Body Personal and Body Politic
Adornment and Leadership in Cross-Cultural Perspective
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Abstract. — In an effort to discover why particular body decorations are practiced in certain societies, this essay attempts to demonstrate that specific forms of adornment are often correlated with types of political leadership. Drawing on a range of ethnographic examples, the analysis explores the relationship of four types of body arts (body painting, tattooing, marking, and crowning) to the political systems in which they are found. ([Melanesia, Polynesia, West Africa, personal adornment, political organization, body painting, tattooing, masks, crowning])

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The relationship between the human body and the social collectivity is a critical dimension of consciousness in all societies. Indeed, it is a truism that the body is the tangible frame of selfhood in individual and collective experience, providing a constellation of physical signs with the potential for signifying the relations of persons to their contexts (Comaroff 1985: 6).

The adornment of the social body consists of the construction of the individual as social actor. Encoded on the skin are a wide variety of signs communicating information about such things as a person’s rank, authority, ethnicity, group membership, gender, and ritual condition. “The surface of the body,” writes Terence Turner, “as the common frontier of society, the social self, and the psychological individual, becomes the symbolic stage upon which the drama of socialization is enacted, and bodily adornment … becomes the language through which it is expressed” (1980: 112).

Much of the literature on the decoration of the human body has tended to emphasize the most fantastic and exotic elements of self-decoration. In a manner often glossed as “Frazerian anthropology,” studies of this sort have attempted to explain one society’s form of body mutilation or ornamentation by demonstrating the existence of what appears to be a similar practice in another part of the globe. Edmund Leach has rightly criticized studies of this sort that disaggregate cultural practices from their ethnographic context and compare them among far-separated societies across the world. In so doing, Leach has emphasized the arbitrary nature of the symbolism of the body, and has argued that in body decoration the relationship between signifier and signified has no necessary, “natural,” or predetermined logic that can apply across the boundaries of different cultures. In his famous essay on “Magical Hair,” Leach argues against the significance of worldwide similarity of certain symbol-referent configurations, and dismisses from consideration the question of why a culture chooses one item and not another for its symbols. He writes: “Europeans wear black for mourning. Chinese wear white. In each case the special status of the mourner is indicated by the wearing of special dress. But the question of why one culture selects black for this purpose and another white is surely both irrelevant and unanswerable” (1958: 152).

Leach’s point serves as a useful critique of studies that rely for their data on the exercise of mindless globe-trotting. I would argue, however, that his point may unfairly dismiss the possibility that the details of some practices of ornamentation may be something less than arbitrary. In an essay entitled “The Meaning of Body Ornaments,” Anthony Seeger has taken up the very challenge that Leach sets out and has attempted to show that when viewed within the total context of a culture it may be possible to postulate that certain body decorations have similar meanings in different ethnographic milieus. “If instead of lifting a single trait out of a society for examination,” argues Seeger, “one looks for structures of interrelated symbols, then the problem of why one culture uses black and another white can perhaps be explained
and an underlying logic uniting the two symbol systems may come to light” (1975: 211).

The purpose of this essay is to offer some possible answers to why particular body decorations are practiced in certain societies. Specifically, I will attempt to show that forms of body adornment are correlated to different political types. The evidence for this sort of analysis emerges from consideration of a few ethnographic examples. In order to demonstrate the relationship between type of body adornment and type of political leadership, I will examine four distinct forms of self-decoration: (1) body painting, (2) tattooing, (3) masking, and (4) crowning. In the first section of the essay, I compare the sociopolitical significance of the art of body painting in Melanesia to that of tattooing in Polynesia. In the second, I concentrate on several societies in West Africa, and compare the sociopolitical implications of an artform that conceals (masking) to one that reveals (crowning).

1. Body Painting and Tattooing: Contrasting Arts of Leadership in Melanesia and Polynesia

In an essay in comparative political anthropology, “Poor Man, Rich Man. Big-Man, Chief: Political Types in Melanesia and Polynesia,” Marshall Sahlins draws some basic contrasts between two abstracted sociological types of political leadership among neighboring populations in the South Pacific Islands. According to Sahlins, the political leadership of Polynesia is characterized by centralized chiefdoms that rule large populations covering a vast territorial region. It is a system organized in a pyramidal structure in which local groups are subunits of a more inclusive political body. The leader or chief, who is situated at the pinnacle of this pyramidal organization, has incontestable right of rule and his authority is given by social ascription. In Polynesian political systems, leadership is vested in title. Power resides in office and is not derived from the leader’s demonstration of personal superiority.

In Melanesia, by contrast, political leadership is organized in the form of a “big-man” system. A big-man rules a small number of groups across a restricted territorial extent. This type of organization consists of politically unintegrated segments made up of small, separate, and equal political blocs. A big-man’s authority derives from his personal power. In the traditional Melanesian system of government, there are no political offices. little or no authority is given by social ascription, and leadership is largely achieved through the creation of a followership. As Sahlins summarizes, “Big-men do not come to office; they do not succeed to, nor are they installed in, existing positions of leadership over political groups. The attainment of big-man status is rather the outcome of a series of acts which elevate a person above the common herd and attract about him a coterie of loyal, lesser men” (1963: 289).

From Sahlins’ study of South Pacific political types, and from the work of others who have followed with similar attempts to produce general or theoretical analyses of political types on a Pacific-wide basis (e.g., Douglas 1979), it would appear that one of the most salient differences between the political systems of Melanesia and Polynesia consists in the extent to which political authority and social rank are fixed in a hierarchical fashion or, put slightly differently, the contrast rests on the difference in the intensity of social stratification. While Polynesian societies are typified by fixed hierarchy and minuscule amounts of social mobility, Melanesian societies are characterized by a more fluid social structure with a great deal of individual mobility and changes in status. In the former system, both groups and individuals are related to one another in permanent dyadic relations of superior to inferior; in the latter system, the power or status differential between both groups and individuals continually shifts.

It is on the basis of these differences in levels of social stratification that I will argue that the ephemeral art of body painting, which is found throughout Melanesia, is a logical correlate to a system of political and social organization with a high degree of status mobility, while the indelible art of tattooing, which is typical of many parts of Polynesia, is best suited to a system of political and social organization with fixed and rigid hierarchy.1

Tattooing is a form of body decoration found among many societies in Polynesia. The word “tattoo” is derived from the Tahitian word *tatu*, meaning “to mark the skin,” and was first introduced into the English language by Captain Cook on his return from the South Seas (Teilhet 1973:

1 On this point my argument takes issue with Lévi-Strauss’s famous essay on the structuralist interpretation of art. Although Lévi-Strauss discusses at some length the differences among certain motifs of body decorations, he finds insignificant the fact that while the Caduveo Indians temporarily decorate themselves with paints, the Maori permanently imprint themselves with tattoo. “The difference due to the fact that Maori design is tattooed whereas Caduveo design is painted may be dismissed” (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 257).
83). The techniques of tattooing are fairly uniform throughout the Polynesian islands, and consist of inserting ink or some other coloring agent into the skin with the use of a needle or sharp instrument. Tattooing is an ineffaceable art which leaves an intradermal mark that cannot easily be removed. For this reason, I will argue, tattooing is an art which is associated both with permanent events and with forms of political organization characterized by fixed hierarchy.2

Throughout Polynesia tattooing has served as a mark of rank. In Samoa, tattooing functioned to distinguish the chiefly class from the commoners. Tattooed designs of small bands and stripes were restricted to persons of high status, while persons of lower status were allowed to wear only tattoos of solid black which covered a person from the waist to the knees (Teitelt 1973: 87). Besides these broad distinctions between chiefly class and commoner, tattoos also signaled distinctions in rank within the Samoan ruling class itself. The number of triangles down the back of a man’s leg proclaimed rank. And two variations of a pattern known as aso tali tu served to distinguish a chief and a “talking man” from all others of high rank (Handy and Handy 1924: 21).

In Tahiti, tattooing was used as a symbol of status within the ‘Arioi Society. Members of the Society are said to have functioned as entertainers in the fields of sports and dancing; the Society drew its membership from the chiefly class (Ferdon 1981: 138–141). Within the ‘Arioi Society there were seven different ranks of membership, and each one was distinguished by its particular tattoo motif. A traveller to the region in the early nineteenth century reported: “A number of distinct classes prevailed among the Areois, each of which was distinguished by the kind or situation of the tatouing [sic] on their bodies. The first or highest class was called Avae parai; painted leg: the leg being completely blackened from the foot to the knee. The second class was called Otiore; both arms being marked, from the fingers to the shoulders. The third class was denominated Ha- rotea, both sides of the body, from the armpits downwards, being marked with tatau. The fourth class, called Hua, had only two or three small figures, impressed with the same material, on each shoulder. The fifth class, called Aito, had one small stripe, tatau on the left side. Every individual in the sixth class, designated Ohemara, had a small circle marked round each ankle. The seventh class, or Poo, which included all who were in their noviciate, was usually denominated the Poo faararea or pleasure-making class, and by them the most laborious part of the pantomimes, dances, etcetera was performed” (Ellis 1831: 238).

In the Marquesas Islands, tattoos functioned to indicate rank and tribal affiliation. Although not as strictly confined to the upper or ruling classes, the art of tattooing in Marquesan society was a very costly one, and tattoos served therefore to demarcate socioeconomic position. A complete covering of the finest work was limited to the wealthy “who could afford to employ the best artists and stand the attendant expense of feeding them and their assistants as well as the large band of ka’ioi who erected the special house for the occasion” (Handy 1922: 3). At the turn of the last century, a traveller in the region noted the following: “The poorer islanders who have not a superabundance of hogs to dispose of in luxuries, but live chiefly themselves upon breadfruit, are operated upon by novices in the art, who take them at a very low price as subjects for practice. The lowest class of all, the fishermen principally, are often not able to afford even the pay required by a novice, and are therefore not tattooed at all” (cited in Handy 1922: 4).

In Hawaii, tattooing differentiated between free men and slaves.3 Specific tattoo designs were used to designate the status of slave. These included, “a round spot in the middle of the forehead, a curved line over the nose, and curved lines resembling parentheses outside the eyes” (Teitelt 1973: 99).

Finally, among the Maori, one of the most fiercely class-structured societies of the Polynesian complex, the art of tattooing reached its highest and most sophisticated form (Goldman 1970). Unlike the tattooing of island Polynesia which was

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2 Although the focus of this essay is concerned with the relationship between tattooing and political leadership, it ought to be pointed out that tattooing is a form of body decoration that is also typically associated with a permanent change of status brought about, for instance, by a rite of passage (for some examples of these type of markings see Hambly 1925: 197–210; Rubin 1988: passim).

3 It is not at all uncommon for tattooing to be associated with a mark of either slavery or criminality. The abhutum or Babylonian slave-mark, for instance, was a tattoo mark imprinted on the forehead or the hand that identified slaves in the ancient Near East (Driver and Miles 1952: 422). In both Japan (Richie 1973) and Thailand (Terwiel 1979), tattooing was the brand of the criminal. “The [Japanese] criminal,” writes Richie, “was marked on the forehead or around the eyes, so that proof of his crime would be clearly visible” (1973: 50). During the eighteenth century, the Japanese criminal code, Gojojaki Hyakkajo, codified approximately one hundred tattoo patterns, each indicating a separate offense (ibid: 50).
done with the use of a needle puncturing the skin and introducing pigment, Maori tattooing (known as moko or whakairo) consisted of a low relief design carved into the skin, with a black pigment rubbed into the incisions (Phillips 1948).

As in other Polynesian societies, tattooing among the Maori symbolized hierarchy (fig.1). "Moko was a status symbol and the right to wear it was strictly controlled. ... Chiefs usually had more tattooing ... [and] the quantity, quality and many of the patterns of moko would not be applied except to ranking individuals" (Simmons 1983: 229–236). Early travellers and missionaries in the region were greatly impressed by Maori tattooing. In some cases, they have left careful descriptions of the techniques and patterns of moko, and have noted the relationship between moko and rank. One such example comes to us from a Catholic missionary writing in the early nineteenth century: "The distinctive mark of the chiefs is not only the face tattooing, for subordinate chiefs and even people of lower class have this tattooing in common with them, but the very distinct mark of the chiefs is the tattooing on the inside of the thigh, descending in varying degree towards the knee according to their greater or lesser standing. This mark is called puhoro" (cited in Simmons 1983: 234). Commoners among the Maori only received minor tattoos, while slaves were branded with a tattooed marking on the back which was known as papa (Simmons 1983: 235).

Together with limited social mobility, another

Fig.1: King Tawhiao, Maori, New Zealand, 1902. Photograph by Woodworth, Peabody Museum, Harvard University.
The feature of Sahlins's model of Polynesian society is a high degree of specialization. According to Sahlins's argument, "the extent of specialization could be taken as an indication of the degree of social stratification" (Noo-Palm 1976: 87). Tattooing is a form of body decoration which is appropriately suited to a social system stratified along lines of specialization. Throughout Polynesia, tattooing was done by highly skilled specialists. In Samoa, the tattooers were of the artisan class called tufuga. They were organized in guilds with tightly restricted memberships (Marquardt 1899: 6). "A trainee's membership in the guild had to be approved by the other members, who met to pass judgment on his ability" (Teilhet 1973: 85). Among the Maori, "tattooing was done by professional artists called tuihanga" (95). A moko artist learned his profession as a young apprentice. If he became successful at his craft, it was not uncommon for men of high status to secure the services of such an expert tattooer by showering him with gifts of guns, canoes, clothes, and slaves (Robley 1896: 98–101).

To summarize, then, whether distinctions in social status were marked by the absence of tattoos (i.e., in those societies where the costs of tattooing were so great that only the wealthiest were adorned) or whether status was symbolized by the presence of specific markings (i.e., in those societies where slaves or members of the lower classes were identified by certain tattooed patterns), Polynesian tattooing was a form of permanent body art that invariably functioned to signal (and maintain) class and rank differences in the highly stratified social systems of the region.4

While tattooing is a permanent body marking associated with the rigid class hierarchies of Polynesian chiefdoms, body painting is a temporary form of self-decoration found among uncentralized, acephalous societies in Melanesia. It is a type of art that has attained its most sophisticated form in the Highlands of New Guinea, especially among the Hagens of Central Melpa. Consistent with Sahlins's model of the "ideal" Melanesian political type, Hagen society has no hereditary offices of chiefship nor any rigid hierarchical relations (Strathern 1971). Leadership is not organized in a permanent or hereditary manner but is structured around the authority of a big-man whose power is tenuous and volatile. Big-men fall from power as rapidly as they rise. Godetier has described the fall of a big-man in the following terms: "Undermined and cracked, his social and material base collapses beneath him and his faction disperses, to rally around one or other of his rivals, who is thus raised by his fall" (1982: 4).

Andrew and Marilyn Strathern, who have studied extensively the "big-man" political systems of New Guinea, have pointed out that there are two sorts of relationships in Hagen society that are affected by the sort of competition which leads to shifting relations of authority. The first is the relationship among groups. During the moka or ceremonial exchange of shell valuables and pigs (an event which is a focus of political activity in Hagen society) the group which is presenting the gifts (the donors) will, for a time, have a relative position of superiority. On another occasion, however, this same group will assume a position of inferiority, when they become the recipients of gifts from another group. Changing body decorations are correlated with such shifts in a group's status. "Decorations do not mark out lasting relations of superiority and inferiority, but are assertions that one's own group has succeeded in a current bout of exchanges" (Strathern and Strathern 1971: 3).

The second shifting relationship in Hagen society is that between leader and follower. Because Hagen leadership is ever-changing, the symbols of rank that distinguish a big-man from men of ordinary status are ephemeral and are not indelibly etched on the holders of power. One might say that the paints and feathers which are used to adorn the body of a big-man are as easily removed as the authority that they are meant to represent. The Stratherns summarize their argument on this point in the following way: "There are no formalised offices of leadership nor any indigenous form of centralised government which could establish permanent relations of super- and sub-ordination in the society. Concomitantly, there are no items of ornamentation or 'regalia' which could belong to such offices and thus be the perquisites of those who held them. Individual big-men who have achieved eminence can display this by the wearing of numerous King of Saxony feathers and by an overall magnificence of their decorations. But they have no prerogative over these features. Other men

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4 It is interesting to note that the function of tattooing could remain so constant whether the tattooed pattern took its meaning from its absence or from its presence. Parallels to this sort of duality of meaning in body markings can be found in other regions of the world. With regard to slave-marks in Africa, for example, Orlando Patterson has noted that "Sometimes it was the absence of marks that identified slaves, as among the Yoruba who forbade slaves to scar themselves with Yoruba tribal marks; at other times it was the presence of such tribal marks that immediately betrayed the slaves, as among the Ashanti, who did not tattoo themselves like the many neighboring peoples they captured and enslaved" (1982: 59).
are their rivals, and may supplant them as leaders: a big man can decline in status and become like an ordinary man, whereas an ordinary man may rise to become a leader" (1971: 105).

While status distinctions between groups and individuals are relatively fluid, the Strathens point out that the distinctions between males and females in Hagen society is irreversible: i.e., it is an absolute category opposition rather than a relative one. In this regard, it is especially interesting to note that the only people in Hagen society to receive tattoos are women. At a young age, girls are permanently tattooed on the face. The marks are made by pricking the skin and rubbing in charcoal and blue dye. The design consists primarily of dots over the forehead or arching over the eyebrows, and under-eye dots or short streaks at the top of the cheek (Strathern and Strathern 1971: 40-43).

Finally, in contrast to the high degree of specialization which correlates with the multi-tiered hierarchy found in Polynesia, Melanesian societies are characterized by an egalitarian ideal with a much smaller amount of specialization. Hagen body painting is an artform that is consistent with this type of sociopolitical organization. "The skill required for making [body paint] is not a specialized one," write the Strathens, "... and we may remark in general that although skill enters the construction of other items, such as spears and shields, Hageners lay no great emphasis on technological expertise or craftsmanship. The one area in which specialist skill is recognized is in the making of particular types of wig[s], and even here the specialists do not gain high social status because of their skills" (1971: 26).

Body painting, then, is a type of adornment that is characterized by self-decoration in which individuals are not required to rely on the expertise
of a class of trained specialists (fig. 2). “It is themselves that they decorate,” conclude the Stratherns, “for it is through men’s personal achievements that renown is brought to them and their clan alike” (1971: 173).

2. Masks and Crowns: Contrasting Arts of Leadership in West Africa

Like the political systems of Oceania which were typologized by Marshall Sahlins in an essay discussed above, traditional African political organization can be classified according to types that then can be placed on a continuum ranging from centralized and highly differentiated kingdoms — with a sacred king at the apex of a ranked court — to undifferentiated or segmentary systems of political organization with few easily identified leaders (cf. Eisenstadt 1959). This sort of classification was first proposed by Fortes and Evans-Pritchard in what has become a classic monograph in comparative political anthropology: “African Political Systems” (1940). In this work, the authors describe both centralized and uncentralized political types for Africa as a whole. Typologies of this sort have continued to be produced, although in later works the categories of sociopolitical types have become somewhat more diverse in order to better account for the complexity of African political organization (Brown 1951; Middleton and Tait 1958; Forde and Kaberry 1967).

As in the previous section of this essay, I will use as my starting point a comparative sociopolitical typology of the region and will attempt to show that each of these political types can be correlated with a different form of art that functions to legitimate a particular style of leadership. Specifically, it will be argued that while the arts of centralized African kingdoms tend to be arts of display that serve to make visible the leader and the wealth and power of his court, the arts of uncentralized African political systems tend to be arts of masking that function to conceal rather than reveal a potential locus of authority (cf. Fraser and Cole 1972: 296–299; Adams 1980: 30).5

While crowns and masks may both be classified as decorations of the head, they are in fact very different from one another. In contrast to crowning, which draws attention to the head and face of the wearer, masking hides a person’s identity. Because of its capacity to disguise the human face, masking, in the broad spectrum of body decoration, should be classified as a unique form of adornment. In his essay on “Split Representation in the Art of Asia and America,” Lévi-Strauss overlooks the uniqueness of masking, and concludes instead that all societies which create decorations for the face and head should be described as “mask cultures.” He writes: “All the cultures considered here are, in fact, mask cultures whether the masking is achieved predominantly by tattooing (as is the case for the Guaicurú and Moari) or whether the stress is placed literally on the mask, as the Northwest Coast has done in a fashion unsurpassed elsewhere” (1963: 261 f.). In a mode of reasoning similar to the one which led him to conclude that the arts of body painting and tattooing were indistinguishable, Lévi-Strauss blurs the distinction between masking and tattooing. Writing on Polynesian tattooing, one author has criticized Lévi-Strauss in the following way: “Facial tattooing is in opposition to a true masking tradition because it becomes an intrinsic sign of the individual, a part of his or her physiognomy. ... In a tattooing situation, such as Polynesia, the individual represents a fixed position in the social hierarchy. The tattoo does not disguise or conceal the person’s basic social identity: it signifies an addition of new social roles or transitions in status. A masking situation is significantly in contrast to this. Instead of being a marker of additional new features of social identity, it represents the disguising, the ‘masking’ of the old social identity in order to signal some cultural form. A mask disguises as well as symbolizes. Marks of status do not disguise; they embellish” (Teilhet 1979: 198 f.).

5 The distinction between masks and crowns finds some parallels in the contrast drawn by Simon Ottenberg between masking and charisma. In an essay on the psychology of West African masquerades, Ottenberg has written the following: “It is fruitful to contrast masking in West Africa with the concept of charisma ..., for they are at opposite ends of a scale. ... The charismatic person or leader has as his social role his personality fully projected; he puts his individual behavioral characteristics strongly into his role so that his personal qualities predominate and become his attractiveness to others. ... On the other hand, the masker is in a highly structured role situation in which, to the audience, the individual personality disappears, almost totally masked in the social role portrayed” (1982: 157).

6 A similar critique has been put forth by Ogeben in his article on “Mask in the Light of Semiotics” (1975). He too directly addresses Lévi-Strauss’s point regarding the similarity of masks and tattoos, and concludes contra Lévi-Strauss that “The mask is ... only a temporary instrument, not permanently fixing as the tattoo does the social class of a person; although also an instrument of transformation of a social type, the mask leaves undisturbed the distribution of social roles, creating only the semblance of another hierarchy” (1975: 3).
Although some forms of masking are found in a few of the more centralized kingdoms of West and Central Africa, the primary domain of elaborate masking traditions is in the decentralized societies of West Africa (most notably in the present-day nations of Nigeria, Côte d’Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Mali, Liberia, and Sierra Leone). Masking in this region tends to be coupled with secret societies which are structured along the lines of lineages. Secrecy in these situations functions to protect those engaged in judicial and policy-making deliberations against pressure from their various lineages (Jones 1979: 48). “This makes it easier for them to consider any situation on its merits, and to avoid taking up positions inspired by purely sectional interests” (Horton 1976: 96).

In societies organized on the basis of secret sociopolitical organizations, the mask is a well-suited form of body adornment since it hides the face in social intercourse and protects a person’s identity. Among students of African masks, one of the earliest to draw a meaningful connection between the politics of segmentary societies and the art of masking was George W. Harley (Steiner 1986). In his monograph “Masks as Agents of Social Control in Northeast Liberia” (1950), Harley demonstrated how the functioning of law and politics among the Mano and Dan depended on the use of wooden masks that were owned by ritual specialists and judges referred to collectively under the Mano name, Gonola (1950: 12). The masks, Harley wrote, were “practical implements that served to guarantee the smooth working of a system of government founded on strict adherence to custom” (vii). Each type of mask served a different function and was ranked along a hierarchy ranging from the most feared and powerful ones to the most benevolent (fig. 3). The connection between masking and political organization has also been taken up in the writings of Robin Horton, who argues that the masking of the society’s executives “makes immediate sense when considered as a device to ensure acceptance of the harsher sanctions applied by the society to offenders against community laws – sanctions which may include death, corporal punishment, or confiscation of properties. Where the executives are masked, it is possible for the public to accept their actions, however harsh, as impersonal manifestations of the collective will. If they were unmasked and identifiable, their actions might cause dangerous resentment through suspicion of sectional interest” (1976: 97).

In his research among the Mandinka of the Gambia in West Africa, Peter Weil has put forth an argument suggesting that masking functions to reduce political tensions in communities characterized by lineage rivalry and factionalism. “Masked figures in this context,” writes Weil, “provide a mechanism through which the probability of sustained, divisive conflict is decreased by converting secular actions of rule-application into sacred, supra-social actions” (1971: 279).

The Mandinka communities which were studied by Weil are made up of two potentially factional groups: members of the patrilineage that founded the village (dinsara) and members of all other patrilineages in the village who are termed “strangers” (falifo). Stranger lineages are clients to founding lineages which grant them use-rights to land in return for political and public economic support. Rules in the village are established by the village senior founders at village-wide meetings. The established rules and decrees are then enforced by members of the young men’s age grade. Because the age grade recruits its members from both founder and stranger lineages, the enforcement of rules by young men of all lineages is potentially challenging to the principle of lineage ranking since it cuts across stratification based on lineage membership. Weil explains this when he writes. “In the process of applying rules, the young men’s age grade must punsh or be able to make a fully credible threat to punish malingerers, adulterous women, sorcerers, gossip, and the like – anyone from any level of the stratification system” (1971: 285). The chances of conflict in the application of rules is lessened by the use of masked and costumed figures. On communal work projects, for example, where equal labor is

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7 The Yoruba and Kuba have masking traditions that operate in a separate domain from centralized royal authority. The Asante, however, one of the most powerful kingdoms in nineteenth-century Africa, present a powerful contrast to accephalous societies with masking, since it was their policy to strictly outlaw masking in their territory. “Unlike several of their neighbours,” explains McLeod, “the Asante have no tradition of masks and masquerade. ... It is possible that Asante rulers actively discouraged the importation of masks as these would undermine their political control. It is striking that the only nineteenth-century masks were recorded in the 1880s when the Asantehene’s [paramount chief] powers were diminished” (1981: 67).

8 In this form of political organization, the hierarchy of the masks forms a separate status system which is conceptually distinct from the individuals who actually exercise authority. By identifying the source of power outside society, an image of diffuse, impartial social control is maintained within the community.

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expected of all participants, a young man wearing a mask calls out the workers, strikes even the foreman, and punishes shirkers (Adams 1980: 30). "The masked figure and its secret association," concludes Weil, "offer this age grade a mechanism to establish its credibility, impartiality, and flexibility as a rule-applying structure" (1971: 285 f.).

Among the Afikpo Ibo of eastern Nigeria, Simon Ottenberg describes a situation in which masks are used by the young men in the community to criticize the behavior of the village elders. Like other Ibo communities, the one studied by Ottenberg has never formed itself into a highly centralized political system. "The male elders rule the village by common agreement amongst themselves. There are no formal village chiefs or heads; consensus is the rule" (Ottenberg 1972: 100). Young Afikpo men organize an annual festival known as Okumkpa that consists of a series of skits and songs presented before the entire village. The performers wear painted wooden masks and cloth and fiber costumes that hide their identity. Because
the identity of the players is not known, "the young men are essentially free from the usual authority of the elders" (107). The masked skits serve to comment on the need to follow proper procedures and etiquette, as well as to criticize and ridicule named elders of the villages. Some dramas, for instance, reveal "that certain elders are foolish men who make unwise decisions for their own personal goals rather than for the whole community" (110). Ottenberg emphasizes that it is only by using the masks that direct criticisms like these are possible. "The kinds of comments these masked figures - young and middle-aged men - make concerning their leaders," writes Ottenberg, "would be, Afikpo admit, impossible to utter, unmasked, in public. The political structure of the village is such that no young or middle-aged man would normally dare to make such statement at village councils" (111). And, further on, he concludes: "The secrecy of the dancers, achieved through the use of masks and costume as concealing forms, is a method of publicly revealing what persons gossip about privately, or simply do not know. The masked players, through a ritual role reversal of leadership, become devices through which the secrets of the 'other world' are revealed and explained" (119).

While masks conceal the face and head of the wearer, crowns, headdresses, and other forms of coronal regalia function to draw attention to a named leader. "Personal regalia, elaborate architecture and furnishings, and various objects used by leaders render them more conspicuous and thus enhance their superior status and power to control" (Fraser and Cole 1972: 309). Rather than hide the wearer's identity, headdresses serve to "establish direct identity" (Biebuyck and Abbee 1984: 49).

In many instances, the crown itself is one of the most important defining features of the institution of kingship. In the African kingdom of Ngoyo in western Zaire, for example, the royal insignia consists primarily of a cap and a throne or stool. The cap is said to be the most vital symbol of kingship. At the conclusion of the investiture of the Ngoyo king, the newly invested leader is reminded: "It is the cap/crown which makes nsi [king] live and last" (Van Wing 1959: 110). In fact, "the cap [which is] received as his foremost piece of regalia and the invested chief himself become conceptually identical" (Volavka 1981: 46).

Although most kingdoms in Africa share many of the same characteristics, there is some variation in the degree to which the ruler is thought to be divine (Vansina 1962: 325). In divine kingship, it is not the individual who is sacred or who holds power, but rather it is the office of royalty which represents the ruling authority. In those African political systems that place the most emphasis on the special supernatural powers of the king, the ruler tends to be enveloped in the most layers of regalia which serve to reveal his office by hiding his person.

Among the Yoruba of Nigeria, the divine na-

Fig. 4: The Ore of Otun with his wives, Yoruba, Nigeria, 1900-1910. The King's face is not only covered by a veil of beads affixed to the crown but is also concealed by a beaded shield held over his mouth. Photographer unknown. Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Library and Records Department, London. Reproduced by courtesy of John Pemberton III.
ture of kingship is strongly felt. Because the king's divine powers are thought to emanate from his head, crowns are considered to be the most powerful aspect of the Yoruba king's regalia (Ogunba 1964; Blier 1985; Euba 1985; Drewal and Pemberton 1989). The Yoruba crown consists of a tall conical cloth form which is covered with different brilliantly colored glass beads (Thompson 1972: 230). At the bottom edge of the crown are strings of beads that hang in front of the wearer's face (fig. 4). As a result, the king's identity is partially masked behind a veil of heavily beaded fringe (Thompson 1976: 81). "The function of the [Yoruba] crown," Ulli Beier has written, "is to eliminate the individual personality of the wearer and supplant it with the divine power of the dynasty. ... Once a king is installed, it is imperative that he never shows his face to the public. The crown thus becomes the mask that transforms him into the 'brother of the gods'" (1982: 24–26).

Not all crowns or royal headdresses function to hide the divine leader's secular body. In some African kingdoms, especially those where the king's functions are principally administrato-

head ornaments identify individually named leaders and subordinate members of the king's entourage. In what is now the present-day republic of Ghana, the ruler of the Asante Confederacy, the Asantehene, represented directly the visual grandeur of his court. The Asante Confederacy was a highly centralized political system with a named leader at the summit of a well-developed court administration (Wilks 1975). In Asante, Cole reports, "regalia became hierarchical, with 'first-class' chiefs allowing their subjects certain items, and so on down the organizational pyramid which had at its apex a divine king – the dispenser of gold and other riches" (1970: 21). In "The Sacred State of the Akan," Eva Meyerowitz describes the king (fig. 5) in the following way: "He sat under the enormous double state umbrella of his ancestors. He wore full regalia; a purple cloth of heavy velvet richly embroidered with the royal emblems, necklaces, armlets, bracelets, finger-rings, anklets and toe-rings of gold, and round his head a chaplet covered with triangles of gold" (1951: 53).

Like the tattoos of the centralized kingdoms of Polynesia which functioned to signal rank in
the political hierarchy, crowns and other regalia in African kingdoms served to differentiate leaders according to status. During the annual state festivals in Asante, for example, hundreds of regalia-laden rulers assembled in the Asante capital. According to Cole, “All were visually differentiated according to rank. The more elaborate, rare and expensive the regalia, the more important the leader. Lesser chiefs were restricted to more common materials like brass or wood instead of gold, cotton instead of silk, and horse tails instead of elephant tails” (1970: 22). In fact, even textiles in the Asante Confederacy were ranked along the lines of political hierarchy. Denise Paulme tells us that Asante “silks and cottons have designs which identify the origin, social status, and sex of the bearer; in earlier times all new designs were the property of the king who either reserved them for his own use or else made a gift of them to those whom he wished to honour” (1973: 12).

The contrast between coronal ornaments that reveal (Asante) and those that partially conceal (Yoruba) is even more interesting when one considers evidence of changes through time in the symbolism of royal regalia within a single African kingdom. To return, for a moment, to the Yoruba, it has been discovered in archaeological finds at Ife that fourteenth-century Yoruba crowns were very different from those described in contemporary accounts. Of greatest significance is that none of the uncovered Ife heads or figures that bear crowns appear to have strings of beads that hide the wearer’s face. If these heads are indeed, as Frank Willett (1967) has argued, representations of deceased kings, then the concept of royalty among the Yoruba has changed drastically since the fourteenth century. Exploring the contrast between present-day Yoruba crowns and earlier ones, Ulli Beier concludes that “[Today] the individuality of the oba . . . is not something to be remembered and preserved. His face is hidden from the public throughout his life and it is unthinkable that it should be preserved with naturalistic detail for posterity. But the crowns of ancient Ife do not attempt to hide the face of the king. Instead of the mask-like supernatural mystique of the beaded crown and its highly stylized frontal face, we see the idealized, naturalistic feature of a serene, but definitely anthropomorphic face. Somewhere between the fourteenth century and the seventeenth or eighteenth century Yoruba kingship developed from the splendours of a wealthy, cultured leadership to the mysteries and complexities of divine kingship” (1982: 33 f.).

From these examples of adornment and leadership in West Africa, it is possible to conclude that there exists a continuum of body ornamentation associated with political authority which ranges from adornments that help the leader be seen to those that serve the leader as screen. In societies with uncentralized political organization it has been demonstrated that masking disguises the source of authority. In some cases masks allow lawmakers to remain anonymous (and presumably impartial) while carrying out the enforcement of rules. In others, masks permit those in subordinate positions to criticize superiors without risking punishment or retaliation. In societies with centralized political organization crowns make visible the locus of authority. Crowning can be divided into two separate categories. The first, which falls somewhere in the middle of the overall continuum, partially masks the wearer. In a divine kingdom, this type of crowning hides the secular form of the leader in order to focus full attention on the sacred office which he represents. The second type of crowning draws attention to the individual in power. Characteristic of administrative kingdoms like that of the Asante, this sort of crowning frames the leader in a panoply of regalia: a stool at his feet, a state umbrella above his head, and a ring of attendants all around.

Conclusion

There exists in social anthropology a tradition of what Durkheim called the study of “concomitant variation.” This sort of analysis aims to investigate the relationship among a given cultural practice and particular features of the cultures in which it appears. In “Child Training and Personality” (1953), for example, John Whiting and Irvin Child analyzed across many societies the statistical correlation of child-training practices and beliefs about the causes of illness. Working in a similar tradition, S.F. Nadel, in his essay on “Witchcraft in Four African Societies” (1952), suggested that witchcraft beliefs were causally related to specific anxieties and stresses arising in social life. Through cross-cultural analysis of concomitant variation, he discovered that societies with particular forms of tension brought about through aspects of their cultural beliefs or social organization were likely to have more incidents of witchcraft accusations than societies in which these tensions were absent.

By asking whether a society’s degree of political differentiation is reflected precisely in its artistic forms, Douglas Fraser and Herbert Cole, in
their edited volume on “African Art and Leadership” (1972), raised for the first time the possibility of analyzing concomitant variation in the realms of ornamentation and politics. “Are the nuances and complexities of the leadership sphere sufficiently related,” they ask, “to those of the visual domain to link the two in a cause-and-effect manner?” (299).

In this essay I have taken seriously the challenge put forth by Fraser and Cole. In so doing, I have demonstrated that at least in some instances there is a significant correlation between art form and style of leadership, and that certain arts are suited by design to certain types of political organization.

In recent years, historians and social scientists have become increasingly aware that important clues to uncovering the mechanics and meaning of political systems lie not only in the formal structures and actions of political groups, but also in the less obvious realms of language, gesture, posture, and art. Hegemonic relations are perpetuated not merely through the direct application of rules and codes of conduct, but also less directly through the control of vocabularies, grammars, and a host of other symbolic materials (Cohen 1986). Body decoration, it has been argued herein, is a key symbol in the structuring and unfolding of political life. Though sometimes silent in its direct political manifestations, body decoration has been shown to be so central to political organization that its forms may indeed covary with diverse political types.

One of the results of discovering political messages in the minutiae of both everyday and ritual life, has been the realization that the flow of information which establishes, modifies, and comments on major sociopolitical categories is not limited to particular moments or isolated spatial domains, but is present, often in unarticulated ways, at all times all around us. In a recent book on the history of colonial Virginia, Rhys Isaac takes up this very point: “A society necessarily leaves marks of use upon the terrain it occupies. These marks are meaningful signs not only of the particular relations of a people to environment but also of the distribution and control of access to essential resources. Incised upon a society’s living space appears a text for the inhabitants – which he who runs may read – of social relations in their world. Moving more slowly, anthropologists for present societies, and historical ethnographers for past ones, must understand the relations of production inscribed upon the land and decipher as much as they can of the meanings that such relations assumed for those who were part of them” (1982: 19). It is but a small analytical leap from the physiography of the meaning of the land to the social geography, as it were, of the human body. Like a map with marks of social and political terrain, body adornments provide a chart of the cultural anatomy which structures relations of status, hierarchy, and power.

I am grateful to Professors Monni Adams, Sally Falk Moore, Stanley Tambiah, and Nur Yalman for having read an earlier draft of this essay. I wish also to thank Christraud Geary, Barbara Isaac, Kathleen Skelly, and Carol Thompson for their assistance in making available the photographs and artifact which illustrate this article.

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