

Of all the archetypal themes in African art, the mother-and-child is the most fundamental, widespread, and important. These values stem partly from two obvious and unremarkable facts—we are all children and we all were born to mothers. While the mother-baby unit is omnipresent in human society, it is an equally vital font of generative ideas and actions that have energized, stabilized, and replenished societies across the African continent for millennia. The image evokes concepts and values of great importance to the peoples who make, display, and employ it. Knowing its roles and purposes reinforces the universal character of the icon while revealing deep wells of African thought. Mother-and-child arts are not just evocations of biology. They are cultural expressions varying widely as potent embodiments of history, philosophy, and worldview. I am especially fascinated by their layered meanings and complex allusions that

transcend yet obviously arise from the biological mother-child unit.<sup>1</sup>

My fascination began fifty years ago on my first fieldtrip among the Igbo in eastern Nigeria. By a roadside I was surprised yet delighted to see a larger-than-life sun-dried clay sculpture of Ala, the earth goddess, with two children at her sides, front and center in an *mbari* house populated with other figures (fig. 2). This powerful goddess is the mother of other gods, of plants, animals, and of humans. She is the font of morality and guardian of Igbo traditions as well: a cultural genetrix. When I later learned that the deity Ancient Mother nurtures male initiates with “the milk of knowledge” among some Senufo groups (fig. 1), I could not let this subject go unexplored.

This paper focuses on several African cultures that have devoted extraordinary thought, ritual activity, and artistic energy to maternity and its images. The preoccupations examined here occur in three widely separated parts of the

continent: southern Nigeria among the Igbo; the Western Sudan among the Bamana and Senufo; and the Congo watershed among Pende and Luba peoples. In all these cultures motherhood blossoms into layered concepts, powers, and metaphors.

Sculptured and painted versions, uses, and interpretations of mother-and-child images clearly vary greatly in different places. Yet even where they are prominent or even dominant, local beliefs also recognize a balanced female/male reciprocity underlying biological life and culture. In some cases, as among the Owerri Igbo and Pende, our subject is clearly ascendant,<sup>2</sup> whereas the Bamana Gwan association emphasizes male/female reciprocity yet places greater stress on the female, probably because its primary mission is fertility and population increase. The Luba combine the genders in female figures, only a few of which are maternities. They produce few male statues.

## THE COMPLEXITY OF MATERNITY IN AFRICA

By Herbert M. Cole



FIG. 1 (left):  
Maternity, perhaps Ancient Mother.  
Senufo, Côte d'Ivoire.  
Wood. H: 89.5 cm.  
National Museum of African Art,  
Smithsonian Institution, gift of Walt  
Disney World Co., a subsidiary of  
the Walt Disney Company, inv.  
2005.6.51.

FIG. 2 (above):  
Igbo *mbari* house dedicated  
to Ala (Earth) in Umugote  
Orishaeze, Imo State,  
Nigeria.  
Photo: Herbert M. Cole, 1966.



FIG. 3 (above left): Senufo mother  
and child.  
Photo: Herbert M. Cole, 1978.

FIG. 4 (left): Ala (Earth) and  
children (detail) in the *mbari* to  
Obiala in Ndiama Obube Ulakwo,  
Imo State, Nigeria.  
Photo: Herbert M. Cole, 1966.



FIG. 5 (above): *Mbari* in Nguma,  
showing sun, moon, and rainbow  
paintings on wall above Mamy  
Wata.  
Photo: Herbert M. Cole, 1966.

FIG. 6 (below):  
Termite mound. Southern Nigeria.  
Photo: Herbert M. Cole, 1966.

FIG. 7 (right):  
Pounding “yam.”  
Photo: Herbert M. Cole, 1966.



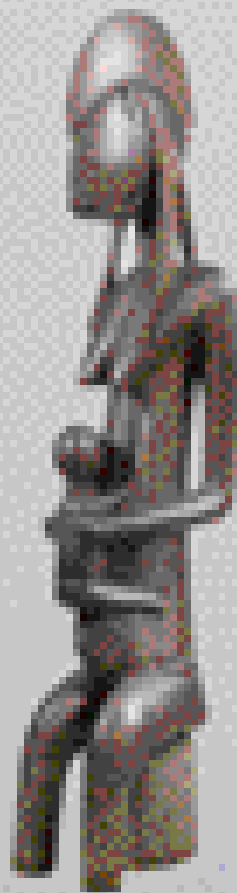


## EARTH AMONG THE OWERRI IGBO

Earth, Ala, is the dominant all-purpose deity<sup>3</sup> for the Owerri Igbo. For more than a hundred years she has been the recipient of extraordinary structures called *mbari* houses, which are major community sacrifices to this goddess. Ala is an older woman, a mother with one or two children (fig. 4). Other figures are half her size or smaller. Earth is the mother of all gods and all growing things, including humans. She is the literal ground of being for the Owerri people as the source of fertility, morality, tradition, and, therefore, culture.<sup>4</sup> She is at once nature and culture, which in her are joined and simultaneous. The deified Earth is sometimes thought of in conjunction with her fertilizing sky world male partner, Amadioha, god of thunder, lightning, and rain, but he is of lesser import in art and thought.

*Mbari* images of Ala are modeled in sacred clay taken by initiates<sup>5</sup> from termite mounds, then mashed in mortars to become the consistency of pounded yam, the staple prestige food (fig. 7). Twice processed, by termites and by women as if preparing food, this unusual clay is called *fufu*—the same term used for balls of pounded yam readied for eating. *Mbari* spirit workers say they are going to the “yam farm” when they leave to collect spirit-infused termite hill clay. The fact that a queen termite hatches as many as thirteen million eggs per year is not insignificant. Earth’s essence—sacred, fertile, generative, nurturing, law-giving—as interpreted in Igbo thought and action is nature and, at the same time, culture.

An *mbari* house was built infrequently to avert disaster brought on by human or natural causes and as a major sacrifice to Earth as the most prominent deity.<sup>6</sup> Specially selected men and women were initiated into the ritualized process for a year or longer for large *mbari* constructed in the 1930s. Professional artists modeled *mbari* inhabitants, along with people and scenes of everyday life. As many as fifty to one hundred fifty images were included (fig. 6). All of the figures and the *mbari* building itself were painted by the spirit workers. Often a sun, moon, and rainbow were seen on the upper walls (fig. 5). In honor of Mother Earth, the community and indeed the world were renewed in Earth and “yam.” The biological imperatives of childbirth



and subsistence are focused in the sculptured Ala with her children, as well as in the process of symbolically rebuilding her community, its farms, and the world.

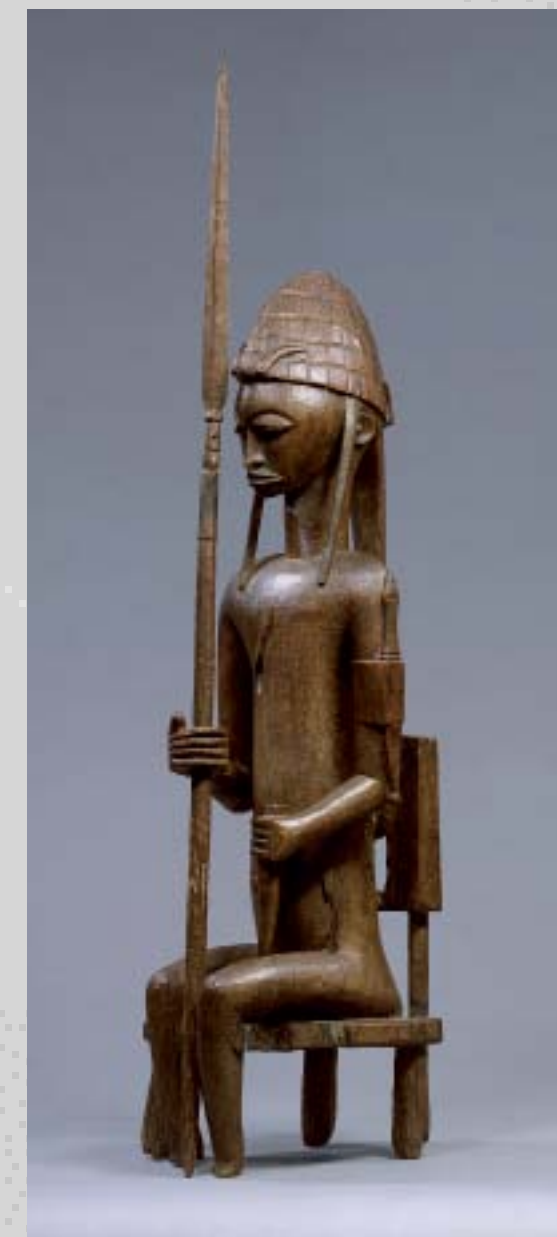
## BAMANA GWAN FIGURES

The dualistic concepts of *badenya* and *fadenya* exemplify the richness of Bamana of Mali thought associated with Jo societies and related Gwan female and male figures. They indicate again that female principles typically have balancing, complementary male-oriented ideas. The emphasis here on female principles and maternal roles thus should not wholly eclipse those of males, obviously essential to human and agricultural productivity, which is the main concern of Gwan association rituals and sculptures.

Great wisdom and spiritual force are embodied in the maternity figure and the male with weapons, both central in Gwan cult ensembles, as signified by amulets and weapons worn or carried, as well as by their large size and stately poses (figs. 8 and 9). More vital, however, are the ritual processes and medicines that empower such statuary.<sup>7</sup> Notably, the trees from which blacksmith-sculptors carved many such powerful images grew out of termite mounds, and both trees and mounds embody fertile spiritual energy, *nyama*.<sup>8</sup> *Badenya*, the Bamana concept of “mother-childness,” links with centripetal social forces of stability, unity, and cooperation, that is, those traits that pull a person back into the group, effectively toward the hearth and mother. *Fadenya*, “father-childness,” is centrifugal, allied with individuality, competition, self-promotion, and heroics—traits that spin a person outside his social field.<sup>9</sup> Both genders have components of each quality, and both are essential for human prosperity. But women, who desire above all to be mothers, are anchored in *badenya*. They can go forth to make their mark or help others become innovators or heroes—*fadenya* traits—but it is traditionally more necessary for males to do so. As Kate Ezra stated, “For Bamana women, children are a source of pride, self-fulfillment, and status in the community; their absence brings anxiety, shame, and often a diminished role in the family and village. [...] Children are a woman’s most valued possession

FIG. 8 (left and right):  
Gwandusu seated mother  
and child.  
Bamana, Mali.  
Wood. H: 117.8 cm.  
Private collection.

FIG. 9 (far right):  
Seated male with a lance.  
Bamana, Mali.  
Wood. H: 85.8 cm.  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
gift of the Kronos Collection in  
honor of Martin Lerner, 1983,  
inv. 1983.600ab.



and most respected accomplishment... .”<sup>10</sup> A woman is powerful enough to pass greatness on to her children, as stated in a proverb, “everyone is in his mother’s hands,” and in a song: “a man’s power comes from his mother,” again a reference to her *fadenya* components.<sup>11</sup> Gwan is a female initiatory association, with the purpose of promoting childbirth, but it is also the association of blacksmiths who carve Gwan figures. Explicitly, Gwan celebrates both childbirth and the metaphoric “birthing” of iron from the furnace, as the word *gwan* also means “smelting furnace.”<sup>12</sup>

In formal terms, the two sculptures illustrated here appear to reflect ideas espoused by *fadenya* and *badenya*. The male (fig. 9) holds his tall spear projecting into open space above, keeping it between his surroundings and his body,



whereas the mother (fig. 8), with arms pulling her child to a close embrace beneath her large full breasts, is a more closed, contained form maintaining stability and balance. The mother holds only her child, as if it were an extension of her womb.

The identity and nature of these sculptured couples are contested. Perhaps they materialize unseen deities, whose names may not be said,<sup>13</sup> or, at the least, they may be embodiments of the supernatural force *nyama*, essential to the fertility and productivity of crops and people, and thus to prosperity. This latter interpretation is implicit in Sarah Brett-Smith's thesis that Bamana sculpture is about marshaling spiritual powers toward yielding the most vital need of the people, which is children.<sup>14</sup>

The Bamana parallel between the explicitly female smelting furnace that gives birth to iron and a mother in parturition is notably present in several other parts of Africa.<sup>15</sup> The transformative mysteries of new life in childbirth and a useful and equally transformative new substance in the "birth" of bloom, or smelted iron, both reinforce the deeply cultural process of childbirth to many African peoples. The virtually universal ascription of "mother" to the African earth helps to account for this parallel.<sup>16</sup> Notably, it is blacksmiths who create—give birth to—Gwan and other sculptures.

#### ANCIENT MOTHER AMONG THE SENUFO

Some Senufo groups in Côte d'Ivoire have a prominent deity, Ancient Mother, credited with founding much that is central to segments<sup>17</sup> of Senufo culture (figs. 10, 12, and 13). As the first mother, she is the founder of matrilinearity and the patron of women. She also heads certain powerful male-dominated initiatory and educational institutions, the governing bodies of Senufo life.<sup>18</sup> The sacred grove, located outside the village, is Ancient Mother's compound (fig. 11). She has a counterpart male creator deity, who is less prominent in both life and art. Ancient Mother embodies a cluster of overt and covert ideas, just as the initiation over which she presides imparts both practical and esoteric learning to novices, her children, over a period of twenty years. She is said to absorb these



FIG. 10 (left): Nursing mother and child. Senufo, Côte d'Ivoire. Wood. H: 76 cm. Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal.

FIG. 11 (above): Senufo sacred Poro grove. Côte d'Ivoire. Photo by Herbert M. Cole, 1978.

FIG. 12 (right): Nursing mother and child. Senufo, Côte d'Ivoire. Wood. H: 63.6 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, James Albert and Mary Gardiner Ford Memorial Fund, inv. 1961.198.

FIG. 13 (below): Mother with multiple figures on a stool. Senufo, Côte d'Ivoire. Wood, pigment. H: 49.5 cm. Derby Collection.





shapeless beings—male youths taken from their mothers—when they first enter her compound as novices. She redelivers them later as fully formed human beings, having nourished them “with the milk of knowledge” (fig. 1).<sup>19</sup> The same author speaks of a conventionalized sculpture of this deity and its “thin, larva-like creature,” the unformed novice, a shapeless being, who is suckling.<sup>20</sup> A later ceremony symbolizes a “weaning” from the Mother.<sup>21</sup> During the long initiation cycle, young men in training will say they are “at our mother’s work.”

#### EASTERN PENDE ROOF FINIALS

The commanding presence of a large mother-and-child carving, *kishikishi*, atop the ritual houses, *kibulu* (fig. 14), of important “great chiefs” among the matrilineal Eastern Pende peoples of the Democratic Republic of the Congo is a mid-twentieth-century phenomenon.<sup>22</sup> A fine weathered figure in this tradition (fig. 15) might lead us to think this is an ancient practice, but Strother’s fieldwork suggests otherwise, reminding that change is more or less constant in African ritual, art, and daily life.<sup>23</sup> Rooftop maternity figures holding weapons came to be vital symbolically in announcing a chief’s sacred domain and his training in sorcery, skills enabling him to lead and protect his people. The axe-wielding female guards the secrets of chiefly power contained in this structure, which also serves as the chief’s residence (fig. 17). The house’s “stomach” is its innermost sanctum beneath the center pole, which supports the maternal roof figure. All seeds and grains grown locally are ritually deposited there, and protective medicines are added. A prayer intoned during this rite, secretly in the early morning darkness, shows the house and its contents to be a microcosm of the Pende world. This is the chief’s invocation:

You are the center pole of the house, you are the village with its people, fields, and forest. We have given you all the seeds for cultivation so that you may grip the earth as the seeds [roots] grip the earth over there. All seeds grow, may you grow [as] the seeds grow, so that the women may give birth, so that there may be lots of palm wine, so that the hunters may kill [their prey] with their guns.<sup>24</sup>

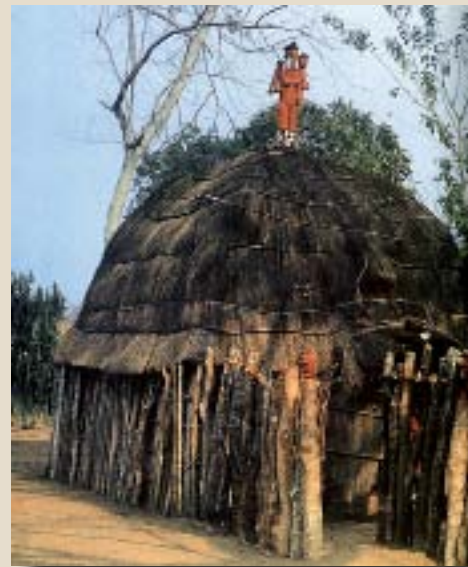


FIG. 14 (above): The *kibulu* of Pende Chief Komba-Kebeto. Photograph by Leon de Sousberghe, 1955. Eliot Elisofon Archive, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution.

FIG. 15 (near right, top): Mother and child. Eastern Pende, DR Congo. Wood. H: 81.3 cm. Private collection. Photo: Jerry L. Thompson.

FIG. 16 (near right, bottom): Maternity roof finial for a chief’s house. Eastern Pende, DR Congo. Wood, metal, pigment. H: c. 125 cm. Africarium Collection. Photo: Austin Kennedy.

FIG. 17 (far right): Maternity roof finial for a chief’s house, carved by Kaseya Tambwe. Eastern Pende, DR Congo. Wood. H: 153 cm. Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, inv. EO 1950.25.1.

The axe-wielding rooftop maternity is the public declaration of these ideas, visible and elevated. The figure recalls a woman-chief, first wife of the great chief, emphasizing his nurturing role. Under ancestral sanctions, she protects Pende life within the chief’s realm. Her weapon is a warning to anyone of evil intent. As first wife, she has ritual duties regarding agriculture and is

a political force. She dances with an axe at the chief’s investiture, then hands it to him to behead a dog in one stroke. Its blood and that of a goat killed by his first minister is collected in a cup, which is passed to all present. Her child is the continuation of her matrilineal line and reminds the people of the death of a sister and thus the loss of a lineage.<sup>25</sup>

The Pende sculptor Kaseya Tambwe Makumbi is noted for his finial sculptures in a more naturalistic style than most Pende works. He was partly influenced by Madonna and Child images in missionary hands during his productive years, the 1940s and 1950s, when rooftop maternities became popular.

Pende symbolism parallels that of Ala in *mbari* houses to some extent, although the Igbo microcosm is celebrated publicly in *mbari*, open, visible to all. The Pende house, also decorated with added images, is strictly off limits to all but a few, with a hierarchy of palisade fences, courts, or vestibules and sometimes guardian sculptures impeding access to sacred items within. The outer room houses public chieftaincy insignia, such as weapons and regalia, while the inner room hides three powerful chiefly masks. Here the notion of microcosm is more veiled. Still, several cosmic metaphors attach to the Pende structure. It is called a “house of the dead,” a foyer to the ancestral otherworld, “the heart of the village,” a granary, and a corral where ancestors send animals as food.<sup>26</sup> Like *mbari* houses, it is a deliberately impermanent structure that may not be repaired. “The *kibulu* is also an aesthetic object testifying to the wealth, rank, and personal tastes of a named individual.”<sup>27</sup>





**LUBA**

Explicit mother-and-child imagery is quite rare in the artistic corpus of the Luba of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, even though most of the numerous Luba figural sculptures are female. That fact speaks to the great importance of women, who besides being known as mothers, are seen in Luba history, life, and thought as sacred ancestors, as “epicenters of power,” as protectors of sacred royalty, as advisors to kings, as emissaries to foreign chiefdoms, as spirit mediums or diviners, and much more.<sup>28</sup> Women, too, are said to contain and protect the “secrets of life,” a critical Luba role parallel to that of Yoruba mothers a great distance away in Nigeria.

Occasional Luba stools, more properly called royal thrones, feature maternity themes, reinforcing the central role of women in Luba kingship. One example, illustrated here (fig. 18) has iconography that is unique: A diminutive adult-proportioned child stands on the mother’s thigh, holding and suckling her pointed left breast intently, with his head thrown back. Sculptured thrones with female caryatid figures are an effective expression of women upholding kingship—in this case literally. For important state occasions a leader would sit upon a living female royal, who served as a utilitarian support and also the actual and metaphorical seat of authority. Perhaps the female throne figure represents a founding ancestor or at least the woman who became the embodiment of a deceased king’s spirit after he died.

As the most important emblems of sacred kingship, thrones are rarely seen in public. Rather, they are kept away from the royal compound, wrapped in white cloth, and protected in secret locations. Like many maternities discussed in this article, a Luba throne’s real purpose is layered and complex, and it is not accurately understood in its apparent primary function as a “seat,” that is, a support for a body.<sup>29</sup> Its metaphoric dimensions are multiple: a locus of royal memory and authority, an embodiment of the king’s spirit, a tangible sign of spiritual ascendancy, and the site and instrument of the installation ritual, which is to say, an emblem of this critical process. The Luba word for “throne,” *kipona*, is a synonym for *kitenta*,



which is the summit of power and achievement. Thus a throne enshrines *kitenta*, the essence and spirit of ancestral kingship and dynastic succession.<sup>30</sup> When the Luba say, “The king is a woman,” they are encoding many of these references, suggesting, probably especially in maternity images, that a woman, as king, is the mother of the Luba people.

A second throne (fig. 19), again a kneeling mother, holds her actively positioned child with her left arm and hand while she supports the round seat resting on her head with her right. The composition is asymmetrical, as is often the case with maternities: a dynamic rendering that alludes to the vital, transformative role of motherhood. Such thrones were also allusions to the succession of leaders in dynastic history. Luba royal power was gendered as both male and female, a reciprocity that is often embodied elsewhere in two separate figures.

Luba bowls are commonly held by female figures but again are rare as maternities. These are spiritually charged containers for both chiefs and royal diviners who are spirit mediums (fig. 21). The women holding these bowls are

said to be the wives of the spirits who possess and empower the diviner, and the sculptures reinforce the idea of “woman as container.”<sup>31</sup> The suckling child stresses the centrality of royal women as mothers responsible for future generations. These bowls held chalk, sometimes beads, plus other magical medicines, *nkishi*, that contributed to the bowl figure’s curative and oracular powers. Of course, these contents and the practices of diviners, spirit mediums, and chiefs—as well as the figurative bowls and stools—point to and recall the ritual processes of healing and governance.

Elaborate keloidal scarification patterns are featured attributes of the Luba royal forms discussed above and are also seen on the few known Luba headrests that show mothers with children (fig. 21). As in the other images, the baby here suckles its mother’s breast enthusiastically. The Luba believe that breasts contain and protect royal secrets and spirits, so the suckling children on all the objects illustrated here might well recall the passing of such sacred ideas and powers from one generation to the next. Such a “pillow” was employed to protect a beautiful, sculptural, labor-intensive coiffure of the type worn by both Luba men and women in earlier times as emblems of prestige and status. The head is accentuated proportionately in all these carvings as the locus of power and wisdom, while a virtuoso hairstyle functions in life to enhance these same attributes.

Analogous and even more complicated ideas and ideograms are encoded in scarification designs and related patterns on other Luba royal forms—bow stands, staffs, spears, thrones, etc. These ideograms are found also in many beaded strands, such as those on the first mother-and-child throne discussed above, and on sacred “memory boards,” *lukasa*. A deceptively small artifact, a *lukasa* is in fact a microcosm of Luba history and thought. Its patterned beads and carved designs—only apparently abstract and thus without meaning to outsiders—are a kind of symbolic shorthand of history and belief for Luba adepts, and analogous designs appear in decorative scarification. Raised tactile patterns on living women while at the same time serving as inscriptions and encryptions of complex, often

FIG. 18 (far left):  
Royal stool.  
Luba, DR Congo.  
Wood, glass beads. H: 46 cm.  
Galerie Rattou, Paris.

FIG. 19 (left):  
Royal stool.  
Luba, DR Congo.  
Wood. H: 40.6 cm.  
New Orleans Museum of Art,  
bequest of Victor Kiam, inv. 77.140.

FIG. 20 (below):  
Maternity figure.  
Luba, DR Congo.  
Wood. H: 15 cm.  
Furman Collection.





esoteric and powerful historical ideas, narratives, energies, and places. This merger of aesthetics with spiritual and royal powers is the essence of Luba sculptural arts, as analyzed in Polly Roberts' extensive research and publications.

#### TO CONCLUDE: SEMANTIC AND METAPHORIC ELABORATIONS

In several African cultures (or segments thereof), the mother is the center point—a hearth or furnace<sup>32</sup> from which other beings, crucial substances such as iron, and activities emerge or radiate. The semantic, metaphoric, and philosophical elaborations seen in all the foregoing examples of mothers with children are common in areas where this icon is a major focus, sometimes *the* major focus, of belief and ritual process, whether spiritual, political, social, or all of these. Most of the sponsoring institutions also orchestrate aesthetic values, whether visual or, frequently, aural and kinetic forms and processes. As a dominant image and concept, maternity is a transformative, generative reality, a centripetal nexus that extends outward from its prototype in nature to embrace and amplify many other aspects of life.

The mother-child group thus simultaneously represents a complex of

values and ritual actions, even as these vary in different regions. As an artistic unit, the sculptured maternity might seem to be a fixed image, but it is not. It represents and evokes a temporal process akin to a mother's activity in raising her children, as demonstrated by the transient nature of Igbo Earth sculptures and the ritualized building of her *mbari* house, the symbolism of a Pende chief's house and its construction, or a Luba king's installation rites. In childbirth, a woman is refashioned into a mother while creating new life. Not static, as fire and motherhood are not, maternity images are dense, compressed symbols of human development and social change that depend on nurturing, teaching, and many other activities for success and prosperity. The rites central to these maternity images are also transformations of the institutions and places in which they take place. This archetype, then, goes far beyond a mother nursing her infant, to education and its conversion of children into responsible adults, and on to the succession of leaders and the regeneration of entire communities.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, mothers understand that motherhood for them ends in their death but is carried forth in their offspring.

The above essay is adapted from a portion of the preliminary text for the upcoming book

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#### NOTES

1. The male and female couple, the equestrian, the hero, and in many respects the stranger could all be described as archetypal. See Herbert Cole, 1989, *Icons: Ideals and Power in the Art of Africa* and Alisa LaGamma, 2011, *Heroic Africans: Legendary Leaders, Iconic Sculptures*. I am aware of the freighted controversy attending the word and concept "archetype," but I believe if there is any one universal theme that it applies to, it is our subject. See Erich Neumann, 1963 (English edition), *The Great Mother*. My thanks to Kate Ezra for reading and commenting on an early version of this essay.
2. Other female deities are shown in *mbari* houses in similar poses with children. Still, Earth is the preeminent local god over a large area.
3. Polytheistic, the Igbo believe in several tutelary gods, many associated with aspects of nature (rivers, forests, the sun, thunder and lightning) and with the four days

of the week and markets held on them, and with warfare in the old days. These deities are protective, healing, fostering agricultural and human productivity and general prosperity—or their lack if poorly treated. Earth is by far the most important god in the Owerri region of Imo state, among more than two million people. Most Igbo regions have mother-and-child woodcarvings representing deities, but only in Owerri is the Earth goddess so ascendant, or at least so visibly present. See Herbert Cole, 1982, *Mbari: Art and Life Among the Owerri Igbo*, p. 19.

4. Omenala is the Igbo word for tradition, custom, and culture. *Ome* = sprout, or bud of new growth; *na* = and; *ala* = earth. Elided with *na*, the word (apparently) is: "sprout and earth." See Michael J. C. Echeruo, 1998, *Igbo-English Dictionary: A Comprehensive Dictionary of the Igbo Language*, p. 127.
5. People from the sponsoring village are initiated as spirits after they enter the *mbari* enclosure, walking through its entrance backward, then symbolically killed as they are dedicated to the god for whom the *mbari* is being built.
6. Approximately half of the 125 *mbari* houses I surveyed in 1966–67 were dedicated to Ala. *Mbari* like those I'm describing here are no longer built, although a few cement and concrete block versions were built after the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War of 1967–1970; they were substantially secular structures, more as museums than as sacrifices.
7. More deeply than anyone, Sarah Brett-Smith has explored these ideas in her remarkable 1994 book, *The Making of Bamana Sculpture: Creativity and Gender*.
8. Brett-Smith, op. cit. 1994: 124ff. There are many analogies between Bamana and Igbo beliefs about termite mounds as spirit dwelling sites and symbols of fertility and abundance. As among the Igbo, termite mounds among the Bamana are points of contact between this world and that of spirits and are said to have mouths and doors (ibid: 126). And like Igbo *mbari* houses, Gwan and Jo societies and sculptures are not found in all Bamana regions. These two cultures are about a thousand miles apart and have almost surely never been in historical contact.
9. Charles S. Bird and Martha B. Kendall, 1980, "The Mande Hero: Text and Context," in Ivan Karp and Charles S. Bird (eds.), *Explorations of African Systems of Thought*, p. 15.
10. Kate Ezra, 1986, *A Human Ideal in African Art: Bamana Figurative Sculpture*, p. 37.
11. Ibid., p. 38.
12. Jean-Paul Colley, 2009, *Bamana: Visions of Africa*, p. 33; Kate Ezra, personal communication, 2014.
13. Salia Malé speaks of the Jo society that owns these images as "the thing not to say" ("The 'Jo' and the 'Gwan,'" 2001, in Jean-Paul Colley (ed.), *Bamana: The Art of Existence in Mali*, p. 143), perhaps also indicating that the names and nature of the figures also should not be spoken.
14. Brett-Smith, op. cit., 1994: 33.
15. For example, among the Chokwe, Shona, Hausa, and other peoples not related to one another. See Eugenia G. Herbert, 1993, *Iron, Gender, and Power: Rituals of Transformation in African Societies*, pp. 34ff, 56ff.
16. Most, but clearly not all, African people consider Earth to be female. The Beng and Wan of Cote d'Ivoire are exceptions. See Herbert, op. cit., 1993: 215.
17. Neither Bamana Gwan cults nor beliefs in Senufo Ancient Mother are found in all parts of these two cultures, just as *mbari* houses are also confined to one Igbo region. My Senufo data owe greatly to the work of Anita Glaze, 1981, *Art and Death in a Senufo Village*; Anita Glaze, 1993, various contributions in Jean Paul Barbier (ed.), *Art of Côte d'Ivoire: From the Collections of the Barbier-Mueller Museum*; Gilbert Bochet, 1981, in Susan M. Vogel, *For Spirits and Kings; African Art from the Tishman Collection*, 44, 45; Gilbert Bochet, 1993, "The Poro of the Senufo," in Jean Paul Barbier (ed.), *Art of Côte d'Ivoire: From the Collections of the Barbier-Mueller Museum*.
18. Bochet (op. cit. 1981: 47) and Glaze (op. cit. 1981: 103) say that Ancient Mother is head of Poro, while Till Förster disagrees, though he does see Katiolo as head of some related initiatory societies (personal communication, March 2014).
19. Bochet, op. cit., 1981: 45, 46; 1993: 78.
20. Bochet, op. cit., 1981: 45.
21. Bochet, op. cit., 1993: 78.
22. Zoë S. Strother, 1993, "Eastern Pende Constructions of Secrecy," in Mary H. Nooter (ed.), *Secrecy: African Art That Conceals and Reveals*, p. 175; 5.10, 5.11.
23. Constantine Petridis, however, indicates that some of these rooftop maternities were carved in the 1930s or perhaps earlier. See Petridis, 2002, "Mbala, Tsaam, or Kwilu Pende? A Mother-and-Child Figure from the Kwango-Kwilu Region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo," in *Cleveland Studies in the History of Art*, vol. 7, p. 134.
24. Ibid: 161.
25. Petridis, op. cit., 2002: 133; Strother, op. cit., 1993: 176.
26. Strother, op. cit., 1993: 176; Zoë S. Strother 2004, "Architecture Against the State: The virtues of Impermanence in the Kibulu of Eastern Pende Chiefs in Central Africa," in *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 63, 3 (September), 277.
27. Strother, op. cit., 1993, 291.
28. Mary Nooter Roberts, 2013, "The King Is a Woman: Shaping Power in Luba Royal Arts," in *African Arts*, 46: 3. Many thanks to Polly Roberts' many publications and to her careful reading and comments on an early draft of this essay.
29. Roberts, 2011, in William Falgout (ed.), *Ancestors of Congo Square*, p. 288.
30. Mary Nooter Roberts and Allen F. Roberts, 1996, *Memory: Luba Art and the Making of History*, p. 156.
31. Ibid: 196.
32. See Brett-Smith, op. cit., 1994: 139, 140, for parallels between Bamana iron smelting and childbirth, between the domestic cooking hearth and the blacksmith's forge, as well as between sexual intercourse and the working of iron as transformative processes. Blacksmiths as fertilizing agents, iron tools as life-giving instruments, analogies between carving a human figure and childbirth, and many other complex ideas germane to our topic are explored in the Brett-Smith text, but are too extensive to be recounted here. These ideas are also developed in Herbert (op. cit., 1993).
33. For the importance of process (in contrast to form), see Cole, op. cit., 1982: 72–100; Roberts in Evan Maurer and Allen F. Roberts, 1986, *Tabwa: The Rising of a New Moon. A Century of Tabwa Art*, p. 10; and Petridis 1987: 199, note 25.

FIG. 21 (below):  
Bowl figure.  
Luba, DR Congo.  
Wood, beads. H: 13.7 cm.  
Museu Carlos Machado, Pont  
Delgado, Azores, inv. 256.

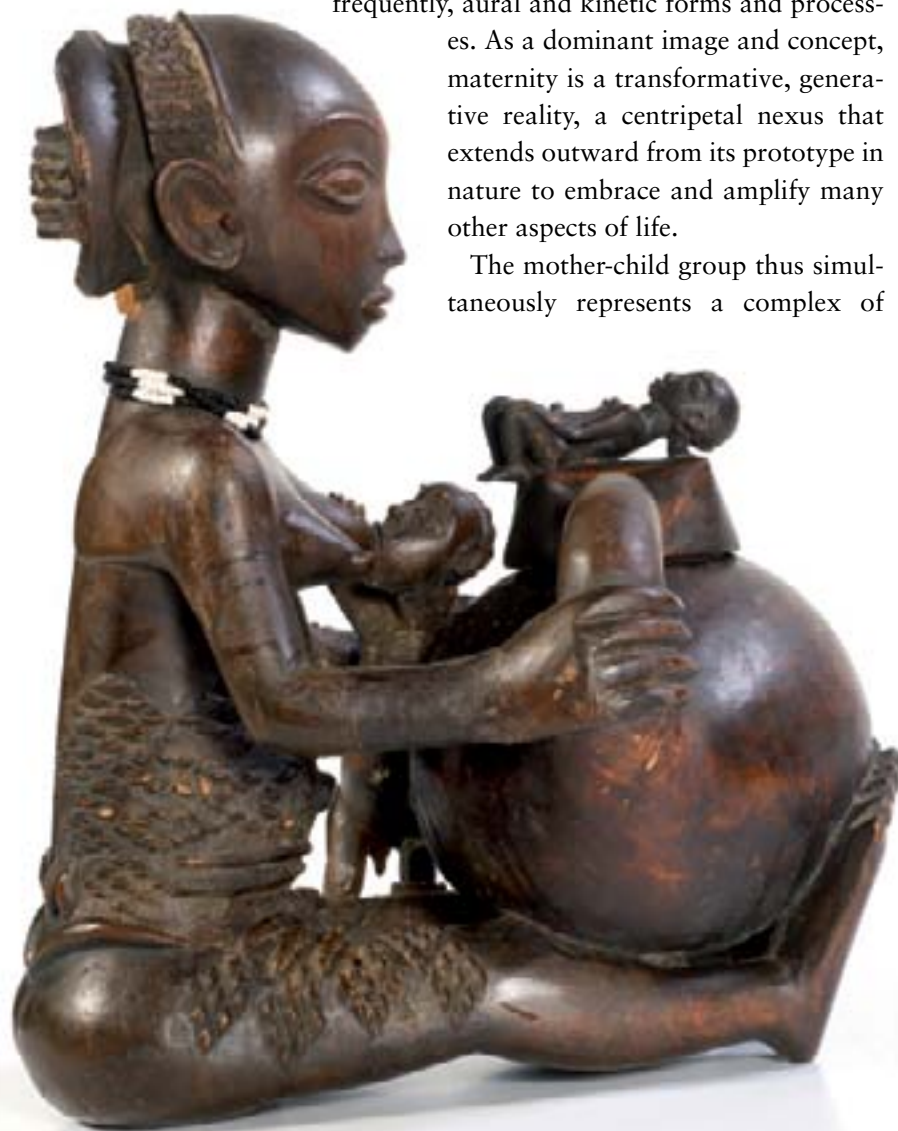


FIG. 21 (above):  
Neckrest.  
Luba, DR Congo.  
Wood. H: c. 12.5 cm.  
Collection of Marc Felix.

FIG. 22 (below):  
Cover of the upcoming  
book *Maternity: Mothers  
and Children in the Arts of  
Africa*.  
Courtesy of Mercatorfonds.

