the term “presentification” for a similar phenomenon, that is, for “the action of or operation through which an entity that belongs to the invisible world becomes [virtually] present in the world of humans.”¹⁴¹ From this perspective, the *tadep* figures on the VMFA gourd may not represent specific ancestors or supernatural forces as such. Rather, they can be said to *presentify*, signify, or, as it were, humanize metaphysical beings in order to facilitate the use of the Mambila language to communicate with them. All the other attachments on the gourd might have had similar implications in their roles as catalysts, enabling the gourd’s content to achieve desired result when poured as libation or administered as “medicine” for divinatory trances, healing, self-empowerment, initiation, cursing or blessing, swearing, detecting witchcraft, hunting animals, tracking criminals or mesmerizing and disempowering

¹³⁸ George Nelson Preston. *Sets, Series and Ensembles in African Art*, (New York: The Center For African Art and Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1985), 17.

¹³⁹ Martha G. Anderson and Christine Mullen Kreamer, *Wild Spirits, Strong Medicine: African Art and the Wilderness*, ed. Enid Schildkrout (New York: Center for African Art, 1989), 59.

¹⁴⁰ Allen F. Roberts, *Animals in African Art: From the Familiar to the Marvelous*. Munich: Prestel Publishing, 1997, 18. He defines metonymy as “the relationship of two (or more) terms that occupy a common domain but do not share common features, except those features necessary for inclusion in the conceptual set itself.” (p. 19).

¹⁴¹ Rosalind I. J. Hackett. *Art and Religion in African Art* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 1998), 48.

enemies, among others. The secrecy surrounding the use of the gourd inside a dark enclosure with a fire-place for burning herbs is apparent in the smoky patina on its body and attachments—a patina that further underscores its use to navigate the underworld.

It is significant to note that, because of its anthropomorphized stopper and the miscellaneous attachments on its body, the VMFA gourd brings to mind many masquerades along the Nigeria/Cameroon border (such as the *Kheghebcio*, *Nkang* and *Mabuh* among the Oku; *Kwifon* of the Bamum, Babungo)¹⁴² with feathers and assorted materials on their costumes to empower and enable them to mediate between visible and invisible realities through the performing arts. That the gourd had multiple functions is evident in the miscellaneous materials on its body, all of which were expected to (metaphysically) work in concert to realize specific goals, depending on contexts of use.

¹⁴² See Hans-Joachim Koloss. *World-View and Society in Oku (Cameroon)*. (Berlin, Verlag von Dietrich Reimer, 2000), 126-127; 267, 293; Tamara Northern. *The Art of the Cameroon*. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1984), 158 and Richard B. Woodward, *African Art: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts*. (Richmond, Virginia: Office of Publications, 2000), 69.

Conclusion: The Transition of the VMFA Gourd from a Ritual Icon to an Art Museum Exhibit

Before the nineteenth century, many Western art historians ignored African assemblages such as the VMFA gourd, dismissing them as “fetish” or “voodoo.” One reason for this attitude can be traced to the western ignorance of the nature of ritual symbols and material metaphors in non-western cultures. Another explanation can be found in the Eurocentric ideas of enlightenment and evolution which not only placed western aesthetics at the apex of human development, but also used naturalism as the hallmark for the arts of non-Western cultures. Thus the emphasis on abstraction and conceptual representations in African art caused several Western art critics to regard them as ‘primitive’ and “a failed attempt to imitate nature.”¹⁴³ However, this attitude would change in the first decade of the twentieth century when, prominent Western artists such as Andre Derain, Maurice Vlaminck, Henri Matisse, George Braque, Pablo Picasso and Emil Nolde became disillusioned with naturalism and discovered a high level of inventiveness in African stylized forms. The inspiration from that discovery gave birth to certain modern aesthetic.¹⁴⁴ Pablo Picasso’s first encounter with African art is consequential:

Everyone always talks about the influence of the Negroes on me.

¹⁴³ For details, see Babatunde Lawal, “AFRICA.” In *A New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*. Volume 1. Maryann, C. Horowitz (ed). (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2005), (p. 144.)

¹⁴⁴ See Jack Flam with Miriam Deutch (ed), *Primitivism and Twentieth Century Art: A Documentary History*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Colin Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994); Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives*. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990); Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1986) and William Rubin (ed), *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, 2 volumes. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984).

What can I do?

When I went to the Trocadero [Ethnographic Museum] it was disgusting. The flea market. The smell. I was all alone. I wanted to get away. But I didn't leave. I stayed. I stayed. I understood something very important: something was happening to me, wasn't it?

The masks weren't like other kinds of sculpture. Not at all. They were magical things... The Negroes' sculptures were intercessors ... Against everything; against unknown, threatening spirits. I kept looking at the fetishes... But all fetishes were used for the same thing. They were weapons. To help people stop being dominated by spirits, to become independent. Tools. If we give form to the spirits, we become independent of them... All alone in that awful museum, the masks, the Red Indian dolls, the dusty mannequins. *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*¹⁴⁵ must have come to me that day, but not at all because of the forms: but because it was my first canvas of exorcism – yes, absolutely!¹⁴⁶

Picasso's use of "exorcism" is significant in the sense that the sudden realization of the creative ingenuity behind conceptual imagery in non-Western art liberated many Europeans from previous prejudices.¹⁴⁷ Moreover, Picasso's use of found objects in his cubist constructions in the second decade of the twentieth century would be elaborated upon by the Dadaists and other avant-garde artists to interrogate established Western traditions.

To make a long story short, the new development produced amalgams of found objects, assorted artifacts, skins, feathers and other natural materials not previously associated with art in

¹⁴⁵ Now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, this painting (aka *The Young Ladies of Avignon*, 1906-07), is considered as a seminal work on Western Modernism. It features two women with facial features reminiscent of African masks. For an illustration, see Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art*, fig. 61.

¹⁴⁶ Andre Malraux, *La Tete d'Obsidienne*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 17-19; quoted from Flam with Miriam Deutch (ed), *Primitivism and Twentieth Century Art*, 33.

¹⁴⁷ See also Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Art and Secrecy." In *Secrecy: African Art that Conceals and Reveals*. Mary H. Nooter (ed). (New York and Munich: The Museum for African Art and Prestel, 1993), 15.

the West. Their uniqueness influenced the Museum of Modern Art in New York to organize a major exhibition in 1961, entitled “The Art of Assemblage,” featuring examples by Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Kurt Schwitters, Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, Jean Dubuffet, Robert Rauschenberg, Lawrence Vail and Bruce Conner, to name only a few.¹⁴⁸ The nexus between African art and Western collage or bricolage is apparent in William Seitz’s introduction to the exhibition catalogue:

Every work of art is an incarnation: an investment of matter with spirit. The term “assemblage” has been singled out, with this duality in mind, to denote not only a specific technical procedure and form used in literary and musical, as well as the plastic arts, but also a complex of attitudes and ideas.¹⁴⁹

Since that exhibition, African ritual assemblages, previously relegated to anthropology/ethnography museums, have found their way to major art museums in the West. They can also be found in the collections of several contemporary Western artists who now seek inspiration from them.¹⁵⁰ As Susan Vogel (the former Director of the Museum of African Art, New York) once observed:

Everybody seems to collect African art these days, so the mere act of collecting is no longer very interesting in itself. But collecting by artists has special significance. African objects that artist’s choose to possess and live with are, on some level, professional working tools,

¹⁴⁸ See the exhibition catalogue: William C. Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage*. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1961).

¹⁴⁹ Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage*, 10.

¹⁵⁰ See Jack Flam and Daniel Shapiro, *Western Artists/African Art*. (New York: The Museum for African Art, 1994).

notes and archives, things to ponder and absorb, things that contain an inventory of ideas.¹⁵¹

The African American artist Renee Stout (b. 1958) is world famous today because of her “FETISH” series which explores different aspects of African assemblages for self-empowerment and aesthetic purposes.¹⁵² According to her, she first encountered a Kongo *nkisi* assemblage when she was about ten years old and a member of an art class visiting the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania:

I saw a piece there that had all these nails in it. And when I first saw that one; it was like I was drawn to it. I didn't really know why... And I think once I got exposed to more African art in my travels as I got older, I found that I started going back to the pieces like that.... Because I feel like I'm coming back with a little more knowledge each time.”¹⁵³

Other renowned African American artists influenced by African assemblages include Betye Saar (b. 1926), Houston Conwill (1947), Willie Cole (1955) and Allison Saar (b. 1956).

From Private Storage to Public Display

Although it is uncertain why and how the VMFA gourd got separated from its ritual contexts, it is possible that it was discarded after the death of its owner or the latter's conversion to Islam or Christianity. Normally, such a ritual icon would have been destroyed after the event that caused the rupture. It is also possible that, given the Western interest in African artifacts as a

¹⁵¹ Susan Vogel, “Out of Africa and into the (Western} Living Room.” In Flam and Shapiro, *Western Artists/African Art*, 8.

¹⁵² See Stout's *Fetish No. 2* in Monica Blackmun Visona and others, eds., *A History of African Art* Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2008. (fig 16-28, p. 538)

¹⁵³ Michael Harris, “Resonance, Transformation and Rhyme: The Art of Renee Stout” in *Astonishment and Power*, 111.

result of its influence on Modernism, the gourd was sold to a European connoisseur or local art trader. Alternatively, somebody got hold of the gourd and facilitated its transatlantic journey—first to France, and eventually, to the United States where it is currently on display at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond. The gourd is exhibited in a section of the African gallery of the museum displayed as a work of art for all to see, contemplate, and marvel at—unlike the secrecy associated with its previous *life* in Mambila culture. Though now secularized as an African collage to be appreciated for its form and content, the gourd continues to generate an “affecting presence”¹⁵⁴ in the sanctuary that many contemporary museums have become.

¹⁵⁴ Popularized by Robert Plant Armstrong (*The Affecting Presence: An Essay in Humanistic Anthropology*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), this phrase refers to the visual and psychological impact of a given work of art.

Glossary of Mambila Terms

Baltu: painted images of celestial beings often hung on shrines or storehouses.

Bò Bà: “The Ba” The term used by the Cameroonian Mambila to identify themselves.

Ceiba petandra: “Silk-cotton tree”

Chàṅ: “Supreme Being”

Chàṅ mo: “My Chàṅ.” Individual spirit or soul.

Chàṅ tandalu: “Spirit in the bush”

Chúchú: “Breath”

Damə: A ceremony whose invocations are aimed at attracting positive forces to a given community, repelling the negative ones and warning evil doers of dire consequences.

Gua fə: skull house

Jù Bà: The language of the Cameroonian Mambila.

Kassala: Administrative head in Warwar.

Kumú: “Corpse”

Kuru: A shrine for offerings during the dry season festival.

Kurum: A mutual aid society that clears or harvests fields, builds houses, and completes other large tasks. The society also provides important social contact through feasts, dances, and drinking for members.

Kike: Pith figures with peg appendages.

Lamsua: “Python”

Ndip so: “ancestral shrine” or “ritual storehouse”

Ngam: Spider or crab divination.

Ngam ngofogo: A special divination practice using a snail shell.

Ngubu: “Gaboon Viper”

Nɔr bɔ̀: “The people” The term used by the Cameroonian Mambila to identify themselves.

Sho Kuru: “Cult of the Dead”

Sogo ba: “Small four-handled Mambila basket”

Sùàgà (or Sua): Mambila healing association. The association seeks justice and supernatural cleansing of its community.

Suah bvur: Dog-like masks used by Mambila during biannual dances.

Tadep: Painted pith figures with conical heads and heart-shaped faces.

Tandalu: “Wilderness.” or “Bush”

Tetam: “Weaver bird”

Yor: “Body”

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Illustrations



Figure 1. Mambila Culture (Nigeria, Cameroon), Healer or Diviner's Calabash. Calabash, wickerwork, wood, shell, horn, other natural material, 24 x 20½ in. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Virginia. Photograph taken by Richard Woodward.



Figure 2 A. VMFA Gourd Stopper. Photograph taken by Richard Woodward.



Figure 2 B. Tademouset Figure. Photograph taken by Richard Woodward.



Figure 2 C. Tadep Figure. Photograph taken by Richard Woodward.



Figure 2 D. Tadep Figure. Photograph taken by Richard Woodward.



Figure 2 E. Tadep Figure. Photograph taken by Richard Woodward.



Figure 3. Hornbill. Photograph taken by Richard Woodward.

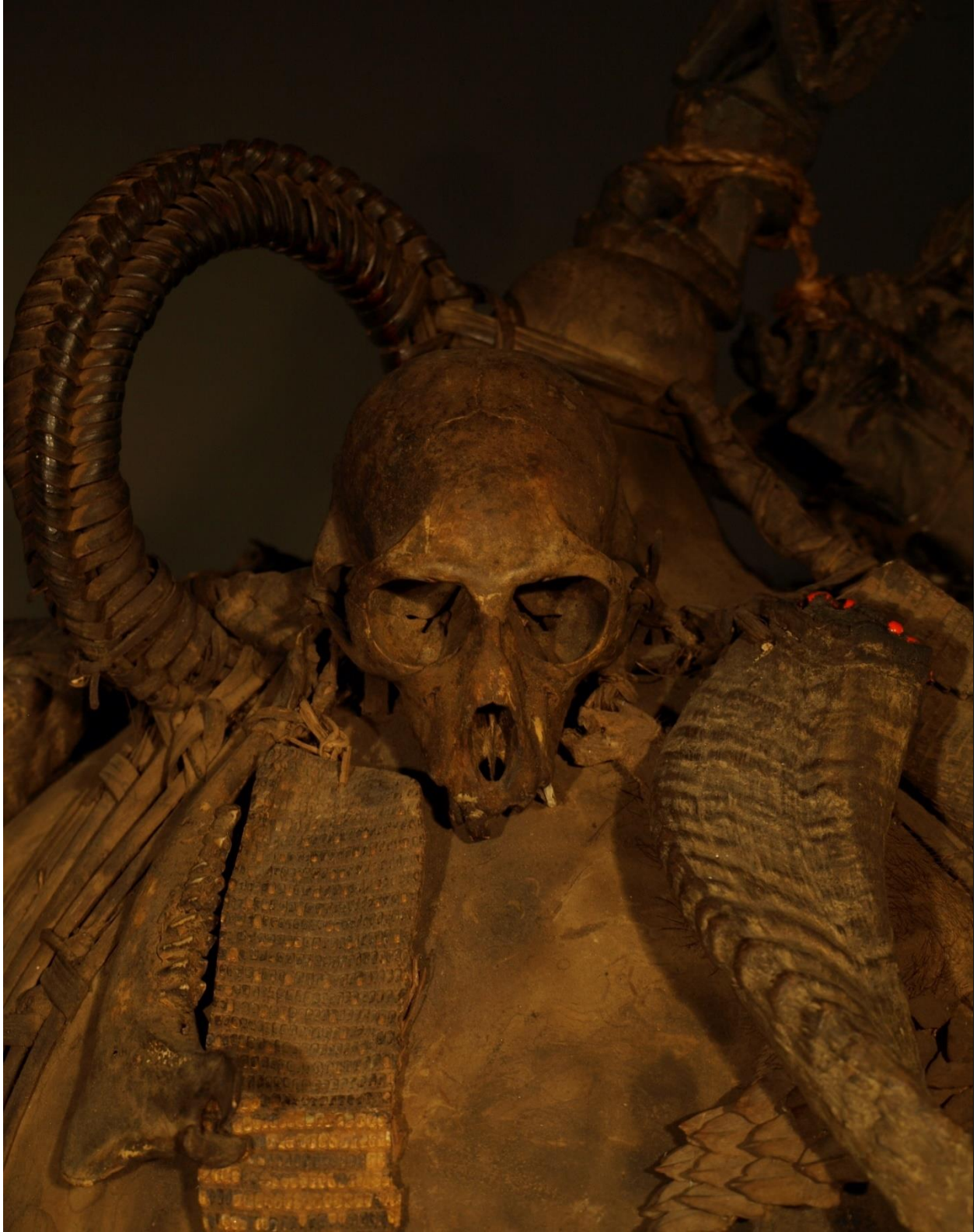


Figure 4. Smaller Monkey Skull. Photograph taken by Richard Woodward.



Figure 5. Large Monkey Skull. Photograph taken by Richard Woodward.



Figure 6. Canine Skull. Photograph taken by Richard Woodward.



Figure 7. Snakeskin, chicken foot, leather packet, bean pod. Photograph taken by Richard Woodward.



Figure 8. Man-made bundle. Photograph taken by Richard Woodward.



Figure 9. Primate mandible. Photograph taken by Richard Woodward.



Figure 10. Primate mandible. Photograph taken by Richard Woodward.



Figure 11. Bovid mandible, snail shell, pangolin pelt. Photograph taken by Richard Woodward.



Figure 12. Mandible and snail shell. Photograph taken by Richard Woodward.



Figure 13. Mandible and snail shell. Photograph taken by Richard Woodward.



Figure 14. Bovid Mandible and snail shell. Photograph taken by Richard Woodward.



Figure 15. Pangolin pelt, animal horn, snakeskin. Photograph taken by Richard Woodward.



Figure 16 A. Pangolin Pelt. Photograph taken by Richard Woodward.



Figure 16 B. Pangolin pelt. Photograph taken by Richard Woodward.



Figure 17. Snakeskin. Photograph taken by Richard Woodward.



Figure 18. Chicken Foot detail. Photograph taken by Richard Woodward.

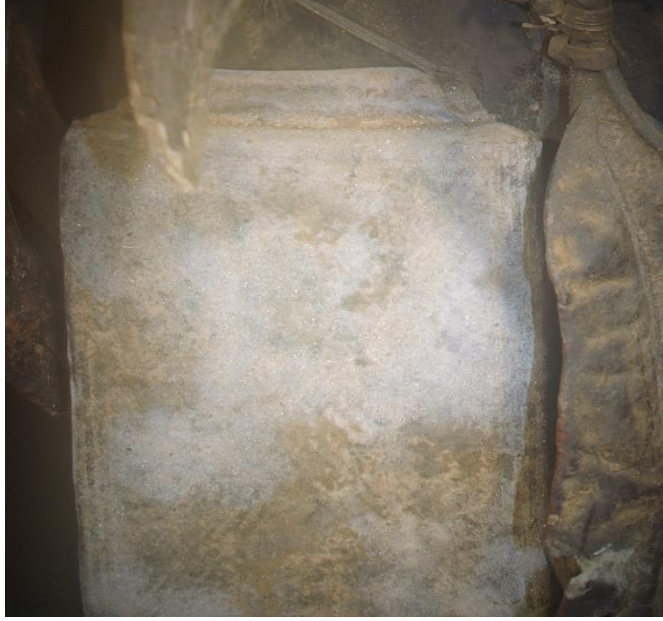


Figure 19. Detail of crisscross pattern on leather packet. Photograph taken by Richard Woodward.