When French Catholic missionary Joseph Henry published his monograph in 1910, he included in the book a photograph of a dark, bulbous object at the threshold of a building. A taller object distinguished by its tapering form leans on the building’s outer wall (fig. 2.1). The caption accompanying the image identifies the rounded object as a boli (sg.; bolis, pl.), or power object, “in the form of a hippopotamus” and the other object as a “mask worn during the sacred dance” (Henry 1910, opp. 150). Raking light shines on the power object and helmet mask, causing the objects’ surfaces to shine. The dim interior space beyond the boli contrasts with the illuminated exterior space dominating the picture.

The juxtaposition between seeing the objects outside and not seeing the interior space shown in the photograph hints at the contrast between visibility and obscurity in the making and display of bolis that Henry addresses in his writing. According to the missionary, bolis remain hidden, and their owners bring them outside only for certain events (Henry 1910, 141). Henry also suggests that the objects’ outer layers obscure their content so that the materials used in the objects’ making are difficult to discern visually. The physical appearance and inaccessibility of bolis combined with the visual indeterminacy of their contents create a tension that recalls Michael Taussig’s “striptease of hidden presence” (1999, 34). The striptease created by Henry’s recognition of the presence of bolis, his sight of them on occasion, and his inability to

FIGURE 2.1. The caption accompanying this image in Joseph Henry’s 1910 book describes the rounded object at the threshold as a “boli fetish, in the form of a hippopotamus” and the mask as one “worn during the sacred dance” (Henry 1910, opp. 153). Image courtesy of the James J. Ross Archive of African Images, Yale University.
discern their constituent elements seems to have prompted the missionary to do more than look at the accumulative works. The missionary reports he disassembled many boliw to uncover an array of materials, including tree bark, roots, animal horns, nails from diverse quadrupeds, and even human remains (Henry 1910, 140).²

My own research on power association objects has not led me to tear apart objects. But information I gathered in the three-corner region combined with examinations of boliw in American and European collections confirm that power association leaders and other specialists have long used a variety of vegetal, animal, and mineral matter to construct the assemblages. Specialists use their expert knowledge to concentrate potent energy from disparate sources into boliw and other objects in order to effect change in people’s lives. The accumulative objects thus operate as tools to help their makers or owners accomplish certain goals. The English phrase power object highlights the potency of the materials and energies gathered to effect change, and it offers an approximate translation of the Mande-language term bolî. The exact composition of each power object varies as a function of the people and contexts surrounding the work’s production and use. Accordingly, power objects reflect their makers’ individual abilities, careful attention to specific situations, and considered responses to particular circumstances rather than unwavering repetition of some formula or ritual. Each bolî is different and documents its makers’ singular responses to distinct circumstances, constituting a custom-made object designed to achieve particular goals. Each bolî also exists in relation to other assemblages, installations, architecture, and performances. Its meaning and effectiveness as a power object depends on such contexts and interconnections. Apart from them, the object loses meaning.

Investigating ambiguity and indeterminacy in modern European and Euro-American art, art historian Dario Gamboni alerts readers to a potential trap in a “desire to attribute everything either to the work itself (‘fetishistically’) or to the viewer (by ‘anti-fetishism’), instead of admitting, cultivating, and studying the interaction between the two” (2002, 18). He calls for scholars to consider how art maker, art viewer, and art itself interrelate (cf. Hay 2007; McNaughton 2009, 5–6; Gagliardi 2020b). Similar interplay is critical to the conception and design of bolîw and other power objects, works that Henry and other observers have called “fetishes” precisely because they thought that the objects’ makers
and users misattributed agency to objects or used the objects to venerate false
gods or demons. The characterization of power objects as “fetishes” may reflect
observers’ assumptions about the objects more than makers’ and users’ under-
standings of the works. In recent decades, academic critiques of the term fetish
coincided with efforts of scholars who focused attention on African understand-
ings of power objects. Such scholars often considered the agency of the objects’
makers and also highlighted interplay among makers of power objects created
in disparate parts of the continent, the objects’ audiences, and the objects them-
selves. Audiences are central to the design of power association arts, and power
association leaders operate with their audiences in mind.

Specialists invest in and maintain an array of arts to achieve particular goals
and to advertise their expertise without disclosing the details of what they
know. As viewing circumstances for the works change, concealment and revela-
tion modulate. Audiences may catch a glimpse of smaller or larger objects in
enclosed rooms or open courtyards during the day or the night. Specialists add
material to and subtract it from the works they create when working on their
own, collaborating with their colleagues, or performing in front of other people.
Mary Nooter [Roberts] posits that power objects and other African arts associ-
ated with secrecy serve as boundary markers that distinguish people who know
secrets about the objects from people who do not (Nooter [Roberts] 1993, 16).
But power association arts do not serve as static boundary markers. They engage
more and less knowledgeable audiences with ever-wavering visual access to the
works and their contents.

Ambiguity anchors the design of power association arts, and attempts to de-
termine exact meanings miss the point. Power association leaders construct as-
semblages, installations, and buildings that hint at the possibility of revelation,
but full disclosure remains unattainable. Specific activities and contexts integral
to the design and use of power association arts often leave no visible trace on
the works. Even if Henry tore into boliw to expose their contents as he claims,
the materials he spied would not have necessarily betrayed the intricacies of the
objects or their assembly. Flux rather than stasis, and indeterminacy rather than
fixity, characterize power association arts. It is the impossibility of pinpointing
exact details about materials, methods, or contexts of the works’ making, rather
than an unambiguous legibility, that captures and sustains audiences’ attention.
A boli on display in a European or American museum may invite closer or longer
looking than afforded viewers in western West Africa, but significant details of the object remain inscrutable.

**Differences Beyond Sight**

Many of the power association objects that entered European and American museum collections during the twentieth century arrived with little, if any, details about exact makers, patrons, audiences, or circumstances involved in the works’ production, use, or circulation. And yet scholars and other art enthusiasts in Europe and North America attempted to classify the objects based on their visual properties. Examining the works’ physical features, grouping like forms together, and identifying particular sets of objects with certain organizations seemed a reasonable way for art enthusiasts to assess the works. As we saw in the previous chapter, twentieth-century efforts to determine a comprehensive list of exact names for and characteristics of power associations in and beyond the three-corner region did not yield clear or consistent results. The organizations have proven complicated to evaluate, and their arts have also persistently resisted rigid form-based classifications.

American art historian Robert Goldwater attempted to distinguish among different types of power association arts on the basis of form in his 1960 exhibition *Antelopes and Queens: Bambara Sculpture from the Western Sudan* at New York’s now-defunct Museum of Primitive Art (MPA). Despite never having traveled to the three-corner region to conduct research, Goldwater relied on the accounts of other observers to explain a cultural context for art in the Bambara, or Bamana, corpus. The exhibition and its companion publication, *Bambara Sculpture from the Western Sudan*, earned acclaim for their efforts to establish parameters of a single style of African art, one Goldwater linked to the Bamana cultural or ethnic group (Goldwater 1960, 9–10; see also Gagliardi 2016). For Goldwater, designation of a corpus of art as Bamana implied that the objects’ makers, owners, and audiences were also Bamana. Goldwater viewed Komo, Kono, and other power associations as Bamana institutions, and he repeatedly referred to them as “secret societies.” Goldwater imagined that within what he identified as a Bamana corpus, the arts of each power association varied. Positing that “each [secret society] employs traditional forms that are associated with it alone, and repeated, with variations, in all the objects of similar use” (1960,
Goldwater assumed each organization invested in works that were visually distinct from the objects of other organizations.

Based on his conception of power association arts and his emphasis on visual distinctions, Goldwater considered objects’ formal features to separate helmet masks he imagined were for Komo from ones he thought were for Kono. He writes, “The Kono masks are much like those of the Komo, though larger and less complicated” (1960, 12). He also observes that in 1960, European and American art enthusiasts had more familiarity with Kono helmet masks than Komo helmet masks (1960, 12). Reflecting the visual differences he proposed, the helmet masks Goldwater included in *Antelopes and Queens* and identified with Komo feature rich accumulations of horns, quills, and other animal fragments as well as vegetal matter, textiles, and coatings of crusty, darkish materials on their wooden frames (fig. 2.2; see also Goldwater 1960, 25, pl. 21). The helmet masks he identified with Kono show dark, crusty coatings but fewer, if any, additional materials attached to the objects’ wooden armatures (fig. 2.3; see also Goldwater 1960, 24, pl. 20). The distinctions Goldwater proffered gave art connoisseurs convenient means for assessing power association helmet masks, and the classifications have largely endured (e.g., see Colleyn 2001, 2009a).

Yet identifying helmet masks with fewer accumulations on them with Kono rather than Komo does not match descriptions in historical documents or more recent statements about the arts that western Burkinabe power association leaders have supplied me. In 1910, Henry published a photograph that shows a man standing alone with a helmet mask balanced on his head (1910, opp. 147). He identifies the helmet mask with Komo. When Goldwater (1960, 5, fig. 2) published the same photograph in *Bambara Sculpture from the Western Sudan*, he associated the object with Kono (fig. 2.4). The point here is not the veracity of Henry’s or Goldwater’s attribution. Rather, it is to highlight Goldwater’s reliance on formal criteria to classify arts and assess their original contexts, even when historical records offered different determinations. Goldwater provided other reattributions in the same publication. A photograph reproduced at the front of the book features performers wearing antelope crest masks, therefore suggesting that Goldwater recognized the crest masks as Bamana in form. He included objects similar to the ones shown in the image in the exhibition. The caption that accompanied a reproduction of the same photograph in a 1912 source, which Goldwater cites, links the crest masks to a Senufo event rather than a Bamana

one (Goldwater 1960, frontispiece; Delafosse 1912, 3, fig. 60; see also Gagliardi 2014, 48–49).

The labeling and relabeling of objects depending on what the works look like reflects European and Euro-American connoisseurs’ commitment to the formal qualities of art rather than historical West African understandings of the objects.⁵ Ostensibly intended to recuperate West African perspectives, the approach actually denies rather than facilitates insight. Power association leaders, blacksmiths, and other community members in western Burkina Faso I interviewed did not maintain the same formal distinction between Komo helmet masks bristling with materials added to their surfaces and barer Kono helmet masks. When I showed them photographs of helmet masks in European and American collections, several of them suggested that the works with less

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FIGURE 2.4. The caption accompanying this image in Henry’s 1910 book describes the helmet mask on the man’s head as a “mask of the boli Komo fetish” (Henry 1910, opp. 147). When Robert Goldwater reproduced the same image in 1960, he linked the helmet mask to Kono, a different power association. Photo: R. P. Dubernet. Image courtesy of the James J. Ross Archive of African Images, Yale University.
abundant accumulations of material on their surfaces did not resemble works power association chapters in the immediate area commissioned or maintained. They asserted that both Komo and Kono chapters in western Burkina Faso sponsor helmet masks loaded with animal horns and quills similar to the helmet masks identified with Komo in European and American collections. Boureima Tiékoroni Diamitani offered a similar conclusion in his study of Komo power association chapters and their arts in western Burkina Faso. He writes, “The Kono mask is similar in style to the Komo one, and a blacksmith carves both” (1999, 47n15).

The specific criteria for distinguishing Komo objects from Kono objects may vary from person to person, place to place, or moment to moment. Given that at least in some places and at certain moments accumulation is common on Komo and Kono helmet masks, power association leaders and their audiences in West Africa may rely on the placement or type of materials or still other not necessarily visible criteria to distinguish Komo helmet masks from Kono helmet masks. Power association leaders’ stated preference for abundant materials added to wooden helmet mask armatures carved for Komo and Kono seems to coincide with their ambitions to add difficult-to-obtain materials from distant locales to their assemblages in order to differentiate one power association chapter from another. Specialists also use the objects they create to advertise their expertise. Understood from this vantage point, a helmet mask with more materials added to its surface may signal to audiences that its owner possesses greater knowledge and skill than the owner of a helmet mask with fewer materials attached to the surface.

Do Ouattara, who studied Komo with his father and was positioned to lead his family’s Komo chapter before he became a Christian pastor, told me that Komo and Kono masks wear porcupine quills in different ways. He said that Kono masks feature warthog tusks. While he declined to elaborate, his comments raise but do not confirm possibilities for distinguishing between Komo and Kono helmet masks based on visible features. Other specialists I interviewed did not identify the same visual differences. Unclear or contradictory responses to my questions intimate that visual distinctions may be neither categorical nor universal. The responses raise the possibility that I may have pursued information specialists preferred not to share or asked questions they found irrelevant to their own conceptions of Komo and Kono. More extensive exegeses
about specific materials and methods used to create and maintain Komo and Kono helmet masks may have infringed on some of the most guarded knowledge power association leaders acquire.

People I interviewed in western Burkina Faso acknowledged differences between Komo and Kono that elude visual detection. Their attention to other aspects of the organizations further suggests that efforts to distinguish between Komo and Kono helmet masks on the basis of features detectable to the eye may reflect European and Euro-American preoccupations with visual properties more than West African understandings of the organizations or the objects they create. Specialists and community members alike told me that music for Komo events differs from music for Kono events. Their comments indicate that audiences may assess aural rather than visual cues to determine the presence of Komo or Kono (see also Jespers 2001). Indeed, sound is an important component of power association activities.

Leaders of Komo and Kono chapters across western Burkina Faso also told me in separate interviews that the most significant differences between the two institutions involve variations in plant matter at the core of Komo and Kono leaders’ activities. Power association leaders develop expert knowledge of plants, and vegetal matter constitutes some of the most important material incorporated into power association objects. Specialists mix vegetal substances and other matter into a paste for application on helmet masks’ surfaces (see also O’Hern 2012). They may also pack vegetal or mineral matter into horns. Ibrahim Traoré Banakourou, who studied Komo with his grandfather, a renowned power association leader in Bougoula, Mali, reported that the mixture applied to a helmet mask’s surface or another boli may contain matter from nearly three hundred plants.

From most viewing distances afforded spectators of power association arts, plant matter incorporated into assemblages or applied to the objects’ surfaces is not discernible. Exact methods for obtaining, processing, or applying it to the objects’ surfaces are also not visible when looking at the object. Power association arts require us to investigate what Mariane Ferme, in *The Underneath of Things: Violence, History, and the Everyday in Sierra Leone*, describes as an “aesthetics of ambiguity” and “a cultural idiom of indirectness” based on her research in communities she recognizes as Mende (2001, 9). Ferme’s concepts of ambiguity and indirectness offer generative possibilities for thinking about
power association arts, and efforts to classify the organizations’ arts on the basis of their visible qualities have diverted attention from more salient aspects of the works.

The inscrutability of power association arts on the basis of what viewers see makes clear the inability of art-historical methods grounded in formal analysis to offer insight into conceptual discourses informing the works’ creation, use, and circulation in diverse communities in and beyond the three-corner region for more than a century. In order to align art-historical understandings of the organizations’ arts with the theories and insights that power association leaders and their audiences have articulated, I foreground what specialists in western Burkina Faso have told me about power association arts. I also compare my field-based data with other observers’ accounts from the late nineteenth century to the present as well as with objects acquired in the three-corner region during the same period to situate information I gleaned within broader historical and geographical spheres. But because power association leaders and their audiences have long operated within contexts of ambiguity and indirectness, any statement about the arts can only be partial.

**Distinctive Sizes, Shapes, and Matter**

Power association leaders gather and assemble materials that, visibly or not, refer to their previous forms and histories. Specialists’ selection of matter often depends on its past shapes or contexts, because its prior conditions contribute to the materials’ potency. An individual specialist’s choice of elements to use as well as his assembly methods in any instance are associated with that expert’s particular goals in a certain place and in a single moment. Consequently, power objects reflect their makers’ deliberate juxtapositions of different fragments due to the materials’ connections with previous forms and histories as well as the specialists’ situation-specific aims. When an object is removed from the ever-evolving contexts of its making and use, its meaning becomes increasingly obscure.

Museum records and other documentation usually lack details about the exact makers of power association arts or circumstances surrounding the works’ creation. European museums began acquiring power association objects in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and foreign travelers in the
three-corner region at the time started to write about the organizations and their arts. As we have seen, evidence clearly indicates that since at least the end of the nineteenth century, makers of power association assemblages operated in culturally, linguistically, religiously, and geopolitically diverse communities. The objects’ makers thought about how to combine disparate elements in their constructions as they worked. The assemblages they created vary in size, shape, and composition. While extant information makes it difficult to trace local-level histories for individual power association arts, I highlight the earliest documented dates I was able to access in publications, collection records, or other unpublished documents for objects housed in museums or private collections. Attention to such dates allows us to begin to place power association arts within an historical perspective, even though an object may or may not be significantly older than the earliest documented date for the work.\textsuperscript{11}

The dark, so-called hippopotamus-shaped boli in the photograph Henry published in 1910 appears larger than the rock in front of it but smaller than the helmet mask positioned at the building’s wall. In another photograph reproduced in the same book, a man places his hands around the body of a humanoid-shaped boli, perhaps to show the object to the photographer (fig. 2.5). A composite object, elliptical in form, entered the collection of Paris’s Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro, or Trocadéro, in 1902, when French military officer Louis Archinard donated it and other objects to the museum (fig. 2.6). It measures fewer than three inches in length and is small enough for a person to grasp in one hand. A 2012 photograph from western Burkina Faso shows a pile of similarly shaped power objects of various sizes gathered in a pottery fragment in the workroom of Karfa Coulibaly (fig. 2.7). But the focus on resemblances in shape among objects produced in different places and in different moments overshadows attention to the specific people, contexts, and materials involved in assembly of the objects.

A pyramidal boli in the collection of objects Archinard donated to the Trocadéro in 1902 stands fewer than six inches tall. Metal links attached to the tapered end of the object further distinguish it from other boliv (fig. 2.8). Another boli, roughly four-and-a-half inches in height and donated by the same officer to the same museum in the same year, resembles an animal horn packed with difficult-to-discern materials (figs. 2.9–2.10). Closer visual examination of the object indicates the presence of cloth near the open end, and metal, perhaps iron, at the other end seems to mimic the form of a curved
animal horn. Among a group of power objects that Archinard donated to the Musée de l’Homme in the 1880s are several works that feature actual animal horns in their construction. The objects range from about three inches long to twenty-three inches long. Other boli are much larger. Catherine De Clippele photographed a nearly human-size boli in a location identified as “Namporompela” (possibly Nanporopéla) in 1994 (Colleyn 2001, 172, fig. 40). The sheer variety of materials, shapes, and sizes of power objects produced from the late nineteenth century to the present further supports the observation that makers experiment rather than blindly copy a prototype.

Specialists concentrate potent matter and energy in the helmet masks they maintain; thus helmet masks constitute a kind of power object. Power association helmet masks generally consist of a wooden base with a long maw extending from a cap-like or domed cavity. Wooden or actual horns extending from the back of a helmet mask visually counterbalance the long maw. The tripartite shape evokes powerful animals but does not represent any single, observable creature in the wild. Writing about Komo masks, Patrick McNaughton explains that they “become a body of visual non sequiturs grouped to create a kind of chimera” (1979a, 35). McNaughton also cites sculptor-blacksmith Sedu Traore, who told the American researcher, “The Komo mask is made to look like an animal. But it is not an animal, it is a secret” (Traore in McNaughton 1979a, iii; see also McNaughton 1979a, 35). After a power association leader carves or commissions

a wooden base for a helmet mask, he or another specialist may add materials to it, including animal horns, animal quills, plant matter, and other elements (figs. 2.11–2.14). Over time, the assemblage grows. A specialist may also remove materials from the work or replace certain elements, or an assemblage may be left to decay over time. The exact process varies depending on the people involved in it as well as the circumstances surrounding the work’s construction and use (cf. McNaughton 1979a, 28–29; Diamitani 1999, 117–124). Power association arts are in a constant state of flux. Process, rather than achievement of a final form, is central to their design (see also Brett-Smith 1994, 2001).

Power association leaders construct helmet masks and other assemblages to wield potent material and concentrate strong energies as they work to realize

**Figure 2.10.** Detail of difficult-to-discern materials at the open end of musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, 71.1902.12.55. Paris, Franc, June 27, 2017. Photo: Susan Elizabeth Gagliardi.


FIGURE 2.13. The same wooden armature carved by Bè Coulibaly and given to Karfa Coulibaly with additional materials attached to and placed around it. Sokouraba, Burkina Faso, January 20, 2012. Fieldwork image 2012–0629. Photo: Susan Elizabeth Gagliardi.

their goals. Animal horns, animal quills, bird skulls, and thick encrustations of indeterminate mixtures are attached to the wooden bases of two helmet masks now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Met). But materials incorporated into each object and their arrangement on a wooden base vary from work to work. The long maw and wide ears of one helmet mask’s wooden base contrast with the short mouth and narrow ears of the other helmet mask’s wooden base (figs. 2.15–2.16). Horns surround the bird skull attached to the

**FIGURE 2.15.** Unrecorded makers. Helmet mask identified by the Metropolitan Museum of Art as Kômô Helmet Mask (Kômôkun), from Guinea or Mali or Burkina Faso or Côte d’Ivoire, West Africa, Komo or Koma Power Association. Before 1959. Wood, bird skull, porcupine quills, horns, nails, cotton, sacrificial material; 54.9 × 32.4 × 73.3 cm. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY.

center of the long maw on one helmet mask. The bird skull on the other helmet mask extends beyond the edge of the wooden armature. When Ibrahim Traoré Banakourou saw a photograph of the helmet mask with the shorter mouth, he recognized the skull as one from a scavenger bird. He said the reason for incorporating the skull into the work depended on what the particular power association chapter that owned the helmet mask sought to accomplish when it added the skull to the assemblage. According to Traoré, certain power objects identified with scavenger birds evoke the creatures’ abilities to swoop down from the sky to retrieve something on the ground. Specialists use such objects to help rescue people from dire situations that they face. Few other bundles attach to the helmet mask with the bird beak that Traoré identified with a scavenger bird. Bundles on the helmet mask with the longer maw further distinguish it from other power association helmet masks. The composition of each bundle is difficult to discern from afar, the likely viewing distance for people who were allowed to see it but were not involved in its making or maintenance. Close-up examination of bundles in the Met’s conservation lab revealed woven fabric, plant matter, metal hardware, and other materials poking through some of the thick surface layers (fig. 2.17).
Museum records for the two objects, like museum records for many power association arts, do not include information about the specific people or particular contexts involved in the objects’ creation or maintenance. Extant documentation does indicate that the two objects traveled from two different New York galleries to the MPA before they were transferred to the Met. Nelson A. Rockefeller purchased the helmet mask with the longer maw in 1959 from Aaron Furman Gallery before placing it on permanent loan at the MPA. Working in consultation with Stolper Galleries, Mr. and Mrs. Morton Lipkin donated the other helmet mask to the MPA in 1961. The MPA transferred the helmet masks along with many of its other holdings to the Met in the late 1970s. The lack of details about each object’s creation and use prior to its arrival in a gallery means that the object itself offers the only documentation of its making. Still, the object-as-documentation is partial for anyone not involved in the object’s initial creation and care.

Museum professionals seek to document materials incorporated into objects that the institutions house, in part to aid the institutions with maintaining the works. Yet visual inspection of power association assemblages often defies foreign observers’ attempts to determine constituent elements of the works. The matter incorporated into the objects’ surface layers consistently confounds viewers. Curators, conservators, and other record keepers assess the dark, crusty surfaces they see, but the surfaces yield few visual clues about ingredients in the layers. Figure 2.18 shows lists of materials that the Art Institute of Chicago, Baltimore Museum of Art, Dallas Museum of Art (DMA), Met, Paris’s musée du quai Branly–Jacques Chirac, and New Orleans Museum of Art recognized as present in power association arts in their collections (fig. 2.18) in May 2018 and again in October 2020. The lists make clear that materials in the constructions escape ready identification.

Certain terms on the lists do not point at specific materials. Encrustation describes a physical characteristic of accumulated surface layers. The phrase sacrificial materials alludes to a certain set of materials but does not specify what the materials are. The terms blood and coagulated blood offer more specific identifications. Yet the sources of blood remain unclear. The latter term also recalls Michel Leiris’s reference to “coagulated blood” on power association objects that he and his companions stole during the Mission Dakar-Djibouti (Leiris [1934] 1981, 104–105; [1934] 2017, 154). Given that animal sacrifice is integral to the
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MUSEUM</th>
<th>OBJECT TYPE</th>
<th>ACCESSION OR CATALOG NUMBER</th>
<th>MATERIALS AS LISTED ON EACH MUSEUM'S ONLINE CATALOG</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Art Institute of Chicago</td>
<td>Helmet mask</td>
<td>1997.62</td>
<td>Wood, horn, quills, and sacrificial material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baltimore Museum of Art</td>
<td>Helmet mask</td>
<td>1983.79</td>
<td>Wood, animal horns, bird skull, plant fibers, porcupine quills, encrustation, glass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dallas Museum of Art</td>
<td>Helmet mask</td>
<td>1997.24</td>
<td>Wood, glass, animal horns, fiber, mirrors, iron, and other materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Metropolitan Museum of Art</td>
<td>Helmet mask</td>
<td>1978.412.426</td>
<td>Wood, encrustation, quills, feathers, horns, bird skull</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Metropolitan Museum of Art</td>
<td>Helmet mask</td>
<td>1979.206.124</td>
<td>Wood, bird skull, porcupine quills, horns, nails, cotton, sacrificial material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Metropolitan Museum of Art</td>
<td>Helmet mask</td>
<td>1979.206.150</td>
<td>Wood, bird skull, porcupine quills, horns, cotton, sacrificial materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Metropolitan Museum of Art</td>
<td>Power object</td>
<td>1979.206.175</td>
<td>Wood, sacrificial materials (patina)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac</td>
<td>Power object</td>
<td>71.1885.121.3</td>
<td>Wood and coagulated blood, two bundles of chicken feathers (Bois et sang coagulé, deux paquets de plumes de poulet)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac</td>
<td>Power object</td>
<td>71.1902.12.7</td>
<td>Iron, coagulated blood (Fer, sang coagulé)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac</td>
<td>Power object</td>
<td>71.1902.12.12</td>
<td>Earth, blood (Terre, sang)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac</td>
<td>Power object</td>
<td>71.1902.12.55</td>
<td>Iron, blood, animal hair (Fer, sang, poils)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac</td>
<td>Power object</td>
<td>71.1910.1.93</td>
<td>Wood, coagulated blood, beads (Bois, sang coagulé, perles)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac</td>
<td>Power object</td>
<td>71.1931.74.1091.1</td>
<td>Earth mixed with beeswax, coagulated blood, wood (Terre mêlée à de la cire d'abeille, sang coagulé, bois)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Orleans Museum of Art</td>
<td>Helmet mask</td>
<td>92.804</td>
<td>Wood; animal fur; porcupine quills; duiker, oribi, and roan antelope horns; feathers; mirror; sacrificial patina</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
creation and maintenance of power association arts, *blood* may refer to animal blood added to objects during particular events (fig. 2.19). I address the practice in greater detail in chapter 5. Here it is important to note that prior to sacrificing an animal, a specialist or his client must verbalize a reason for the sacrifice. The energy emitted through the animal’s blood when a specialist slits its throat sends the petitioner’s message from this world to the otherworld (cf. Strother 2000, 61–63). Karfa Coulibaly compared blood released during a sacrifice to gas that propels a motorcycle. The message, like the motorcycle, requires sufficient fuel to reach its destination. But recognition of blood incorporated into a power object does not suffice to determine the exact animals sacrificed or messages sent to the otherworld. Species identification through scientific analysis may seem to offer more information, but it still does not reveal important factors contributing to the selection of the particular animal.

The thickness and texture of an object’s surface layers suggest the presence of other matter. The terms *earth* or *mud*, which appear in some listings of materials incorporated in power association assemblages, may seem to identify thicker substances included in a layer. However, the terms do not capture specialists’ attentiveness to the exact kind of earth they may have added to their works or

Facing, **Figure 2.18.** Table of materials as listed on museums’ online records for select power association assemblages illustrated in this book. Online records accessed May 29, 2018, and October 26, 2020. Table based on a similar table compiled by Sarah Lindberg in her September 2016 report on the technical analysis of a helmet mask in the collection of the Michael C. Carlos Museum (1994.004.095). Design: Mark Addison Smith, 2021.

Above, **Figure 2.19.** Power objects absorbing fresh chicken blood in Karfa Coulibaly’s workroom. Sokouraba, Burkina Faso, August 2, 2013. Fieldwork image 2013–7466. Photo: Susan Elizabeth Gagliardi.
Seeing the Unseen

the complexity of the mixtures they create. Intangible yet significant features of power association assemblages make it clear that key details of the objects remain elusive, even when the works are subjected to technical studies.

Scientific analysis of the material composition of two power association helmet masks housed at the Fowler Museum at UCLA (X77.392 and X86.385) indicates that the ingredients in the crusty surfaces differ from layer to layer on the same helmet mask and from helmet mask to helmet mask. Working with conservator Ellen Pearlstein, Robin O’Hern identified three distinct layers in a sample taken from the applied surface of X77.392 and an uneven application of a mixture of plant fibers, red particles, and other materials in a sample taken from X86.385. Visual analysis further showed that the middle layer in samples from X77.392 comprised only plant fibers. Plant fibers appeared in other layers on the two helmet masks (O’Hern 2012; see also O’Hern et al. 2016). O’Hern’s findings coincide with field data indicating that plant matter constitutes an essential component of power association arts. Yet as I was writing this text, any reference to plant matter was conspicuously absent from most museums’ lists of materials in power association arts.

The physical presence of plant matter in surface layers of the two helmet masks at the Fowler Museum at UCLA matches statements of power association leaders I interviewed about the importance of plants to their activities. The specialists I interviewed also refused to elaborate on specific vegetal matter used in their work, leading me to conclude that identification of plants and methods of plant collection constitute some of the most restricted aspects of their knowledge (see also Gagliardi 2010, 157–158). Based on this information as well as her understanding that specific plant-fiber identification is not necessary to care for an object in a museum, O’Hern decided not to pursue plant-fiber identification even though it would have been possible for her to have done so (O’Hern 2012, 26–30, 47, 49; O’Hern et al. 2016, 77–79). The ability to access information does not on its own constitute a necessity or right to know.

Evidence exists to suggest historical precedent for the presence of plant matter in power association arts. Plant fibers speckled throughout the layers applied to the surface of a power object that a Dr. Bellamy, probably François Auguste Bellamy, donated in 1885 to the Trocadéro become evident upon close visual inspection of the object in a well-lit room. Two bundles of feathers and quills are attached to the top of the object. An animal horn in one of the bundles curves
away from the feathers and quills in that bundle (figs. 2.20–2.21). Bellamy characterizes the coating applied to this type of object as “reddish-brown” and explains it consists of “many magic ingredients” (1886, 81, 83, fig. 22). Bellamy’s general description may not recognize the intricacies of specialists’ knowledge of tangible materials and intangible energies, nor does it take into account that specialists may have isolated healing properties or other features of a given plant. But his description does at least acknowledge the composite nature of layers applied to power objects.

More recent observers of power associations in and beyond the three-corner region have noted the inclusion of plant matter and other materials in the organizations’ assemblages. They report the possible presence of materials including alcoholic beverages, bark, blood, claws, charred plant matter, chewed kola nut, cloth, cotton, excrement, feathers, gold, honey, horns, human placenta, human saliva, iron, leaves, millet, other metals, quills, resins, skulls, stones, tails, teeth, tusks, or wax. Extant museum documentation tends not to record the diversity of materials. Even if museums provided extensive lists of materials incorporated into power association objects in their collections, the documentation likely would not include other key details about the exact qualities of the matter added to a work or information about the specific procedures for handling the material before or during its addition to the work.

Observers’ descriptions of the kinds of gold and earth added to power association arts hint at factors that specialists consider when selecting certain materials. According to Sarah Brett-Smith, a sculptor familiar with power association arts whom she interviewed and identified as Kojugu Cissoko characterized gold placed within Komo helmet masks as “true, true, true gold” (Brett-Smith 1994, 138). Brett-Smith explains “true, true, true gold” comes from the ground and is not worked before its smelting. She also indicates that the process of smelting the gold required animal offerings (1994, 138). Jean-Paul Colleyn writes that earth integrated into boliw may come from certain places within or beyond a town such as “the oldest threshold, first well, crossroads, cemetery, oldest kitchen, [or] anthills located at the cardinal points of fields” (2009b, 40) or the soil may come from fresh graves (2009b, 42) or garbage heaps (2009b, 57). Colleyn also indicates that boliw may contain joints or bones from deceased power association leaders, thereby offering one possible explanation for the bones in boliw that Henry reported he found (see also Jespers 2001, 60). Other ingredients added
to power objects likely derive from specific sources with particular properties. After power objects are separated from their makers, such details may not be evident in the assemblages. And even when the objects’ makers still possess the objects, they may not divulge such details. Yet from their own exchanges with specialists and other experiences, power association audiences in western West Africa are familiar with the idea that particular properties inhere in different kinds of earth, metals, textiles, or other matter incorporated into the organizations’ assemblages but beyond most people’s sight.

**Pursuits of Knowledge and Materials**

Without specific information about when, where, why, or how particular power association arts were created, it is difficult to determine when, where, why, or how exactly their production has changed or stayed consistent across space and time. And without specific information about the particular individuals or contexts involved in a work’s making, it is impossible to determine whether or to what extent a work was created by or for a power association leader or if it was made for another client or patron. Still, the extant corpus of power association arts in Europe and North America acquired since the end of the nineteenth century as well as photographs of power association arts and other documentation indicate that people involved in the creation of arts linked to Komo, Kono, and other power associations have looked at and engaged with the work of their predecessors, colleagues, and competitors or have interpreted what they cannot know in order to meet their own needs. They have often exploited similar materials and employed similar methods as their predecessors. But the specific configurations of materials and exact methods of making vary, yielding novel combinations designed within different contexts and for varied audiences.

Specialists I interviewed in western Burkina Faso insisted that no object sparks action on its own. Power objects are tools that specialists use to concentrate potent materials and energies in order to effect change. Komo leader Yaya Bangali stressed that the power of an object depends on the education and skill of its owner. A successful power association leader—or rather one deemed powerful, or tárá ṣówá in the Senufo Sícité language—knows which materials are necessary to construct an object likewise considered tárá ṣówá. Makers of power association arts have placed a premium on acquiring difficult-to-obtain
materials from distant locales and incorporating the matter into their arts. The materials signal specialists’ vast interpersonal networks and access to scarce resources. They also advertise specialists’ expert knowledge and skill without disclosing significant details.

Industrial paint applied to the surface of a Komo helmet mask that Diamitani photographed in western Burkina Faso in 1997 may reflect preference for a material that viewers in the rural towns where Diamitani worked would have immediately recognized as costly (see Diamitani 2008, 15, fig. 1). Similarly, the incorporation of wineglass stems in a helmet mask now housed at the DMA suggests that someone involved in the work’s construction sought to add to it materials that would have been rare in rural West African farming communities at the time. Placement of the circular bases of the glasses above the helmet mask’s maw also transform the glass from the bottoms of drinking vessels to eyes (fig. 2.22).

Anne-Marie Traoré told me that power association leaders and other specialists devote significant time and resources to the continual elaboration of assemblages they construct and maintain. Traoré, the Burundi-born Catholic wife of Mélégué Traoré, a prominent politician and international diplomat based in Burkina Faso’s capital city in the early 2000s, may seem far removed from power associations, organizations prevalent in rural towns in the three-corner region. However, at the time, Mélégué Traoré and his brothers presided over one of the most prominent Kono chapters in the area, and Anne-Marie Traoré was aware of her husband’s work with Kono. During an interview, Mélégué Traoré told me that wherever in the world his studies or work have brought him, he always returned to Bougoula, his hometown, to attend his family’s Kono festivities. He recalled once leaving a meeting at the United Nations headquarters in New York, flying through Paris, landing in Ouagadougou, and then driving the next day to Bougoula for a Kono event. The juxtaposition of the United Nations and a local power association chapter may seem incongruous when viewed from a distant perspective. Yet Traoré maintained he is perfectly at home in both contexts. His wife also has experience with at least one Kono chapter. She told me that power association leaders at times travel far distances to procure diverse or rare matter. When added to assemblages and installations, the materials render their constructions more effective as tools specialists can use to meet their own needs and the needs of their clients. As power association leaders and other specialists refine their knowledge, acquire new materials, and bolster their authority,
they aim to sharpen their tools and increase their abilities to accomplish their goals. They also engage with more local and more distant audiences.

Small yellow beads wrapped around one end of an accumulative work with a pointed tip and long handle distinguish the assemblage from other power association arts in European and American collections (fig. 2.23). The beads may reflect a specialist’s desire to incorporate materials from a distant place into the power object. In a July 1910 article, Fr. de Zeltner explains that local guards confiscated the object from Nama power association leaders in a town near Bamako. Zeltner donated the object and two other accumulative works seized at the same time to the Trocadéro, purportedly saving them from destruction by fire. He notes that the three objects resemble six other objects that a member of a Nama chapter in the town of Nioumala in the cercle of Kita showed him. According to Zeltner, leaders of Nama guarded knowledge of the objects’ fabrication. However, Zeltner speculates that the dark surface matter on the three assemblages consists of tar or pitch (Zeltner 1910). He offers little other information about the accumulative sculptures or the materials of their making, including the beads. But in the past, beads arrived from elsewhere and circulated on the African continent through expansive trade networks. By the early twentieth century, as in the early twenty-first century, materials from faraway places may have appealed to makers of power association arts. The use of industrial paint, broken wineglasses, and beads in different power association assemblages hints at the willingness of makers, who probably worked in different places, in different moments, and for different clients, to combine disparate and unique materials, some from more or less distant locales, in order to create distinctive assemblages.

Power association leaders draw on the knowledge they acquire and materials they obtain from near and far to individualize and personalize the objects they create. A history of power association arts would trace how specific objects relate to each other, and it would elucidate when, where, why, and how certain creators modified or otherwise innovated upon materials or methods of the arts’ making. The lack of such written histories may reflect the indirectness, ambiguity, and secrecy at the core of power associations and their arts rather than a lack of dynamic interaction and change over time. Western Burkinabe power association leaders have reported since 2004 that they exchange ideas with other specialists. They attend events that their colleagues and their competitors sponsor. And they have modified practices based on other specialists’ activities.

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For example, Karfa Coulibaly explained that he consulted with a specialist from another town to add fire to his performances. In the early 2000s, people across western Burkina Faso commonly identified fire performances with the power association known as Wara. Coulibaly, who studied Kono and who maintains an assemblage he calls *dahaba*, decided that he wanted to learn how to work with fire but did not want to invest in establishing a Wara chapter. Eager to expand his performance possibilities and his abilities to work with dangerous energies, Coulibaly sought assistance from other experts and worked with his apprentices to teach them the skill.\textsuperscript{35}

Power association leaders acquire difficult-to-obtain materials, including rare metals, animal bones, and animal quills, to add to their accumulative works.\textsuperscript{36} They have included animal horns and quills in their works since before 1885, when Bellamy donated the previously described work to the Trocadéro. In order to gather the materials, a specialist must know how to hunt successfully or know where to find skilled hunters willing to provide the relatively rare and desirable materials. The late sculptor-blacksmith Ninjalé Traoré, from the western Burkinabe town of Bama, told me he knew how to carve and prepare accumulative power association helmet masks, but he also said that he needed to acquire materials from hunters in order to add elements to the works.\textsuperscript{37} Hunters, like leaders of Komo, Kono, Nama, Wara, and other power associations, gain skills and knowledge through years of apprenticeship and study. Hunters also form their own associations, and they invest in powerful accumulative arts.\textsuperscript{38}

Another possibility, given the existence of specialized markets where vendors sell botanical matter and animal parts, is that makers of power association arts travel to such markets to acquire materials. Specialists I interviewed did not emphasize the availability of supplies for power objects in markets. But even if a specialist were to obtain materials in a market, he would still acquire the potent matter from people with the know-how necessary to gather and sell the difficult-to-obtain resources. Procurement procedures contribute to the potency of materials incorporated into power objects, and creators of the works may prefer to obtain matter on their own or from trusted purveyors. Knowledge of the intricate processes and specific elements integral to the design of each work often rests with the object’s maker or makers. Consequently, labels and other presentations of an object in a European or American museum can never recapture such precise and important information.
Animal fragments incorporated into power association arts come from the defenses of some of the most dangerous, difficult, and prized animals that hunters track and kill. According to the late hunter Seriba Coulibaly, a hunters’ association chapter in his town obtained porcupine quills for their masks from his brother, who was deceased at the time of our interview but had been a skilled porcupine hunter who had learned how to enter a hole in the ground and emerge from it with a porcupine in hand. Not everybody knows how to kill a porcupine and remove its quills without personal injury. Game depletion in and beyond the three-corner region in recent decades may have also contributed to a decline of hunters’ abilities to track and kill animals, making animal fragments even tougher to obtain. Whether they know how to hunt or gather potent materials from other sources, makers of power association arts must rely on their own abilities as well as the competence and trustworthiness of people they know locally and in distant or diverse communities in order to acquire materials needed to create objects they use to advance their goals.

Power association leaders dedicate significant time and resources to acquiring, testing, and refining their knowledge. They also work to develop and sustain their professional networks. Some specialists cover considerable distances to meet with and learn from other experts. When they want to acquire wooden armatures to construct helmet masks, power association leaders must know how to carve wood into the desired form or locate people who have learned how to carve armatures for helmet masks. Power association leaders in western Burkina Faso reported that they commissioned the armatures from select blacksmiths with the necessary skills. While many blacksmiths in the area made stools, kitchen goods, farming implements, and other everyday items from wood in the early 2000s, only a few sculptor-blacksmiths seemed to know how to carve wooden helmet mask armatures.

Power association leaders may prefer to rely on personal networks to procure the knowledge and materials they need for their work, and their networks may extend beyond any single organization. In 2004, Karfa Coulibaly identified the late Bè Coulibaly as the only blacksmith then living in the town of Sokouraba equipped to carve helmet mask armatures. The two Coulibalys lived in separate neighborhoods and did not specify any family ties between them. Other blacksmiths worked in the town, and some of them carved wooden objects. Nobody ever acknowledged to me that the other blacksmiths carved helmet mask armatures. When I interviewed Bè Coulibaly, he told me that he
had converted to Islam sometime before the mid-1960s and never belonged to a power association. His comment suggests that not every sculptor-blacksmith who carves wooden helmet mask armatures necessarily belongs to Komo, Kono, or another power association.

Sculptor-blacksmiths and their patrons deliberately shroud processes of commissioning, production, and acquisition in secrecy. Patrons safeguard the names of sculptor-blacksmiths with whom they work to protect the carvers from individuals who may desire to harm the sculptor-blacksmiths involved in the making of tools that could help specialists achieve aims contrary to the individuals’ own ambitions. Karfa Coulibaly stressed that he and his colleagues exercise caution and strive to protect the carvers they employ from people who might seek revenge on the sculptor-blacksmiths who create wooden armatures that specialists transform into power objects to use in their campaigns against violence. The late Kono leader Moukanitien Traoré expressed a preference for similar discretion. Therefore, in order to commission a wooden armature necessary for a helmet mask, a power association leader must know a suitable carver or someone willing to supply a reference to one of the few sculptor-blacksmiths in the area able to carve a helmet mask armature. The leader must then negotiate a commission orally through a process that conceals many details. As they develop expertise, power association leaders seek to position themselves advantageously within a network of people who will facilitate their access to essential knowledge and materials.

Significant aspects of patronage in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century western Burkina Faso become clearer when viewed alongside classic studies of patronage in fifteenth-century Italy. In a generative social history of art, Michael Baxandall refers to a fifteenth-century Italian painting as “the deposit of a social relationship” (1972, 1). The concept also applies to power association arts that serve as loci of sophisticated interpersonal exchanges required for the works’ creation and use. Written contracts regarding the production of art in fifteenth-century Italy include the names of the parties involved in an agreement, the type of work to be executed, the quality and type of materials to be used, and the terms of payment; notaries’ signatures often sealed the documents (O’Malley 2005, 4–9). However, the contractual details surfaced in Italian sources are conspicuously absent from oral accounts of contemporary power association commissions. Power association leaders deliberately obscure specifics as they construct and maintain the arts, thereby shaping audience response to the works they sponsor.
A dynamic assemblage created for a power association chapter reflects the extent of the knowledge and networks a specialist has built over time. And while power association leaders and other specialists want people to see that they have acquired abundant knowledge and developed vast networks, they vigilantly guard against indiscriminate sharing of expertise with untrustworthy people. These characteristics of present-day power associations that I have observed in western Burkina Faso since 2004 coincide with Zeltner’s observations about protecting knowledge based on his pre–July 1910 observations in an area located several hundreds of miles west of Sokouraba. Jealous, malicious-minded, unsuitable, or inept people who gain powerful information could use it to mislead or undermine the very protection and success that power association leaders and other specialists seek for themselves and their families, communities, and clients. Consequently, most specialists prefer to work with counterparts and objects they know well (see also McNaughton 1979a, 29). They also recognize that objects that appear similar may actually differ significantly in terms of how and with what they were made. Specialists choose not to risk injury or illness that may result from a lack of precise knowledge concerning methods and materials used in the manufacture of a particular object.45

A specialist’s diligence, curiosity, reputation, and networks of trusted colleagues and clients result in the production of potent power objects. Proprietors of the detailed knowledge necessary to build and maintain power objects mete out information to apprentices and other students desirous to learn from them once the learners have earned the experts’ confidence. The specialists carefully survey how students in pursuit of powerful knowledge observe their environment and master instruction. Students, especially those seeking to acquire and manage their own power objects, remain attentive as they slowly seek to learn how to create power objects and assert their own authority. The process lasts years or even a lifetime and requires students to canvass mentors and other respected experts.46 As students develop relationships with senior specialists, they gain access to greater knowledge and materials needed to construct compelling power objects. In their efforts to hone their skills and distinguish themselves from colleagues and rivals, emerging and established specialists commit themselves to the ongoing pursuit of knowledge and materials.47

Only the most accomplished and revered specialists attempt to construct power objects with the most powerful and evocative materials and energies.
Careless, incompetent, or negligent use of materials and energies can court dangerous rivalries and incite devastation. Power association leaders and other specialists use the arts to declare visually the extent of their knowledge and skill and thus their capacities to render change. Specialists harness the multisensory potential of their ever-changing arts to distinguish themselves and advertise their abilities in order to attract and serve clients as well as protect themselves from jealous competitors. Yet specialists must also respect the limits of their expertise. Specialists who doubt or want to challenge their competitors’ abilities may seek to duel with their rivals in ways not always visible to spectators. As we saw in the previous chapter, competition between two collaborators—Touba Ouattara and Bembélé Traoré—reportedly prompted each man to launch an invisible lethal weapon at his opponent.

When audiences encounter power association arts, they may catch a glimpse of an object but glean little about the constituent elements or contexts of making. They may hear about the work a specialist accomplished without learning all the details or become aware of a particular conflict without being privy to all its contours. The arts bear witness to activities and knowledge beyond sight but not beyond perception.

**Precision and Ambiguity**

Specialists create power objects as three-dimensional forms that demand physical reactions. Whether experienced as static objects within their owners’ private spaces, as the focus of significant events, or as masks moving in performance, the works engage their viewers and exact bodily responses. Indeed, power association leaders and other specialists have for more than a century been responsible for the creation of assemblages and installations that place the material qualities of their work in the foreground and, in so doing, shape audiences’ reception.

Pointy materials abound in power association constructions. Pointed tips of rigid animal quills and an animal horn are visible on the power object Bellamy gave to the Trocadéro in 1885 (fig. 2.20). The maker of an assemblage Archinard donated to the same museum in 1902 shaped metal to evoke the pointed tip of an animal horn, a projection that an animal uses for its defense (fig. 2.9). The object with yellow beads wrapped around one end that Zeltner presented to the Trocadéro in 1910 features a pointed tip and two pointed animal horns (fig. 2.23). Pointy
horns and bird beaks adorn the two helmet masks at the Met (figs. 2.15–2.16). And Karfa Coulibaly positioned a sharp knife next to his dahaba assemblage when I photographed it in his workroom in 2012 (fig. 2.7). Power association leaders also incorporate pointy materials in the buildings they erect for the chapters they lead. In May 2007, spiky branches surrounded the pointed roof of the house Coulibaly constructed for his dahaba assemblage. Sharp metal rods stood on the vestibule wall and in the ground next to the entrance (fig. 2.24).

When specialists incorporate claws, horns, quills, and tusks as well as knives, scythes, and other sharp tools in their assemblages and installations, they advertise their abilities to use the accumulated materials in their efforts to meet their own and their clients’ needs. Coulibaly explained that he constructs


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particularly dangerous power objects known as *korti* (pl.; *kort*, sg.) with pointed materials so the sharp ends penetrate.\(^49\) Coulibaly told me on another occasion that animal horns and porcupine quills added to Komo and Kono helmet masks enhance chances for success.\(^50\) Coulibaly also said that he and his colleagues add porcupine quills to helmet masks in order to render the objects powerful or *fāriyā*.\(^51\) He explained that porcupine quills, like knives, are sharp and can pierce their targets (see also McNaughton 1982b, 58).\(^52\) At times, Coulibaly adds porcupine quills to his assemblages and installations in order to meet a client’s specific needs with speed and with exactitude.\(^53\) Sharp points make
visual reference to the idea that specialists work with precision to attain their goals.

Quills in power association assemblages and installations may also remind viewers of the animals that once wore them. Aly Traoré, a younger hunter in the town of Kangala when I interviewed him, said porcupines are dangerous, but the animals also alert other creatures to danger. He referred specifically to the quills that porcupines use to defend themselves from approaching predators. People who, like Traoré, associate the animals with danger and recognize porcupine quills in an assemblage or installation may associate the construction with the danger they understand the animal portends or the approaching danger the animal signals. They may recognize difficulties associated with procuring quills from the animals sporting them. As photographer Agnès Pataux’s 2008 portrait of Nangounian Coulibaly, a specialist in the town of Kankalaba, Burkina Faso, demonstrates, porcupine quills added to a construction attract the eye (fig. 2.25) (Pataux 2010, 89, 164). But the quills, like porcupines themselves, threaten onlookers and deter them from approaching too closely.

Other specialists I interviewed highlighted the pointy-ness of materials they incorporate into assemblages and installations. When I brought the prominent hunter-musician Adoulaye Traoré a photograph of him performing in his hometown of Sokouraba for the United States ambassador to Burkina Faso, Traoré was not pleased that the pointed tips at the top of his hat had been cropped from the image (fig. 2.26). His critique stands alone. Most recipients of photographs I had selected for printing in the United States commented on the clarity of the images and otherwise responded enthusiastically. Traoré’s admonition intrigued me, and I inquired several times about the reason for his displeasure. Traoré opted not to elaborate. He told me simply that the image was not good.

Although Traoré did not specify what he disliked, I realized he may have wished the picture had included the pointed tips at the top of his hat. The photograph clipped the pointed tips from the visual field, dulling the image as an

expression of his power and status. When audiences of power association arts see pointed materials, they may sense the potential for those materials to pierce, although their ability to discern the precise nature of such materials wavers. In arts that promote a specialist’s expertise in responding effectively to different circumstances in people’s lives without giving away their methods for doing so, pointed materials proliferate and are evidently intended both to engage and to menace the spectator.

The second time I asked Adoulaye Traoré to explain why horns on his hat should not have been cropped out of his image, he repeated something he had previously told me. He had mounted warthog tusks and not animal horns to the cap. He said he had attached the tusks to the hat so the ends would point upward to evoke animal horns rather than tusks. Traoré’s visual transformation of tusks into horns and his insistence on incorporating pointed materials into the assemblage suggest that specialists, like makers of art in other places and other times, choose materials to create illusions as well as provoke tactile and other bodily responses (cf. Roberts). Tusks adjusted to appear as horns, like metal shaped to resemble the tip of an animal’s horn or the outline of a knife shifting in and out of focus beneath layers of accumulated matter, reveal specialists’ ambitions to alter materials and play with perception.

Specificity, ambiguity, and oscillation between the two characterize power association assemblages, installations, and architecture. Some materials specialists incorporate into their constructions appear readily discernible to casual observers, whereas other elements escape even the most penetrating gazes (see also McNaughton 1979a, 43–44; 1988, 143–144; Brett-Smith 1997, 79). The inability of others to identify all the materials and methods marshaled to create an accumulative work protects its makers and the people who manage it from adversaries who aim to undo or redirect potent energies concentrated in an object. As a result, often only the specialist responsible for a work as well as perhaps his instructors and closest, most trusted confidants know the exact components of a construction or processes of its assembly. When audiences witness powerful arts, they may glimpse certain elements and identify methods of production that also simultaneously conceal more important materials and procedures. This “denial of accessibility,” as Megan O’Neil (2009, 120) calls it in her study of the seen and unseen in ancient Maya
sculptures, “[highlights] the power that lay at the boundary between visibility and invisibility.”

Thick encrustations of indeterminate materials obscure bundles of powerful materials, hollowed-out horns contain potent medicines, cotton cloths are steeped in plant-infused baths, and certain power objects are smoked with vegetal material. Looking at a photograph of a power association helmet mask in the collection of the New Orleans Museum of Art, Moukanitien Traoré referred to each bundle as a korti, thus implying that each bundle contained dangerous matter and energies (fig. 2.27).\(^5\) Karfa Coulibaly referred to smoking Kono and Komo objects with plants.\(^6\) Lamissa Bangali similarly explained that soaking clothes Komo and Kono members wear in performance in a vegetal bath adds power to the garments.\(^7\) Indeed, absorption imbibes objects with power, an idea Sarah Brett-Smith has examined in her study of textiles and assemblages produced in present-day Mali (Brett-Smith 2001, 2014; see also McNaughton 2009). However, access to details of the processes necessary for creating any of a variety of effective medicines or to exact recipes for dyeing cotton or smoking other objects remains restricted due to specialists’ attentiveness to the consequences the abuse of potent knowledge could unleash.

Makers’ methods of procuring materials and treating certain powerful objects often leave no visible trace. Karfa Coulibaly explained that specialists learn an array of procedures to acquire plant matter, and their methods vary even when they work with the same type of plant. Their exact plans for the materials they collect inform their procedures in each instance. To illustrate his point, he said that when he gathers plant matter for a certain power object, he undresses before he approaches the plant to collect the necessary materials. For a different power object, he remains clothed as he gathers what he needs. Coulibaly added that he utters a few words before he begins. He emphasized that the plant matter specialists collect and their methods for obtaining it contribute directly to the effectiveness or potency of a power object. But such processes do not physically mark the materials Coulibaly uses or the objects he constructs.\(^8\)

Power association audiences in the three-corner region remain acutely aware of the unknown or deliberately hidden in power association arts. They recognize that in addition to studying flora, fauna, minerals, and other matter

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extensively, specialists spend years learning methods to create potent three-dimensional arts. Specialists acknowledge their audiences and aim to draw attention to their abilities to harness their expertise in order to heal or cause harm. They exploit the tension between the knowable and seen aspects of their arts and features that remain unknowable and unseen. They work to create assemblages, installations, and architecture that, through the very act of witnessing them, highlight materials and methods their audiences cannot see (cf. Malé 1999, 50).
Audiences constantly shift between seeing and not seeing when they encounter power objects. In Secrecy: African Art that Conceals and Reveals, Nooter [Roberts] explains, “As Georg Simmel writes, a secret always has two faces: the knowledge of its existence and its unknown content” (Nooter [Roberts] 1993, 49; see also Simmel 1906). She and other authors contributing to the volume investigate how arts from different places on the African continent reflect the secret ownership of knowledge, the transmission of restricted knowledge, and the boundary-making nature of secrecy. But when audiences encounter a “strip-tease of hidden presence,” as Taussig quips, or the oscillation between seeing and not seeing, they experience more than an announcement of secret ownership, a statement about graded levels of knowledge, or the boundary erected around a secret. Rather, audiences experience an ever-wavering possibility of revelation as well as boundless hidden presence.

Any power association assemblage, installation, building, or performance does not exist as a specific entity separate from other assemblages, installations, buildings, or performances, so no single work can contain all the secrets of a single association or a single power association chapter. A specialist’s collection of potent objects may reinforce the energy concentrated in other objects, even if all the objects are not in close proximity. Boundaries among different works thus become ambiguous. According to Do Ouattara, his father, Touba Ouattara, carried a portable power object with him when he traveled to France, Madagascar, Senegal, and Tunisia in the late 1930s and early 1940s as a soldier in a regiment of the Tirailleurs Sénégalais du Niger at the time of the Second World War. The power object was related to other objects the soldier left in western Burkina Faso. After Touba Ouattara returned to his hometown of Sokouraba at the end of the war, the elder Ouattara became a redoubtable Komo leader. The object the elder Ouattara carried with him belonged to a collection of objects that had afforded him protection during a precarious time. He built on that success, investing in the construction and maintenance of more power objects to help him and his clients achieve his and their goals.

Formal characteristics of power association arts reflect the interrelation among different works at different scales. Smaller power objects assume the shapes of larger helmet masks, and buildings constructed to house them resemble the objects’ forms. The power object Bellamy donated to the Trocadéro (fig. 2.20) and one of the assemblages Zeltner gave to the same museum...
(fig. 2.23) display a tripartite structure similar to the structure of power association helmet masks, yet they are too small for adult performers to wear on their heads as caps. Other power objects likewise evoke helmet mask forms (see also Imperato 2009, 181, figs. 3.10, 3.14). The dark, crusty surfaces of helmet masks recall the indeterminate matter of power objects. While the wearable size of helmet masks suggests that power association members wear them to dance, some helmet masks may never be worn in performance. In form and substance, a single accumulative work refers to other complex works, thus rendering boundaries between works unclear.

Power association architecture similarly evokes the assemblages and installations related to it. Erected by power association leaders and their colleagues, buildings for power association chapters are accumulative structures that contain potent materials, including assemblages and installations that a chapter’s leader constructs and maintains. Pointed roofs on circular houses connected to rectangular vestibules echo the domes and maws of power association helmet masks (fig. 2.24). Designed to resonate with multiple forms and resist any single referent, power association assemblages, installations, and buildings tempt audiences with full revelation. Evidently never contained within any single work, the associations’ secrets defy full revelation. Objects divorced from their original contexts of creation and use become dislocated fragments of a larger whole, no longer wieldable as they had once been. The dislocation amplifies the objects’ indeterminacy for people who view them in museum galleries or private collections.

**Variant Forms and Indefinite Perspectives**

The dahaba that Karfa Coulibaly constructed around a pottery tower assumes diverse forms and demands different types of viewing when staged in different environments. Men, women, and children can see it. By focusing on Coulibaly’s presentation of his dahaba on several different occasions, we can begin to imagine how other assemblages and installations vary and how audiences’ views of them may also change. *Dahaba* is a generic term that refers to the earthenware vessel at the core of Coulibaly’s construction; it does not appear to name a particular power association. But as Coulibaly studied and worked with Kono in the past, his knowledge of Kono informs his work with dahaba. Coulibaly also maintains connections with leaders of Kono, Wara, and other power associations. As
previously explained, he sought to incorporate fire-wielding techniques associated with Wara into his own performances. Coulibaly’s practice demonstrates that even the boundaries of a single organization can blur.

After one of my first meetings with Coulibaly in August 2004, he carried his dahaba outside so I could photograph him with it (fig. 2.28). A cluster of animal skulls hangs from a three-pronged implement driven into the ground over the vertical axis of the assemblage, more than doubling the height of the pottery tower. Coulibaly holds a long knife in his right hand and a speckled chicken in his left over the construction, a gesture suggestive of the earlier sacrifice that the chicken feathers visible on top of the construction imply. A second, shorter knife balances on top of a pile of portable power objects.

In the 2004 photograph, Karfa Coulibaly poses with some of the most piercing displays of power for the foreign researcher who asked to photograph him. Coulibaly’s young adult son and apprentice, Kléyéré Coulibaly, crouches behind his father and holds a power object similar to others piled in the large pottery fragment. With his frank gaze, Karfa Coulibaly engages the camera and thus his audience. Indeed, power association leaders and other specialists wield the arts to capture the attention of disparate audiences within ever-different contexts. They create variant forms as circumstances for working with their assemblages and installations shift. People move around the constructions during performances and other events, and audiences’ views of the works constantly change.

At times, specialists create materials-dense assemblages and installations that accent tension between the material specificity and indeterminacy of their works. Continual restaging contributes to the tension. A 2006 photograph of Coulibaly’s dahaba shows a profusion of materials that overwhelms the beholder (fig. 2.29). A tapered tower of locally created pottery forms a central axis. Feathers, quills, a variety of other sharp implements, a mass of portable power objects in a large pottery fragment, bands of locally woven cotton, and other elements combine in an expansive work.

In a single instance of its display as well as over time, the assemblage’s visual appearance fluctuates. Other photographs show that its composition defies a sense of stability or stasis. Coulibaly rearranges, adds to, and subtracts from the pottery tower as he works, and the construction grows or deteriorates between instances. As materials of the dahaba’s manufacture merge into its surrounding
environments, the work’s physical limits become indeterminate. In its July 11, 2006, presentation, a cluster of animal skulls positioned on the wall above the top of the pottery tower effectively lengthens the central core vertically. Knotted ropes hanging down from the skulls above accentuate the vertical axis. A band of locally woven cotton stretches somewhat tautly across the pottery tower and extends the assemblage horizontally. The large pottery fragment holding a mass of portable power objects in the crowded workroom pushes the installation into the viewer’s space.

The staging of Coulibaly’s assemblage also changes over time, sometimes gradually and sometimes dramatically. The assemblage looks different on July 22, 2007 (fig. 2.30). No longer contained by the somewhat taut band of locally woven cotton, the form of the pottery tower emerges more clearly. The whitened base anchors the work. The vertical axis still extends above the central tower. However, the skulls do not achieve this effect. Rather, what seems like a tattered cloth hangs from the low roof in a building then recently constructed to house Coulibaly’s dahaba. The large pottery fragment holding the pile of portable power objects rests to the side of the pottery tower. A yellow but also rusty tin can for Nestlé Nido powdered milk adds brightness to the scene in the photograph.

Weather, atmosphere, and placement alter the light around Coulibaly’s dahaba. Coulibaly moves his assemblage and reworks it for public performances. On March 26, 2006, and again on May 6, 2007, Coulibaly sponsored overnight performances and public sacrifices. For the 2007 event, Coulibaly placed his dahaba outside—roughly in the same spot he had positioned it for the 2004 photograph—where it served as the focus of activities. Photographs taken at different moments reveal dramatic aesthetic changes that Coulibaly generated publicly with the help of his colleagues over the span of a few hours. For example,

![Figure 2.30](image-url)
Facing, **FIGURE 2.32.** Unrecorded performers working with fire around the Coulibaly *dahaba* in the courtyard of Karfa Coulibaly during the first phase of a performance. Sokouraba, Burkina Faso, May 6, 2007. Detail of fieldwork image: 2007–7444. Photo: Susan Elizabeth Gagliardi.

a white powdery substance delimits a circle around the assemblage (fig. 2.31). The composition resembles its previous instances, yet porcupine quills, a knife, feathers, and other indeterminate matter have been added and cover the uppermost pot on the tower, preventing access to the assemblage’s central core.

Shortly thereafter, Coulibaly and his colleagues began to perform around the dahaba with fire (fig. 2.32). The composition became more illegible with the red glow of fire, and it shifted from an assemblage that pierces to one covered with burning cinders. Men, women, and children watched as Coulibaly, his colleagues, and their apprentices wielded fire and danced around the dahaba, which was covered in red-hot embers. The next day, Coulibaly and his colleagues performed a number of animal sacrifices over the composition (fig. 2.33). Coulibaly presided over an event during which women played music energetically. The assemblage that had glowed the night before grew with the addition of animal blood, feathers, locally brewed beer, expectorated kola nut, and other materials.

The changes Karfa Coulibaly makes to his dahaba reflect deliberate decisions grounded in extensive knowledge and based on specific circumstances. The ever-changing assemblage evinces an expansive repertoire of materials and methods that Coulibaly has acquired and continued to acquire in order to protect himself and his family, serve his clients, and effect change. However, Coulibaly, like his colleagues and artists or specialists anywhere, guards many of the details of his creative process even when working before large audiences. Spectators not privy to the same knowledge can catch sight of his work in small interior spaces or large exterior spaces. But they never completely see how and with what the entire assemblage is formed and reformed. They also never see how exactly the assemblage connects to other objects, installations, buildings, people, and places.

When, in the twentieth century, Goldwater and other art enthusiasts in Europe and North America sought to classify power association arts as Bamana and to distinguish the arts of one power association from the arts of another organization on the basis of form, the connoisseurs sought to recover West African contexts for the objects’ production and use. But their efforts reflected European and American preconceptions and led them to gloss over complex conceptual understandings of the arts that people in West Africa have sponsored
for more than a century and likely even longer. It may be impossible to trace particular histories of modification and replication, given a dearth of documentation about the people and circumstances involved in any work’s construction or that work’s relationship to other power association arts. However, museums’ collections and observers’ accounts of the organizations’ arts offer some clues.

Close analyses of extant documentation combined with careful listening to contemporary power association leaders and their audiences indicate that rather than cling to rigid categories, power associations and the organizations’ arts have long transcended borders. Networks of power association leaders traverse cultural, ethnic, linguistic, religious, and geopolitical boundaries. The organizations and their arts elude other efforts to classify them. For example, horns, quills, and bundles of indeterminate matter may cover Kono helmet masks as well as Komo helmet masks. A single object exists not alone, but rather in connection to other assemblages, installations, and architecture, so an infantryman was able to travel from his hometown in present-day Burkina Faso to France, Madagascar, Senegal, and Tunisia, carrying with him a power object connected to a mass of power objects at home. And a specialist can study with a celebrated Kono leader and learn new techniques from a Wara leader while maintaining neither a Kono chapter nor a Wara chapter.

Flux and indeterminacy characterize assemblages, installations, and architecture that power association leaders and other specialists construct and maintain. Any work is connected to other works as well as particular sounds and performances, making it impossible to uncover restricted contents or knowledge at the core of any single construction. And even when someone tears into a work as Henry reportedly did, the physical presence of certain materials does not necessarily reveal important details surrounding their collection or assembly. Details of any work reflect the ever-changing knowledge and skills of the work’s makers in a particular place and in a particular moment. As specialists gather together tangible materials and intangible energies into a single object and a collection of objects, they create a phenomenon that is greater than the sum of its parts and also indivisible into separate elements.

Specialists use arts they construct and maintain to engage their audiences. They maximize tension between seeing and not seeing, reminding audiences
again and again of hidden presences. Audiences recognize the tension as well as the impossibility of full revelation. While this chapter has focused on the interplay among makers of three-dimensional works, their audiences, and the works themselves, it has hinted at performative contexts linked to the accumulative arts. In the next two chapters, we will examine how the seen and unseen operate in power association performances.