

9. EL ANATSUI

COLORFUL WOODS AND DARK LINES

New wood has poetry locked in it,
Old wood is poetry itself, time
Having worn off its prose

EL ANATSUI¹



El Anatsui, born in 1944 at Anyako in southeastern Ghana and of Ewe background, moved to the university at Nsukka in 1975 and has made his home there ever since (fig. 107).² Igbo and Ewe social groupings have much in common. They have traditionally been composed of noncentralized, largely patrilineally organized communities and towns, with strong traditions of individualism and enterprise and proximity to large-scale traditional states. The transition to Igbo society must not have been a difficult one for Anatsui.

CHILDHOOD

When young, Anatsui lived in a mission compound at coastal Anloga in Ewe country, isolated from the culture and social life of the town and under the influence of an uncle who was a Presbyterian minister. He attended primary and middle Presbyterian mission schools, learning little of Ewe or other African cultures.

His uncle wished him to be an engineer, lawyer, physician, or teacher—top careers for an aspiring Western-educated child in Ghana in the 1950s. At Keta Secondary School, in coastal Ewe country, he decided to be an artist. His art teacher taught European style, as demanded by the school curriculum. Lacking the opportunity to explore indigenous cultural sources, he drew pineapples, oranges, and other still lifes in the English grammar school tradition. Of his pre-university schooling he has written that “whatever artistic stimuli, images or model I was exposed to were limited to what these two institutions provided which were not only from foreign sources but were bland examples from such sources.”³



107. El Anatsui outside his Nsukka studio, October 1993.

This was a different form of cultural isolation from that experienced by Uche Okeke. Although Okeke was brought up in a foreign cultural area, his parents extolled Igbo culture, while Anatsui's mission seniors lived surrounded by Ewe life, art, music, and rituals but rejected much of it. As Okeke developed a strong curiosity about Igbo culture as a consequence of his childhood cultural isolation, Anatsui developed strong curiosities about Ewe and other Ghanaian cultures, later to extend to other African peoples. Cultural inquisitiveness has made Anatsui's art rich.

Anatsui's political ideas developed early. After secondary school, he took a local teaching position but refused to take part in an annual Ghana independence day celebration, much to the anger of his uncle and others, and he was fired. He felt that local leadership had become corrupt and mismanaged after only some six years of the country's independence. He was later to express strong political ideas through his art.

UNIVERSITY DAYS: THE WORLD OPENS UP

Undaunted by his childhood experiences, Anatsui soon entered the College of Art at the University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, one of the oldest and most distinguished African art schools. He left the broad beaches and fishing communities of the coast for the tropical forests of inland southern Ghana, and one language, Ewe, for another, Twi. Here he earned a bachelor's degree in sculpture in 1968 and obtained a postgraduate diploma in art education the following year. Away from the mission world, his curiosity could develop, and he thrived. Kumasi, the capital and cultural center of a confederation of traditional Aşante states, had a rich cultural tradition in cloth, bronze, gold work, woodcarving, and all kinds of chiefly regalia.⁴ At the National Cultural Centre at Kumasi, with its various craft workshops from Ghanaian cultures, Anatsui had the opportunity to meet artisans and examine their works and to listen to a variety of Ghanaian music. The rich *kente* cloth designs of the Aşante intrigued him, as did the *adinkra* black-stamped ones, where each symbol stands for a saying or a proverb. Through Anatsui's B.A. thesis on chieftaincy regalia, he acquired knowledge of Ewe designs.⁵

These experiences contrasted with the European-oriented art courses at the university. Anatsui made little use of indigenous designs or other cultural materials while at Kumasi, though several of the African faculty had begun to consider their own roots. There was no Zaria Art Society, as there had been for Uche Okeke. After taking course work in life-studies, anatomy, and portraiture, he moved into freer explorations. A modeling he made of a figure in typical Graeco-Roman contrapposto left him unsatisfied, though it pleased his teachers. As he has written:

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It somehow started dawning on me that there was something inadequate and superficial about this way of looking at the world. As I became more aware of art as a way of re-ordering, re-interpreting, re-creating the world rather than copying it, my understanding and rapport with African traditional sculpture, which I encountered only in a few books, then began.⁶

Quickly gaining a mastery of figure studies, he was soon bored with them and began playing with pure lines and shapes.⁷

THE TRAYS OF WINNEBA

Anatsui lectured in the Art Education Department of the Specialist Training College at Winneba in Ghana for five years between 1969 and 1975. This teacher's training college was located in another Ghanaian coastal town in the Fante area, a cultural group that Anatsui seems little to have drawn upon, albeit its members belong to the same language group as the Ašante. He came there as a prominent Ghanaian sculptor, Vincent Kofi, left to teach at Kumasi. Oguibe thinks that Anatsui was influenced by his particular artistic qualities, though he largely worked in bronze at the time, which Anatsui did not do.⁸

Anatsui, attracted to the market at Winneba, noticed the wooden trays on which the market women displayed their wares. Wanting his art to have strong links to social life, he contacted the tray carvers, who were delighted to talk with him, and he spent whole days traveling with them as they cut trees and shaped trays. On commission, they would carve fifteen to twenty trays a day for him, from the soft *sese* wood that did not easily warp. Some were circular, some oval, some irregular in shape, but they had a slightly recessed central section and were generally small, about 43–50 cm in diameter. He burned designs into the upper surface of the central portion and the raised rim, often drawing from *adinkra* motifs. Anatsui used a hot knife or hot rods of various thicknesses, even shaping the rods into a variety of forms so that he could create repeat patterns with them. As Anatsui was aware, burnt designs were an old African technique. One possible model was the designs on the numerous fishing canoes in the Winneba area, sometimes partially burned. Working with fire and heat, hardening the object, has become an important part of Anatsui's art, whether in wood or clay. On these trays he also placed some color, sometimes using poster paint, and occasionally flat metal, such as copper plate or aluminum foil. The trays went through a transformation from utilitarian horizontal objects to artistic vertical wall hangings or plaques. In Anatsui's art, the idea of transformation of some sort seems always at work.

Anatsui created rich designs on these wooden trays, varnished and burnished to create a soft, shiny surface. The lines stand out clearly, contrasting with the wood, paint, and metal. The key images are generally in the central portion, with the rim often completely filled with parallel lines pointed toward the center, concentric squares, circles, or ovals of some sort; sometimes these are broken up with contrasting motifs. Colors tend to be derivative of *kente* cloth,⁹ simulating the cloth's "gay primary harmonics."¹⁰ With the employment of *adinkra*, mostly in the center of the work, of *kente* colors and sometimes designs, of burned lines, and of indigenous style market trays, Anatsui made a sharp break from his art training at the university at Kumasi. As O. Udechukwu writes: "By burning designs into, adding some colour and varnishing them, the 'common' trays were transformed into vibrant plaques for interiors."¹¹ Cloth designs and cloth as metaphor play a seminal role in Anatsui's art at Nsukka in later years as well. Oguibe states: "By introducing Adinkra motifs into his form he was not only defining a cultural location for his work, but also defining an attitude to form by emphasizing that the graphic is integral rather than peripheral to sculpture."¹² This became a basic principle of much of his sculptural work from then on.

The content of the wall plaques varies greatly but largely reflects indigenous themes.¹³ *Yaw Berko: Stand Up and Say No!*, an irregularly shaped plaque, refers to a legendary Ghanaian who worked hard in many Ghanaian towns for forty years and was not able to save up to forty *cedis* at the end of it all.¹⁴ The center depicts a bent-over man, face down with arms crossed. His body, appearing exhausted, is simply outlined. On the rim there are

108. El Anatsui, *Blood of Your Sweat*.
1974, wood, poster paint, aluminum
sheet. 45.8 cm diameter, 2.5 cm
depth. Collection of the Asele Institute.



angular lines, boxes within boxes and parallel lines, perhaps suggesting the loads he has had to bear, and there are touches of white and other colors in the work for relief. But the dark patches that immediately surround the figure, add to the sense of depression.

The title of the circular *Blood of Your Sweat* (1974, wood, poster paint, aluminum sheet; fig. 108) is from the work of an African poet whose name Anatsui could not immediately recall to me, but is probably David Di. The design and title refer to the days of colonial slavery. History, especially African history and the impact of Euro/America on Africa, has been a major theme in Anatsui's art through the years. The center of this plaque is unusually small and somewhat off center, apparently made that way for Anatsui. The black horizontal lines toward the middle contrast with the vertical lines at the top and the broad, wavy, and colorful lines at the bottom. The shining metal reminds one of the gold that, from pre-European days, has been mined in Ghana.

Other plaques have specific references to Ašante symbols, such as crossed lizards with a common stomach found on Ašante gold weights, referring to the need of cooperation. There is the *adinkra* symbol of the soul, *Gi Name*. Other works draw designs directly from proverbs, such as "Because of death we shouldn't sleep?" and "No one is born with all his teeth." This is not surprising, as many traditional designs in southern Ghana are linked to proverbs. An occasional crucifixion scene is found. Other works have titles such as *Wisdom*, *Versatility*, and *Fanatics*. In these plaques, the art on the rim often frames the work and contrasts with what is in the center, creating a balance of elements, even though the artist, as if being playful, violates this distinction in some pieces by using elements that cross both regions, such as in *Blood of Your Sweat*, *Crucifixion*, and *Versatility*. One does not have to know the meanings of these works to enjoy them as abstract or semi-abstract expressions.

While teaching at Winneba, Anatsui took part in five group exhibitions, there or at Accra, and in 1976, the year after coming to Nsukka, he had his first solo exhibition based on his plaques at Uche Okeke's Asele Art Gallery.¹⁵ At Winneba in 1972, Anatsui designed and created a giant ceremonial chair, mace, and crest for the University of Cape Coast, but he is better known for the plaques from his Winneba days.

The beginning of Anatsui's professional career was modest, but he showed skill, had a willingness to explore indigenous cultures with a sensitivity to traditional materials, and had a desire to experiment technically.

BROKEN POTS, SANKOFA, AND HISTORY

In 1974 Gerd von Stokar, then head of the Department of Fine and Applied Arts at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, who had previously taught Anatsui at Kumasi, asked him to apply for a teaching position at Nsukka. By the time the appointment was confirmed in 1975, von Stokar had left and Uche Okeke had again taken over as head. Anatsui was impressed by Okeke and his orientation to art. Both shared a strong interest in indigenous symbols and design. Anatsui liked to refer to the Ghanaian Twi term *sankofa*, meaning "go back and pick," that is, to draw from indigenous Ghanaian life and not Europe. As he states:

Sankofa syndrome was a reaction to a conscious and forcible attempt to denigrate a people's culture and replace it with an extraneous one. As in all situations of this kind, it is recognised also that there are always elements of an invading culture which stay behind; you cannot obliterate it completely because every culture has its positive aspects. Thus the essence was neither a wholesale return to the past nor a total exclusion of external influence. The thrust was inward orientation and selectivity.¹⁶

The Nsukka art department was a stimulating one not only because of its interest in indigenous cultures but because its members, such as Obiọra Udechukwu, Chike Aniakor, and Uko Akpaide, were willing to go to the villages to get to know people and their designs and art; this very much fit Anatsui's interests.¹⁷ *Uli* designs intrigued Anatsui, as well as their linearity, also present in some Ghanaian symbols, and he began to incorporate these into his art.

The wood tray plaque period was over, except for exhibiting them. Anatsui went on to work in clay from 1976 to 1982. He had the opportunity to travel and see Nigerian antiquities: the bronzes of Ile-Ife, the Cross River Akwanshi carved stone monuments at the National Museum in Lagos, the ancient Nok terra-cotta sculptures at the Jos Museum, and the Awka carved doors of the Igbo, among other arts. A rich new world to draw upon opened up. Already used to absorbing ideas into his art from other cultures in Ghana, he had no difficulty in doing so in Nigeria, without setting aside his interests in the former. But now he did so through clay rather than wood.

With this earthy substance, with grog composed of crushed potsherds and using manganese tailings, sometimes melting in pieces of glass, he created terra-cotta works, dark gray and blackish in color as a rule. These ceramics resulted in the well-known exhibition at Enugu and Nsukka, *Broken Pots*, and a 1982 exhibition at the Goethe Institut in Lagos.¹⁸ Anatsui took to the idea of "the inevitability of destruction and continuity, death and immortality, hate and love. Although a broken pot does not return to its original shape, it is not negated. It passed on to another level of existence."¹⁹

As with the tray plaques, there is transformation, though of a different nature: the old potsherds, ground up as grog, take on a new life in the new ceramic object, serving to harden it. There is continuity. This is a metaphor for human ancestors, perhaps for reincarnation. The transformation is spiritual, Anatsui believes, which relates

to its positive outcome in his art. Clay has spiritual qualities associated with the earth, with fertility, growth, and regeneration.²⁰ In these ceramics we see the increasing development of Anatsui's ideas.

The *Broken Pots* series also contains political and social associations, referring to what Anatsui calls the "Chambers of Memory." As he has written:

All of Africa is undergoing a period of turmoil. There is despondency, despair, bewilderment and frustration all over. It is to this predicament that my attempt in these works to use decadence and destruction as elements of creation, addresses a message. I hasten however to reiterate that regeneration and growth are not automatically consequent upon break-down.²¹

Conscious effort is necessary to regroup. Broken pots represent broken African societies. But as with broken peoples and shattered cultures, they can be rebuilt. Oguike feels that "memory and remembrance have remained the preoccupying themes of Anatsui's work since the beginning of the 1980s."²² This is clearly linked with Anatsui's interest in African history and in the African cultural past. Yet he does not wish to return to the past, but to incorporate it into the present.

The artist draws upon the significance of pottery in indigenous life in Ghana and later in Nigeria. Ceramics, formerly widespread in Africa, have had many uses—in rites, at shrines, in sacrifices, and as funerary objects in Ghana. They carry water, palm wine, and other elements and are employed in cooking. While nowadays they are largely replaced by plastic and metal containers, the many uses of the clay forms suggest to Anatsui a variety of ceramic metaphors.

He believes that clay represents the earth, "and the earth is recognized as the source of life, or creativity in most places I have lived."²³ Clay also relates to a well-known Ewe historical account in which an oppressive king once asked the Ewe to weave a rope of clay, an impossible task. They were able to extricate themselves by diplo-



109 (LEFT). El Anatsui, *Sinking Men*, 1979, manganese with clay and glass. 38.1 × 48.3 × 4 cm. Collection of the artist.

110 (FACING PAGE, TOP). El Anatsui, *Chambers of Memory*, 1977, manganese body. 40 × 29.3 × 7 cm. Collection of the artist.

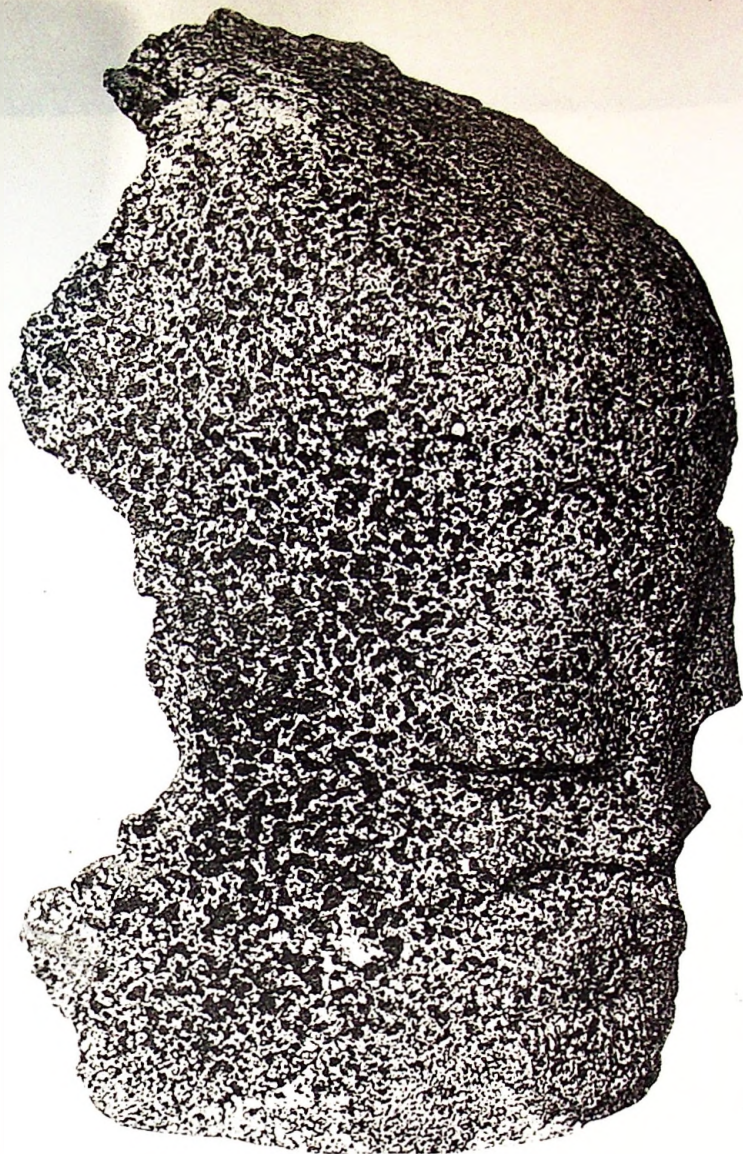
111 (FACING PAGE, BOTTOM). El Anatsui, *Gbeze*, 1976, manganese body. 40.7 × 45.7 × 35.6 cm. Collection of the artist.

matically asking the king for a sample clay rope to guide them. So "working with clay enables me to re-enact the essence and challenges of, or, to fantasize with this period in the history of my people."²⁴

For Anatsui the pots are symbolic containers, as were the tray plaques, and as would be old Igbo palm oil mortars that Anatsui later made artistic use of, suggesting that the theme of containers is a major one in his work.²⁵

Manganese tailings came from a mine in Ghana; the clay came from near Enugu in Nigeria. The electric kiln he used was at the University at Nsukka and was fired to at least 1,100 degrees centigrade to fuse the manganese to the clay. Manganese bits were mixed with clay and the grog of potsherds and sometimes with glass pieces. The manganese gave the objects a spotted dark quality, with black representing African people.²⁶ Glass, when used, provided a twinkling quality. A work had an antique appearance, as the Nok and Yoruba Esie terra-cottas, yet was also modern and fresh, with irregular shapes and openings.²⁷ Past and present are joined—clearly the artist's intent. By controlling the percentage of manganese in the clay, Anatsui regulated the tonal values of a work. The ceramic's texture was mostly created by rolling the clay on pieces of jute fabric during the forming process.

Anatsui developed two ceramic forms, a flat one meant to be laid on the table or hung on a wall and a freestanding form; only the latter belongs to his *Broken Pot* series. In either case, there is no correct way of viewing any of these works; it's up to the viewer, Anatsui says. As with the wood plaques, their themes range widely. Some have to do with suffering, as *Victim*, *Sinking Men* (fig. 109), and *Kivashiorkor*. Some draw from Igbo culture, as *Nsukka Shrine*, or Ewe pottery, as *Gbeze*; some relate



to the past and history, as *Chambers of Memory*. A human head or figure may occur, yet human elements are not frequent. Several works refer to a popular modern male dress, *agbada*. There is an occasional hint of *adinkra* design, and some pieces exhibit *uli* features.

Symmetry is rare. Almost all of the standing forms show marked contrast between a relatively complete side and an open opposite one, the former regular, the latter highly irregular and full of holes and cavities. It is as if there is a dark side and a positive side to a work. Because of incompleteness, empty spaces and places, there is a sense of never being finished, the process of regeneration never complete.

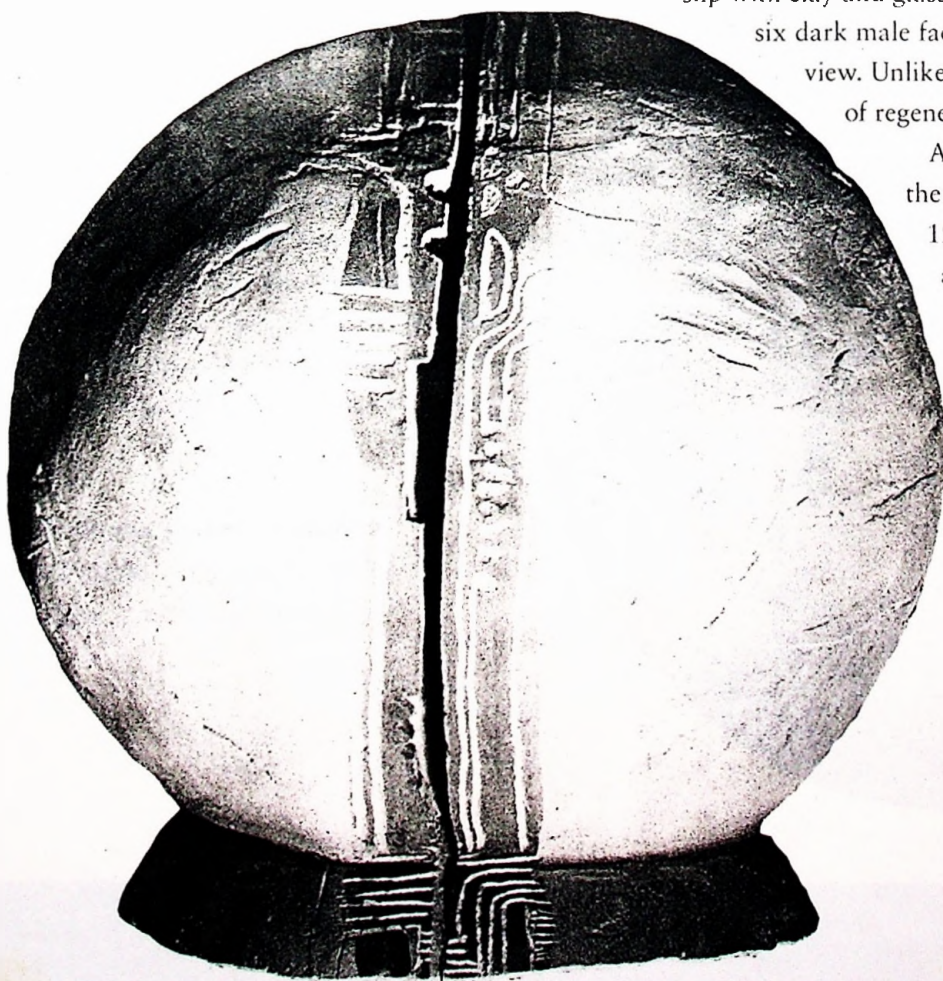
One of the best known of Anatsui's ceramics is *Chambers of Memory* (1977, manganese body; fig. 110). Anatsui draped a clay slab on wood; when it hardened the next day it looked like a Nok terra-cotta piece, so he developed it along that line. It is a strong but quiet face, and in the back there are a number of irregular chambers that contain nothing. "In most of Africa we keep making the same mistakes," he tells me; "we do not remember anything, the chambers of memory seem to store nothing. Those who follow never learn from history." The reference to Nok is to a collective memory. He seems to hold an idealized picture of these ancient northern Nigerian peoples as being at peace. The idea of peace is suggested to him because the shadows in the work are soft and not deep, he says. This is the only Nok-style work he has made.

Gbeze (1976, manganese body; fig. 111) is named after an Ewe herbal pot that holds potent herbs and is not to be left uncovered.²⁸ Anatsui tells me that in his piece the potent forces are let loose; he has left the pot uncovered. "They will have to look for what is wrong and do whatever they can," he says. Linear incisions on it, some carved and some irregularly straight, show *uli* influence. A second *Gbeze* work (1979, manganese body and slip) has numerous curvilinear lines of dark manganese slip on a lighter manganese body.

Broken Pot Series (1976, manganese body) is another example of a work with incised lines, including a number of designs of a circle within a circle with a dot center, relating to *adinkra*. *Sinking Men* (1979, manganese slip with clay and glass; fig. 109), one of his mural ceramics, depicts six dark male faces sinking in a quagmire, a rather ghostly view. Unlike some of his other ceramics, there is no sense of regeneration here.

Anatsui ceased working in ceramics in 1982 as the facilities at the university deteriorated, but in 1985 he went through a second pottery period as a visiting artist at the Faculty of Art and Design, Cornwall College of Further and Higher Education, Redruth, England. He was there for two months, during the vacation period, so that he concentrated on his ceramics.

The result was an exhibition of his work there in 1987 entitled *Venovize*, the term referring to Ewe twins' pots.²⁹ The art was



112. El Anatsui, from the *Venovize Series*, 1985, ceramic. 38 × 18 × 40 cm. Collection and photo: the artist.

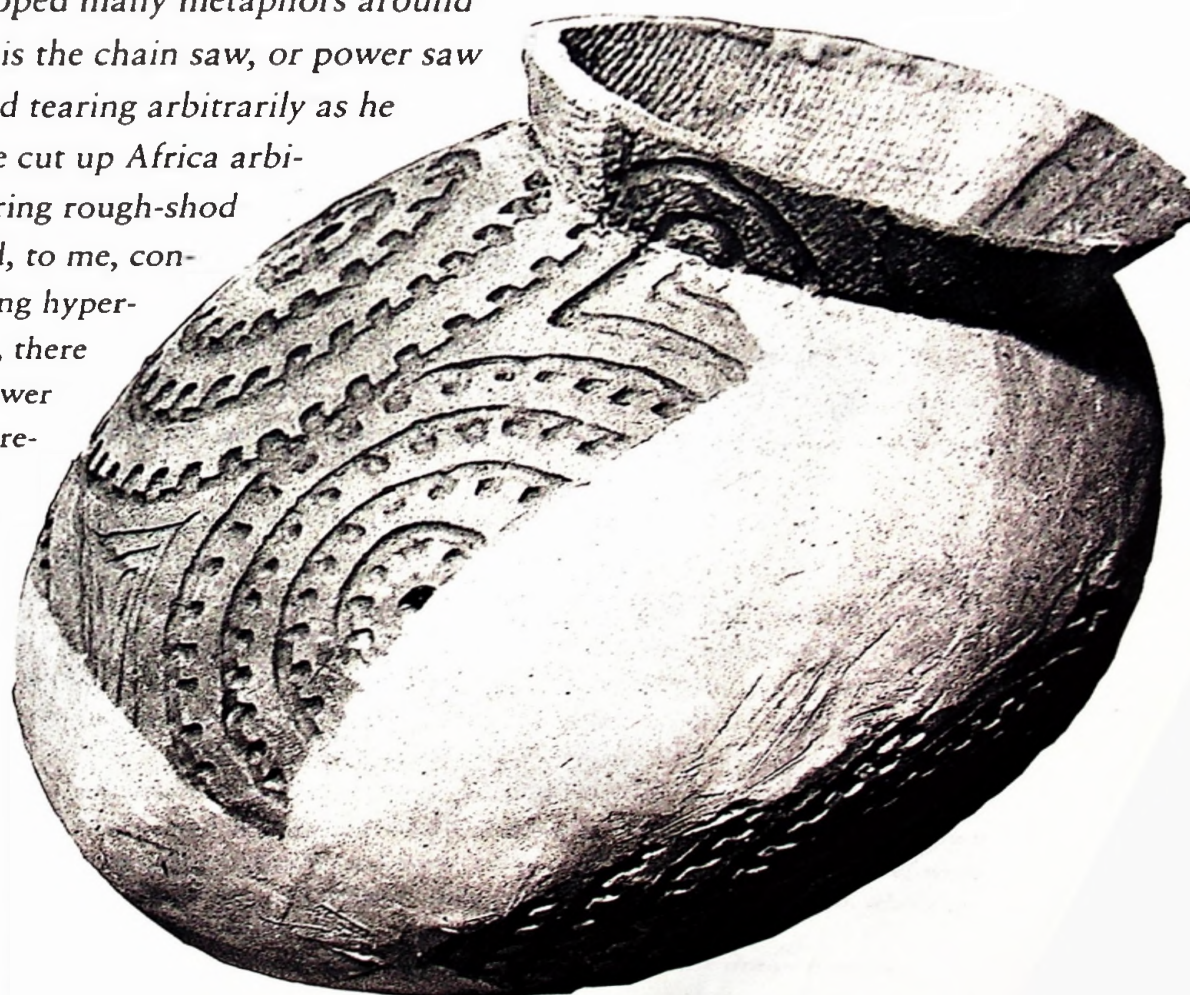
devoted to the issue of divided personalities. It refers to the failure of acculturation process which is not complete. The process which has led to the dilemma in which most Africans (especially the formally educated ones) find themselves, torn between two worlds, belonging to none. In real life, *Venovize* consists of two little pots used in traditional ceremonies for twins in my part of Ghana. My personal conception fuses these two individual and parallel concepts into one, split up by either horizontal or vertical fissures or by employing two differently coloured clay. It represents different aspects and colours that create the twin or split personalities in one individual. My formative years lived between the quasi-western world of the church and school on one hand, and that of the indigenous society has left quite an imprint.³⁰

Again Anatsui, as other Nsukka artists, synthesizes Africa's past with current issues in imaginative ways. He views *Venovize* as a continuation of the *Broken Pot* series, though they differ in theme (figs. 112, 113). He says of the Cornwall experience that "a lot of things from home kept coming to me more intensely. When you are separated from a place, an event, and you long for them, that nostalgia for an artist, can translate into more meaningful work."³¹

WOOD RELIEF WALL PANELS AND VISUAL METAPHORS

Between Anatsui's two ceramic experiences he spent several months in 1980 at the Community of Arts, Cummington, Massachusetts, attracted there by, among other things, a plentiful supply of wood. This led him in new directions. He had used the chain saw at annual wood gathering expeditions for students' use while at Winneba and to reduce blocks of wood in the studio preparatory to carving, but at Cummington he discovered that he could easily use it to cut rough designs into wood. The rough edges of cuts could then be smoothed and blackened by burning with a torch.³²

From this experience Anatsui developed many metaphors around gouging and burning wood. A basic one is the chain saw, or power saw as it is also called, destroying, cutting, and tearing arbitrarily as he dictates, as the European colonialists once cut up Africa arbitrarily. Another is that the "powersaw tearing rough-shod through organic wood at devastating speed, to me, constitutes a metaphor of the hassling, rat-racing hypertensive pace of present day living."³³ Again, there is the idea of decay and regeneration; the power saw destroys the old form of the wood and creates a new one. Wood, for Anatsui, has a spiritual quality that he sees embedded in his own creations. Trees in Africa are sometimes believed to have souls and thus must be propitiated with prayer and ritual before cutting.



113. El Anatsui, *Patched Pot*, from the *Venovize Series*, 1985, ceramic. 36 × 36 × 38 cm. Collection and photo: the artist.

Anatsui's respect for his woods is considerable. As Qlōidi writes of him: "Whether or not the artist is at work, he sees wood, thinks wood and feels wood, because he has already developed that spiritual attachment to wood forms."³⁴

Back at Nsukka, it took time for Anatsui to develop the potential of the chain saw and torch, discovering that the saw was useful in creating designs on flat pieces of wood. He developed a form of wood relief wall hanging that he has continued to make until recently, over a period of some fifteen years, though now his attention turns more and more to standing objects.

The basic style of a wall hanging consists of five to fifteen vertical slat pieces, about 3 cm thick or slightly more, generally of even thickness. The width of each piece of wood in a hanging may be the same, about 8–13 cm wide, though they may vary in both width and length, lengths being in the neighborhood of 50–75 cm. The slat pieces hang tightly side by side on the wall, with cut and burnt lines, further scorching to create masses of plain black areas, and cut nonburned lines made with a router. Often the pieces show partial use of paint, the whole finished with a lacquer. There is generally continuity between the designs on one piece of wood and its neighbors, so that the whole is coherent, and there may be repetition of the same design elements on a number of the pieces. Different African woods, as many as five or six, may be employed in a work; their color variations add to the interest of the piece. Their selection, done before cutting into the woods, is an aspect of Anatsui's creativity. Wood pieces are generally cut to proper size by him or by an assistant using a chain saw.

With a nail as a hook in back of each piece, they are easily hung on a horizontal wall bar. Each piece is numbered so that its owner can readily assemble the work; Anatsui may do this before starting to work on them. However, he does not mind, and even encourages, the owner to reassemble the pieces, even to change their relative height position, as another artist, Tayo Adenaike, has done with a work of Anatsui's at his Enugu office. Anatsui occasionally likes the reassembled version better than his own. However, he says that so far mainly artists and architects have had the courage to reorder his art. His view is that, once a finished work of art has left his hands, it is up to its owner to interpret it as he or she chooses; the owner takes over. The idea, he says, is to awaken the artist in everyone.

Oguibe argues that Anatsui has been fascinated with multiples from his seashore childhood, for "his was an environment that in several respects involved a paradox of multiples, the mass of fishing boats on the banks, the bustle of the fish market in the morning as the fishermen return from the waters, the tumble of catches which, nevertheless, had to be sorted and separated."³⁵

Anatsui sees the edges of the rough chain saw cuts in the wood as "savage," which are "civilized" by scorching with fire, smoothing them. So fire is also associated with colonization in his mind. Fire also imparts strength and hardness to his woods, he says. The chain saw is to him the modern equivalent of colonial firearms. The different-colored woods represent the different African colonies, and I believe they also stand for different cultures in an African country or in Africa.³⁶ The burnt lines cutting across the different-colored woods, and the repeat of similar burnt patterns on different pieces of a work, provide unity to the variety of colored woods used in the wall hanging.

Some time after beginning these wall panels, Anatsui saw what he thinks was in his unconscious, that the panels are analogous to cloth, for each wood piece is about the width of African woven strip cloth, strips sewn together side by side to form cloth. He still employs *adinkra* and *kente* cloth symbols on some of his panel work, and now he also uses southern Igbo *akwete* cloth motifs. The whole wall panel is a metaphor for cloth, also suggested by a number of his pieces' titles having cloth associations.

The designs on the pieces have increasingly come from a wide African scope. He not only draws from the

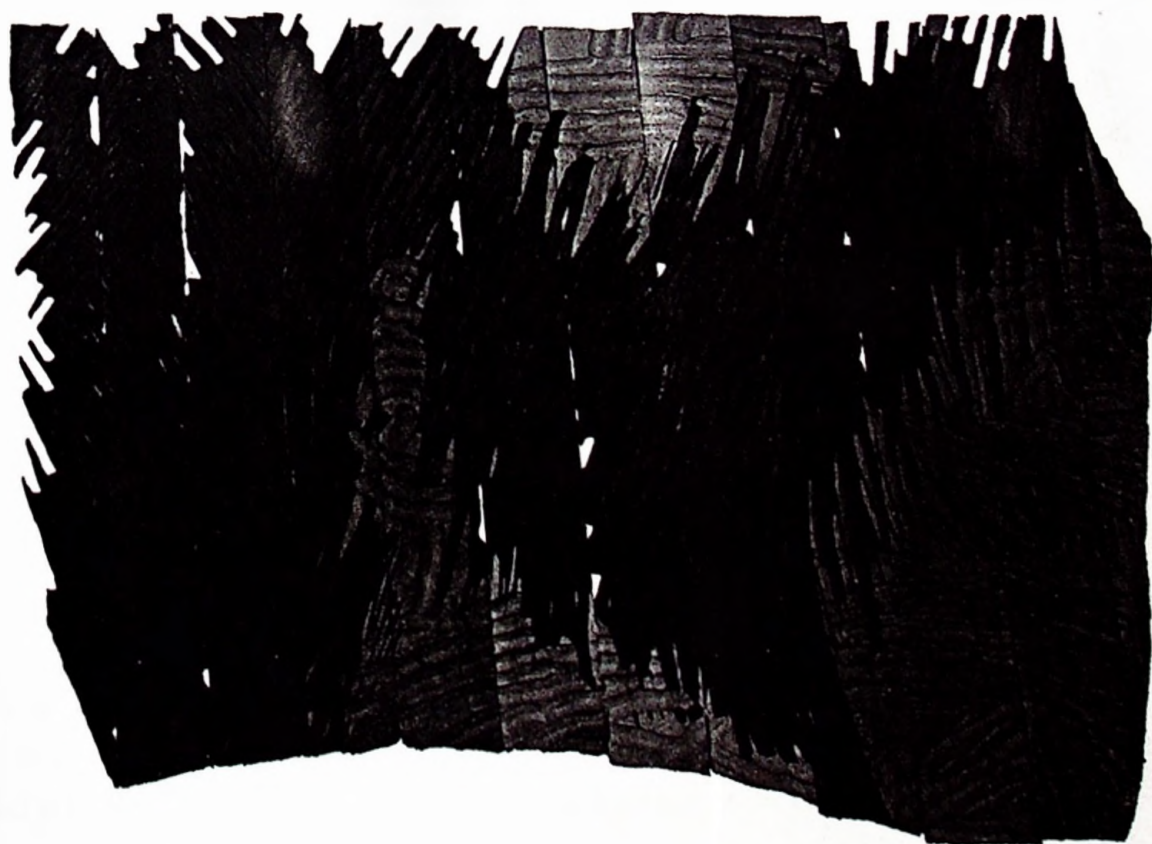
three types mentioned above but also from *uli*, *nsibidi*, and Igbo *mbari* motifs, and recently from Bamun and Njɔya scripts from the Cameroun, Yoruba Aroko symbols, and the East African Bolange script. Anatsui is convinced that there have been many more traditions of writing in Africa than is generally realized: he searches for these elements to use in his own art, what Aniakṣr calls "visual calligraphy."³⁷

Anatsui suggests that Euro/American art's preference for three-dimensional art relates to the tendency to conceive of these categories of art in terms of manipulating various light reflecting capacities of planes; in African art traditions, one sees, in addition to this, the practice of defining forms on the flat plane by sheer use of texture. Awka carved wood panels of the Igbo for instance provide a good example of this. My works are closer to this attitude.³⁸

Anatsui seeks an African artistic view with its own qualities.

Similar themes to Anatsui's earlier ceramics and wall tray plaques occur here: the impact of colonialism, slavery, and history; the selecting of elements from indigenous cultures to be retained, used, and manipulated; the idea of destruction and regeneration; the value of indigenous motifs. His *Migration Series* refers to the days of slavery, the recent movement of Africans out of Africa to Euro/America in search of a better life, and the many migrations within Africa, including, he points out, the Ewe to their present home at some time in the past. Of course, Anatsui himself migrated from Ghana to Nigeria, where he is quite at home, fully integrated into the Nsukka art scene, without rejecting his Ghanaian past and experience.

His themes characteristically have a broad sweep; there is little of his art that does not have this characteristic, whether the theme arises before or during his preliminary sketches, if he employs these at all. Considerable travel in Europe and the New World in recent years has not diminished his African thematic orientation. If anything, his travel experiences have enlarged it, and he has found non-Africans receptive to it (fig. 114).



114. El Anatsui, *Undercurrents*, 1993, wood relief, *opepe*, *oyili-oji*, camwood, twelve pieces. 76 × 118 × 3 cm.

Collection of the artist, courtesy of the October Gallery. Photo: Franko Khoury.

At first Anatsui did not use much paint on his wall panels, but he has increasingly employed it, particularly red, blue, white, and black, which he views as major colors for shrines and rituals. He began with acrylics but found that they did not bind well with the wood and now employs water-based paints—tempera, gouache, and the almost similar poster color—which are absorbed. He used to fix a work with lacquer but felt this left the piece too glossy; now after painting he sprays with lacquer and then repaints to create a more matte-like finish. Other changes have occurred over time. He has changed from a blowtorch to an acetylene one, which burns more finely and effectively. He has learned the limitations of the chain saw, and he also employs a gouge, a plumber's hole saw, and wood routers of various thicknesses. He began by employing only two woods, mahogany and *iroko*, but now selects from at least nine others as well: *akparata*, *afara*, *oke qfo*, *oyili-qji*, *okpo-qcha*, ebony, *ufie* (camwood), *opope*, and *mansonina*. Fortunately he lives where a wide variety of woods are available. He sees these various-colored woods as being in interaction in his work and as metaphors for people of different skin color in interrelationships. Yet he feels that each piece of wood, with its designs in a wall hanging, also has an independent existence.

The wood colors also relate to history in Anatsui's mind:

I look at the textures of my work in process
And I think about the texture and grain of Africa's history;
I look at the authentic colours of the different types of wood
And they remind me of the real colours of history . . .³⁹

As Anatsui's skills in creating wall hangings developed, he began to vary his work and play with it. Some pieces of wood in a work are arranged in nonparallel fashion, as in *Crumbling Ancestral Fence*.⁴⁰ Some are deliberately arranged to be reset in different yet coherent patterns; *Zuma* occurs in three forms, *Conceiving Moon* in two.⁴¹ He occasionally employs numerous round wooden knobs or spools—custom-made for him—as in *Mahogany Face* or in *Beckon . . . distance . . . beckoner*.⁴² Sometimes he cuts through a panel so that the background wall appears. Recently he has created more rounded and irregular pieces in a wall hanging, separated by some space, as in *The Ancestors Converged Again* (see fig. 120).⁴³

Adinkra symbols are traditionally bunched together on cloth; *uli* motifs use space between them. Similarly there is variation in the use of empty space in Anatsui's panels. Generally the upper portions of the individual pieces are full, with human forms or figures, or cloth designs or other elements. The middle and lower parts may or may not be filled; there is variation here. I find my eyes going first to the top of a work, then to the rest. He often creates his own motifs as well as drawing from indigenous sources.

Qguibe has indicated how Anatsui creates these panels:

El works like the traditional sculptor of his roots. He works straight on his wood, making rough, bold outlines in charcoal or chalk. Then he descends on the pieces of wood with the powersaw, working freely without any additional sketches, paying due respect to both material and tool, each a living force. He lets these forces direct his hand, follows their reverie with the anxiety of a diviner. To suggest that he is totally reduced in this process to the position of a medium may not be accurate, but it is no less the truth to say that, like the traditional sculptor, he is only a part, contributing to, and at the same time discovering the independent existence of the creation.⁴⁴

His titles are intriguing, whimsical, sometimes drawing from Pidgin English, as . . . *long before the chief executive told us the only way to get water is prayers*, referring to the endemic shortage of piped water in Nigeria; *Began wall but abandoned*; *Dey patch*; *The travelers have returned, carrying burdens of debt*; or:

When I last wrote to you about Africa
 I used a letterheaded parchment paper,
 There were many blank slots in the letter

 I can now fill some of these slots because
 I have grown older.

The last title is for a work with its panels hung horizontally, containing some twenty panels that curl something like a scroll.⁴⁵

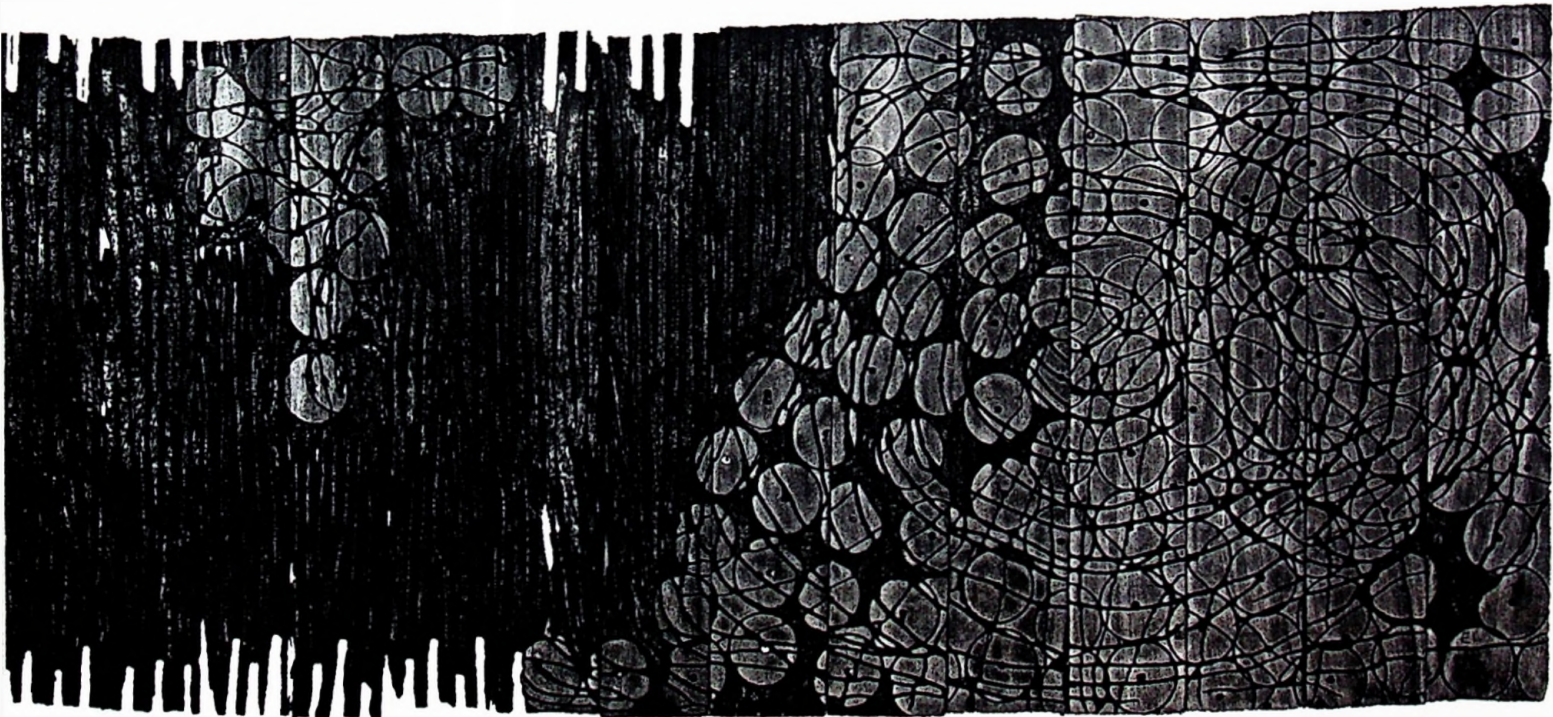
EXAMPLES OF WALL HANGINGS

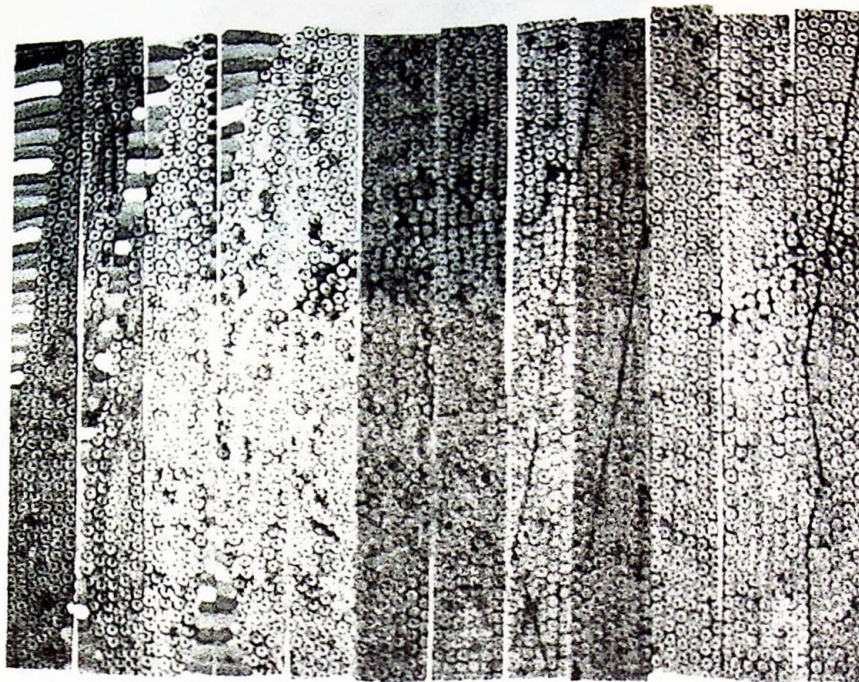
Coins on Grandma's Cloth (c. 1993; fig. 115) concerns the past and the present.⁴⁶ The circles, mostly on the right half, represent coins, the left and darker side, the cloth. The reference is to the way African material treasures and antiquities are sold off for barely a few coins. People come and buy them, crate them away to sell elsewhere at high prices in Euro/America. Anatsui says the same thing is happening with contemporary art. People buy it for practically nothing in Africa and sell it for high prices; the artist gets virtually nothing. There is no good system of marketing controls in Africa.

This is typical of much of Anatsui's work in its references to cloth and history, and to the negative influence of Euro/America on Africa and its heritage. A linked work is *Remnant of Grandma's Cloth*, characterized by jagged edges at both top and bottom and angular cuts through some pieces, much of it in black.⁴⁷ There are,

115. El Anatsui, *Coins on Grandma's Cloth*, c. 1993, wood relief, *akparata*, *oyili-oji*, camwood, *oke-ofo* woods, fourteen pieces. 58 × 127 × 3 cm.

Collection of the artist. Photo: Franko Khoury





116 (LEFT). El Anatsui, *Lace and Kente*, c. 1993, wood relief, *okpo-ocha*, *oyili-oji*, *akparata* woods, tempera, twelve pieces. 94 × 116.9 × 2.5 cm. Collection of the artist.

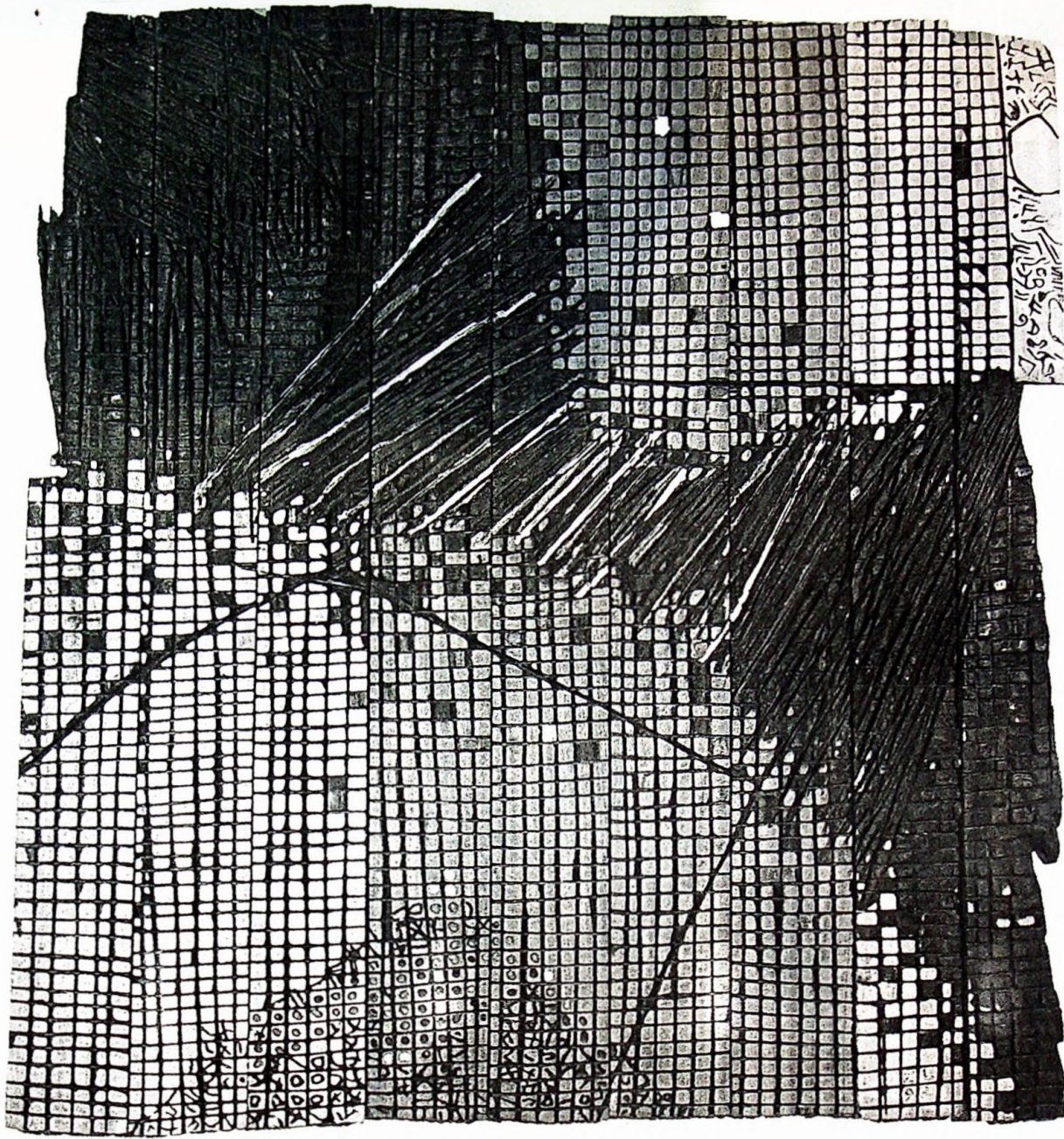
117 (BOTTOM). El Anatsui, untitled, 1989, wood relief, *afara*, *oke-oko*, and other woods, acrylic, thirteen pieces. 55.9 × 146.7 × 2.5 cm.

Collection of Nkiru Nzegwu.

118 (FACING PAGE). El Anatsui, *Earth-Moon Connexion*, 1993, wood relief, *okpo-ocha*, *oyili-oji*, tempera, nine pieces. 90 × 84.4 × 3 cm. Collection of the National Museum of African Art. Photo

Franco Khoury



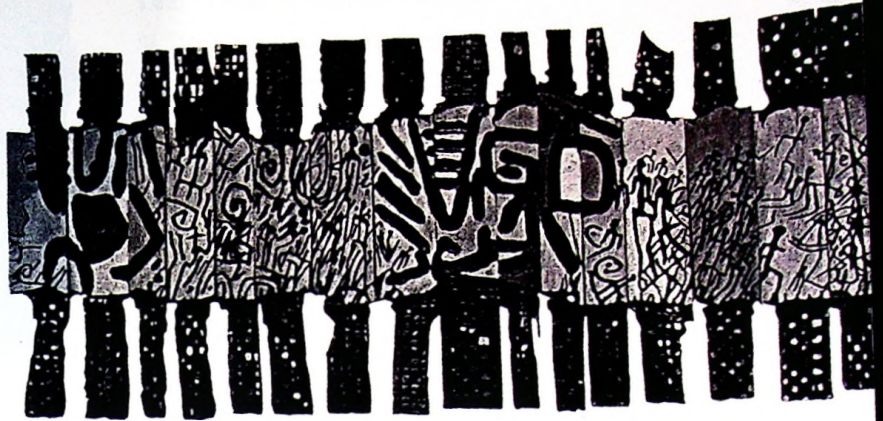


however, two sections composed of small squares in yellow, red, blue, and green, which are the remnants. In fact, the work looks like a burned cloth remnant.

In *Lace and Kente* (c. 1993; fig. 116), the tempera colors of blue, orange, yellow, and green represent the *kente* cloth colors of Ghana.⁴⁸ The many circles, made with a hole saw, represent lace, a popular and fashionable contemporary cloth in Nigeria. To Anatsui these are the cloths of the two countries he has lived in, linking the past and present in his life.

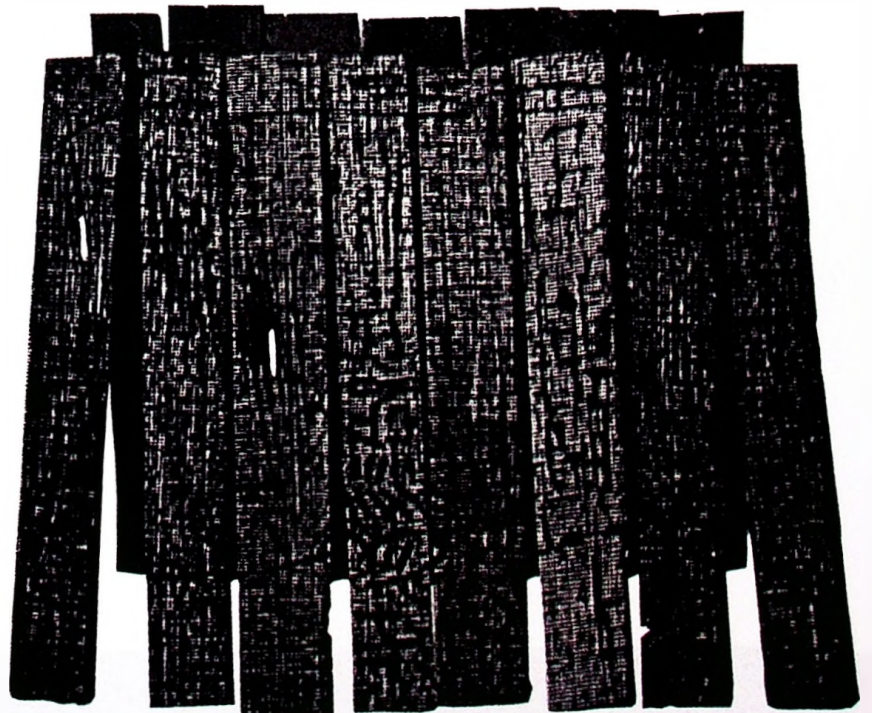
A work with no title (1989; fig. 117) represents roughly sketched people with their heads in a white sky.⁴⁹ They are going out of control, estranged from realities, concerned with ideals. Anatsui says the work is a jab at African universities, and maybe even those elsewhere, which are static and not producing manpower for immediate

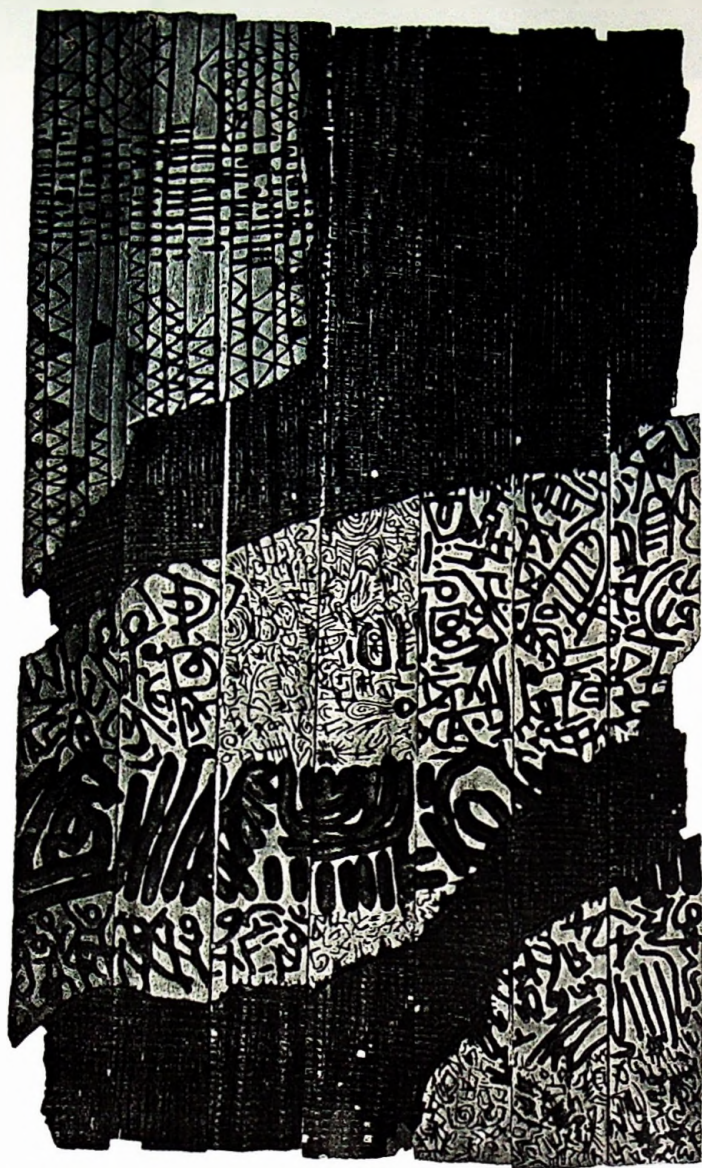
119 (TOP RIGHT). El Anatsui, *Unfolding the Scroll of History*, 1995, wood relief, oke-*qfo*, oyili-*oji*, akparata, okpo-*ocha* woods, tempera, sixteen pieces. 61 × 141 × 4 cm. Collection of the artist, courtesy of the October Gallery.



120 (CENTER). El Anatsui, *The Ancestors Converged Again*, 1995, okpeye, tempera, twenty-four pieces. 98 × 150 × 15 cm (variable). Collection of the artist, courtesy of the October Gallery. Photo: Franko Khoury.

121 (BOTTOM RIGHT). El Anatsui, *Invitation into History*, 1995, wood relief, iroko, oyili-*oji*, tempera, fifteen pieces, dimensions unknown. Collection of the artist.





122. El Anatsui, *Patches of History III*, 1993, wood relief, *opepe*, *oyili-oji*, camwood, seven pieces. 114 × 69 × 3 cm. Collection of the artist, courtesy of the October Gallery. Photo: Franko

needs. There is ivory tower reasoning going on. In the white areas a variety of different motifs are drawn from different cultures, including an *nsibidi* mirror.

Earth-Moon Connexion (1993; fig. 118) is more squarish in shape than most of Anatsui's other panels.⁵⁰ It gives the sense of two strong visual sections, at lower left and upper right, connected by more or less parallel lines that hold the work together, with darkness in the upper left and lower right, as if setting the earth and moon in space. *Unfolding the Scroll of History* (1995; fig. 119) shows the artist's tendency in some works to use strong tempera colors.⁵¹ The rich designs gouged out and blackened and those in tempera suggest a scroll, some form of writing.

The Ancestors Converged Again (fig. 120), in Anatsui's more rounded, irregular piece form, with spaces between most of them, rep-

resents a meeting of ancestors to discuss present conditions.⁵² The heads, mouths, and eyes of the ancestors are large compared to their bodies (not unusual in traditional African culture), and they appear unworldly, as if astonished as to what has happened to earth in recent times. There is an appearance of antiquity about them. Groups of people or crowds appear in other panels, such as *Mammoth Crowd I* (1993) and *One out of a Crowd* (1993).

Invitation into History (1995; fig. 121) is at least twice the size of most of Anatsui's wall hangings.⁵³ Transitional between a wall piece and a standing work, being both, it has eight long, wide, brown outer panels that rest on the floor with their tops leaning on seven darker inner panels hung on the wall. The outer panels represent Euro/American conceptions of African history, the inner panels African history as Africans see it. Both sets of panels contain irregular, unsystematic black gouges in the wood that appear to stand for the writing of history. The meaning of the work is clear: true African history has been hidden and is not well known, being misrepresented by Euro/America. This is only one of Anatsui's works that relate to history; others include *Patches of History III* (1993; fig. 122)⁵⁴ and the already mentioned *Unfolding the Scroll of History*.

STANDING FIGURES, MORTARS, AND OLD WOOD

By the early 1980s Anatsui was creating standing wood figures. This work in wood has increased over time, until he now feels he is ready to put wall hangings aside for these generally larger pieces, a few of which are wall leaning pieces, such as *Invitation into History*. In 1984–85 he produced some acrylic paintings and considered moving in that direction, but his woodwork has proved more attractive to him.

He has created a variety of standing forms, generally creating works for the indoors. Nevertheless, in 1983, he designed two outdoor sculptures at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in concrete with terrazzo finish, which he prefers to metal.⁵⁵ In *The Ambivalent Hold*, in black (also entitled *The Goddess*), a huge humanlike figure holds some form of creature in its giant hands. The work refers to science—its potential for destruction or for the improvement of mankind. *For the Upliftment of Man*, in white, rests off the ground on a number of poles, having “a ruggedness befitting its theme of tenacity and ascent.”⁵⁶ The title of this work refers to the motto of the University of Nigeria: “To restore the dignity of man.” Both works show Anatsui’s ability to create strong public sculpture.

A characteristic standing form of Anatsui’s involves flat pieces of wood, horizontally stacked upon one another, some about the thickness of his wall hanging panels but others 7–10 cm or more deep. With these, in various shapes, he creates human figures or other images; their outsides are often scored with burnt lines. One example of this type of work is the couple, *Mr. and Mrs. Nyanga* (1988).⁵⁷ A similar work, *Couple* (1990; fig. 123), is composed of blocks of wood of different sizes for each figure, partially worked on the outside with burnt lines, the woman with a small face, the man’s quite large.⁵⁸ The man’s body is darkish brown, the woman’s is light brown with burn marks that provide contrast. Anatsui once spent some time rearranging the pieces for me in different poses, a characteristic of many of his standing works. In one pose the couple faced forward and seemed detached and somber; in another they slightly faced each other, appearing cheerful and communicative.

He has produced three *Wonder Masquerade* figures. The second (1990; fig. 124) is again composed of numerous pieces that are cleverly arranged.⁵⁹ There is little sense of a face mask, rather more of a total body costume. In another work, *Back of Front* (1990, 186 cm high), the upper



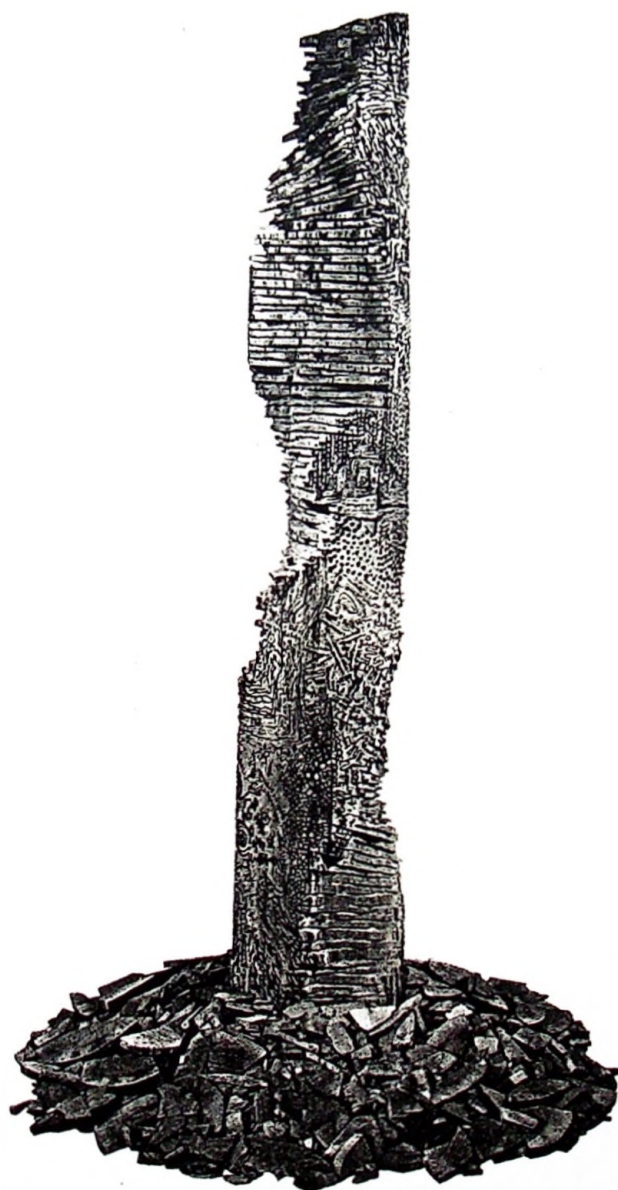
123. El Anatsui, *Couple*, 1990, standing figure, *oyili-oji* and other woods, c. 172 cm high. Collection of the artist.

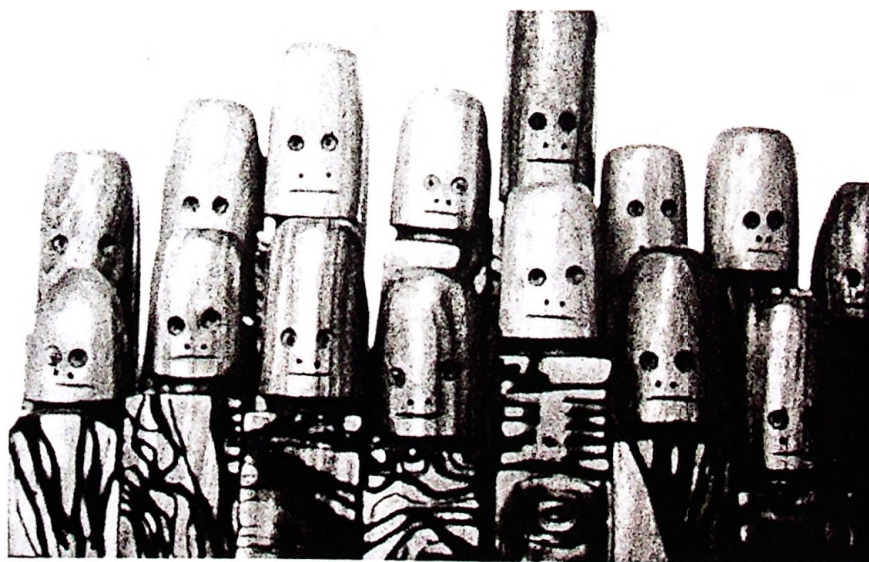
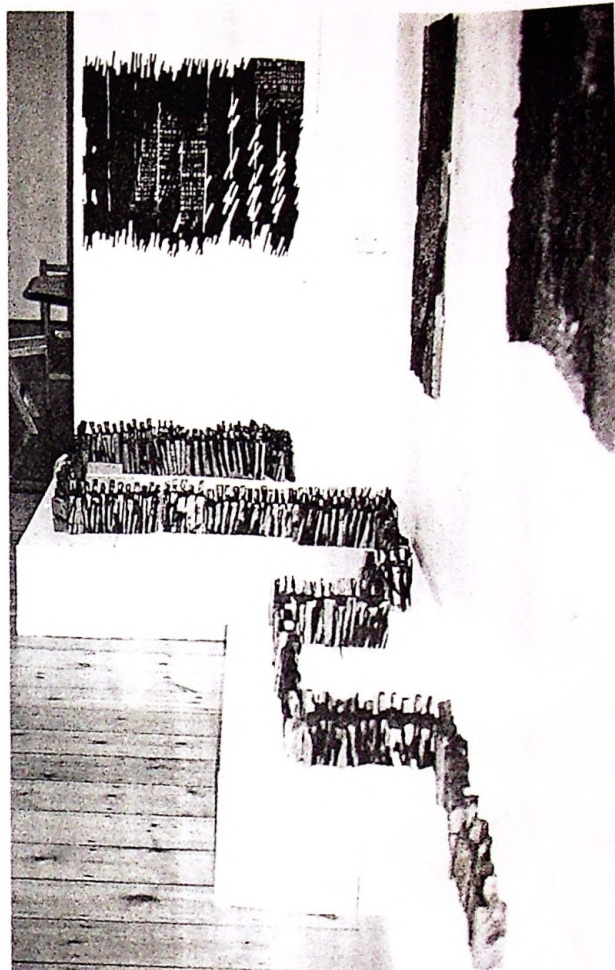
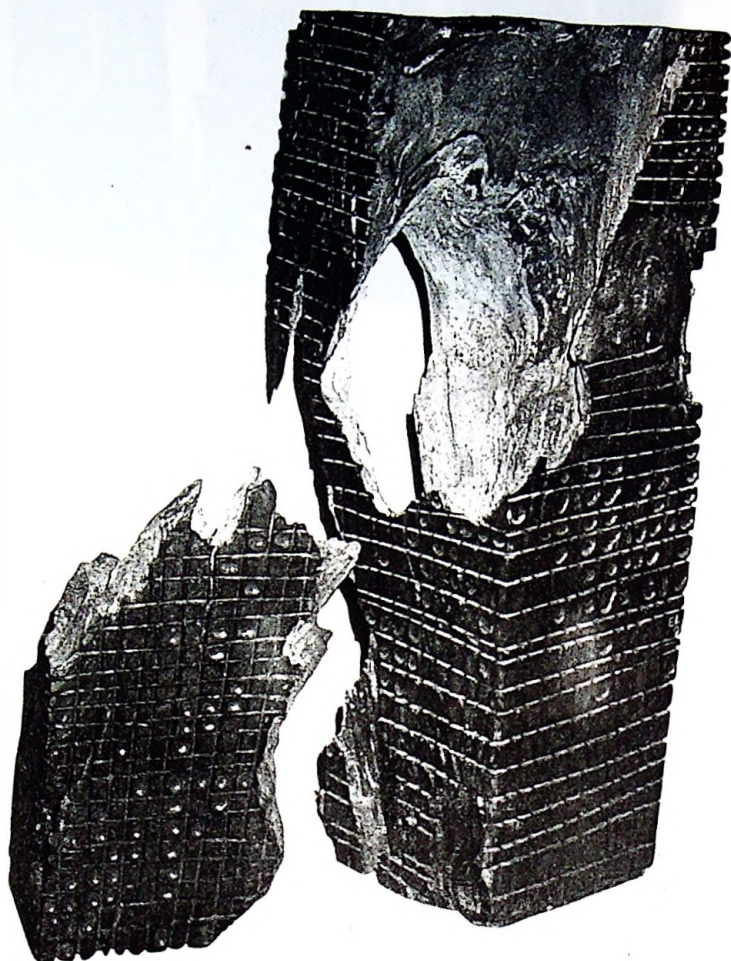


124 (LEFT). El Anatsui, *Wonder Masquerade II*, 1990, standing figure, oak.
159 × 20 × 14 cm. Collection of the artist.
Photo: Franko Khoury.

125 (BOTTOM MIDDLE). El Anatsui, *Erosion*, 1992, installation, *piqua*, *marfin*, tempera. 300 cm high. Collection of the National Museum of African Art. Photo: Franko Khoury.

126 (BOTTOM RIGHT). El Anatsui, detail from *Erosion*, 1992.

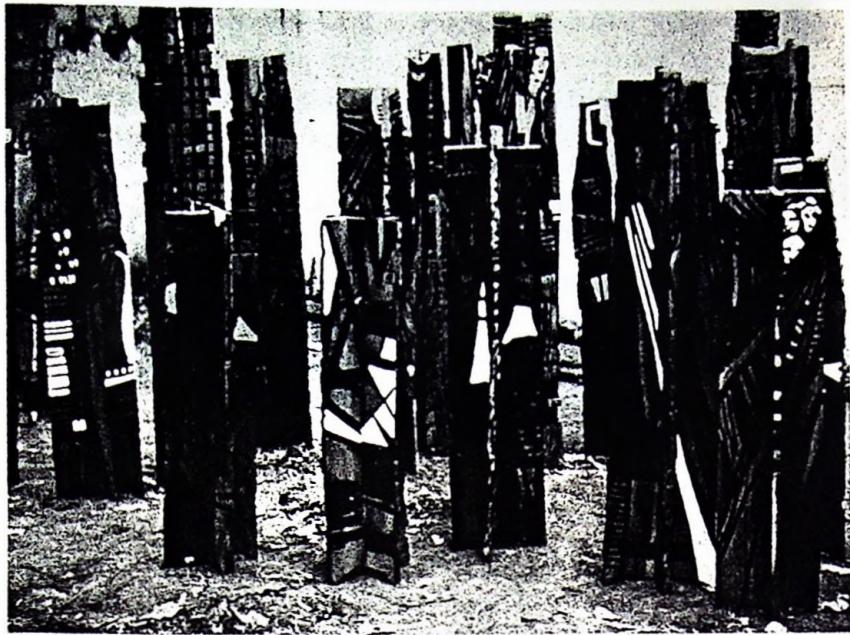




127 (TOP LEFT). El Anatsui, *Chip off the Old Block*, 1991, two standing figures, iroko wood, 125 x 45 x 32 cm. Collection of the artist

128 (TOP RIGHT). El Anatsui, *Visa Queue*, 1992, installation, tropical hardwoods, numerous standing figures, dimensions unknown. Collection of the artist, courtesy of the October Gallery

129 (BOTTOM LEFT). El Anatsui, *Group Photograph*, 1988, standing figures, oak, 39 x 60 x 15 cm (variable). Collection and photo: the artist



130. El Anatsui, *Africa: Internal Rhythms*, 1988, installation, wood and acrylic. 180 × 300 × 200 cm (variable).
Collection of the artist.

part opens up like a flower. One side is composed of numerous vertical burn marks, contrasting with a second side of irregular unburned cuts that look much like those in some of his history pieces.

In these wood standing sculpture works the individual pieces are numbered. While generally assembled in the same order, the way individual pieces lie on top of one another can be altered to change the overall impression. Again, we see Anatsui's belief that the owner of the work should feel free to interpret it.

In 1992, for an international artists' workshop, Arte Amazonas, in Manuas, Brazil, which preceded the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Anatsui created a tall wood piece entitled *Erosion* (figs. 125, 126).⁶⁰ Here there were no serious restrictions on size, materials, or other facilities. The workshop's theme was "Environment and Development"; the results were exhibited at the Modern Art Museum in Rio, touring to Berlin and Aachen, Germany. In 1995, *Erosion* was also shown as part of Anatsui's 1995 solo exhibition at the October Gallery, London. Anatsui says he delighted in the freedom to create in the workshop, with all its facilities:

I indulged in the extravagance. The result or effect was that when I felt about for a theme, what I ended up with was something with monumental implications. Or it could be that the freedom engendered monumental concepts. . . .

I was not thinking of soil erosion as you suggested earlier, but something more basic to that, something which is at the root of it, but which is more monumental, more epochal—the erosion of cultures.⁶¹

This is one of his larger works. Composed of a central single piece of wood with some complex surface designs, it has separate flat wood pieces that appear to have fallen from it to its base, indicating deterioration. The midpoint is narrow, as if wasted, and there is a general sense of decay about the work, with intricate cuttings on the surface of the lower half.

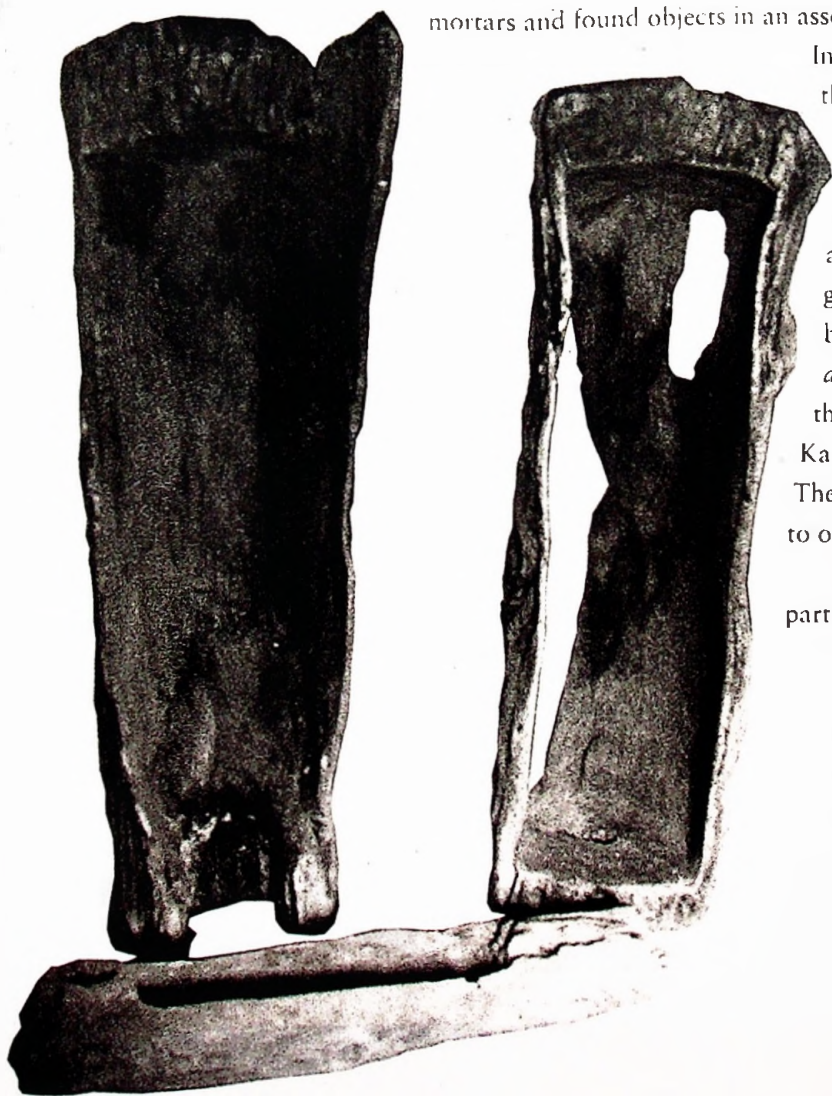
The pattern of Anatsui's creations has gone from smaller to larger over time, from tray plaques and ceramics to wall hangings to standing figures. Partly this reflects accessibility of materials, but it is also due to his increasing skill and willingness to move toward postmodern giganticism, which he has certainly seen in his world travels, but without giving up his African ties and fundamental themes. His standing art exemplifies the continuity of his imaginative creativity with his past work.

A different style is found in Anatsui's *Untrimmed Art Exhibition Catalogue*, which consists of three vertical boards linked by rope. There are pages of illustrations of art—animals, a snake, a human figure, a ladder—in wood relief on light brown panels with black surrounding the panels.⁶² Anatsui says it is “untrimmed” because the concept is unfinished—he might add more pages. To him an exhibition catalogue is like a scroll that is open-ended. An artist's life is a series of catalogues, he adds.

Another style is in *Chip off the Old Block* (1991; fig. 127), created from an old wood block that once was in one piece with a crack in it and that split when he put something in the crack.⁶³ Placing burnt cross-lines on its flat outer surfaces, he created many small squares; as with some of his other works, the two pieces can be arranged in a variety of ways.

He has created works involving numerous small standing pieces. *Visa Queue* (1992, assorted tropical hardwoods; fig. 128) consists of dozens of simply fashioned figures waiting in what seems like an endless line to obtain visas to leave Africa because of conditions there.⁶⁴ Other works with a number of small pieces include *Devotees* and *Group Photograph* (1988; fig. 129) and *Africa: Internal Rhythms* (1988; fig. 130).

On the lookout for pieces of old wood, Anatsui visits the villages around Nsukka and gets to know the people there, which he enjoys. He purchases some wood from shrines of priests. He is on the lookout for old palm oil mortars, which somewhat resemble small shallow wooden canoes. Women use these mortars to thresh palm fruit with their feet to extract the edible oil. When he obtains a mortar, he rolls it down a hill; this breaks off the weaker parts and makes for a stronger object (fig. 131). He then uses them in standing sculptures, generally only working the inside. Again we see the idea of rebirth, of regeneration. He is thinking of using some mortars and found objects in an assemblage without working them at all.



In *Tapper* (1995; fig. 132), an upended mortar forms the body of a palm wine tapper, with his raffia palm fiber belt of the type actually used in tree climbing and a cloth hat.⁶⁵ On his right shoulder, the tapper carries firewood that he found along the way. The arms and other parts of the figure can be adjusted to give the tapper different poses. *Man with Flying Tie*, based on an old mortar, was created for the 1995 Osaka Triennial Sixth Contemporary Art Exhibition at the Osaka Festival of Culture. This work won him the Kansai Telecasting Corporation Prize for sculpture.⁶⁶ These mortar-based works are intriguing to me as well as to others.

Anatsui's interest in mortars and other old wood is part of his desire to keep in touch with ordinary people

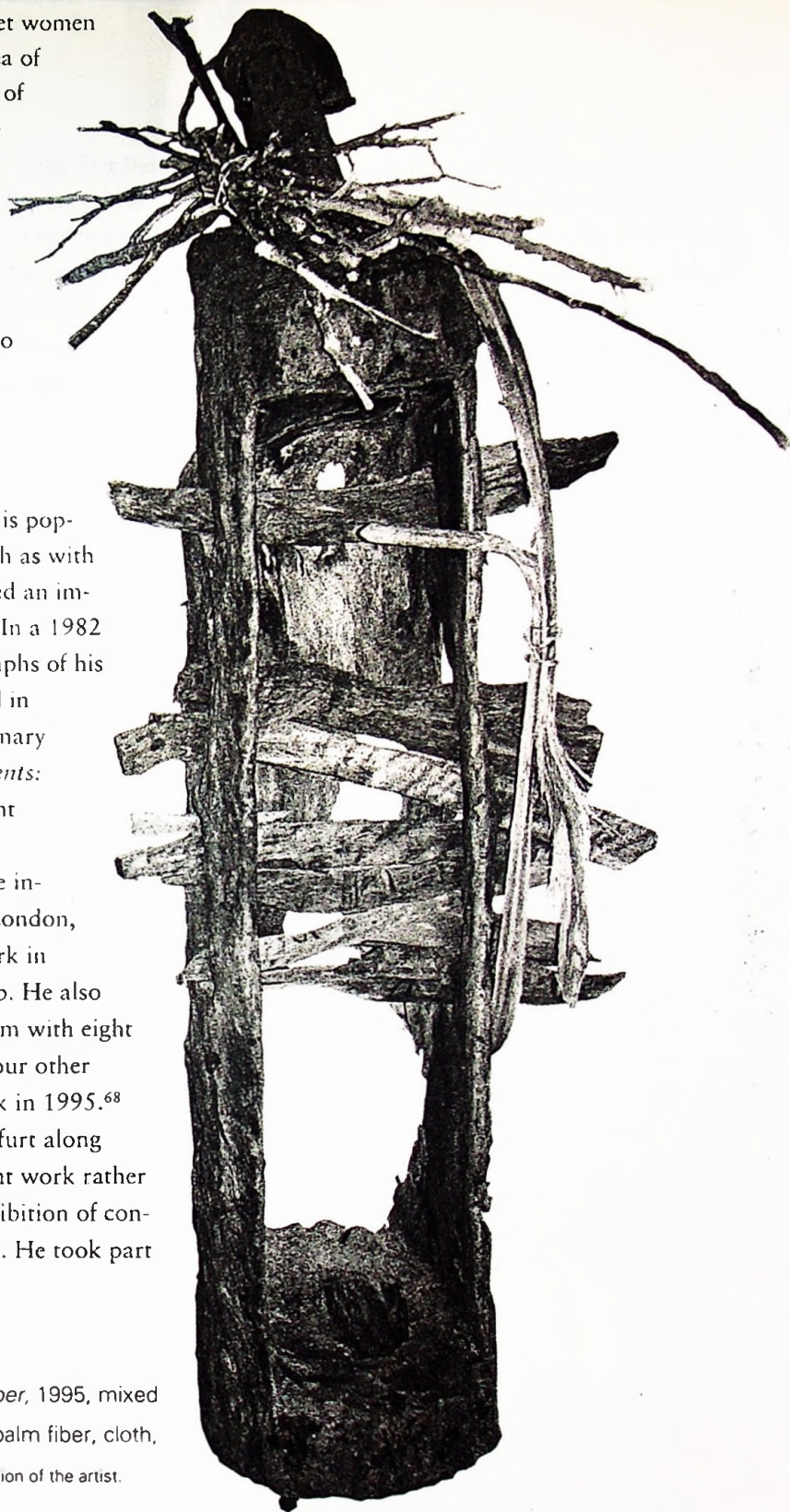
131. Old and worn village mortars used to pound palm fruits, in El Anatsui's studio, c. 123 cm high. Collection of the artist.

outside the university. We have seen this with the market women and their trays and the woodcutters in the Winneba area of Ghana; it continues in Nigeria in his search for a range of woods in the markets. These nonacademic contacts undoubtedly stimulate his creative skills and provide him with new ideas for his art. He may have been critical of the university's "ivory tower" (in his untitled wood panel discussed earlier), but he successfully moves between academia and the external world. His wood standing figures show his ability to experiment, to try different forms, and to do so with humor.

MOVING ON AND OUT

Anatsui frequently exhibits in Nigeria, where his work is popular. His work appears most often in group shows, such as with the AKA Circle of Exhibiting Artists, in which he played an important founding role along with Obiqlra Udechukwu. In a 1982 exhibition at Lagos, he showed drawings and photographs of his work as well as ceramics.⁶⁷ His line drawings appeared in *Okike* (numbers 18, 19, and 20, 1981), mostly preliminary sketches for sculpture. He also exhibited in *New Currents: Avant Garde Nigerian Art* (1993, Lagos) as one of eight selected Nigerian artists.

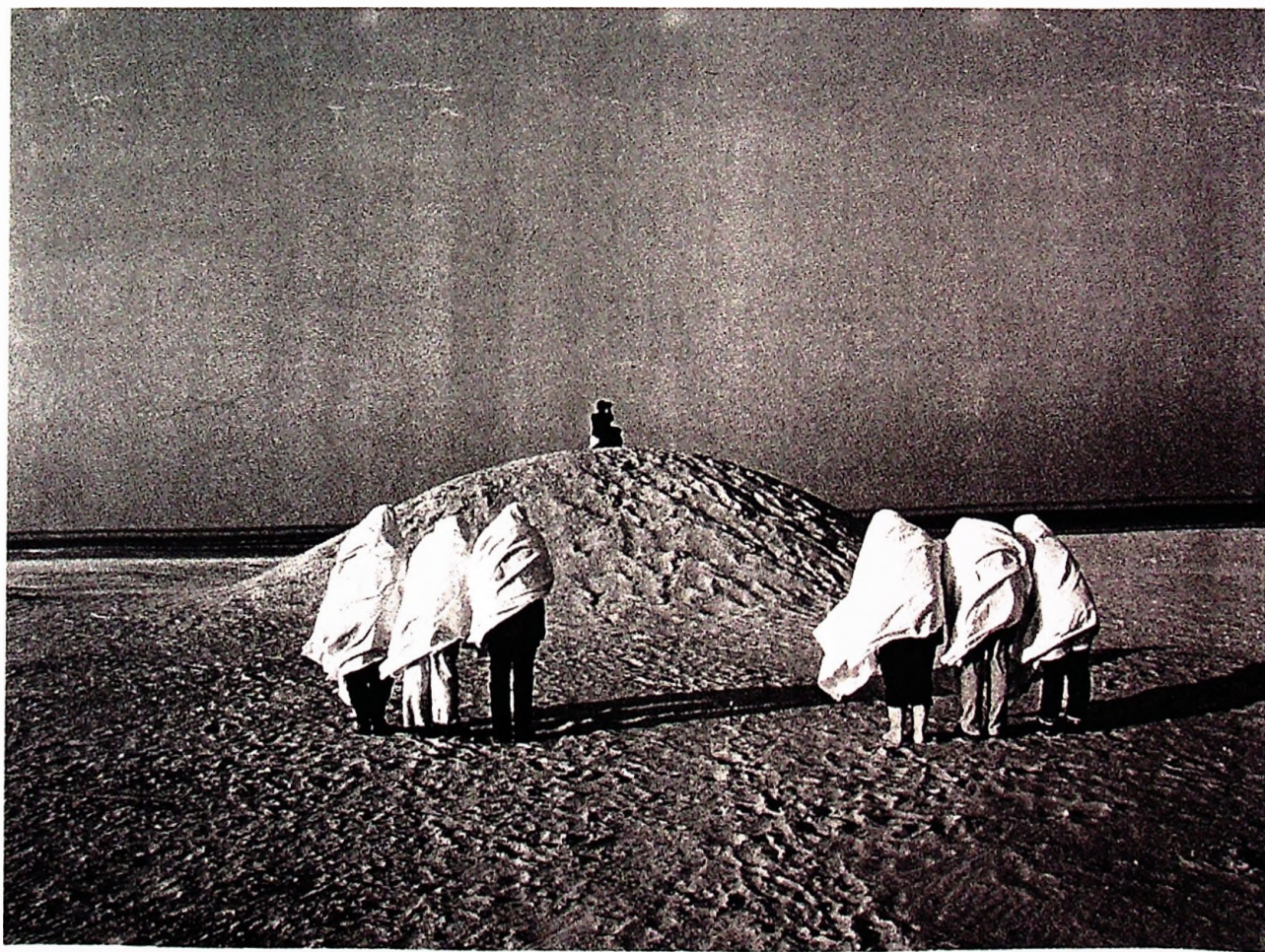
In the last fifteen years Anatsui has moved into the international world. I have already mentioned his 1995 London, October Gallery solo exhibition, his prize-winning work in Osaka the same year, and his 1992 Brazilian workshop. He also exhibited in New York at the Studio Museum in Harlem with eight other African artists in 1990—the exhibition toured four other American cities—and in a group *uli* show in New York in 1995.⁶⁸ He took part in the 1995 *Configura 2* exhibition in Erfurt along with Obiqlra Udechukwu; unlike the latter, Anatsui sent work rather than creating it on the spot.⁶⁹ He also joined in an exhibition of contemporary Nigerian art in three German cities in 1989. He took part



132. El Anatsui, *Tapper*, 1995, mixed media: wood, raffia, palm fiber, cloth, c. 183 cm high. Collection of the artist.

in 1990 with four other African artists in the first Venice Biennale to exhibit contemporary African art, and he participated in the 1994 Fifth Havana Biennale, which he enjoyed more than the Venice exhibition.⁷⁰ Matters were arranged so that the artists had a better opportunity to get together, in this case, largely third and fourth world artists whom Anatsui was eager to meet. He was one of four Nigerians in the first South African Biennale in 1995.⁷¹ There were other exhibitions abroad as well.

One of Anatsui's most unusual artistic experiences was in 1984 at Cuxhaven, Germany, at the *Zweites Symposium Nordseeküste*, where nine artists each created separate works relating to the weather at a sandy North Sea estuary. Anatsui was the only African among the artists, most of them being German, with others from Korea, Yugoslavia, and the United States. His public sculpture was a huge mound of earth on top of which he placed a large self-produced black pot, calling the whole *Altar*. Then with the help of six other artists dressed in white shawls, he developed and carried out a ritual to the weather spirits, casting himself as priest, calling it an "Offering to the Weather" (fig. 133).⁷² He had taken the weather for granted in Africa, so at Cuxhaven he had to consider what to do. As the area was flat, he felt he had to break the horizon, which he did with the help of an earth-moving tractor. This is an excellent example of Anatsui's ability to innovate; it is one of his most postmodern works.



Though the ritual pot and associated rites were very African, the ritual mound is more Middle Eastern and Mediterranean, and the white clothes of the participants suggest Christian rites.⁷³

In 1996 for two months Anatsui participated in two events at Copenhagen in the third Images of Africa Festival, *96 Containers: Art across Oceans* and *Images of Africa*.⁷⁴ For the latter he worked in an old hammermill that had produced Dane guns used in slave raids in the Gold Coast many years ago, his work commenting on slavery. In *96 Containers*, these were stacked up into a little "city" at the port of Copenhagen, with each serving as a space for an artist's installation. The recent work of Anatsui, particularly away from home, shows an ability to move toward postmodernism and to installations without giving up his strong interests in Africa.

Anatsui's increasing international recognition as an artist has given him the opportunity to meet many contemporary artists, postmodern and otherwise, from Europe but also from third and fourth world regions. He has the recognition to exhibit internationally and is becoming a world artist, moving beyond the *kente*, *adinkra*, *uli*, and *nsibidi* design traditions of Ghana and Nigeria. Though many of his themes are still African, for example, his deep concern with African history and the erosion of African cultures, some of his art takes on a more universal character, as his Brazilian *Erosion* and his North Sea *Altar*. The contrast with Uche Okeke, and even Obiqlra Udechukwu, strongly rooted in Nigerian culture, is clear. Anatsui has moved further into the international scene. He will, I believe, continue to move out, experiment, and go in new directions. His career is characterized by change and development.

133 (FACING PAGE). El Anatsui's
acolytes before the *Altar*, 1984, instal-
lation and performance, earth and
ceramic pot, dimensions unknown.

Photo: El Anatsui.