



# Smithsonian

*National Museum of Natural History*

Guide to the Barbara W. Blackmun papers, 1979-2012

National Anthropological Archives  
Museum Support Center  
4210 Silver Hill Road  
Suitland, Maryland 20746  
Business Number: Phone: 301.238.1310  
Fax Number: Fax: 301.238.2883  
naa@si.edu  
<http://www.anthropology.si.edu/naa/>

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## Collection Overview

<b>Repository:</b>	National Anthropological Archives
<b>Title:</b>	Barbara W. Blackmun papers
<b>Date:</b>	1979 - 2012
<b>Identifier:</b>	NAA.2016-30
<b>Creator:</b>	Blackmun, Barbara Winston
<b>Extent:</b>	7.25 Linear feet (11 boxes)
<b>Language:</b>	English .
<b>Summary:</b>	Barbara Winston Blackmun was a scholar of African art history who conducted pioneering research into the art and history of the Aken'ni Elao, or carved tusks from the royal altars of Benin, Nigeria, as well as other African art. The collection contains Blackmun's notes, photographs, research data, correspondence, and writings and talks.

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## Administrative Information

### Acquisition Information

Received from Monica Blackmun Visonà in 2016.

### Related Materials

Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art holds the Barbara Blackmun Collection of photographic slides.

All three volumes of Blackmun's dissertation are held in the Library at the National Museum of African Art.

### Processing Information

The collection came to the archives in a fairly organized state, and this organization was maintained with the exception of some minor re-ordering of folders for clarity. Materials were rehoused into acid-free folders and boxes, but the majority of Blackmun's folder labels were retained as she often recorded a lot of information on the folders.

### Preferred Citation

Barbara W. Blackmun papers, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution

### Restrictions

Access to the Barbara W. Blackmun papers requires an appointment.

### Conditions Governing Use

Contact the repository for terms of use.

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## Biographical Note

Barbara Winston Blackmun was a scholar of African art who conducted pioneering research into the art and history of Aken'ni Elao, the carved tusks from the royal altars of Benin, Nigeria.

Born in 1928 in Merced, California, Blackmun grew up in US national parks where her father managed camps for the Civilian Conservation Corps. She graduated from UCLA in 1949 with a BFA and a teaching certificate, and taught art, music, and drama at a public school in Trona, California. There she met and married Rupert Blackmun, a professor of industrial arts. The couple had three children.

In 1964, Rupert was asked to help build a polytechnic college in Malawi. The family spent five years there, with Blackmun teaching at both the polytechnic college as well as at the University of Malawi. There, Blackmun developed her interest in African art, conducting research into Maravi mask traditions. Upon returning to the United States in 1969, Blackmun enrolled at Arizona State University, earning her MA in art history in 1971. Following this, the Blackmuns moved to San Diego, where Blackmun joined the faculty at San Diego Mesa College.

In 1978 Blackmun enrolled in a PhD program in African art history at UCLA, and spent the summers of 1978 and 1979 working with Frank Willett at the Hunterian Museum in Glasgow. In 1981-1982, funded by a Fulbright award, Blackmun conducted field research in Benin City, Nigeria, interviewing members of the Igbesanmwan ivory carvers guild and others as she learned about the motifs carved into altar tusks.

Blackmun received her PhD in 1984, based on her study of the Benin altar tusks. Her work was significant for its examination of over 130 tusks held in museums and collections worldwide, and for her early use of computer analysis of the motifs depicted on the tusks. Blackmun continued research into tusks over the years, as well as other Nigerian art forms, including bronzes, terracottas, and other carved ivory objects.

From 1988 to 1990 Blackmun served as the director of the San Diego Museum of Man, overseeing the renovation of the museum's Africa gallery. In 2003, she founded the African Art Collection at San Diego Mesa College, curating numerous exhibits. She retired from San Diego Mesa College in 2010, but continued to remain active, lecturing, publishing, and consulting on African art history. Blackman died in 2018.

### *Sources consulted*

"Obituary: Barbara Winston Blackmun," <https://networks.h-net.org/node/12834/discussions/2439735/obituary-barbara-winston-blackmun> (accessed April 2, 2024)

Ezra, Kate. "Barbara Winston Blackmun, 1928-1918." *African Art* Vol. 52, No. 1, Spring 2019, pp. 11-13

### **Chronology**

1928	Born on June 29
1949	Receives AB in fine art and teaching certificate from UCLA
1964-1969	In Malawi with family, teaching at Malawi Polytechnic College and the University of Malawi
1971	Receives MA in art history from Arizona State University Joins faculty at San Diego Mesa College
1978	Starts PhD program in African art history at UCLA
Summers, 1978 and 1979	Works with Frank Willett at the Hunterian Museum in Glasgow, UK
1981-1982	Field research in Benin City, Nigeria
1984	Receives PhD
1988-1990	Serves as director of the San Diego Museum of Man
2003	Founds the African art collection at San Diego Mesa College

2010

Retires from San Diego Mesa College

2018

Dies on July 6

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## Historical

Aken'ni Elao, or carved altar tusks of Benin, Nigeria, are carved elephant tusks featuring scenes representing rituals and other activities of the Oba (traditional ruler of the Edo people), and were made as a historical record of events in the Kingdom of Benin. The tusks were placed on the ancestral altars or shrines of the Oba, fitted into a pedestal in the shape of a head, made of bronze or brass.

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## Scope and Contents

The Barbara W. Blackmun papers primarily document Blackmun's dissertation research into the carved altar tusks of Benin, Nigeria. Series 1: Research, includes tusk data files, charts, data and analysis on motifs and types, photographs, and correspondence. Also included is volume 1 of Blackmun's dissertation, "The iconography of carved altar tusks from Benin, Nigeria" and files related to the appendices (Volumes 2 and 3). Though the bulk of the material relates to the tusk research, there are files on other Nigerian art forms as well, such as bronzes, terracottas, and other carved ivory objects held in museums and collections worldwide.

Series 2: Writings and talks, are working files containing manuscripts and drafts, photographs and illustrations, correspondence, and notes for published articles as well as for lectures and talks given.

Please note that the contents of the collection and the language and terminology used reflect the context and culture of the time of its creation. As an historical document, its contents may be at odds with contemporary views and terminology and considered offensive today. The information within this collection does not reflect the views of the Smithsonian Institution or National Anthropological Archives, but is available in its original form to facilitate research.

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## Arrangement

The collection is arranged in two series: 1. Research; and 2. Writings and talks.

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## Selected Bibliography

*The Iconography of Crved Altar Tusks from Benin, Nigeria.* (1984): University of California.

"Who Commissioned the Queen Mother Tusks? A Problem in the Chronology of Benin Ivories." *African Arts*(1991): 55-91.

"The elephant and its ivory in Benin." *Elephant: The Animal and Its Ivory in African Culture* (1992): 163-186.

"History and Statecraft on a Tusk from Old Benin." *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 81, no. 4 (1994): 87-115.

"Icons and Emblems in Ivory: An Altar Tusk from the Palace of Old Benin." *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 23, no. 2 (1997): 149-198.

"From Time Immemorial: Historicism in the Court Art of Benin, Nigeria." *Symbols of Time in the History of Art* (2002): 27-39.

## Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

Art -- History  
Art, African

Places:

Africa, West  
Benin (Nigeria)  
Nigeria

## Container Listing

### Series 1: Research

**Scope and Contents:** Series 1: Research, comprises Blackmun's doctoral research on Benin carved altar tusks, as well as research files on other forms of Nigerian art.

Subseries 1: Dissertation research on Benin altar tusks, includes Blackmun's dissertation proposal, Volume 1 of her dissertation, and other files relating to the writing of the dissertation. There are also reports on her use of computers in the analysis of the tusks. The tusk research files contain photographs (contact sheets, negatives, prints) and often notes and correspondence and are ordered numerically by tusk number. These files relate to the tusk card files, which contain photographs (prints) and notes and are organized primarily by tusk number, but also by motif type. The tusk research files also contain motif drawings and analysis, and charts.

Subseries 2: Other research files, contain photographs (contact sheets, negatives, and prints; the majority of Blackmun's slides are held at the National Museum of African Art), notes, and correspondence regarding objects held at various museums and collections worldwide. Included are some tusk-related files, but the majority focus on other objects such as bronzes, terracottas, and other carved ivory items.

### Dissertation research on Benin altar tusks

**Scope and Contents:** This subseries contains two groupings of material: dissertation, and tusk research files. The first grouping contains components of Blackmun's dissertation, "The iconography of carved altar tusks from Benin, Nigeria" as well as information about her research process. The tusk research files (arranged numerically by tusk number) contain photographs and notes about each tusk, and occasionally correspondence. Regarding photographs, Blackmun organized most of the negatives and contact sheets into the tusk files and labeled them by tusk number and repository where the tusk is held. These files relate to the tusk card files, which are organized by tusk number and motif style. Also in this grouping are Blackmun's motif and type charts and motif drawings.

Dissertation	
Box 1, Folder 1	Dissertation proposal, 1979
Box 1, Folder 2	Dissertation, volume 1 (pages 1-57), 1984
Box 1, Folder 3	Dissertation, volume 1 (pages 58-147), 1984
Box 1, Folder 4	Dissertation, volume 1 (pages 148-239), 1984
Box 1, Folder 5	Original dissertation photographs, undated
Box 1, Folder 6	Literature review, undated
Box 1, Folder 7	Methodology, undated

Box 1, Folder 8	A computerized study of the ivory altar tusks of Benin: background, methodology, and schedule (report), 1979
Box 1, Folder 9	Progress report: Computerizing the Benin tusk project, 1980
Box 1, Folder 10	Blank data forms, undated
	Tusk research files
	Notes: The Tusk research files include files organized by tusk number assigned by Blackmun. Folder titles indicate the tusk number and the museum or collection where the tusk is held. Other files include drawings of motifs and master charts of tusk types and motifs.
Box 1, Folder 11	Tusk 1 (La Trobe University), undated
Box 1, Folder 12	Tusk 3 (Royal Tropical Museum/Tropenmuseum), undated
Box 1, Folder 13	Tusk 13 (Museum Fur Volkerkunde, Leipzig), undated
Box 1, Folder 14	Tusk 14 (Museum Fur Volkerkunde, Leipzig), undated
Box 1, Folder 15	Tusk 15 (Museum Fur Volkerkunde, Leipzig), undated
Box 1, Folder 16	Tusk 16 (Museum Fur Volkerkunde, Leipzig), undated
Box 1, Folder 17	Tusk 17 (Museum Fur Volkerkunde, Leipzig), undated
Box 1, Folder 18	Tusk 18 (Museum Fur Volkerkunde, Leipzig), undated
Box 1, Folder 19	Tusk 19 (Museum Fur Volkerkunde, Leipzig), undated
Box 1, Folder 20	Tusk 21 (John F. Kennedy Library), undated
Box 1, Folder 21	Tusk 23 (Leipzig/Berlin), undated
Box 1, Folder 22	Tusk 24 (Brooklyn), undated
Box 1, Folder 23	Tusk 25 (Royal Museum of Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium), undated
Box 1, Folder 24	Tusks 26, 27, 28 (Field Museum), undated
Box 1, Folder 25	Tusk 27 (Field Museum), undated
Box 2, Folder 1	Tusk 29 (Art Institute of Chicago), undated
Box 2, Folder 2	Tusk 30 (Irma Stern Museum), undated



Box 2, Folder 3	Tusk 31 (Cleveland Museum of Art), undated
Box 2, Folder 4	Tusk 32 (Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum), undated
Box 2, Folder 5	Tusk 33 (Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum), undated
Box 2, Folder 6	Tusk 38 (Dresden), undated
Box 2, Folder 7	Tusk 39 (Dresden), undated
Box 2, Folder 8	Tusk 41 (Frankfurt), undated
Box 2, Folder 9	Tusk 45 (Museum Fur Volkerkunde, Hamburg), undated
Box 2, Folder 10	Tusk 48 (Lore Kegel collection, Hamburg), undated
Box 2, Folder 11	Tusks 50-53, 56, 90 (Lagos), undated
Box 2, Folder 12	Tusk 57 (Museum Fur Volkerkunde, Leipzig), undated
Box 2, Folder 13	Tusk 58 (Museum Fur Volkerkunde, Leipzig), undated
Box 2, Folder 14	Tusk 59 (Leningrad), undated
Box 2, Folder 15	Tusk 60 (Liverpool), undated
Box 2, Folder 16	Tusk 61 (Liverpool), undated
Box 2, Folder 17	Tusk 63 (Sotheby's, Copland-Crawford), undated
Box 2, Folder 18	Tusk 65 (British Museum), undated
Box 2, Folder 19	Tusks 65-79 (British Museum), undated
Box 2, Folder 20	Tusk 66 (British Museum), undated
Box 2, Folder 21	Tusk 69 (British Museum), undated
Box 2, Folder 22	Tusk 73 (British Museum), undated
Box 2, Folder 23	Tusk 75 (British Museum), undated
Box 2, Folder 24	Tusk 76 (British Museum), undated
Box 2, Folder 25	Tusk 77 (British Museum), undated
Box 2, Folder 26	Tusk 79 (British Museum), undated

Box 2, Folder 27	Tusk 81 (Leipzig, Meyer), undated
Box 2, Folder 28	Tusk 113 (Manchester Museum), undated
Box 2, Folder 29	Tusk 118 (Mannheim), undated
Box 2, Folder 30	Tusk 119 (Mannheim), undated
Box 2, Folder 31	Tusk 120 (Mannheim), undated
Box 2, Folder 32	Tusk 123 (Menil), undated
Box 2, Folder 33	Tusk 124 (Minneapolis Institute of Arts), undated
Box 2, Folder 34	Tusk 125 (Montreal Museum of Art), undated
Box 2, Folder 35	Tusk 130 (Benenson, NY, Yoruba), undated
Box 2, Folder 36	Tusk 155 (Sheffield), undated
Box 3, Folder 1	Tusk 165 (Museum Fur Volkerkunde, Vienna), undated
Box 3, Folder 2	Tusk 167 (Museum Fur Volkerkunde, Vienna), undated
Box 3, Folder 3	Tusk 168 (Museum Fur Volkerkunde, Vienna), undated
Box 3, Folder 4	Tusk 169 (Wellesley College), undated
Box 3, Folder 5	Tusk 172 (Smithsonian) (1 of 2), undated
Box 3, Folder 6	Tusk 172 (Smithsonian) (2 of 2), undated
Box 3, Folder 7	Tusk 200 (Lore Kegel collection, Hamburg), undated
Box 3, Folder 8	Tusk 223 (Mannheim), undated
Box 3, Folder 9	Tusk 250 (Musée de l'Homme, Paris), undated
Box 3, Folder 10	Tusk 256 (Stockholm), undated
Box 3, Folder 11	Tusk 258 (Beatrice Riese), undated
Box 3, Folder 12	Tusk 300 (Lore Kegel collection, Hamburg), undated
Box 3, Folder 13	Tusk 409 (Liverpool), undated
Box 3, Folder 14	Tusk master file, 1983

Box 3, Folder 15	Master charts of tusk types and motifs, undated
Box 3, Folder 16	Characteristics of tusk types, undated
Box 3, Folder 17	Altar tusk motif catalog, 1992
Box 3, Folder 18	Notes on tusk motifs and artists hands, undated
Box 3, Folder 19	Motif drawings - miscellaneous, undated
Box 3, Folder 20	Motif drawings - mixed, undated
Box 3, Folder 21	B motifs, undated
Box 3, Folder 22	J motifs, undated
Box 4, Folder 1	L and T motifs, undated
Box 4, Folder 2	Q motifs, undated
Box 4, Folder 3	R motifs, undated
Box 4, Folder 4	S motifs, undated
Box 4, Folder 5	T motifs, undated
Box 4, Folder 6	W motifs, undated
Box 4, Folder 7	Y motifs, undated
Box 8, Folder 1	Charts, H, undated
Box 8, Folder 2	Charts, J, undated
Box 8, Folder 3	Charts, L, undated
Box 8, Folder 4	Charts, M, undated
Box 8, Folder 5	Charts, Q, undated
Box 8, Folder 6	Charts, R, undated
Box 8, Folder 7	Charts, S, undated
Box 8, Folder 8	Charts, T, undated
Box 8, Folder 9	Charts, Y and Z, undated

Box 8, Folder 10	Charts, first stage, undated
Box 8, Folder 11	Charts, various, undated
Box 9-11	Tusk card files, undated Notes: The tusk card files contain photographs and notes on tusks, organized by tusk number and motif type.

### Other research files

Scope and Contents: Subseries 2: Other research files, are similar to the tusk research files in that they contain photographs (prints, negatives, contact sheets), notes, and sometimes correspondence. These files are organized alphabetically by subject.

Box 4, Folder 8	20th century bronzes, Benin and elsewhere, undated
Box 4, Folder 9	Allman collection tusk, Montreal, undated
Box 4, Folder 10	Art Bulletin, Ife catalog and notes, undated
Box 4, Folder 11	Art Institute of Chicago project (Tusk 29), 1995
Box 4, Folder 12	Art thefts, Nigeria, undated
Box 4, Folder 13	Art theft, Nigeria - terra cotta IY1115, 1998
Box 4, Folder 14	Art of Benin exhibit and symposium at UCLA, 1983
Box 4, Folder 15	Barbier-Muller Museum, Geneva, undated
Box 4, Folder 16	Benin chronologies, 1995-2000
Box 4, Folder 17	Benin chronologies and notes, undated
Box 4, Folder 18	Benin hip pendants with pleated flange and/or nets and loops at bottom, undated
Box 4, Folder 19	Benin hip pendants with mudfish flange, undated
Box 4, Folder 20	Cologne/Koln photos, undated
Box 4, Folder 21	De Menil collection, undated
Box 5, Folder 1	Dresden, spoons and other ivories, undated
Box 5, Folder 2	Dublin objects, undated
Box 5, Folder 3	Elaborate container tusks with lids, undated

Box 5, Folder 4	Erbach Ivory Museum, 1992
Box 5, Folder 5	Frankfurt ivory armlets, 1994
Box 5, Folder 6	Frankfurt tusk, 2007-2008
Box 5, Folder 7	Fyler - small tusk, Sotheby's, 2010
Box 5, Folder 8	Ife head photos from Frank Willett, Hunterian Museum, undated
Box 5, Folder 9	Ife-Iwinrin Grove terra cottas, British Museum, undated
Box 5, Folder 10	Ife photos, Detroit, undated
Box 5, Folder 11	Ivory armlets, miscellaneous styles, Benin, undated
Box 5, Folder 12	Ivory - small tusks and horns, animal decorations only, undated
Box 5, Folder 13	Ivory - small tusks and horns, figural (humans), undated
Box 5, Folder 14	L-2 tusks and notes, Paris and Vienna, undated
Box 5, Folder 15	Lagos Museum photos, undated
Box 5, Folder 16	Lagos and Benin, museum photos, undated
Box 5, Folder 17	Liverpool Museum, undated
Box 5, Folder 18	Miscellaneous bronze objects, undated
Box 5, Folder 19	Musée de l'Homme, Paris, miscellaneous, undated
Box 5, Folder 20	Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, exhibit on Royal Art of Benin, undated
Box 5, Folder 21	Museum Fur Volkerkunde, Dresden, undated
Box 5, Folder 22	Owo and Benin ivories at British Museum, undated
Box 5, Folder 23	Penn Museum, Philadelphia, undated
Box 5, Folder 24	Pitt Rivers Museum, undated
Box 6, Folder 1	Padraig Madden tusk, 1998
Box 6, Folder 2	Problem tusks, undated
Box 6, Folder 3	Sale of tusks at Sotheby's, July 1976, undated

Box 6, Folder 4	Vienna bronzes - miscellaneous, undated
Box 6, Folder 5	Wembley "tusks", undated
Box 6, Folder 6	Yoruba tusk at Pitt Rivers Museum, undated
Box 6, Folder 7	Loango tusk at Oberlin College, undated
Box 6, Folder 8	Photograph (copy print) of altar by Cyril Punch, 1891, undated
Box 6, Folder 9	Photographs (copy prints) of Benin altars, undated
Box 6, Folder 10	Notes on Barbara Blackmun's files, undated

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## Series 2: Writings and talks, 1979-2012, undated

Scope and Contents: Series 2: Writings and talks, comprise files containing Blackmun's drafts and manuscripts, talk outlines, correspondence, photographs and illustrations for publication. The files are arranged by date. Also present are a few files of articles by others.

Box 6, Folder 11	The historic naturalistic sculpture of Ife, Nigeria: a classification through style analysis, 1979
Box 6, Folder 12	The Nobleman Plaque, 1980
Box 6, Folder 13	The Ife-Benin controversy: a bibliography, 1980
Box 6, Folder 14	Reading a royal altar tusk, and other essays, 1982
Box 6, Folder 15	Ivory tusks in Benin history: searching for a key, 1982
Box 6, Folder 16	In search of an ivory chronology, 1983
Box 6, Folder 17	Ambiguity and duality in Benin iconography, 1984
Box 6, Folder 18	The art of Benin: stories and symbols in ivory, 1984
Box 6, Folder 19	Benin altars of the head, 1985
Box 6, Folder 20	Are they really all alike? A classification of Ife heads, 1986
Box 6, Folder 21	Are they really all alike? A classification of Ife heads (UCLA lecture), 1986
Box 6, Folder 22	Olokun, 1987
Box 6, Folder 23	Royal and non-royal Benin: distinctions in Igbesanmwan carving, 1987
Box 6, Folder 24	From trader to priest, notes and correspondence, 1987-1988
Box 6, Folder 25	The face of the leopard: its significance in Benin court art, 1991
Box 6, Folder 26	Ancestral ivories as a key to Benin's history, 1992
Box 6, Folder 27	Decoding a carved altar tusk: stories, symbols, and scandal from the Kingdom of Benin, 1993
Box 7, Folder 1	Ancestral ivories as a key to Benin's history (Lowe Art Museum talk), 1993
Box 7, Folder 2	Outline of Africa's cultural contributions for D.C. Heath text, 1993
Box 7, Folder 3	History and statecraft on a tusk from old Benin, 1994

Box 7, Folder 4	Reading of an altar tusk, 1994
Box 7, Folder 5	The role of archaeology in Nigeria: progress and problems, 1995
Box 7, Folder 6	Carvers, continuity, and change: the ivories of Ovonramwen and Eweka II, 1997
Box 7, Folder 7	A new focus on the Igbesanmwan: recent progress in Benin's art history, 1997
Box 7, Folder 8	Ancestral kings and queens on Benin's sacred ivories, 1997
Box 7, Folder 9	Icons and emblems in ivory: an altar tusk from the palace of old Benin (see tusk 29), 1997
Box 7, Folder 10	Understanding the carved ivories of old Benin
Box 7, Folder 11	Stories from antiquities: decoding Benin art, 1998
Box 7, Folder 12	The hands of the artists, 1998
Box 7, Folder 13	Essay for dictionary of African art, 1998
Box 7, Folder 14	Reading a royal altar tusk (CD version), 2001
Box 7, Folder 15	Instant antiquities: art from Benin, 2004
Box 7, Folder 16	Late 20th century bronzes and ivories in Benin City, Nigeria, 2007
Box 7, Folder 17	Behind the bronzes: stories and scandals from old Benin, 2009
Box 7, Folder 18	Contradictions between modernity and authenticity: bronzecasting in the Edo kingdom of Benin, 2010
Box 7, Folder 19	MIA (Minneapolis Institute of Arts) tusk essay, 2012
Box 7, Folder 20	Vienna's mystery tusks, undated
Box 7, Folder 21	British Museum permissions to publish, undated
	Writings and talks by others
Box 7, Folder 22	Yoruba symbolism of the earth by H.A. Witte, circa 1983
Box 7, Folder 23	How to present Benin - categories, attitudes, terminology by Coombs, Blackmun-Visona, Rodolitz, 1986-1997
Box 7, Folder 24	Recent archaeological discoveries in the ancient city of Ife by E.H. Duckworth, 1939



Box 7, Folder 25

The Treasures of Ancient Nigeria symposium, 1980

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