

# Imaging Otherness in Ivory: African Portrayals of the Portuguese ca. 1492

Suzanne Preston Blier

This new white cloud, the sails of their boats slowly nearing the shore, was a thing never yet seen; it was something strange. If these were their ancestors come back from the Land of the Dead, they could be none but their nobles, for no souls but theirs were immortal. They must be worthily received. Or were they the devils of the world below seeking vengeance for diverse crimes, committed by members of their tribe?

—Julius E. Lips, *The Savage Strikes Back*,  
New Hyde Park, N.Y., 1966

The stranger, writes Georg Simmel in his seminal essay on the subject, is bound up with paradoxical qualities of closeness and remoteness, for such persons are, in Simmel's words, both "near and far at the same time."<sup>1</sup> Simmel goes on to explain that:

Between these two factors of nearness and distance . . . a peculiar tension arises, since the consciousness of having only the absolutely general in common has exactly the effect of putting a special emphasis on that which is not common. For a stranger to the country, the city, the race, and so on, what is stressed is again nothing individual, but alien origin, a quality which he has, or could have, in common with many other strangers. For this reason strangers are not really perceived as individuals, but as strangers of a certain type. Their remoteness is no less general than their nearness.<sup>2</sup>

Related questions of otherness have been a central concern in recent scholarship in fields as diverse as history, anthropology, literary theory, philosophy, and film theory with regard

to dominant views of disempowered individuals or cultures, delimited by factors as diverse as race, class, and gender.<sup>3</sup> Rarely, however, has the question been reversed in the context of arts outside of Europe to ask how native residents have perceived Europeans and have sought to express ideas about European otherness in local art.

Several exceptions stand out in the context of Africa, however; one is Julius Lips's *The Savage Strikes Back*,<sup>4</sup> which surveys African, Oceanic, and Native American artistic portrayals of Europeans. Another is Henry Drewal's article on African Mami Wata worship,<sup>5</sup> which describes the role such arts play in constructing meaning in the context of African encounters with overseas strangers. Still another is Herbert Cole's recent discussion of "ambiguous aliens" in his catalogue *Icons: Ideals and Power in the Art of Africa*.<sup>6</sup> If the first two works are identified primarily with recent periods many centuries after the time of the first encounter, the third offers an interesting if brief overview of African stranger images from diverse areas and periods. In addition to the above, a short article by Kathy Curnow examines European representations in late fifteenth-century and early sixteenth-century ivories from the Sapi area and Benin.<sup>7</sup> My essay explores instead the larger corpus of ivories carved in Africa in the period ca. 1492 (including not only Sapi and Benin works, but also those from the Kongo).<sup>8</sup> My concern is with the unique insights these ivories offer as objects created by the first generation of African artists to meet or know of the Portuguese.<sup>9</sup> I suggest here that African beliefs about death, regeneration, and the afterworld played a critical role in African perceptions and representations of the Portuguese, and that related issues find expression in a range of artworks created at this time.

<sup>1</sup> G. Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. and intro. D. N. Levine, Chicago, 1971, 148. This paper was originally presented at the National Gallery of Art in a symposium coinciding with the exhibition "Circa 1492." I thank Marcia Kupfer for her invitation to present this paper on that occasion and Eunei Lee for helping in the course of manuscript preparation. All translations in the text are my own.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of strangers in Africa, see E. P. Skinner, "Strangers in West African Societies," *Africa*, xxxiii, 4, 1965, 307–320, and W. A. Shack and E. P. Skinner, eds., *Strangers in African Societies*, Berkeley, 1979.

<sup>3</sup> See, among others, C. W. Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, New York, 1991; M. Sahlins, *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities*, Chicago, 1981; N. Z. Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre*, Cambridge, Mass., 1983; J. Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, New York, 1983; H. L. Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, New York, 1988; T. de Laurentis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, Bloomington, Ind., 1984; T. Todorov, *The Conquest of America*, trans. R. Howard, New York, 1984; V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*, Bloomington, Ind., 1988; R. H. Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization: A Study of the Indian and the American Mind* (1953), Berkeley, 1988; M. B. Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing, 400–1600*, Ithaca, 1988; E. S. Said, *Orientalism*, New York, 1978; K.

Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics*, New York, 1983; G. C. Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, New York, 1987.

<sup>4</sup> Originally published in German in 1937.

<sup>5</sup> H. J. Drewal, "Performing the Other: Mami Wata Worship in Africa," *Drama Review*, xxxii, 2, 160–185.

<sup>6</sup> National Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C., 1989.

<sup>7</sup> Curnow, 1990. In this work Curnow suggests that artistic differences in Portuguese portrayals can be correlated with distinctions in European reception and integration in these two areas.

<sup>8</sup> The inclusion of Kongo in this discussion presents an important contrasting (yet complementary) context. Because Kongolese ivories at this time do not appear to have been carved at the request of Europeans or following European models, scholars generally have not included them in discussions of Afro-Portuguese art. It is my belief, however, that regardless of their patronage, these works provide important insight into Kongolese perceptions of the Portuguese, and the latter's place within Kongolese cosmology.

<sup>9</sup> Both in Africa and in Pre-Columbian Quetzacoatl traditions, there is a certain ironic convergence with respect to indigenous beliefs concerning the death and return of the white-skinned culture hero(s) and the arrival of the European explorers.

As will become evident, this essay is a largely speculative one, revealing among other things the enormous challenges that one faces in a field in which recuperating a distant past is often based on a combination of very limited European sources (which themselves require careful deconstruction) and sparse local oral traditions, which are quite distant in time and subject from the artworks in question. Despite these difficulties, I hope through this analysis to push our understanding of these magnificent ivories in a new and important direction. My essay seeks to "excavate" the indigenous African cosmologies into which the early Portuguese travelers entered, and through which these strangers were reconfigured. Within this analysis I have also shifted interpretive emphases from European to African perspectives, hoping thereby to enrich our knowledge both of the works themselves and of the cultures that made them.

The period ca. 1492 in African art is particularly interesting to explore from the perspective of stranger ideation and issues of European otherness. The second half of the fifteenth and the first half of the sixteenth centuries was a time of artistic florescence in sub-Saharan Africa. Great Zimbabwe, the famed East African Shona site, witnessed during this period the building of architectural works and stone enclosing walls of impressive scale and beauty.<sup>10</sup> In Ethiopia, to the north and west, this was a time of similarly rich cultural and artistic achievement, the area reaching what Tamarat calls "... the pinnacle of its cultural, literary, and spiritual attainments."<sup>11</sup> In the western Sudan, the accession of Askia Muhammed to the Songhay throne in 1493 similarly ushered in a reign of extraordinary artistic development with the construction of architectural monuments of striking visual power, exemplified by the still-extant mausoleum of Askia Muhamed.<sup>12</sup> In the nearby inland delta of the Niger River, bronzes and terra-cottas of remarkable beauty were being made as well. Further south in the forests of the Guinea Coast, at this time ancient Ife also experienced an era rich in art, marked by a corpus of magnificent bronzes and terra-cottas.<sup>13</sup> Each of these civilizations, it should be emphasized, was identified at once with local artistic values or concerns and outward artistic orientations. Chinese ceramics have been found among the remains at Great Zimbabwe. Coptic and Italian art forms had a significant impact in Ethiopia. Islamic architectural models were a critical force in the western Sudan. At ancient Ife sites, foreign metals were used in casting.

Although contact with Europe and other areas of the world was clearly felt in Africa during this period, European sea navigation along the West African coast had a particularly profound effect on the cultures with which the travelers came in contact. In 1472, twenty years before Columbus's first voyage to the Americas, European navigators reached the West African coast of what is now Ghana. When the famous

Treaty of Tordesillas was signed twenty-one years later, guaranteeing the Castilian monopoly of the Americas, it simultaneously accorded sub-Saharan Africa to the throne of Portugal. Africa, a land of legendary riches, now offered Portuguese merchants ports of direct access to the interior, independent of the still powerful (and wealthy) Islamic states that had been controlling routes across the Sahara for several centuries previously. Ever since the fourteenth century when the Mali king Mansa Musa had traveled to Cairo and spent so much gold that he caused a crisis in the gold-based world monetary system,<sup>14</sup> European desire had been great to find an alternative means of entry into the continent.

What the Portuguese discovered on their arrival on the West African coast were not only vast reserves of gold, but also impressive traditions of art. Among the locally manufactured items brought back by the Portuguese in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries were richly woven mats which soon were prized as bedcovers and floor coverings.<sup>15</sup> Locally made textiles also were appreciated, Kongolese examples being compared to fine imported silk. The most highly valued of the African works collected during this period, however, were carvings made of ivory (Fig. 1), a number of which were displayed in the 1988 exhibition "Africa and the Renaissance: Art in Ivory" at the Center for African Art in New York. These ivories, which consist today of some 140 or so pieces, found their way early on into such prestigious collections as those of Albrecht Dürer, the Medici of Florence, and the Elector of Saxony in Dresden, to name but a few.<sup>16</sup> Horns from the Kongo (which today lies in the modern nation state of Zaire) were among the earliest of the ivories to have been brought back to Europe (Fig. 2), several having been given as gifts to the Portuguese monarch by the king of the Kongo in 1482.<sup>17</sup> Later ivories, many of them commissioned with European motifs, were acquired primarily from two regions, the area once identified with the Sapi culture<sup>18</sup> (which today lies in the country of Sierra Leone, where related objects were collected by the 1490s), and Benin, a kingdom in what is now Nigeria, which produced ivories for European export beginning in the 1520s (see Fig. 3).

Carvings from these areas, which today are generally referred to as Afro-Portuguese ivories because of their frequent incorporation of both African and European imagery, take various forms, including saltcellars, trumpets, spoons, and Catholic ritual objects such as pyxes.<sup>19</sup> In Europe many of

<sup>14</sup> C. Monteil, *Les Empires du Mali: Étude d'histoire et de sociologie soudanaise*, Paris, 1929, 102.

<sup>15</sup> Curnow, 1983, 61.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 237; Bassani and Fagg, 53.

<sup>17</sup> Ruy de Pina in Bassani and Fagg, 47, n. 10.

<sup>18</sup> The Sapi also are identified as Temne and Bullom in the literature (Curnow, 1990, 39).

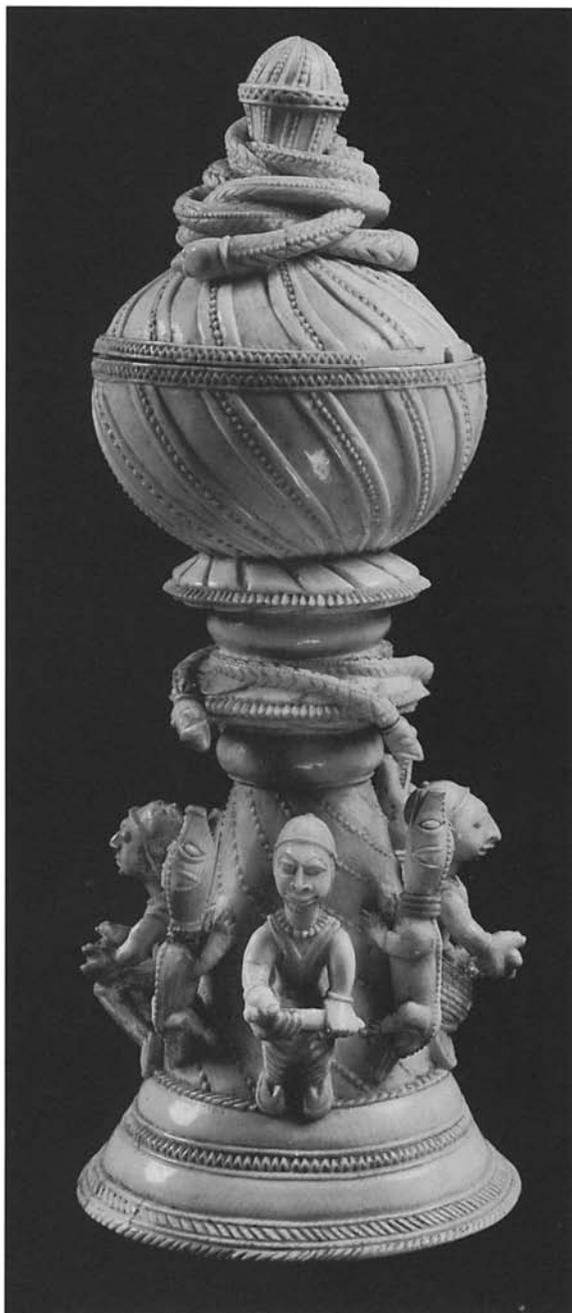
<sup>19</sup> Until recently, related objects often were attributed to carvers in India and other places. William Fagg's *The Afro-Portuguese Ivories* (London, 1959) played a significant role in reattributing these objects to African artists. Others whose early work was important in this regard were A.F.C. Ryder, "A Note on the Afro-Portuguese Ivories," *Journal of African History*, v, 1964, 363-365; K. Dittmer, "Bedeutung, Daterung und kulturhistorische Zusammenhänge der 'prähistorischen' Steinfiguren aus Sierra Leone und Guinée," *Baessler-Archiv*, n.s. 15, 1967, 183-238; and P. Allison, *African Stone Sculpture*, London, 1968.

<sup>10</sup> D. W. Philipson, *West African Archaeology*, Cambridge, 1985, 206.

<sup>11</sup> T. Tamarat, "Ethiopia, the Red Sea and the Horn," *Cambridge History of Africa*, III, ed. R. Oliver, Cambridge, 1977, 163.

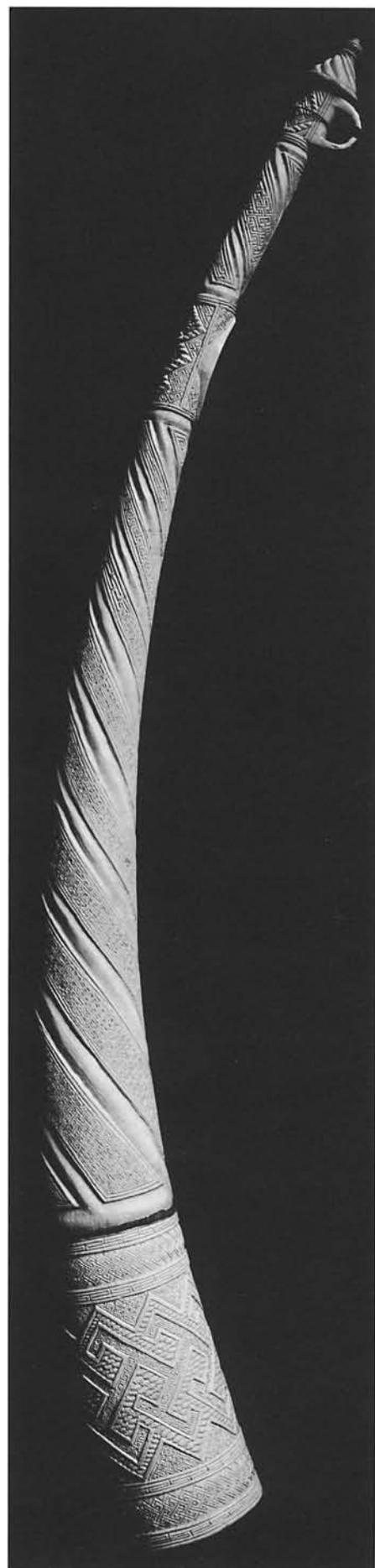
<sup>12</sup> L. Prussin, *Hatumere Islamic Design in West Africa*, Berkeley, Calif., 1986.

<sup>13</sup> S. P. Blier, "Kings, Crowns, and Rights of Succession: Obalufon Arts at Ife and Other Yoruba Centers," *Art Bulletin*, LXVII, 3, 1985, 383-401; F. Willett, *Ife in the History of West African Sculpture*, London, 1967.



1 Sapi-Portuguese saltcellar, ca. 1490–1530, ivory, h. 27.4cm. Berlin, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Museum für Völkerkunde, no. IIC 4888.

2 Oliphant from the kingdom of the Kongo, 83cm. Florence, Museo degli Argenti, no. 181, entered collection before 1553

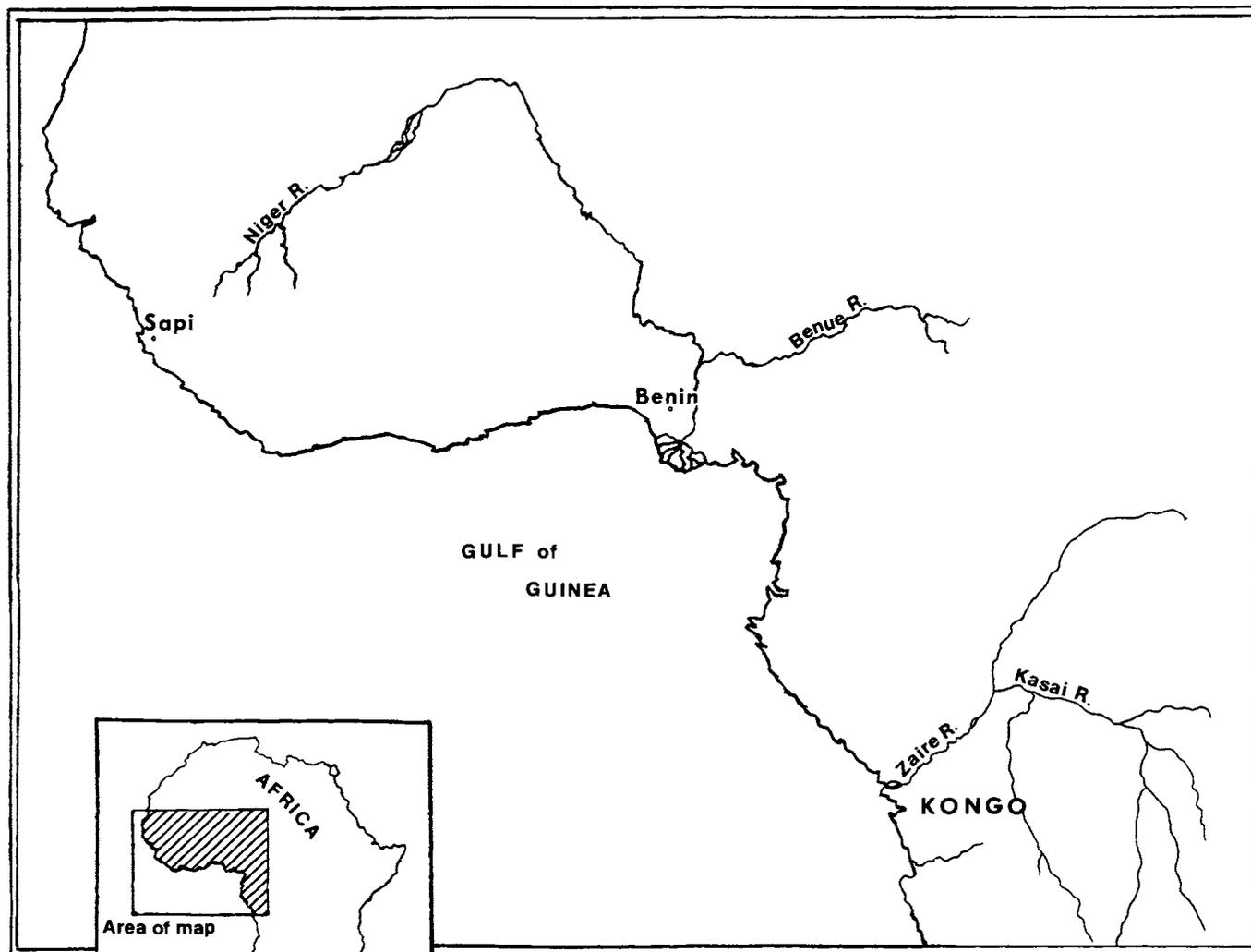


these works became important status markers. Trumpets were employed by royalty and nobility in the hunt, during battle, and to call individuals to meals or audiences. Saltcellars were accorded similarly high value as objects of prestige. As Curnow reminds us in her insightful dissertation on the larger corpus of Afro-Portuguese ivories,<sup>20</sup> the term “below the salt” was employed in Europe as a means of designating those persons seated at the “lower,” less distinguished end of the table opposite the host at the head.

Most scholarship on Afro-Portuguese ivories to date has focused on the painstaking task of locating pieces, clarifying origins, and delimiting artists and workshops.<sup>21</sup> European

<sup>20</sup> Curnow, 1983, 94.

<sup>21</sup> See esp. Curnow, 1983, and Bassani and Fagg.



3 Map of Africa showing Kongo, Benin, and Sapi area of Sierra Leone (drawn by E. Lee)

sources of imagery and prototypes for related vessels also have been explored. Although it has been remarked that there are no direct European prototypes for the forms and decoration of the saltcellars and spoons, earlier scholars have stressed the vital role of European patrons in delimiting particular types of imagery. Ezio Bassani and William Fagg assert in their recent catalogue on the subject, moreover, that even where local motifs were used, their original meaning is now lost. As they explain:

While it is possible that European drawings served as models for the overall form, the embellishment with human and animal figures on the Afro-Portuguese salts is of African origin. . . . After almost five centuries and in the absence of surviving evidence, it is not possible for us to attach even a hypothetical meaning to those motifs which are not in some way tied to European culture.<sup>22</sup>

In this paper I will offer evidence to the contrary, tantalizing and tentative though it may be. These ivories, I will suggest, provide critical insight into African perceptions of the Portu-

guese as Other—as personages at once inside and outside local perceptions of time, space, and being. The Afro-Portuguese ivories convey, I contend, a unique view of the place of Europeans in African thought and artistic expression in the period of the first encounter.

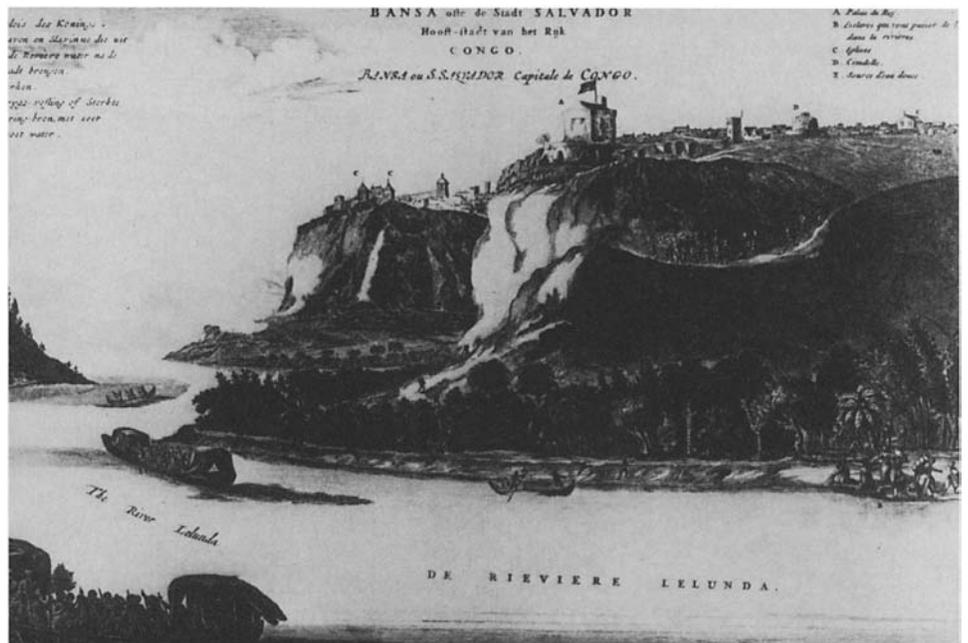
#### **Dawn of the Living Dead: Early Encounters with the Portuguese**

In Kongo, Benin, and Sierra Leone, the three principal areas of Africa where the Portuguese acquired ivories during this period, certain complementary beliefs were shared about the world and those who lived in lands beyond the sea. In all three areas, it was widely held that after leaving the earth, the dead travel across a great body of water to reach the place of the ancestors. Wyatt MacGaffey describes this most clearly for the Kongo: “The world, in Kongo thought, is like two mountains opposed at their bases and separated by the ocean. . . . Between these two parts, the lands of the dead and the living, the water is both a passage and a great barrier.”<sup>23</sup> Two terms are employed in the Kongo language in reference to the land of the dead. One is *mpemba* (meaning bone, chalk, and whiteness generally), the other is *nsi a bafwa*,

<sup>22</sup> Bassani and Fagg, 69. They add (p. 14): “European prototypes for lidded vessels like the Afro-Portuguese saltcellars are very different in form and decoration from the African ivories.”

<sup>23</sup> MacGaffey, 44.

4 View of San Salvador, capital of Kongo (from O. Dapper, *Naukeurige Beschrijvinge der Afrikaensche Gewesten van Egypten, Barbaryen, Libyen, Biledulgerid, Negrosant, Guinea, Ethiopien, Abyssinie*, Amsterdam, 1668)



the word *nsi* signifying “down below” or “underneath,” the dead themselves being perceived to live “in the water” beneath the earth.<sup>24</sup> Conversely, the residence of the Kongo king was associated with the heights and that which was “above.” The capital city and royal center of this 300,000-square kilometer kingdom, with its conservatively estimated two to three million inhabitants, was located at the top of the highest mountain in the realm (Fig. 4).<sup>25</sup> As was noted by a late sixteenth-century traveler to the Kongo,<sup>26</sup> after leaving the port of Pinda “you walk for ten days rising continually until you arrive at the aforesaid city and the province of Pemba” (the latter term perhaps morphologically recalling the land of the dead, *Mpemba*). In this way, the Kongo king defined himself spatially to be the most “living” and “vital” of all humans. His house, which sat at the apex of the known world, served as a cosmic center from which he could address both key socio-political concerns and important religious and cosmological events, including among other things the return of ancestors to the land of the living as new children. Accordingly, one of the Kongo king’s many titles was “Matombola,” the one “who summons the dead.”<sup>27</sup>

When the Portuguese disembarked in the Kongo in 1482, no doubt the local residents found them sources of wonder, perplexity, and shock, as they called to mind dead people who had in some way been able to come back to life.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 44, 52.

<sup>25</sup> Balandier, 29.

<sup>26</sup> Cuvelier in Balandier, 30, n. 11.

<sup>27</sup> MacGaffey, 199.

<sup>28</sup> The fact that for Europeans, Africa was “notorious for the high mortality rate” (Ryder, 32) also may have been important. Early travelers died in great numbers, thus mirroring extraordinarily the high mortality rates for local infants. MacGaffey suggests (p. 54) interestingly, that like the Portuguese, “in the first months children are regarded somewhat as visitors who may or may not return whence they came.” According to P. Manning (*Slavery and African Life: Occidental, Oriental, and African Slave Trades*, New York, 1990, 31), for European adults not

As MacGaffey explains:<sup>29</sup>

When the first Portuguese arrived in Kongo in 1485 they exhibited the principal characteristics of the dead: they were white in color, spoke an unintelligible language, and possessed technology superior even to that of the local priestly guild of smiths. . . . The first Portuguese, like their successors to the present day, were regarded as visitors from the land of the dead. . . . The king of Portugal was the Kongo King’s otherworldly counterpart. . . .<sup>30</sup>

Georges Balandier’s discussion of the context of the earliest encounter is similar:<sup>31</sup>

. . . The Europeans who landed in the Kongo in the late 15th century seemed to be related by an extraordinary kinship. They were incorporated into a single landscape, a single symbolic universe. The newcomers came from the water (their caravels were compared to whales) and had the white color of relatives who had gone to the village of the dead. They arrived bearing riches and armed with instruments which demonstrated their power. They came to speak of God and lands unknown. The analogy seemed obvious: these whites . . . were emissaries who heralded the return of the ancestors. They were going to build the “society below” on earth, to divulge the secret of true life, of power and abundance. . . . The dead [thus] were the living par excellence. They lived outside of time and surrounded by riches; they possessed a power which enabled them to control nature and men. From their villages, which were situated under river beds or lake

previously exposed to malaria, the death rate in the first year alone ranged from thirty to fifty percent (Manning, 31).

<sup>29</sup> MacGaffey, 199.

<sup>30</sup> See also A. Hilton, *The Kingdom of Kongo*, Oxford, 1985, 50.

<sup>31</sup> Balandier, 253–254, 252.

bottoms, they could emerge to mingle with the living (without being seen) and direct the course of events.<sup>32</sup>

Circumstances of the first sighting of Europeans were comparable in Benin, a kingdom whose capital so impressed the seventeenth-century Dutchman, Olfert Dapper,<sup>33</sup> that he compared it favorably to the Dutch city of Haarlem. The Portuguese, like the Dutch and other Europeans who succeeded them, arrived in the city of Benin after first dropping anchor in the waters off the town of Ughoton, the same port from which the Bini dead were believed to depart in canoes as they moved westward toward the land of the ancestors. Europeans, suggests W. L. Schonfeld, "were seen by the Benin to have reversed that journey, coming from the land of the spirits to that of the living."<sup>34</sup> At Benin, as in the Kongo, the Portuguese were thought of as liminal beings, individuals at home in the realms of both humans and spirits.<sup>35</sup> Like the ancestors, the Portuguese carried with them riches (metal, beads, and cloth) of great value. Here, as in Kongo, their identity as living dead may have been reinforced by their skin color. In Benin, the color white was associated not only with the dead, but also with Olokun, the wealthy god of the sea.<sup>36</sup> Also identified with Olokun, the wealth of his realm, and the ancestors was the python. For example, a bronze python historically surmounted the Benin king's palace turret, its mouth opening onto the royal grave and the altar of the king's ancestors. Interestingly, in a bronze plaque showing this palace turret with its prominent python (Fig. 5), depictions of Portuguese heads enliven the roof-support pillars. Bronze bells placed on the royal grave and altar to call the dead during ceremonies also frequently incorporated Portuguese, serpent, and aquatic imagery.<sup>37</sup> The visual message of these signifiers was clear: the path to the ancestors and their Portuguese confreres proceeded along a serpentine path leading across the watery realm of Olokun.

<sup>32</sup> The term for the Portuguese is interesting in this light. In the Kongo language, the Portuguese are called *nzambi mpungu*, meaning "highest spiritual authority" (Hilton [as in n. 30], 50). Yombe-Sundi and Kongo myths of creation appropriately describe the creator god, Nzambi, as white (K. Laman, *The Kongo*, II, *Studia Ethnographica Upsaliensia*, Stockholm, 1957, 9). White plays a part in other aspects of Kongo society as well. In the course of the initiation of young Kongolese men into the Khimba society—a rite identified with the symbolic death and rebirth of these youths—the young men have their faces covered with chalk. Kongolese masks and funerary statues similarly are whitened (Laman, 9, 145; R. Lehuard, *Les Phemba du Mayombe*. Arnouville-en-Gonesse, 1977, 18).

<sup>33</sup> O. Dapper, *Naukerige Beschryvinge der Afrikaensche Gewesten van Egypten, Barbaryen, Lybyen, Biledulgerud, Negrosant, Guenea, Ethiopien, Abyssinie* (1st ed. 1668), Amsterdam, 1676.

<sup>34</sup> W. L. Schonfeld, "Part Human, Part Divine," *Connoisseur*, CCIX, 841, 1982, 93.

<sup>35</sup> According to Blackmun ("From Trader to Priest in Two Hundred Years: The Transformation of a Foreign Figure on Benin Ivories," *Art Journal*, XLVII, 2, 1988, 131): "In Benin belief European ships of Esigie's era laden with luxury goods sailed over Olokun's waters, which separate *ernmwun*, the world of spirits, from *agbon*, the world of mortals. Crocodiles, as guardians of Olokun's undersea realm, escorted the foreign ships from the coast through the delta rivers to Ughoton, the port of Benin. The Portuguese themselves were considered liminal beings, moving freely across the boundaries between *agbon* and *ernmwun* to bring coral and other luxuries to the Oba [king]."

<sup>36</sup> Ben-Amos, 46.

<sup>37</sup> Serpents similar to those surmounting the turret also appear prominently on these bells.

To the west in the coastal Sapi area of what is now Sierra Leone, similarly the color white was associated at once with the spiritual world and the world of the dead. Indeed, today among the Mende, white chalk is applied to the bodies of male and female initiates as a mark of both their symbolic initiatory deaths and their association with the spiritual world during this period of their lives.<sup>38</sup> In this area as well, the dead are believed to cross over a body of water in order to reach the world of the ancestors.<sup>39</sup> In keeping with this tradition, among the Temne descendants of the coastal Sapi encountered by the first Portuguese, the dead are buried facing the west, along with various riches—gold, iron, copper, and tin—so that when they arrive in the next world they will have prominent positions and will be able to help their living kin more effectively.<sup>40</sup> The arrival of the Portuguese thus coincided here too with a tradition that maintained that wealthy (white) ancestors lived in communities beyond the sea.

In addition to their pale color, ubiquitous wealth, foreign language, and homes across the sea, the Portuguese also carried with them in these three areas a common African sign of spiritual passage—the cross (Fig. 6). Christian crosses, rather than being seen as signifiers of a "new" European god and religious faith, were locally identified as a mark of sacred crossroads where humans and spirits came together in contexts of ritual and prayer. Among the Kongo, as MacGaffey notes, "The cross was known . . . before the arrival of Europeans and corresponds to the understanding in their minds of their relationship to their world. . . ."<sup>41</sup> In Sierra Leone, similarly, the cross (or X-shape) was understood to signify the conflation of spiritual and earthly realms, particularly the regeneration of the dead among the living.<sup>42</sup> At Benin, crosses were employed indigenously as well, as both political and religious signifiers. In this kingdom, crosses not only were important cosmological signifiers (evoking at once the four directions, the four times of the day, and the four days of the week), but also were prominent in royal Benin objects of political allegiance and succession.<sup>43</sup> In 1540 when several Benin emissaries left for Portugal, one of them carried a local Bini cross with him (Fig. 7).<sup>44</sup> Although we know little about their meaning except that they were identified with Ife, in the early part of the twentieth century, crosses were employed in Benin in conjunction with a November yam festival called *Agwe* (earth), which served as a New Year's rite marking the most sacred period of the year,

<sup>38</sup> W. L. Hommel, "Form and Meaning of Masks in Three Mende Societies," Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, Bloomington, Ind., 1981, 102–103.

<sup>39</sup> Lamp, 235. As Lamp explains for the Temne (p. 236): "Coolness is a virtue of the spiritual world and is related to water as a cleansing agent of regeneration."

<sup>40</sup> Lamp, 235.

<sup>41</sup> MacGaffey, 45. See also R. F. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, New York, 1983, 108ff.

<sup>42</sup> Lamp, 229.

<sup>43</sup> Ben-Amos, 28–29; Ryder, 31–32. The cross was identified during this period with the throne at Ife.

<sup>44</sup> Ryder, 31–32. For a discussion of later cross-bearing figures in Benin art, see Blackmun.



5 Benin plaque showing the palace façade, 16th–17th centuries, bronze, h. 52cm. Berlin, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Museum für Völkerkunde, no. III C, 8377.

when the spiritual and earthly realms were cojoined.<sup>45</sup> On this occasion, a leopard, the king's royal animal complement, was offered to the gods.<sup>46</sup>

In Benin, Sierra Leone, and Kongo, the cross in this way may have served as additional support for the idea that the strange white-skinned, long-haired Portuguese came from a nether world of spirits and the dead. What is important to stress, however, is that in spite of the similarities in local perceptions of the Portuguese as ancestral beings from another world, the Kongo, Benin, and Sapi artists each depicted the Portuguese and the lands from which they came in unique and divergent ways. The differences in their portrayals in the ivories, I suggest, not only reflect key artistic, cultural, and social distinctions in the groups themselves, but also significant dissimilarities in the degree of local contact with the Portuguese.

<sup>45</sup> H. Melzian, "Zum Festkalender von Benin," in J. Lukas, ed., *Afrikanistische Studien*, Berlin, 1955, 99; Ben-Amos, 93. Melzian (p. 99) links this rite in important ways with Oba Esigie, the king most closely associated with the Portuguese and with Christianity. See also Blackmun.

<sup>46</sup> Melzian (as in n. 45), 103.

#### **Kongo Ivories: Spatial Frames, Spirals, and Textile Maps**

As noted above, among the earliest objects sent by the Kongolese king to the king of Portugal were elephant tusks and ivory pieces. A chronicle written in 1491 by Cuvelier on the occasion of a missionary expedition sent by Joao II of Portugal to Kongo eight years after initial contact provides important insight into the Kongolese use of ivory horns at this time.<sup>47</sup> When the Portuguese made their return trip to Kongo, as Cuvelier explains, a group of local Kongolese musicians played ivory trumpets in order to "sing the louanges of the king of Portugal and the great ones; . . . produce[ing] a sound so melancholy that its like has never been heard." These horn players, naked to the waist and their bodies painted white, repeated their song twelve times in order to recall the twelve generations of Kongo kings since the kingdom's inception. Like the white bodies of the musicians, the horns thus were intended to call and recall previous generations of ancestors.

Kongolese carved horns of the period, although devoid of overt references to the Portuguese, provide tantalizing clues

<sup>47</sup> In Balandier, 202, n. 54.

concerning local perceptions of the Europeans as ancestors and the lands in which they dwell.<sup>48</sup> One of the most beautiful of these horns is a work that entered the Medici collection sometime before 1553 (Fig. 2). In this and other early Kongo horns (Fig. 8), several features stand out. First is the prevailing surface emphasis on spatial frames, a visual form that Robert Farris Thompson suggests alludes to the physical separating of this world from the world of the dead in other Kongo contexts.<sup>49</sup> In this light Georges Balandier points out that in Kongo, burial grounds of high-ranking individuals were situated at the top of plateaus, a screen (or *lumbo*) of poplar trees serving as a sacred boundary dividing the cemetery from the land surrounding it.<sup>50</sup> Other forms of fences or screens similarly were used to delimit the palace, the homes of provincial governors, and the residences of dignitaries.<sup>51</sup> Compositional frames within the body of the Kongolese horns suggest in this way ideas of spatial and conceptual division such as those between living and dead, nobility and commoners, foreigners and local residents.

Another striking feature of this and other early Kongolese horns is the prominent compositional use of an open spiral line. Spiral forms, suggests MacGaffey, "are important features of Kongo symbolism . . . associated with longevity."<sup>52</sup> Spirals for this reason characterize the hats of kings and local chiefs (Fig. 9). Each such hat is constructed from a single strand of thread which is worked in a spiral, beginning at the center of the crown and moving in ever-enlarging circles to the edge.<sup>53</sup> The Kongo king in this way further evoked ideas of long life through the wearing of a cap which, through its unique spiral-form construction, conveyed ideas of vitality and longevity.

In some of these hats, including the one worn by the Kongo king in his meeting of 1490 with the returning Portuguese, themes of life, longevity, and renewal are further reinforced by the use of serpent-form patterning.<sup>54</sup> The serpentine and spiral-form lines that characterize many of the Kongo oliphants, as will be seen, also may have alluded to the circuitous route taken by the dead to the world beyond. As R.F. Thompson suggests, serpentine forms signify among

<sup>48</sup> Because these horns may not have been made expressly for European patronage, and more importantly show little if any concern for European subject matter or formal features, Curnow and others do not include them within the larger class of "Afro-Portuguese ivories." For the purposes of the present discussion, however, this distinction is less important.

<sup>49</sup> R. F. Thompson, "Kongo Civilization and Kongo Art," in R. F. Thompson and J. Cornet, *The Four Moments of the Sun, Kongo Art in Two Worlds*, exh. cat., Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art, 1981, 82.

<sup>50</sup> Balandier, 234.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 122. Thompson points out (as in n. 49, 114) that in Kongolese funerary figures the bodies rarely extend beyond the frames set by the pedestal diameter. This feature, he suggests, "conform[s] with the term *tuluwa ku luumbu* which means 'to place oneself within the walls,' and refers to the keeping out of negative forces and keeping in the powers of the chief."

<sup>52</sup> MacGaffey, 96.

<sup>53</sup> G. D. Gibson and C. R. McGurk, "High-Status Caps of the Kongo and Mbundu Peoples," *Textile Museum Journal*, v, 4, 71-96.

<sup>54</sup> In 1490, eight years after the initial contact, a missionary expedition was sent out by Joao II of Portugal. The Kongolese welcome of the Portuguese was described in elaborate detail by Cuvelier (in Balandier, 238). On this occasion the king wore a hat of the type said to be "decorated with skillful embroidery representing a snake."



6 Father G. A. Vavazzi, Araldi MS, procession with self-portrait, ca. 1665 (from *Quaderni Poro*, IV, 1987, pl. 28)

the Kongo the "journey through water, which the dead must take. . . ."<sup>55</sup> Concomitantly in this area, the serpent-form rainbow is also an important marker of fecundity,<sup>56</sup> an identity of considerable importance because in Kongo, as generally elsewhere in Africa, babies are believed to be brought to life through the intervention of the ancestors, only coming into the world after being sponsored by a person who had been dead for a period of time.

It is tempting to speculate in this light that the open spiral compositional lines that distinguish the Kongolese oliphants allude to the path the dead themselves follow from earth to the ancestral realm and back again as newborns. Interestingly, spiral forms of this type also are important compositional devices in more recent eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Kongolese ivories made for European patrons as tourist objects (Fig. 10). With their parade of figures, such works also suggest the long and winding procession followed by individuals (both living and dead) as they leave the ocean shore to travel the mountainous route leading to the Kongo capital and to the home of the ancestors. In both cases, spirals reinforce the prominent identity of Europeans as signifiers of transition, death, and life.

A third feature of these ivory horns that offers insight into the questions raised here is the primacy placed on textile

<sup>55</sup> Thompson (as in n. 49), 83.

<sup>56</sup> Lehuard (as in n. 32), 33.



7 Benin figure wearing a cross, 16th century, bronze, 63.5cm. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Museum.

motifs within each compositional frame (Fig. 11). Textiles are of critical significance in Kongo daily and ritual life.<sup>57</sup> Closely associated with royalty, with kings wearing the richest of such brocades, textiles also served as currency and as a

source of taxation. So essential were locally manufactured textiles that kings were once prohibited from wearing any imported fabrics.<sup>58</sup> In addition to being markers of status, local raffia textiles also were frequently associated with ideas of spatial and social transition. According to legend, chiefs in this area once were able to cross rivers on raffia mats.<sup>59</sup> Raffia cloth also played a vital role in ceremonies of marriage. Among the Teke, a Kongo-related group, textiles served in the words of A. M. Detourbet as a “gauge of alliance between families and their future wives. . . .”<sup>60</sup>

Finally and perhaps most significantly, textiles in the Kongo kingdom also were closely associated with the dead, and several hundred pieces of cloth sometimes were used to cover the body of a deceased person before burial. According to Karl Laman, funerary textiles mark the wealth of the deceased and the associated family. As he explains, “. . . the cloth he takes with him into the grave is supposed to show those who dwell in the realm of the dead that the deceased is very rich, so that they, too, may honor him.”<sup>61</sup> Kongoese textiles (and related imagery in the ivories) in this way are linked to the ancestors and to the spatial and social transition that marks the passage from this world to the next.<sup>62</sup> Critical in this regard as well is a local tradition documented by Detourbet among the Teke, wherein textiles were seen to function as symbolic maps to guide the deceased to the afterworld.<sup>63</sup> Constructed generally of three pieces of cloth, which refer to areas of sky, earth, and water, such textiles were folded and rolled before being placed in the tomb as instructive seats for the dead. As Detourbet explains,

Thanks to this cloth, the deceased is “rich in words of the ancestors” and guided by them he knows the route to follow to rejoin directly the village of the dead. This cloth is also an assurance of the living against the dead: showing them the road they must follow, so they will not join the errant spirits who come to torment men.<sup>64</sup>

Textile patterns such as those incorporated into the ivory oliphants thus may have served to direct the deceased along the road from this world to the land of the dead, and conversely back again to the home community—generally in the form of a new child. As gifts or commissioned pieces for the Portuguese, Kongo horns from this period may have been thought to help to assure their return.

### Benin: Foreign Features, Fish Forms, and Femininity

In the kingdom of Benin, references in carved ivory to the world of the Portuguese are equally striking. However,

<sup>57</sup> Textile forms also characterize Kongo habitations (Balandier, 141).

<sup>58</sup> Balandier, 114, 166.

<sup>59</sup> MacGaffey, 129.

<sup>60</sup> Detourbet, 78.

<sup>61</sup> Laman (as in n. 32), 90.

<sup>62</sup> In Teke textile traditions, according to Detourbet (p. 78), three serpents taught humans the art of weaving. Because serpents here are associated with the dead, this belief further reinforces the linking of textiles arts with the ancestors.

<sup>63</sup> Detourbet, 78.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

whereas in early Kongolese ivory horn traditions, ideas of otherness are conveyed through design principles such as framing, spirals, and abstract textile patterning, in Benin ivories, figural concerns predominate (Figs. 12–13).<sup>65</sup> In certain Bini saltcellars, as Curnow points out, details of Portuguese dress and demeanor are achieved with such specificity that they can be used to date associated works.<sup>66</sup> Generally in such objects, the faces of the foreigners are shown with long flowing hair and mustaches, thin, deeply set oval eyes, and prognathous jaws. The careful attention to physiognomy and costume and the accuracy of such detail, I would argue, reflect not only the importance placed on relative naturalism in the Benin court and the concomitant skill of royal artists, but also both the sustained period of residence of the Portuguese in the Benin capital during this period and the general availability of the foreigners as models for arts at court.<sup>67</sup> The gaunt, aged faces of the Portuguese in many of the early ivory depictions<sup>68</sup> also stand out in contrast to the idealized fleshy features and youthful ephemerism of kingly and dignitary portrayals in Benin. These contrasting aesthetic norms are particularly revealing as they convey through acute visual means how court artists sought to identify local Benin individuals as in the prime of life, while indicating that the Portuguese were in many respects sickly or moribund.

Several other features also distinguish the representation of the Portuguese in Benin ivories at this time—some compositional, others iconographic.<sup>69</sup> In many such works, the Portuguese are shown in pairs (or multiples of two)—a mode of portrayal usually associated with Benin court officials and religious figures who are ancillary to the king. Whether depicted standing or as equestrians,<sup>70</sup> the Portuguese are also generally displayed in active poses. Moreover, in contradistinction to the static and characteristically immobile renderings of Benin court figures, the Portuguese are often shown either in profile (Figs. 12–14),<sup>71</sup> frequently with twisted pos-

<sup>65</sup> When the Portuguese arrived in Benin, the kingdom was at its height. As P. Ben-Amos has noted (p. 18), the 15th and 16th centuries was for Benin “an age of conquest and artistic flowering. Many of the brass sculptural forms so characteristic of Benin art—commemorative, trophy, and queen mother heads as well as plaques and stools—are either mentioned for the first time in oral traditions about this period or are specifically attributed to *obas* who ruled then. . . . It was a time of consolidation, development, and expansion of the kingdom.”

<sup>66</sup> Curnow, 1983, 218.

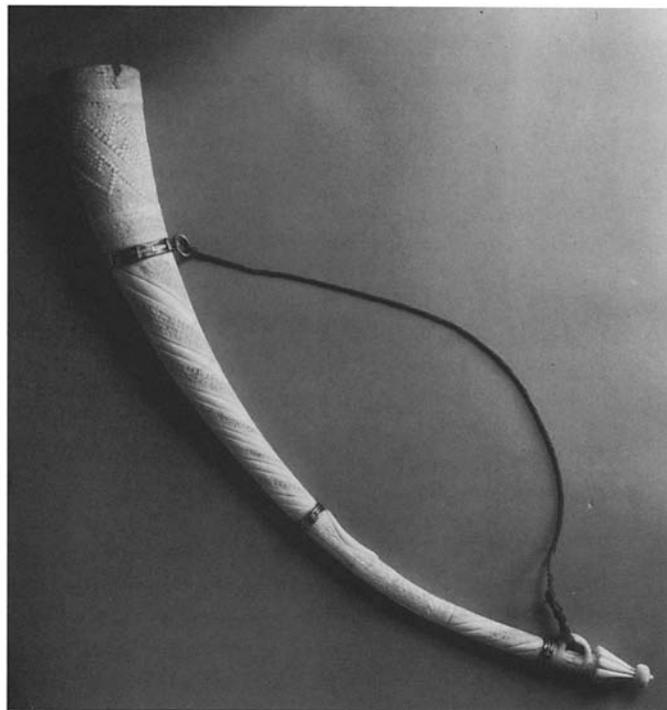
<sup>67</sup> Ryder, 47ff.

<sup>68</sup> In later Benin depictions of the Portuguese this feature is sometimes less apparent.

<sup>69</sup> Other Portuguese elements incorporated into Afro-Bini works include overlapping elements suggesting two-dimensional forms (Curnow, 1983, 244–245). Curnow points out, moreover, that often such depictions indicate the artist’s lack of familiarity with European means of representing three-dimensional space. Frequently figures shown in low relief are portrayed with profile heads on frontal bodies in a manner reminiscent of Egyptian art (Curnow, 1983, 149). See also S. Q. Travis, “The Image of the Portuguese in the Art of Benin,” M.A. thesis, Columbia University, New York, 1984.

<sup>70</sup> A horse was given to the Bini king in 1505 by the Portuguese (Ryder, 45). The depiction of Portuguese in ways resembling Benin chiefs (in relation to the king) suggests that the Portuguese were incorporated into the king’s politico-ritual field of command, holding positions that were important but subordinate to the king.

<sup>71</sup> Interestingly, in a number of the plaques, a pair of profile Portuguese heads are shown in positions above and behind the king.



8 Kongo-Portuguese oliphant, 16th century, 70cm. Paris, Musée de Cluny

tures, or frontally with animated postures marked by splayed feet and arms akimbo.<sup>72</sup> Similar poses are also characteristic in Benin brass castings showing Portuguese musketeers. The tendency toward torsion and tension in the representations of the Portuguese may have its source in the European Baroque (at least in those works postdating the 1550s) and a desire to cast the foreigners in the style of their own artists. (Examples of Portuguese religious works no doubt had been brought to Benin by the early European missionaries as they were in succeeding years.)<sup>73</sup> But equally, if not more importantly, the emphasis on sculptural movement in the Portuguese portrayals suggests the intention to depict the individuals as symbols of transition and mobility in their own right.<sup>74</sup> These characteristics, it should be noted, are appropriate at once to the identity of the Portuguese as accomplished seafarers and to their Benin associations as returning ancestors.

Other motifs that appear in the Afro-Portuguese ivories from Benin, namely angels and fish, also reinforce the association of the Portuguese with movement, water, and otherworldly realms. In ivory spoons commissioned at Benin, reference to Europeans as inhabitants of a mystical land

<sup>72</sup> In wall plaques, ancillary Portuguese figures often appear in the background, holding manilla (metal bracelets) and other trade objects.

<sup>73</sup> In 1668 the Dutchman Olfert Dapper noted (as in n. 33) “. . . his astonishment at the evidence of the extensive Portuguese influence, saying that he found the natives reading the Bible and other books in Portuguese.” There is also an account of a visit to Benin in the 1790s by a Captain John Adams, who wrote: “On entering the first apartment of the palace, we were much surprised to see placed on a rude kind of table several emblems of the Catholic religion, consisting of crucifixes, mutilated saints and other trumpery” (in J. Chick, “Reformation without Conversion: The Impact of Christianity on the Bini People of West Africa,” *Church Quarterly Review*, CLXVIII, 1967, 468–469).

<sup>74</sup> The frequent association of the Portuguese with horses—animals of transition and mobility par excellence—also reinforces this idea.



9 Kongo chief's hat, fiber, h. 18cm. Copenhagen, Nationalmuseet Etnografisk Samling, collected before 1674

beyond the sea is much in evidence as well. In these works, fish, crocodiles, and snakes appear, all of which are closely identified with Olokun, the Benin god of the sea and wealth.<sup>75</sup> Fishing eagles, the raptorial birds linked at once to day, water, and Benin royalty, also are shown prominently.<sup>76</sup> Objects held by the Portuguese reinforce their identity with power and prosperity; these include primarily swords, lances, rifles, manillas (metal bracelets), and books.

Two extraordinary ivory hip masks carved around 1520 to portray Idia, the mother of Oba Esigie, the first Christian king at Benin, also offer important insight into issues of Portuguese otherness in Benin art. In the crown of one of these masks, Portuguese heads alternate with figures of mudfish (Fig. 15); in the other, Portuguese heads are shown alone.<sup>77</sup> The Portuguese in this way are depicted as semiotic equivalents of the mudfish, the piscatorial avatar of the sea god Olokun. What is also significant in these masks is the formal equivalence created between mudfish and Portuguese through the complementary conflation of features. The long, droopy gills of the mudfish serve as signifying substitutes for the long, outward flaring mustaches and lank hair of the Portuguese. Hair and mudfish gills share key associations

<sup>75</sup> In Benin art, portrayals of the king with fish legs, a serpent-form belt, and crocodile-holding hands, identify the ruler with his deity complement in similar ways.

<sup>76</sup> Ben-Amos, 86.

<sup>77</sup> Akenzua in Ben-Amos, n. 77. For a reproduction, see Ben-Amos, pl. 86.

<sup>78</sup> Long hair in many areas of Africa is associated with the spirit world.

with movement and liminality,<sup>78</sup> features that are also closely identified with the Portuguese. The perception that human hair continues to grow after death may also have been important to the identity of these long-haired foreigners as coming from the world of the dead.

The mudfish, more accurately known as the African lungfish (*Protopterus*), is characterized by two other extraordinary features which at once make it an appropriate sculptural substitute for the Portuguese and offer insight into Benin perceptions of European otherness. The first is the mudfish's possession of a functional lung and its resultant ability to estivate, to live for long periods of time in dried stream and marsh beds in a hibernation-like state, seemingly coming back to life when the areas swell again with water after the rains. Like the Portuguese, in other words, mudfish seem to return from the dead. A second distinguishing feature of the mudfish, its extraordinary ability to both swim and move about on land, also makes it an appropriate visual metaphor for the Portuguese.

In sum, the mudfish and the Portuguese were clearly seen to share essential features. Not only were they at home on both land and water, but like the mudfish, the Portuguese were perceived to be able to reside outside of normal human life-and-death constraints. The Portuguese in this way were equated with dead people who had returned to life, not as Benin infants as was the norm, but rather as adult spirit personae. Reinforcing this idea in the associated artworks is the use of ivory as a carving medium. Ivory in Benin is identified not only with wealth but also with communication with the dead.<sup>79</sup> Equally importantly, ivory is identified with the sea and wealth god, Olokun, because of its white, chalky color.<sup>80</sup> Bini ivory carvers, even when completing objects for external patrons and using foreign models and motifs, thus seem to have approached these forms with their own cultural assumptions, creating in turn striking images of the Portuguese as stranger humans and spiritual others.

Reinforcing this idea is the appearance of mudfish in other Benin sculptural contexts. In Benin, mudfish are also identified with women, particularly royal women,<sup>81</sup> and accordingly were offered to the altars of the kings' mothers. The ivory mask of Fig. 15 with its mudfish and Portuguese crown is said to have been worn on the hip of King Esigie in special annual ceremonies (called *Ugie Iya Oba*) commemorating the Oba's deceased mother.<sup>82</sup> While the data are inconclusive,

<sup>79</sup> P. Ben-Amos "Symbolism in Olokun Mud Art," *African Arts*, iv, 4, 1973, 29–31; 1980, 86; P. Dark, *An Introduction to Benin Art and Technology*, Oxford, 1973, 57–58.

<sup>80</sup> Ben-Amos (as in n. 79), 28–31, 95. It is also of interest that elephants, the source of this ivory, are linked in Benin with powerful rival chiefs (P. Ben-Amos "Men and Animals in Benin Art," *Man: The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, ii, 1976, 2, 247), and the creation of ivory objects for the Portuguese may coincide with a similar view of them as chiefs.

<sup>81</sup> R. E. Bradbury, *The Benin Kingdom and the Edo Speaking Peoples of South-Western Nigeria*, London, 1957, 74; Ben-Amos (as in n. 80), 245; Schonfeld (as in n. 34), 92–93.

<sup>82</sup> Akenzua in Ben-Amos, 80. It is interesting in this light that the early 16th-century ruler Esigie, who probably witnessed firsthand the arrival of the earliest Portuguese in Benin (either as crown prince or as sovereign) is credited both with elevating the status of the queen mother and with casting the first of the Benin queen mother heads (Ben-Amos, 81; Curnow, 1983, 191).



**10** Kongo elephant tusk, h. 68cm. Berlin, Staatliche Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Museum für Völkerkunde, collected by Bastian in 1874, no. III C 429

there are suggestive hints that the Portuguese as liminal beings were also in some way conflated with women and ideas of fertility. As noted above, the Portuguese were closely identified with Olokun, a god who, as Ben-Amos notes, was a “special concern [of] . . . women because of his role in providing children.”<sup>83</sup> Interestingly, in a Castilian text writ-

<sup>83</sup> Ben-Amos, 46. She adds (p. 46): “Parents of a female child install a small shrine to Olokun for her protection and future well-being. At the time of marriage, a woman transfers this shrine to her husband’s house, where it assumes even greater importance with her new married status. The shrine consists of a whitewashed mud altar upon which are placed pieces of kaolin chalk, a symbol of purity and good luck, and a special ritual pot containing fresh river water. . . . While all traditional women in Benin have Olokun altars in their homes, some of them become particularly involved in his worship because of health or sexual prob-



**11** Kongo or Angola cloth, 17th century, raffia pile, 57–48cm. Copenhagen, Nationalmuseet Etnografisk Samling

ten in Benin in 1651–52, we are told that in the course of wedding ceremonies, a Bini man would cover himself with white clay before taking his wife.<sup>84</sup> As noted above, this color is associated at once with Olokun, the spirits, and the dead. Later, when the man received his bride from the hand of the king, she appeared before him adorned in an array of jewelry—coral, brass, manillas, glass beads, ivories, and cowries—trade items identified in various ways with the Portuguese.<sup>85</sup> Portuguese men, local women, and the institution of marriage in this way were cojoined in Bini thought, for each was seen to be identified at once with the transfer of wealth and with the production of new life.

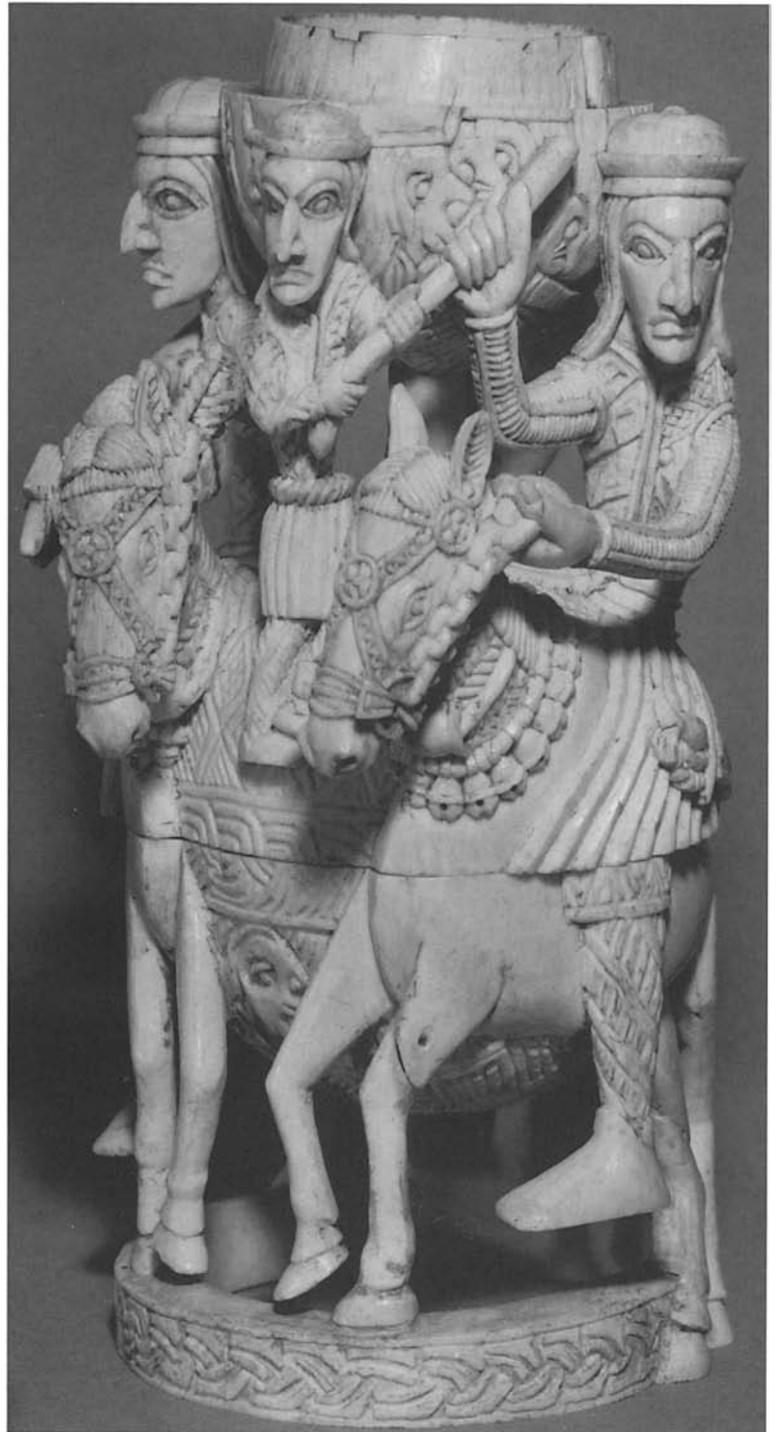
lems, difficulties in conception, or a ‘calling’ expressed in states of possession.”

<sup>84</sup> A.P.F., *Scritture originali*, in Ryder, 313–314.

<sup>85</sup> Ryder, 313–314. Color and material symbolism are important here in other ways as well. Thus white is frequently identified as a color of purity and transition—ideas central to marriage; costly objects are of course devices of exchange.



**12** Bini-Portuguese saltcellar, ca. 1525–1600, ivory, h. 28cm. Copenhagen, Nationalmuseet Etnografisk Samling, inv. no. EKc90



**13** Bini-Portuguese saltcellar (lid missing), ca. 1525–1600, ivory, h. 18.3cm. Edinburgh, Royal Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh, inv. no. 1950.3

### **Sapi: Janus Imagery and Water “Genies”**

In early ivory carvings from the Sapi area, our third and final area of discussion, references to the Portuguese are equally striking (Fig. 16). In these works, as in those from Benin,

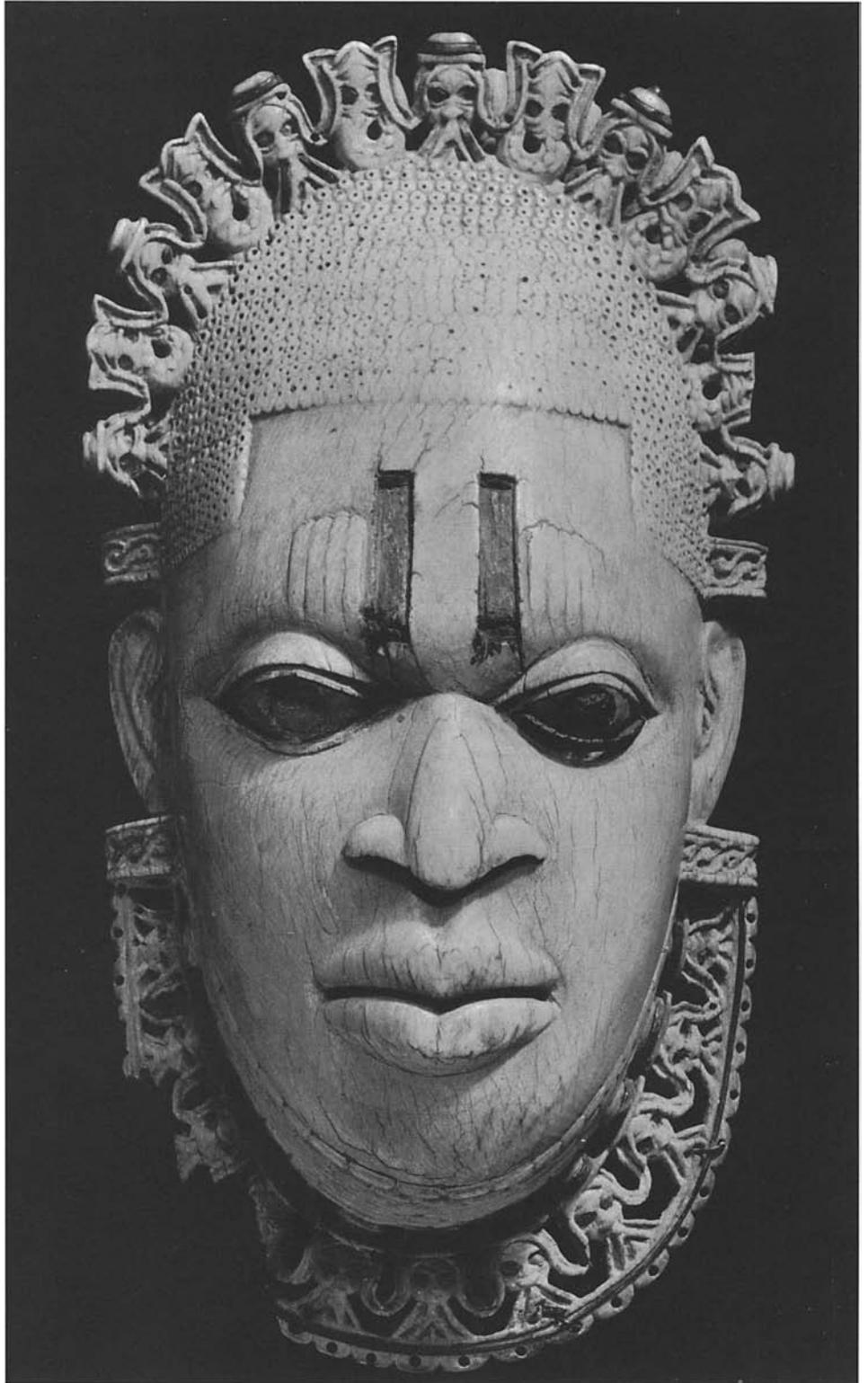
European motifs appear frequently. Related foreign motifs include angels, unicorns, rosettes, family arms, crosses, fleurs-de-lys, mermaids, harpies, centaurs, griffins, sphinxes, lions, eagles, wyverns, and religious scenes such as the Virgin



14 Plaque showing Benin king and two chiefs at Ague ceremony, probably 16th century, bronze, height ca. 39cm. London, British Museum

and Child; phrases like “hail Mary” and “Hope in God” also are shown prominently.<sup>86</sup> The early sixteenth-century traveler to the area, V. Fernandes, observed, with regard to these ivories, that “. . . in Serra Lyoa, the men are very skillful and very ingenious; they make all the things we ask them to out of ivory and these objects are marvelous to see. . . . They . . .

<sup>86</sup> Curnow, 1983, 141–143. The question of Portuguese artistic models also is important. Curnow suggests (1990, 41) that the saltcellars can be divided into two groupings, one of which (Type A) displays the direct use of foreign models, the other of which (Type B) does not. Although Curnow argues (1990, 39) that “. . . type A workshops seem to have been accessible to visiting ships, while B workshops seem to have been positioned in areas with less external interaction,” the use of foreign models by Type A artists does not in itself offer proof that they had direct contact with the Portuguese, for the models they used were portable.



**15** Ivory hip mask from Benin worn on the hip of the king during commemorative rites for his deceased mother, purported to represent Idia, the mother of King Esigie, early 16th century, h. 23.8cm. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection of Primitive Art, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1972, no. 1978.412.323

also can carve any work one draws for them.”<sup>87</sup> Despite the pervasiveness of European influence on Afro-Portuguese ivory surface decoration, I would argue that these works, like those from Benin, reflect important local ideas of the Portuguese as Other, framed within a visual vocabulary that is firmly rooted in the place of their manufacture. Among the most spectacular of the Afro-Portuguese ivories from this

area are a group of saltcellars produced over a relatively short period of time—between 1490 and 1550—in what Curnow<sup>88</sup> and later Bassani and Fagg describe as seven or eight semi-independent workshops.

<sup>87</sup> In Curnow, 1983, 62.  
<sup>88</sup> Curnow, 1983, 1990. See Barbara Blackman’s review of the Fagg and Bassani catalogue in *African Arts*, xxiii, 1, 1989, 12–20, and rebuttals of that review by E. Bassani and S. Vogel in *African Arts*, xxiii, 3, 1990, 10–20.

<sup>87</sup> In Curnow, 1983, 62.

It is important to note that two vital socio-cultural differences distinguish Sierra Leone from Kongo and Benin. The first is political. Rather than being ruled by a king and court, the area was governed by local chiefs aided by counsels of elders and officials of local men's and women's associations.<sup>89</sup> The second difference is one of historical continuity. In contrast to the situations in Kongo and Benin, where there had been considerable local ethnic stability since the late fifteenth century, Sierra Leone saw striking cultural change. As a result of various invasions by the northern Mande (Mande) in the sixteenth century, the Sapi peoples first encountered on this coast by the Portuguese were dispersed to various other locales.<sup>90</sup> The Mende, Vai, Kono, and Gbandi who live in the area today are generally identified as combining elements of both Mande and local traditions. Those people who share closest cultural ties with the original Sapi—the Baga, Temne, Nalu, and Bullum, and their linguistic relatives, the Landuma, Kissi, and Gola—today live in communities farther inland, in Sierra Leone or neighboring Guinea. Traditions associated with both contemporary Sapi-related peoples and more recent Mande-Sapi mixed groups offer important insight into the Sierra Leone Afro-Portuguese ivories, insights that both reinforce and stand apart from artistic perceptions of otherness in Kongo and Benin ivory traditions.

As with the ivories from Benin, Portuguese individuals are represented in a large number of the ivories from this area. Here, however, European identity is based not on distinctive physiognomic features, but rather on more ephemeral qualities of display or *parure*. In some works this consists of longish hair;<sup>91</sup> in others it entails European attributes such as breeches, jerkins, shoes, books, and/or long gowns. There are also several examples of what may be European prayer gestures. Despite these differences, Africans and Europeans often are shown in the ivories to be strikingly similar.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, European portrayals are characterized by numerous inconsistencies, with a number of figures being shown with attributes of both Europeans and Africans. Breaches are sometimes combined on figures with African shields, for example, or individuals are depicted with European clothes and local scarification forms.<sup>93</sup> These discrepancies suggest that many of the Sierra Leone ivory artists may never have

<sup>89</sup> Perhaps, significantly, contemporary oliphants are used in conjunction with men's associations and funerals among the Kissi (A. Schaeffner, *Les Kissi, une société noire et ses instruments de musique [Cahiers d'ethnologie, de géographie et de linguistique]*, Paris, 1951, 80). Among the Mende, in turn, horns of this type were associated with paramount chiefs and related celebrations (today they are called appropriately *ndolo maha bului*, "paramount chief horn"). Historically they also were employed by war chiefs to signal warriors during battle or to announce emergencies (Henggeler, 59). Queen Victoria sent an ivory trumpet to influential warrior chiefs in this region during the 1890s. This trumpet probably came from India or Ceylon (Henggeler, 59).

<sup>90</sup> Lamp, 220.

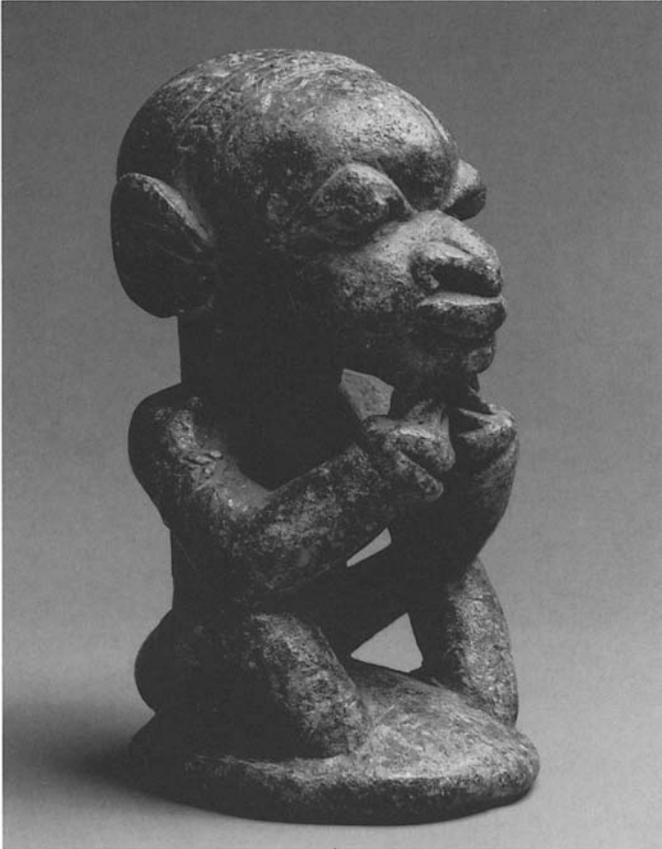
<sup>91</sup> A sign here, as in many other parts of Africa, of spirit identity.

<sup>92</sup> Bassani and Fagg, 69; Curnow, 1990, 39ff.

<sup>93</sup> Curnow, 1983, 133; 1990, 39ff. On the bases of these saltcellars, male and female figures often alternate. The female figures more characteristically show local cicatrization patterns. Curnow suggests (1990, 41) that this is an indication that *lançados* (see below) intermarried with the local population. It is equally possible, however, that the local artists knew even less about European women than men.



16 Sapi-Portuguese saltcellar, ca. 1490–1530, ivory, h. 33cm. Edinburgh, Royal Museum of Scotland, inv. no. 1956–1157



17 Sapi *nomoli* figure, 15th–16th centuries, soapstone, h. 15 cm. Francesco Pellizi Collection

seen the Portuguese firsthand (or if so not for very long), basing their portrayals on fleeting glimpses or descriptions brought to them by others, some of the latter perhaps even wearing examples of European attire.<sup>94</sup> This coincides both with Portuguese traditions forbidding its citizens from living in Africa<sup>95</sup> (although certain individuals—the *lançados* or traders—did), and with the local traditions of dispersed settlement patterns and noncentralized artistic production (both of which are in marked contrast to Benin). Although the *lançados* played critical roles as intermediaries between the Sapi and the Portuguese, possibly even serving as middlemen for the ivories, the fact that few of the ivories from this area show the Portuguese with distinctively Caucasian features and European attributes suggests that most of the Portuguese moved in circles generally removed from those of local artists.

<sup>94</sup> Or if they saw them it was never for very long. Other factors may also have been important, including less interest in naturalism on the part of local artists. It is also possible that to them the Portuguese and the ancestral Sierra Leone inhabitants were so conflated that real distinctions were not artistically needed. Roy Sieber has suggested to me (personal communication, November 1991) that the figures on the Sapi ivories may be intended to represent the offspring of Portuguese-African unions. While this is possible and Euro-African children often adopted the language, dress, and social mores of the area, many such offspring were identified within local taxonomies as essentially European.

<sup>95</sup> This law was intended to prevent individual Portuguese from benefiting financially at the expense of the king.

The probably minimal contact between Sierra Leone artists and the Portuguese did not, however, prevent the ivory carvers from incorporating important ideas about Europe and its inhabitants in their works. As at Benin, so too in these sculptures do the Portuguese appear to be identified with the land of the dead, for they seem to be shown in the guise of *krifi*, or ancestral spirits, as the Temne called them. According to period sources, *krifi* spirits appeared prominently in the ivory spoons commissioned for the Portuguese.<sup>96</sup> This possible identity of the Portuguese as ancestral spirits also accords with early stone-carving traditions here in which figures shown in styles similar to the ivories are said to have depicted important ancestors (Fig. 17).<sup>97</sup> Local artistic traditions of memorializing the dead in stone thus may have been conflated with ivory carvings made for Portuguese patrons—particularly as the Portuguese themselves were identified closely with the ancestral realm. That the artists who carved the commemorative funerary stone figures most probably also made the Afro-Portuguese ivories seems to reinforce this possibility.<sup>98</sup>

Also in keeping with this idea, figures in the Sierra Leone ivories are often shown seated in bent-knee positions (Figs. 18–19), references perhaps to the local tradition of burying the dead in seated postures (sometimes on a chair). On the bases of the ivories, bars or spears frequently are shown between the figures, recalling in turn the tradition of burying swords or spears with persons of high status.<sup>99</sup> The frequent inclusion of single (and/or severed) heads at the top of the ivory vessels for their part may correlate with a tradition, practiced by the Mende and others in the area today, of guarding the heads of deceased chiefs or important initiatory society members in a shrine for a period of time before reburial.<sup>100</sup> The heads of the human figures also are disproportionately large in comparison with the bodies, in keeping with local rather than European proportional canons.<sup>101</sup>

Reinforcing the association of the Portuguese with powerful individuals who have died is the Janus imagery emphasized in a number of these ivories (Fig. 18). In the coastal area of Sierra Leone and neighboring Guinea, as in many

<sup>96</sup> Atherton and Kalous in Curnow, 1983, 90. Alvares commented in 1616 that “ivory spoons, very refined, on whose handles are various ornaments, like the heads of animals, birds and *krifis* with such perfection that one cannot see anything to surpass them” (in Curnow, 1983, 66, n. 103).

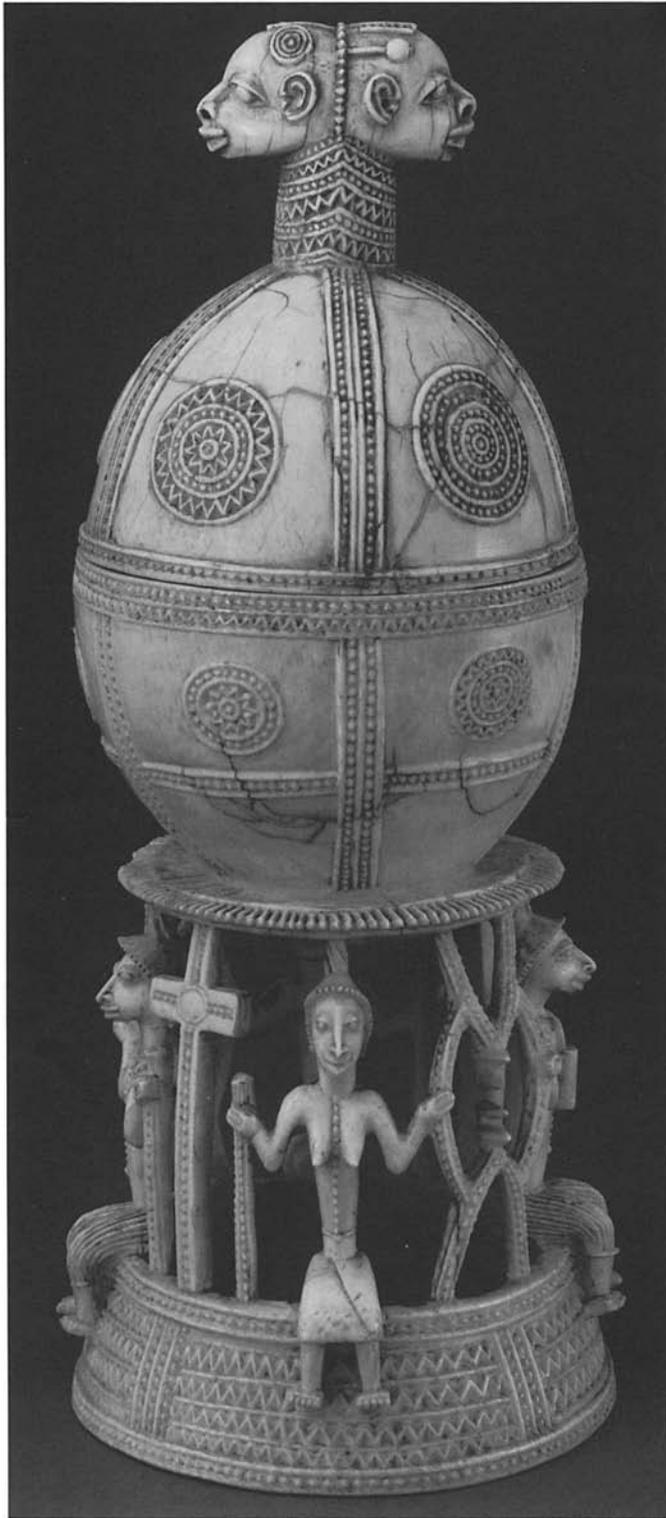
<sup>97</sup> See Curnow, 1983, 88, and Lamp, 229. As Lamp points out (p. 229), funerary themes and references to the dead are prominent in the early stone carvings from this region. According to a Sapi tradition recorded in the early 16th century by Fernandes, “idols” were made by the natives to represent honored (deceased?) men (Curnow, 1983, 88).

<sup>98</sup> Curnow, 1983, 91. The person who carved these works in all probability was a blacksmith, for among the Mende it is blacksmiths who today carve oliphants (Henggeler, 59ff.). So renowned did some of the Mende ivory carvers become that their names are still known.

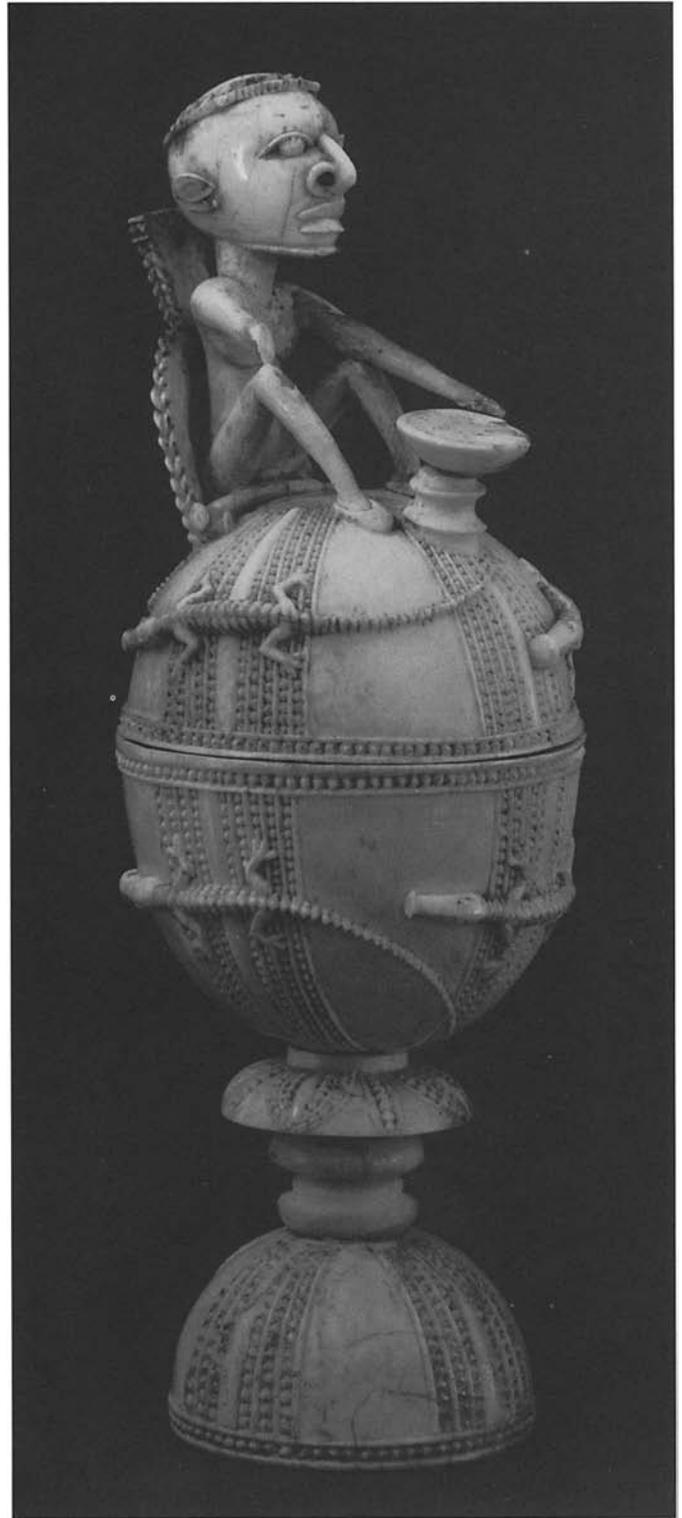
<sup>99</sup> Fernandes, 1506, in Lamp, 229. Interestingly, hair in these works is similar on both the male and female figures, as if to suggest that in the ancestral world gender differences are dissipated.

<sup>100</sup> Hommel, 17; K. Little, *The Mende of Sierra Leone: A West African People in Transition*, London, 1967, 25.

<sup>101</sup> Where scenes or figure(s) are carved at the summit of the saltcellar cover, they vary considerably. Single figures often are shown seated or kneeling. Multifigure groupings appear to be linked in various ways to ideas of political power, supernatural power, or regeneration.



18 Sapi-Portuguese saltcellar, ca. 1490–1530, ivory, h. 30.4cm. Seattle, Seattle Art Museum, Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company, no. 81.17.189 (photo: Paul Macapia)



19 Sapi-Portuguese saltcellar, ca. 1490–1530, ivory, h. 21cm. Seattle, Seattle Art Museum, Gift of Nasli and Alice Heerama-neck

parts of Africa, Janus forms (with their characteristic references to four-eyed or double-headed vision) are a frequent signifier of persons having extraordinary power, specifically individuals able to bridge two worlds, past and present, human and spiritual. Called *yacani* by the Nalu and Landuma, such powerful individuals are credited not only with the capabilities of night-time sight, but also with special abilities

enabling them to surpass others in the community in farming, trading, or similar endeavors.<sup>102</sup> The frequent use of Janus imagery in the Sierra Leone saltcellars thus coincides with a tradition of identifying important individuals

<sup>102</sup> Appia, 1944, 37.

(both present and past, local and foreign) at once with economic success and supernatural power.<sup>103</sup> Perceptions of the Portuguese in many respects fit this tradition.

References in the Sierra Leone saltcellars to local animals, particularly snakes, dogs, crocodiles, and birds, also offer insight into local perceptions of the Portuguese and the lands from which they came. Probably most of the local ivory carvers never encountered individual Portuguese firsthand (or if they did, never for very long), and they most likely worked without full-scale models for their commissioned pieces. These artists, like artists everywhere, appear instead to have turned inward for their ideas, and equally to contemporary perceptions and traditions of the societies in which they lived. Many of the carving features seem to have been left up to the artist, no doubt with the sole proviso that the work be beautiful and worthy of a rich and powerful individual living far away across the sea. How would the artist have proceeded? How would he have sought to convey ideas of power,<sup>104</sup> wealth, seafaring, and otherness in sculptural form?

Among the most important of the figures appearing on the Sierra Leone saltcellars are images of serpents. These are most often shown slithering down the cover or pedestal toward the base,<sup>105</sup> and in key respects constitute both local signifiers and prominent Portuguese referents. Throughout the coastal area of Sierra Leone and Guinea today, serpent imagery is identified with a local water spirit called variously “Ninkinanka” (among the Nalu, Landuma, and Dyola) and “Niniganné” (among the Baga); in Portuguese Creole this same being is known as “Rianséou.”<sup>106</sup> With the Baga (who are believed to have lived in the coastal area of Sierra Leone in the late fifteenth century as one of the Sapi groups),<sup>107</sup> the serpent Niniganné is described by Appia as a creature of striking beauty and power.<sup>108</sup> This being, which is depicted in the well-known Baga *bansonyi* masks, is characterized by brilliant scales and long and smooth hair similar to that of other “genies.”<sup>109</sup> Niniganné water spirits of this sort are said to reside in springs, rivers, and ocean harbors, in abodes

filled to the heights with riches of varying sorts. Born originally from a female python as the centermost egg in her nest of eggs, the Niniganné water spirit also is thought to be owned by powerful individuals. Having spied such an egg, persons blessed with supernatural (or Janus) sight are said to take it home to incubate it in a container.<sup>110</sup> When the egg hatches (generally after a period of a year), the owner can carry it on missions to acquire riches for himself or his family. As Appia explains, the serpent stays next to “someone versed in magic and brings him whatever riches he wishes—gold, clothing and the like.”<sup>111</sup> Ownership of this mystical water spirit, however, carries the potential of grave danger, for only those who are truly “powerful”—those who have extra “eyes” with which to “see”—can command such a being and avoid its killing them first. The Niniganné’s attributes of brilliant scales, long hair, and vision in two worlds, as well as its associations with waterways, riches (clothing and metal), and danger, offer striking complements with the Portuguese.

Other important signifying qualities of the serpent connecting it to the Portuguese are found in local descriptions of its daily habits. Throughout the area, it is viewed as a great mystical being who is “master” of iron (a material it consumes through ritual offerings),<sup>112</sup> and its permission is requested whenever metal is to be extracted or worked. Sometimes as it travels, the serpent offers metal and other riches to humans in exchange for the death of a child.<sup>113</sup> On other occasions, it may bring rain or ascend to the sky in the form of a rainbow to prevent rain from falling.<sup>114</sup> These identifications with metal, death, and access to the world above and water (rain) all coincide in important ways with perceptions of the Portuguese as rich seafarers from a distant land who reside with the dead and from this base have power over the forces of nature. It is quite possible that local residents assumed the Portuguese themselves to be in control of Niniganné spirits or able to gain access to them, through which they were able to acquire wealth, power, and the skills to navigate great distances at sea. In the Edinburgh

<sup>103</sup> This idea is also suggested through the representation of heads that are larger than normal, for in this area it is said of someone with extraordinary power that he has “a lot of head” (Appia, 1944, 34–35).

<sup>104</sup> Curnow, 1990, 41–42.

<sup>105</sup> According to Lamp (p. 229), twisted or spiraling patterns are references to the devious ways of spiritual beings. Among the Nalu, Da Silva similarly suggests (“Arte Nalu,” *Boletim cultural da Guiné Portuguesa*, xi, 4, 1956, 35), the serpent is said to be a possessor of great supernatural power. In the hierarchy of forces, the serpent is placed at the top, the only being thought to combat all forms of negative force.

<sup>106</sup> Appia, 1944, 33.

<sup>107</sup> See Lamp, 231ff.

<sup>108</sup> Appia, 37. See also n. 111.

<sup>109</sup> Today Baga images of Niniganné appear in the form of the serpentine mask called a *bansonyi* (Appia, 1943, 160ff). Early descriptions of these masks indicate that they originally were worn in stilt dances (D. Meo, “Études sur le Rio Nunez,” *Bulletin du Comité d’Études Historique et Scientifique de l’Afrique Occidentale Française*, Paris, 1919, 341–369, in G. van Geertruyen, “La Fonction de la sculpture dans une société africaine: Les Baga, Nalu et Landuman,” *Africana Ganesa*, Rijksuniversiteit-Gent, 1, 1976, 66), conveying in this way an image of enormous height comparable in some respects to that of the serpents on the ivory salts. Contexts of *bansonyi* mask use also may offer insight into serpent portrayals on Sierra Leone ivories. Serpent-form dance crests of this type were employed historically both in the funerals of important people and in rites to distance sorcerers and other destructive forces.

Additionally they were identified both with protecting youth during initiation and with safeguarding women during childbirth (D. Paulme, *Les Gens du Riz*, Paris, 1954, 406–416). On still other occasions serpent-form masks were associated with requests for rain or solutions to difficult social situations (Van Geertruyen, 76). Because of its sometimes violent nature, the intervention of *bansonyi* also is sometimes sought in bringing about the demise of an enemy (Appia, 1943, 169). Baga serpent-form masks serve in this way as powerful signifiers of transition and security in contexts of personal and societal danger. Like the dead (and following from this the Portuguese), the serpent was perceived by the coastal Baga to be able at once to secure life and to take it away. Underscoring this idea, Paulme provides an account (pp. 406–416) of a *bansonyi* mask that brought about prosperity at the cost of a human life.

<sup>110</sup> This container is described by Appia, 1944, 34, as taking the form of a suitcase, an interesting identity vis-à-vis this serpent’s general association not only with plenty but also with travel.

<sup>111</sup> Appia, 1944, 36–37.

<sup>112</sup> Along with rice, eggs, cereal, and cloth.

<sup>113</sup> On other occasions, Appia points out (1944, 35), for no apparent reason, “When it meets a man, it tries to kill him by swallowing him.” Because of these powerful and contradictory qualities, the skin and scales of Ninkinanka are highly sought for the making of charms. Possession of serpent scales or related attributes, however, must be kept secret, since to acknowledge ownership of Niniganné or any of its parts is to bring certain death to oneself.

<sup>114</sup> Appia, 1944, 35ff.

saltcellar (Fig. 16) the serpents' scales suggest beads and they carry rings in their mouths.

Interestingly, in this and other of the Sierra Leone saltcellars, the serpents generally are shown with downward-facing heads, a positioning that may relate to local beliefs linking the ancestors to the heights. In the men's and women's initiatory traditions of the Sapi-related Temne, as Lamp explains, "matters from the ancestors" are described as having been "brought down" from above to humans here on earth.<sup>115</sup> If in some respects the Portuguese were conflated by local inhabitants with water-spirit serpents in much the same way that the Portuguese were made semiotically equivalent to mudfish at Benin, then these saltcellars may convey the idea that, like the serpents, the Portuguese themselves traveled down to earth along a watery route from the land of the ancestors. As Sylvia Boone points out for serpents in general among the Mende,<sup>116</sup> they are "liminal creatures *extraordinaire* . . . operating between earth and water. . . . These animals can be intermediaries between man and the divinities. They are metaphysical messengers, actors in truth, travelers between worlds."<sup>117</sup> The Portuguese as navigators between Africa and the lands across the sea fulfilled a role that was in many respects complementary.

Crocodiles, like serpents, also appear frequently on the Sierra Leone saltcellars, either climbing the supports or slithering over the surface (Figs. 16, 19). Sometimes identified as a village protector among the Baga,<sup>118</sup> the crocodile, like the serpent, also is seen to be a bringer of wealth.<sup>119</sup> Among the Temne, persons having supernatural power are believed to be able to transform themselves into crocodilian spirits. As Lamp notes, "These animals are considered malicious, but human command of a crocodile is associated with tremendous potential."<sup>120</sup> Parallels with the Portuguese as powerful, wealth-bearing, and water-associated beings from the spirit world here too are striking.

<sup>115</sup> Lamp, 1983, 236. In its vertical positioning on the saltcellars, the serpent recalls what Lamp has described for the Temne as the snake's "descent from the spiritual above, bringing a renewal of life to the physical world" (F. Lamp, "Cosmos, Cosmetics, and the Spirit of Bondo," *African Arts*, 1985, 18, 3, 38). Among the Mende, where the boa constrictor is associated with the local medicine society, this serpent is identified as both protector and punisher, a being who brings harm to those disobeying social regulations by draining life from them (Hommel, 15–16).

<sup>116</sup> As noted earlier, the Mende share cultural ties with the Mande or Mane peoples, who came into this region from the north in the 16th century. In the course of time, however, they have adopted the principal cultural traditions of the local inhabitants, today sharing a range of art and religious forms with the Temne and related Sapi groups. For this reason, I have included material evidence from the Mende in my discussion of historic Sapi art.

<sup>117</sup> S. A. Boone, *Radiance from the Waters: Ideals of Feminine Beauty in Mende Art*, New Haven, 1986, 201. So too with the Temne, the serpent is seen to be a prominent medium of communication and transition between the physical and spiritual worlds.

<sup>118</sup> Particularly if the crocodiles are pale or "white" (Appia, 1943, 155–156, 160). On horns from this area, crocodiles often serve as lugs; in other cases they ornament spoons.

<sup>119</sup> The bile of the crocodile is used to poison enemies (Appia, 1943, 169). Among the Vai, in turn, crocodiles under the control of powerful humans are said to bring riches to their masters, grasping such wealth as they can carry in their long, strong jaws (G. W. Ellis, *Negro Culture in West Africa*, New York, 1914, 66).

<sup>120</sup> Lamp (as in n. 115), 39.

Dogs also appear prominently on the Sierra Leone saltcellars, often in direct confrontation with serpents (Fig. 16). In such depictions, the dogs are frequently shown in states of alarm, with hackles raised, fangs bared, and ears drawn back in terror. While the exact meaning of this pose is not clear, local tradition maintains that a strong animosity exists between dogs and the serpentine water spirit. As Lestrangle explains, "Ninkinanka [Niniganné] does not like dogs. If it meets you with one of these beasts, it flees, but will avenge itself later on you."<sup>121</sup> The root of this animosity is not mentioned, but it may be grounded in the idea that dogs bark at things that others cannot see. Niniganné, as a serpent invisible to all but those with supernatural vision and power, would be an obvious cause of dogs "barking at the wind." Appropriately, among the "gifts" that the water-spirit snake is said to provide to its owner is an ability to "see at night," a power also associated with the dog.<sup>122</sup>

Birds find frequent representation in Sierra Leone saltcellars as well. Like both the serpent and the crocodile, birds are described as important liminal beings. As Boone explains for the Mende, "Birds communicate across the barriers of time and space, between the realms of the human and the divine."<sup>123</sup> For this reason, birds and serpents commonly appear together in local arts, whether fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Sapi stone figures or twentieth-century Sande masks.<sup>124</sup> Curnow identifies the birds on the ivory saltcellars as parrots largely because of the prominence and hook of their beaks (see Fig. 16, top).<sup>125</sup> Interestingly, elsewhere in Africa<sup>126</sup> birds of this type often are associated with the ancestor (or spirit) realms because of their ability to "communicate" in both their own and human languages. In some of the saltcellars the beaks are strikingly parrot-like, but in other examples the birds are larger and their beaks are long and straight, recalling those of water birds (Fig. 16, base). Similar long-beaked birds appear prominently in the twentieth-century art and initiation practices of the Baga and Nalu.<sup>127</sup> While the specific species of water bird in these images has not been identified, René Caillié (who visited the Baga area in the early nineteenth century) noted that the

<sup>121</sup> M. de Lestrangle, "Génies de l'eau et de la brousse en Guinée Française," *Études Guinéennes*, IV, 1950, 43.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>123</sup> Boone (as in n. 117), 213.

<sup>124</sup> In Sapi stone carvings, Lamp suggests, the bird is identified with sustenance (as in n. 115, p. 39). Birds and serpents appearing together in contemporary Mende masks have a different meaning. As Boone points out for the appearance of bird and snake imagery in these masks (as in n. 117, p. 201): "Birds and snakes are deliberately contrasted for their high-affect powers of symbolic abatement. Birds are friends; snakes are enemies. Birds are bright and visible; snakes are dark and hidden. Birds are light and life; snakes are night and sudden death. . . . Birds help bring babies; snakes steal them away. A bird and a snake together suggest internecine strife; they are natural enemies—when they meet they fight. . . . Together they depict life as a battle."

<sup>125</sup> Curnow, 1983, 138.

<sup>126</sup> With the Fon of the Benin Republic, among others.

<sup>127</sup> C. Kjersmeier, *Centres de style de la sculpture Nègre Africaine*, 1, (Copenhagen, 1935), repr. New York, 1967, 24; B. Holas, "Danses Masques de la Basse Côte," *Études Guinéennes*, 1, 1947, 65; J. Delancey, *The Art and Peoples of Black Africa*, New York, 1974, 34; J. D. Lampreia, "Mascara ritualistas dos Nalus da Guiné Portuguesa," *Actas do Congresso Internaccional de Ethnografia* (Santo Tirso, Conoquio de Etnografia Comparada, IV, 4, 1963), 146.

head of the men's *Simo* society would dress in the guise of a pelican,<sup>128</sup> suggesting the importance in local politics and art of this water bird because it carries gifts from the deep in its beak. Whether representing pelicans or some other water species, the long-beaked birds appearing on the saltcellars would have had complementary functions, at once suggesting ideas of power (both local and foreign) and serving as signifiers of the Portuguese through their identity with water and the wealth of the seas.<sup>129</sup>

Yet another aspect of the Sierra Leone saltcellars important to us in the context of Portuguese signification is the prominent egg-shaped form of the vessel itself. This shape, though found in European saltcellar prototypes, appears to have a signifying role in local beliefs and religious traditions. According to Harris and Sawyerr, "the Mende conceive of the earth as a primeval egg from which life emanated."<sup>130</sup> The saltcellar in this sense may be seen to have assumed certain qualities of an *imago mundi*—a world image in which the earth was associated not only with a distinctive space or shape but also with the power to impart life. In its embryonic egg shape, the saltcellar may also have suggested the fertile mass from which human and all other life emanated. As noted earlier, in this region of Africa the Niniganné water spirit itself is said to be born from the egg of a python.<sup>131</sup> Within the context of Sierra Leone saltcellars, the egg is thus a particularly provocative signifier—alluding at once to the fragility of life and to its desired perpetuity. As local Sapi artists no doubt knew, these vessels were carved to be used by powerful Europeans to contain salt, a substance identified closely with life and well-being.

### Tusks and the Slave Trade

The egg-like shape of the vessels may also allude to the complex and potent local identity of the Portuguese as

potentially both creative and destructive forces, part of an identity that no doubt coincided with the role they played in the slave trade. As early as 1512, the Portuguese king required that ships returning from Africa "be [as] heavily laden as possible with slaves. . ." to help defray the costs of navigation and missionary activity.<sup>132</sup> Like the Niniganné water spirit and its egg-shaped embryo appearing so prominently in the Sierra Leone saltcellars, Africans purchased by the Portuguese and by later arriving Europeans during the horrifying epoch of the slave trade came to be identified as a means to external wealth and power. Significantly, the Portuguese called a slave *peca* (piece), a trade term also employed for metal, beads, cloth, and other items of commerce.<sup>133</sup>

Similar to the Niniganné water spirit, the slaves came to be identified with the ocean, for they were forced participants in a sea voyage that literally took them from Africa, the place of life, family, and well-being, to a strange locale that meant separation from loved ones, enormous personal trauma, and social (and frequently actual) death. The ivory saltcellars as *peca* (items of trade) may be understood in this way as visual complements to the European trade in human chattels.

The use of ivory in the Afro-Portuguese sculptures reinforces this link between such arts and the slave trade. Like human bone, ivory is hard and white; like skin it is smooth, shiny, and easily incised with the scarification marks similar to those which distinguish the bodies of many Africans. Like enslavement practices, the acquisition of ivory marked the death of a powerful and potentially dangerous living being. In monetary terms, slaves and ivories were seen to be complementary as well. Though prices varied over time, Alan Ryder points out that at Benin in 1522, female slaves at the prime age of seventeen to eighteen carried the equivalent value of two ivory tusks.<sup>134</sup> Human life and elephant life in this way were roughly equivalent. Today it is hard to fathom the vast numbers of slaves who were exported during this period. In the minds of the Europeans, a connection between African ivory carvings and the slave trade no doubt was made. If, as suggested here, this coincided with African beliefs concerning the oceans as the pathway to the land of the dead, it also suggests the ways in which human life, death, and otherness were to some degree conflated in Africa and Europe. In portraying the Portuguese as other, African artists also show them, as both extensions and inversions of themselves, however temporally and spatially removed.

African ivories ca. 1492, as has been seen, offer strikingly poignant insight into African perceptions of the Portuguese. Whether originating in Kongo, Benin, or Sierra Leone, such ivories present both markedly different and complementary perspectives on the European. In Kongolese ivories of the period, emphases on spatial framing, spiral compositional

<sup>128</sup> R. Caillié, *Journal d'un voyage à Temboctou . . .*, 1, Paris, 1830, 27.

<sup>129</sup> Bird imagery on the Afro-Portuguese ivories also may have alluded in important ways to male power, for, like the Portuguese, water birds appeared prominently in the initiation rituals of local men's societies, generally referred to in the literature as *Simo*; see Lampreia (as in n. 127), 146. Members of this association played a central role in community governance, assuming functions that in Kongo and Benin would have been the prerogative of the king. Caillié, an early visitor to the Baga area, observed (as in n. 128, 227) that the head of the *Simo* society would dress in the guise of a pelican. Baga long-beaked bird sculptures similarly were identified by one of Lamp's sources as representing pelicans (personal communication, Nov. 2, 1991). Lampreia (p. 146) identifies the Baga bird-form *Komi* headdresses in turn with the *machol* bird, which frequents marshes and eats small fish. Masks of this type appear in situations associated with deceased chiefs and with holders of supernatural power (Da Silva, as in n. 105, *passim*). Performing during the rice harvest festivals and funerals, *komi* bird maskers in this way express values that complement the Portuguese, conveying in general themes of plenty, afterlife, liminality, and transition.

Interestingly, this area as well holds a belief in a certain genie called Sata-Bo who takes the form of a bird (Appia, 1943, 155). This genie appears variously in the form of a canoe, an armed boat, a thicket full of birds, a white man with a helmet, a white female with prominent breasts, a plate of rice, a chair, and a serpent. Sata-Bo is believed to appear in the area during crises—floods, fires, or the death of important people.

<sup>130</sup> W. Harris and H. Sawyerr, *The Springs of Mende Belief and Conduct*, Freetown, 1986, in Hommel, 36.

<sup>131</sup> Lestrangé (as in n. 121), 43. The fact that local residents accord this serpent being the ability to destroy the human embryo in utero may also be important to this symbolism (J. Littlejohn, "The Temne House," *Sierra Leone Studies*, xiv, 1960, 73).

<sup>132</sup> De Pina in Bassani and Fagg, 47.

<sup>133</sup> Ryder, 295.

<sup>134</sup> Ryder, 299. Each female slave at this time, it should be noted, was accorded a worth of twenty-four yards of cloth (ten pieces) or two bars of lead (Ryder, 335). The quality of the cloth varied of course, and at Benin Ryder notes (p. 335) that one slave was also valued at one piece (two and a half yards?) of Indian cloth, coarse muslin, or blue Coromandel.

lines, serpentine images, and abstract textile patterning convey ideas of transition, regeneration, and cosmological mapping, with references to Europeans found both inside and outside the larger circle of spatially and temporally delimited cultural values and beliefs. As diagrams of the Kongolese worlds inhabited by humans and spirits, these elegantly carved horns offer critical evidence of the centrality of art in the expression of indigenous ideas about space, self, and the other.

In the Benin ivories, court artists who studied the Portuguese at close hand used their highly accomplished skills at naturalistic representation to create images of great accuracy, using a semiotic code that presented the Portuguese as signifying figures of transition, liminality, and renewal. Whether emphasizing movement and torsion, complements with mudfish, or parallels with court women, the point was clear: in the Benin ivories, the Portuguese were identified as at once part of and separate from the larger Benin world. Sierra Leone ivory carvings from this period, which in formal and semiotic terms are in some respects the most complicated, present equally provocative perspectives on the Portuguese. Although most of their artists may never have seen the Portuguese firsthand, they created complex images of them as persons, who like local ancestors and water genies are powerful, wealthy, and blessed with supernatural sight.

African ivories from this period make us aware of the historic boundaries of here and there, selfhood and other. Like the stranger, to requote Simmel, they are "near and far at the same time." These works make visible an ongoing dialogue of mutual appropriation and investment—of money, meaning, value, and power, and in the process, the production of new Portuguese and African identities as they articulate each other. By focusing on how Africans represented Europeans as others in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, this essay has, I hope, both complemented and countered the rhetoric of "discovery" in the current quincennial year of Columbus. Renowned for centuries as objects of great artistic skill and beauty, the African ivories now also can be admired for the provocative insights they encode about exchange between Africans and Europeans during the initial period of contact.

*Suzanne Preston Blier has published widely on African art, architecture, and theory. Her Art and Danger: Psychology,*

*Power, and African Vodun, is in press (University of Chicago). The Anatomy of Architecture: Ontology and Metaphor in Batammaliba Architectural Expression received the Arnold Rubin Outstanding Publication Award in African Art (Sackler Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. 02138).*

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