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Physical and Metaphysical Aspects of Mende Feminine Beauty

FEMALE BEAUTY IN THE LIFE OF THE COMMUNITY

Mende think that human beings comprise the most interesting category of things in the world. No animal or plant, lake or mountain, cloud or star—no other creature or object which exists to be seen or sensed is more deserving of consideration than a person, *numu*. With their imaginations and speech, poses and movements, comings and goings, activities and entanglements, people rivet Mende attention. The development and expression of the human personality and the complexities of human behavior and interaction are an ever-fascinating focus of observation, comment, and speculation.

Within this context of the primacy of the person, women are thought to be by far the most interesting people. Admittedly, like so many of their sex, Mende women are dominated by their menfolk, and it is a fact that they often are callously treated; nevertheless, the community assumes that women have more possibilities and that the unfolding of their lives contains more surprises. The duckling-to-swan change of body lends drama to every female; the internality of her sexuality gives every female mystery. A woman is distinct and different from but no less than a man. And women have under their control the most important human capabilities: they are the sources of love and the makers of wealth.

Of all the women in the world, young women and especially pubescent girls exert a fascination which Mende themselves find dangerously excessive but seemingly uncontrollable and inevitable. Starting at the time of her initiation into adulthood and continuing until the birth of her second child, a Mende girl is the object of intense concern. The entire community worries about how she will "turn out": will she "do right" and bring riches, honor, and even fame to her family; or will she "do wrong" and cause chagrin and disgrace? Because a girl can be a blessing or a curse, her whole

world watches intently—advising, teaching, cajoling, encouraging, punishing—hoping she will bring only goodness.

Of all the things in the world, Mende also think that *people* are the most beautiful. If beauty is the promise of pleasure,¹ then for Mende the happiness and satisfaction to be found only in human company renders people “in the eye of the beholder” truly more beautiful than any scenery. Among people, the most beautiful ones are women (fig. 29). Mende agree that woman is primary beauty, and that the female face and body are beauty incarnate.² Woman is the most beautiful thing that God has put in the world; she is God’s finest handiwork. It is against the standard of feminine pulchritude that other beings, creatures, and objects are judged. If a man is really handsome, Mende say “he is like a woman.” When a local furniture store advertises on the radio the attractiveness of its well-made tables, the announcer declares that they are “fine like a woman.”³ Should a Mende sculptor wish to make something beautiful, he will carve on it the head or shape of a woman. Almost anything can have a female likeness—hotel-room keyholders,⁴ hammock holders.

Mende elders are categorical on this point: a woman must be an object worth looking at, something you can adore. The sight of a lovely woman is considered one of the great pleasures of life; her presence brings a surge of satisfaction and contentment.⁵ An attractive female is constantly being admired openly or surreptitiously, is always the focus of a certain kind of side-glance awareness. Though villagers may not decorate their homes (with drapes, wallpaper, pictures, or bric-a-brac), they nevertheless share the same human desire for gracious surroundings. To Mende, women are the decoration, the adornment—literally, the embellishment of the compound. So, a woman is expected to strive to be beautiful—it is her duty to society, her obligation to her appreciative audience (fig. 30).

Along with the emphasis on beauty, there is also a concomitant belief that every woman has something attractive about her. However plain the woman, she will always find a man to admire and marry her; no woman is rejected because she is not “pretty.” A Mende proverb says: *Nyaha gahanèè lò pèè woma*—“A woman’s hamper will not remain behind the house,” meaning that no woman, no matter how bad-looking, is excluded from full social life. This is not to imply that people now are judging the character of the homely girl and giving her marks for being nice. Rather, it is that no woman is considered or called ugly, no matter how far she may be from the physical ideal. Just by the fact of being a woman, she is attractive. Another proverb puts it squarely: “Nothing that has vagina can be called ugly.”⁶

Beauty, however, does confer immense prestige on a young woman and gives her a sense of independence and personal power. A belle is expected to be discriminating and selective in her activities and associations. It is believed that she makes her decisions and choices based on enlightened

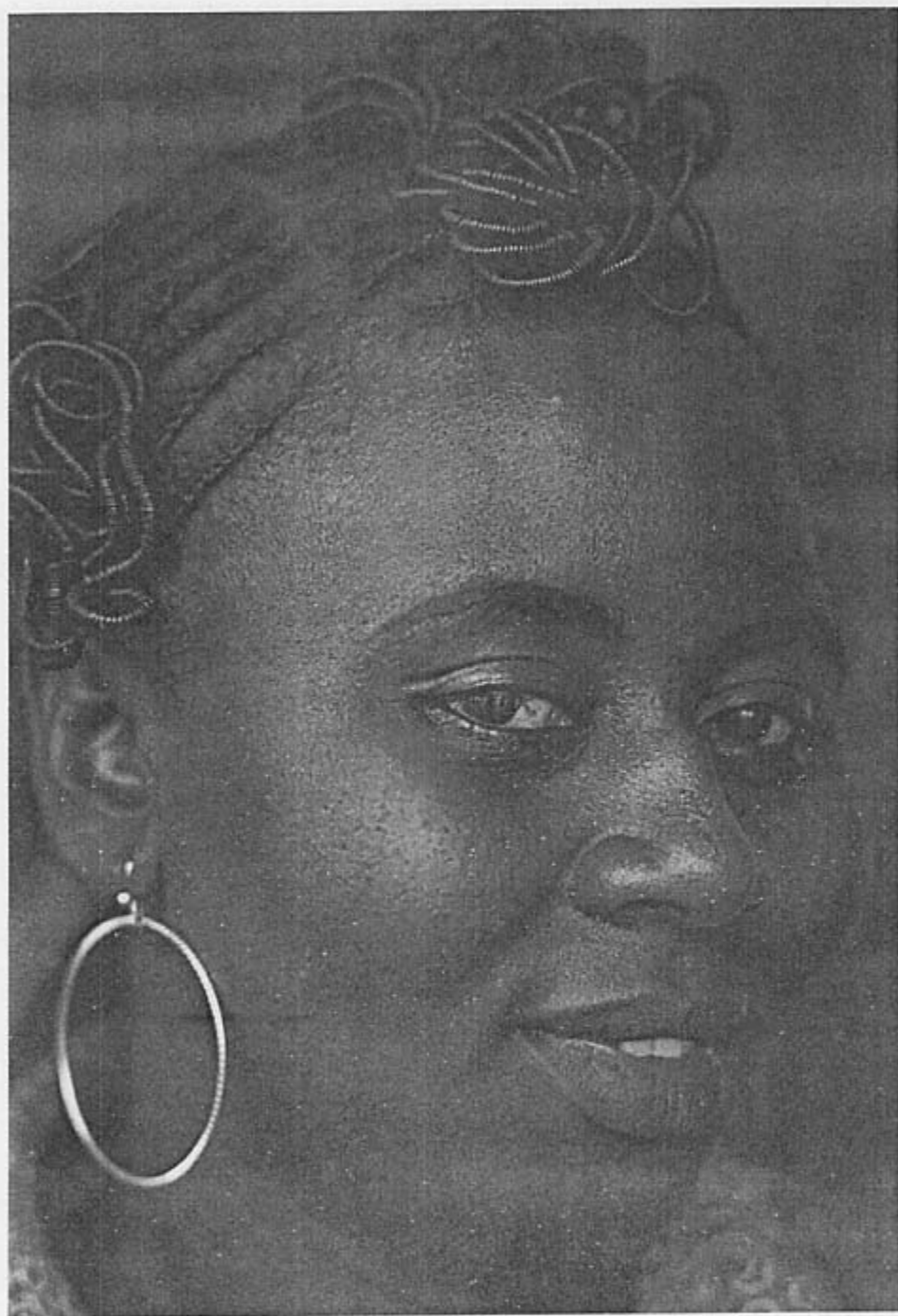
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self-interest and high moral standards rather than on hasty, low expediency. For a young Mende girl to find herself possessed of a pleasing face and figure is a stroke of great good fortune. Beautiful women with whom I have spoken value their good looks.⁷ They say it brings them attention, admiration, money, gifts, suitors, preferential treatment. Because they are beautiful they feel welcome everywhere, easily make friends, and are always respected. Men vie to be husband or lover to a beautiful girl; winning her means that a man has come out on top in a keen competition. A man with a beautiful wife is automatically an important person in the Mende community, and to have more than one beautiful spouse means a man is rapidly rising in the world.

Every woman is appreciated for her feminine attributes and will attract a husband or lover, but what makes all women reach for beauty is the competition of life in the *mawè*, the polygynous family arrangement (fig. 31). A husband with several or many wives always chooses the most attractive one as his consort on excursions. While other aspects of domestic life are regulated by a rota, with each wife participating equally, outside of the home on trips or at festivities only one wife will appear at the husband's side—the most beautiful one. Although another wife may be the husband's closest confidante or his beloved, when he goes out in public he will choose as his companion the wife who is most physically attractive.⁸

Because lovely young brides are so feverishly desired by the men of the community, competition for control over their minds and bodies begins early. The mother of a beautiful little girl can be sure that they both will continually receive money and gifts from eager men who hope to be regarded as suitors for the girl's hand. One attractive mother of a cute four-year-old in the town told me that on occasion she would make matching mother/daughter outfits for herself and child, get them both dressed up (including make-up and jewelry for the little girl), and together, they would go out strolling or visiting on a Sunday afternoon.⁹ By the evening she would have collected two or three pounds in tips and gifts from neighbors and strangers as compliments to her and her daughter for their fine appearance.¹⁰

Again, a woman is a woman; all are desirable and valuable, and the custom of intrauterine betrothal still happens from time to time in Mendeland (Little, 1967:153). The discussion here focuses on the particular attention paid to a pretty child. Beauty bestows such personality on its possessor that it is difficult to keep a really lovely girl bound by a marriage contract her parents may have made when she was still a very young child. The community and her parents acknowledge that, as a young beauty, she may be destined for greater heights than originally foreseen, and it would be unfair to hold her back.

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them affiliate with their lodges. Having a number of good-looking girls in her initiation camp enhances the prestige of the Sowe; if she consistently enrolls young beauties, her *kpanguima* can become famous and fashionable. From Madame Yoko to Madame Gulama, Mende female leaders have gained power in part through arranging strategic love alliances between initiates and important men.¹¹ The pawns manipulated in this game are the beautiful young virgins. If she is able to control or influence a young girl's marriage plans, a Sowe rises in the esteem of highly placed men of the area, something which an ambitious woman can turn to economic and political advantage.

The allure a beautiful girl holds for the wealthy and powerful also contributes to her father's social advancement. A brief examination of the economic workings of Mende society will make clearer the meaning and importance of a beautiful daughter, and my later description of her care and grooming will be more understandable. For most Mende, life means year after year of arduous physical labor. Men and women are trained to be hard-working and uncomplaining as they endure the toil of wresting subsistence from a harsh environment. There are very few ways in which a man may rise above his fellows or become eligible for important community positions. An athletic youth of exceptional strength and daring who excels in feats of hardihood and cleverness in hunting, battles, or contests, will favorably impress his elders. His reputation will earn him prestige and the rewards of land, money, and wives; at a young age he has everything for a happy future. On the other hand, a more restless and enterprising young man may decide to leave home to seek his fortune elsewhere. If lucky, he may unearth diamonds,¹² have good harvests of lucrative cash-crops on rented land,¹³ or find employment in the civil service, in a large company, or at sea. Once he is known to have money and control over property and labor, his village will welcome him back as a success. However, the ordinary man who remains at home must prove himself the hard way, first as a prosperous farmer. Then, if he is of strong character, fair, even-tempered, reliable, and decisive, he will gain respect and eventually rise to positions of family and community leadership and responsibility.

After factoring out from observation these avenues to success and public recognition, I put my ideas to my informants. They agreed with me in part; but each one told me simply and directly that the best (most direct, sure, and easiest) way for a man to get ahead was by having beautiful daughters (fig. 32)! A girl who combines good looks with a demure, submissive manner is considered by her father as a gift fit for the paramount chief.¹⁴ Because his enticing child certainly will be chosen as wife by one of the highly situated men, the father finds his own prestige increased. Then, as father-in-law, he is a special, well-attended-to guest in his daughter's new home. Through his son-in-law he is always sure of consideration and favor in high places.

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THE STUDY OF MENDE FEMININE BEAUTY

This essay on Mende female beauty is directly inspired by the Ivorian ethnographer and historian Harris Memel-Fotê. He is the first Africanist to treat seriously the subject of West African concepts of beauty and to find in Africa tastes, preferences, and reflections on women's beauty, the new materials for a deep understanding of aesthetics, morality, and metaphysics. Showing great originality, his paper—a contribution to the *Colloquium* at the First World Festival of Negro Arts, Dakar, 1966—is a sort of introduction to and statement of the question; it is a comparative survey. In studying his article, I have extrapolated his methodology and used it for an extensive and intensive study of a single West African culture, the Mende.

The following quotations from Memel-Fotê give a picture of his basic ideas:

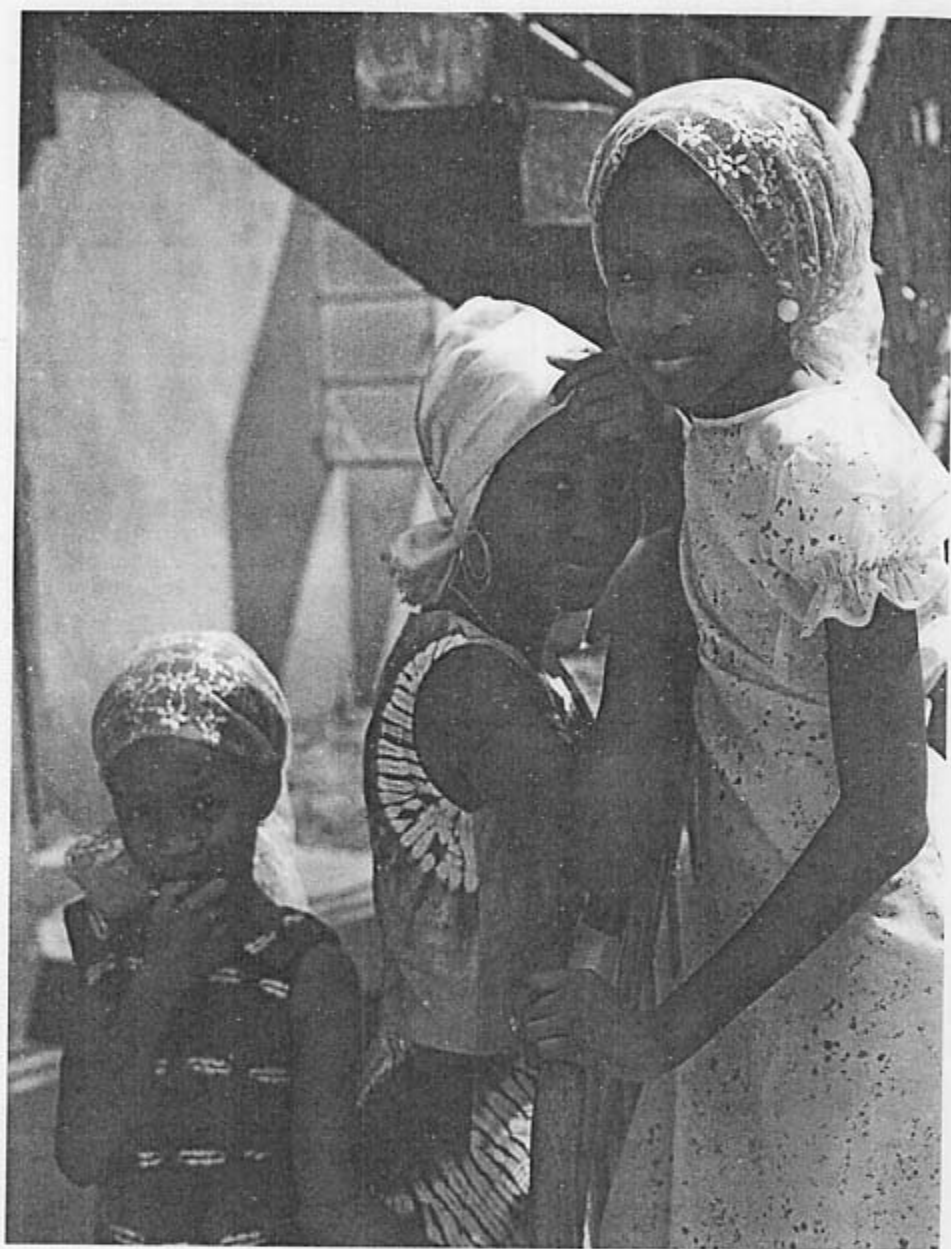
Beauty, Africans think, is an indescribable something which inhabits all the regions of the universe—in any case a category which is applicable and which is applied to all kinds of things, to all sorts of beings in the world. There is an innate beauty in things and beings, natural beauty. And there is a beauty in man's acts and accomplishments, artistic beauty. . . . Let us listen to the stories and legends, let us observe life, these are all depositories of the aesthetic. . . . In the legendary or the authentic history of men, there are also memorable and proverbial beauties. . . . As cosmic as it may appear, beauty is, as far as understanding is concerned, marked by one foremost characteristic—*relativity*. . . .

Relative and relativistic to a certain degree, the African perception of beauty is also a *unitary* perception. Here is not a question of beauty in the strictly physical sense nor of beauty in the strictly moral sense. It is not a question of physical beauty with neither ontological thickness nor moral radiation. And not a moral beauty that offers no carnal outlet. Beauty is one. But it is pluridimensional and presents various aspects.

There is a physical-mathematical aspect of beauty, there is the ethical aspect, there is the metaphysical and metamoral aspect. Three aspects of the same reality whose analysis and genetics constitute an ontology. Thus, for beauty, we can sketch an aesthetic of sensitivity, an aesthetic of morality, an aesthetic of being.

Is it a matter of physical aesthetics? It is in the form of criteriology that Negro cultures offer what is elsewhere called canons of beauty. [1968:48–50]

The study of female beauty was my entree into Mende culture. All other roads to an understanding of Mende art seemed barred by the restrictions laid down by the *hale*, societies; but beauty, as Mende affirm, has the power to open many doors. Never once in conducting more than a hundred interviews did I encounter the least reluctance to answer questions on this subject. On the contrary, everybody was eager to contribute his or her views. After I had started with one or two persons, others would arrive, and soon there would be a high-spirited gathering that offered me a good-



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natured outpouring of information and anecdotes, punctuated with laughter and demonstrations.

Mende society is of one mind on criteria of women's beauty. Every adult has clear, articulated notions about what is beautiful— notions shared by every other man and woman in the community. As Thompson found, in Dan life, a cultivated awareness of movement (1974:2), so I found in Mende an extreme interest in all aspects of the female face, figure, and motion. Every Mende man and woman seems to be an enthusiastic amateur critic and connoisseur of female beauty who wants to appear well-versed in all the criteria and how to apply them. Since everyone freely comments on girls' looks, children learn early what set of features is desirable, and by the time they are eight or nine years old they too can state clearly what a young woman should look like. Older, more experienced people continue to take beauty very seriously and never lose their sense of delight and interest in its development. They feel responsible for maintaining the standards of physical appearance while at the same time, with more settled, even temperament, they remind the community of the moral and ethical considerations.

The overwhelmingly obvious point about beauty in Mende life is that *discussion is solely about women*. Men are completely excluded from consideration. Men may evaluate beauty, desire beauty, pay for beauty, obtain beauty, exchange beauty—but they have placed themselves outside the arena; they are consumers of beauty, not its source. Our very guide to the study, Memel-Fotê, entitled his work, "The Perception of Beauty in Negro-African Culture," but *the article is all about women and their features!* His automatic and unconscious equation of beauty with the female face and form is an assumption that Mende share (fig. 33).

Using Memel-Fotê's instructions, I sought information about beauty from a variety of sources. In scores of interviews I asked simply: What is the best kind of breast? What is the best kind of eye? I let people start in any way they wished and I was sure that I covered all parts of the body.¹⁵ When I had learned enough to ascertain patterns of thought and values in the replies, I began to study the implications more deeply with my preceptors. There does not seem to be any particularly beautiful heroine in Mende stories, rather, every female character is referred to as good-looking. The female lead performers in Mende stories must perforce be beautiful, otherwise they could not qualify as lead performers. There are several songs, not so much about a good-looking person, but rather giving instructions on "how you too can become beautiful" through the practice of art or graceful movement.

SHAPING A GIRL'S BEAUTY

Once diagnosed as pregnant, a young "woman is now subjected to certain taboos and negations, the infringement of which are supposed to have a



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disastrous effect on the outcome of the pregnancy. The admonitions are then combined with the judicious use of herbs and concoctions to be used during the antenatal period" (Kargbo, 1975:3). A woman's primary concern must be to bring forth a healthy and normal baby and herself survive and be strong. But beyond the basics of health and well-being, a conscientious woman may seek to have an especially beautiful child. She will thus have additional rules to follow (such as not to look at ugly objects or animals), certain songs to sing, and particular amulets to wear. A complicated delivery is thought to be ruinous to a newborn's looks. One girl complained to her mother that she was not beautiful and her mother replied, "Well, for a breech-baby, you're not bad."

A Mende child's looks are considered from the very moment of her birth.¹⁶ As the head appears, even before the umbilical cord is cut, one of the midwives begins rubbing the infant's head, shaping it round and smooth and pressing the ears to the skull. This effort at molding the head into a pleasing shape must be done immediately while the bones are soft and malleable. Over the next few weeks the mother and grandmother will continue the shaping process; and if the baby's ears seem to protrude, a band will be used around the head to pin them flat. A finely shaped head with small ears close to the skull is an absolute necessity for beauty; any odd shape will mean a lifetime of embarrassment.¹⁷ A Mende person's head is always on display: a boy's hair is usually shaven off, leaving head and scalp visible; girls wear their hair in tightly braided sections, again revealing the contours and surface of the head.¹⁸ There are no long or fluffy styles to disguise the head's outline; rather, Mende love to see the head itself, admiring its worth above all other parts of the body.¹⁹

A Mende mother encourages her child to enjoy splashing and playing in the water. "We are fish, we love water," one Mende told me.²⁰ Far beyond the requirements for cleanliness, a bath is one of the good things of life; for an adult an evening bath is so necessary and so satisfying that to miss one is as uncomfortable as missing a meal.²¹ The daily bath is a beauty session for baby; a mother uses this time to attempt to improve her child's appearance. She will pay particular attention to shaping and enlarging the baby's buttocks. First the mother puts the baby on its stomach; then she squeezes the two dimples near the base of the spine. The baby reacts by kicking its legs back. This exercise is thought to develop a high behind. While the baby is still on its stomach, the mother will push in at the waistline (as though making an indentation) and will slap the buttocks from underneath up (fig. 34).

Some mothers throw the baby in the air and catch it—this rough play conditions a child to the shock of falling, so that she will take spills easily and not be injured or disfigured. The mother then holds the baby up under the arms, so that she makes pedaling motions in the air, a good exercise for strengthening the limbs. Laying the baby on its back, the mother presses the baby's knees and legs together tightly, and holding



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them with one hand, she uses her other hand to push them flat, attempting thereby to make the legs grow straight and close together. Then she will pull at each leg, to make the legs long and tapered. For flexibility a mother rotates the joints in their sockets; some tie strings around the baby's wrists, elbows, and knees, hoping that the slight irritation will cause the child to move the joints more. In another exercise for suppleness, a mother picks the baby up by one arm and shakes her, then by the other. Once the infant is rinsed and dried, the mother rubs her from head to toe with clarified, perfumed palm oil.

These cosmetic efforts must be made while the child is very young and the bones "soft" enough to be effectively molded into perfect shape. The devotion of women to this task is touching and much commended by husbands and family. Mende people know great beauty is a given from God but prefer to treat it as something that can develop from a mother's tenderness and love. If you compliment a Mende woman on her clear complexion she will tell you that when she was a baby her mother washed her clean; on her soft skin, that her mother rubbed her well with beneficial oils. A girl with a lovely, smooth back told me that when she was a baby her mother stretched her arms behind her so that now she is "double-jointed" and can comfortably reach and scrub all the rear parts of her body.

Once she is able to sit up and have her ears pierced, a baby girl begins to have occasions of playing a little woman. For an outing, the baby's eyes and eyebrows will be blackened with kohl, her hair plaited in a style; she will wear tiny earrings and bangle bracelets and be dressed in fancy cloth. Admirers will comment on how pretty and fine she is, a "perfect little woman." Although the mother lavishes time and effort on making her infant daughter into a little doll, she herself is expected studiously to neglect her own appearance. Beyond attention to basic cleanliness and neatness, she must not show any interest in her own looks—no make-up, perfume, jewelry, or rich clothing. A plump, pretty coquette fades into a thin, tired shadow, constantly complaining of being drained by trying to meet baby's incessant needs. Mothers boast of their child's vigor and loud demands and sacrifice their own good looks so that baby may thrive. The mother's beauty, then, is a tangible thing which she offers up as sacrifice for the good of her child.

The Mende community realizes that for many a girl the period between her debut into society and her subsequent responsibilities as a mother is too brief. Some girls cannot stand adult restrictions and long to return to a carefree life with their friends. Others cannot bear to give up their round faces and firm figures. A girl comes out of Sande School at fifteen or sixteen years of age. As a new *nyaha*, she is constantly praised, and an inordinate fuss is made about her looks. Then she is immediately married and is probably pregnant within a few months. In addition to all the new prenatal rules and taboos she must follow, the girl must no longer show

interest in her own appearance. The same older people who formerly swooned over her now berate her if she tries in any way to display her beauty. For many initiates, it is a difficult adjustment to make.²²

A pregnant girl returns to her kin to await the birth of her child (MacCormack, 1978:4). She is usually glad to escape the tensions of the *mawé* and be back under the comforting care of her mother. As is familiar to students of African social life, a Mende woman observes a period of from one to two years of sexual abstinence following the birth of a baby (Little, 1967:142); on no account must she cohabit with her husband before the baby walks. For the first year especially the mother is expected to give the baby close care. Of course, the new mother is inept and scared, so guidance by a grandmother helps to ensure the baby's well-being. As sympathetic as they are to a young mother's clumsiness, maternal kin are stern about her behavior: here, too, she is harshly criticized for any attention to her appearance. "Why are you putting on make-up, is it because you are going to a man?" "Are you going to abandon your baby?" "Why are you trying to attract men? If you sleep with men your baby may die." A nursing mother is not supposed to be beautiful any more. Denied are all the aspects of beauty that serve feminine pride and self-esteem. Beauty now is stated as being necessary only for the attraction of men as sexual partners; so, with the temporary proscription on sex comes the temporary banishing of beauty.

As she grows up, the little girl follows her mother in her daily routine (ibid.:115). Like her mother, she will go to the stream twice a day, morning and night, to bathe. In the morning she will clean her teeth by using a hard stick that is chomped to strengthen them, while the stump is used to scrub the teeth surfaces of any film. Alternately, mixtures of ash and salt may be used as abrasives. After her bath she rubs her skin with oil and uses pumice stones to clean her feet of dirt and calluses. Nails on her hands and toes are kept cut short. The little girls of the village wear a little *cache-sexe* of cloth, hide, beads, or an apron tied at the side. Otherwise they are quite naked and admired for their innocence (fig. 35).

BEAUTY OF FACE AND HEAD

The sensitivity of Mende to beauty and all its associations emerges particularly in considering the head and neck: the features should be fine and small, with small gradations determining quality and distinction. The Sande mask is an image of a head and neck; in evaluating it, also, delicacy is the major criterion. Every element of the mask is suffused with mystical associations beginning with its physical shape. This complicated and extensive lore will be examined in the following chapter, as part of the intellectual and spiritual concepts to be used in analyzing the symbolism of the form of the mask.

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Mende pay close attention to the shape of the head, *ngu*, and the face, *ngama*. General contours are settled in infancy and, as indicated before, women work to see that the baby's head is properly molded. A woman's face must be round, gently contoured. A long face is bad, "masculine." The chin must be medium: too spread out has no firmness; sharp is "ugly." High cheek bones are admired, and dimples on the cheeks or chin are considered charming. Ears, *ngoli*, should be small, close to the head, not large or protruding.

Hair

In the Mende lexicon, that which in English we generally call by the collective noun *hair* is designated by three entirely different words: *ngundia* is hair on the head; *njombo* is hair on the body; and *ndega* is pubic hair. Since Mende vocabulary is compact and Mende have a predilection for joining words together to form new nouns rather than inventing new sounds, this multiplicity of words is an indication both of the attention paid to hair and the sharp distinctions made among types. Judgments on hair concern its quantity and volume. Because a man's hair is kept shaved or cut close to the scalp, people say that "men don't have hair." Beautiful hair thus is a distinctly female trait; and the more of it, the more feminine the woman. This polarization of attributes by sexual label is the core of Mende aesthetic evaluation. In a way, the "further away from" a man's appearance a woman is, the more beautiful she is considered.

Beautiful hair is praised as *kpotongò*, literally, "it is much, abundant, plentiful" (Innes, 1969:62). The root word, *kpoto*, is most often used to describe fruits on a tree, rice, other things, and things of a kind that can be pulled together and tied. When referring to hair, *kpoto* means long and thick; Mende think the salient quality of hair is that it grows, and *kpoto* denotes an abundant, numerous quality of growing things. *Kpoto* objects can be tied together, the way hair is styled, using threads to hold it together or weaving it together in plaits tied at the ends. Other hair words play on this analogy between hair and flora, one growing on a woman's head, the other on the earth's surface. *Kpèndèngò* is a word meaning "stunted, not growing robustly"; it describes hair that is short or thin (ibid.:60). The opposite term, *pòpòòngò*, indicates thick growth, luxuriant like a farm or forest (ibid.:126). Hair that is *pòpòòngò* is growing in abundance as it should.

A woman's hair must be clean, smooth, shiny, well-groomed, and plaited into a flattering style. Only a black color is acceptable to Mende. Brownish hair is thought to be dusty and dirty. Men and women both dye their hair deep black, using indigo dye obtained from the *njaa* plant, the same dye used for threads and textiles. Commercial hair dye compounds are also popular. A woman normally washes her hair every week. After

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rinsing out the soap she may apply a herbal mixture prescribed to make her hair healthy. Afterwards she will oil it with a perfumed animal fat that comes from goats (rather like our sheep-derived lanolin), or she may use clarified palm oil.²³

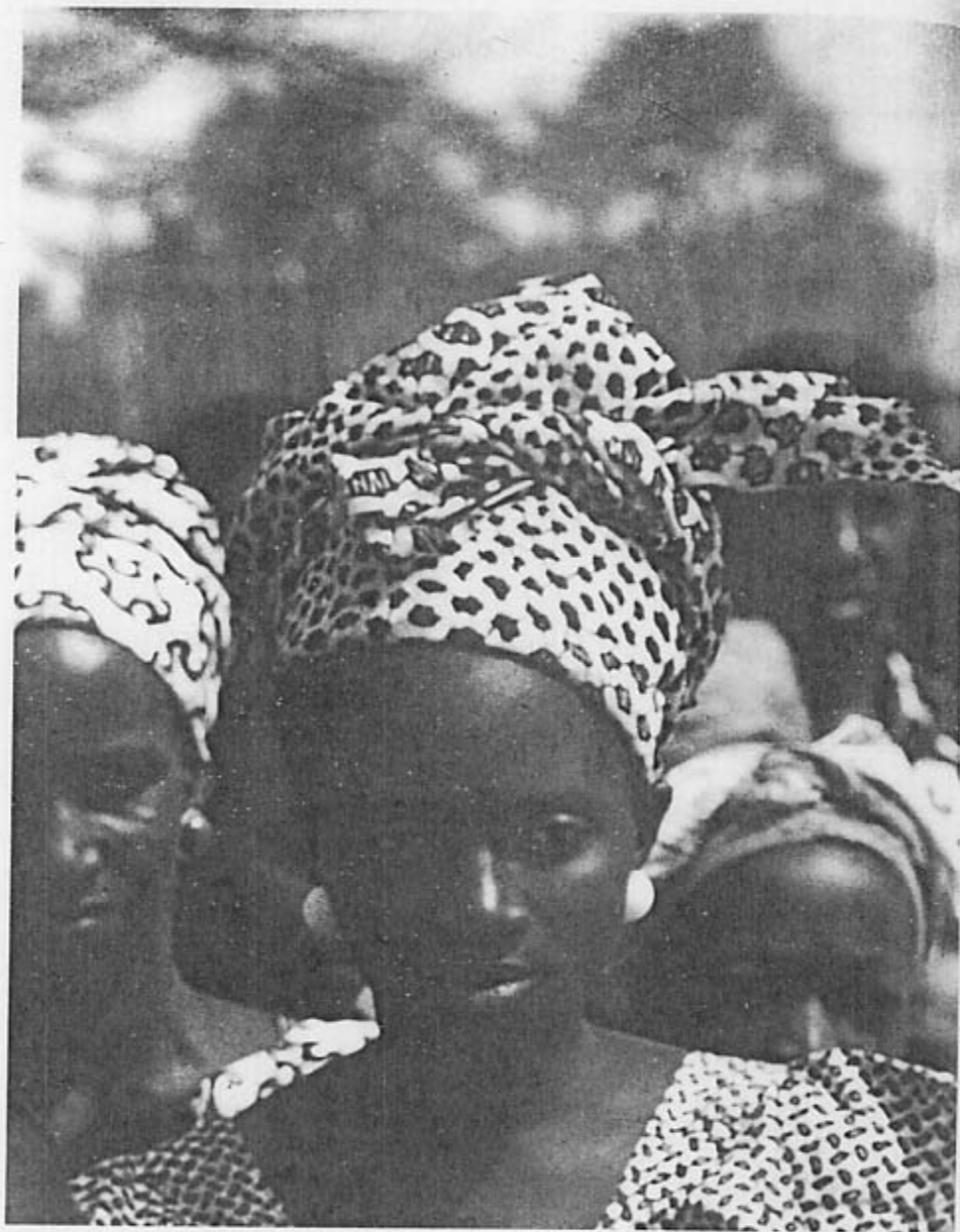
Forehead

The forehead, *tawa*, of a beautiful woman is smooth and clear, free of bumps, blemishes, or wrinkles. The texture must be delicate and fine, appearing to be "thin," not tough or leathery (fig. 36). The forehead should slope back slightly, be even and level, and "fit well" between the eyebrows and hairline, in no way protruding or overhanging so as to cast a shadow over the eyes and face. Mende usually leave the forehead as a broad, open area of the face. In deep Mende villages, women still prepare for a festivity by making up their foreheads (not their cheeks or lips): using white clay they draw lines, stars, dots, circles, and other simple motifs to compose an individual and flattering pattern. After the party the design is washed off; a new one will be created for the next occasion. There are fads and fashions in forehead painting, but they are so ephemeral that we have no record of their variety. No doubt the patterns have communicative value within a closed time and social set, but I have no further examples of them.

Eyes

Mende love looking at eyes and adore them above all other human attributes. Eyes are the most beautiful part of the human body and its single most important feature. If the head is supreme over the body, then eyes command the head (fig. 36). The word for eye, *ngama*, is the same as the face, indicating that the whole aspect of the face is centered on and summed up by the eyes. The most beautiful eye is large and round—*ngama waja waja*. The eyes must not be too close together: they must be well-placed in the socket, slightly bulging rather than deep-set. A too-bulging eye is bad because it is "like a frog's." Little, narrow eyes are "like having no eyes at all." Any abnormalities, such as tearing, cross-eyes, tics, or squinting, are grievous faults. Almost everyone has black or very dark brown eyes, but the rare light-colored eyes—gray or blue especially—are considered delightful and are highly admired.

The whites of the eye should be clear, free of any film or discoloration; a yellow cast indicates sickness. Also, whites should not be red: a red eye is the warrior's eye as he goes fearlessly into combat; a red eye is the lover's eye, heated with sexual desire—both are unsuitable for pretty young girls. Eyes bright and shining, the shape large and round, the whites clean and white, and the whole surface glisteningly alert and sharp—those are the perfect eyes of health and beauty. Most people express a preference for rather thick eyebrows (*ngama gbeka*) of a curved, S-shape. They should be



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wide apart and distinctly separate, not meeting in the middle. Both the eyebrows and the rims of the eyes are darkened with a mineral cosmetic, kohl (*tiwo*). Again, the desire is for emphasis and clarity, black kohl making a contrast that brightens the whites of the eyes.

Nose

"The nose, *hokpa*, should be small, not too big." "It shouldn't be broad or flat." "It should be like the mask." A good nose is said to "stand straight"; the descriptive declarative, *wonangò*, means "it is straight, it is right, it is correct" (Innes, 1969:126). Alternately, a small, round, "pug" nose is acceptable; but in no case should the nose be large or wide. If westerners consider a broad nose a "typical Negro feature," Mende certainly do not; they hate broad noses. Answers to my questions about noses elicited raucous laughter as the ugliness of flared, open nostrils or sprawling flatness was evinced through appropriately vulgar grunts, snorts, and punches. Having a big nose is a disaster, a cause of a lifetime of teasing and derision. The great praise of a nose is to say the *ngi hokpei kia puumoi*, "her nose is like a European's." In fact, the only European physical feature which Mende do admire is the nose: Mende consider them "smallish," and say that aquiline noses look sharp and "cut." Sierra Leonean girls of Foulah blood are liked for their delicate noses and Mende think the Mandingo nose "aristocratic."

Mouth

The mouth/lips, *nda*, of a woman must be clean and smooth, without any peeling skin or discolorations; the breath must be sweet and fresh. After these essentials, the beauty of the mouth and lips lies in their action—the mouth should be smiling. People love smiles and consider a frowning mouth, or closed or pursed lips, as "not beautiful." Size and shape are considered when judging between two smiling mouths. Mende like mouths a bit small, though full and rounded, with the lipline sharply defined, as though cut. They find large or blubbery lips repulsive; too thin lips are also bad, being regarded as a simian characteristic.

A mouth of naturally red color is desirable; it alludes to ripeness, something sweet and succulent. The red color refers to the vulva. In Mende, *nda* means mouth; *ndabu* (the same *nda* plus the adverb *bu* meaning bottom, underside, under, underneath) means the genitals (Innes, 1969:91), specifically, the vulva, "the mouth found underneath."²⁴ Female genitalia are red. As with the face mouth, then, the redder they are, the more attractive and alluring, possessing the red of ripeness, readiness.

Teeth

Teeth, *ngòngolu*, should be small, the smaller the better, widely spaced, preferably with a gap, *sape*, between the two front teeth.²⁵ A pearly white-

ness is beautiful. To keep teeth immaculately clean, free from stain or decay, they are scoured at least once a day with an abrasive powder of salt and ashes, or with commercial tooth powders and pastes. The best cleansing, however, is obtained by rubbing the teeth with special sticks that remove all film and whiten the enamel. Small, widely spaced teeth are so attractive to Mende that in the past teeth were filed to reduce their size and open the spaces, a practice which has almost died out. Likewise, on a more modest scale, any woman not born with a middle gap would have the two upper incisors filed to open a space.

The small amount of flesh showing between the two front teeth is considered a beauty mark, a point of attention and admiration. Carrying further the punning interplay between mouth and genitals, the opening is seen as the vulva and the interaction between that space and the tongue as the act of sexual intercourse between male and female. The opening between the teeth suggests the opening between the legs—a girl with open teeth suggests easy seduction and a more passionate encounter. (For the same reason, a hissing noise made by sucking air through the teeth is abusive and offensive; it is a “fig” remark without words.)

Neck

A good neck, *mbolo*, is long, firm, and flexible; but “not too long, like a giraffe’s or a camel’s,” and not too short, because then the person looks “like a tortoise.” A truly beautiful neck should be ringed with indentations so that it appears segmented into rows; the deeper the indentations and the more distinct the rings, the better (fig. 37). It cannot be said that a girl *should* have a ringed neck, because ringed necks are the most special aspect of human appearance, not assumed within the merely nice, normal, and pretty. A ringed neck, *mbolo gènyè*, is a beauty in and of itself: it is *physical beauty incarnate*.²⁶ It has an identity and aura outside the person, but it does not make its owner beautiful. In fact, it is ludicrous to see this gorgeous neck on an otherwise unattractive girl; it becomes a caricature—the beauty of the neck mocks the plainness of her appearance.

BEAUTY OF THE BODY

Mende take note of the smallest variation in the features of the neck and head; but the human body, *kahu*, is by definition large, so our consideration of it involves larger areas with less fine distinctions. This discussion will concern itself with proportions, health, grooming, and praises; then will go beyond the physical to examine Mende notions about the parts of the body and the symbolic inferences of their morality and power.

Breasts

Young Mende girls are proud of their beautiful breasts, and justly so, for the breast, *nyini*, elicits the admiration of women and the adoration of

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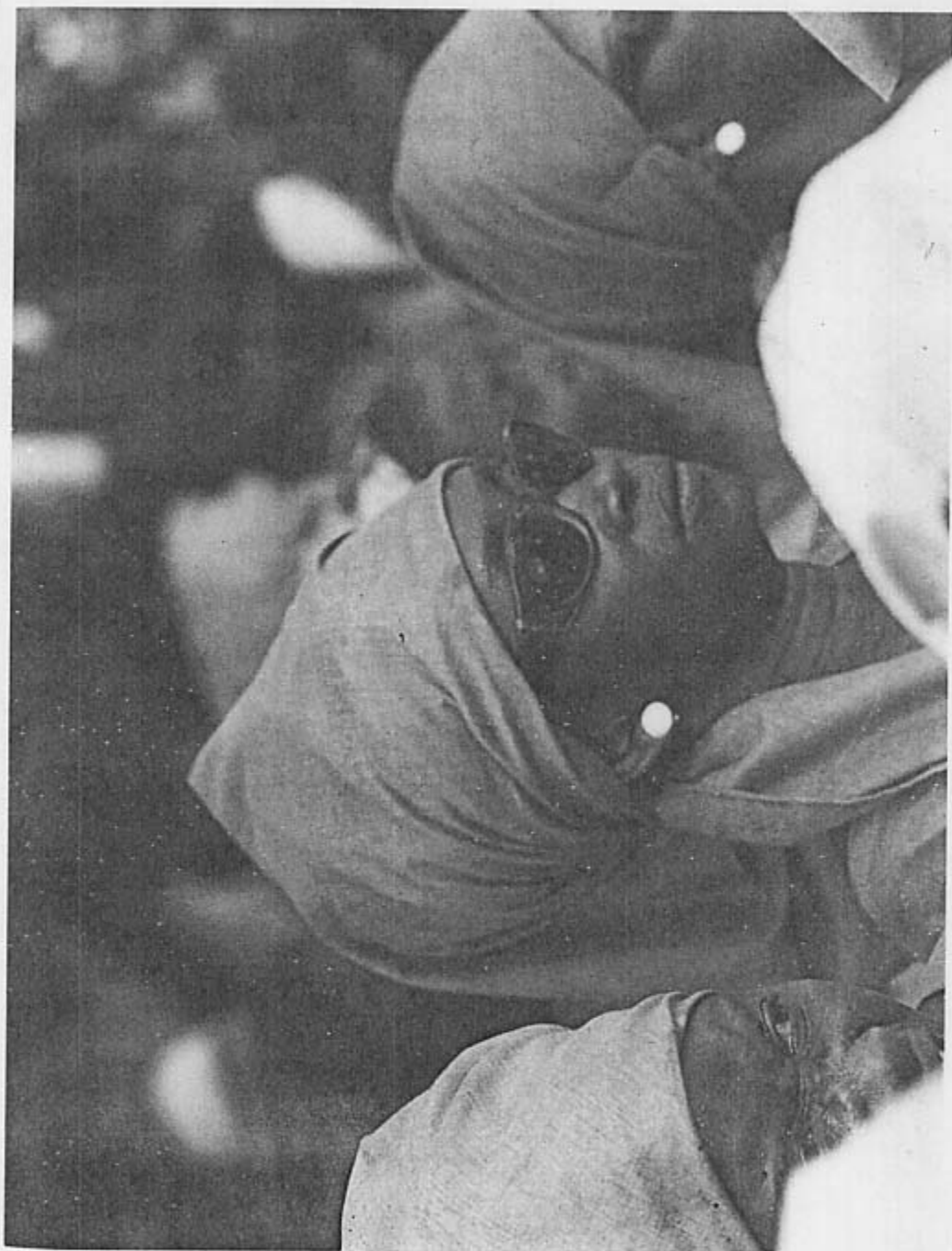
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men. Looking at breasts, evaluating them, touching and fondling them are favorite Mende pastimes. On more than one occasion I have seen older men meet a young dancer for the first time and actually reach out and give her breasts a squeeze, murmuring admiringly, "you have nice breasts, huh," while the girl beamed. No amount of familiarity with the breast seems to diminish its appeal: all Mende infants are nursed for at least one, sometimes as long as three years; Mende girls and women go topless in the village and farmhouse. Even in urban areas, girls are bare-breasted in the house: schoolgirls take off their dresses when they come home, and boarding students are most comfortable around the dormitories wearing only a wrapped skirt. And yet, despite this constant and causal exposure, Mende people remain delighted at seeing breasts and always have an interest in judging their qualities. As each girl is growing up, the community observes to see "if the Breast has come," if, in her case, the idea of the breast will manifest itself.

Mende find the development of breasts, their "action," fascinating and significant. In general, it is a feminine characteristic to have more of everything,²⁷ and women have more breast than adult males and children of both sexes. The features of a healthy human body maintain their discrete structure, enlarging proportionally, retaining their relationship with the whole. But in the instance of the female chest, a flat area suddenly begins to swell and become round, changing the body's contours. Pregnancy is the only other occasion for such a dramatic change in a woman's body, as her abdomen rounds into a sphere, another marvelous female phenomenon. The chest of the prepubescent girl is of no interest because it is "just like a boy's or man's." But once her breasts bud and ripen, a girl is considered sexually mature, ready to enter into adult life. The swelling of her breasts foreshadows the capacity of her belly to expand and house and protect an unborn until its birth and her ability to nourish the baby after its birth.

Sometimes it seems that a girl is getting breasts "too soon," while she is still too young. Frequently in such cases the mother or an aunt will slap or punch down hard on the budding breasts or else hit them with the flat of a paddle—all in an effort to retard their development and make them "go back in." They say it works, but can only be a delaying device.²⁸ By the age of fourteen or fifteen the girl's breasts are full. She is now "complete" with all the necessary "parts," equipped by nature for full womanhood. The expression *nyini hu vendangô*, "the breast is full," praises breasts: "The breast is full up, it is fully ripe, the girl is in the bloom of youth, nubile, tender, yet mature." Now it is up to the Sande Society to take her, groom her, train her for her tasks, and place her in her proper position in the community (fig. 38).

For all that they are desired and worshiped, perfect breasts are rare in the world. A full, firm, wide breast is the Mende ideal. It should be low,



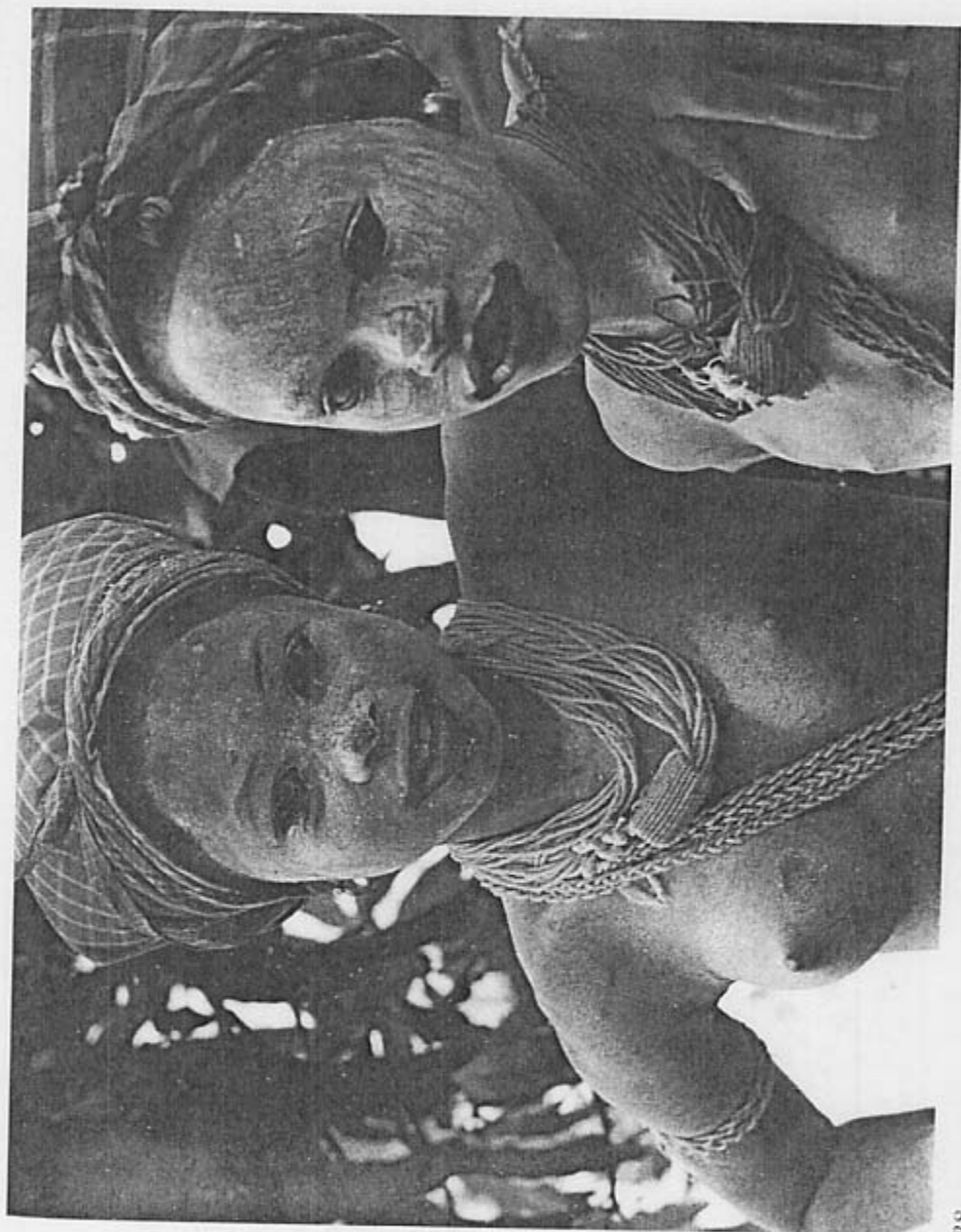
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rounded, close to the chest, rather like a saucer; it should be thick, but not protruding or extended. It must be erect and solid in appearance, secure to the body, so that it does not jiggle or shake even when a girl dances or runs. Mende liken such breasts to a calabash, *tawa*, a witty simile for size, shape, hardness, and function.²⁹ The breast must be wide, covering the entire surface of the chest, from the sides across to the cleavage. Mende say in admiration: *Ngì nyini ngì yaka vendangò*—"her breast covers her chest (and sides)." Such erect round breasts are fully visible, there is no under-side or underneath—the whole globe is seen at once. They are sculpted, clean-cut, sharply outlined. Speaking of such perfect young breasts, one elder mused, "The girl doesn't need any other decoration. She just stands there, and you see it."

Even at its best, in its ideal form, the beauty of the breasts is seen as a most transient thing: rarely occurring, it is also short-lived. The essence of its nature decrees that its beauty is fleeting. Once her breasts are developed, a girl is ready for initiation and marriage. She will become pregnant as soon as possible, nursing the newborn at these same young breasts and, in the process, ruining their shape. When her breasts have fallen or become flabby, a girl is dismissed as "ugly" by her peers.³⁰ An added distinction of the "calabash" breast, then, is its capacity to give suckle to a first and second child while maintaining its firmness. The ability of this breast is to do its job but not show the wear, to go into battle and come back unscarred: the fortunate owner will be considered ever after "truly beautiful."

In erotic play and love-making, the female's breasts are the focus of the couple's amorous attentions. Mende do not kiss on the mouth, and the vulva itself is so secret and sacred that few Mende women will allow even their husband to touch or probe them there, as he might wish to do; so fondling of the breasts is a major pleasure for both partners. The response of the breast to sexual excitation seems analogous to that of the penis—the nipple grows turgid and erect, while the entire breast becomes increasingly sensitive, aches for contact, and at the same time is receptive to harder, more insistent manipulation.

To name the nipple, Mende employ two different three-word phrases, whose elements indeed spring from other contexts and thus form a tableau of visible inference. One term alludes to the erotic and carnal nature of the breast, while the other delivers a poetic promise of youth and nubility, with both leading to concepts of fertility and nurturance. *Nyini la wondi*, nipple (Innes, 1969:119) is comprised of words for breast (loc. cit.), mouth/opening (ibid.:90), and foreskin (ibid.:119)—thereby designating the breast as an analogue of the penis. The breast has a mouth, opening at its tip as does the penis; and this orifice is covered by a prepuce, as in an uncircumcised penis. The other term, *nyini la bowa* (loc. cit.) is comprised of words for breast, mouth, and blossom (ibid.:126).³¹ The words evoke a picture of a flower in a stem-vase, or a flower held over the mouth. Mende

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see the little puckers of flesh which cover the opening of the breast as petals and so recall delicacy, prettiness, tenderness. When a tree produces flowers, Mende say, "*Nguli bowa*," the tree has flowered, the tree is ready to bear. By the same association, "*Nyini la bowa*," the mouth of the breast has flowered, celebrates at once the maturity of a young girl and the evidence of pregnancy in a young wife.

The word for breast itself is a compound word whose parts separate easily and if read together form a concept in a small phrase. *Nyi* means "bite," *ni* is an ideophone for "very sweet, very pleasant." Thus *nyini* means "bite the sweetness"—a reference to the infant's eating that which is the ultimate of sweetness and goodness, giving the ultimate in oceanic feelings of pleasure and satisfaction. It refers also to the erotic bites given the breasts by a lover. As in so many Mende words, the name of the thing is what you do with it or what its end product is. The breast is the sweetness that you bite, the sweetness there for you to take into your mouth for your sustenance and your pleasure.³²

Lovers are not the only people who handle and caress the breasts—Mende babies are allowed to play with breasts to their little hearts' content. They are suckled on demand for the first year or two of life. Nursing babies is a public act, and the public jokingly envies the baby's access to cradling and physical gratification. At first the newborn searches for the food for survival; but in a few months the community sees him begin to take an interest in the breast for comfort and sensual pleasure. Before long, an older child, usually a girl, will be given the toddler to care for. It is a common sight to see a one- or two-year-old straddling the hip of his seven- or eight-year-old sister, the toddler continually groping for her nipple to pinch and pull. Most times the older child will bear nipple-teasing or even encourage it as a way of keeping the baby amused and quiet (fig. 39). Mende call this constant sucking and squeezing of the breast by the baby (and the lover) *nyivo*, "to trouble the breast," to worry it, to quarrel with it.³³

There is still more about the deep meaning of the breast as part of the central mystery of woman. Let us return to the starting point of observing the beauty of the ripe breast, *nyini hu vendangò*. It is said to be "full," and the ideal breast is "like a calabash." Both these two constantly repeated comments are single words that encapsulate cosmic notions. The *ve* word stem refers to the flowing-in of bodies of water; when the tide rises, or when a waterfall fills a pool, a *ve* word is used. Using the same stem, *ve-nda* means "to be full," specifically with a liquid; thus a calabash can be *ve-nda* with water (*ve-nda-ngò a njei*) but not with stones. So, in using *ve-nda-ngò* to describe a ripe breast, Mende are referring to the idea that the breast is now full of liquid, since the word for mother's milk is *nyini ya*, the water of the breast.

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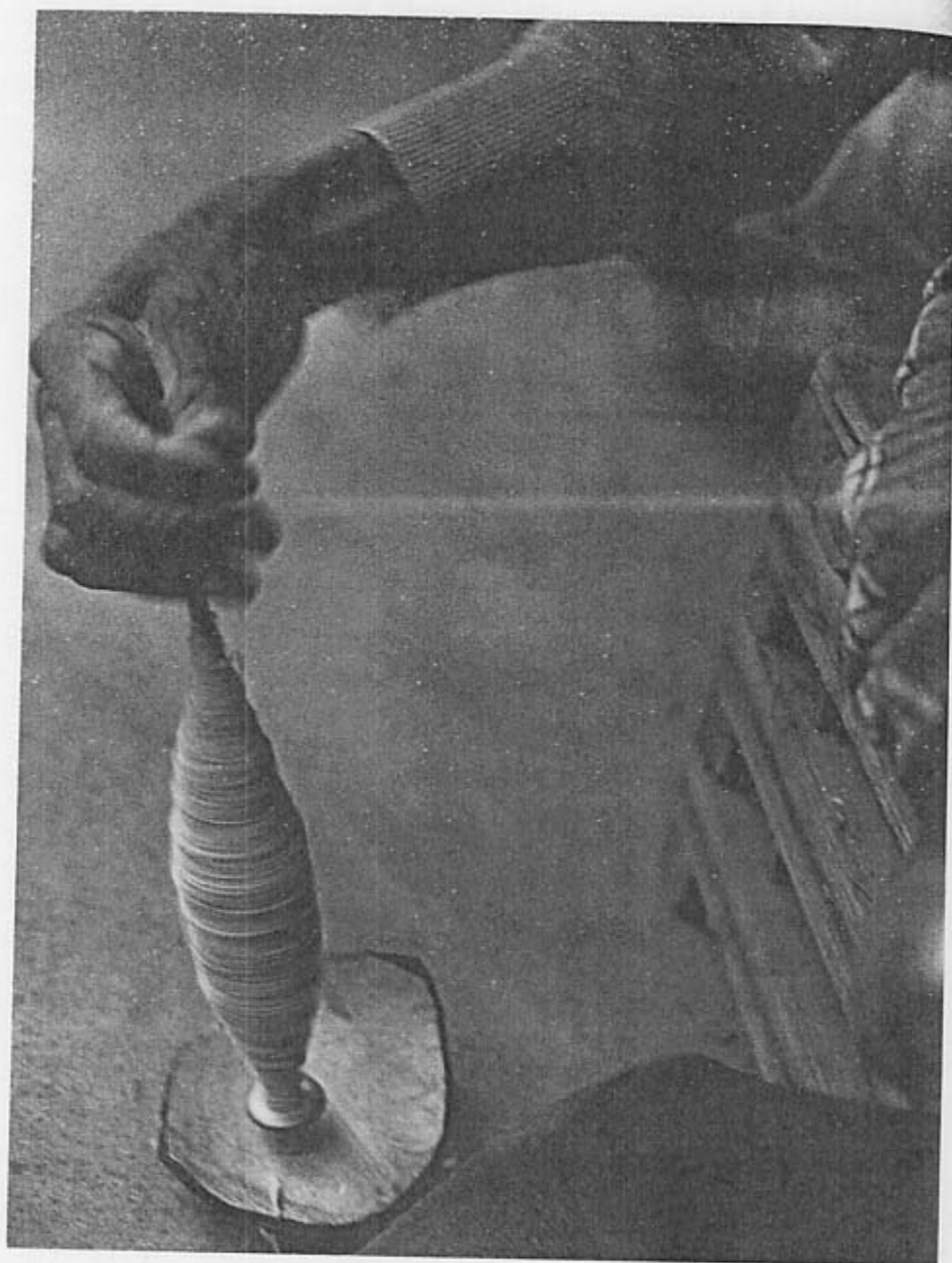
the spiritual essences of life. This swelling of the breast with life-nurturing liquid relates to the girl's ability to give birth; it presages the uterus filled with amniotic fluid, *ndo bôlô ye kpulu hu yèi*. We just mentioned that Mende call the nipple the foreskin of the breast. The penis, the publicly analogous organ to the breast (the clitoris is never mentioned), also becomes swollen with fluids when erect. The sperm, *hindoï mayèi*, ejaculated through the tiny holes in the head of the penis, is a milky liquid that will water the ovum, the "baby seed," and nudge it into life. In the water of the womb, "under the water," the new life is forming; afterward the water of the breast will sustain it outside the mother's body. We are engendered by water, nurtured by water—water is mystical space because it is the medium of love and life before life.

Hands

Hands, *toko* (Innes, 1969:142–43) have a markedly dual nature in Mende thinking. Viewed as a pair, in other words, as a single entity, hands are a sense organ, an external one not situated in the head. As a sense organ, the hands extend out into the world, explore the environment, and through sensations report back on surrounding conditions. Hands also are seen as implements, a set of tools, instruments, an apparatus for performing tasks as ordered by the brain. The beauty of hands is judged by their size, texture, color, and movement. Lovely hands are slim and dainty with long tapering fingers. Fingernails are always cut very short; long nails are "foreign." A woman's hands must be soft and smooth, without the roughness characteristic of hard-working hands. The palm, *tokovèlè*, should be light in color even in the darkest person; a black palm is considered a simian attribute, ugly and coarse on a human being. Hands must be flexible in movement; any stiffness is arthritic and disfiguring.

Female hands, like those of the men, are working hands, and work is the toil of farming, fishing, and cooking (fig. 40). At the farm, women's hands do painstaking, tedious tasks which require considerable dexterity and strength. They handle growing plants, removing insect pests; at the same time, they pull out each weed individually at the roots. In fishing most women employ nets, but the champion fisherwomen can spear larger fish by hand with a hunting knife. When one dives for fish, her hands go where her body cannot. Using only her sense of touch, a fearless fisherwoman's hands probe behind rocks and into caves, grabbing at the fish who hide there, fish which are naturally considered the most meaty and succulent.

In her kitchen work a woman's hands again are her main tools. Proper preparation of Mende greens requires using a sharp paring knife to shave the leaves into fine slivers that will cook and blend well with other ingredients, a task requiring steadiness and precision; any error means injury. Most impressive is a woman's ability to handle very hot items, something men absolutely cannot do. Little girls have to learn early not to be afraid of



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All Mende are right-handed, and giving and receiving is socially acceptable only with the right hand; to use the left hand in any exchange is a social crime. Whereas the right hand is used for public exchanges, the left is used for those that are private, or hidden. It is familiar information that in West Africa the left hand is used in personal hygiene. But in Mendeland, intimate ablutions are only a part of the work done by the left hand. For women, who are responsible for the cleanliness and health of the household, there is further ritual separation of the roles of each hand. A woman's part in love-making is taken by the left hand; once engaged in sexual contact, she can only handle the penis, and later tidy up the space, using her left. This division of activity is very seriously regarded as a social requirement; if a woman is not scrupulous in this matter, her husband can formally bring charges against her and have her haled before the chief's court.

Idiomatically, the hands represent the individual's participation and action; and a number of expressions depend on this association. *Nya toko wili lo hu*, "my hand is in with them," means "I will take part in the activities." *Toko fele kè koi fele*, "two hands and two feet," a statement of agreement, means "I am in it all the way." Hands indicate a person's intentions or interests; so when one says *loko wèè ngi ma*—"rest hand on it," it means accepting it in good faith, accepting completely. The hands are used in settling a dispute or misunderstanding; the touch of the hands, as in a handshake or a pat, is the true sign of forgiveness and reconciliation; without the contact of the hands, forgiveness is not truly given.³⁵

Again, the left hand has a separate meaning. In these hard-working farming communities, each member of the body has laborious tasks to perform: the head, back, and shoulders bear the weight of loads, the feet and legs carry the body long distances; in a woman, the breasts and the buttocks nurture and support the young; and the right hand never ceases its manipulations and maneuvers. In all this industry the left hand is relatively inactive. Because it is such a nonparticipant, Mende accord the left hand the status of a witness, a silent observer of a person's actions. They swear an oath with the left hand, not the right; the left hand is subject to the ordeal because it stands detached from the individual's plans, and thus it is more likely to be honest and truthful.³⁶

Hips/Buttocks

Mende are not much interested in waistlines as such. Secondary school girls do become inch-conscious and think 26" to 28" is a nice size; but most Mende say only that the midriff should be slim. The abdomen must be flat, or just a bit rounded, soft to the touch. *Tèvè lèvè* (Imes, 1969:140), thin,

flat, describes an attractive waist and stomach area; any protrusions or hardness of the mid-section are a sign of illness.

In any discussion of the body, longest and loudest appreciation is for buttocks, *ngoto*. If breasts are the high point of beauty of the front of the body, then the buttocks are the beauty of the back. In terms of the breast, beauty lasts at most five or six years for a village girl; beauty of the buttocks lasts a lifetime. Whereas breasts are exposed and familiar, from puberty buttocks are always covered. Perfect breasts are rare, but every woman seems to have a nice behind. And while breasts are more or less given by God, the buttocks are cultivated and developed.

Buttocks are judged by their size, shape, and movement. Even if the girl is otherwise slim, she must have bulging buttocks, of relatively greater mass. "The bigger it is, the more appreciated it is." "Each man has his own tastes, but everybody likes big buttocks."³⁷ The buttocks must be rounded and high on the body, protruding distinctly, then rounded down. Opinions differ on how high and protruding the behind should be. Urban folks and younger persons seem to prefer a very exaggerated size hip, so high that it forms a "shelf" in the back; to more traditional villagers such buttocks are "artificial" and make the body look "bent."

The insults are specific for any faults. A flat behind is derided as *Bi woti vèvè le ngoi bè fèlè*—"Your behind is as flat as a winnowing fan."³⁸ If the shape is not nice, people just say in contempt, *Ngoto gbi ngi ma*—"There are no buttocks on her; she has no buttocks." Of a small behind: *Bi wotoi bè hindo*—"Your behind is like a man's." Mende males are expected to be slim and strong of body, spare and angular. Most men do hard physical work and retain a military level of lean physical fitness all their lives; even the idle rich have no tendency toward a bay-window or body softness. Women, on the other hand, generally petite, are encouraged to be plumper. Again, women are thought to have a greater quantity of body flesh; so while a man's behind should be small and hard, a woman's should be ample (fig. 41).

The principal appeal of the behind is in the liveliness of its action. The buttocks must have strong movement; they must wriggle rhythmically as the woman walks, either alternately bumping up and down with each step, or swiveling in. A large or rounded backside that does not dance about when the girl walks is dismissed as a fraud. Because hips are always covered, it is possible for a woman to augment their size and round their shape secretly. But such artificial improvements are incapable of the desired movements. *Ngoto mayugbè* is the perfect behind, because the adjective includes the idea both of size and of motion. Another term is *ngoto tisèi*. The adjective and noun *tisa* refers to fruits in a bunch that are ripe and hanging, juicy and ready to be plucked. The two cheeks of the buttocks make this bunch with their motion resemble things that are suspended, capable of swaying and bobbing.³⁹ When a girl's buttocks are fleshy,

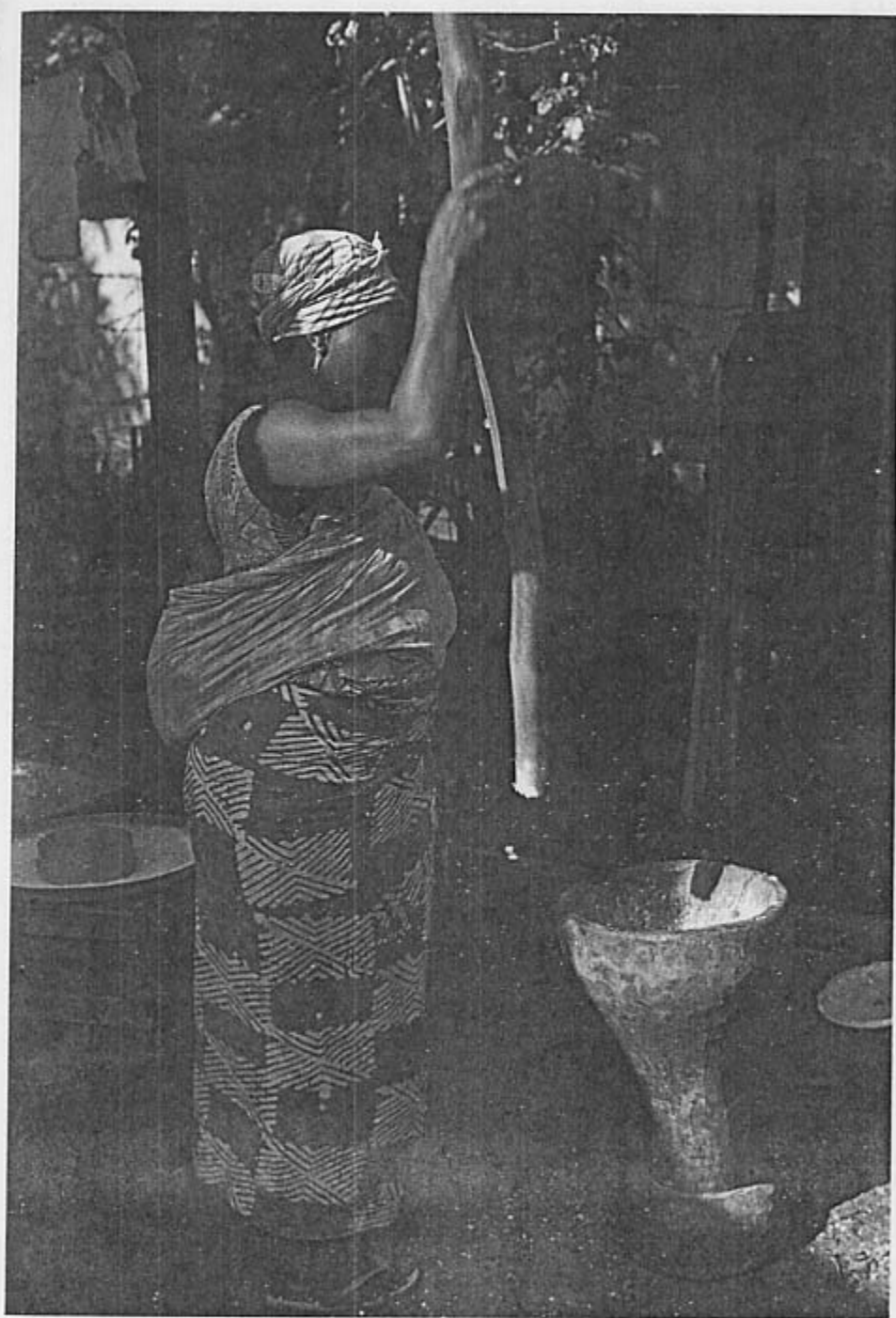
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round, high, and active, she is in possession of an alluring physical asset. People praise her, saying: *Ngi wotongò*—literally, “she is Buttocks”; to see her is to see Buttocks, the incarnation of true buttocks.

Every woman desires attractive hips and, unlike some other aspects of beauty, mothers feel there is a good deal they can do to help them develop properly. Mothers are particular about this, and make a definite effort to shape the child's buttocks. As part of the baby's bath routine the mother will work on the buttocks every single day.⁴⁰ Women recall becoming conscious of their hips at around age eight or nine. A group of little friends begins to take an interest in the way older girls flaunt their big hips. In an effort to appear more grown-up, the little girls begin to strut around with their chests pushed forward and their behinds thrust back and up as far as they can manage. Their mothers, in annoyance, call out, *Ngalengò*, “crooked! bent!” and strike them on the back to make them straighten up. But once out of sight, the girls are at it again, imitating their elders, pulling their wrappers as tight as possible to emphasize the shape, and religiously practicing to gain control over the muscles so as to make them go up and down.⁴¹ The reward of all these years of attention to the behind is that indeed nearly every Mende woman seems to have the kind of buttocks that the community considers so desirable.

Everyone, male and female, observes the buttocks of girls and women and is really excited when a good pair of hips goes by. Swaying from side to side with the cheeks rising and falling in rhythm, a prominent, lively behind is sexually enticing.⁴² Women tie their lappas tight and deliberately twist and shake as they walk away from a man, knowing full well how provocative this is. There is a good deal of this hip “display” by a woman when she wants to attract sexual interest. As part of flirtation, the man may maneuver to brush by her quickly, or if they are married or not afraid of scandal, he will simply rest his hand on her behind. This gesture, called *ngoto lee*, is apart from words the most direct Mende statement of “I love you and I want you,” and is the most public Mende sexual expression.⁴³ Because of the blatantly sexual nature of contact with a woman's buttocks, to be seen even looking at the behind of another man's wife can cause trouble. As part of the fun, the distracted young men devise ways of stealing quick looks at tantalizing behinds, adding the pleasure of the ruse to that of sexual excitement.

Good buttocks are beautiful in part because of their association with child-bearing and childcare; they are called in praise: *Ndo wopo woto*—“child-carrying buttocks.” A Mende woman carries her baby on her back in a sling, *kula hakpa*, made of cloth wrappings (fig. 42). The baby is placed with its chest resting on the mother's back, its little behind nestled onto the upper curve of her buttocks. The baby's arms encircle her chest sides while the legs are open, one resting on each hip. Thus the buttock shelf is the

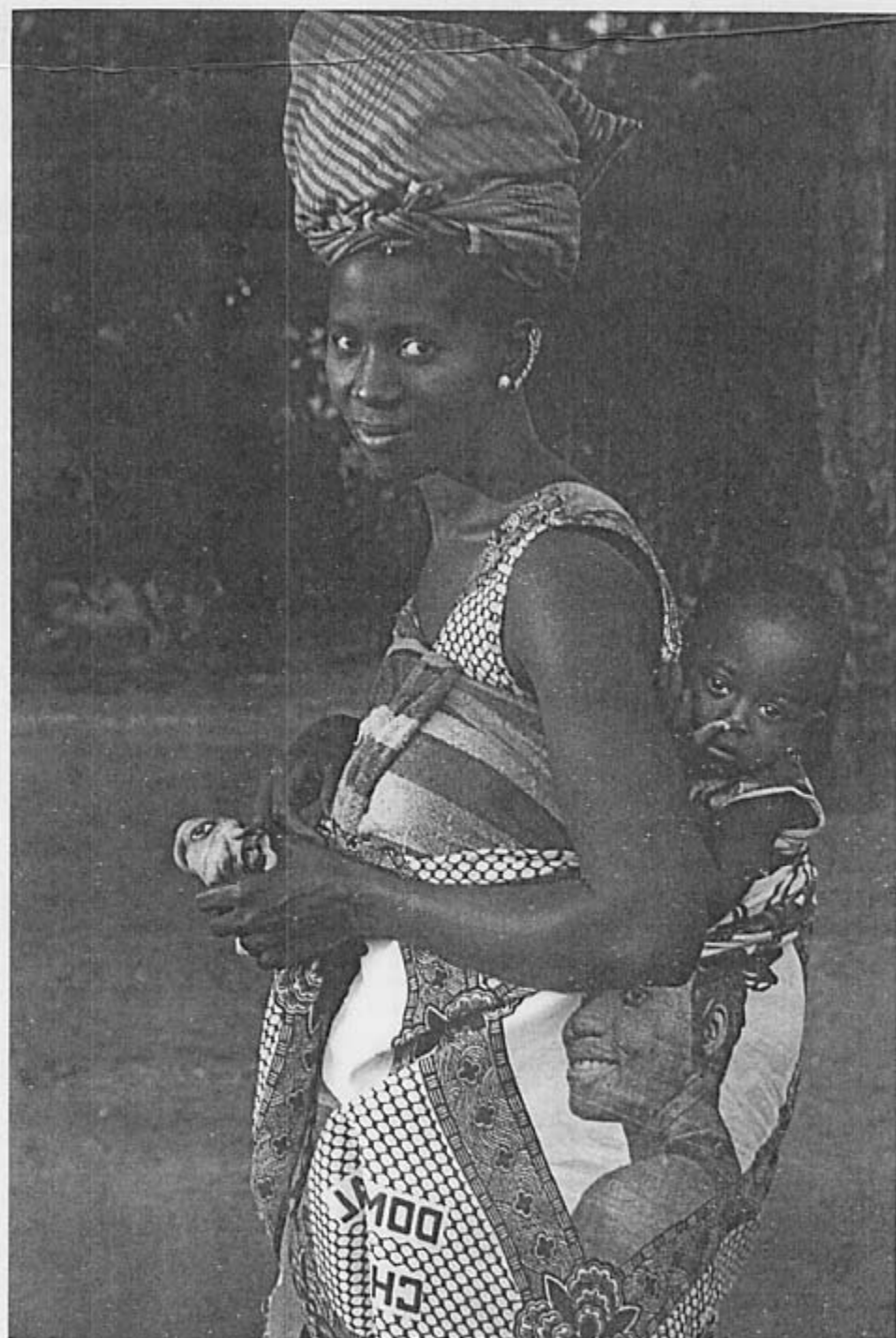
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baby's "seat"; without this configuration the baby would slip down to injury and harm.⁴⁴

In addition to its pronounced sexual associations, buttocks provide other reference points in Mende life. *Bi woto heimèi*—"your behind sitting place"—is figuratively "your headquarters," your permanent abode. As a gesture expressing high emotion about a matter a woman will strike her own hip; this is a gesture that only women make. In a high-spirited exchange among friends, when a woman comes to the best part of her story, to emphasize the favorable developments in the situation, she will strike her hip, giving the tale added emotion and expressing her good feelings. On the other hand, confronting another person with "hands on your hips" is extremely insulting in the Mende community. "It is not allowed"; "people don't do it"—it is a social crime for which there are no mitigating circumstances, and the offender will without fail be fined by the chief's court.⁴⁵

Sande is gravely serious about fertility and nurturing; and no one knows better than Soweï that life begins with love, and that love between the sexes thrives in an atmosphere of exuberance and pleasure. Thus, it is not surprising that Sande is the major advertiser and promoter of women's buttocks. All Sande public dance groupings emphasize a display of hip size and flexibility. From their early initiation training, women dance with their hips more than with any other part of the body.⁴⁶ One dance that all initiates learn is called *mayugba*, a word defining a good behind as fleshy and flexible. The girls sing, "You are pretty and I am pretty, but I win all the admiration because I know how to display [*magè*] myself." At the refrain, each girl in turn steps out to do a dance of hip twisting and bobbing, making the strings of the skirt fly.⁴⁷ For the more expert and experienced dancer, the motion of the hips remains the test of her skill and talent. The Sande dance costume features several large bells hanging at the middle of the dancer's behind. The expert, *sowo-lolimò* (Sowo dancer) is the one whose hips toss the bells about wildly, making them clank and ring (fig. 43).

Genitals

Mende include the genitalia in their picture of feminine beauty and, as with other body parts, there are definite standards for evaluation of their quality. Despite the "private" nature of the sexual organs, in these close-knit communities a woman's sexual organs are subject to speculation and discussion; intimate information about their condition somehow manages to become public. *Kpota*, *mbòli*, and *tete* (Innes, 1969:62, 85, 139) are interchangeable words referring to the external portions of the female genital organs; internal areas combine one of these words with the noun meaning "inside," *hu* (ibid.:28). To be considered beautiful, the vulva should be small and neat, healthy and free of blemishes. The labia minora and other

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internal surfaces should be moist, free of blemish, and of a healthy red color. The vaginal tract itself should be small and tight.

The appearance of pubic hair, *ndega*, on a girl is a sure sign of female sexual maturity. A girl with budding breasts still plays freely about the village, wearing just a string of beads or a kerchief tied around her waist. But once the pubes appear, her nakedness becomes an embarrassment to adults. Father and grandmother will hear comments from neighbors: "That girl is growing up; isn't it time she went into Sande?" "She should put some clothes on; she looks shameful." "You shouldn't let her run around like that." It is certain that the girl will be initiated into the next Sande session.

Mende people detest pubic hair, and both men and women routinely shave their genitalia. Safety razors are popular now, but some people still use a straight razor made by a blacksmith. As in all matters of beauty and grooming, women are the more fastidious. Whether a girl going to her lover or a wife going to her husband—the vulva must be free of all traces of hair. If a woman should go to a man without shaving, she is indicating indifference and that she has no regard for his opinion of her. After giving birth, a young woman will wait out the year of sexual abstinence without shaving herself. Should she shave before then, she incurs her family's wrath because she is suspected of intending to resume her sex life and thus to neglect her baby.

A cleanly shaven vulva is a treat for a man; it shows that the girl is for him "heart, mind, and body" and that she cared enough to present herself as attractively as possible. Women of a harem will always polish up their appearance before their prescribed nights with their husband. But in a monogamous marriage or one in which there are only two wives, after a while the women may take less care. Some jealous husbands refuse to let their wives shave; while declaring that they get special pleasure from a bristly vulva, they have as an ulterior motive the prevention of the wife's going to a lover. The complications are easy to imagine. The wife who, after being careless, suddenly becomes fastidious about intimate matters, is announcing that she has a new love, for to make a good impression, it is necessary to shave. So for those who wish to be discreet about their infidelities, one cost is the tedium of constant attention to meticulous grooming.⁴⁸

The vagina is meant for sexual intercourse, so by being small and tight it better grips the penis and provides greater contact and pleasure. If the vaginal wall has an independent rhythmic motion during coitus the organ is judged "the very best." But everywhere nature is coy, and it is hard to know, say the elders, where one will find the best vagina. A man can see by looking at his bride that she has nice breasts and nice hips, and a nice vulva; but he has no sign about the state of the vagina. It can happen that the vagina of a young girl will be big and slack, while that of an older woman

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who has borne several children may still be in shape because "she knows how to arrange herself."

Mende men see this puzzle about the vagina as a "problem in the community" and a topic they return to often. They agree that the girls who are less attractive often have vaginas that are the "best ever," almost as a compensation for what they lack in looks. And a man is very lucky to find both internal and external desirability combined in one woman. The general community can be harsh and vocal in its judgments of a factor so intimate and supposedly secret. If a young woman is not sought after, it will be because word has gotten round that her vagina is not good. Women know about each other, and in any catty quarrel an unpopular girl is bound to be told that men do not want her because her vagina is too big. And vice versa, if a girl is popular with the opposite sex, her neighbors assume that she must have the most desirable type of organ.⁴⁹

Added to the allure of the female genitalia is the Mende notion that it never ages: while the woman's other charms fade, the vagina is thought to remain young and fresh! One story about this comes from an interview with a popular singer. When I asked her how she got inspiration for her songs, she replied that she had plenty of material just from watching life around her. It happened that she was one of several junior wives to a chief who received a continuous stream of visitors. One day a woman in her sixties came to the chief to complain that her husband was ignoring her. The woman declared, "Yes, I know I am old now, but a woman never gets old down there." The young wives thought the incident hilarious and so the singer wrote a song detailing the ravages of time on the supplicant, from her grey hair to her withered behind, then adding loudly, "But my vagina is fine; I'm still young down there!"⁵⁰

The whole genital area must be kept scrupulously clean, absolutely free of odors. A Sande *nyaha* washes herself constantly, and the first part of her body to be washed is the genitalia. A woman takes a bath after the day's work before the evening meal, and she washes again before going to her husband or to bed at night. In the morning she rises early, before the men, and before being seen again bathes thoroughly. A woman's menstrual period is a strictly private, hidden affair, with modesty preventing the slightest tell-tale signs.⁵¹ All of this is part of the sexual etiquette a girl is taught during her Sande initiation.

For all their bathing and affinity with water, Mende women detest having water thrown or sprinkled on them by another person, taking it as an extreme insult. A Mende woman is of the water, is always in it, and is herself a source of water; so to put more water on her gratuitously is a grave affront interpreted as saying that she "needs water"—namely, that she is not clean, i.e., that her genitals are not clean. The cleanliness of a woman's genitalia is a serious and delicate issue in a Mende village or compound. A woman guards her reputation by scrupulous attention to

intimate hygiene; the slightest imputation that she exudes an offensive odor is a grievous insult, capable of involving a whole community in turmoil and bitter feelings. Women, Sande *nyaha*, are the cleanest people in the village, far outshining men, children, or animals, the house or the furnishings. A *nyaha*'s very function is to bring freshness and cleanliness into community life; so even a whisper that a woman is less than clean and trouble starts.

This "throwing water" needs a bit of explaining. It doesn't mean that one purposefully hurls or flicks water at a woman—that would be unspeakable. It is rather more complicated. Women are constantly handling water while in close proximity to other women of the family and community, but in no circumstance must a woman allow water to spill on another. So, if she is handing water to someone to drink and some drops fall on the other woman; or if she is emptying a basin just at a moment when another woman comes around the corner, and it splashes on her; or if she is carrying a bucket of water on her head and some of it spills on someone—if any of these things occurs (which an American would accept as a harmless accident)—in the Mende community a crime has been committed, and there will be controversy until matters are settled.

An even more serious situation arises in relation to the Sande Society. Certain Soweï are part of the noble elect of *water Soweï*. Introducing me to a group of Sande leaders, Chief Foday Kai indicated one as a "water Soweï" and said that on no account must water be sprinkled on her.⁵² At a mere drop she falls into a faint or trance, so offended is her water spirit. Then the Sande *hale* seizes the offender, demanding expensive gifts and sacrifices as well as physical punishment in order to expiate the crime. It is a question of water and women, water and the spiritual, water and the female genitals, water as purity and life.

Thighs/Legs/Feet

Ideally, the legs, *gbaè*, of a Mende girl should be straight, full, and naturally close together. The thigh, *kpala*, should be round, a bit fleshy; the calf, *haka*, should be long, drawn out, and shapely. Legs that stand easily together from the knees to the groin are especially desirable. The ankles, *kpowo*, should be slim and flexible and the whole foot, *kòwò*, small and dainty with a high instep, both feet parallel, resting squarely on the ground. These considerations of the lower extremities bring into play the whole range of Mende beauty care and training. It is the duty of the mother to ensure that her child's legs are straight. Knock-knees, *wombi-la-wèlengò*, and bowlegs, *gòwò-hu-heingò*, are faults considered preventable by conscientious shaping from earliest infancy. Standing or walking with the feet turned out, "pigeon toes," is considered just a habit that can be corrected if a child is nagged about it enough. Big feet, on the other hand, are just an unfortunate accident of nature for which a girl must continually endure teasing and taunts.

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A major concern about a female's legs is their position—they should be as close together as possible, with no space between the thighs. The community requires this; whether she is sitting or standing, people hate to see a girl's legs apart. Before puberty, little Mende girls go about nearly naked, so they must learn to protect their modesty by keeping their thighs closed. Thus, as soon as a little girl is able to understand, she is constantly reminded by words, slaps, glances, and yells: *Bi gbaè gbèema*—"Get your legs together!" Train almost any child from early childhood, as any ballet teacher knows, and gradually the legs will be shaped, the tone aligned, the sinews stretched, the balance weighed. As a result of her upbringing, by the time she is a teenager, every Mende girl has closed thighs that brush each other as she walks; and she can for hours effortlessly adopt the posture of the *mbogboni*—seated upright on the floor, legs together, stretched out straight on the floor, arms resting on the thigh.⁵³

Mende traditionally are barefoot people and to them feet are almost devoid of distinction. They say, *Numu èè numu gòò ngi gòò ma*—"A person will not know another person by his feet." Although most villagers do not use footwear, they still require that a person's feet must be clean underneath! Feet are the first to pick up dirt and dust so they are frequently splashed with water during the day; calluses are rubbed away by pumice stones so that the foot surface is free of rough skin in which dirt can lodge. Once smooth and dry, they are massaged with oil. Over the years of bathing, scrubbing, and oiling, well-cared for feet obtain the polished look of glossy parchment, an admired indication of careful grooming and attention to detail.⁵⁴

Skin Color and Texture

Most Mende are dark brown in color, but skin either lighter or darker than the norm has great allure. A copper complexion, described as a point between the usual brown and a fair color, is unusual and very attractive; a copper-colored woman will always be considered beautiful and desirable. Very black skin, completely black, is the most desired and adored. In traditional society, a black person automatically was a celebrity. Mende expatiate, saying: "the blacker the better," "black people are *the* people," "jet black is the most beautiful." They describe the special glow of clean, jet black skin polished with oil, and they love the heightened visibility given to the whites of the eyes and the teeth as they contrast with the black of the skin. The very term for a "black person," *tèli-mò*, expresses this admiration: in Mende speech the word for person, *mò*, leads to the term for "beautifully black," *mòò*, giving a play on words of *tèlingò*, "it is shiny black, beautifully black" (Innes, 1969:88).⁵⁵ Black or copper-colored women are sought after by the wealthiest and most powerful men. One paramount chief told me that he always invites such unusually colored women to accompany him to important gatherings because they are a source of prestige and good fortune.⁵⁶

Skin of whatever color must be soft and smooth to the touch, with an even, all-over color. It must be free of infections or eruptions, and have no discolored blotches or spots. In the difficult forest climate, six months of monsoon rain prompt the growth of skin fungus which can disfigure a girl with light-colored blotches. Year-round children especially are prey to irritating insect stings and bites which, when scratched, spread infection and often leave dark scars, a sadly common sight. A mother who wants to protect her daughter's looks must battle against this hostile environment, hoping to prevent these catastrophic threats to beauty. When I commented on one young woman's flawless skin, she replied, "It is thanks to my mother; she always washed me clean."

The Mende word for body hair is *njombo*; this includes any hair on the body surface, and underarm hair. The word also means fur, feathers, hide, any skin of animals. Women should not be hairy; they should have soft, smooth skin. Hair on a man's chest or body may be appreciated, but any body hair on a woman is an undesirable, masculine trait. Opinions are divided about underarm hair; half of the community seems to like it and find it attractive, while others want it shaved off. The choice is left to the woman; and if it grows out full, it will be considered a beauty point for her.

Overall Look

So far, we have evaluated one by one the physical characteristics of a woman. But in life, in person, the individual features are of course seen as an ensemble, with the separate elements coming together to form a whole. Mende are interested in the complete picture, in the proportions and the composition. Most important of all, everything about a girl must "fit together," *mbè-ma*, harmoniously with no jarring notes. Like grandfather's clock, a girl's parts should be about equal in quality; any gross imbalance is truly disturbing. If a girl is plain, let her be thoroughly plain. Should a homely girl somehow be born with a long, serrated neck or develop perfect calabash breasts, her whole look is upsetting. The beautiful thing "doesn't fit," it is "wasted on her." Rather than a bit of beauty improving its possessor, it is seen as a taunt from nature, a grotesquerie, making the girl embarrassingly ludicrous. Alternatively, if an otherwise lovely girl has scanty hair, squinty eyes, a flat behind or big feet, it is a disaster, a bad joke played on her by nature, to have one thing that "spoils" her.⁵⁷

The term Mende use to express their ideal of size and proportion is *yèngèlè*, translated as "delicacy."⁵⁸ *Yèngèlè* relates to a small size that is complete and mature; it is a thing as small as it can be and yet "do the job." The *yèngèlè* girl is petite yet rounded and well-shaped. She is graceful, finely balanced, dainty, wispy—a breeze could waft her away (fig. 44). She is the little doll men just want to pick up and carry around; they want to baby her, play with her. She is like a jewel, a tiny thing that is delicate, beautiful, precious. She is adored, admired, and desired.

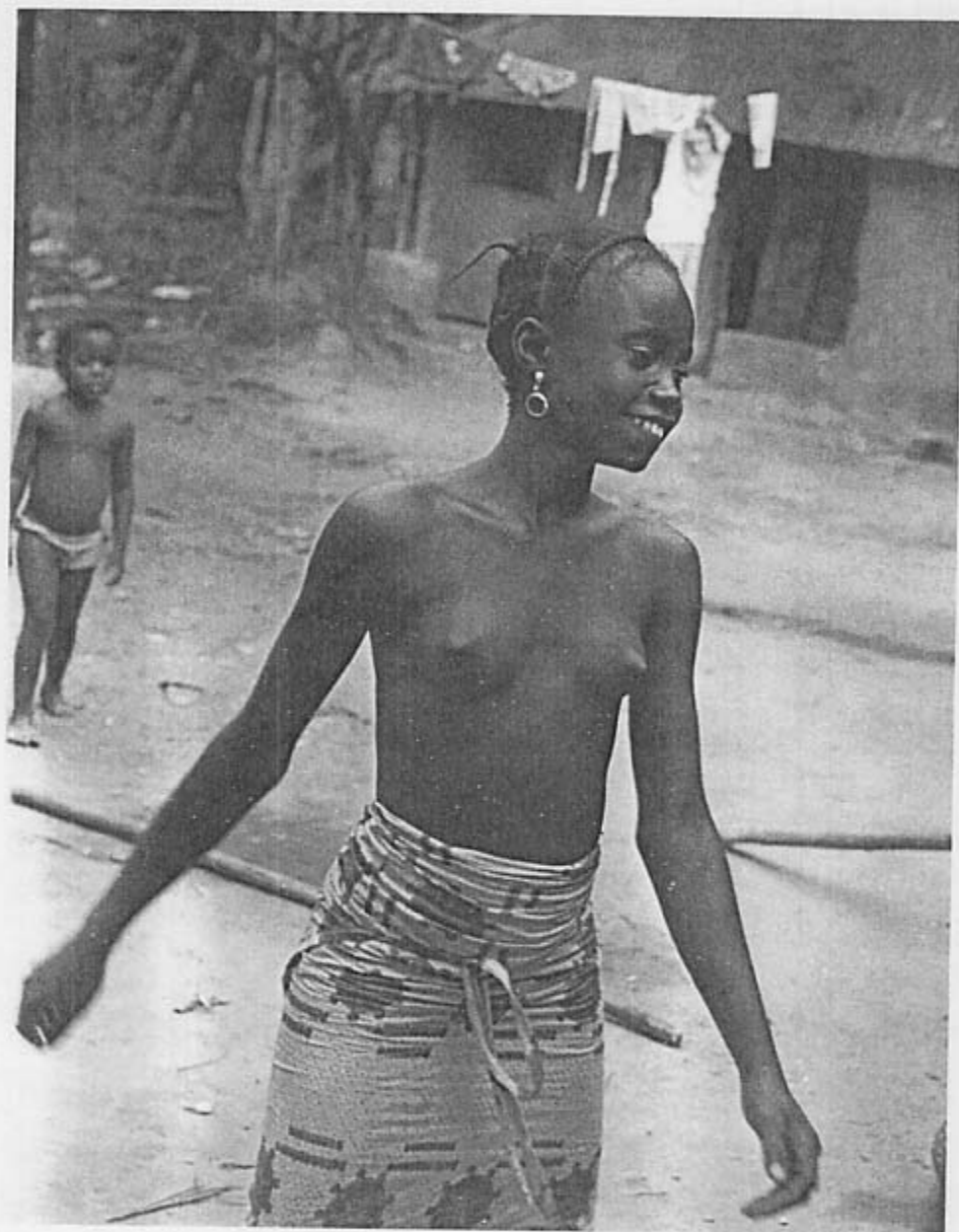
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BEAUTY IN THE MANNER OF DOING THINGS⁵⁹

Mende beauty is defined first in its physiological terms, in terms of objective reality. "The first fact is that formal beauty is based on a physico-mathematical structure: a measurement, a relationship, a proportion. Beauty as a quality seems to emerge from a certain quantitative threshold" (Memel-Foté, 1968:52). It is first of all the material mass or volume—abundance of hair, fullness of calves, roundness of buttocks; then color, either of skin (black or copper), or of hair (black), or lips (red). It is also line and contour—flatness of stomach, tapering of fingers, parallel lines of legs and feet; it is relative size, sharpness of outline, all-over harmony of aspect. But beauty is *alive*, moving about in the community and interacting with the world. In many of the criteria of beauty for a particular part of the body, matters of motion were seen to be part of the basic essentials—a smiling mouth, bobbing buttocks, flexible hands. Beyond this, Mende are very alert to movement in everyday life and have clearly defined standards for what is the beautiful, elegant, graceful, pleasing way of performing even the most commonplace actions; pretty is as pretty does.

Standing

When a woman stands she takes care to keep her feet and legs together as much as possible; it is highly improper to hold them apart. Her shoulders should be back, her spine straight. Her hands should be together and the overall appearance should be relaxed yet contained, poised, and graceful (fig. 45). This "good posture," with the body erectly aligned and head held proudly high, is at once the platform, display, and posing-for-pictures position of Mende women. However, it is quite unseemly for a woman to be standing at all, especially in the company of men. Standing is a prominent position, and a woman should rather seek to lower herself when among men. Once a person stands up, all eyes are upon him or her, and it is thought that a woman should not advertise herself. To stand is to be exposed to the public and this is both immodest and dangerous; a woman should not be such an obvious target. If a woman must stand, then let it be behind the men, as unobtrusively as possible. The standing position has further implications in Mende social life. A visitor to a family is expected to sit down; not to do so indicates that one wants more people to come, wants strangers to come. It is considered a challenge and a provocative action if a man who comes with a subject for discussion stands while presenting it. Either of these two unfriendly aspects of standing are certainly to be avoided by women.⁶⁰

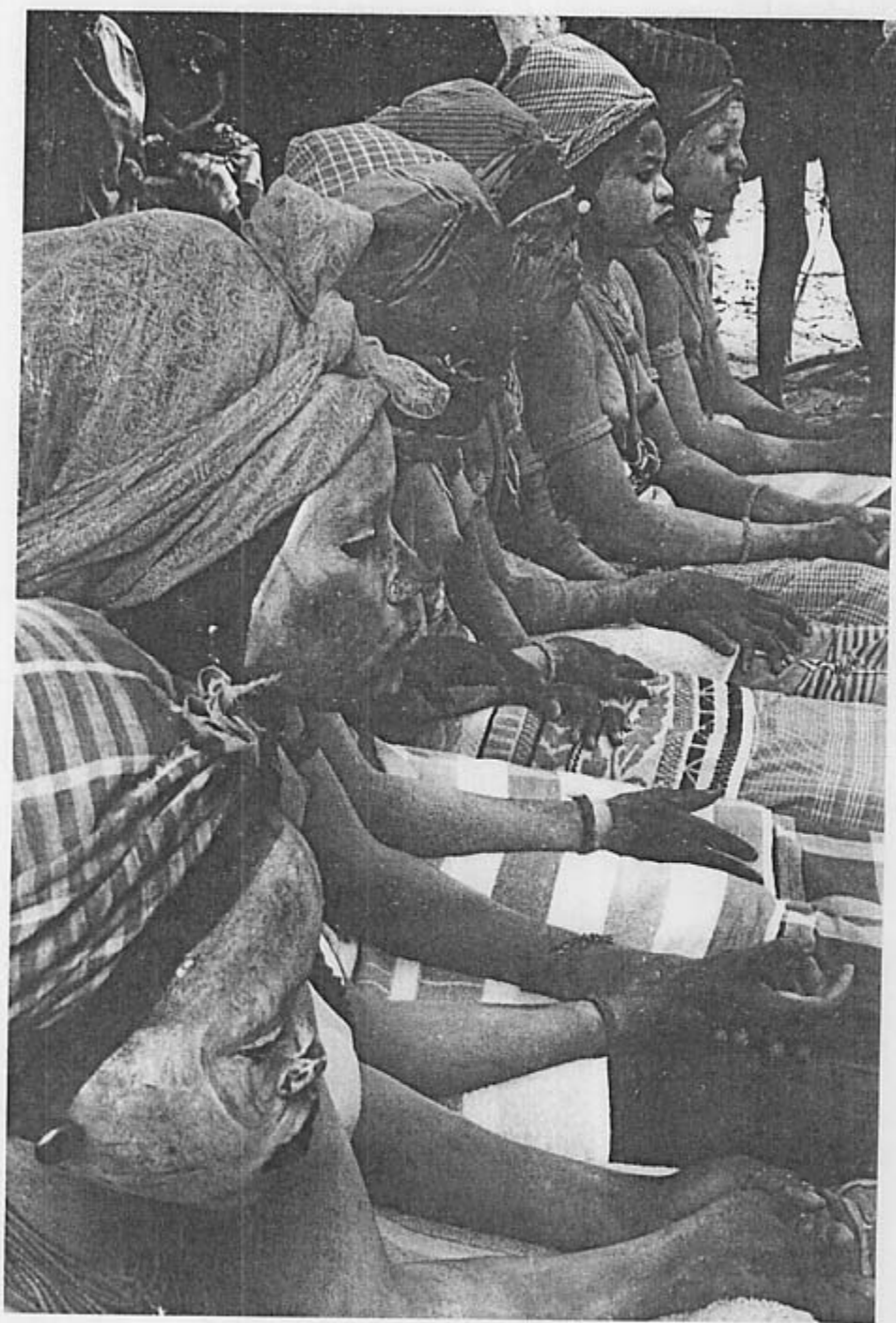
Sitting

It follows, then, that a woman must always find a place to sit down in company. A woman will always be provided with a chair or bench; women

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are thought to prefer sitting and are meant to sit down more quickly than men. From earliest childhood a girl learns to sit with her legs together, and by the time she reaches puberty she can sit with full feminine modesty. On a chair or bench, no matter how low, a woman sits with her knees and feet tight together. Seated at work, she will tuck her skirt between her legs, covering her thighs completely. On a mat on the ground, she adopts the *mbogboni* posture, a strict ninety-degree angle with her back vertical, legs together and stretched out straight in front of her on the floor (fig. 46).

This requirement that females always keep their legs together gives rise to a number of games and jokes. Little girls internalize all the admonitions of their elders. When they go bathing in a stream, girls vie to see who can sit in the water with legs so close together that water collects in little pools between the thighs and legs, with no space to allow water to flow or seep through. Also, when they play Sande Schools, the girls who imitate the initiates, *mbogboni*, are required to sit with their legs straight, while the girl who is "Sowe" chastises them if their legs should part.⁶¹

There is a weed that grows along the roadside which Mende have named *gbaa gbemèi*, "leg closing," because it is thigmotropic. At the lightest touch the leaves close up, which is always a cause for mirth because of its association with the women of the community. A Mende woman reacts to the approach of an outsider by closing her legs. At home with husband or friends she can sit in a relaxed manner; her casual postures are a sign that she feels free with the company. So, to tease his wife a husband will say suddenly, "I see Mr. So-and-so coming up the path," and then laugh as she immediately claps her legs together into the required respectable posture.⁶²

Kneeling

As further evidence of their modesty and self-effacement, females lower themselves by kneeling, bowing, or curtsying when approaching their seniors and superiors. These postures of fealty and respect are due every man from his wife and children, every senior wife from the junior wives, every mother from her child, every Sande Sowe from every *nyaha*. Kneeling, *ngombi-ghakpa*, is going down on hands and knees, a position not often seen by outsiders to the culture but still assumed in traditional rural compounds. As a token of their deference, and as a sign of their strict and refined upbringing, most wives will kneel when presenting an evening meal to their husbands or refreshments to a gathering of honored guests. Most often a woman bows down, *mawèlè*, by bending over from the waist and putting her hands on her knees. This is the "attendant" position for listening to an elder, awaiting instructions, receiving assignments and orders. Another kind of bowing resembles a stoop or deep curtsy. This is another posture for making presentations to a senior, whether of a mes-

sage, water, or food. The junior lowers herself at the side, makes the delivery, then remains in that position until told she is free to rise and go.⁶³

Walking

A woman's walk should combine the majestic standing posture with a smooth slide from the hips. Legs together and thighs brushing, the foot touches the ground softly and the whole motion is graceful, flexible, but disciplined. A walk is a way of approach, of self-presentation, and thus is an expressive communication. Dragging the feet in the presence of any old person is an insolent act. Walking with legs apart is slutish, as though one has just gotten up from bed after coitus. Pressing the heels into the ground is coarse.

Generally, however, when men criticize a girl's walk it is on the vaguer ground that "she is walking like a man"—that is, assertively, assuredly, energetically, rather than with feminine languor.⁶⁴ Far from wanting to walk "like men," most women use their style of walking as a major way of attracting male attention and admiration. Only in walking does a girl have the opportunity to display her figure fully for the delectation of men, and she makes the most of it. By the way she moves her legs, a girl can make her behind wriggle and bob up and down. The girls even get enjoyment out of it themselves, and are fond of walking while looking over their shoulders to observe their own buttock movements! Mothers complain, to no avail, that the girls are shaking their hips too much and tantalizing men. In this otherwise puritanical society, walking and walk-watching is a sport, a game in which all Mende delightedly participate.

Transporting

In Mendeland, women transport pans and buckets on their heads, babies and bird-cages on their backs. Fine form in head portage requires that the object be maintained in a state of equilibrium on the head of the person by itself, without the hands supporting it (Thompson, 1974:84). "Almost from the time she starts to walk a girl-child imitates the habits of the older children and women in carrying a bowl or piece of cloth on the head" (Little, 1967:115). The pride resides in having the load rest easily on the head with an insouciant countenance that reveals no sign of pressure or strain, then to walk gracefully, smoothly, with the arms swinging free. Indeed, as Thompson observes, "To move in perfect confidence with an object balanced on the head is one of the accomplishments of traditional life in Africa" (Thompson, 1974:96).

Facial Expression

Men adore a face displaying the clarity and shine of youth and health; they love to look at a woman and see a bright visage with sparkling eyes and a smiling mouth. Despite the physical and emotional rigors of compound

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and farm life, a girl must always appear cheerful, optimistic, and uncomplaining. Whenever in the company of seniors, a feminine face projects calm, composure, and restraint. The object is to be seen but not heard or noticed, to seem serious but not gloomy or forbidding, sensitive but not demonstrative or vulnerable, sweetly appealing but not obvious.

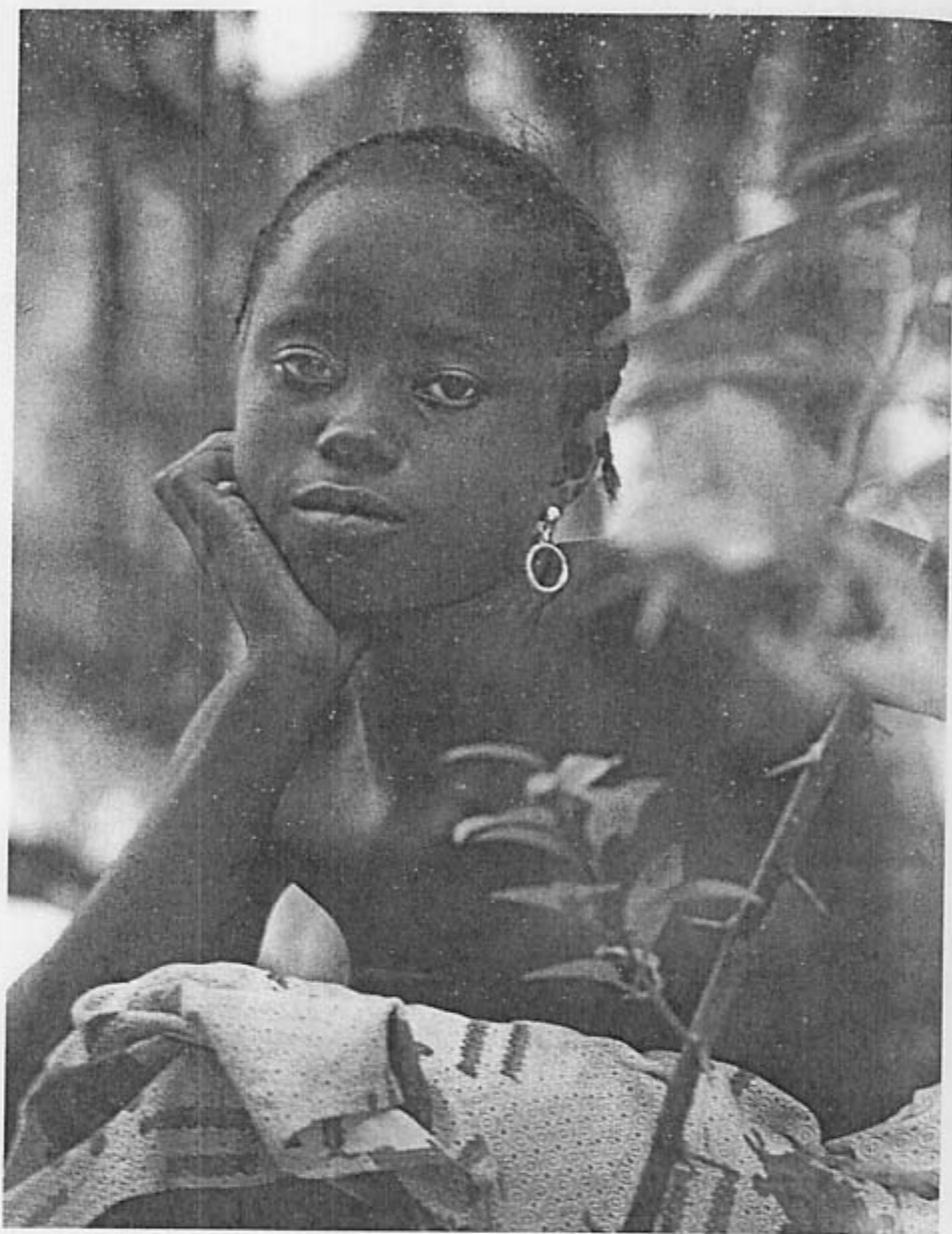
Females are reminded all their lives to show the world a serene and happy countenance. Frowns, scowls, and pouts indicate a surly personality and are not allowed. Wide grins, laughter, and grimaces of shock or surprise are considered coarse and gauche. These negative facial expressions make even the prettiest face "ugly"; and Mende girls too are threatened that their faces will "freeze" in these distorting contortions, leaving them scarred for life. The girl who wins is the girl who pleases; the girl who pleases is the one able to appear gentle and submissive.⁶⁵ (How very different, then, is life in the *kpanguima*, how relaxing and how free! Indeed, Sande makes a special world where for a time women can ventilate their feelings, open up their personalities, take off their masks.)

Looking/Gazing

As Mende love eyes and consider them the most appealing and beautiful of human features, so too they articulate clear canons for the movement and comportment of the eyes. Much of the excitement about eyes is engendered by their action, all the nuances and extensions of the verb "to look," *kpe* (Innes, 1969:57). Through looking, one can touch another person, can project part of oneself onto the other. This ability of the eyes to pierce space and break through boundaries—in a society where rank and respect are of prime importance—calls for control of the way eyes are directed and disposed. Gazing at another person is a definite form of social intercourse and, as such, is subject to myriad conventions and standards.

The way in which a woman disposes her eyes, the way she looks at another, is certainly the single most important aspect of her overall manner. The general expression of a woman's eyes must be modest, restrained, and quiet (fig. 47). An eye that is alert, darting, piercing, is greatly condemned. The eyes should have a certain "innocence," as though they are "not able to read what is going on." A woman tries not to gaze at someone directly in the eyes; a straightforward look is considered belligerent, cheeky. With an elder or a senior person, one looks at the floor; even in a warm exchange, the junior keeps her eyes downcast a bit, open just enough to see the person before her, thereby indicating acquiescence to authority.

"Just looking" is a favorite Mende relaxation. Much of village visiting and socializing is based on simple looking. A man goes to visit his brothers; after exchanging salutations, they both sit and look at each other. He looks at the brother, the brother looks at him; they both look around, *yaun jia*—literally, their "eyes walk around" (ibid.:153). Then they glance back at



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each other. There may be nothing for them to converse about, so they "just look." Mende never feel that talk has run out because they are not accustomed to chatting informally with each other. Conversation between people indicates an intimacy beyond the ordinary; they must share some secret and be in private before they can talk freely.⁶⁶

Public "people-watching" is a major form of entertainment. In these stratified, secretive communities where no one dares ask a superior for an explanation, watching is also a principal source of news and information. Everyone in Mendeland watches everyone else; one is never alone and unobserved; there is always someone nearby taking note of one's behavior. Watching is done in public, but it is somewhat of an illicit act. Since looking forthrightly at another is a breach of etiquette, or even a social crime, every individual in the community adopts a personal set of dodges and ruses by which he or she can take in everything that is going on without appearing to do so. That is, he must observe all without being observed observing. This sounds complicated, and it is. It is also great fun and a real challenge. Children are allowed to be wide-eyed as long as they are closed-mouthed. Young bachelors, though, have to develop clever tactics if they are to feast their eyes on the women's charms without being caught doing so. Ah, Mendeland—place of peeking, peeping, prying, and spying; home of clandestine ogling, veiled observations, shifting focus, averted eyes, darting glares, shielded gazes, stolen glances, silent witness!

ASPECTS OF BEAUTY

Beauty as a concept in Mende thought operates on three planes of existence—in the world of spirit, in the world of nature, and in the life of humans. The spiritual and the natural are seen to establish the standards and values of the human experience. *Tingoi*, the spiritual notion, is the mystical ideal to be yearned for but never attained. *Neku* is a description of the beauty of the natural world around us. *Haenjo* is the person who in her appearance most approximates the canons of perfection.

Beauty as an Ideal: *Tingoi*

Tingoi is a water spirit "which is said to assume the form of an exquisitely beautiful woman, and is therefore supposed to be a mermaid" (Harris and Sawyerr, 1969:41). There is no one more beautiful than *Tingoi*; rather, she is the starting point of beauty, and she is the standard. Her habitat is the holiest of domains, deep waters out at sea or in big rivers and ponds. *Tingoi* is a vision that appears dazzlingly and fleetingly to only a favored few. Those who claim to have seen her report that she has long, black, shining hair, a fair complexion, and a long, lined neck. Some say she has a pointed nose, small, sharply outlined lips, glistening, bright eyes, a smooth, glowing forehead, and succulent breasts.⁶⁷ The rest of