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Exhibiting Africa: Art, Artifact, and New Articulations

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Midterm: Collections Research

Maternity Figure – Yoruba (yur-rue-bah)

Late 19th Century – Early 20th Century

Wood with pigment

Location: Nigeria, Africa

Classification: Ceremonial and Performance Artifacts

**Physical Description:**

The figure is a wooden sculpture of a woman with her child on her back. She is on her knees and holding her breasts. Her child is resting in a cloth that is attached to her body. Her body is red and black, the cloth holding her child is green, and her child is mainly brown and black. The child is greatly smaller than the woman, and viewers are only able to see the child’s head rotated to the side. The woman is carved in a very particular way. He has three lines on her face and has an expression that looks straight ahead. Her hair has many lines and appears to be carved in a linear and geometric fashion. The placement of the breasts is symmetrical, as they are pointing downward. Her hands are placed on her firmly on her breast (somewhat resembling the motion of “milking”). She has several embellishments, including a necklace and bracelet.

**Interpretation:**

The description on TriArte gives a short but rich explanation of the piece. It’s deep in the language of the piece “*may* represent”. However, viewers are able to see the theme of mother and child. The description explains how the kneeling is perceived to be showing an act of worship and symbol of devotion to god. The red coloring in the woman’s skin signifies life force and the green in the structure holding the child signifies serenity. Also, the grasping of the breast is to show fertility and protection.

**Research:**

For my research I wanted to find the unique quality and distinction of this particular figure. Clearly, there is a minimal and incomplete set of information about the piece. However, TriArte did identify that it was connected to the Yoruba. The Yoruba is a group of people mainly located in Southwestern and North Central Nigeria, as well as, Southern and North Central Benin. They have formed the Yoruba People through a bondage by a common language, history, religion, and overall culture. To affirm the interpretation of the figure given by TriArte and also distinguish this figure as just another maternity figure, I researched other maternity figures from the Yoruba to find many of the same trends. Similarities included the position of the woman on her knees, the child being significantly smaller than, lines on the face, lines structuring the hair, and also the breast being shown.

I feel as though I do have a better understanding and can locate this figure. However, I still see a huge gap. The research done is pure speculation. It does not seem to be concrete and that speaks to the history of its acquisition. I would like to know how made this piece and his/her inspiration behind it, however, the power and agency in that was ripped away in the name of colonialism, art collections, and discovery.

**http://triarte.brynmawr.edu/Obj145849?sid=1956&x=40331**