

Sula Malina
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Exhibiting Africa
WALL TEXT

SIDE 1: Womanhood & Motherhood

The wakemia, or “spoon associated with feasts,” is a work of the Dan people, an ethnolinguistic group living in eastern Liberia and western Côte d’Ivoire. Bestowed upon a particular woman in the village, known as wa ke de, the wakemia is meant to acknowledge the recipient for her generosity, hospitality, caring nature, industriousness, culinary talent, and service to other people. Through the carefully carved features resembling elements of the female form, the artwork pays homage to the strength and beauty of Dan women. Within the Dan community, as in the rest of the world, food is symbolic of life; thus, the womb-like bowl of the spoon acknowledges the essential role of Dan women in life giving and sustenance, through both childbearing and nourishment. The holder of the wakemia is a woman of great power, both socially and spiritually, and acts in a maternal role within the community.[1]

The maternity figure is a work of the Egba people, a subgroup of the Yoruba people, who inhabit Abeokuta, a town in western Nigeria. Within Yorubaland, which spans across Benin, Nigeria, and Togo, the bond between mother and child is emphasized above all others. Mothers keep their children wrapped close to their bodies in their daily lives, offering nourishment and imparting values and wisdom. Yoruba women gain authority within the larger community after bearing the child, and hold significant economic and social status. They are also seen as spiritually powerful through the granting of life, and command deep respect. As such, motherhood is strived for among many Yoruba women, and some bring maternity figures as offerings to the deity òrìṣà to ensure fertility and healthy children.[2] Holding her breasts, the woman depicted in this maternity figure demonstrates immense, life-giving generosity, and kneels in offering.

Both the maternity figure and the wakemia symbolize the sanctity of the female role as mothers, caregivers, and social leaders in entirely distinct cultures. We bring these pieces together to celebrate the power and agency of Dan and Egba women, particularly given popular, sweeping, damage-based narratives that represent gender roles across African cultures as archaic and purely oppressive. Through ritual and offering, women are revered as mothers not only of their children, but of the larger communities they belong to.

[1] "Ceremonial Ladle (Wakemia or Wunkirmian)." The Met. Accessed December 1, 2016.

[2] McIntosh, Marjorie Keniston. Yoruba Women, Work, and Social Change. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009.

Side 2: Maternity Figure

Maternity Figure
Yorubaland
Abeokuta, Nigeria
The Ebga People

Late 19th century - Early 20th century

Gift of Mace Neufeld and Helen Katz Neufeld, Class of 1953

Bryn Mawr College
99.5.8

The Yoruba perceive the cosmos as consisting of two realms, *aye* (the visible world of the living) and *orun* (the invisible otherworld of the ancestors, spirits, and gods). There is a saying in Yoruba culture, "*aye l'oja, orun n'ole*," which translates to "the world is a marketplace [we visit], and the otherworld is home." For many peoples of Yorubaland, mothers are the bridges between these worlds, as their reproductive power allows mothers "to see and know more than is permitted to ordinary mortals."¹ The cycle of birth and life throughout the body and spirit of mothers symbolize home and *orun* for many Yoruba peoples and is highly celebrated.

Among the western Yoruba peoples, they participate in a masking tradition known as *Gelede*. This masking tradition originates in Ketu, one of the oldest kingdoms of Yorubaland. Scholars describe *Gelede* as "[a tradition that] pays homage to the spiritual powers of elderly women known affectionately as *awon iya wa*, 'our mothers.' The powers possessed by such women are comparable to those of the gods, spirits, or ancestors, [and] may be used for the benefit or the destruction of society."² These masks are typically worn during ceremonies and festivals, to celebrate every mother's ability to both create life and take it away.



Figure 1 An elderly priestess of the goddess Odua. Photographed by H. J. Drewal Ilaro, Nigeria 1975

Traveling further out from Ketu, one would continue to encounter the power and spirit of motherhood. The maternity figure displayed above is likely to belong to the Egbga people of Abeokuta, an urban center in western Yorubaland.

¹ William Buller. Fagg, John Pemberton, and Bryce Holcombe, *Yoruba, Sculpture of West Africa* (New York: Knopf, 1982), 124.

² Henry John. Drewal et al., *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought* (New York: Center for African Art in Association with H.N. Abrams, 1989), 219.

Abeokuta was established in 1830. Literally meaning under the rock, the Egba of Abeokuta migrated there and made their mark in wood carving, pottery, and more.

From the direct gaze and softness of the mother's face to construction of her wide-almond shaped eyes and linear and geometric fashion of her hair, it is clear that the Egba have continued this appreciation of mothers throughout artistic expression. Also, her kneeling position and erect posture with hands on her breast and child on her back, contribute to this maternity figure symbolizing the power of worship to orun, the reproduction of life in aye, and fertility. Furthermore, the vertical lines on her face are a symbol of the Egba. These marks symbolize beauty, identity, and protection and were commonly made on the faces of both women and men of the Egba peoples, as well as other peoples of Yorubaland.

SIDE 3: Wakemia

Ritual Spoon
Africa, Côte d'Ivoire

Early 20th century
Carved wood

Bequest of Margaret Feurer Plass, Class of 1917

Bryn Mawr College
99.6.7

The dark, hardwood *wakemia*, or ritual spoon, is carved in an anthropomorphic form, as an abstraction of the female body. It has a deep, wide bowl, for holding rice or small coins during ceremonies. Its handle is carved in the shape of an abdomen and two legs, with intricate carvings around its handle that mimic the effect of scarification on human skin. The dark patina of the wood contrasts with the lighter wood exposed by etchings on the surface, highlighting the intricacy of the carving. The human form is reproduced in the fine craftsmanship of this spoon, animating it with human sensuousness and the suggestion of life.

However, the form of the *wakemia* must be appreciated beyond its functional and aesthetic value.

The Dan believe in a ubiquitous force called *dü* that permeates the universe. This force takes shape through spirits that can appear in corporeal form, materializing itself in people or animals. Sometimes, these spirits inhabit handmade objects that were crafted to channel the spirit's power, such as this *wakemia*, which was created to harbor a spoon-spirit.

Multiple stories that explain the origin of the spoon-spirits exist. Here is one:

“One night a spoon-spirit appeared in a dream to the first wife of a farmstead, asking her to use and care for him. ‘Willingly, she said, ‘but you are nowhere to be seen.’ The spirit replied: ‘I only hid myself so that you would not sell me to the white men. Early tomorrow morning go and look in the thatch above the entrance to your house, and you will find me.’ The next day the woman assembled a group of witnesses, and plunged her hand into the thatch, and—sure enough—withdrew the spoon.”³[3]

Thus, these *wakemia* are essential conduits for contact between spirit and human realms. It is a Dan woman's means of accessing the power of the *dü*.

³ Eberhard Fischer and Hans Himmelheber, *The Arts of the Dan in West Africa* (Museum Rietberg Zürich, 1984)

This wakemia is owned by the most hospitable woman in the village. She is valued for her industriousness, efficiency, generosity, and her ability to provide for those living in and passing through her village. She is called wa ke de, which means “at feasts acting woman.” The spoon is bestowed upon her so that it might assist her in performing her womanly duties as wa ke de, which extend beyond what is normally expected of women in Dan society. She hosts village feasts, leads masquerades, and presides over festivals and ceremonies. She is responsible for taking care of guests and her extended family. The spoon is the vehicle by which the spirit acts, and it is given to the wa ke de as recognition of her exceptional community-building skills and to enhance her capacity to serve the village. Dan spoons dignify the role women play in making society. The wakemia is also a symbol of power and honor, and it is believed to bring fortune and prestige to the woman who possesses it. The wa ke de eventually selects a successor to pass the wakemia down to. The transferral of power is then confirmed by the spirit, who visits the new wa ke de in a dream.

Notably, when objects that house dü-spirits are destroyed or when the spirit decides to vacate the object, the object loses its value. We have no way of knowing if the spoon-spirit that inhabited this wakemia is still intact after its removal from its original context.



Fig. 2. Photographer unknown. From: Eberhard Fischer and Hans Himmelheber. *The Arts of the Dan in West Africa*. Museum Reitberg Zürich, 1984.

SIDE 4: Representations

Western museum curators have a history of doing violence to African art and artifacts through a process of **conflation**. Just as the many distinct African cultures and countries are conflated by making reference to “Africa” or “Africans,” museum curators often place artworks from different regions and peoples beside one another with little or no contextual information. This act of curatorial erasure through unfounded proximity allows Western viewers to **look** without **seeing**, rendering the pieces on display both **invisible** and **hyper-visible**.

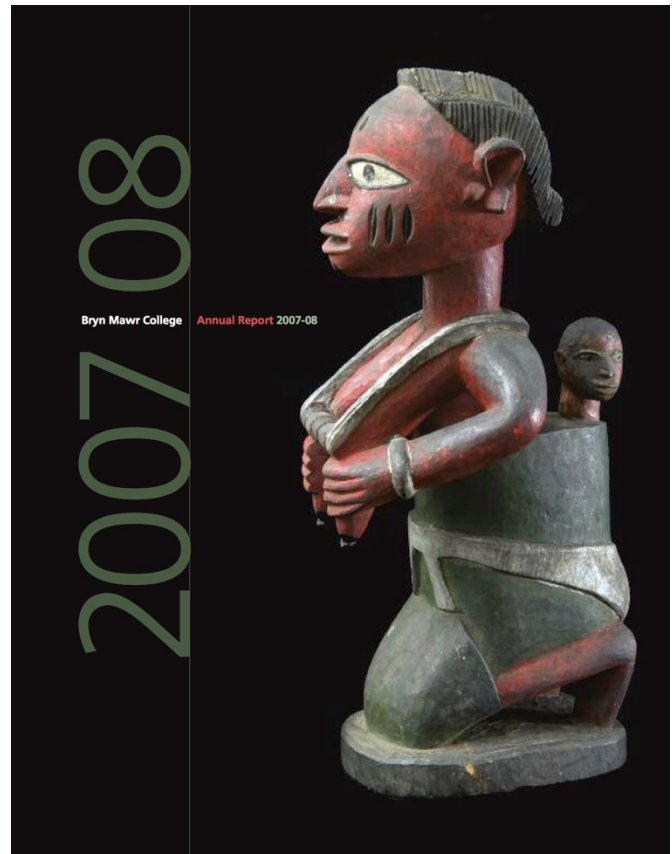
The **ritual spoon** and the **maternity figure** draw their origins from separate regions and hold distinct cultural meanings. However, these living objects have a history of this conflation within Bryn Mawr’s Special Collections. In 2008, the Bryn Mawr College Communications Office published an annual report, documenting notable donations from alumnae. A number of pieces from the college’s African collection were included. The art included in the document was from a number of different countries and cultures, but all pieces were compiled into a single document, without extensive background information to offer cultural context.

*How does **context** impact representation? How does it make a statement about the **value** of the object being represented?*

*When does proximity **conflate**? When can it draw powerful connections? What does the **medium** of representation say about the art it is representing?*

*In what ways is an **exhibition** a representation? How does the **positioning** of objects impact this representation?*

We aim to make visible this history and disrupt it, curating the pieces together to put them in conversation with each other. We aim to call attention to **thematic commonalities** while attending to **contextual differences**, in order to precipitate thinking about the artworks’ shared evocations of womanhood and motherhood in distinct societies.



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