

# Ritual, Prestige, and Decoration: The Art Forms of the Dan

## Masks

*Long, long ago people made a law that the word of the mask be decisive.—Zlan, the carver (Himmelheber, Negerkunst, 1960, 143)*

Masks are the most important art form of the Dan. Many of the other forms of sculpture are derived from the mask and what the mask symbolizes. Numerically, more masks are created than any other form of sculpture. Spiritually, masks are perceived to embody the most powerful of spirit forces. Socially, masks are the means of bringing control and order to village life. Masks provide the strongest impressions of a young Dan person's earliest experience, as their importance is reinforced by their presence at all significant events.

Masks are empowered by the strongest of supernatural spirit forces, called *gle*. Like *dü*, *gle* inhabit the dark forest, particularly where the trees grow high and dense. *Gle* long to enter into and participate in the ordered world of the village but, being invisible, cannot until a visible form for each is made. The nature of that form, a mask and complete masquerade ensemble meant to represent the personality of the *gle*, is seen in a dream. In addition, the *gle* must reveal its intended function in the dream or that dream is considered useless. The dreamer, who must be an initiated member of the men's society, reports the dream to the council of elders. They then decide whether the masquerade ensemble should be created for that man to wear and perform.

The carver carves the wooden face, and this is accompanied by attire that includes forest materials such as raffia, feathers, and fur. It is believed that each *gle* has its own personality, character, dance, speech patterns, likes, and dislikes, and it is given a personal name. The wearer of the mask takes on all these characteristics and qualities when he wears the mask ensemble. Having come from the unknown realm of the dark forest, a *gle* is thought to be unpredictable. Therefore it always has an attendant with it to control it as well as to interpret its speech.

## Gle

*Gle* can be divided into two broad categories: that of *deangle*, gentle, peaceful *gle*, which have no gender, but whose qualities are thought of as feminine; and that of *bugle*, gun or war *gle* named after the sound of the gunshot (Tabmen 1971, 18), whose qualities are thought of as masculine. A third category, *gle va*, are "big" or "great" *gle* that have risen to importance, and can be either *deangle* or *bugle* in form.

Apart from these general statements, it is difficult to classify the many forms of mask *gle* to correlate form with function. The individuality of *gle* make this so. A *gle* in mask form, which might look very similar to another, could have different characteristics and therefore different functions, even in the same village. Furthermore, there might be

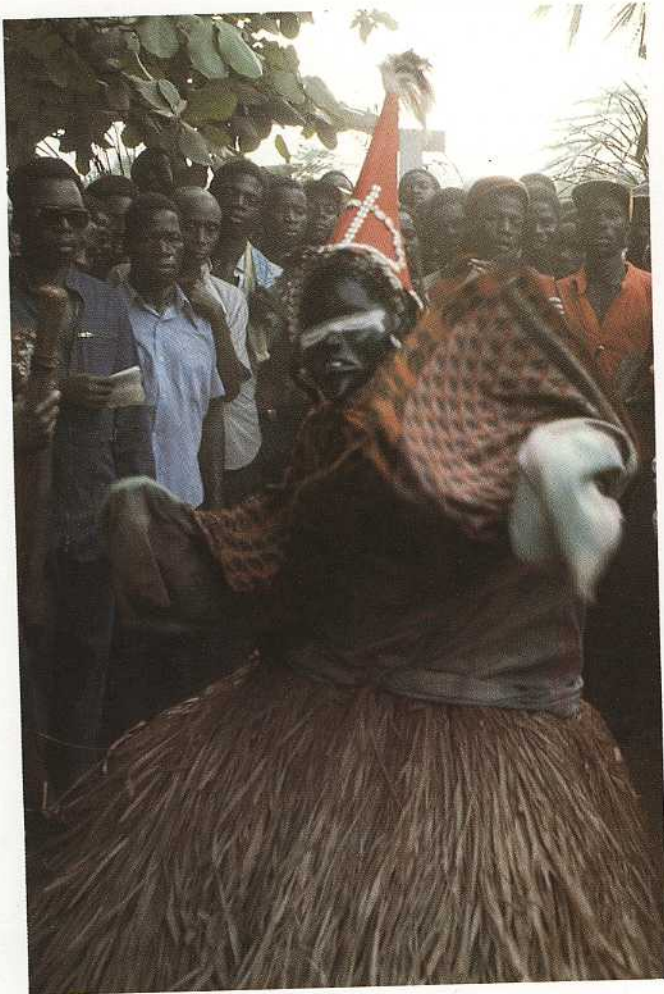


Fig. 2 Dancing *deangle* of *sohngle* type, named Korto  
Gapele, March 1983

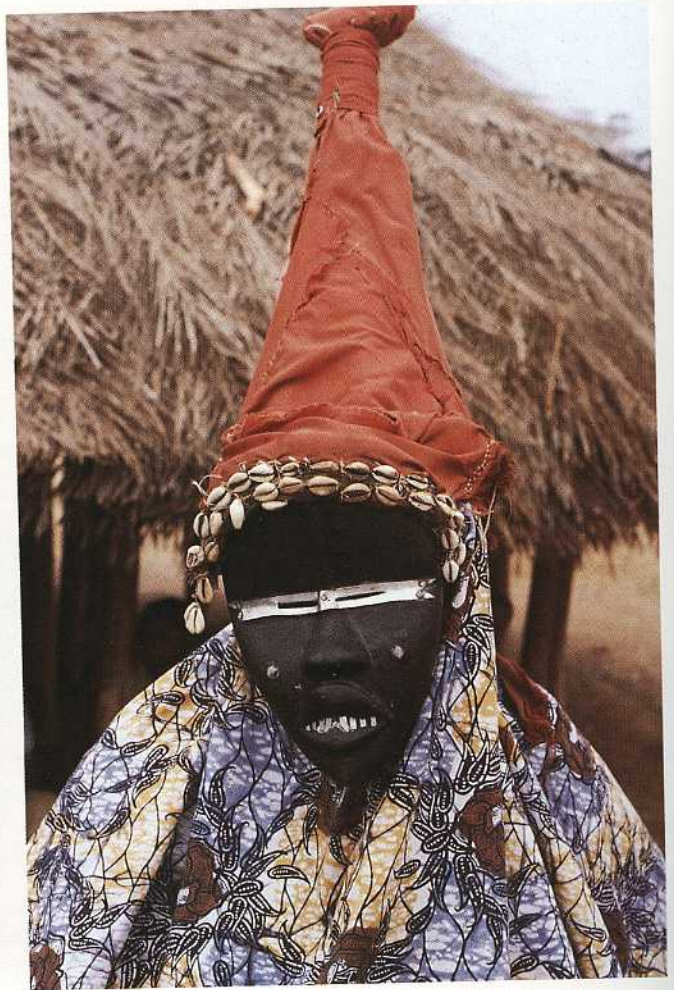


Fig. 3 *Deangle*  
Nyor Diaple, February 1986



Fig. 4 Woman with midline forehead tattoo  
Near Tapita, February 1986

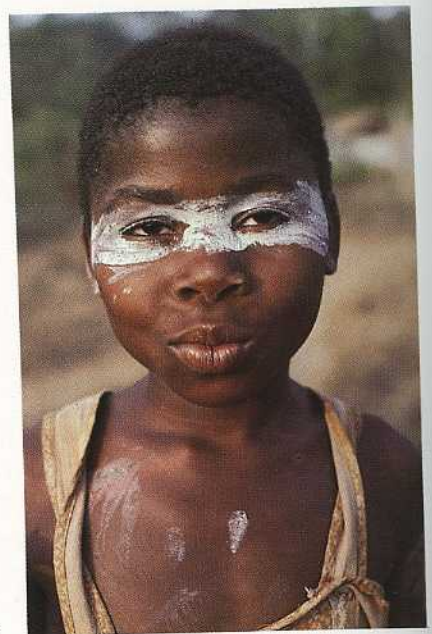


Fig. 5 Girl with kaolin face decoration across eyes  
Yuopie Old Town, February 1986

changes in function during one gle's lifespan, which is often several generations long. A new face mask could be carved to replace a worn out or damaged mask for the same gle. Confusion also enters with the many different names given to each gle. A gle is given a personal name (e.g., Slü, "Hawk"; Ble, "Termite"; or Korto, "You don't make farm," meaning the gle distracts one from normal work) and one or more praise names (e.g., Zuku, "Amazing"; or Sadhoplo, literally, the palm leaf funnel that enables one to pour palm wine, meaning that the gle enables one to achieve success). The gle also may be called various names that denote its functions or physical characteristics, or even names that distinguish it by the traditional implements it carries. One gle may have seven or eight names.

In spite of the possibility of such variations, the following range of known functions may be assigned to the most common mask forms of the Dan.

### Deangle

The *deangle* mask-being has the oval face with slit eyes (figs. 2, 3; cat. nos. 1-4, 8, 17, 27). Its character is gentle and graceful, and it represents an idealized Dan form of beauty. Slit eyes, or eyes that barely show below lowered lids, are thought to be beautiful, as are the expressive protruding lips with a few teeth showing, the curve of the forehead, and the oval face. Deangle's function is to teach, entertain, and nurture; in other words it supports peaceful activities in the village. Although it has no gender, its qualities are thought feminine by both Dan and outsiders.

The deangle mask often has raised tattoo markings forming a vertical pattern or line in the center of the forehead, representing a discontinued practice of the Liberian Dan still seen on some older people (fig. 4). A horizontal band of white across its eyes is also often seen, representing the continuing cosmetic practice by women and girls of painting white kaolin on the face for special occasions (fig. 5). Among the northern Dan of the Ivory Coast and Guinea, deangle masks tend not to have the forehead line and instead sometimes have an incised pattern around the periphery of the mask, also representing tattooing.

### *Bonagle*

The most frequently made and used mask in the deangle category is the *bonagle*, which serves the *bon*, or bush school. Every boy enters the *bon* at or near adolescence for one to four months, to be circumcised and initiated into the men's society. The bonagle acts as an intermediary between the *bon* and the village. It transmits messages back and forth, and carries food from the mothers to the boys.

### *Entertaining Deangle*

Other deangle entertain and teach in the village. Singing deangle entertain and teach by singing accounts of history or memorable recent events; dancing deangle entertain and sometimes teach correct behavior. Deangle whose function it is to entertain tend to be dressed more elaborately than the bonagle, wearing richer garments and sometimes a

more elaborately carved face mask. One type of gle in this category is the *sohngle*, named for its tall conical hat that looks like a basketry fish trap, *sohn*. The *sohngle* is said to be the best dancer, but it jokes, sings stories, walks with great dignity, mysteriously drinks water or palm wine with face mask in place, and imitates the birds of the forest as well (Kerser 1986, Tabmen 1986; see fig. 2).

#### *Weplirkirgle*

*Weplirkirgle*, the “fun-making” gle, is another form deangle may take (fig. 6). Because it sometimes has projecting tube eyes, *weplirkirgle* may also be a form of bugle. It is distinguished by its distorted asymmetrical features, usually representing a physical deformity. Although it is against the law to laugh at it, this gle is purposely very funny, thereby collecting fines. It makes fun of people with deformities, assuaging their feelings of being cast out, and alleviating the tensions that surround them. This gle teaches by negative behavior. Although we may safely assume that a mask with distorted features functions or functioned as a *weplirkirgle*, a mask with symmetrical features may also function this way by distorting its speech, coughing, or mimicking other deformities (Kerser 1983 and 1986; for other examples see Harley 1950, plate IX).

#### Bugle

*The first mask to come to man in his dreams said, “Make me, wear me; that will scare the enemies.”—Dro (Himmelheber, Negerkunst, 1960, 159)*

*Bugle’s* eyes are usually either triangular or round, projecting as tubes, or carved out (cat. nos. 5–7, 18–20, 28). The face tends to be less flat and to have boldly projecting surfaces. It is meant to be fearsome because it functions to create excitement, “to make the town hot” (Kerser 1983). The personae of these gle once were associated with warriors, and whipped battle participants into action, frightened the enemy, and sometimes led the soldiers into battle. They dance with appropriate vigor. Bugle has been labeled masculine because of this aggressive behavior, although, like deangle, it has no gender.

#### *Kagle*

One functional category of bugle takes several forms and is called *kagle* (figs. 7, 8, 9; cat. nos. 6, 28). *Kagle* is the rough and vigorously dancing gle that takes its name from the hooked sticks it carries and hurls into the crowd. (*Ka* means “hook”.) *Kagle* whips bystanders, pulls off shirts with its stick, throws the sticks indiscriminately into the crowd, and generally rouses the people (Tompieme 1983). It is believed that this was done in former times to excite the town in preparation for battle. Despite its rough display, it is greatly loved, particularly by men who make a game of avoiding its hooked stick and other forms of attack. *Kagle* is said to be associated with the chief, who used it to test loyalties during times of war. If the *kagle* injured anyone or caused damage with its rough behavior yet there were no complaints or criticism of the chief, that chief



Fig. 6 *Weplirkirgle* mask  
Peabody Museum, Harvard University  
37-77-50/2699



Fig. 7 *Kagle*  
Form of *bugle*  
Yuopie Old Town, February 1986



Fig. 8 Cubist *kagle* mask  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York  
1979.206.219



Fig. 9 *Nya gbo kagle*  
Nyor Diaple, March 1983

knew he could count on unfailing loyalty from the particular family involved (Chief Tomah of Butuo, in Thompson 1974, 164). Today kagle is followed by an attendant who carries the sticks and tries to prevent injuries.

All representations of kagle wear a wig of shaggy cotton yarn, have feathers stuck behind both ears, and wear a cloth cape and raffia skirt.

*Cubist Kagle*—The face mask of the kagle can be one of several types (Kerser 1983, Tompieme 1983). The cubist kagle has protruding disc-like or triangular cheekbones, triangular eye holes, an overhanging brow, a large open mouth, and no chin (fig. 8; cat. no. 6). Most of these masks are meant to look like chimpanzees and the wearer acts accordingly. A number of other masks offer variations on this same basic style, representing animals such as crocodiles or birds.

*Nya Gbo Gle*—Another form of kagle is that of *nya gbo gle*, which refers to its protruding, tube eyes (*nya*, “eyes,” and *gbo*, “ceramic pot”; fig. 9). All masks with round or protruding eyes are called *nya gbo gle*, regardless of function. This type of kagle also has a prominent brow, often carved with a row of duiker horns. These represent power objects, as duiker horns are often used as containers for magical power substances. Instead of horns, the mask sometimes has a brow represented as a shelflike overhang. The jaw and mouth are either realistically human or large and animallike. These masks frequently combine human and animal features, again often resembling the chimpanzee.

*Kagle with Slit Eyes*—A third form of kagle features recessed slit eyes, broad mouths, and sharply projecting animal features (cat. no. 28). Its behavior is much the same as the others in the kagle category.

#### *Blua Gle*

Another functional type in the bugle category is the *blua gle*. This is considered an important gle whose principal function at one time was to escort and bless warriors. Today it investigates and settles disputes too great to be settled by the townspeople and often rises to the rank of *gle va*, the most important gle of an area, which is discussed below. *Blua gle* dances vigorously, showing its great strength by carrying someone on its back while dancing, or by picking up and flinging a heavy wooden mortar great distances (Kerser 1983).

*Blua gle* has a large jaw and projecting tube eyes, which make it by definition a *nya gbo gle*. The significant features that identify it, however, are the *blua*, the tall vertical black feather headdress it wears, and the *maan*, the broom whisk it carries in its hand (Tabmen 1986).

### *Gunyege and Zakpai Ge*

Round-eyed masks, which occur only among the northern Dan, are another form of bugle. They are oval and have the fine features associated with deangle, except for their round eyes, which may be slightly projecting or carved out as holes. They are often painted red, at least in part. Functionally such masks fall into two categories, although the face masks themselves without their accoutrements often look much alike.

The two functional categories of northern Dan bugle masks are called *gunyege* and *zakpai ge*. The northern Dan equivalent to gle is *ge*. *Gunyege* participates in races with the fastest young men of the village. It is believed that the power of the *ge* helps its wearer to win; if the wearer of the mask loses the race, it means that the spirit has deserted that person, and the mask will go to the fastest runner. In this sense it is a trophy mask. The mask usually has wide-open round eyes, necessary for good vision, and is tied to the head with a strap. A kerchief usually serves as head covering (fig. 10). *Zakpai ge* is the fire prevention *ge*. Its function is to insure that women have put out their cooking fires every day during the dry season, before the afternoon winds begin to blow. *Zakpai ge* is aggressive, sometimes throws things, and is meant to inspire fear. The round eyes on this mask are often smaller than those of the *gunyege*, and may even be slightly projecting tubes. Tall green leaves cover the head. In addition, the masker wears pants with a ruff of raffia around the waist and neck. It carries a branch as a weapon (Fischer 1978, 21).

### *Ge Gon*

Another mask type also exists only among the northern Dan and their neighbors. This mask is called *ge gon*, "masculine" *ge* (fig. 11). It appears to be a variation of bird-beaked masks from the Mau. The mask has oval or slit eyes often framed with tin, and a large beak or snout with a black beard of monkey fur. The lower jaw is often moveable. The headdress of this *ge* is ornamented with mirror glass, cowries, cloth, fur, and tall white feathers. As the mask spirit swoops and dances, the masker carries in its hands horsetail fly whisks that are waved gently to imitate a large and graceful bird (Fischer 1978, 22–23). The bird represented by the *ge gon* is probably the hornbill, important in Dan mythology as the first being created by Zlan and as bringer of the oil palm, which is an important food source of the Dan. *Ge gon* today dances strictly for entertainment, although it is thought long ago to have sung songs and proverbs to instruct the people in the importance of this mythological bird (Fischer and Himmelheber 1984, 81–85).

### *Tankirgle and Gbaagle*

Most of the above *gle* come under the broad heading of *tankirgle*, "dancing" *gle* (literally "to make dance" *gle*; Tabmen 1971, 15). Another term for dancing *gle* is *gbaa gle*, literally "bench" *gle*, so called because the figures perform in a defined area where spectators can watch while seated on benches (Tabmen 1986). Although these *gle* are admired and respected for various manifestations of spiritual power, a skilled dancer is greatly loved also for its entertainment value.





Fig. 10 *Gunyege* mask  
Private collection



Fig. 11 *Ge gon* mask  
Peabody Museum, Harvard University  
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### Gle Va

*Gle va*, big or great gle, are the most important, most powerful gle of an area (cat. nos. 7, 9). In the past a gle va had an enormous reputation, and rarely made an appearance. It only settled large matters, such as stopping wars between villages. Some became so famous for their ability to negotiate settlements that they were requested across great distances and ethnic boundaries. Himmelheber tells of the gle va named Ve, who was Mano but was sent for by relatives in We country to stop a war between two We towns. Ve was known as the gle who could separate fighters (Himmelheber, *Negerkunst*, 1960, 146).

Today a gle va settles disputes that cannot be settled by ordinary authorities. It also maintains traditions by policing and controlling traditional ceremonial activities, such as the opening of bush school or a cow feast (Fischer 1978, 23).

Gle va may wear the mask of any deangle or bugle who has been promoted to this highest rank, although it is most likely to be embellished with fur, feathers, leopard skin, cast brass bells, and usually a red shawl. If a mask has been carved to be a judge mask, it can be large, with *nya gbo*, projecting tube eyes, and a moveable bearded animal jaw hung with symbolic power objects (Kerser 1986, Tabmen 1986).

### *Gunlagle and Wompomeingle*

To rise to the status of the most important gle of an area, a gle must prove itself wise in settling disputes and powerful in bringing about desired results. It must prove that its spiritual backing is strong by demonstrating supernatural feats. *Gunlagle*, the "village quarter" gle, is the judge of its village quarter (section of village divided by family lineage). Disputes within the quarter are brought before, and settled by, the *gunlagle*; a good and wise *gunlagle* can become a judge for the whole town. A *wompomeingle*, an "accusation" gle, judges and settles disputes for a whole village or larger area (cat. nos. 18–20). It commands respect wherever it goes. One must be careful not to break any of its many rules of behavior in its presence for fear of being fined in such valuables as white chickens, kola nuts, or money (Kerser 1983 and 1986, et al.). Thus the problem in identifying these masks by function alone is very great when we consider that any gle, if it proves itself worthy, can rise hierarchically to become a leading mask, or gle va.

### *Gor Gle*

The problem of identifying gle va becomes even more complicated when we consider the *Gor*, "Leopard" society, which moved into some regions of the Dan from the northeast in the last century (Fischer and Himmelheber 1984, 105). The principal function of the *Gor* seems to be the administration of justice, and as such it has superimposed itself on the existing system of men's societies that control the mask spirits. As it usually was high-level society members who joined the *Gor*, their mask spirits became elevated in status by being invested with *Gor* functions, and they often became leading masks, gle va. These masks would also be known as *Gor gle* (Fischer 1978, 23).

## Miniature Masks

*Every morning, in secret, the owner takes out his ma, spits on its face, rubs its forehead against his own and says, "You there, good morning. Don't let any witch come to me. So be it."*

—George Schwab (1947, 365)

Miniature masks, *ma go*, like the big masks, are carved to embody tutelary spirits, *dü* (cat. no. 21). The main function of the *ma go* ("small head") is the protection of its owner from harm, particularly that caused by witchcraft. However, it also may be used in divination and as a sacred object upon which to swear an oath. Thus miniature masks are treated like other sacred objects, regularly fed with ritual offerings and kept hidden from public display. The forms of *ma go* vary almost as much as the forms of the masks meant to be worn, but, like the full-sized masks, the slit-eyed deangle type predominates. These small masks also vary greatly in artistic merit, as it is not considered difficult to carve one and many attempt it. Particularly well-carved and well-treated ones may be miniature works of art, having acquired a fine patina from being "fed," rubbed with oil, and carried around for a long while.

Personal protection is afforded by a *ma go*, which may take the form of a particular full-sized mask. In such cases the *zo*, or owner of a full-sized mask, as well as other male members of his family and occasionally even women, may keep and carry a miniature of the large mask to serve as a *ma go* (Fischer and Himmelheber 1984, 107). This allows the individual a personal and portable form that shares the power and protective force of the full-sized mask. Moreover, the person is provided with a symbol that he is under the power and protection of a particular mask. Such a symbol may occasionally be shown to demonstrate a person's status and affiliation in places where he is not known (Si 1983). This function may have given it the commonly applied name of "passport mask."

The *ma go* is appealed to in times of uncertainty and danger. Before undertaking a journey, for example, the owner rubs his *ma go* with palm oil and asks aloud for its protection (Schwab 1947, 278). If he is to appear before a court hearing and wishes to present a strong case, he will again appeal to his small mask. If the owner or one of his family falls ill, a native healer sometimes will advise commissioning a carving of a *ma go* in order to cure the illness by spiritual means.

*Ma go* also serve to protect members, collectively, at men's society meetings. Here *ma go* are laid out in a flat winnowing basket, along with other protective objects embodying *dü*. Sometimes a *ma go* is attached as a face to a cloth figure (Himmelheber, *Negerkunst*, 1960, 161–162); or it may be attached to an animal horn filled with power substances.<sup>1</sup>

*Ma go* also are used as sacred objects for taking oaths. Upon entering bush school, every boy or man must swear on them that he brings no harm. Likewise they are used for swearing to tell the truth at any hearing in the bush school (Schwab 1947, 277–278).

<sup>1</sup> There are a number of these in the Koninklijk Museum voor Midden Afrika in Tervuren, Belgium.

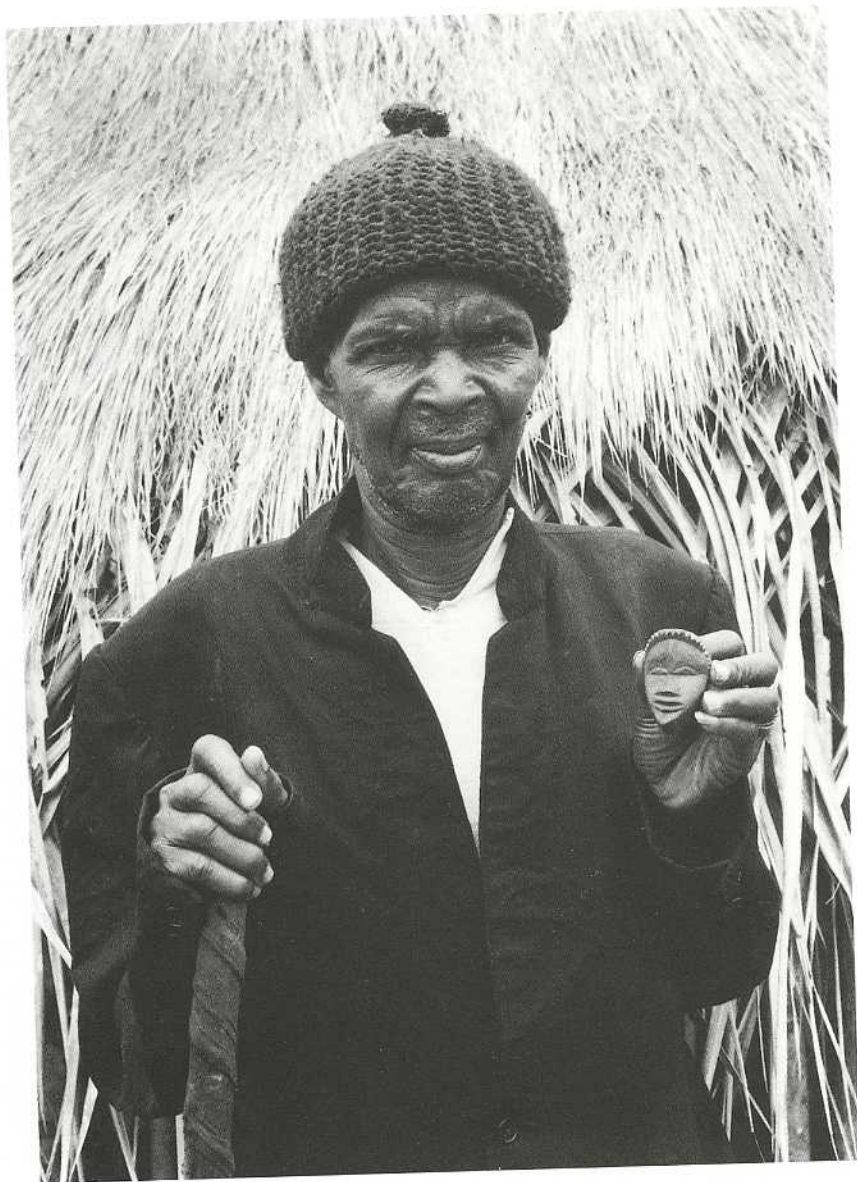


Fig. 12 Dan man  
with *ma go*

Native healers use *ma go* divination to help them arrive at a diagnosis. For example, "One breaks a kola nut in two parts, presses them on the forehead of the mask, and spits on them. Then one throws the halves of kola on the floor." The prediction is based on the pattern made by the nuts falling cut-side-up or down (native healer, in Himmelheber, *Negerkunst*, 1960, 162).

A *ma go*, as are all other objects that are kept to embody *dü*, must be fed regularly to keep it strong and able to help its owner. Food may be simply set before it, or the offering, such as rice or oil, may be rubbed or poured onto it. Kola nuts may be chewed, then the juice spat onto it; on special occasions a sacrificed chicken's blood is spilled onto the mask. Unless regularly fed in this fashion, the spirit, the *dü*, grows weak and tired from working on behalf of its owner and can be effective no longer (Schwab 1947, 364).