



Figure 1: Akati Ekplékendo: *Gou*, ca. 1858. Iron, wood, h. 165 cm.  
Paris, Pavillon des Sessions, Louvre.

---

Kerstin Schankweiler 

## Double Trophy: *Gou* by Akati Ekplékendo

---

**Abstract** The unique life-size figure, discussed in this chapter, represents the Vodun divinity *Gou*, the god of iron, smithing, and war of the Fon people. It was attributed to Akati Ekplékendo, an artist from Doumé (today in the Republic of Benin) who was enslaved and brought to the royal court of Dahomey around 1860. In 1894 it was stolen and brought to France. Today it is exhibited in the Louvre in Paris. The *Gou* figure will be considered as an example of a transcultural art history on three levels: 1. The materiality that was used to create it; 2. Its context of production and usage; 3. Its canonization in museums in France.

**Keywords** Akati Ekplékendo, *Gou*, 19th Century African Art, Dahomey, Royal Arts, Transcultural Art History, Récupération

This unique life-size figure represents the Vodun divinity Gou, the god of iron, smithing, and war of the Fon people. It was attributed to Akati Ekplékendo, an artist from Doumé (today in the Republic of Benin) who was enslaved and brought to the royal court of Dahomey around 1860.

The Dahomey kingdom had its center in Abomey and was founded in the seventeenth century. It existed until the end of the nineteenth century, when the French colonized it. The research of Suzanne Preston Blier concluded that the Gou figure had been commissioned by King Glèlè (1859–1889) in tribute to his father, King Guezo (1818–1858) (Blier 1990). Recent research, however, is convinced that King Glèlè seized not only the statue but also its sculptor Akati Ekplékendo from Doumé during a military intervention around 1860. King Guezo had already unsuccessfully tried to conquer Doumé to the northwest of his kingdom's capital, Abomey. Later, King Glèlè's diviner explained that the magical power of Gou protected Doumé, which is why the king became interested in the figure and its creator. The sovereign then sent spies to learn about the statue in order to be able to seize it and protect himself from his own enemies (Biton 1994; Beaujean-Baltzer 2007).

After introducing the Gou figure and describing its function within the royal court of Dahomey, the object will be considered as an example of a transcultural art history on three levels: 1. The materiality that was used to create it; 2. Its context of production and usage; 3. Its canonization in museums in France.

The life-size figure represents a striding man wearing a royal war tunic (called *kansa wu* in Fon, Blier 1990, 49). It stands with oversized bare feet on a thin plate that serves as a base for the figure. Thin legs and raised, bent arms emerge from its voluminous garment. The figure holds a royal ceremonial sword in its right hand and a rounded gong or a bell in the left. The face is reduced to essential features and appears not so much warlike as peaceful; with its eyes closed, it seems introversive. The figure wears a type of crown on his head that consists of a slightly skewed round plate with various objects attached to it. Hanging down from its center is a chain with a cylindrical bell at its end. Metal objects *en miniature* decorate the crown and characterize the god: weapons, tools, and iron icons (described in detail by Adandé et al. 1999). This presentation of miniatures is reminiscent of the so-called *asen* that served as memorials for the deceased in Fon culture (Blier 1990). *Asen* include iconic miniatures, sometimes figurative depictions or small scenes characterizing and symbolizing the ancestors. In family shrines, *asen* were often grouped (together with empowerment figures, so-called *bocio*), and this form of ancestral worship was also practiced at the royal palace. The same room where the Gou figure was installed also included an *asen* in memory of the Dahomey troops killed in battle (Blier 1990, 49).

Not much is known about the function of this figure. The sculpture can be read as a *bocio*, since offerings were made in front of it before battles to release power or to restrain forces of danger and evil. It was very likely

made to be moved, because it is not massive. The iron plate of its garment is very thin and rests on an inner support structure (See Delafosse 1894 and Adandé et al. 1999 for detailed drawings). It probably was brought to the battlefield during war and placed on a hill. It is said to have shouted "Watch out!" whenever danger approached (which is why it was referred to as *agojie*, meaning "watch out above") (Blier 1998, 117). The bell on the chain suggests that there was also an acoustic aspect to it, and it is even possible that the bell was supposed to hit the figure's garment, which itself has a bell-like shape. This feature points to the psychological importance of noise in battle. The performative aspect of 'sculpture' in the arts of Africa is particularly interesting and important, yet often ignored in presentations in Western Museums.

Interestingly, the sculpture is forged from scrap metal of European origin: Old steel plates from ships, rails (Beaujean-Baltzer 2007), and, presumably, slave chains. It is a particularly early example of recycling in the arts. The artist has combined a variety of techniques: forging and hammering of metal parts as well as nailing, spiking, and riveting. The material in which artists worked defined their social status in society, as there was a hierarchy of materials. Iron played an important role for royal iconographies. For some of the kingdoms in central Africa, it has been proved that smiths enjoyed the highest prestige and were so highly respected that even kings claimed to have descended from smiths or, at least, been capable of forging (Vansina 1984, 51). Iron mining and ironworking in Africa is documented throughout its history, but starting in the seventeenth century, iron imports became relevant in the coastal areas. The Gou figure may also indicate the growing import of cheap scrap metal from Europe in the colonial era.

What is fascinating about the object is that slave chains were used to make it. The collar of the tunic's upper part is reminiscent of a neck ring used in slave trade. During the heyday of the slave trade (local as well as transatlantic), the main goal of military conflicts was to capture as many people as possible and sell them to slave traders. The linking of slave chains to the God of War thus seems quite fitting.

To this day, recycling in the arts plays a significant role in the Benin art scene (Adandé et al. 1999). Contemporary Benin artists such as the Dakpogan brothers (Théodore, b. 1956 and Calixte, b. 1958) link their work to the royal blacksmith tradition (in the city of Porto-Novo) and retain the close connection between forging and recycling. This artistic approach in contemporary art from Africa is called *recup-art* (*art de la récupération*), describing the practice of re-using found and used objects (mostly from 'foreign' sources) in sculptures, assemblages, or installations—a practice not confined to Benin (see Harney 2004; Kart 2013). The notion of *recupération* means recovery or recycling and indicates processes of appropriation (► **Appropriation**) for one's own purposes, with a witty, often ironic touch added to it. It underscores the creative and functional capabilities of objects as well as the often transcultural history or biography inscribed into them.

Remarkably enough, the adaption and appropriation of 'foreign' materials and their reference to a (mostly oppressive) history of exchange between Europe and West Africa already played a role in the arts of the mid-nineteenth century.

*Récupération* generally signifies a cultural technique of everyday life that is widespread in African societies and the source of an informal economy that is of eminent social importance. Often, this concerns consumer articles that flood the African market after having been dropped from the economic cycle of affluent industrialized countries (►North/South). These items are creatively transformed and repurposed. Used in this way, such materials, unlike industrially recycled materials that are turned into smooth, clean, and 'faceless' raw material, tell stories of their provenance, mobility, journey, or previous use.

In retrospect, the aesthetic quality of the Gou figure is that of *récupération*, even though this concept was not yet articulated in the nineteenth century. The piece has a fragmentary and assembled character. The materials used are partly left in their original form (like the chain, screws, bolts, and nuts). The function of the reutilized objects is not limited to their material aspect, but also includes their iconic implications. This allows for a two-pronged interpretation: the scrap metal of European origin was without doubt used for pragmatic and economic reasons, but at the time its use was also relevant to warfare and the negotiation of power relations. By appropriating this material, the kingdom could show that they had far-reaching trade ties and were connected to commodity cycles at a time of beginning globalization.

The fact that we know the name of the artist who created the Gou figure is rather unusual. Akati Ekplékendo was taken prisoner, brought to Abomey, and enslaved. In the capital of the Dahomey kingdom, he worked in the royal blacksmith workshop. Joseph Adandé points to the importance of enslaved Yoruba artists for art production in Dahomey in the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Given the mobility of objects and people in the pre-colonial era, this provides a starting point for a trans-local art history of the region. The figure was originally produced in a context of violent confrontation and war where one group tried to protect itself and its identity by fighting off another. The object was first decontextualized when it was brought to Abomey as a trophy, and at the royal court it was appropriated for the first time. Not surprisingly, it was reinterpreted as a royal symbol.

Between 1892 and 1894, the palace in Abomey was seized by French troops and Dahomey was turned into a colony. In this context the Gou figure was, once again, taken as a war trophy, this time by the French captain Fonsagrives who brought it to France and, in 1894, donated it to the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro, the first anthropological museum in Paris (the history of the musealization of "Gou" has been thoroughly

---

1 Adandé presented this argument in a lecture given at the Freie Universität Berlin on December 2, 2014.



Figure 2: Installation view of the exhibition *African Negro Art*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 18, 1935 through May 19, 1935. Photographic Archive, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, IN39.1.

reconstructed by Beaujean-Baltzer 2007.) Fonsagrives indicated that he had found the sculpture in Ouidah, a seaside town that was one of the most important slave harbors on the African west coast. It is likely that King Behanzin, who came to power after Glèlè, had taken it there for a fight against the French, but because his soldiers died in spite of it, the figure was thought to have lost its efficiency and therefore left in Ouidah.


The Gou sculpture is closely intertwined with the history of public ethnographic collections in Paris, as it passed through three institutions with very different concepts and collection and exhibition policies. As part of the Trocadéro collection, it was regarded as an ethnographic object and object of science. Yet at the same time it served to represent the French colony of Dahomey and its conquest in the temporary exhibition “Ethnographie des colonies françaises” (1931) at the Trocadéro. As early as the 1930s, two major exhibitions also reinterpreted “Gou” as a work of art. It was included in the 1930 Paris “Exposition d’art africain et d’art océanien” and in the famous 1935 exhibition of “African Negro Art” at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (see Fig. 2). The Paris show was put together by the surrealist poet Tristan Tzara and two art dealers, Charles Ratton and Pierre Loeb, the former specialized in African, Oceanian, and pre-Columbian art and the latter in modern art. This suggests that the Gou figure and other objects were associated with the avant-garde and, indeed, also highly sought-after on the art market. Keeping in mind that French artists of the time (► **Primitivism**) frequently visited the Trocadéro and appropriated the aesthetics

of the ethnographic objects for their own artistic purposes (Picasso being the most prominent example), we can better appreciate the role avant-garde art played in interpreting and assessing objects of this kind. “African Negro Art” then reinforced the unequal association, as it aimed to show the “artistic importance” of African objects for contemporary Modernist art in Europe and America (Sweeney 1935).

In 1937, the collections of the Trocadéro museum, and “Gou” with them, transferred to the newly established Musée de l’Homme. Given the latter’s orientation towards physical anthropology and focus on the development of mankind, this institution added yet another layer of meaning. In 2000, the Pavillon des Sessions (the Department of the Arts of Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas) at the Louvre opened as a satellite for the Musée du Quai Branly (which took over the ethnographic collections of the Musée de l’Homme but did not open until June 2006). “Gou” was selected as one of the “masterpieces” for this presentation. Summarizing the migration of this object from Dahomey to France, Beaujean-Baltzer writes: “A century later, Gou entered the Louvre by accumulating the status of god of iron, spoils of war, work of art, avant-garde work and masterpiece” (Beaujean-Baltzer 2007) (► **Masterpiece**). This “masterpiece” of “African art” is indeed a product of the contact zone on both a local and global level.

Returning to the figure’s context in Dahomey, something else becomes obvious: Even at the time of its production in the mid-nineteenth century and while being used as a power figure, the Gou sculpture may already be seen as a “modern” artefact or artwork in its own right. In Dahomey and Fon culture, its production meant a departure from tradition and innovation, as the god of iron had previously been represented by a non-figurative mound of earth with pieces of iron sticking out of it (Adandé et al. 1999). The anthropomorphic depiction is thus a manifestation of an aesthetic modernity in West Africa marked by transcultural exchange in the contact zone (► **Multiple Modernities**). The fact that this contact zone is still very much politically contested became evident in 2016 when the Republic of Benin officially claimed repatriation of objects from Dahomey in French public collections that had been taken during the colonial era, including the Gou figure (► **Return**). Thus, the object biography of this famous piece remains open-ended.

## ORCID®

Kerstin Schankweiler  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8357-0492>

## Figures

Fig. 1: © bpk/RMN – Grand Palais/Hughes Dubois, inv. 94.32.1.

Fig. 2: © 2020. Digital image, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence.

## References

- Adandé, Joseph, Gabin Djimasa, Nicolas Garnier, Claude Savary, and Serge Tornay. 1999. *Une Figure Emblématique de l'Ancien Musée de l'Homme: Le Dieu Gou du Danhomè*. Paris: Musée de l'Homme.
- Beaujean-Baltzer, Gaëlle. 2007. "Du trophée à l'œuvre: parcours de cinq artefacts du royaume d'Abomey." *Gradhiva*, 6: 70–85.
- Biton, Marlène. 1994. "Question de Gou." *Arts d'Afrique noire*, 91: 25–34.
- Delafosse, Maurice. 1894. "Une statue dahoméenne en fonte." *La Nature*, 1105: 145–147.
- Harney, Elizabeth. 2004. *In Senghor's Shadow: Art, Politics, and the Avant-Garde in Senegal, 1960–1995*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Sweeney, James Johnson, ed. 1935. *African Negro Art, Museum of Modern Art*. New York: Arno Press.
- Kart, Susan. 2013. "From Direct Carving to Récupération: The Art of Moustapha Dimé in Post-Independence Senegal 1974–1997." Columbia University Academic Commons. Accessed November 20, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.7916/D8057P0P>.
- Preston Blier, Suzanne. 1990. "King Glele of Danhomè, Part One: Divination Portraits of a Lion King and Man of Iron." *African Arts* 23 (4): 42–53, 93–94.
- . 1998. *Royal Arts of Africa: The Majesty of Form*. London: King.
- Vansina, Jan. 1984. *Art History in Africa: An Introduction to Method*. London: Longman.