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.

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 Owena Igbo and Pende, our subject is clearly ascendant, 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.
EARTH AMONG THE OWERRI IGBO

Earth, Ala, is the dominant all-purpose deity 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. 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 the world.

An mbari house was built infrequently to avert disaster brought on by human or natural causes. 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 energy, trees and mounds embody fertile spiritual power. Images grew out of termite mounds, and both termites and mounds embody fertile spiritual energy. 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 and most respected accomplishment….” 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.

Mbari images of Ala are modeled in sacred clay taken by initiates 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 energy, trees and mounds embody fertile spiritual power. Images grew out of termite mounds, and both termites and mounds embody fertile spiritual energy. 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 and most respected accomplishment….” 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.

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 figures 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. 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. 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.”

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, 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.

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. 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.

Notably, it is blacksmiths who create—give birth to—Gwan and other sculptures.

ANCIENT MOTHER AMONG THE SENUFU

Some Senufo groups in Côte d’Ivoire have a prominent deity, Ancient Mother, credited with founding much that is central to segments 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. 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
shapeless beings—male youths taken from their mothers—when they first enter her compound as novices. She redecorates them later as fully formed human beings, having nourished them “with the milk of knowledge” (fig. 1). The same author speaks of a conventionalized sculpture of this deity and its “thin, larva-like creature,” the uniformed novice, a shapeless being, who is sucking. A later ceremony symbolizes a “weaning” from the Mother. During the long initiation cycle, young men in training will say they are “at our mother’s work.”

EASTERN PENDÉ ROOF FINIALS

The commanding presence of a large mother-and-child carving, kibulu, atop the ritual houses, kishikishi, is that of the Democratic Republic of the Congo is the mid-twentieth-century phenomenon. A peoples of the Democratic Republic of the Congo chiefs” among the matrilineal Eastern Pende houses, atop the ritual kishikishi, The commanding presence of a large mother.

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 serves as the continuation of her matrilineal line and reminds the people of the death of a sister and thus the loss of a lineage.

The axe-wielding rooftop maternity is the public declaration of these ideas, visible and elevated. The commanding presence of a large mother-and-child carving, kibulu, atop the ritual houses, kishikishi, is that of the Democratic Republic of the Congo is the mid-twentieth-century phenomenon. A peoples of the Democratic Republic of the Congo chiefs” among the matrilineal Eastern Pende houses, atop the ritual kishikishi, The commanding presence of a large mother.

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 serves as the continuation of her matrilineal line and reminds the people of the death of a sister and thus the loss of a lineage.

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 serves as the continuation of her matrilineal line and reminds the people of the death of a sister and thus the loss of a lineage.

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 serves as the continuation of her matrilineal line and reminds the people of the death of a sister and thus the loss of a lineage.

The same author speaks of a conventionalized sculpture of this deity and its “thin, larva-like creature,” the uniformed novice, a shapeless being, who is sucking. A later ceremony symbolizes a “weaning” from the Mother. During the long initiation cycle, young men in training will say they are “at our mother’s work.”

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.
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 chiefs, as spirit mediums or diviners, and much more.18 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 intensely, 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 throne of ancestral kingship and dynastic succession.30 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 maternity images: 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.”31 The suckling child stresses the centrality of royal women as mothers responsible for future generations. These bowls held chalk, sometimes other magical medicines, nkubis, 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 focus 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 designs and related patterns on other Luba royal bowls—kukungas—are in fact microcosms 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 the skin are both beautiful and erotic on living women while at the same time serving as inscriptions and encryptions of complex, often
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 analysed 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 furnace32 from which other beings, crucial substances such as iron, and activities emerge or radiate. The semantic, metaphoric, and philological elaborations seen in all the foregoing instances such as iron, and activities emerge or radiating 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 temporospatial 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 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 archetypal 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.33 Indeed, mothers understand that in some cases 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

Maternity: Mothers and Children in the Arts of Africa By Herbert M. Cole

To be published in English by Mercatorfonds, autumn 2017. French edition to follow.

29.7 X 24.5 cm, 384 pages, 350 illustrations, most in color
ISBN: 978-90-300-2391-8
Hardcover, 90 dollars/79.95 euros

NOTES

1. The male and female couple, the equestrian, the hero, and in many respects the stranger could all be described as archetypes. See Herbert Cole, 1989, Visual Identities and Power in the Art of Africa and Alia LaGamma, 2011, Heroes, Horses, and the Strangers: I know I am aware of the fraughtly controversial attending the word and concept “archetypes,” but I believe if there is any archetypal theme that applies to it, it is our subject. See Erich Neumann, 1963 (English edition), The Great Mother. My thanks to Kate Ezra for reading and commenting on an earlier version of this essay.

2. Other female deities are shown in robai houses in similar poses to the mbari chief. Earth is the presentment local god over a large area.

3. Polytheistic, the Igbo believe in several tutelary gods, many associated with aspects of nature (trees, 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 Igbo 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 exalted, or at least so visibly present. See Herbert Cole, op. cit., 1981. See Susan M. Vogel, For Spirits and Kings: African Art from the Ian Tschmann Collection, 44–45; Gilbert Bochet, 1993, “The Poro of the Senouf,” in Jean Paul Barbier (ed.), Art of Côte d’Ivoire: From the Collections of the Barbier-Mueller Museum; Gilbert Bochet, 1991, in Susan M. Vogel, For Spirits and Kings: African Art from the Ian Tschmann Collection, 44–45; Gilbert Bochet, 1993, “The Poro of the Senouf,” in Jean Paul Barbier (ed.), Art of Côte d’Ivoire: From the Collections of the Barbier-Mueller Museum.

12. Other female deities are shown in robai houses in similar poses to the mbari chief. Earth is the presentment local god over a large area.

13. People from the sponsoring village are initiated as spirits to be female. The Beng and Wan of Cote d’Ivoire are other peoples not related to one another. See Eugenia Art of Existence in Mali, p. 143, perhaps also indicating that the names and nature of the figures also should not be spoken.

14. Other female deities are shown in robai houses in similar poses to the mbari chief. Earth is the presentment local god over a large area.

15. For example, among the Chokwe, Shona, Hausa, and other peoples not related to one another. See Eugenia Art of Existence in Mali, p. 143, perhaps also indicating that the names and nature of the figures also should not be spoken.

16. Other female deities are shown in robai houses in similar poses to the mbari chief. Earth is the presentment local god over a large area.

17. Neither Barman Gwana culls nor beliefs in Senouf Ancient Mother are found in all parts of Africa. For spirits and kings, see Eugenia Art of Existence in Mali, p. 143, perhaps also indicating that the names and nature of the figures also should not be spoken.

18. Bochet (op. cit. 1981: 47) and Gwana (op. cit. 1981: 109) say that Ancient Mother is head of Poro, while Till Förster disagrees, though he does see Kaliko as head of some related initiatory societies (personal communication, March 2014).


23. Constantine Petridis, however, indicates that some of these rooftop maternities were carved in the 1930s or perhaps earlier. See Petridis, 2002, “Mgbia, T’em, and Okwelu Poro: A Mother-Child Figure from the Kwango-Kikul Region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo,” in Crawford Studies in the History of Art, vol. 7, p. 134.

24. Ibid., 161.


30. Ibid.: 196.

31. Ibid.: 196.

32. See Herbert Cole, op. cit., 1981: 139, 142, for parallels between Barman iron smelting and childhood, 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 fertility agents, iron tools as life-giving instruments, analogies between caring 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).