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Bamana people, Mali, Djitoumou region

Headdress (*chi wara* or *n'gonzon kun*)

Late nineteenth–early twentieth century

Wood, metal, cotton, grass, palm fibers

22 × 23 × 7 in. (55.9 × 58.4 × 17.8 cm)

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This headdress is a fine example of one of three Bamana headdress types that is configured as a horizontal animal composite or *n'gonzon kun*—literally, “aardvark head.” *N'gonzon kun* appears in masquerades of an association concerned with agricultural work and other tasks, as well as for public entertainment. The masquerades’ performances celebrate and encourage agricultural activities, the mainstay of many Bamana communities. Today, secular and religious meanings converge in the masquerades, but formerly the masks were used in the context of initiations of the *jow* societies and were considered to be spiritually powerful. At the turn of the century, and perhaps before, the masquerade was known as a tribute to the mythical figure named *chi wara*, or “farming animal,” who was the son of a divine being and appeared as half human and half animal. *Chi wara* had extraordinary agricultural skills and taught humans how to cultivate food crops. Eventually humans became lazy and wasteful and angered *chi wara*, who revoked their power to grow food and hid himself from them by burrowing in the ground.

In order to regain his favor, humans made headdresses representing *chi wara* and performed a dance in his honor. The *chi wara* dancer, cloaked in long black raffia strands, the headdress on his head, and walking with two sticks, would mimic the movements of a roan antelope. The *chi wara* always appears in performance as a male and female pair, signifying fertility and cosmic balance. The Horn headdress represents a male *chi wara*, which is distinguishable from its female counterpart by its two sets of horns and male genitalia.

The headdresses combine elements of various animals identified with *chi wara*. The Horn headdress has the stately horns and flexed legs of the roan antelope, the curved back of aardvarks, and the texture of pangolins



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that dig the earth with the same ferocity as the mythical being and as champion farmers. Other animal characteristics include its large head, which combines the aardvark's long snout and pod-shaped ears with features of a roan antelope and a goat. The upward-curved tail alludes to the curled tail of the chameleon, but it is inverted. This inversion is a reference to the peculiar growth of the groundnut, a staple food that produces its fruit underground.

Particular attributes of the Harn n'gonzon kun can be identified with a workshop that was active as early as the late nineteenth century in the Djitoumou area of central Mali. There are two sets of horns, the upper pair short and curved upward at the tips, the lower pair swept back and curved upward, as is typical of the horizontal type that inverts the downward sweep of the horns of the roan antelope. A tassel of ochre-colored cotton thread is attached by a loop through the perforated nasal septum, and a row of tassels adorns the left ear (the right ear is missing). The wide iron band on the neck, attached with small nails on the seam and edges, typifies the Djitoumou workshop style. Its purpose—to join the upper part of the figure, its head and neck, to the lower part, the body and legs—is not merely a structural necessity but draws attention to the juncture of head and body. The neck band is metaphoric of the soil line that separates the visible portion of a leafing plant from its roots and, in the case of the groundnut, its fruit. Remarkably, the basketry cap, which allows the headdress to remain securely seated on the dancer's head, is still intact. The cap would also have had a fringe of black fibers attached to it to hide the dancer's face.

