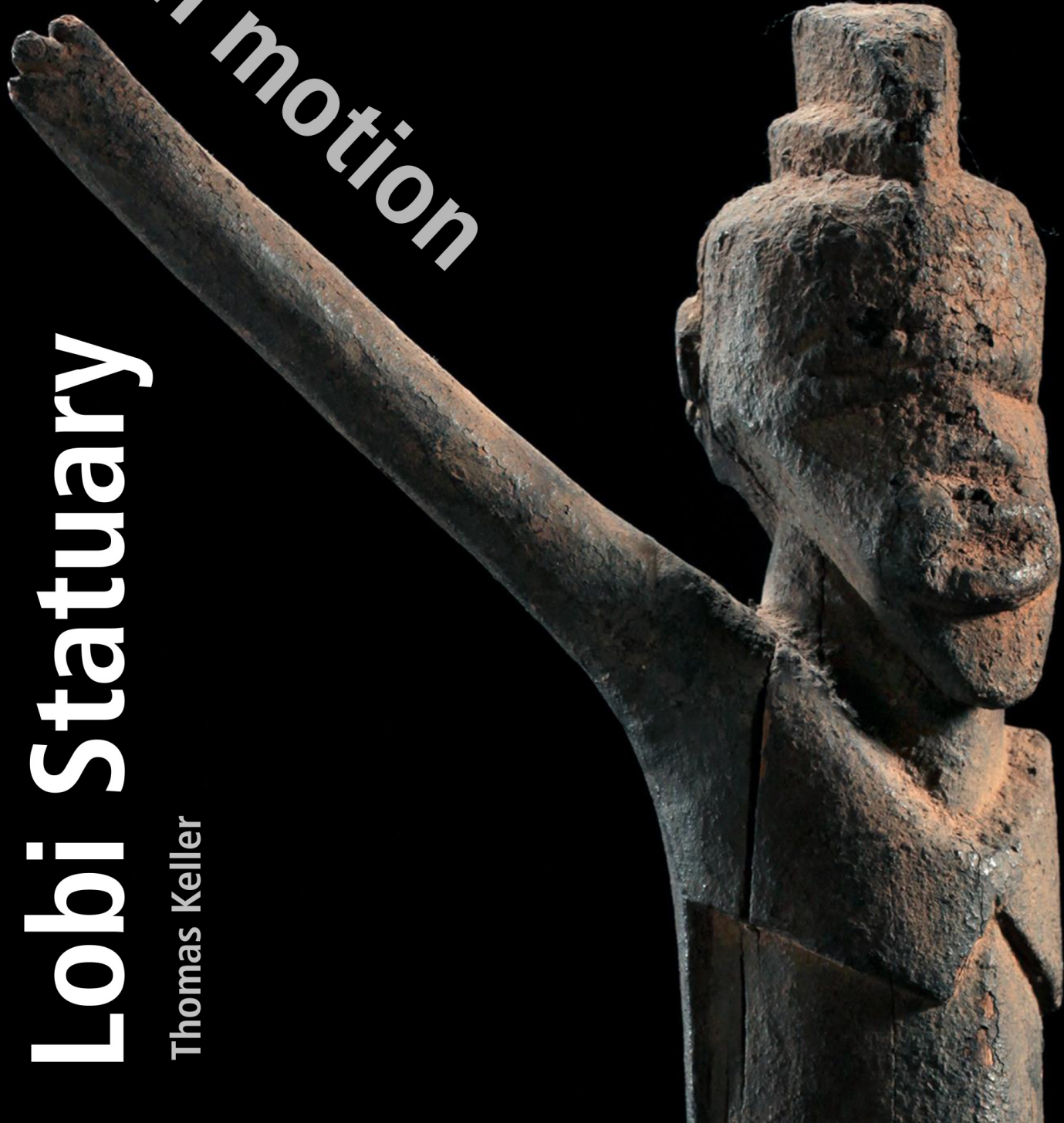


Lobi Statuary

Thomas Keller

in motion



Lobi Statuary – in motion

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Blog: <https://statuary-in-context.blogspot.ch>

Contact: info@statuary-in-context.ch

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1. Introduction

The iconography of the statuary of the Lobi people in West Africa is characterized by a remarkable variety of forms, postures and gestures. Forms as frequently observed in African art, e.g. mother-child (Fig. 1) or Janus representations or seated persons, are part of this iconography, as well as those much more specific to Lobi due to their frequency, such as figures with outstretched arms or body alterations. This variety of forms also constitutes the foundation of several iconology-based classification systems, where specific functions are attributed to specific postures or gestures (e.g. Meyer 1981, Bognolo 1990, Bosc 2004). However, this alleged direct relationship between form and function is also contradicted (Keller 2011) and will be further addressed in the following where the iconology of the Lobi statuary is derived from a different perspective.

Fig. 1
Typical element of
Lobi iconography:
mother with child
(photo Walter 1955)



2. Just standing statues

In the center of interest of this work are at first the just standing statues without any particular gesture. Several descriptions can be found in literature for these statues. Himmelheber (1966) designated just standing figures as being compact not in the vertical, but in the horizontal direction, resembling soldiers standing to attention in rows, thus restricting the lateral body extension. Meyer (1981) described so-called ordinary figures as having grim and furious faces, and being in a state of extreme agitation and rage and then also referred to Himmelheber's description. Warin (1989) designated the just standing figures as being hieratic, severe, unadorned, rigid, austere, tight. Bognolo (1990) attributed them with a calm attitude, being at rest, and according to Gottschalk (1999), again, they express an upright posture, bringing to mind soldiers standing to attention. There are thus some contradictory interpretations, e.g. between Meyer and Bognolo, however, the general image presented is that of still standing postures which certainly do not express any motion.



1934



1950



1972

Fig. 2

Dance type D1: female group dance during funeral ceremonies, photo by Heim (1934), frames from the Téhini village (1950) and Dumas (1972) films

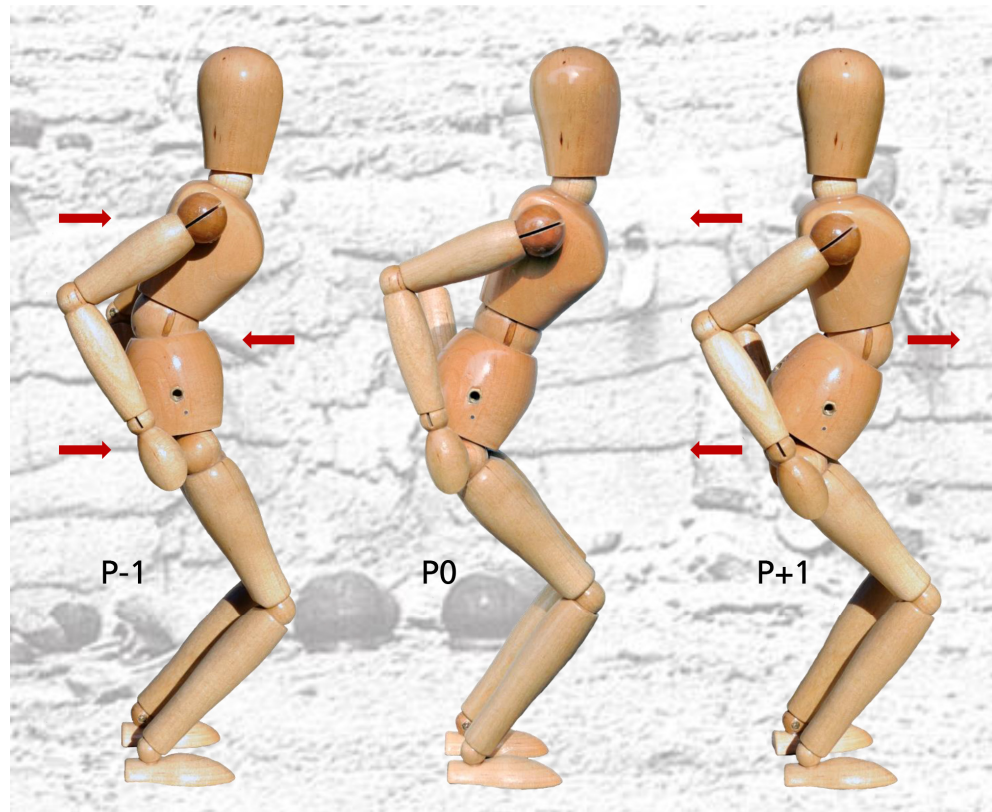
On the other hand, watching films about traditional Lobi culture, which in most cases include dance scenes during funeral or other ceremonies such as the Bagre, and watching these dance scenes frame by frame, postures and gestures that look very similar to those expressed by the statuary, and the just standing figures in particular, can be recognized. A typical group dance scene (D1) from a funeral ceremony can be seen in a photo taken by Heim in 1934, see Fig. 2, whose choreography has not changed since then, as evidenced in the Téhini village (1950) and Dumas (1972) films. The same dances are shown that look, which seems contradictory, full of motion and immobile at the same time. The pelvis and shoulders of the dancers, always only women, are moved forward and backward in the same direction, while the spine is moved in the opposite direction, both at the same high frequency, as depicted in the frame sequences in Fig. 3 and schematically

Fig. 3
Dance type D1:
sequences (film
frames) during the
first funeral in
Dumas film (1972)



shown in Fig. 4 (movement positions P-1 and P+1). The legs with flexed knees, at the same time, alternately stamp the ground, but with a lower frequency. The dancers, however, remain in the same place, in an upright position and hardly moving their bent arms and the head, the facial expression calm and inward-looking, as shown in the sequence in Fig. 5 (left). Looking at these individual film frames, postures of frozen movements are shown, which look rigid and tight, as described by Warin above for the just standing figures, and shown in Figs. 6 to 9. These statues thus, rather than soldiers standing to attention, seem to express complex dance motions, which, in addition, are deeply anchored in the tradition of this people.

Fig. 4
Dance type D1:
typical movement
positions P-1, P0
(collapse position),
P+1



The assumption that African statuary may express dance movements is not new. Back in 2000, an exhibition took place in the Musée de l'homme in Paris, entitled "From dance to sculpture, a different view on African aesthetics" (title translated from French), where a link between dance movements and statuary postures was established. However, much earlier, in 1969, Günther wrote about "Basic phenomena and notions of the African and African-American dance" (title translated from German) where he also attributed statuary postures to dance movements. Later contributions to this topic were published by Thompson (1974) and Tiérou (1989), and the latter also participated in the above-mentioned exhibition in 2000. In these



Fig. 5

Dance type D1: movement positions P-1, P+1, P-1, sequences during the first funeral in Téhini film (1950) and video of Behon Dhpao (2013)

Fig. 6

Just standing
statues,
dance type D1,
movement position
P+1 (77cm)

**Fig. 7**

Just standing
statues,
dance type D1,
movement position
P-1 (59cm)



works, the attribution of statuary postures to dance movements is mainly based on the flexed knees and, less often, the cambered spine.

According to Günther, African dance styles differ fundamentally from Western styles. They are characterized by polycentric movement techniques, i.e. the whole body does not move as a unit, as in Western styles, but each body region has its own dance center. The body is thus able to reflect the multilayered metrics of African music through isolated movements, for instance arms and legs move in different rhythms. The African dancer therefore does not perceive his body as a unit, but decomposes it into different body centers, such as head, torso, pelvis, arms and legs. These primary centers are then subdivided into several body areas, e.g. shoulders, chest, buttocks, which again can move independently. This polycentric movement technique requires a specific basic posture with a low center of gravity, called “collapse” in modern jazz dance (whose roots lie in African dances), i.e. the upper body is slightly inclined forwards, the knees are flexed and the buttocks protrude backwards, as shown in position P0 in Fig. 4. The movements are thus not directed upwards to overcome gravity as in Western dances, but stamp downwards onto the ground, which also expresses the typical connection to earth of African culture.

Günther also established a classification of African dances and characterized West African styles by movements of the legs, and isolated movements of the shoulder girdle, back and pelvis. This description thus closely corresponds to what can be seen in the aforementioned films. Furthermore, he also emphasized that the activated body centers are often visually marked by details of the dancewear, i.e. raffia skirts, feathers or cowry shells. In this respect, an allusion may be made to the well-known Lobi sculptures “with glasses”, see sculpture in Fig. 9 (Keller and Katsouros 2014). Small, sculpted protrusions, located at the elbows, knees and shoulder blades can be seen, which may be interpreted as markings of movement centers, together with similar protrusions at the buttocks, breasts and navel. This sculpture too has the typical frozen movement posture (P+1) as discussed above.

Fig. 8

Just standing
statues,
dance type D1,
movement position
P-1 (19cm)

**Fig. 9**

Sculpture "with
glasses",
interpretation of
protrusions at
elbows, knees and
shoulder blades as
markings of motion
centers,
dance type D1,
movement position
P+1 (42.5cm)



3. Body alterations

The sculptors of statues, who are also dancers – no barriers between dancers and spectators exist – may thus conceive their works from a very different perspective than do Western sculptors. If the concept of a statue is based on a view of the body as being decomposed into isolated parts with different rhythms and metrics, this may also contribute to the understanding of why, for instance, the proportions of African statuary differ so much from human proportions. The perception of the body as being a modular construction made up of independent elements may also explain body alterations such as deformities or superabundance of gesture or body parts, as identified by Blier (1982). Individual limbs for instance may thus be deformed, omitted or doubled or tripled, depending on their significance in the sculptural concept. Body deformities, according to Meyer (1981), do not express illness but superhuman power. Even if individual limbs are omitted, the remaining body parts are composed in a harmonious and balanced manner and do not express any disability, as shown in the one-legged statue or the well-known

Fig. 10
Body deformities:
heads on stylized
trunk (42cm) and
one-legged figure
(62cm).
Superabundance of
body parts: two
heads (23.8cm)



heads “on posts” in Fig. 10. Superabundance of gesture, e.g. sculpting two heads (Fig. 10), could further emphasize body movements, i.e. merging consecutive frames or postures into one sculpture.

4. Outstretched arms

Coming back to the statues with outstretched arms, similar gestures can again be found in African ceremonies and dances. Statues with two raised arms were already attributed to women expressing mourning for a deceased person (Meyer 1981, Warin 1989). This is confirmed by photos and film

Fig. 11

Raised arms of individual mourning women during funeral ceremonies, without dancing, film frames (Téhini 1950, Dumas 1972) and photos from Vila (1956) and Le Querrec (1998)



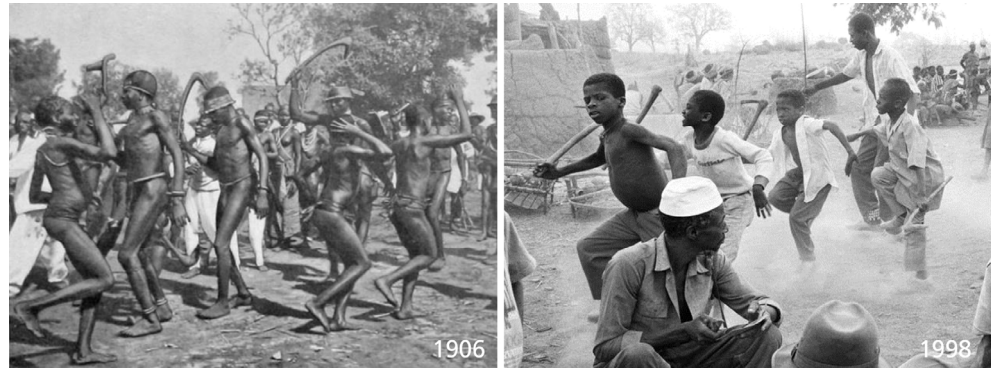


Fig. 12

Dance type D2: men and women with raised arms, Bagre ceremony, Dumas film (1972)

Fig. 13

Dance type D3:
male row dance
with one raised arm,
in 1906 (Brossard)
and during a last
funeral ceremony in
1998 (Le Querrec)



frames shown in Fig. 11, where individual mourning women, who are not dancing, periodically raise both arms during funeral ceremonies. However, men and women, who jump from the typical collapse position upwards, simultaneously raising both arms, are also part of the choreography of a group dance (D2) in the Bagre ceremony in the Dumas film, see Fig. 12. An interesting detail is that one man even holds two statues in his hands during this dance.

A further dance type (D3), already shown in a photo of 1906 and then in the funeral ceremony of the Téhini (1950) film and again in 1998, see Fig. 13, differs greatly from the above-described, somewhat unorganized group dances. In this choreography, men or boys move forward in a row, again stamping alternately on the ground with bent legs or even running, one arm is raised and holds a hoe. After a certain distance, they turn in the opposite direction and move or run back, again one after the other, to the starting point.

A second row dance (D4) of men or boys, shown in the film frames and photos in Fig. 14, and taken during Bagre (in 1972) and funeral ceremonies (in 1998 and 2007), consists of the same stamping forward movement as in the previously described row dance. The arms and hands, however, are moved differently – they are downward directed, outstretched and alternately rotate around their axes together with the shoulder blades, at a high frequency, the torso remains straight.

Fig. 14

Dance type D4:
row dance with
downward directed
arms, during Bagre
(Dumas 1972) and
funeral ceremonies
(Le Querrec 1998,
Enemy Music 2007)

**Fig. 15**

Sculptures with
outstretched arm(s),
up- or downward
directed,
dance types
(from left to right):
D2 or standing, D4,
D3 (71, 88, 92cm)



All the different gestures of outstretched arms observed in Lobi statuary, as shown with a few examples in Fig. 15, can thus also be recognized in dances with different choreographies and purposes, for men and women, i.e. the two raised arms gesture is thus not limited to only standing mourning women. All four dance types can also be seen in the Savonnet film about a Bagre ceremony in the village of Kwenoma-Sansana in 1968, see Table 1. However, dances D3 and D4 are combined, one arm is raised and holds a hoe, while the other arm is downward directed and alternately rotates together with the shoulder blades at a high frequency.

Coming back to the aforementioned iconology-based classification systems, figures raising one or both arms are denominated “dangerous persons” by Meyer (1981), and a protective function is ascribed to them as they block the entrance of enemies into the house. On the other hand, Meyer also allocates one statue with raised arms to his “sad persons” category, figures that express deep grief. Still more different denominations and functions are attributed to these figures by Warin, Bosc and Bognolo (see Keller 2011). This clearly demonstrates that a function-based classification of the Lobi statuary is not adequate and meaningful. One specific gesture may thus express very different functions, the precise one being known, case by case, only by the diviner and his client (Keller 2011).

5. Seated figures

Having said this, another posture to which a specific function is attributed is that of figures seated flat on the ground. They are denominated by Meyer (1981) as “paralyzed figures”, which cannot move and watch the house; if danger approaches, they call the residents back. These figures are characterized by a rigid posture, i.e. the upper body and legs are tense and the gaze is empty, as expressed in Fig. 16, a posture which is opposed to that of relaxed seated people, shown in Fig. 17, or even mourning seated women in Fig. 2.

On the other hand, several photos and films of the first funeral ceremony also show the deceased, see Fig. 18. They are normally leaned against a tree, the upper body and head fixed back with cords – thus expressing a posture much more similar to that of the seated figures (Fig. 16) than that of just seated people (Fig. 17). These seated figures may thus also be interpreted as images of the deceased, the rigid posture even symbolizing rigor mortis, a condition that lasts a certain time, which may disturb people or have a specific significance in the transition process to becoming an ancestor. Also, it seems incomprehensible and is unexplained in literature why paralysis should have greater significance than any other infirmity and thus be incorporated into the iconography.

Fig. 16
Seated figures in
rigid posture
(21/11.5cm/18.5cm,
height)

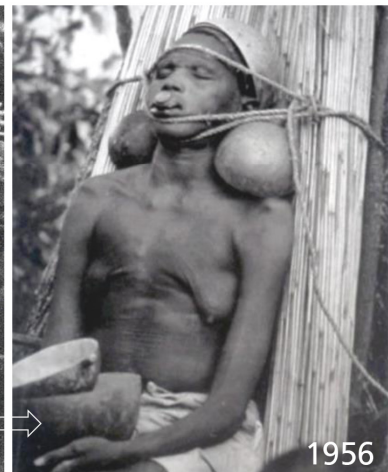
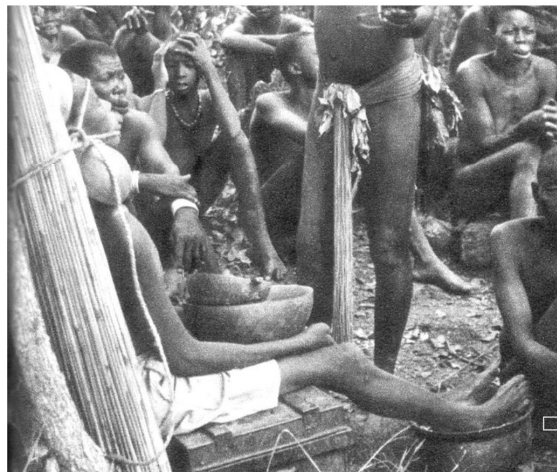


Fig. 17

Seated women,
frames from
Téhini (1950) and
Dumas (1972) films

**Fig. 18**

Deceased during the
first funeral
ceremony, frames
from Téhini (1950)
and Dumas (1972)
films and photos
Vila (1956)



6. Conclusions

To conclude, it has been shown that many of the typical postures and gestures of Lobi statuary may be traced back to motion sequences during ceremonial dances, occurrences during the first funeral ceremony or, in a wider sense, as a “frozen” state in the ancestor transition. Dances play a key role in African culture; they enable a powerful expression of life with its emotions and traditions and allow for the communication with the world of spirits and ancestors. It hence seems understandable that dance elements or movements also became part of the iconography.

Table 1
Lobi traditional
dance types and
movements,
summary
(frequency in Hz)

Motion centers	Dance types and movements			
	D1	D2	D3	D4
Head	upright, unmoved	upright, unmoved	upright, unmoved	upright, unmoved
Shoulders	back↔forth (3-5Hz)	torso from collapse position up↔down	torso slightly inclined forwards, straight, unmoved	torso slightly inclined forwards, straight, unmoved, shoulder blades follow arm rotation
Chest	forth↔back (3-5Hz)			
Pelvis	back↔forth (3-5Hz)			
Arms	both angled, unmoved	both angled, raised↔lowered	one arm raised, holds a hoe	downward stretched, alternatingly rotate around axis (4-5Hz)
Legs	flexed knees, alternatingly stamp (2-3Hz), on the spot	knees flexed↔stretched, on the spot or moving forward	flexed knees, alternatingly stamp (2-3Hz), moving forward or running	flexed knees, alternatingly stamp (2-3Hz), moving forward
Choreography	female group dance	group dance	male row dance	male row dance
References Playing time (selections)	Téhini (1950): 02:32, 04:04, 04:21 Savonnet (1968): 04:47, 13.25 (woman) Dumas (1972): 28:14, 28:16 (women)	Savonnet (1968): 16:50 Dumas (1972): 33:07, 35:56	Téhini (1950): 02:36, 02:50, 05:30 Savonnet (1968): 04:17,13:25 (men)	Savonnet (1968): 04:17,13:25 (men) Dumas (1972): 28:16 (man), 33:40

Four basic dance types could be identified in films about traditional Lobi culture, as summarized in Table 1. In more recent videos, the correspondences observed in earlier documents between gender and dance type have disappeared in most cases. Men can be seen dancing in type D1 and women in type D4, and both either in group or row choreography, standing on the spot or moving forward, e.g. on a video about a festival of music and traditional dance in 2013 (Loropéni Djoro Festival). Surprisingly, no systematic records or detailed information about the significance of these dances are available. Since they form one main essence of Lobi culture and seem to evolve with time, their investigation and documentation should be taken up.

Regarding the possible sculptor's interpretation and thus representation of the human body as a composition of independent elements, which express their varying conceptual significance in body alterations, at this stage, more research is certainly required for a possible validation of this hypothesis.

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Magnum Photos, photographer Guy le Querrec: Figs. 11 (bottom-right) & 14 (bottom-left): last funeral of Tediremana Palenfo in Olkopouo, 8 March 1998. Figures 13 (right) & 14 (bottom-right): last funeral of Koundiema Hien in Bouli, 3 March 1998.

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