

PHEMBA,
THE NURTURING MOTHER IN YOMBE
SOCIETY

A JOURNEY THROUGH
FEMININE SYMBOLISM



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Depictions of 'mother and child' are commonly found in numerous cultures, reimagined multiple times over the course of history. As well as recalling this universal image, each civilization uses the 'mother and child' to emphasise the specificities of its own history, making a direct connection with the moment of origin as told in its creation myth.

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INTRODUCTION

A universal theme, the 'mother and child' is a subject that is found as commonly in African cultures as in others (Western, etc.). It can be expressed in different kinds of art (for example, sculpture and painting) and evokes a fundamental feature of humanity.

Here, we will tackle this theme using the framework of a journey in time and space. Starting with a general approach to the theme, the main objective is to highlight the various cultural codes and symbolic foundations that underlie these images and depictions.

The 'mother and child' theme suggests a biological connection, or perhaps a relationship based on protection, nourishment and the transmission of values.

As well as these maternal concepts, it also evokes more abstract notions, which go back, on the one hand, to the place of the mother and wife in society and her role in bringing up children, and, on the other hand, to the original nurturing mother, the founder of the civilization.

Starting, therefore, with a concept that has spread to numerous cultures, it is easy to explore this notion using various interpretative frameworks (biological, social and spiritual), and so to highlight the cultural specificities of the civilizations that have used this female image. To do so, we shall approach this theme using various works of art, created in different places and eras.

THE 'MOTHER AND CHILD' THEME. MOTHER GODDESS OR VIRGIN ICON?

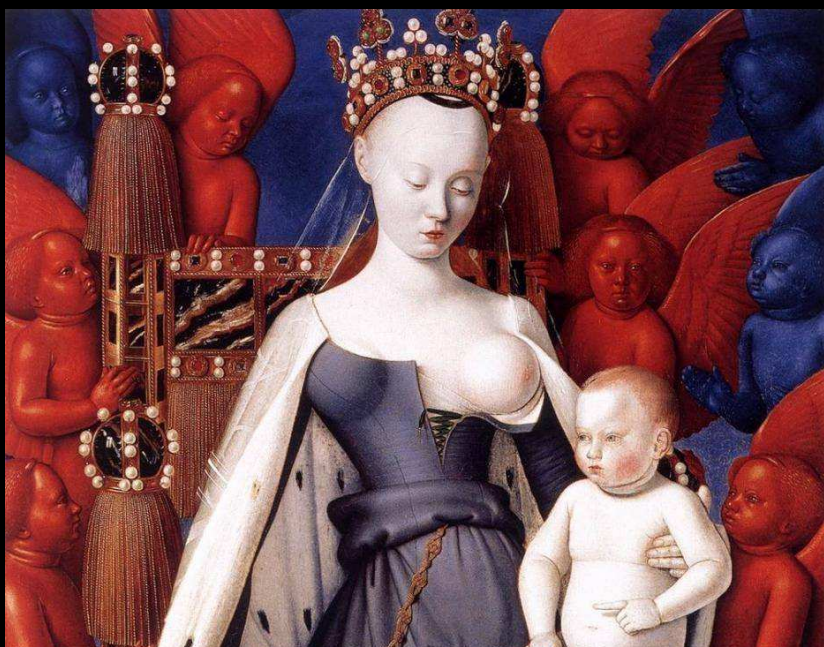
Fig 1:

Statuette of Queen Ankhnes-meryre II and her Son, Pepy II, ca. 2288-2224 or 2194 B.C.
E. Egyptian alabaster, 15 7/16 x 9 13/16 in. (39.2 x 24.9 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Charles
Edwin Wilbour Fund

Fig 2:

Jean Fouquet (1415/20-1478/81).- Diptyque de Melun, Vierge à l'Enfant entourée d'
Ange, c. 1452-1458 (Huile sur bois, 91,8 x 83,3 cm), Musées des Beaux-Arts d'Anvers,
n° inv. 132

THE 'MOTHER & CHILD' THEME. MOTHER GODDESS OR VIRGIN ICON?



ANCIENT EGYPT. ISIS, THE WOMAN WHO COMMUNICATES WITH THE DIVINE

In ancient Egypt, depictions of the 'mother and child' can be found dating from the 3rd century BC. Evoking the myth of Isis and Osiris and the birth of Horus, these sculptures present a seated woman with a miniature adult on her knees.

Without going into the details of the story, we shall recall the basic facts of this myth, which was prevalent from the Old Kingdom until the period of Greek rule. The legend goes back to ancient times, before the first pharaohs. Osiris was the king at the time, reigning over both kingdoms, Upper and Lower Egypt. Loved by his people for his attention to peace and generosity, he was supported by his sister and wife, Isis. However, his brother Seth, who was his enemy, eventually used trickery to kill him. After this murder, Seth threw Osiris' body into the sea. Following this, Isis began to search for her husband: she eventually found his corpse, but Seth had already managed to butcher it. However, with help from the gods, including Thoth and Anubis, Osiris was resurrected, and Isis gave birth to his son. This child, Horus, was brought up secretly by Isis in the marshes of Khemnis, while Osiris took refuge in the underworld. When Horus reached adulthood, he went to meet Seth and challenged him to a duel, intending to avenge his father. Seth was defeated and Horus became a beloved king of Egypt.

Depictions of the goddess Isis are often characterised by the presence of a throne above her head, consisting of a backrest and a pedestal. She holds one breast in her hand, a sign that she is lactating, and with the other hand holds Horus on her knees. [2]

This image represents the pharaoh. This alabaster statue from Brooklyn Museum is an example dating from c. 2269–2181 BC, depicting Queen Ankhnesmeryre and King Pepy II.

Notice the way the queen interacts with the king, putting her right hand on her son's legs and her left hand on his back. This hand position suggests that the mother is framing and protecting her child. During the Ptolemaic period, depictions of the goddess Isis breastfeeding her son Horus were frequent and powerful examples of funerary symbolism.

[1] Isis' Egyptian name is Iset, which translates to 'the throne' (Rachet 1992, 133).

[2] These figures were very common during the Late Period.

THE 'MOTHER & CHILD' THEME.MOTHER GODDESS OR VIRGIN ICON?



Fig 3

According to the myth that these depictions recall, it evokes rebirth: a fundamental part of ancient Egyptian beliefs, especially in the worship of Isis. Thus, Isis' role in funerary rituals is to protect the dead and to allow them to be resurrected.

"I am the mother and I am nature, mistress of all the elements, the origin and chief of the centuries" [5]

This myth of Isis and Osiris was later incorporated into Roman beliefs by Plutarch (45–120): this indicates the importance of this story, which continues to be found not only in Greek- and Roman-ruled Egypt, but also elsewhere in the Middle East.



Fig 4

[3] The Ptolemaic dynasty arose after the death of Alexander the Great, a Greek emperor who extended his empire to Egypt and was fascinated by this ancient culture which had been renowned in Greece for a long time. Ptolemy was a faithful companion of Alexander. This dynasty ruled Egypt for three centuries (305–30 BC).

[4] Protection under her wings: she is depicted elsewhere with long wings that extend outwards. This refers to the Pyramid Texts, where Isis is also depicted in the form of a vulture.

[5] Serge Sauneron, cited in Posener 1959, 140.

[6] In Moralia, vol. IV. Isis and Osiris.

Fig 3:
Statuette of Queen Ankhnes-meryre II and her Son, Pepy II, ca. 2288-2224 or 2194 B.C.E. Egyptian alabaster, 15 7/16 x 9 13/16 in. (39.2 x 24.9 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund

Fig 4:
Statuette of Isis and Statuette of Isis and Horus (faience) Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

CHRISTIAN CULTURE. MARY, THE ICON OF COMPASSION

Fig 5:
Hans Memling (circa 1433–1494), The Virgin Mary nursing the Christ Child, between
1487 and 1490, Medium oil and gold on oak panel, Diameter: 17.4 cm (6.9 in).
Private Collection





Depictions of mother and child recall the birth of Jesus.

Since the beginning of Christianity, European art has given rise to numerous depictions of the Virgin as she is portrayed in the Adoration of the Magi. In the painting and sculpture of the Roman church, the most common depictions of the Virgin from the 11th to 13th centuries showed her with the holy child, seated on a throne.[7]

Depictions of the adult Jesus on the knees of Mary are referred to as the pietà. Here, Mary is in tears and powerless, lamenting the death of her son, the crucified Jesus. Unlike in his form as a child, Jesus now represents death, and Mary is shown lamenting, crying over the body of Christ. The pietà is a painted or sculpted portrayal of the grief-stricken Virgin, either alone or accompanied by others, and bearing the dead Christ on her knees.

[7] Additionally, sculptures of the Black Virgin, unique to medieval Europe, include the Christ child seated on his mother's knees. This appears to be a reference to fertility.

Fig 6: Pietà (pierre, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)



The only resemblance we can draw between the Yombe phemba and the pietà rather than the Virgin and child is in the way that the bodies are arranged in the composition: Christ, the dead adult Jesus, is on the knees of the Virgin, whose hands support and protect him. However, with the Virgin and child, the evocation of family and protection is more obvious. In the pietà, we are faced with a more dramatic element, which encourages emotion and sadness, and thereby makes reference to the desire of the Catholic church[8] to provoke an emotional reaction to Jesus' death in the believer, interpreting it in this religious context as an act undertaken to save mankind from original sin. Mary is in a position of powerless, as all she can do is witness this fatality. However, she is the one who gives birth to Jesus and protects him from death during the murderous quest of King Herod. Nonetheless, she cannot prevent the crucifixion. Mary, from the Annunciation onwards, is in some respects established as an intermediary between humans and the divine.

[8] Particularly during the Baroque period.

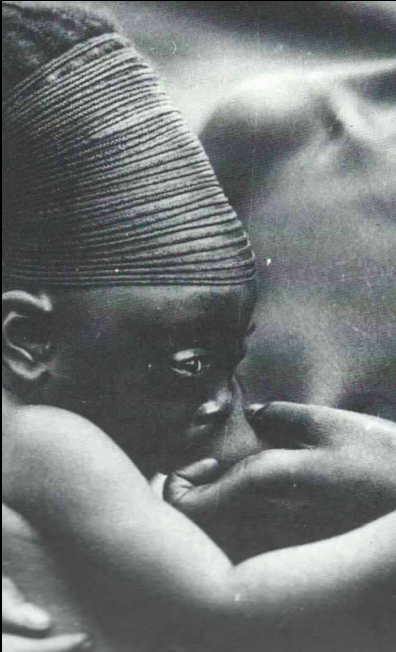
Fig 7: Michelangelo (1498–1499), Pietà, Marble, 174 cm × 195 cm (68.5 in × 76.8 in), St. Peter's Basilica, Vatican City

AFRICAN CULTURES. WOMEN, THE GUARDIANS OF TRADITION

Right Page

Fig 8: Mère Mangbetu et son enfant (Photographie R.F. Franque, Musée Royal de l'Afrique centrale, Cornet 1989, 157)

Fig 9: Tyekpa Maternity Figure, 19th–20th century, Côte d'Ivoire, northern Côte d'Ivoire, Senufo peoples, Wood, oil patina, H. 21 1/4 x W. 7in. (54 x 17.8cm)
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



AMONG THE LUBA



Fig 10

The role of woman within African society—both matrilineal and patrilineal societies—is fundamental, as it is the woman who is responsible for the transmission of family or clan customs. As well as artefacts and rituals that evoke fertility or the journey from childhood to adulthood, other types of artifacts and depictions of women are often found in African cultures, often portraying them as cupbearers or caryatids for royal seats. As the fundamental figure within society, the woman gives life, feeds, and passes on cultural values. But she is also a link with the world of the spirits, and so it is she who is often depicted on religious objects.

Among the Luba, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, depictions of cupbearers, also called *mboko*, are used in a royal or religious context. Kneeling or seated, the woman holds the cup, which is usually used to hold kaolin.[9] Beautified using several different means, such as scarification, jewellery and elaborate hairstyles, she is an idealistic representation of femininity as perceived within the cultural context to which she belongs.



Fig 11

It can be noted that numerous royal and religious objects exist that depict or are decorated with women, not only in reference to fertility, but also often to signify that royalty is a female attribute in Luba culture. Thus, women play an undeniable role in making decisions and alliances, as well as in rituals of investiture. The special status of royals continues beyond death through the intermediary of the *Mwadi*, a woman who takes on the role of 'representative of the dead king' and performs the role of a medium.

[8] Particularly during the Baroque period.

[9] White clay, a symbol of the world of the spirits or the dead.

AMONG THE YORUBA



Fig 12
Female bowl bearer Olowe
d'Ise, Yoruba (Smithsonian
Museum of Art,
Washington n° inv. 2005-6-
34)

Left Page:
Fig 10
The Buli Master , Hemba,
Democratic Republic of the
Congo, 19th century, Wood,
metal studs, H. 24 in. (61
cm), Accession Number:
1979.290. Metropolitan
Museum of Art, New York

Fig 11
Luba female bowl bearer,
Dem. Rep. Congo,
University of Pennsylvania
Museum.

importance of the female image can also be seen in various artifacts and architectural structures. Yoruba artists whose names have been identified [10] created numerous objects for royal use, such as cups, statues and the columns of palaces. This prestigious cup, belonging to a royal, originally contained cola nuts, a symbol of hospitality towards guests. kneeling female figures wearing typical Yoruba costumes and crowned with a bird; second, under the bowl, a moving male head enclosed within four kneeling female figures. The caryatids[11] indicate the importance of the woman in Yoruba society.

The Yoruba people, a tribe from south-west Nigeria, occupied a large part of the country and were also found in Benin, the neighbouring country. They developed a family-based system of organisation that resulted in a strong political system, establishing themselves as an important urban tribe very early on. Families (ebi) were organised according to patrilineal principles, called agbole. The Yoruba people were essentially farmers, and each male line was in charge of cultivating its land. Of course, other economic practices were developed, such as trade and crafts (blacksmiths, potters, weavers, etc.).

In Yoruba society, the woman plays multiple roles. Depending on her age, she is involved with certain important rituals. She is also the guardian of royal powers. The woman therefore takes the role of intermediary between the living and the world of spirits and the dead.

[10] Such as that of Olowe of Ise (c. 1875–1938), an artist well known in Yorubaland. Since the Second World War his name has been as well known in Africa (Nigeria) as in the West (particularly in the UK). William Fagg noted this name through the intermediary of Philip A. Allison, a British colonial administrator in Nigeria.

[11] A load-bearing element, the caryatid symbolises a person who sustains, seen here in a social context. Occasionally, depictions of males carry an infant

AMONG THE K(E)AKA



Fig 13
K(e)aka paternity
(Collection of Alain Naoum)

Occasionally, depictions of males carry an infant on their backs.[12]

These ‘paternities’ express more of an idea of transmission of cultural values than of biological links. However, Viviane Baeke proposes the hypothesis that these sculptures may belong to the so ritual. Laburthe-Tolra adds to this, proposing that men initiated into the cult of so are, like women, able to give birth. This image is illustrated by the child’s being placed on the back of the standing man.

The Kaka people live near the Donga river, in Cameroon and Nigeria.

The Keaka, a subgroup of the Ejagham also known as the Eastern Ejagham, live near the Cross River in Cameroon, close to the Nigerian border. We know little about their traditions. The Keaka live to the west of the Bangwa, and are also neighboured by the Banyang.

Keaka statues are rare and poorly documented. However, similarities have been found with those of their neighbours, the Chamba and Mumuye, as well as the Ejagham.

Nigerian artefacts have been arriving in Europe and the United States since the 1960s and the Biafra civil war (1967–1970). Little known before that time, Nigerian art, especially that from the Cross River area (Igbo and Mumuye), has since entered French collections, and is now exhibited in museums and galleries.

Fig 14
Right Illustration:

Rare K(e)aka Figure
Paternity, Nigeria
(Collection of Alain Naoum)

H. 31, 69 inches
(80,5 cm)
Provenance : Galerie
Robert Duperrier, Paris

[12] Various cases of this have been found in exhibitions or at sales since the second quarter of the 20th century (Bastin 1984, 228; Lebas 2012, 254; Claes 2015, 44).



THE K(E)AKA

Here is another example
of a K(e)aka paternity

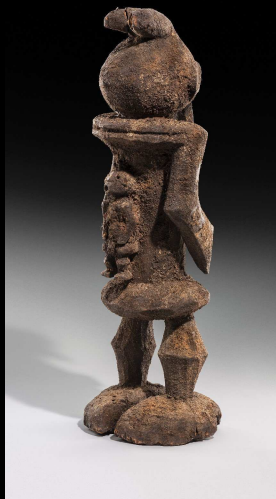


Fig 14

its expressiveness and balanced sense of form making it particularly fine. The sculpture has a strong presence due to its posture, its large, geometric limbs, and its head, turned towards the sky in a silent cry. The lacquer that covers its surface gives the face a sfumato effect, giving the impression that its fixed expression is emerging from an earthy sort of fog. The head is crowned by horns in the form of a V, suggesting rearward movement, while the rectangular, elongated shape of the beard emphasises the sense that the sculpture is anchored to the ground, beginning at its two square shoulders, continuing into the arms and hands, and finishing in the wide, long feet.



On the back of the sculpture, the shoulder blades are indicated and accentuated by a round protuberance and an incision that travels down the length of the figure's back. Below this, there is a depiction of a small person, shown by its posture and facial expression to be being carried on the male figure's back. The large mouth, own wide as if in a deep cry, gives gravity to the whole ensemble, as the only sound it emits is silence. This is not only the silence of the inanimate object, but also that of the lack of information about how this male figure was interpreted within its culture of origin.

Fig 14,15,16 right page:
K(e)aka Ptarenity (Alain Naoum Gallery)
Provenance: Jo & Sol Levitt, New York



THE K(E)AKA

While the previous K(e)aka sculpture shares many features with this paternity, the facial expression is different. In this paternity, the mouth is fixed in a silent cry, while in the other sculpture the mouth is closed and the face scarcely perceptible. The sfumato style of K(e)aka art, as practised by Symbolist painters such as Fernand Khnopff (1858–1921), gives rise to a certain ambience, a strange atmosphere that seems to grant a presence to the invisible. This vaporous veil, in this case made of earth and other elements of nature, creates a fearsome effect to which the viewer cannot feel indifferent, in the case of both this sculpture and the other male figure presented here.

We can conclude the analysis of these artefacts by putting African paternity and maternity figures into perspective. The former seem more to recall death, real or symbolic, creating from this point a male character who is reborn as a member of K(e)aka society, recognised as such by his peers. The child is not carried in front, as it tends to be in the case of female figures, but on the back. Might this refer to a process of inheritance that is more spiritual than biological, such as in the context of an initiation ritual?

Maternity figures, on the other hand, recall in a broader sense the values of life, and worldly and cultural nourishment, the woman being in charge of passing on these qualities. The physical traits of the female are a clear expression of beauty and kindness, indicated in the way the mother's hands cradle the child.

Fig 16, right Page
K(e)aka Ptarenity (Alain Naoum Gallery)
Provenance: Jo & Sol Levitt, New York



PHEMBA,
THE NURTURING
MOTHER



Fig 15
Yombe Phemba,
Democratic Republic of
Congo (Collection of
Alain Naoum)

THE YOMBE PEOPLE, HEIRS TO AN ANCIENT KINGDOM

The Portuguese discovered the Atlantic coast of central Africa in the 15th century, with Diego Cão (1450–1486) in charge of their expeditions. At this time, they reached the mouth of the river Congo and encountered one of the then most important kingdoms of the African continent, the kingdom of Kongo. According to Lehuard, the origin of this kingdom must have been ancient given the advanced state of their legal system and mechanisms of hierarchy and parental structure by the time the Portuguese arrived in their territory.

The Yombe subgroup is located on the left bank of the Kwilu, covering an area that neighbours Boma. They thus occupy one of the oldest provinces of the kingdom of Kongo.



Fig 17 - 17th-century map showing the kingdom of Kongo in *Congi regni in Africa Christiani nova descriptio* (Northwestern University Library)



Fig 18

THE YOMBE FEMALE FIGURE

Commanding female figures of imposing stature were a frequent subject of Kongo sculptors during the 19th century. A highlight among these artistic depictions of powerful women is a corpus of what at first glance appear to be ‘mother and child’ figures.

Given the paucity of information concerning the original patronage and use of these works, our understanding of their significance is highly limited.

These female figures evoke the image of the woman as nurturing mother, but also as a clan ancestor or an image of power.

The infant in the mother’s arms can stretched out or seated, living or dead, according to Lehuard. Even if the distance between the mother and her child often seems large, this does not prevent emphasis on the familial connection as the essential aspect of this sculpture. This is highlighted by the matriarchal social system of the Yombe



Fig 19

Fig 18

Kongo-Yombe Maternity Figure by the Master of Kasadi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Height: 27.5 cm/ 10 3/4 in (27.5 cm). (Sotheby's , Malcolm Volume One: New York, May 2016 , Lot 5)

Fig 19

Kongo-Yombe Maternity (H. 11 inches/27,9 cm), from the William Rubin Collection (Sotheby's 2014, lot 95)

THE YOMBE FEMALE FIGURE

“A Yombe wooden mother-and-child figure in the Musée Royal de l’Afrique Central in Tervuren is reported by its collector, Léo Bittremieux, to have been owned by a powerful male diviner for whom it represented the source of his own divinatory and generative powers. It was called *phemba*, a word that Bittremieux thought to be derived from *kivemba*, meaning to broadcast or eject, as in the seeds of potential children which accumulate in either a man or a woman. Thus, rather than representing a particular woman and child, or even a concept as specific as motherhood, the Yombe image of a nurturing woman may express the more general idea of fertility and creativity as it applies to all people, male as well as female” (Maesen 1960, pl. 1; van Geluw 1978, 147–50).

From a sociological perspective, this female figure depicts woman as an important social member of this matriarchal society, who allows the clan to continue existing. She is the foundation of the family, assuring its stability in the education of children. None of these important aspects can be forgotten: they are all taken into consideration during marriage. Marriages are carried out within a strict and codified frame, subject to precise cults and rituals.



Fig 20

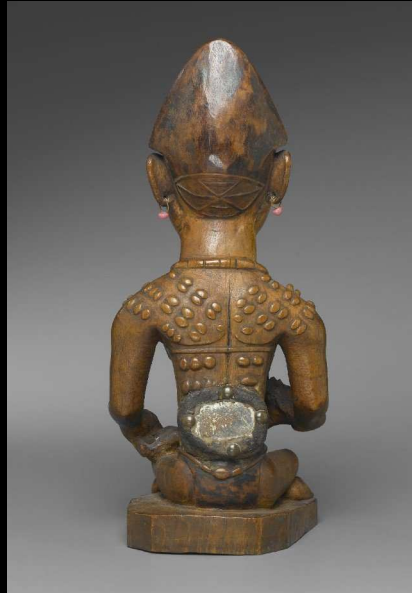


Fig 21



Fig 22
Mbala Maternity(H. 30 cm,
, collection Arman (1996,
137)
Left Page
Figure 13:
Konge-Yombe with
scarifications on her back
(Lehuard 1989)

Left Page
Fig 20:
Yombe woman with
scarification, De Cleene - De
Jonghe Collection (KFZ
8/4), Documentation and
Research Center for
Religion, Culture and
Society (KADOC),
Katholieke Universiteit
Leuven

Fig 21
Kongo (Yombe subgroup).
Figure of Mother and Child
(Phemba), 19th century.
Wood, beads, glass mirror,
metal, resin, 11 x 5 x 4 1/2
in. (27.9 x 12.7 x 11.4 cm).
Brooklyn Museum,
Museum Expedition 1922,
Robert B. Woodward
Memorial Fund, 22.1138.
Creative Commons-BY
(Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

Thus, Lemba society, present in Kongo cultures, governs men's and women's behaviour in the context of marriage and the family. The members of this culture were required to meet certain conditions: have a stable marriage, and possess sufficient wealth. For rituals associated with this culture, various objects were used: tambourines, phemba statues, and also jewellery worn by members, such as bracelets and necklaces. To return to the female phemba figures, they are embellished with bracelets called (*n*)lunga, as well as round hats, often decorated with typical Kongo motifs,[13] the *mpu*.

As well as the social aspect, this fundamental role of women in Yombe society can be linked to the power of the chief, the *mfumu mpu*. As a result of this, Alisa LaGamma claims that these statues belong to the category of "Kongo power figure" (2015, 161).

Thus, girls were prepared for their life as future wives and mothers in the tshikumbi initiation. At puberty, girls underwent this rite of passage, being led out of the village to live as recluses and to be initiated and instructed by an older woman, particularly on the subject of taboos on eating.

We have also seen that the female race also marked its body with decorations and ornaments. These decorations, or 'scarifications', underline aesthetic concerns on the one hand, but also carry specific cultural messages which were at the heart of Yombe society. Sometimes, teeth were also removed for reasons of beauty, as can also be seen on the female phemba figures, whose open mouths contain a few teeth sculpted into points.

[13] Hence the marks of scarification on the bodies of women and on female phemba figures.

OUR FEMALE PHEMBA FIGURE

Yombe Phemba, Democratic Republic of Congo
Late 19th century

Height c. 13.77 inches/c. 35 cm
Wood with light patina
Collection Alain Naoum

Origin: Field collected by a colonial administrator, Mr Puissant, by
inheritance to family: Pierre Darteville





The artist has realistically depicted various facial details (left), taking care to reveal the teeth, which have been sculpted into points, an aesthetic practice in Kongo cultures. The shaping of the face, particularly in the cheeks and chin, has been carried out with great skill and attention to detail. Looking at the face in its entirety, it almost seems as if a discreet sound is escaping from the mouth. The thick eyebrows and the upward inclination of the head add to the feeling of life.

The rest of the body, sculpted harmoniously, emphasises the sober diamond-shaped scarification on the shoulders, breasts and back. She nonetheless wears a necklace, and bracelets on her upper arms, wrists and ankles. The back of the head reveals very careful artwork in the depiction of the hairstyle.

Seated on a throne, her legs dangling,[14] she holds a vessel in her right hand, and in her left hand the arm of a child who sits on her left knee. The whole artefact is very detailed, and sculpted in a light, weathered wood.

A Phemba of great beauty, uniting shape, balance, and expressivity in a cultural language unique to the Yombe people, this important work of art shows the mastery and dexterity with which Congolese artists sculpted in wood these masterpieces that speak to the sense and the imagination.





CONCLUSION

We have seen over the course of this journey that the theme of 'mother and child' is ancient, having appeared in multiple human cultures. And so, the place of the woman as mother is central to society, fitting into a cultural lineage. She transmits social values and behaviours; she is the guardian of them, as for example in the example of female initiation among the Yombe people. Depictions of this kind therefore insist on this social aspect. On a more symbolic level, the mother is associated with the Earth, as the nurse of humanity, society, and the family. Social continuity thus depends on the harvests and the inherited values that she transmits to future generations. These symbolic images of woman evoke power in all the various cultures encountered here, among which the Yombe of the Democratic Republic of Congo. This power, which is invested in women as a result of their position as sources of life, as shown in childbearing and breastfeeding, is thereby directed into the heart of human relations.

But the woman also mediates between the world of the living and the world of the dead, as among the Luba, for example. Numerous references to this can be seen in the way that woman is placed within the social symbolism of African cultures.

Of course, the Christian religious images of the *pietà* relate more to a symbolic register, but nonetheless do not depart from the vision of the woman as compassionate mother, who gives birth and thus communicates with the divine.

The aim of this essay was to open the eye, on the one hand, to this ancient human preoccupation about the depiction of woman in society and the symbolism associated with her, and on the other hand, to the great mastery of African sculptors in representing the human in known cultural contexts, relying on remarkable skill.

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