



Fig. 5: Asante Paramount Chief Nana Akyano Akowuah Datch II and his court, Kumasi, Ghana, 1970. Photograph by

Eliot Elisofon. National Museum of African Art, Eliot Elisofon Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

ture of kingship is strongly felt. Because the king's divine powers are thought to emanate from his head, crowns are considered to be the most powerful aspect of the Yoruba king's regalia (Ogunba 1964; Blier 1985; Euba 1985; Drewal and Pemberton 1989). The Yoruba crown consists of a tall conical cloth form which is covered with different brilliantly colored glass beads (Thompson 1972: 230). At the bottom edge of the crown are strings of beads that hang in front of the wearer's face (fig. 4). As a result, the king's identity is partially masked behind a veil of heavily beaded fringe (Thompson 1976: 81). "The function of the [Yoruba] crown," Ulli Beier has written, "is to eliminate the individual personality of the wearer and supplant it with the divine power of the dynasty. . . . Once a king is installed, it is imperative that he never shows his face to the public. The crown thus becomes the mask that transforms him into the 'brother of the gods'" (1982: 24-26).

Not all crowns or royal headdresses function to hide the divine leader's secular body. In some African kingdoms, especially those where the king's functions are principally administra-

head ornaments identify individually named leaders and subordinate members of the king's entourage. In what is now the present-day republic of Ghana, the ruler of the Asante Confederacy, the Asantehene, represented directly the visual grandeur of his court. The Asante Confederacy was a highly centralized political system with a named leader at the summit of a well-developed court administration (Wilks 1975). In Asante, Cole reports, "regalia became hierarchical, with 'first-class' chiefs allowing *their* subjects certain items, and so on down the organizational pyramid which had at its apex a divine king – the dispenser of gold and other riches" (1970: 21). In "The Sacred State of the Akan," Eva Meyerowitz describes the king (fig. 5) in the following way: "He sat under the enormous double state umbrella of his ancestors. He wore full regalia; a purple cloth of heavy velvet richly embroidered with the royal emblems, necklaces, armlets, bracelets, finger-rings, anklets and toe-rings of gold, and round his head a chaplet covered with triangles of gold" (1951: 53).

Like the tattoos of the centralized kingdoms of Polynesia which functioned to signal rank in