Senufo Village Guardian Figure



Senufo guardian figure from the Sikasso region of Mali, West Africa

"*Concealed in a small hut, access to this oracle figure is restricted to the most senior male and female members of the Senufo governing societies – the Poro and the Sandogo*"

This oracle figure represents a hybrid creation. It is a functional piece of art – a fetish – laying outside the realm of anything recognizable in nature. It is not a strict depiction of a man or woman, but the essence of both, containing all the power and strength of each sex. Works such as this and the ritual practice in which they are used are both known as *kafigeledjo*, a term that is variously translated as 'he who speaks the truth, tell the truth, or saying true things.' The kafigeledjo figures give visual representation to invisible bush spirits and function as divination devices. In contrast to the almost perfect humanism of works created by the Senufo, these figures clearly embody a wild and unsettling anti-aesthetic.



Years of ritual use have covered this terra cotta figure with a thick layer of organic material

The practice of kafigeledjo divination is used to uncover misdeeds, false testimony, and culpability. In essence, the purpose of this divination is the pursuit of truth, ultimately seeking to preserve and uphold Senufo social guidelines, in particular, those concerning descent. It does so by unveiling illicit behavior and by punishing with supernatural sanctions those who violate rules pertaining to forbidden sexual relations and exogamous marriage.

In use, the kafigeledjo figure is concealed within a small hut, and although it has the potential to affect all members of a Senufo community, access to this oracle figure is restricted to the most senior male and female elders. These leaders are initiates into the highest level of esoteric knowledge imparted by Poro, the Senufo men's initiation association, and its counterpart, Sandogo, the Senufo women's association. These groups or associations function as a system of government and oversee religious education and all ritual practices. Kafigeledjo figures have historically been an instrument of such elites throughout Senufo society. During the 20th century, the use of these figures shifted to another association called the *Kulebele*, who was also responsible for the creation of the oracle.



Above: During the 20th C. the use of these kafigeledjo figures went from the Poro and Sandogo senufo societies to the Kulebele



Village Gaurdian · Senufo people · Sikasso region, Mali · West Africa · 20th C. · Terra cotta, organic material · 10 W x 9 D x 27 H inches

Item #A1000-126

Kafigeledjo is thus a formidable force wielded by Kulebele leaders to distinguish their heritage and preserve the special interests of their constituents. In order to harness the oracle’s power and operate it successfully, these leaders establish their commitment through ritual sacrifices, which unevenly cover the oracle figure's surface with crusty matter, often over a rough fabric shroud. The effect of engulfing the figure in a textile sack blurs the boundaries between material and immaterial, seen and unseen, physical and spiritual, and plays with the ambiguity between obscured and revealed form.