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Scrofulous Sogolon • Museum of World Cultures in Barcelona • Senufo Art and Identity • Kuba Textiles • The Travels of Augustus Earle

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# TRIBAL ART



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# Scrofulous SOGOLON

## Scanning the Sunjata Epic

*By Anne-Marie Bouttiaux and Marc Ghysels*





*Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order. At least spare us their morality when we write.*

Michel Foucault<sup>1</sup>

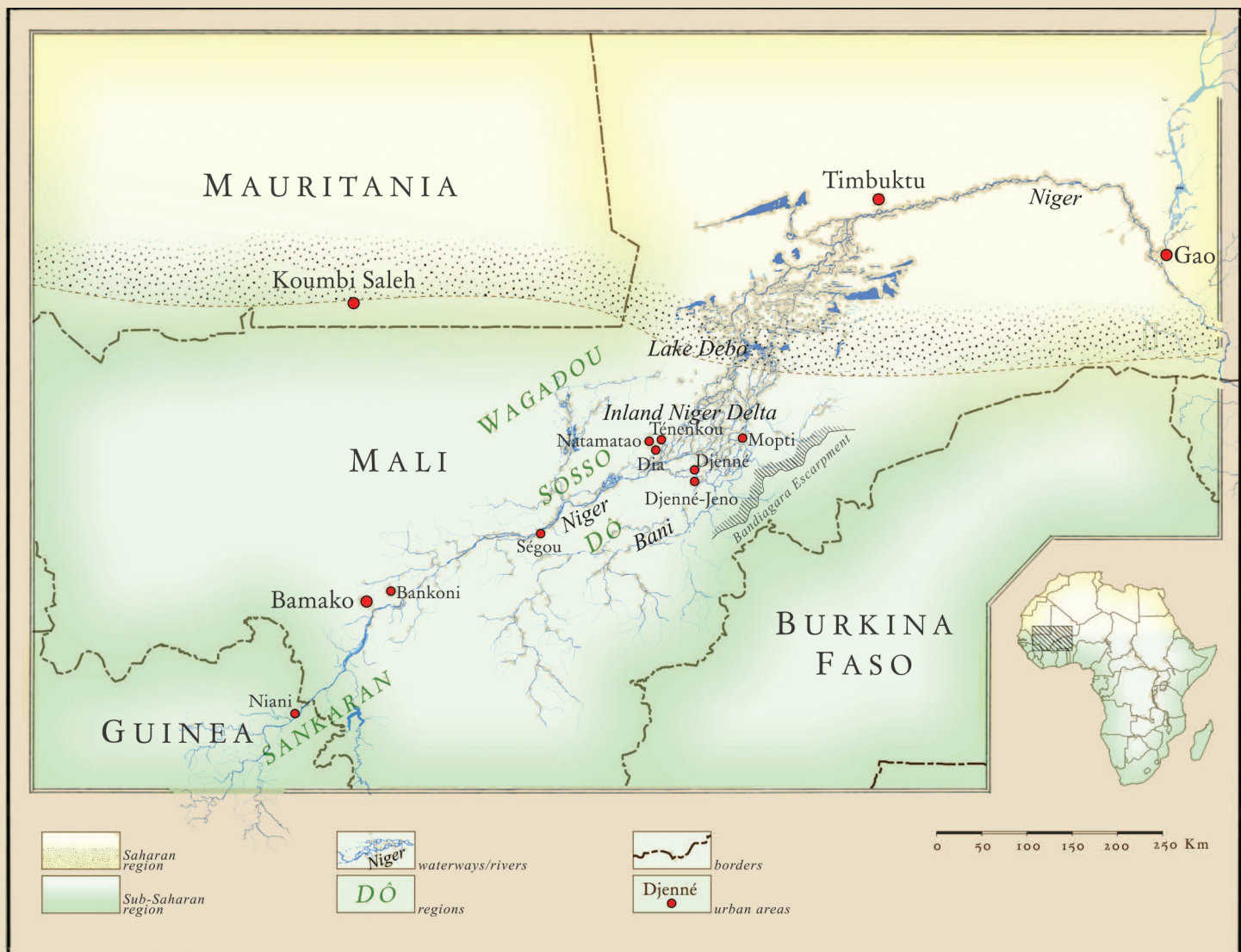
Over the last forty years or so, central Mali and, more specifically, the Inland Niger Delta have supplied the Western art market with hundreds of terracotta figures obtained through clandestine excavations. These so-called “Djenne” archaeological objects, most of which are figurative and date from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century, are now in museum and private collections. The lack of scientific data about their original context has led to considerable guesswork about just what they represent. To remedy this deficiency, we have called on Mande oral tradition that preserves the knowledge of the region as well as upon medical imaging to attempt an interpretation of some of these artworks.

FIG. 1: Female figure. Inland Niger Delta (IND) region, Mali. 13th–15th century.  
Terracotta with ochre/red slip.  
H: 37.5 cm.  
Ex Dr. Pierre Harter.  
Musée du Quai Branly, Paris, inv. 73.1991.0.39.  
© Musée du Quai Branly; Scala, Florence. Photo: Patrick Gries/Bruno Descoings.

MAP: Inland Niger Delta region.  
© Tribal Art magazine/Frederic Cloth.

## Reversing the Curse

This article is not yet another paper on “Djenne” terracotta sculptures in that it does not seek to add to the ongoing and relevant discussion about the pillaging of Malian artworks.<sup>2</sup> Nor does it relate to archaeological research, another field in which many writers have exercised their talents, especially in the wake of the few official excavations that have been carried out in Mali.<sup>3</sup> We are not trying to compete with those studies, which sparked our curiosity but left us surprisingly dissatisfied. This disappointment came not from the inadequacy of the published work but from the deep-seated conviction that something more could be learned from the sculptures themselves. We were convinced that an in-depth study of the pieces would yield essential information despite the dearth of excavations recognized by the scientific community, despite their having been ripped from their archaeological contexts, despite the desire they arouse in the West, and, most importantly, despite the curse laid on them in some academic circles today, where it seems inappropriate or even shameful to publish<sup>4</sup> or, worse still, exhibit them.





Should these sculptures have suffered all these indignities for nothing? Are they condemned to remain mute like certain colonial collections that now speak of nothing but the arrogance of those who set foot on African soil thinking they had every right to do so?<sup>5</sup> We could not resign ourselves to this state of affairs and were certain that they could be used to piece together a relevant history that is theirs by right and should not be taken from them.

We did not embark on this project to explore their styles or to praise their beauty or the genius of their anonymous makers in order to legitimize their place in Western museums and collections by declaring them to be world heritage.<sup>6</sup> Nor are we going to argue for their return to their country of origin.<sup>7</sup> Both options merit discussion and a better balance should probably be found between them, but that is not our purpose here. Once again, others have addressed these issues with varying degrees of success.

### Taking Another Approach

This may be the appropriate place to state that we began our investigation from a position of resignation: Hundreds<sup>8</sup> of these works have entered our Western environment and this fact cannot be reversed, whatever our ethical stand or desire to work within the code of conduct that governs our academic work. Regrettable as it may be, this state of affairs does not seem a sufficient reason for burying—metaphorically this time—these terracottas from the Inland Niger Delta (hereinafter IND)<sup>9</sup> in the sterile soil of our guilt. They are part of the history of Africa and of art, and they are intriguing enigmas that sharpen our perceptions. We wanted to know more, and we had an opportunity to apply two forms of knowledge acquisition that on the surface seem almost contradictory: firstly, the oral traditions of the Mande griots,<sup>10</sup> who are the bards of the history of their region and relate the stories of its historical and mythical heroes;<sup>11</sup> and secondly, the technical insights that can be revealed by medical CT scanning technology.

For centuries, African oral tradition has been used to remember and recount the history of peoples who have often been treated with disregard precisely because they are thought to be incapable of writing.<sup>12</sup> These preconceived ideas about the inefficacy and unreliability of oral sources are unfortunately not a thing of the past, but it should be remembered that before it is written down, a theory is only a volatile concept in the making. Writing it down and publishing it is no guarantee of

its credibility or quality. Far from it. For its part, tradition should not be perceived as an inert substratum that repels change. Quite the contrary, if we adhere to Foucault's definition, "tradition enables us to isolate the new against a background of permanence, and to transfer its merit to originality, to genius, to the decisions proper to individuals."<sup>13</sup>

The shortcomings of memory and its limited potential<sup>14</sup> have made writing indispensable. Writing is certainly practical, but that does not make its content infallible. It is undeniably material, however, which gives it determinate weight, especially in law, yet the ability to write has caused collateral damage in Western societies. It has weakened our ability to memorize, and since it is hard to admit our weaknesses, we have re-framed them as advantages. From there, it was only a short step to considering those who had maintained a great faculty for memorization to be ones who have failed to be part of history. This assertion, which some still make quite openly and loudly, is a mix of arrogance and condescension, and it flies in the face of the most basic reasoning.<sup>15</sup>

The aphorism "words fly away, writings remain" demonstrates how completely opaque our understanding is of a world in which knowledge can also be transmitted orally even today. Despite the resistance of a number of traditionalist griots, who make it a point of honor to dispense their knowledge with great parsimony,<sup>16</sup> researchers have managed to transcribe, translate, and comment on Africa's oral traditions, making them more accessible to the public.<sup>17</sup> We draw upon a number of these studies below.

In quite another field, for the last few decades CT scanners have been used not only to assist in medical diagnosis but as a non-invasive way to explore artworks. This yields varied and sometimes unexpected data. The technique is often used to determine the inauthenticity of an object by detecting irrefutable proof of forgery, and this has become one of its primary goals. But it also supplies an aggregate of information that scientists can use to formulate hypotheses, build theories, or perhaps find evidence of the object's original use.<sup>18</sup>

We have drawn on these transcriptions of oral tradition and CT scans to find answers to the many riddles posed by the terracottas. We tested a few suppositions on one object that had given us some leads and then applied them to other pieces, which seemed to confirm our guesses. We present this analysis here as a working hypothesis, hoping that others will take it up, whether to prove or disprove it, and

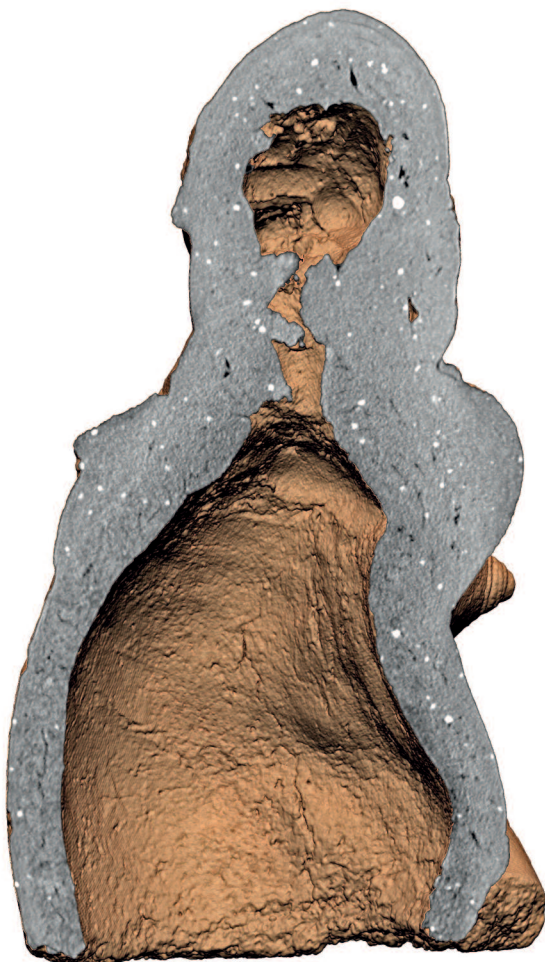
FIG. 2: CT scans of figure 1, opaque 3D views front and back.

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FIG. 3: CT scans of figure 1, opaque 3D views taken from the side, with a vertical section through the center showing the pear-shaped cavity.

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thus further this research into a little-known civilization. We are trying to open up leads and also, in many cases, to challenge or refute assertions we feel are mistaken, for example, that the terracottas from the IND were used in funerary practices and rituals or were directly involved in the manner in which the bodies of the dead were treated.<sup>19</sup> In the current climate of extreme circumspection, dimensions like these make the objects even more taboo and inappropriate for dispassionate academic research.

### An Enigmatic Female Figure

The starting point in our study was a terracotta figure from the Pierre Harter<sup>20</sup> Collection that is now held by the Musée du Quai Branly (hereafter MQB), where it is recorded as an archaeological object: a female statue from the IND region,<sup>21</sup> dated between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, use unknown (fig. 1).

The raw data from the CT scan made in November 2012 were sent to us in December the same year by the MQB<sup>22</sup> so we could interpret them and detect any signs of restoration.<sup>23</sup> The radiological analysis revealed a statue with a hollow head and torso, hand-built from coils of homogeneous clay. The bust cavity is pear-shaped with superficial yet clear signs of scraping on

the smooth inside walls, while the marks left by the artist's fingers in the wet clay can still be seen inside the head (fig. 3).<sup>24</sup> The ear holes and nostrils, now partially filled with soil sediment, were probably used to evacuate gases during firing. Slight damage to the inside of the right upper eyelid and the right eyeball has been repaired. The ankle lying against the right side of the body has been simply glued back into place, but the spatial, densitometric, and structural match between the parts confirms a legitimate repair (fig. 4).

While examining this object, we consulted records of tomodensitometric analyses<sup>25</sup> we had previously made on more than 200 terracotta figures produced in the IND region in Mali between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries and now in museums and private collections. As well as being scanned, most of these pieces had also been tested by thermoluminescence (TL) to determine the date of the last firing (see sidebar by Olivier Langevin, p. 102). Despite erroneous claims to the contrary,<sup>26</sup> CT scanning is not a dating technique.

The damage to the right eye of the MQB statue was probably caused by a probe—a pointed metal tool used by excavators to search for artifacts buried in the ground (fig. 6). This type of damage is commonly found

FIG. 5 (top right):

CT scans of figure 1. Left: transparent 3D view with the terracotta highlighted in blue and the cavity in purple. Right: maximum intensity projection (MIP) in which the black flecks correspond to metal oxide inclusions in the terracotta.

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FIG. 6 (bottom right):

CT scans of figure 1. Semi-opaque lateral and oblique 3D views that reveal restoration around the right eye (in blue).

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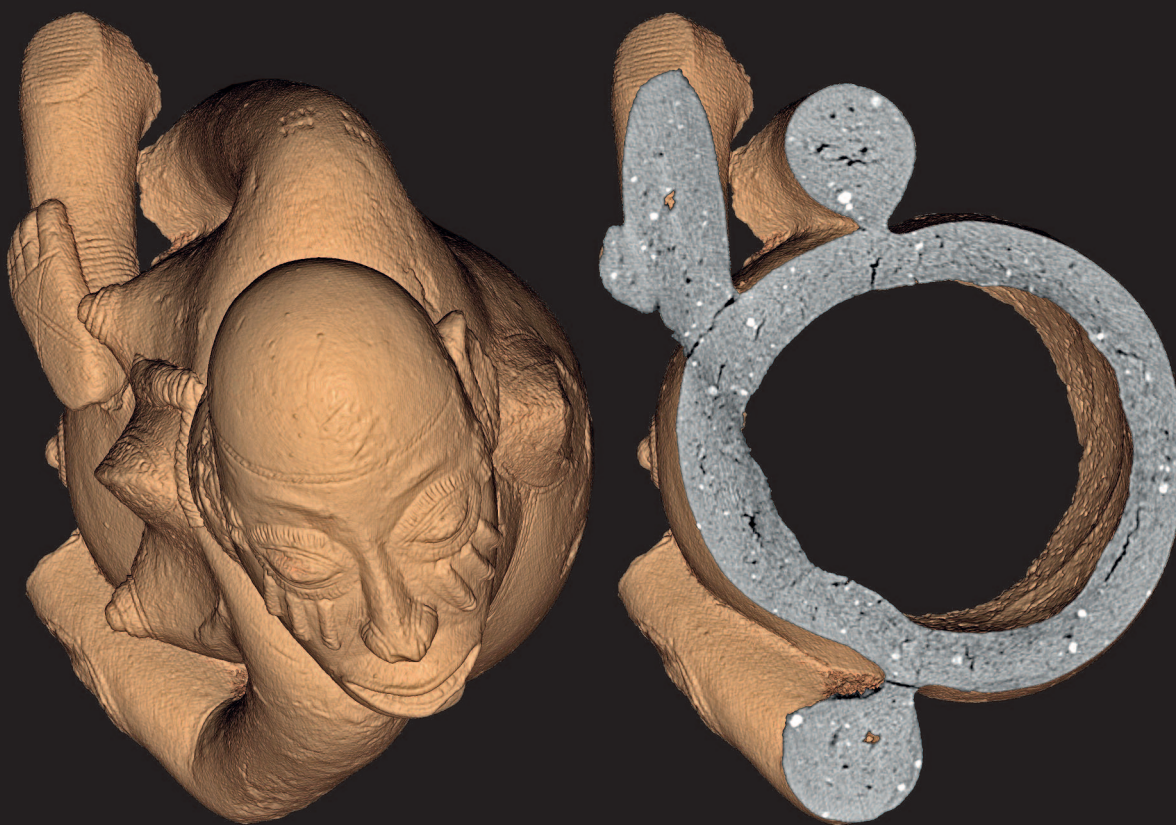


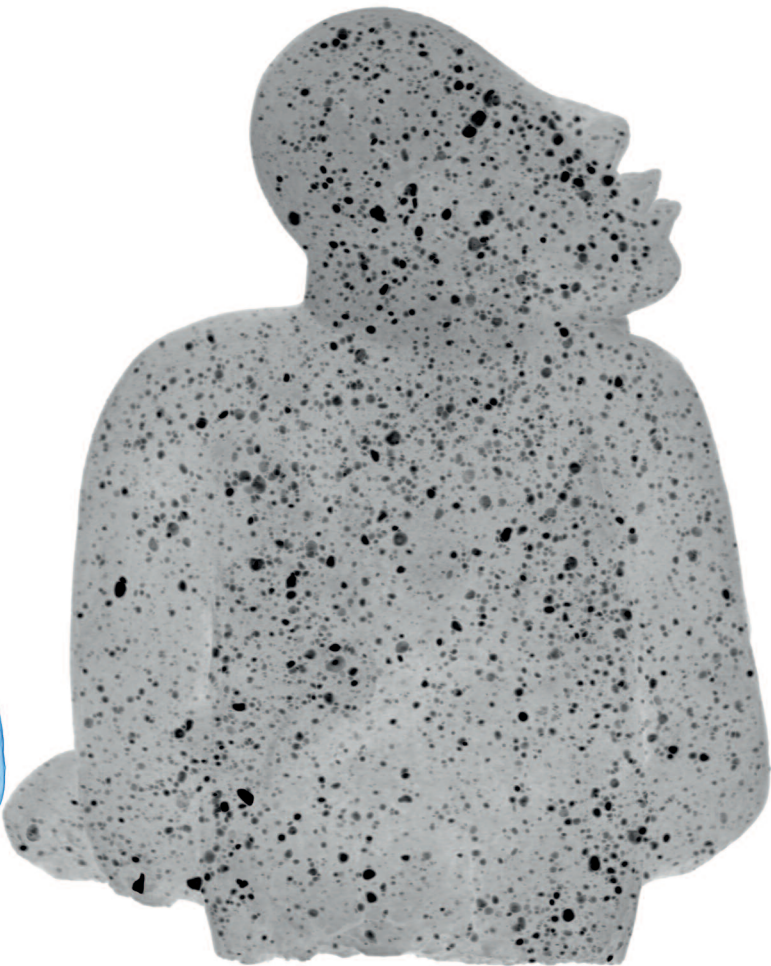
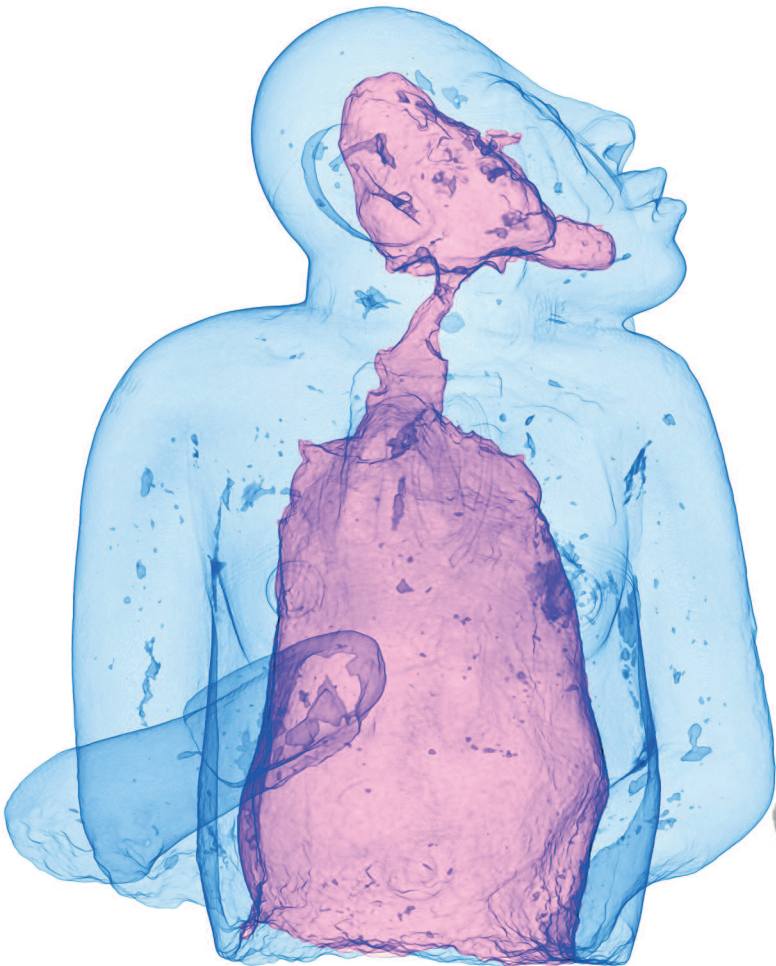
FIG. 4: CT scans of figure 1, opaque 3D views taken from above.

Left: complete view.

Right: view with a horizontal section through the heel, showing that the restoration is genuine.

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on terracottas unearthed from illicit excavations rather than those supervised by archaeologists. From the angle of the probe and the location of the damage, it can be deduced that the sculpture was buried in a natural upright position.

The radiological examination revealed no other anomaly, but it did disclose detailed information on many aspects that we shall now review. These interpretations are partly informed by our reading of various accounts of the Mande “Epic of Sunjata” as transcribed from oral sources<sup>27</sup> and discussed in historical or anthropological publications.

Taken from above with no perspective, the 3D views offer a clear picture of the almost physiologically impossible position of the figure’s head, which is turned more than ninety degrees to the left. The scan confirms that it is the original head and the lack of any break in the neck also indicates that it is in the position originally intended. Possible reasons for the artist’s deliberate choice to put the chin out of alignment with the shoulders will be discussed below, but it should be noted that an excessive rotation of the neck is not unknown in the corpus of IND statues. A diseased maternity figure (fig. 7) is a case in point. This kneeling mother and her child are suffering from a pustular disease, perhaps smallpox. The mother is not only twisting her head over her shoulder, possibly turning away, but she is also holding her right forearm behind her back, perhaps demonstrating that there is no longer



FIG. 7 (above left):  
Diseased maternity figure.  
IND region, Mali.  
13th–17th century.

Terracotta with ochre/red slip.  
H: 26.5 cm.  
Private collection, Liège.  
© Dr. Marc Ghysels, Brussels.  
Photo: Frédéric Dehaen, Roger  
Asselberghs Studio, Brussels.



FIG. 8 (above):  
CT scans of figure 7, opaque  
3D views taken obliquely  
from the back and front.

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FIG. 9: CT scans of figure 1, opaque 3D views taken obliquely front left and front right.

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any point in making the least gesture of affection or support for the hypotonic, probably lifeless child lying on her lap.

On the torso of the MQB sculpture is a “keeled breast” (*pectus carinatum*), a deformity of the rib cage that forces the sternum forward in a sharp ridge like the keel of a boat. This deformity, here accentuated by several concentric tapering incisions, generally results from the fusion of costal cartilage during childhood and is commonly called “pigeon chest” (fig. 9).

The same sternal protrusion can be seen on two other figures in the corpus of IND terracottas that we analyzed. The first of these is a kneeling woman whose head is covered with snakes (fig. 10). Three opaque views taken from the CT scan (fig. 11) confirm that apart from the sternal protrusion emphasized by two concentric tapering incisions, this work shares several other features with the MQB statue: the head turned to the left, snake-shaped tears, incised nasolabial grooves, parted lips, a snake-shaped ring around the neck, an ellipsoidal dorsal hump at the top of the backbone, apparently young breasts, snakes decorating the body, and a good weight status. The second is a female bust in the High Museum of Art in Atlanta (figs. 12 and 13) from which the head is missing but which elsewhere exhibits the same characteristics as the previous work.

### Sogolon as Sung by the Griots

In the mythical tale passed down through the oral tradition common to the groups in the Mande cultural area, the life of the founder of the Mali Empire (13th–17th centuries),<sup>28</sup> Sunjata Keita,<sup>29</sup> is studded with marvelous episodes through which he is transformed into a legendary hero through a process that is well known in epic literature. Researchers still question whether this warrior and eminent statesman ever really existed,<sup>30</sup> although some early Arabic sources<sup>31</sup> tend to confirm some of his deeds, in particular the event of about 1235<sup>32</sup> when he liberated Mande from the rule of Soumaoro Kante,<sup>33</sup> the emperor of Sosso, the ancient kingdom or empire of Ghana.<sup>34</sup>

Sunjata’s mother was Sogolon, said to be the double of a buffalo that terrorized<sup>35</sup> the land of Dô,<sup>36</sup> and she is described in a number of stories. In 1960, the first published version of the Sunjata Epic was produced by Djibril Tamsir Niane and the griot Mamadou Kouyaté. In it, Sogolon is first introduced to the tale by a diviner at the court of King Maghan Kon Fatta, Sunjata’s future father:



FIG. 10: Female figure.  
IND region, Mali.  
13th–17th century.  
Terracotta with ochre/red slip.  
H: 40 cm.  
Ex Freddy Rolin.  
Chambaud Collection.  
Photo: Hughes Dubois, Brussels/  
Paris.

“I see two hunters coming toward your city; they come from afar and a woman accompanies them. Oh, that woman! She is ugly, she is hideous. She has a hump on her back that deforms her, her bulging eyes seem stuck on her face but, mystery of mysteries, you must marry this woman, oh King, for she will be the mother of the man who will make the name of Manding<sup>37</sup> immortal forever, the child will be the seventh star, the seventh conqueror of the earth, he will be more powerful than Djoulou Kara Naïni.”<sup>38</sup>

Further on, Sogolon is brought before the king:

Although the young woman managed to hide her face, she could not camouflage the hump that deformed her shoulders and her back; she was ugly, robustly ugly, her arms were muscled and her swelling breasts could be seen straining against the stout cotton cloth tied under her armpits.<sup>39</sup>

When the hunters explained why they were bringing Sogolon with them, they repeated the words spoken by



FIG. 11: CT scans of figure 10, opaque 3D views from three angles.

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the buffalo woman, Dô Kamissa, of whom she was the avatar,<sup>40</sup> saying:

“The king promises to give the conqueror the hand of the most beautiful girl in Dô; when all the people of Dô are gathered and you are told to choose the woman you want as a wife, you will search through the crowd; you will find a girl sitting aside on an observation platform, a very ugly girl, uglier than anything you can imagine—she is the one you must choose. She is called Sogolon Kedjou or Sogolon Kondouto because she is a hump-back.”<sup>41</sup>

In the version of the epic told by Youssouf Tata Cissé and Wa Kamissoko, she is described as “Warty Sogolon.” Her father, Dô Moko Niamoko Djata,<sup>42</sup> is ashamed of her and says he dare not show her “because she is so ugly and her body is covered all over with deformities and warts.”

Slowly Sogolon Koudouman was brought out and she stopped in front of the other girls of the land. Seven warts, all different, marked her body; she had one eye higher than the other, one arm longer than the other, one leg longer than the other, and one buttock higher than the other.<sup>43</sup>

As related by Jan Jansen, et al., she is “Pimpily Sogolon” and much is made of her ugliness, her warts, and the fact that “she has one leg longer than the other, one arm longer than the other.”<sup>44</sup>

In the David C. Conrad and Djanka Tassej Condé rendition, the buffalo woman explains that it is her fault that Sogolon is so afflicted:

“The duct in her eye is injured and the tears run down,  
And I’m responsible for that.  
Her head is bald.  
She has a humped back.  
I, Do Kamissa, did that.  
Her feet are twisted. When she walks, she limps this way  
and that,  
And I am the cause of that.”<sup>45</sup>

In Bamba Suso’s version, it is Sunjata’s father, whose name is given as Fata Kung Makhang, who pays a visit to King Sankarang Madiba Kante as the diviners instructed. They told him that he could find a woman called Sukulung there who would give birth to the future king of the “black people.” Nine Sogolons (Sukulung) are brought forward, but a clairvoyant, consulting the signs, declares that none of them is the right one:



They said to Sankarang Madiba Konte,  
 “Now is there another Sukulung?”  
 He answered, “There is, but she is ugly.  
 She is my daughter.”<sup>46</sup>

Such descriptions of Sogolon seem consistent with some of the stigmata on the three sculptures noted above, especially the hunched, or gibbous, back; the protuberant eyes running with tears (shown as snakes); and the obvious ugliness of the first two.

Admittedly, ugliness is hardly a relevant criterion for identifying Sogolon<sup>47</sup> because there are so many figures afflicted by disease or physical deformities in the corpus of works from the IND. Yet, if we look at the various stories, proverbs, and myths in West African oral traditions in general, and in Mande traditions in particular, we see that, far from being arbitrary, ugliness is significant, sometimes paradoxical, and almost always related to extraordinary beings. Hideousness is often directly linked to sorcery and various versions of the epic tell us that Sunjata’s mother had significant magic powers. This form of sorcery is not to be seen negatively as the doings of fundamentally malevolent people, but as supernatural magical powers that can be activated

FIG. 12 (above): Female torso with snakes.

IND region, Mali.

11th–14th century.

Terracotta with ochre/red slip.

H: 24.1 cm.

Ex Jerry Vogel.

High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia. Acquired through the Fred and Rita Richman Special Initiative Endowment Fund for African Art, inv. 2011.159.

© High Museum of Art, Atlanta.

Photo: Mike Jensen.

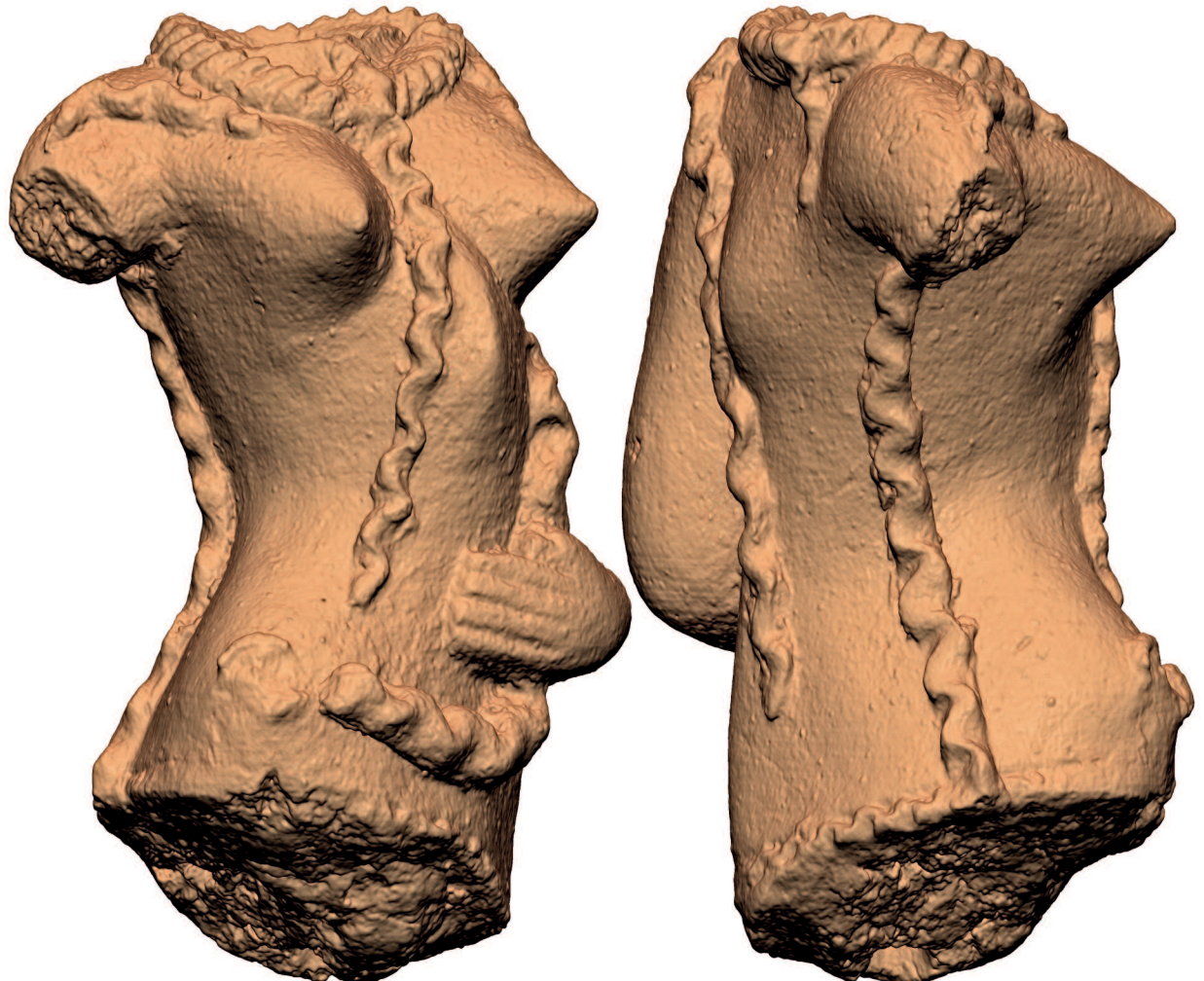


FIG. 13 (right):  
 CT scans of figure 12,  
 opaque 3D views from  
 two angles.

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for good or evil purposes.

These three examples of IND sculptures indicate that we are in the domain of the interpretation of a primary story, either as recited by the griots, whose families have passed on a specific version of the story for generations,<sup>48</sup> or as depicted by the artists who modeled the clay of the terracotta figures. These variations support rather than undermine the hypothesis of a common fund of historical events that the oral tradition has embellished with familiar details.

Apart from the hump that is so obviously characteristic of Sogolon, among the other features shared by the three statues is the strange sternal protrusion. This could be symbolic of the close relationship, bordering on fusion (sister or double), between Sogolon and the buffalo woman (see fig. 15), who terrorizes the Dô. It can also be literally interpreted. In some stories the buffalo woman warns the hunters that Sogolon has something on her chest,<sup>49</sup> something dangerous that can injure them. This brings supernatural powers to mind and indeed Sogolon can fight off assailants by shooting porcupine quills from between her breasts, as a suitor discovered:

She ejected two porcupine quills from her chest and they stuck in him.

He jumped up and fell on the ground.

He spent the rest of the night sleeping on the opposite side of the room,

Because of her sorcery.<sup>50</sup>

Sorcery aside, another explanation may lie in her medical condition. Clasp ing a person with a sternal protrusion in a passionate embrace will immediately reveal the prickly metaphor.

Certain aspects of the epic cannot be translated in visual terms. For example, some versions mention a spindle and a distaff when the buffalo is talking to the two hunters, who will eventually kill her, instructing them exactly how to accomplish this:<sup>51</sup>

“Indeed, I, the buffalo of Dô, I cannot be killed by a bullet;<sup>52</sup> no buffalo bullet can kill me, the buffalo of Dô [...] she raised her spindle high in the air and showed it to the



FIG. 14: CT scans of figure 1, opaque 3D views taken from the side.

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two hunters—the power to kill me lies in this marvelous weapon. My children, I give you my spindle and my distaff. Here is my little bow for threshing the cotton to be spun: my children, I also give you this bow.”<sup>53</sup>

Speaking directly to the hunter who will kill her, she says:

“Here, young man, take this distaff, take this egg, go into the Ourantamba plain where I graze on the king’s crops. Before using your bow, point this distaff at me three times and then use your bow [...]”<sup>54</sup>

The spindle and the distaff refer to techniques of weaving, which, along with other tools for ginning or carding cotton, Cissé and Kamissoko describe as “ultimate instruments of the black magic practiced by women.”<sup>55</sup> Speech is considered active because of its performative qualities, and in Mande oral traditions weaving is directly related to the “fabric” of words.<sup>56</sup> The advice Dô Kamissa provides regarding these tools will lead to her own death, but she is willing to sacrifice herself solely because both huntsmen showed respect for her.<sup>57</sup>



A terracotta figure depicting a bovine<sup>58</sup> in the Yale University Art Gallery may represent the Buffalo of Dô,<sup>59</sup> as Bernard de Grunne suggests. But instead of facing “the twelve witches of the Sankaran” as he indicates,<sup>60</sup> the animal seems to be at grips with a hunter armed with a dagger, while another man seems to be sitting dejectedly on the ground holding what could be an egg in his hands.<sup>61</sup> Has the artist taken a significant shortcut to show that the buffalo, although she has the power to kill and has already killed many hunters, is finally sacrificed (see above pp. 95 and 98)?

### Sunjata, Son of Sogolon

Having credibly identified depictions of Sogolon in the tradition of IND terracottas, looking at other examples of these sculptures with various versions of the epic in mind reveals several possible images of her son, Sunjata, as well. The epic reports that early in his life his legs were paralyzed and that he moved around on all fours or with crutches and thus developed great strength in his arms.

Sogolon’s son had a slow and difficult childhood: at three, he was still crawling while children born the same year as he were already walking. He was not handsome like his



FIG. 15 (above): Quadruped (she-buffalo?) with two human figures (hunters?). IND region, Mali. 12th–17th century.

Terracotta with ochre/red slip.  
H: 39.2 cm, L: 53.9 cm.  
Ex Charles B. Benenson (B.A. Yale, 1933).  
Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut. Inv. 2006.51.118.  
© Yale University Art Gallery.

FIG. 16 (below): CT scans of figure 15, opaque 3D views, proper left, front, and back.

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FIG. 17 (left): Figure representing a disabled person. IND region, Mali. 13th–17th century.

Terracotta with ochre/red slip.  
H: 48 cm.  
Ex Baudouin de Grunne.  
Private collection.  
© Dr. Marc Ghysels, Brussels.  
Photo: Frédéric Dehaen, Roger Asselberghs Studio, Brussels.

father, Naré Maghan; his head was so big he seemed unable to hold it up; he had huge eyes that he opened wide whenever someone came into his mother's hut.<sup>62</sup>

At seven, Sunjata was still not walking<sup>63</sup> and, in some versions, that was yet the case when the lad was nine,<sup>64</sup> fourteen,<sup>65</sup> and seventeen.<sup>66</sup> He was “crippled,” “always on the ground.”<sup>67</sup>

Three sculptures (fig. 17, 19, and 21) of a disabled man moving about on his knees, supporting himself with semi-circular crutches in his hands, spring to mind.<sup>68</sup>



FIG. 18 (above): CT scans of figure 17, opaque 3D views from three angles.  
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FIG. 19 (right): Figure representing a disabled person. IND region, Mali. 11th–17th century.

Terracotta with ochre/red slip.  
H: 47.9 cm.  
Ex Philippe Guimiot.  
The Menil Collection, Houston, Texas,  
inv. 81-056 DJ.  
© The Menil Collection, Houston.  
Photo: Hickey-Robertson, Houston.

FIG. 20 (far right): CT scans of figure 19, opaque 3D views from two angles.

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Two of these figures have a hump on the back (figs. 17 and 19), and of these, one also has a pigeon chest (fig. 17). A humpback and a pigeon chest are clearly reminiscent of Sunjata's mother, Sogolon, as discussed above (figs. 1, 10, and 12). All three male figures are decorated with snakes.

Despite his disabilities, Sunjata was a conqueror and an impressive strategist. He was protected by his mother's clan, the buffalo clan, whose symbolic sign he bears—if we accept the protruding sternum as the reference to a supernatural event in the epic; what this apparent deformity may lack in grace, it makes up for in fearsome effectiveness (see above p. 98). This matrilineal kinship through the buffalo is often mentioned in a positive light:

“Listen to the story of the son of the Buffalo, the son of the Lion. I am going to tell you of Maghan Sunjata, Mari-Diata, Sogolon Diata, Nare Maghan Diata: The man with many names whom sorcery could not touch.”<sup>69</sup>

Apart from the kneeling position with ring crutches signaling disablement, another interesting feature is that almost all visual details in these sculptures suggest a man who will later stand up on his own. His power is immanent and the figures seem filled with determination.

The hump and pigeon breast deformity may serve as a symbolic “charge” linking the figures of the son to those of the mother and transferring her potential for action. This association may also transform these elements into a charge in the literal sense, akin to the bundles of magical substances inserted into many so-called “fetishes” from other parts of Africa.<sup>70</sup> A number of observations speak to this point: Though these portraits are inspired by individuals who lived in the IND region





# Authentic Reflections

By Olivier Langevin,  
Archaeometrist. Director of the Thermoluminescence  
Laboratory at QED Laboratory

A legitimate question that should be posed with regard to every work of art is that of its authenticity. Raising the subject may be impolite, injurious, or even offensive, and it may make us appear ignorant, but it is fundamental, especially since there are so many pseudo-scientific publications on objects of highly dubious authenticity.

Obviously, stylistic expertise is essential, but what we might refer to as the “pedigree expert”—that is, one who will venture no opinion about a work without three generations of provenance, documentation, and receipts—is useless. It is better to find an expert who loves the art, whose knowledge is not rigid, and who recognizes that he is just human. Typology has limits with regard to any given object, and our “sensitive expert” is generally straightforward about this.

In the case of so-called “Djenne” objects, the first thing that usually comes to mind is a kneeling figure with its arms crossed over its chest and its body covered with snakes or pustules. The corpus of these works is actually quite varied, and the inspiration for these sculptors does not seem to have any limits to our Western eyes. The terracottas presented in this article by Anne-Marie Bouttiaux and Marc Ghysels are remarkable examples of the richness of ancient Mali’s cultures. The suspicion that surprise engenders rapidly turns to astonishment, and ultimately culminates in reflection.

Science must no longer stand on the sidelines with regard to issues of authenticity, since science is a tool that is an integral part of this investigation, but what information it can provide must be clearly understood. In many cases, dating by thermoluminescence is an appropriate first step. This method involves calculating the dose of natural radiation received by a terracotta since its last firing, which is known as its archaeological dose. This provides a record of time. To determine the date of firing, the archaeological dose is divided by the amount of radiation that the terracotta receives in a year. It is important to remember that the result obtained will not be a fixed date but rather date ranges. This is because thermoluminescence relies on radioactive phenomena and thus deals in probabilities rather than certainties.

The annual dose depends upon the mineralogical composition of the terracotta and that of the earth it

was buried in. Since the place where it was excavated is generally inaccessible, the annual dose cannot be precisely measured and instead must be estimated.

For thermoluminescence, “Djenne” terracottas can be seen as a textbook case. The area in which these terracottas were produced, the Inland Niger Delta, is, for the time frames we are considering, extremely stable from a geological perspective. It is composed of alluvial plains that are regularly flooded during the rainy season. Thus there is a relatively high degree of homogeneity both in the mineralogical composition of the objects and in the environment in which they are buried, and the annual dose can be estimated with considerable precision. The results obtained have a high degree of reliability, and this has made it possible to date the “Djenne” culture very precisely to between AD 1100 and 1600. Despite our confidence in the dating of these terracottas by thermoluminescence, the works that the “Scrofulous Sogolon” article address are not accompanied by precise dates. The reason for this is nothing more than an abundance of scientific caution and prudence on the part of its authors; however, the reader should be assured that these terracottas have been carefully analyzed using thermoluminescence techniques. For logistical reasons, various laboratories divided up the work. Because each of them used its own study protocols, the comparison of the dating results in this context is difficult because the complexity and variety of the results obtained require special effort to standardize, which is a laborious process, to say the least.

Thermoluminescence relies on samples rather than an analysis of the entire piece. In order to avoid problems relating to sampling, we recommend additional study with X-ray scanning. This article by Bouttiaux and Ghysels is a convincing elucidation of the scanner’s usefulness and pertinence. In addition to detecting possible restorations, both minor and major, this second method of study reveals a fuller understanding of the genesis of the object.

When examinations by thermoluminescence and by scanner yield compatible results vis-à-vis the time period and culture under consideration, a significant step toward the determination of authenticity has been achieved. This is all the more so when the “sensitive expert” confirms those results. Only an enriching, pluridisciplinary approach involving a number of specialists can culminate in a well-supported and correct conclusion. As for the above-mentioned “pedigree expert,” he will never know the simple joy that this exercise brings.



several centuries ago, they do not represent them directly; apart from the hump, the people depicted seem to be vigorous and even youthful; one (fig. 17) has two large lumps on his back as well as a smaller axillary mass; lastly, these male statues portray paralytics or at least disabled individuals.

The most probable explanation for the physical manifestation of these attributes is tuberculosis, an infectious disease common in this part of Africa, where it is endemic and easily transmitted. One of its extrapulmonary manifestations is skeletal tuberculosis, including Pott's disease (spinal tuberculosis, or spondylodiscitis) that often causes the collapse of vertebrae resulting in the development of dorsal hyperkyphosis (gibbosity or hunchback). Pott's disease also leads to the formation of cold abscesses that break out along the spine and can cause paraplegia or paraparesis—that is, a total or partial paralysis affecting the lower body, in particular, the limbs. The same symptom is seen in cases of poliomyelitis (polio), which is also endemic in the region (fig. 23). The artists who made these three statues may well have been inspired by Pott's disease in forming their figures, portraying the symptoms as a reminder of Sunjata's original disability.

In Pott's disease, if the bone infection sets in at an early age, the deformation of the ribcage may thrust the sternum forward. In this context, it could be fair to attribute this sternal anomaly to the representation of this extrapulmonary complication of tuberculosis. Given the lumps in the right armpit and on either side of the spine represented on one of these statues (fig. 17), another extrapulmonary disease could be lymph node tuberculosis (fig. 18).

Returning to the MQB figure discussed above, although CT scanning confirms that the leg at its side is part of the figure and is in the proper position (fig. 4), we challenge the two interpretations that have been put forth about it: firstly, that it is the woman's right leg and foot, and, secondly, that the leg is in an odd position because the figure represents a dead body forced into a funerary urn.<sup>71</sup> We believe these explanations to be erroneous for several reasons: The depiction of her firm breasts indicates that this woman is young and she presents a more than satisfactory weight status; her eyes are wide open and her head is turned in a position obviously requiring good cervical muscle tone; the diameter of the leg in question seems disproportionately small compared with that of her arm; and, lastly, unless the femur is broken or the body is exceptionally flexible, the heel is in a position that hardly seems physiologically

FIG. 21 (right): Figure representing a disabled person. IND region, Mali. 13th–17th century.

Terracotta with ochre/red slip.  
H: 40 cm.  
Ex Baudouin de Grunne.  
Private collection.  
© Dr. Marc Ghysels, Brussels.  
Photo: Frédéric Dehaen, Roger Asselberghs Studio, Brussels.



possible, especially since the woman's back, save for the hump, is quite straight.

The logical conclusion is that although it is an integral part of the statue, the leg does not belong to the woman. To identify the leg's owner, let us turn again to the oral tradition that describes physical characteristics of Sogolon and Sunjata. Based on the arguments put forth above, if we accept that this figure represents Sogolon, there is good reason to think that it may indeed be a rare portrait of her and her son as a maternity figure.

FIG. 22 (below): CT scans of figure 21, opaque 3D views from two angles.

© Dr. Marc Ghysels, Brussels.

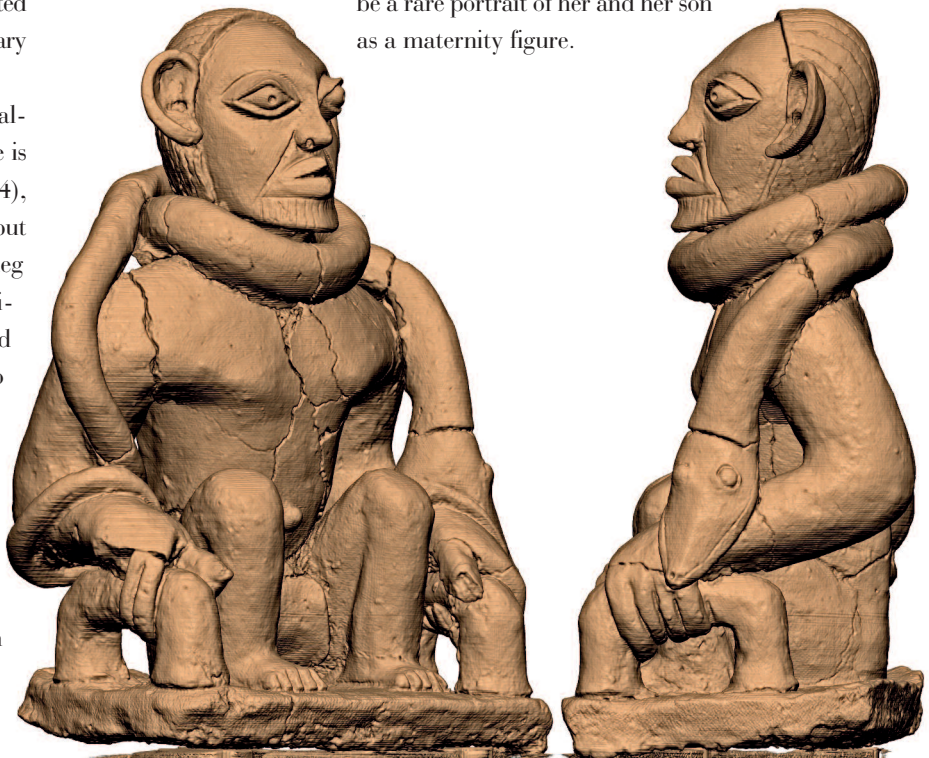






FIG. 23 (above): Football/handball hybrid being played by young Congolese men suffering from paraparesis.

Still shots from Thierry Michel's film *Zaire, le cycle du serpent*, produced in 1992 by Arte France, Les Films de la Passerelle, La Sept Arte and RTBF.

While maternity figures are common in the corpus of IND terracotta sculptures, several qualities support our proposed interpretation of this example. Here the mother is turning her head to the left toward her child, which, if Sunjata, would be already famous and no longer a baby, though she is carrying him on her back in reference to his disability. The hyper-rotation of the head would emphasize the importance of Sunjata, to whom she is attentive although she cannot see him.

For this interpretation to be feasible, Sunjata's legs would be wrapped around his mother's arms and, indeed, a missing leg has left a visible dent on the lower part of the mother's left forearm. If a child's head were also turned to the left reflecting the mother's posture, his right cheek would originally have rested on the mother's back, though given that the mother is looking slightly upward, we can envision a taller Sunjata with his chest instead of his cheek touching Sogolon's hump. When all but the child's right leg was broken off and part of the mother's body was also lost, a traumatic break occurred where his cheek or chest touched the hump.

Unlike the photomontage with the CT image showing a child carried on his mother's back (fig. 24), on this figure, Sunjata's legs would have hugged rather than lifted Sogolon's forearms. There are two plausible explanations for this and they are not mutually exclusive. The first is that Sunjata's mother may have carried her disabled child well beyond the usual age for weaning. Indeed several other examples of "maternity" figures exist in the corpus in which the representation on the woman's back is an adult, certainly small but sporting a beard (fig. 25). Such adult figures may be explained by the sacred status of political chiefs in the Mande cultural area, who, in some circumstances, must not touch the ground.<sup>72</sup> If that were the case, however, it would be surprising if all the carriers were women.

Instead the iconography could be a premonition of the man-in-the-making, already shouldering his future responsibilities and invested with the power inherited from his ancestors, which has brought him prematurely to adulthood. Given this, there is nothing especially surprising about seeing a child as if he were already expressing the maturity of a relative who is reincarnated in him. This is signaled in the given name "Old Man," for example, referring to a deceased elder supposedly spiritually dwelling in his descendant's body. It can also explain the maternal bond with an esteemed person, as was the case with Sunjata, who, apart from being a burden (literally and metaphorically) to his mother over many years, was also very close and indebted to her. The entire epic, up to the death of Sogolon, is constructed on this deep attachment,<sup>73</sup> which also corresponds to behavioral codes in the Mande cultural area, where mothers are notably cherished and respected by their children.

[...] among the children that five thousand women can

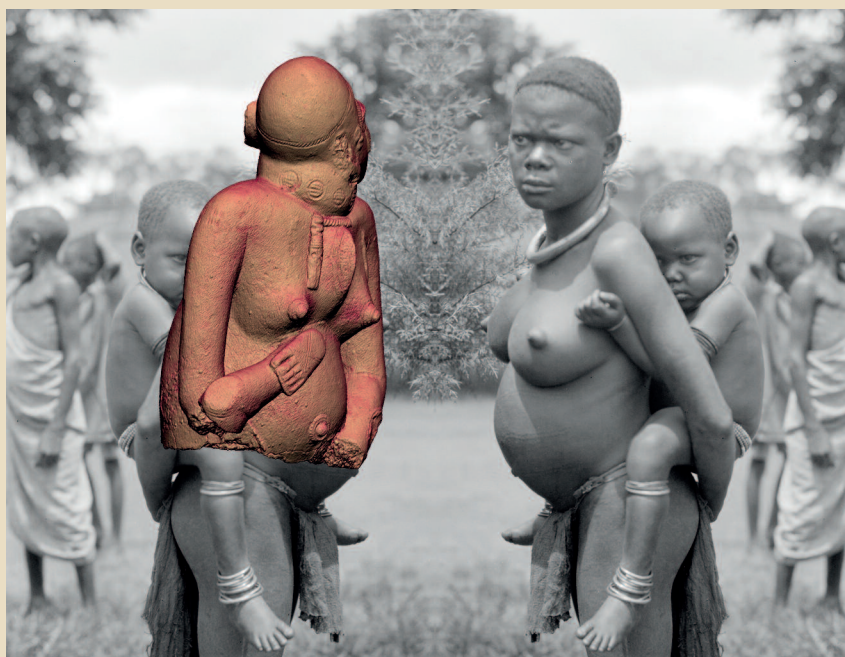


FIG. 24: Photomontage laying an opaque CT scan of figure 1 over a picture of a young Ugandan woman carrying her child on her back, photographed in 1936 on the road from Hoima to Fort Portal.

© Dr. Marc Ghysels, Brussels.  
Photo: Eric Matson.

bring into the world in one year, we will not find more than three potential "men," the others being ordinary uncircumcised lads. Ah! How hard it is to give birth to a "man!" Because a man cannot be born and become someone without the help of his mother. Just as a child receives his genealogy and the prestige surrounding it from his father, so too he receives his baraka [blessing] from his mother. Yes, a man cannot be born unbeknownst to his mother.<sup>74</sup>



This relationship between mother and son is undeniable, even if what emerges most powerfully from the Mande ethos is the inferior status of women subjected to male law.<sup>75</sup>

The second explanation is that the artist, by depicting a child wrapping his legs around rather than under his mother's arms, wanted to show the energy that Sunjata was putting into taking his destiny in hand. This solution fits the exceptional temperament of the hero better than the relaxed posture common to children dozing on their mothers' backs.

The thick callus on the leg of the MQB sculpture is a further argument in favor of the representation of a disabled child. A thickening of the bursa at the knee joint is characteristic of paralytics who move around on their knees (fig. 27). The description of Sunjata as a child in the various versions of the epic (see above p. 101) supports this iconographic detail:

And yet all Niani<sup>76</sup> talked of nothing but Sogolon's paralyzed child: he was now seven, and dragged himself along on the ground; despite the king's attachment, Sogolon was in despair.<sup>77</sup>

And

She [Sogolon] returned and found her son Magan Sunjata sitting in his hole. During the long years of his paralysis, he had dug a hole from which only his head and shoulders emerged. Sunjata, with his paralyzed legs, sat in that hole for seventeen years.<sup>78</sup>

In some versions, Sunjata consciously decides not to stand up and walk out of spite and anger, because the birth of a son born to one of his mother's co-wives was announced before his, even though he was technically the firstborn. This wrongfully established the other male child the king's "legitimate" successor.

For seven years he went on all fours

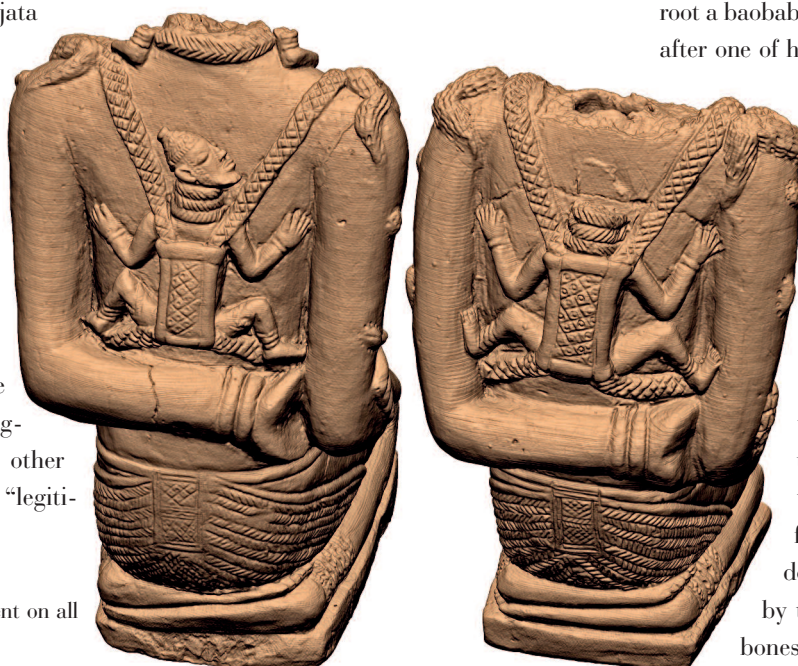


FIG. 25 (above): Two headless maternity figures, one with a bearded figure on the back. IND region, Mali. 13th–17th century.

Terracotta with ochre/red slip.  
Left: H: 32 cm.  
Ex Baudouin de Grunne.  
Right: H: 29.6 cm.  
Kenis Collection, Brussels.  
© Dr. Marc Ghysels. Photo: Frédéric Dehaen, Roger Asselberghs Studio, Brussels.

FIG. 26 (below): CT scans of figure 25, opaque 3D plunging views taken obliquely from the right side.

© Dr. Marc Ghysels, Brussels.



And refused to get up.

Those seven years had passed,

And the time had come for the boys who were to be circumcised to go to the circumcision hut.

The people said, "But Sunjata goes on all fours and cannot walk."<sup>79</sup>

A standing figure in the collection of the Yale University Art Gallery (fig. 28), clearly by the same hand as the male figure shown in fig. 21, could well be another representation of Sunjata wobbling and unstable when he finally stood up, either supported by the iron bar that the epic describes as having been obtained by him from the blacksmiths<sup>80</sup> or at the moment he decided to uproot a baobab tree in response to Sogolon's humiliation after one of her co-spouses refused to give her even a few baobab leaves.<sup>81</sup>

The position of the foot on the MQB figure is harder to explain. It may indicate a calcaneus foot deformity, that is, dorsal hyperflexion (dorsiflexion), recognizable by the foot pointing acutely toward the shin (see fig. 27). This is not a physiological result of the above-discussed disorders, in that paresis or paralysis of the lower limbs usually causes plantar flexion by the retraction of the Achilles tendon (forcing the foot into a pointed position), rather than dorsiflexion that is mechanically hindered by the anatomical disposition of the ankle-bones as depicted in the sculpture. However,





this type of deformity can be caused by other forms of paralysis, such as the effects of antenatal poliomyelitis.

The IND terracottas have familiarized us with all kinds of deformities and it seems clear from the corpus we have analyzed that consistency in relation to a particular disease is not their only intent. The artists have taken their inspiration from reality but have also deliberately moved away from it, as the MQB figure shows on several counts. The features are not gratuitously represented, and while they can be variously interpreted, they are intended to stir feelings about exceptional destinies and hopes to be raised or misfortunes to be avoided or controlled by propitiatory or apotropaic procedures. The symbolic or metaphoric “charge” of certain details is undeniable, and no doubt the visual vocabulary used resonated with the audience of the time, even if nowadays the work leaves us puzzled and decoding it is a complicated process.

In the case of the MQB sculpture, we wonder if the artist decided to take the liberty of putting the foot in dorsiflexion because he felt it semiologically important to show at first glance the cross tattooed on the sole of the foot, which, in our hypothesis, would immediately have identified the figure as Sunjata because the body and head, partly hidden behind his mother’s back, were less directly visible. Could this mark have been as easily interpreted without a shadow of doubt as, for example, a “hand of Fatima” is today? It is also possible that the artist simply exaggerated the atrophy of the limb so that the audience would know at once that he was disabled.

FIG. 27: CT scans of the leg of figure 1, four opaque 3D views, the leg has been isolated and rotated 120° so it can be viewed in the usual position with the heel directly below the knee.

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FIG. 28 (right): Man leaning on a staff. IND region, Mali. 12th–17th century. Terracotta with ochre/red slip. H: 40 cm. Ex Charles B. Benenson (B.A. Yale, 1933). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut, inv. 2006.51.111. © Yale University Art Gallery.

It should be noted that we did not find this cross-shaped tattoo anywhere else in the corpus we analyzed, nor is it on the feet of two other representations, supposedly also of Sunjata (figs. 17 and 19), although the soles of the feet on these are clearly visible. Further research and other stories from the oral tradition or from scientific excavations in the future will perhaps provide more pieces of this particular puzzle.

### Hazarding an Interpretation

If we admit that the MQB sculpture is a maternity figure depicting Sogolon and Sunjata, there are two deductions to be made. Firstly, we must rectify the idea that the IND terracotta statues are associated with funerary practices as was suggested—mistakenly and fortunately only hypothetically—in Jacqueline Eid’s report in

the MQB,<sup>82</sup> and later presented as a plausible or even established fact by other writers<sup>83</sup> as well as being long mentioned on the MQB website (fig. 30). This mistaken interpretation has been grist to the mill in some museums and academic institutions, which are uncomfortable about analyzing cultural heritage mostly taken from illegal digs, not only because the heritage in question is protected by UNESCO conventions, but also because they do not wish to be entangled in the exploitation of goods that might prove to have come from plundered tombs. But as far as we know, save for Eid’s hypothesis, there is no proof that these terracottas were associated with tombs or burial grounds and formal excavations have not turned up any evidence forming a direct link to funeral rituals.<sup>84</sup> The large terracotta jars containing the bodies of the deceased were scattered in several places throughout the few sites that have been properly excavated, indicating that there were no specific places for burials.<sup>85</sup> Funerary offerings certainly existed, but they were more likely to include small objects or jewelry and beads.<sup>86</sup> Various writers have suggested there may have been terracotta funerary figures, but again there is no primary evidence to support this.<sup>87</sup>

Instead, a certain number of analyses and articles published to date suggest that ritual figures were probably used during propitiatory ceremonies involving animal and sometimes human sacrifices to obtain the favors of various entities. They may also have celebrated illustrious, exemplary personalities, who had be-









come deified ancestors.<sup>88</sup> In most cases, these arguments are based on supposedly anthropological fieldwork, including testimonies recorded in the twentieth century, which severely undermines their credibility and means that they cannot be considered scientifically, even if they do support our argument.<sup>89</sup> These assertions are an integral part of a denigrating postulate that sees Africa as a group of societies with immutable practices. This discourse is outdated in academic circles<sup>90</sup> and although it still finds followers, it immediately causes public outcry and an indignant reaction from the community of scholars.<sup>91</sup>

Bamba Suso, one of the griots who was asked to tell the story of Sunjata's deeds, cleverly avoided this pitfall by saying, at the end of his tale:

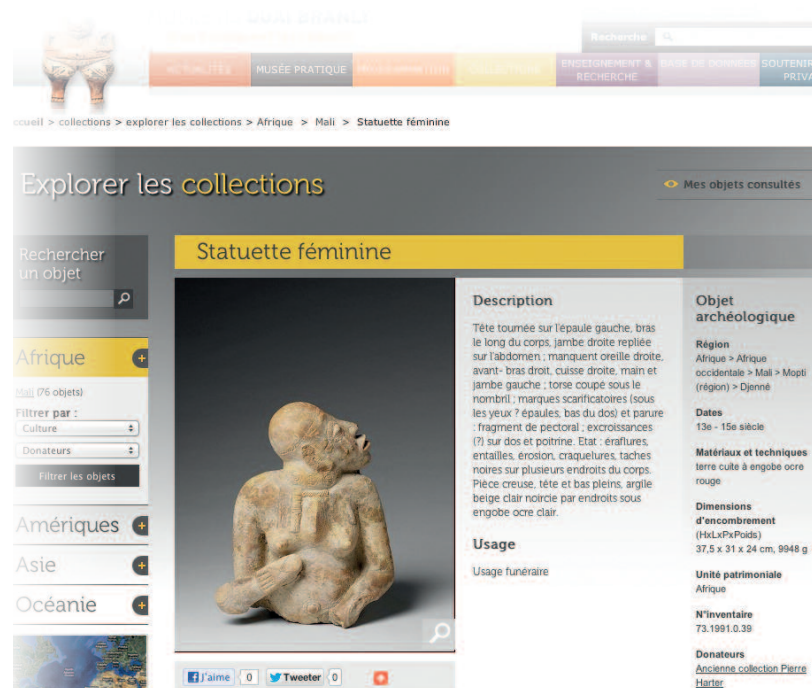
"That is where my own knowledge ends.  
Then Sunjata took control of Susu and Manding.  
The mode of life of people at that time  
And our mode of life at the present day are not the same."<sup>92</sup>

In the dynamics of change, there are facts that oral literature uses and transforms by deliberately introducing anachronisms, since it recounts past events to illustrate contemporary moral values. The griots take liberties with the story to adapt it to their audiences, such as the detail that Dô Kamissa was invulnerable to bullets.

FIG. 29 (above): CT scans of figure 28, opaque 3D views from two angles.

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FIG. 30 (above right): Screen shot from MQB website (March 2013). Note that the "use" has recently been changed from "funerary" to "indeterminate."



Although we can accept the idea that religious practices vary less over time than most other traditions—largely because they try to conform, as far as possible, to the orthodoxy of established rites—it is inappropriate to use certain animist rituals observed among groups in the region<sup>93</sup> during the twentieth century as an indication of probable uses made of IND terracottas hundreds of years earlier. To do so would be a hoax, even without the many surveys that illustrate nothing but the goodwill of the people questioned and their tendency to produce a "veiled discourse"<sup>94</sup> in an attempt to satisfy their interlocutor, who presents himself as an anthropologist. Obviously such data cannot be used.

From archaeological findings, however, we can suppose that these sculptures were part of domestic or perhaps, as in the case of the Natamatao site, collective worship.<sup>95</sup> The results do not confirm<sup>96</sup> whether this was centered on ancestors, figures from origin myths, or supernatural beings. Nonetheless, by drawing on the Mande oral tradition, we can hazard an identification and put names to some of the figures, and this identi-



FIG. 31 (right): Monumental sculpture of the Buffalo of Dô in Place Sogolon, Bamako, Mali.

Photo: Renaud Gaudin.



fication of epic characters, whether fictive or not, at least presents the compelling evidence that, until proven otherwise, these artworks were not used for funerary purposes. It does not seem unreasonable to consider that these objects and the practices surrounding them had something to do with an exchange of services between the worshippers and their gods or tutelary ancestors and protectors.

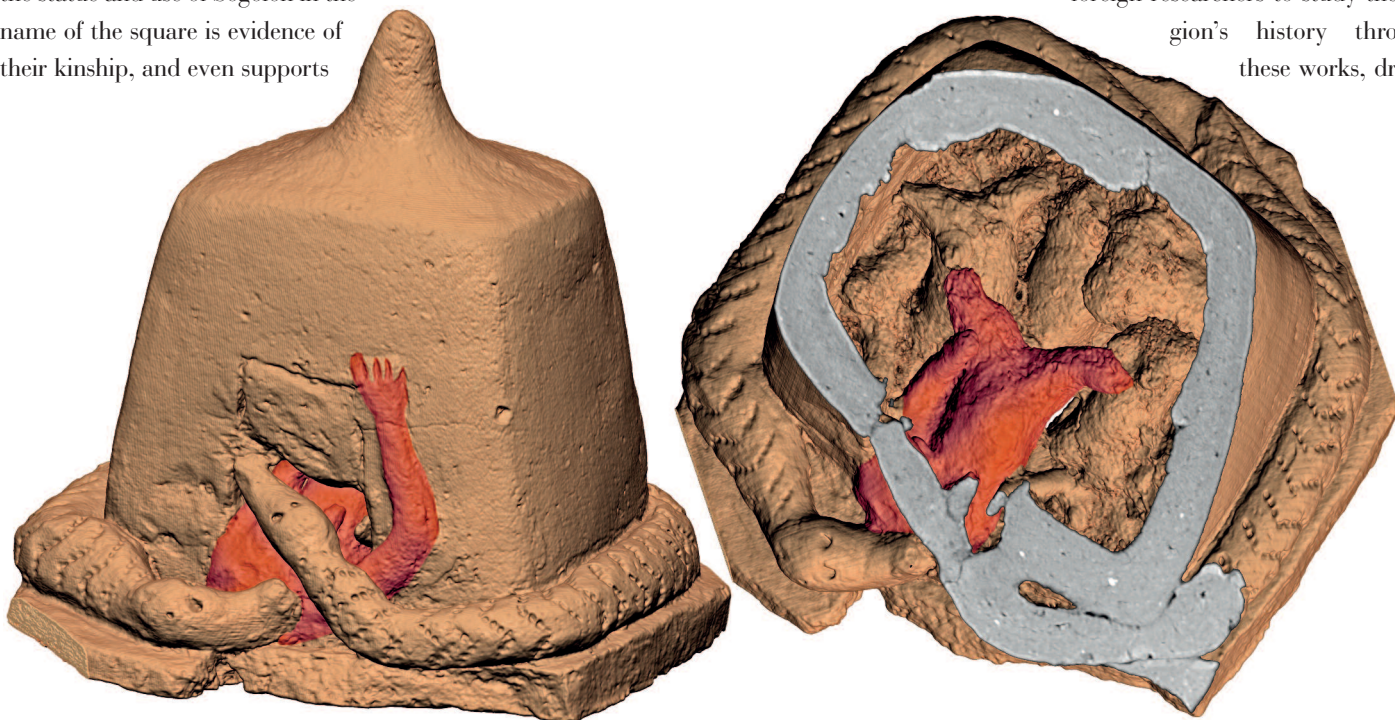
The hypothesis of a maternity figure representing Sogolon and Sunjata could have a secondary implication of a political nature, and the cultural authorities in Mali should be made aware of this for several reasons. The first is that during diplomatic exchanges between France and Mali in the early 1990s when France was seeking authorization to acquire the sculpture for the Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie,<sup>97</sup> it promised to carry out a scientific study of the work and share the results with Mali.<sup>98</sup> The second, which is of a more sensitive nature, relates to French President Sarkozy's speech in Dakar in July 2007<sup>see 15</sup> and France's military commitment in the Serval operation<sup>99</sup> alongside Malian troops in regions that were once in the heart of the Mali Empire. This sculpture may serve as a reminder to all parties of that empire's historical importance. The Malians do not deny this past and indeed even honor it, as demonstrated by the statue of the Dô Buffalo in Sogolon Square in Bamako (fig. 31). This monument celebrates Dô Kamissa (see p. 96) as well as Sogolon, who bore Sunjata. Moreover, the simultaneous presence of the buffalo in the statue and use of Sogolon in the name of the square is evidence of their kinship, and even supports

FIG. 32: Snake hut.  
IND region, Mali.  
11th–17th century.  
Terracotta with ochre/red slip.  
H: 22.9 cm.  
New Orleans Museum of Art, New Orleans, Louisiana. Acquired with the Robert P. Gordy Fund, inv. 90.196.  
© New Orleans Museum of Art, New Orleans. Photo: Judy Cooper.



FIG. 33: CT scans of figure 32, opaque 3D views from two angles. Right: section without the roof of the hut revealing the sacrifice scene. The body of the female figure whose arm is protruding from the hut is marked in red. Her head is in the mouth of the left-hand snake.

© Dr. Marc Ghysels, Brussels.



the fact that they are considered in some versions to be identical—one being the avatar of the other.<sup>see 40</sup> Portrayal of the semantic complexity of the Epic of Sunjata in the center of a contemporary metropolis also demonstrates that Mali not only acknowledges its prestigious historic past<sup>100</sup> but that it honors its storytellers, who maintain the oral tradition and reinterpret it in a topical light.<sup>101</sup>

Finally, this information may encourage Malian and foreign researchers to study the region's history through these works, draw-









FIG. 34 (left): Figure of a woman giving birth to a snake. IND region, Mali. 12th–14th century.

Terracotta with ochre/red slip.  
H: 36 cm.  
Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva,  
inv. 1004-95.  
© Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva.  
Photo: Studio Ferrazzini Bouchet,  
Geneva/Carouge.

FIG. 35 (above):  
CT scans of figure 34,  
opaque 3D views from two  
angles.

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ing on the studies made by anthropologists, historians, and linguists, who have collected, recorded, and archived the oral traditions transmitted from generation to generation, especially by griots. Perhaps the recording of this immaterial culture will one day allow it to resonate with the material culture extracted—legally or otherwise—from its subsoil. The loss of the archaeological data through clandestine digs is something we must live with because it cannot be undone, but it should not be considered a fatality that forbids us to look at these works, exercise rational thinking, or attempt an interpretation of them.

### An Extrapolation Concerning Snakes

We know of other cases in which artifacts match oral tradition, and we will discuss some of them here because they support our attempts to find ways to understand this material heritage by comparing it with what the griots have to tell us. In 2008, after scanning the IND snake hut (fig. 32) in the collection of the New Orleans Museum of Art (NOMA), we recognized what appeared to be a representation of a Mande mythical

story.<sup>102</sup> The hidden sacrifice scene with female figures within the structure that was revealed by the scanner strongly suggested the myth of the snake, Bida.<sup>103</sup>

As in the epic genre, there are many variations on the same theme in myths and stories. Generally speaking, the story of Bida, the tutelary serpent that once protected Wagadu, the ancient Ghana Empire, and enabled it to prosper, goes as follows:

The serpent received as a sacrifice every year a virgin girl supplied in turn by the clans of Wagadu; this girl had to be the most beautiful in the land. Dressed in all her finery, she was led in a procession with music playing to the edge of the sacred well. Charmed by the rhythm of the tam-tams, the great snake rose up from the well, towering nearly ten meters above the crowd. It then sank back into the well. The musicians played more furiously: the snake appeared a second time and a second time sank back into its lair. When it appeared for the third time, it shook its head, it shook and shook its head, then, as it slid back down, it seized the girl and carried her into the well.<sup>104</sup>



In all the versions of the Bida story,<sup>105</sup> the snake is a fundamentally protective supernatural power that brings prosperity. The price to be paid for ensuring this benevolence is human sacrifice, but the benefits are vast and otherwise unobtainable. This is materially demonstrated when the victim's father (or fiancé in some tellings), refusing to lose the girl he loves, kills Bida and the country is plagued by misfortune, drought, and sterility.<sup>106</sup>

Snakes on IND sculptures are a common element and should be seen as a positive iconographic component. They represent control of a potentially dangerous benevolent power that must be tamed, domesticated, nourished, and satisfied so it will continue to provide protection.<sup>107</sup> We know, for example, from the *Tarikh El-Fettash*,<sup>108</sup> that when the Songhai prince Sonni Ali<sup>109</sup> conquered the town of Djenné around 1470, he wanted to settle in the palace of the defeated sovereign but was driven out by reptiles:

So, passing the walls of the fort, he settled in the middle of the residence of Dienné-koï, intending to live there, but he was driven out by the vipers, snakes, and scorpions, which alone forced him to leave.<sup>110</sup>

Several other sources confirm that snakes played an important role in the worldview of these chiefs, who were still primarily animist.<sup>111</sup> It may well be that the serpents shown on so many IND sculptures reference the power of the first sovereigns of the region.

Studying the NOMA snake hut sculpture, it is hard not to think of the Bida myth despite obvious differences: The structure is a hut, not a well; there are two snakes, not one, although some versions speak of the monster's ability to multiply and grow as many as seven heads;<sup>112</sup> and some of the women inside the hut appear to be pregnant, though the story generally recounts that Bida demanded virgin girls.<sup>113</sup> However, these differences may not be significant enough to rule out a link with the oral tradition. The symbolic reference appears to correspond and it seems clear that a scene of sacrifice is being depicted, probably a propitiatory rite as in the myth, in which loved ones are to be offered to make the ritual effective and to obtain the protection of a demanding entity. The reptile's subsequent benevolent actions bring prosperity in terms of wealth and progeny, and these signs are closely watched by the ruling authorities.

FIG. 36 (below): CT scans of figure 37, opaque 3D views from two angles.

© Dr. Marc Ghysels, Brussels.

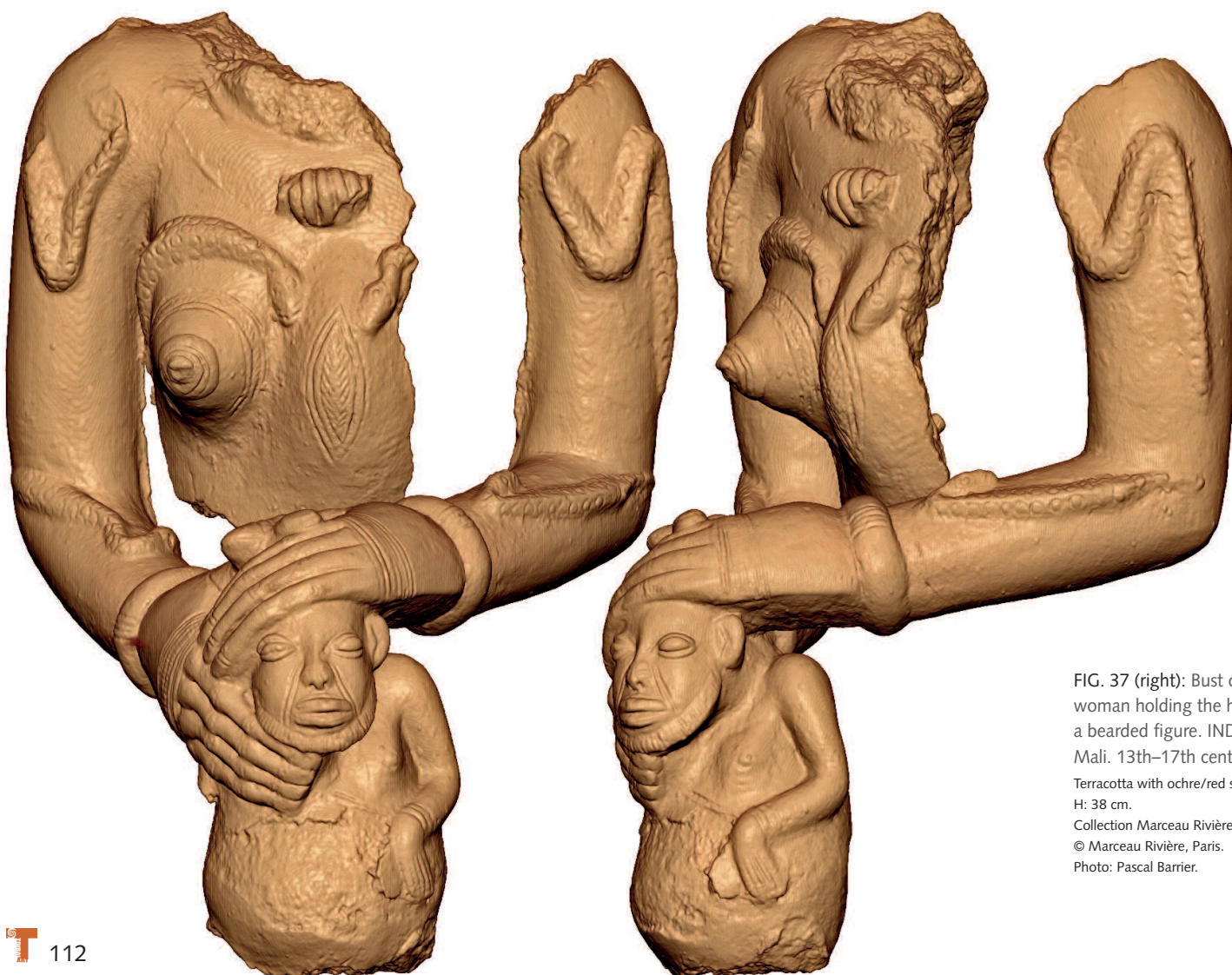


FIG. 37 (right): Bust of a woman holding the head of a bearded figure. IND region, Mali. 13th–17th century.

Terracotta with ochre/red slip.

H: 38 cm.

Collection Marceau Rivière, Paris.

© Marceau Rivière, Paris.

Photo: Pascal Barrier.







Another precedent for the convergence of material culture and oral accounts is the extraordinary statue—unique in the corpus we studied—in the Barbier-Mueller museum in Geneva, in which we see a woman giving birth to a snake, which is slithering out of her vagina onto her belly (fig. 34).<sup>114</sup> Straining in labor, this woman has an ugly face covered with pustules and deep labionasal grooves. She also has a cervical hump. Similar to the sculpture depicted in fig. 10, her head-dress may have been broken off by agricultural implements when she was still buried in the ground, or she may have been bald. Could she be Sogolon?

In some versions of the epic, Sogolon is described as bald (see above p. 96). The more she is afflicted with deformities and sores, the more interesting she becomes as she transitions toward her remarkable destiny. She is sometimes miraculously healed along the way by the powers of her ancestors.<sup>115</sup>

If this work is intended to show Sogolon giving birth to the future ruler of the Mali Empire in the form of a snake, the oral tradition sets the stage for this decisive moment.

Suddenly the sky darkened, towering clouds from the east hid the sun; and yet it was the dry season; thunder roared, lightning cracked ripping clouds and released large drops of rain and a terrible wind kicked up; a flash of lightning followed by a deep growl of thunder lit up the sky from east to west. The rain

ceased, the sun appeared. At that moment, a matron came out of Sogolon's hut; she ran towards the vestibule and announced to Nare Maghan that he was the father of a boy.<sup>116</sup>

It would not be incongruous for Sunjata to be depicted as a snake because at birth he already possessed the potential for the vigorous, unifying, fertile, essentially violent, and eminently occult power he would later wield.<sup>117</sup> He became an inflexible, reckless, and dangerous warrior, and these qualities were unleashed at the moment of birth.

FIG. 38 (below): CT scans of figure 39, opaque 3D views from two angles.

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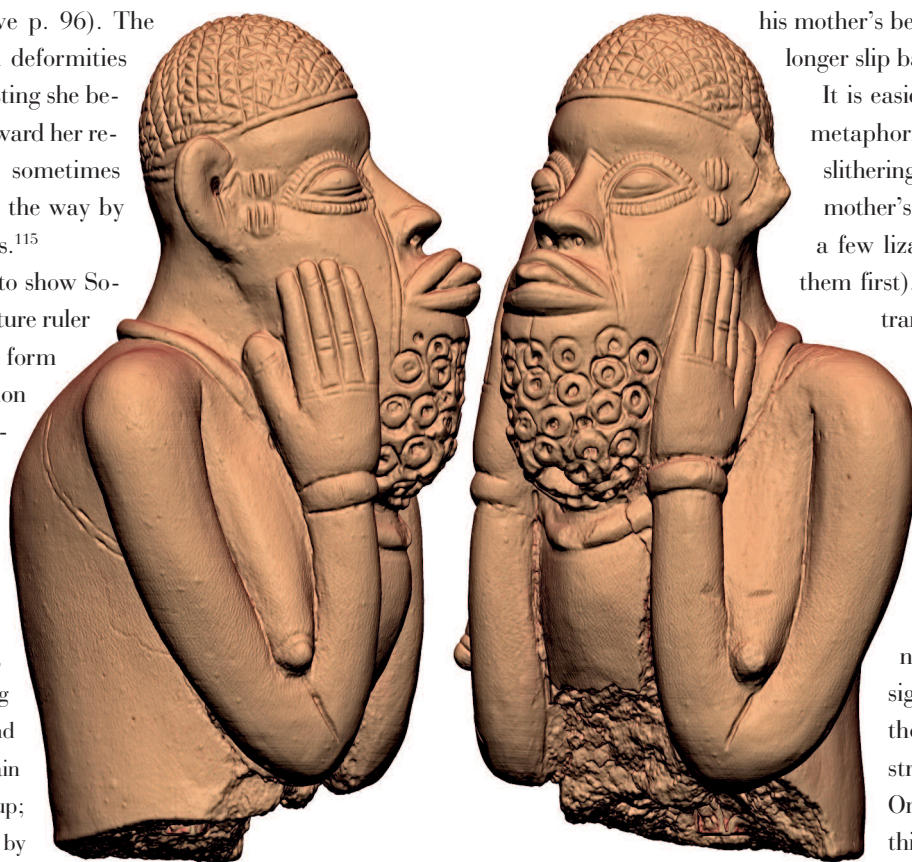


FIG. 39 (right): Female bust. IND region, Mali. 13th–17th century. Terracotta with ochre/red slip. H: 40.5 cm. Ex Baudouin de Grunne. Private collection. © Dr. Marc Ghysels, Brussels. Photo: Frédéric Dehaen, Roger Asselberghs Studio, Brussels.

Sogolon's pregnancy is usually related as extraordinary. Sunjata is said to have stayed curled up in his mother's belly for many years—from seven<sup>118</sup> to seventeen<sup>119</sup> years depending on the version. Some variants of the epic tell that, even as a fetus, he already had a will of his own and would come out of Sogolon's belly at night to hunt and eat lizards.<sup>120</sup> After seventeen years of this "game," "God on High" decided it was time for Sogolon to wake up and realize what her son was up to. She consulted a witch, who helped her trap him by putting a mortar between her legs so he could not crawl back into her uterus.<sup>121</sup> Sogolon's ploy marked Sunjata's birth, which occurred not when he came out of his mother's belly but when he could no longer slip back in.

It is easier to depict such a scene metaphorically through a snake slithering surreptitiously out of the mother's vagina to go and swallow a few lizards (taking care to grill them first). Here we clearly see the transformation from the fantastical animal to the exceptional man. From the moment of his conception, Sunjata was marked with the seal of a singular identity but also with the stigmata of this abnormality, the outward signs of occult power, though this would not obstruct his unique destiny. On the contrary, it fostered this destiny.

### Deus Ex Machina

As we were completing this article, within the space of three days we encountered illustrations in two publications that provided further evidence to support our argument. The first was the official release of a book by the collector Claude-Henri Pirat, for which we had written the foreword but had not seen the final selection of objects illustrated, and the second was Bernard de Grunne's most recently published work. In each we discovered IND terracotta busts—one, a fragmentary female holding the head of a child<sup>122</sup> (fig. 37) and the other a profile view of a well-known sculpture<sup>123</sup> (fig.







39), often interpreted as a man (or woman) with a beard.<sup>124</sup> We were surprised and fascinated to note that both figures also displayed the emblematic sign of the pigeon chest.

In light of the previous evidence, we interpreted figure 37 as a maternity, again depicting Sogolon and Sunjata but this time in a very different configuration. Sogolon, with the familiar sternal deformity, is presenting her son, the future emperor of Mali. Already invested with his role, Sunjata is facing his people and the brilliant future that awaits him. This sensitive and moving sculpture shows a mother's tender gesture, protecting the boy who no longer belongs to her since he is destined for an extraordinary future that will change the course of the history in the region forever. Curiously, Sogolon's thumbs crossed on Sunjata's head exhibit a convex deformation at the last phalange, known as "drumstick finger."<sup>125</sup>

Instead of a bearded man, we interpret the sculpture in figure 39 as a young woman with her tongue protruding. She has breasts and she exhibits the pigeon chest deformity. The texture at her throat should not be read as a beard because this is usually represented by a projection scored with fanning striations. In this case, a hemispherical mass covers the chin and neck.

This mass, which bears about twenty dotted circular motifs, probably alludes to another extrapulmonary manifestation of mycobacterial tuberculosis more commonly called scrofula.<sup>126</sup> In the course of this disease, the cervical lymph nodes, infested with Koch's bacilli, sometimes swell to considerable size (see fig. 40) with an outbreak of deforming abscesses, cutaneous fistulas, and, finally, retractile scars. In extreme cases, the feeling of suffocation resulting from compression of the pharynx by the swollen scrofulous lymph nodes can be relieved only by maintaining an open mouth and thrusting out the tongue.

If we pursue this interpretation, the "snake-shaped ring" around the neck of the MQB statue and the maxillary protuberances on the Barbier-Mueller figure (figs. 41 and 42) take on another meaning: They too may well represent swelling, abscesses, and scars caused by scrofula.

This last-minute contribution, which supports the hypothesis developed in this article, encourages us to think that our tentative interpretation will not stop there, and that by examining other works from the delta, both visually and in the CT scanner, we will discover other features corroborating our analyses.

FIG. 40: Medical wax bust showing scrofula, by Jules Talrich, Paris, 1890.

© National Museum of Health and Medicine, Silver Spring, Maryland, inv. M-550 10070.  
Photo: Matthew Breitbart.



## Epilogue

In comparing the sculpture in the Musée du Quai Branly with other statues from the Inland Niger Delta, we were not surprised to find that several layers of interpretation coexist. First are the medical observations: The artists took their inspiration from what they saw and tried to translate it into clay, but their approach obviously goes well beyond the visual record of the diseases affecting the people of the time. Second is the symbolic meaning: The diseases illustrated must be seen as signs or identity markers,<sup>127</sup> with which we are confronted with what Foucault calls the "exaltation of the performing or productive body."<sup>128</sup> In this context, the diseases emphasize occult practices, those that cause misfortunes as well as those that help avoid them. They are also markers of uncommon status, often in relation to the ambiguous standing of individuals in power. Sogolon and her son, Sunjata, are emblematic figures whose power is multiplied by the mastery of supernatural practices. Sogolon's repulsive ugliness and physical deformities and her son's disability, all associated with their esoteric knowledge, marginalize them from the outset.

If, as we believe, the IND terracottas can be interpreted through surviving oral traditions, the dynamism of which is retained in the griots' storytelling, they can be reinvested with the pride that the Malians and all Mande populations already take in their oral heritage in general and in the Sunjata Epic in particular. This possible convergence of material and immaterial heritage, here brought to light by the CT scanner, opens up new research possibilities. Even more opportunities are revealed, as this also dispels the cliché that the scanner can be used only to verify the authenticity (or rather lack thereof) of objects, or that it is just another form of X-ray. The subtlety of the analysis it allows goes well beyond these functions, and it is an indispensable element of today's analytical toolkit because it allows us to return to the genesis of a sculpture, when the artist was still working the clay, wood, stone, or other material that the rays can penetrate without altering.

We wish to emphasize that we are submitting our hypothesis regarding IND terracottas to the criticism of the scientific community with the hopes of shaking it out of its torpor, which is in part due to the fear of encouraging mercantile speculation and clandestine digs. We now have the legal means to protect this heritage. Given this, we can even envision a systematic study—obviously in partnership with Mali—of all such objects that have already left the country, as well as a traveling exhibition that presents the challenges of this



material in a constructive manner, as the 1993–96 *Val-lées du Niger* show did. It is interesting to note that the figure we have called “Scrofulous Sogolon” (fig. 1) was exhibited in that show along with one of the few figurative sculptures to have been discovered during scientific excavations by archaeologists Roderick and Susan McIntosh. The commentary that went with it said it would be forever speechless and presented this muteness as an inescapable fatality, since the figure had been ripped out of its archaeological context.<sup>129</sup>

We do not need an epic that matches historically verifiable or verified events to defend the idea that IND terracottas sometimes represent epic figures, even if these characters can be fictitious. Like many other commentators, we think that few of the events related in the Sunjata Epic actually took place,<sup>130</sup> but that does not prevent them from being sung, described over and over for West African audiences, held up as paragons of behavior, and even, as we maintain here, poignantly illustrated.

These terracottas are associated with the sensational, marvelous, and magical deeds of history. They recall events that impress people, make them dream, stimulate their memories, evoke ethical models, engender proverbs, and reinforce a feeling of identity, all based on what can be seen as a “success story,” that being the recovery of unjustly confiscated power and the efficacy of occult practices.

The terracotta sculpture of the Inland Niger Delta also demonstrates that the acquisition of power relies on unimaginable sacrifice. The suffering it reveals is a metaphor for the price to be paid for dominion. The snakes that are frequently included are a reminder of this: With their uncanny ability to attract and repel, they—along with the sores, pustules, wounds, and the infernal cycle of suffering—symbolize just how much abnegation is required to assume all the contradictions

inherent in the process of rulership. At the higher levels of Mande politics, when the chief embodies a fundamentally sacred function, power is a scourge and he who wields it is a pariah.

*The fifteen works presented in this article have all been CT scanned. This was a logistical challenge, considering how difficult it is to transfer masterpieces from public collections to a hospital, where they were examined under the watchful, fascinated, and sometimes concerned gaze of their curators. The video scans are freely accessible on the website: [www.scantix.com/sogolon](http://www.scantix.com/sogolon)*

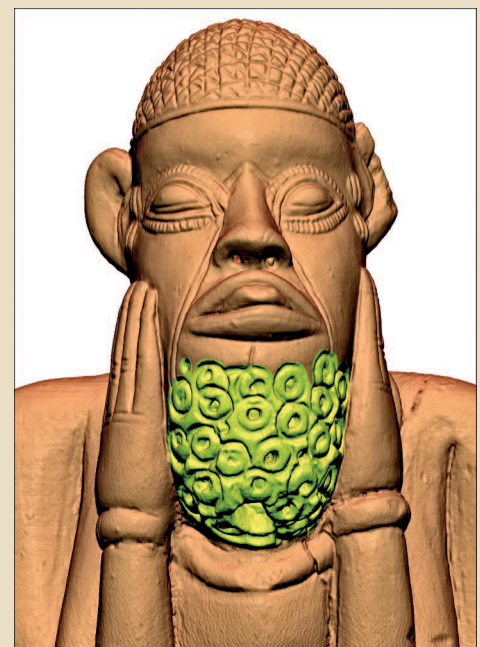
English translation by Isabel Ollivier.

#### NOTES

1. Foucault 1969: 29. *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), tr. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon).
2. Brent 1994; Dembelé & Schmidt & Van der Waals 1993: 228–231; McIntosh & McIntosh 1986a: 1994; McIntosh & Diaby & Togola 1997; Panella 2002, 2013; Sanogo 2010; Schmidt & McIntosh 1996; Van Dyke 2007.
3. McIntosh & McIntosh 1981: 10–22; 1986b; 1988; Vansina 1995.
4. Books on the history of African art always give a few examples but few in-depth articles have focused on them in recent years since Bernard de Grunne’s works (1980, 1987). One of the most recent contributions was published in *The World of Tribal Art* (the former title of this magazine) in 1999 (Leurquin). In 2002, the Amiens museum held an exhibition on the Mande Empire, which was accompanied by a catalog (see Cissé, Dembele & Bedaux 2002). Bernard de Grunne has just published a new book on the subject (2014). Publication was imminent when we were writing this article and he kindly sent us the content.
5. Bouttiaux 2014: 246–267.
6. McIntosh 1989: 74–75, 80–81.
7. Musonda 1996: 164; Schmide & McIntosh 1996, de l’Estole 2007: 323–367; McIntosh & Togola & McIntosh 1995: 61–63.

FIGS. 41, 42, and 43: CT scans of figures 1, 34, and 39, opaque 3D views with ganglionic masses, abscesses, and scars probably due to scrofula, which is indicated in green.

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8. By 2013, 1,226 objects were listed in the database of the Menil Collection in Houston. Kristina Van Dyke, private communication, 19 June 2014.
9. It is more exact to use the expression Inland Niger Delta (IND) for these objects, which are distributed well beyond the area around the town of Djenné, both the present-day location and the ancient city of Djenné-Djeno (Grunne 1990: 17; Panella 2002: 15). In his most recent work, Grunne (2014: 16) proposes "Djenné-jeno," which is scarcely more satisfactory for the above reasons.
10. In West Africa, the griots are speakers. Mamadou Kouyaté calls them "word bags" in his interviews with Niane (1960: 9). They are divided into several categories, depending on whether they use words only or accompany their stories with a musical instrument. They are organized in endogamous castes (Austen 2000: 8; Diawara 1996; Tamari 1991).
11. We had already raised the question, cautiously, with Kristina Van Dyke in 2008 during the Mande Studies Association (MANSA) colloquium, chaired by David Conrad, held in Lisbon on 24 June 2008. Our paper was titled "Slicing Through Time: CT Scanning of Malian Terra Cottas."
12. Goody, 1979, 2007; Mangeon 2010: 127–130; see also Ingold 2007: 6–18.
13. Foucault 1969: 31–32.
14. Wa Kamissoko, one of the griots referred to here, claimed he could tell stories "for seventeen days without repeating what I said the day before" (Cissé & Kamissoko 2000: 249).
15. See speech given by French president, Nicolas Sarkozy (president 2007–2012), in Dakar on 26 July 2007.  
[www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2007/11/09/le-discours-de-dakar\\_976786\\_3212.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2007/11/09/le-discours-de-dakar_976786_3212.html)
16. Niane 1960: 78–79, note 1.
17. Cissé & Kamissoko 1988, 2000; Niane 1960; etc.
18. Bouttiaux & Ghysels 2008: 231; Colley 2009: 17, 141–159; Ghysels 2003, 2007, 2012; Jansen et al. 2001; Kaehr et al. 2007.
19. MQB archives, Eid 1991. A report written on 21 April 1991 when the museum was considering buying the IND piece from the Pierre Harter Collection.
20. Pierre Harter (1928–1991) was a doctor who worked primarily in Cameroon. He specialized in the art of that country, collecting objects and precious information about the contexts in which they were used (Marchal 1993: 12; Tardits 1993: 27). In 1992, the MNAAO received a bequest of fifty-three Cameroonian masterpieces from his collection. These objects are now on display at the MQB.
21. Inventory no. 73.1991.0.39, described as a terracotta with a red/pink ochre slip, H: 37.5, W: 31, D: 24 cm. MQB archives, Bouquillon et al: 1991, 1991 (archives); <http://collections.quaibranly.fr/pod16/#0562c38f-a0b7-4566-b275-ed70ceba7689>. Before its accession in the MQB, it was in the MNAAO, which acquired it in 1991 (inventory no. AP 91-39), following a purchase designed to expand the African collection with the agreement of the Malian government (Féau 1999: 927–928).
22. Through Hélène Joubert, head of the African heritage unit, and Christophe Moulherat, in charge of analyzing the collections in the conservation/restoration unit.
23. MQB archives, Ghysels 2013.
24. Data related to techniques, materials, the artists' gender, etc., will be the subject of a subsequent publication.
25. X-ray computed tomography (X-ray CT), also called computed axial tomography (CAT), is synonymous with CT scan. The scanner produces virtual slices on the axial plane which are then combined to make three-dimensional images (Ghysels 2003: 2012; Bouttiaux & Ghysels 2008: 232).
26. Panella 2013: 116, note 28.
27. Cissé & Kamissoko 1991, 2000, told by Wa Kamissoko, griot from Krina, Mali; Conrad & Condé 2004, told by Djanka Tassey Condé, griot from Fadama, northeastern Guinea; Jansen & Duintjer & Tamboura 1995, told by Lansine Diabate, griot from Kela, Mali; Johnson & Sisòkò 1992, 2003, told by Fa-Digi Sisòkò, griot from Kita, central western Mali; Niane 1960, told by Mamadou Kouyate, griot from Siguiri, Guinea; Suso, Kanute & Innes 1999, told by Bamba Suso and Banna Kanute, griots from Gambia.
28. The Mande or Manding (often spelled Manden) cultural area is occupied by groups from many West African countries who belong to the language group of the same name and were formerly included in the immense territory of the Mali Empire (Niane 2000: 151).
29. Also spelled Soundjata, Suniata, Sundiata, and known by other names such as Mari-Jata or Magan (Makan) Sunjata.
30. Austen & Jansen 1996; Conrad 1984; Conrad & Condé 2004; Conrad & Fisher 1983: 56; Devisse & Sidibé 1993: 143–144.
31. Ibn Battuta and Ibn Khaldun, 14th-century sources in Arabic; Niane 2000: 155.
32. Delafosse 1912: 165–1913, 18; Iliffe 1995: 71; Mauny 1951: 467; Monteil 1929: 380; Niane 2000: 149–150.
33. Also spelled Soumangoro, Soumahoro, Soumaworo, Soumaoro Kannté or Kante.
34. Also called Wagadou (Conrad 1984: 36). It has nothing to do with present-day Ghana or the city of Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso; the capital (Koumbi Saleh?) is thought to have been in southern Mauritania (Mauny 1951: 467–469; Devisse & Diallo 1993: 103–115).
35. Cissé & Kamissoko 2000: 45, 51–68; Niane 1960: 17–26.
36. Located in the present-day Ségou region in Mali (Cissé & Kamissoko 2000: 381; Niane 1960: 21).
37. See note 28.
38. Niane 1960: 20. Djoulou Kara Naïni is the name given to Alexander the Great (356–323 BC) "whom Islam calls Douk Kar Naïn. The traditionalists in Malinke regions often compare Alexander and Sunjata. Alexander's journey from west to east is opposed to Sunjata's journey from east to west" (Niane 1960: 10). "In the Manding tradition, Sunjata is often compared to Alexander. They say Alexander was the second to last conqueror of the world and Sunjata the seventh and last conqueror" (Niane 1960: 49). Translation I. Ollivier.
39. Niane 1960: 22.
40. Or her double. In some versions they are presented as sisters (Conrad 1999: 198). So either Dô Kamissa, Sogolon, and the Buffalo are different manifestations of the same person, or Sogolon and Dô Kamissa are sisters and the latter can turn herself into a buffalo. In any case, they are close and they come from Dô.
41. Niane 1960: 25.
42. "Djata le guide des gens du Dô" (Cissé & Kamissoko 2000: 45), he is therefore the chief or king of Dô.



43. Cissé & Kamissoko 2000: 69.
44. Jansen & Duintjer & Tamboura 1995: 79.
45. Conrad & Condé 2004: 42.
46. Suso, Kanute & Innes 1999: 4. In Banna Kanute's version, Sukulung's name is mentioned but she is not described (Suso, Kanute & Innes 1999: 35).
47. If it were the only criterion we had, we could not present it as conclusive, as Grunne does (Grunne 2014: 46).
48. Depending on where they originated within the immense Mali Empire.
49. Conrad & Condé 2004: 42 and 44.
50. Conrad & Condé 2004: 55.
51. These Mande huntsmen kill the buffalo after many adventures. To thank them, they are invited to choose among the many daughters of the king of Dô. As the buffalo instructed, they choose the ugliest one, Sogolon, whom they take back to the king of Mande so he can marry her. Details vary in different versions of the epic. The names of the protagonists also change, as does the importance given to certain wondrous events.
52. Here we see a reference to the rifle bullet that is an element added to suit the period, but does not change the epic's deep significance and moral impact. It could be compared to similar manipulations of a Greek or Shakespearean tragedy with the characters placed in contemporary situations.
53. Cissé & Kamissoko 2000: 63.
54. Niane 1960: 24.
55. Cissé & Kamissoko 2000: 63; see too Conrad & Condé 2004: 45; Devisse & Sidibé 1993: 147.
56. Weaving as a metaphor for speech is described in length in the work of Griaule and Dieterlen, especially among the Dogon (Calame-Griaule 2006: 10–12; Griaule 1948: 35–37; Griaule & Dieterlen 1965: 232).
57. Cissé & Kamissoko 2000: 63.
58. D'Alleva 1990: 185, entry 57.
59. The CT scan executed in 2014 revealed it to be female, therefore it could indeed represent a she-buffalo.
60. Grunne 2014: 46; in Cissé & Kamissoko (2000: 67), it is specifically stated that Dô Kamissa, turned into a buffalo, had "'eaten' the twelve great hunters of the Sankaran, as well as the twelve great witches who ruled over the Sankaran." Sankaran seems to be the capital of the land of Dô (Cissé & Kamissoko 2000: 57, note 35). A research team, "Historical and Archaeological Mission in the Do," is currently working in what is thought to be the region of Dô. They are Kevin MacDonald (UCL), Nikolas Gestrich (UCL), Seydou Camara (ISH), and Daouda Keita (Université de Bamako) (Daouda Keita pers. comm.; see also <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology/calendar/articles/2013-14/20131204>).
61. As mentioned in different versions of the epic (Cissé & Kamissoko 2000: 63; Niane 1960: 24).
62. Niane 1960: 36.
63. Niane 1960: 41; Suso, Kanute & Innes 1999: 5.
64. Johnson & Sisòkò 2003: 161.
65. Suso & Kanute & Innes 1999: 59.
66. Cissé & Kamissoko 2000: 99.
67. Jansen & Duintjer & Tamboura 1995: 90.
68. The possibility that these figures showed Sunjata as a disabled man was first suggested by Alain Person (personal communication, 2006).
69. Niane 1960: 10–11; "by his father, Sunjata is the son of the Lion, by his mother, the son of the Buffalo" (Niane 1960: 11, note 3).
70. Fetish, a word detested by some writers, here takes its full significance from its etymology: the Portuguese word for an artifact, made (*fetiçao*) by human hands and yet charged with a fundamentally non-human power that gives it its efficacy (Latour 2009, 53; Bouttiaux 2011: 155–156).
71. MQB archives, Eid 1991.
72. Wanono 2003: 104–109.
73. Conrad 2008: 407.
74. Cissé & Kamissoko 2000: 95.
75. Camara 1996: 774.
76. Niani is thought by some writers to be the capital of the Mali Empire. See also Collet 2013.
77. Niane 1960: 39.
78. Cissé & Kamissoko 2000: 99.
79. Suso & Kanute & Innes 1999: 5.
80. Cissé & Kamissoko 2000: 100–103; Creissels & Jatta 1980: 115; Johnson & Sisòkò 2003: 169–173; Niane 1960: 44–46; Suso, Kanute & Innes 1999: 4–5, 61–62.
81. Cissé & Kamissoko 2000: 98–99, 104–107; Creissels & Jatta 1980: 114; Johnson & Sisòkò 2003: 167–169, 175–179; Niane 1960: 47–48; Suso, Kanute & Innes 1999: 63–65.
82. MQB archives, Eid 1991, see also note 19.
83. Guimont 1978: 14; Leurquin 1999: 71.
84. McIntosh & McIntosh 1979: 52–53; 1988: 156.
85. Bedaux et al. 1994: 47; Kiethega, Sidibé & Bedaux 1993: 434.
86. Barth 1977: 57–63; Kiethega, Sidibé & Bedaux 1993: 437; Masson-Detourbet 1953: 100–102.
87. Mauny 1949: 72; Szumowski 1955: 65–69; Vieillard 1940: 347–349.
88. Grunne 1987: 97–114; Leurquin 1999: 69–70.
89. Therefore, at the best estimate, five to six centuries after the works were produced (Grunne 1987: 97–109, 133–182; 1988; 1995; 2014: 36–43).
90. No longer acceptable since warnings by McIntosh (1989: 75, 80–81) and research by J. Clifford on the errors induced by collecting cultures through their art (1988: 215–251). Note, however, that in 1983, Susan McIntosh still presented this edulcorated version of an immutable Africa ("And the past becomes the mirror of the present," p. 47).
91. See the contributions in works by Chrétien 2008, Gassama 2008, and Konaré 2008.
92. Suso & Kanute & Innes 1999: 30.
93. Bamana, Minianka, Dogon, Bozo, etc., now strongly Islamized.
94. Bochet 1993: 60–61; Bouttiaux 2009: 170–177.
95. Ouedraogo 2013.
96. McIntosh & McIntosh 1979: 52–53; McIntosh 1984: 22.
97. MNAAO, whose collections, along with those of the Musée de l'Homme, are now in the MQB.
98. Chazal 1991: 3.
99. Operation Servat began in January 2013 and ended on 13 July 2014. It has been replaced by the anti-terrorist Operation Barkhane. [http://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2014/07/19/la-france-plus-presente-que-jamai-s-en-afrique\\_4459144\\_4355770.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2014/07/19/la-france-plus-presente-que-jamai-s-en-afrique_4459144_4355770.html). We do not mention these two events, the Dakar speech with its disparaging content, and military aid (sometimes interpreted as paternalistic or neocolonial),



because we think they have identical connotations, but rather because, in theory and in practice, they concern parts of West Africa whose cultural, political, and religious past far surpasses the influence that the West may have exerted during the colonial period.

100. "Through these two female figures homage is paid to Malian women over the ages. The frescoes decorating the walls of the monument update this tribute. They show contemporary Malian women engaged in various occupations."  
[http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monuments\\_de\\_Bamako](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monuments_de_Bamako)
101. Johnson 1999: 21.
102. Cissé & Kamissoko 2000: 25.
103. Kesteloot 2007: 248–250.
104. Cissé & Kamissoko 2000: 243; Niane 1960: 63.
105. We will not discuss the variants here.
106. Cissé & Kamissoko 1991: 153; 2000: 245 and 418–419 (map). It is interesting to see that this Wagadou is in the very region affected by the encroachment of the Sahara desert (Devisse & Diallo 1993: 114).
107. Kesteloot, Barbey & Ndongo, 1993: 176.
108. A work written in the sixteenth or seventeenth century by Mahmoûd Kâti (French translation by Houdas & Delafosse in 1913); Monteil 1929: 299.
109. Ruled between 1464 and 1465 according to Tarikh Es-Soudan (whose account of Abderrahman Sa'di was completed in 1656 and translated by Houdas in 1900, Pageard 1961: 73); Sa'di 1900: 104.
110. Kâti 1913: 97.
111. Bazin 1988: 423, 434–435; Adler 2007: 85.
112. Kesteloot 2007: 250.
113. Van Dyke 2011: 26–27.
114. Van Dyke 2008: 80–83.
115. Johnson & Sisòkò 1992: 46; 2003: 149.
116. Niane 1960: 33.
117. Johnson 1999.
118. Suso & Kanute & Innes 1999: 4; Conrad & Condé 2004: 72–73.
119. Cissé & Kamissoko 2000: 73.
120. "Margouillat" is a common term for a lizard in French-speaking Africa.
121. Cissé & Kamissoko 2000: 73–77.
122. Pirat 2014: 85; also illustrated in Grunne 2014: fig. 196.
123. Published on the cover of Kerchache et al., *L'art africain*, Mazenod, 1984, as well as in the 2008 edition: p. 35, fig. 21, and in a side view in Grunne 2014: figs. 191, 192.
124. Grunne 2014: caption fig. 191.
125. This could be a depiction of "nail clubbing" or "Hippocratic fingers," a clinical sign associated with various diseases, including chronic respiratory diseases such as tuberculosis.
126. Supposedly cured by the touch of the French king's hands (Perez 2006).
127. Which is exact, even for genetic or contagious diseases.
128. Foucault 1999: 222.
129. Baumann 1993: 526–527.
130. Wilks 1999.

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FIG. 44: The sculpture in figure 15 (see p. 99), she-buffalo (?) from the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven, being scanned in New York on December 3, 2014.

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