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**‘Perhaps the most important female function in the eyes  
of most Africans is childbearing.’ – C. BLEDSOE 1980: 59**

**‘To bear children is wealth.’ TSONGA SAYING – BECKER 1998: 119**

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## **THE SCULPTURED CHILDREN OF ASPIRING MOTHERS**

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2. Asante Child, *Akua ba*, Ghana  
Wood, beads, 23.4 cm  
Collection of Herbert M. and Shelley Cole

Supernatural help in the conception and the birth of a healthy child has been sought for millennia across the world. Hopeful mothers in Africa have done so by embracing thousands of small sculptures called ‘children’ in local languages. These often simple and semi-abstract humanoid forms, 15 to 25 cm tall, contrast markedly with larger and anatomically detailed maternities.<sup>1</sup> (FIG. 1, 2) Surrogate ‘children’ belonged to married women trying to be mothers, to those already pregnant or seeking more children. The images are usually called ‘dolls’ or ‘fertility dolls’ in the literature, but these are both incomplete and misconceived labels that have become stereotypes.<sup>2</sup> First, while fertility is a central topic, child figures involve much more than this. Second, no equivalent to the word ‘doll’ occurs in any African language I know of, and the figures do not conform to the way the Western world generally defines dolls: small human figures or babies created for children (usually female) to play with. Dolls are normally secular playthings in the Western world, while most African child figures are consecrated, imbued with spiritual energy. In Africa these are surrogate children (many rendered as adult females) tended by pubescent and young women. That said, some African figures do in fact become ‘play children’,<sup>3</sup> given to the young people they symbolize, and surely they figure prominently in the socialization of girls and young women. Both dolls in the West and African child figures can be heirlooms passed down through generations.

Many ‘children’ are carved from wood by men, while women dress them and fabricate others from different natural materials. More important culturally, hopeful mothers care for, dress and carry, feed and interact with these talismanic figures. By modeling familiar, intimate mother-child relations, young women prepare for their own motherhood. The tangible presence of these images provides reassurance and hope. Dozens of regionally varied ‘child’ traditions are known; their materials, manufacture, rituals and symbolism also differ markedly.<sup>4</sup> Before exploring child images further, however, a brief discussion of girls’ initiations is in order.

#### Female Initiation – Preparing for Marriage and Motherhood

‘The main purpose of Sande rituals is to confer fertility on young female initiates’, wrote Caroline Bledsoe about Liberian Kpelle initiation and its sponsoring society, both called Sande (1980: 59). This rite of passage transforms girls into women, and like other coming-of-age rites, Sande has the overarching goals of training women for marriage and rendering them healthy, fertile and ready to bear children. These emphases come from the widespread observation of many commentators that the most important and valuable function of African women is childbearing. Variations on that statement, as in the epigrams above, are known in many cultures, along with references to the shame and stigma of barrenness, too often considered the woman’s<sup>5</sup> fault, even if her husband might be sterile. In some areas, a woman is not seen as properly married, and accepted into her husband’s lineage, until she bears a child. Dogon women must give birth to one child or preferably three before they can move to their husband’s compound (Van Beek 1988: 91). In the past, some Cameroon kings had to have fathered at least one child before their installation rites were completed. Major reasons for wanting and needing children are to provide a source of labor and to give security for parents in old age (Bledsoe 1980: 59). Children, after all, are responsible for their parents’ appropriate burial to ensure them a proper place in the ancestral world, which is understood to affect one’s living descendants. Though usually much loved and well cared for, children are nevertheless ‘property’, with economic implications, as individuals and lineages compete for influence and power.

Girls’ initiation and socialization processes vary greatly on the continent; some occur in formal ‘bush schools’ secluded from the community in a special site – as among Sande for Kpelle, Mende (Sierra Leone) and nearby peoples. Others are more casual and individual, prompted by the onset of menstruation. Most procedures share teachings about domestic skills, crafts such as basket, mat, or pot making, farming, preparing and cooking food, dancing and singing, sexual roles and practices, caring for babies, making medicines and other female pursuits. Novices are schooled,



1. Tsonga Children, *N'wana*, South Africa/Zimbabwe  
Beads, fiber, 25 cm (tallest)  
Collection of W. and U. Horstmann

fed plentiful rich foods, and eventually emerge as marriageable. MacCormack writes that the health, fertility, prosperity and beauty of emerging [Mende] initiates are all linked to their fatness, known to enhance child-bearing potential. Often secluded for many months, and in earlier times, for more than a year, girls were often symbolically 'killed' or 'eaten' by an initiating spirit (a masked Sande priestess), whose 'teeth marks' are the scars on faces and bodies that girls can later show when they are reborn as young women. Sande initiation is a metaphor for the birthing process, since the girl's position for excision,<sup>6</sup> its pain and bleeding, plus the support of older women teachers and midwives, are parallel in the two processes (1982: 121, 122). Childbirth, like initiation, excludes males (Phillips 1995: 80). At times during initiations, Mende girls wear white cloth and go about with their bodies and faces painted with white clay. White has symbolic ties with mourning, the spirit world, purity and cleanliness, as well as semen and breast milk – all appropriate meanings for a girl about to emerge as a woman about to marry.

Several initiatory learning processes, rituals and ideas are also set forth in narratives such as one for and about Tsonga initiates in southern Africa elucidated by Dederen (2007). Her account, much abbreviated here,<sup>7</sup> features sculptured 'play children'. The story, recorded before 1933, is about Nsatimuni, whose name translates as 'What kind of a woman is she?' This question is asked of marriageable Tsonga women leaving their initiatory seclusion, having undergone much the same teaching recounted above for Mende women thousands of miles away. The magical Tsonga tale relates that a novice makes a beautiful child figure, passes tests of her knowledge and skills, undergoes symbolic death and rebirth, learns etiquette and is shown sacred objects and mythical beings by her preceptors. She enters the 'house of mystery', a sacred place of wonders, where, after more ordeals successfully endured and laws learned, her inanimate beaded child sculpture, *n'wana*, is transformed into a live child (FIG. 1). Her sister, in the same process, makes mistakes, fails tests, drops her child figure into the water, and is then eaten by rats. The story's moral is that a girl who

takes her initiation seriously, like Nsatimuni, will be rewarded with a child in marriage, whereas those who abuse the experience will die. It is a truism that for most African women, having a child, or several, represents fulfillment, and the sculpture in this tale, transformed to a living child, answers that need. The story also conflates ideas of 'play children' or dolls with ritual objects, surrogates embodying power, a recurring leitmotif in many traditions examined here.

Both initiation and childbirth are deeply valued transformative events. While most initiations have been shortened in recent decades, they remain symbolically significant, and all are liminal periods for females between childhood and motherhood.

#### Child Figures as Sculptured Prayers

The Tsonga<sup>8</sup> story of Nsatimuni clearly shows that child images deserve to be explored in this study. Such 'children' have everything to do with maternity and are overwhelmingly the province of women in materials, construction and personal interactions. The images help to create the mothers who attend them. Aesthetic preferences expressed in child figures are also usually women's choices. The ideologies and activities surrounding these sculptures lie squarely within the female realm, a private territory deliberately outside male experience and control. Investigating these sculptures is essential as well because African cultures are strongly patriarchal, and because men make most maternity statuary.<sup>9</sup> The identities and uses of mother-and-child imagery, mainly shrines or political sites of public access, are largely managed by and for men. These are not the contexts for child figures.

Many African women cherish their surrogate children as if they were alive: bathing and feeding them (symbolically), fashioning clothing and jewelry, talking and sleeping with them and lavishing maternal attention on them. Many local traditions invoke spiritual and medicinal help to make images effective in facilitating conception, a safe pregnancy and a successful birth. Such sculptures therefore may be called 'tangible prayers'. They have local agency; they are handled lovingly and carried in mother's wrapper



3. Asante woman with an Akua ba in her wrapper, Ghana  
Photograph Herbert M. Cole, 1976



4. Paddle Doll, Egypt, Middle Kingdom, 2030-1802 BCE  
Wood, mud, linen string, pigment, 22.8 cm  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1931, 31.3.35

as her child will later be (FIG. 3). They are instruments of desire, hope or perhaps fear in the withering face of infant death. Women know well that these 'children' are not alive, but they insist on treating them as living beings. As Freedberg indicates, consecration 'transforms the manmade image to a sacred one, and invites the divinity to reside in it'. Consecration gives the image life, makes it serve its purpose (1989: 83). Women holding these images ask for much: a good marriage, conception, a trouble-free pregnancy and birth, a healthy, handsome child, or several children. Child figures often clothed with costly beads suggests that mothers are also pleading for material prosperity. The facts that many represent both married women and children, that they can be playthings and power objects, and that their creation and use are governed by strict rules all prove their importance.

Thousands of mute, sculptured 'children' have been carefully tended in Africa for centuries. Most could tell vivid stories about their private 'lives' with mothers and families, how and by whom they were made and treated, how they were spoken or sung to, or received medicines to aid their efficacy, whether or not they were play children (dolls), and finally, how they left their families and traveled to the museums and private collections where they now reside. Since these tales cannot be related, we must be content to survey some traditions and summarize the available information.

#### Egyptian Paddle Figures

Hundreds of simple, paddle-shaped, painted-wood figurines with minimal heads, truncated arms and no legs have been excavated in Egyptian tombs (FIG. 4). Long considered toys, they are now more associated with fertility and regeneration, primarily because of their exaggerated pubic triangles. A recent paper (Morris 2011) reinforces these notions and further interprets the figures, known as 'paddle dolls', as representations of Khener dancers who honored the mother deity Hathor, goddess of love, fertility, birth and rebirth. Hathor was known to have revived her father, the sun-king Re, by exposing her genitals to him, and exposed genitals also figured in the high-kick dances of the Khener women (2011:85). Fer-

tility and revitalization in connection with the mother goddess Hathor are thus features linked with these quite abstract, anatomically minimal wooden figures. Just as the Egyptian mother god Isis (identified with Hathor) prefigures countless later maternities from vast regions. These early fertility images anticipate later child figures from selected sub-Saharan cultures explored below.

#### 'Children' in Ghana

The wooden, disc-headed akua'ba (Akua's child) from Akan Ghana, is the best known of these sculptures (FIG. 2). Her story is also well known, if of uncertain date. In legendary times, Akua (an Akan female's name if born on Wednesday), was distressed at being barren, so she consulted a diviner, who told her to have a carver make her a small wooden child (ba). He instructed her to care for and feed the child, to give it presents such as earrings as if it were alive. She was to carry it on her back, as women had carried children for ages. When villagers saw Akua with her 'child' they mocked her, saying, 'Look at Akua, look at Akua's child, akua'ba!' Yet before long, Akua conceived, later giving birth to a fine, healthy baby girl.

Such images and countless others have subsequently been called akua'ma (plural of akua'ba) in Akua's honor, and this basic story is repeated with variations. Some versions say that the woman should take her wooden 'child' to a shrine to be empowered, where she (and the figure) may receive medicine to aid conception (FIG. 5). This shrine contains a small terra cotta female, which the hopeful mother ties to her back as the deity's priest consecrates the 'child'. Successful mothers are asked to return their wooden children to Tano's shrine after the birth of their child, a thank offering for the god's intercession. These gifts are just like ex votos placed in Christian churches for centuries,

An akua'ba encodes ideas that include but transcend fertility, and many are never played with as dolls. The flat, disc-heads of Asante versions have high foreheads, an aesthetic preference. (At times in the past an infant's forehead was slightly lengthened and flattened by a mother's gentle molding of her baby's cranial bones, which will not hurt the child if done carefully.)<sup>10</sup> The long ringed



6. Asante Tano Shrine, Ghana, near Kumasi  
Photograph: Herbert M. Cole, 1976



6. Asante Mother and Child *Akua ba*, Ghana  
Wood, glass beads, fiber, metal, 37.5 cm  
National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution,  
Acquisition grant from the James Smithsonian Society  
and Museum Purchase, 87.4.1



8. Seven Asante *Akua ma*, Ghana  
Wood, beads, string, 17.1 cm (tallest)  
New Orleans Museum of Art,  
Promised gift of Barbara and Wayne Amadee,  
2001.353.1-8



7. Asante Child, *Akua ba*, Ghana  
Wood, beads, string, 27.2 cm,  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Michael C. Rockefeller  
Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979,  
1979.206.75



neck seen on virtually all *akua'ma* is another aesthetic choice appreciated as beautiful, as is a glistening surface, echoing the shea butter pomade applied by young women to make their skin shine. These features and the small breasts indicate the preference for a female as the first child; the breasts suggest, too, that the figure is pubescent. Incised scars on the figures' faces reflect those cut on living girls, with medicines inserted for protection against diseases.

Only a few authenticated Asante *akua'ma* are at the same time mother-and-child sculptures (FIG. 6). In this exceptional sculpture, child and mother sit back-to-back on an openwork stool. Both have flat, circular heads, scarred faces, and are adorned with beads. Regrettably the context of this sculpture was never recorded. Common Asante *akua'ma* have analogous flat, disc-like heads on cylindrical bodies, with short, schematic arms at right angles to the ringed neck, a convention for female beauty widely dispersed across West Africa. A few *akua'ma* are without arms, and fewer

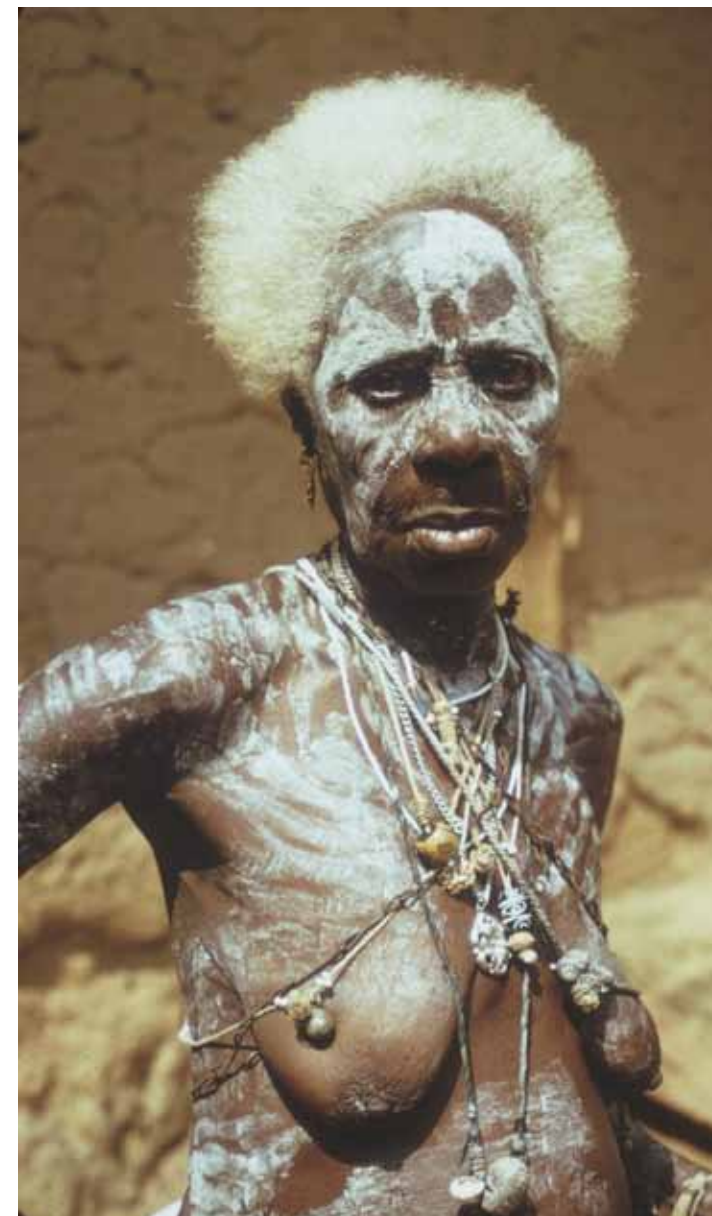
10. Bono/Brong *Akua ma*, Ghana  
Wood, 24 cm  
UCLA Fowler Museum, x87.1682, 1681



9. Fante *Akua ba*, Ghana  
Wood, animal fur, 30.48 cm  
Derby Collection



11. Fante *Akua ma*, Ghana  
Wood, beads, string, ca 30 cm  
formerly collection of Evan Jones



12. Akan Priestess, Aowin, Ghana  
Photograph Herbert M. Cole, 1972

still have fully articulated bodies with naturalistic arms and legs (FIG. 7, 8). All have disproportionately large heads. The backs of heads on some are embellished with incised decorative designs that are not symbolic, apart from the few with small churches, which presumably belonged to Christian women.

The post-natal 'lives' of such sculptures are pluralistic, as if mirroring the variable responses of mothers to their actual children. Some *akua'ma* remain in the family compound, carefully treasured or casually stored, some are returned to shrines, and others will be played with by the very children they symbolize. Thus a young girl plays mother to the 'child' that helped give her life. In the last few hundred years a great many *akua'ma* have been carved by professional artists, becoming so well known that many falsely aged fakes have been produced.<sup>11</sup>

Style differences in *akua'ma* accord well with linguistic and socio-political identities. Coastal Fante examples normally have tall, flat or slightly inclined rectangular (or trapezoidal) heads (FIG. 9), while those from Bono areas North of the Asante are more three-dimensional, with conical bodies, volumetric heads and a flat, curving plane as the face (FIG. 10). The wooden bodies of both Fante and Bono children are armless and frequently left natural, although some in shrines have been embellished with chalky kaolin or sacrificial blood. In most Akan areas, too, some full-figured images of mothers with children that are called *akua'ma*; many, large and small, are valued shrine figures that were never surrogate children. Some are given medicinal, amuletic beads of the same sort worn by priests and priestesses (FIG. 11, 12); these, like chalk or blood, are empowering sacrificial potions that help shrines and deities do their work: healing disease, for example or settling disputes or promoting fertility and productivity, thus fostering prosperity.

***Mossi (Burkina Faso)***<sup>12</sup>

The Mossi have several regional styles of child figures that have long been carved by blacksmiths and sold in markets (FIG. 13). Called 'infant' (*biiga*), by the Mossi, most were children's play-





14. Mossi child, *Biiga*, Burkina Faso, Bonam village  
Wood, beads, string, 33 cm  
Yale University Art Gallery, The Charles B. Benenson Collection, 2006.511

things, toys, socializing devices akin to secular dolls in Western culture. Some, though, were used in girls' excision and marriage rituals to ensure a bride's fertility. Failing to conceive, a woman acquires a child figure that she treats as a living baby. She carries it in her wrapper, rubs it with shea butter to make it shine, clothes and gives it jewelry, and if she conceives and bears a child, she cares for the wooden version as she does the child itself, washing and otherwise attending it. 'The doll [sic] receives the first drops of milk from the mother, and before the new baby is placed on the back of the mother for the first time, the wood figure is tied there for the last time.' (Roy and Wheelock: 2007: 78) Some treasured images were passed down for generations, as evidenced by their deep patina from handling over long periods of time.

Mossi figures, whether surrogate children or dolls (it is hard to discern which), are modest in size and shape, an often-thin head rounded in profile, on a cylindrical body without limbs, some with breasts and navel, and some without, yet always the human anatomy is abbreviated. All are female, most the breasts of at least a young woman. Some 'children' with distended breasts represent women who are already mothers; nursing women's breasts are sometimes stretched to induce lactation (FIG. 14. Roy 2015: 59). Child figures shown as mature women are an ironic contradiction also found in other regions, as we shall see below.

Many Mossi figures have scarification patterns on heads and bodies, echoing those of people, as well as an anus in the base<sup>13</sup> and on some, genitalia. Most also have simple semi-circular female coiffures. One distinctive regional style attributed to father and son carvers has a concave face and vertical triangular shapes on the sides of large circular heads in place of ears. Occasional figures from another area have a front 'braid' with a curl at its end, transposed from known hairstyles, carved as an extension of the chin (FIG. 14). Some Mossi 'children' and others from different areas are faceless – perhaps leaving the specific identity of the child to the mother or to the child itself if a figure becomes a doll. Some, too, are clothed in leather, a few with elaborately woven 'garments', as well as pendant earrings and other decorations. Variations oc-



13. Mossi child, *Biiga*, Burkina Faso  
Wood, 28.2 cm  
Collection of Thomas G.B. Wheelock

cur, but relatively abstract and simple shapes characterize most Mossi 'child'sculptures.

#### Yoruba (Nigeria)

The Yoruba version, 'child of wood' (omolangidi), is a schematic shape, a flat, nearly rectangular form from which spring a neck and head, but no arms or legs.<sup>14</sup> Rare examples show a mother with a child on her back (FIG. 15). These are sometimes carried and danced with by women wishing to conceive (Lawal 1996: 50). Mostly, however, these figures can be called play children, since girls tie them at their backs in wrappers and, as in many cultures, dolls help socialize those expecting to be mothers. Since it is common for girls from the age of six or seven to carry infant siblings, our example may depict this practice.

#### Namchi, Fali, and Kirdi (Cameroon)

Namchi (or Dowayo) and Fali have surrogate children similar to those of the Akan. A Namchi woman hoping to become pregnant adorns a wooden figure, from a blacksmith, with beads, cowries, bells and even coins, mimicking the decorations of a young initiate returning to her village after seclusion (FIG. 16, Cameron 1996: 76). Sometimes a husband carves a figure for his wife to represent their future child. The figures are cherished as if alive. A woman having difficulty conceiving invokes supernatural help with her child figure to become pregnant. A hopeful mother feeds her adorned child, carrying it in a pouch on her back (FIG. 17).

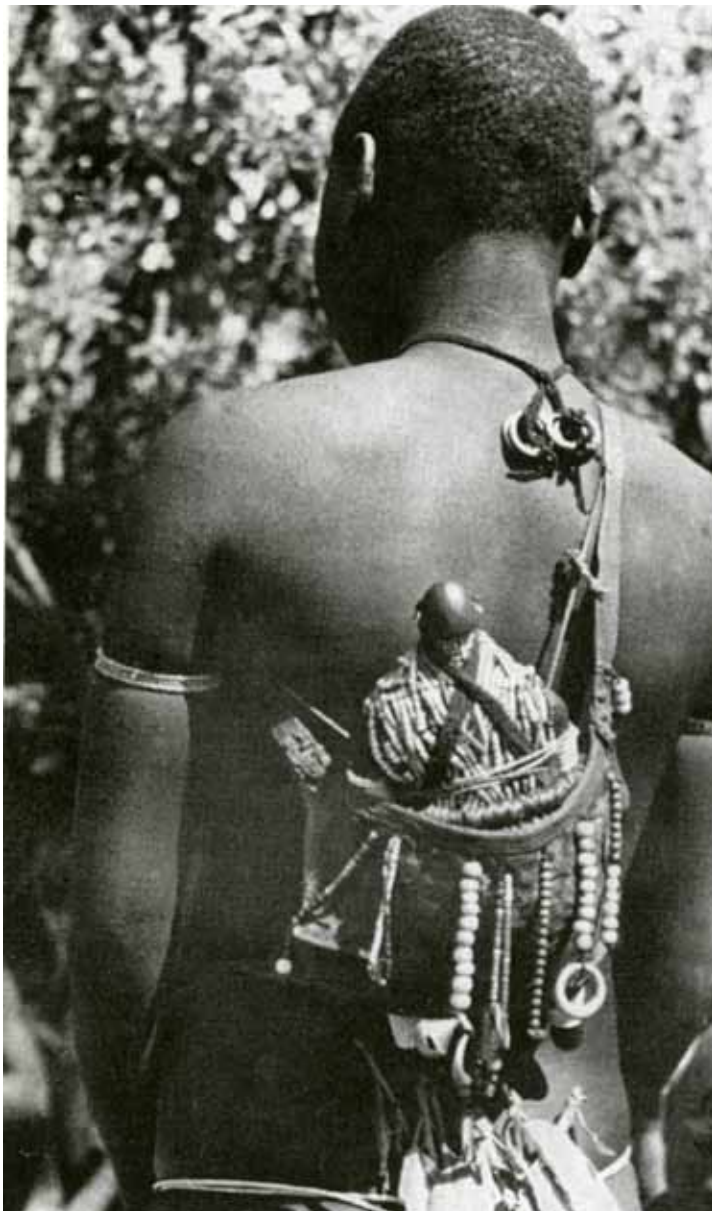
Namchi 'children' are among the more complete human beings in these traditions, with arms, legs and often faces. They are slender, attenuated, with tube-like, stylized body parts, and no attempt at naturalism. The Namchi, Fali and Kirdi – whose figures are normally adorned with red beads and cowries over a simple stick armature – are among the more impoverished peoples of sub-Saharan Africa, so the layered adornments of figures with costly beads, bells, coins, shells, amulets and other talismans, attest to the desire for both children and prosperity (FIG. 18, 19). These symbols of wealth and status foretell the full beading of



15. Yoruba doll, Omolangidi, Nigeria  
Wood, 25 cm  
Collection of W. and U. Horstmann



16. Dowayo (Namchi) Child Figures, Cameroon  
Wood, beads, string, leather, 33 cm (tallest)  
Collection of W. and U. Horstmann



17. Dowayo Woman Carrying Child Figure in Back Pouch  
Photograph Alfred Weidholz, before 1941



18. Fali Child Figures, Cameroon  
Wood, beads, shells, bells, coins, fiber, 31.1 cm (tallest)  
Collection of Marshall and Caroline Mount



19. Kirdi Child Figure, Cameroon  
Wood, beads, leather, fiber, 13 cm  
Collection of Jeffrey Clifton

many 'children' in East and south Africa, again among materially poor peoples.

#### *'Children' in Tanzania*

Several peoples of Tanzania (Kwere, Zaramo, Luguru and Gogo), have initiations similar to those of Mende and related peoples described above. A wooden female figure, 'child of wood' (mwana hiti) (FIG. 20) is given to an initiate by a maternal uncle. These have become female clan heirlooms, passed down through the generations; they serve multiple practical and symbolic roles: representing the initiate herself and her child, and as companions for both. They also recall revered female ancestors and protect the initiate against malevolent spirits. Most figures have female parts – small breasts, a vagina-shaped coiffure – an overall cylindrical phallic form (as explained by locals), appropriate for instruction. In earlier times images were fitted with the girl's hair. 'The initiate was expected to lavish great care and attention upon the figure in mock motherhood to ensure her own fertility and to protect her reproductive powers after seclusion was complete' (Thompson 2008:39). Failure to relate to the wooden child with affection and maternal care threatened her fertility. Foremost, her initiatory education was meant to instill 'ideal qualities of womanhood, which included hard work, generosity, discretion, and a strong caring and nurturing consciousness' (ibid: 40). Toward the end of her seclusion, the girl was instructed in sexual matters, how to please her husband and relate to her future kinfolk.

Lugugru beaded gourds, mwana sesere (FIG. 21, Tanzania) are often called 'dolls,' inappropriately since they often have special magical and/or ritual value. Playful interactions occur between a girl and her 'child', but that does not make a sacred image a toy. Our example, collected in 1912, was an 'artificial child' of the sort 'carried by girls under their clothing in order to simulate a suckling infant' (van Wyk 2013: 138). Such 'children' were filled with millet grains, other local seeds and (perhaps symbolic) materials to give them the heft of a small child, and their quasi-anthropomorphic forms were sheathed in beads as if to signal the affluence of

the clan (ibid: 139). These matrilineal peoples honor female ancestors especially as founders of their communities.

The vast majority of child figures are simple armless and legless cylinders, cones or gourds, some have heads and faces, some do not. Nearly all children are smaller, more schematic and less naturalistic than most maternities. We can speculate on their simplicity: possibly they are limbless because newborn infants are so helpless. It is hard to know. Many with heads are faceless, as in some Kuba wood examples that have distinctive Kuba hairlines. Apparently were played with rather than being oriented to fertility (FIG. 22).

#### *Southern Africa*

A thorough 1998 study of child figures in southern Africa brought a new level of scholarly research to this subject: *Evocation of the Child: Fertility Figures of the Southern African Region*,<sup>15</sup> This book examines the construction, forms, materials, uses, histories, handling of child figures among about 15 ethnic groups, many related to one another historically and linguistically. Some authors found images with uncertain identities, making a positive ethnic origin difficult to determine. Field research also revealed relationships between women and their 'children' to be deeply personal and thus often inaccessible. One author stated that, 'for the sake of privacy, the details of the how and the why [of her informant's interactions with her 'child'] will not be divulged here' (Gwintsa 1998: 31). Mothers and their 'children', both sculptural and flesh and blood, thus retain many secrets.

In southern Africa, pubescent girls, brides or mothers-to-be, make most child figures, although in some areas men carve wooden armatures for women to dress and adorn. In a few cases a mother (or grandmother or aunt) constructs the image for her daughter. And while virtually all are named and considered children, many from different groups are clothed as if they were post-pubescent women. As Becker says of Tsonga figures (FIG. 1): 'All are dressed in adult women's clothes which makes the notion of a doll or even child (nwana) inaccurate and inappropriate.' (1998: 123)



20. Zaramo Child Figure, *Mwana hiti*, Tanzania  
Wood, 17.7 cm  
Collection of W. and U. Horstmann



21. Luguru Child Figure, *Mwana sesere*, Tanzania  
Gourd, beads, fiber, 28.5 cm  
Collection of the Museum for Volkerkunds, Dresden, 31.364



22. Kuba Dolls, DRC  
Wood, 25 cm  
Collection of W. and U. Horstmann



25. Ngwato Child Figures, Botswana  
Gourd, wood, fiber, beads, 31 cm (tallest)  
Collection of W. and U. Horstmann

The Tsonga 'children', like many, simultaneously represent young mothers. These are simple, flat or dome-topped cylinders covered with colorful beadwork in geometric patterns, without explicit heads or faces; yet they do have a few beaded hair ornaments and sumptuous cloth and beaded skirts.

As told in the Nsatimuni story, a Tsonga beaded figure represents the hope for a child and promotes conception in the woman who carries it. Marriageable women receive their 'children' after initiation and compete with one another, showing the images off in public dances; no one may touch the 'child' without paying a fee. In other cases, when a married woman is ready to go to her husband's room, she first receives her 'child', to signal her maternal preparedness, and her husband first sees the image in exchange for a gift. This ceremony is *ku alula*; the same verb 'is used for releasing boys and girls from initiation or a newborn from the place of birth'.<sup>16</sup> The beaded child usually stays with the newlyweds until a real child is born, although practices vary. They name the image and play with it; caring for it helps relieve the young mother of homesickness. Some earlier researchers saw Tsonga child images as merging an explicit upright cylindrical phallic form with a woman's skirt below, thus combining the sexes, as the Tsonga understand a child's anatomy: bones are the male contribution, while the flesh comes from the female.<sup>17</sup>

In several southern African traditions child figures are (or were) made for girls' initiations, where they are carried in dances, and in a few, the 'child' is given by a woman to the man she hopes to marry. Other versions take part in wedding rituals, when the figure is named, a name usually given to the bride's firstborn (Wood 1998: 35, 39). When part of initiation rites, images are instructional aids for learning domestic and sexual roles that the novice will shortly assume.<sup>18</sup> Some South Sotho and Tsonga figures are owned and used exactly as cited above for Akan *akua'ma*. They are also active participants in a bride and groom's marriage contract. After the child's birth the bead-covered 'child' is offered to the shrine of the spirit that activated it before its owner became pregnant. Such spiritually charged sculptures were also cared for

by barren South Sotho women wanting to become pregnant (Wood 1998: 39, 41). David Riep found evidence that these child figures were made as early as 1840. He also thinks Sotho figures, almost certainly female, may represent the hopeful mother rather than the child, an explanation that applies elsewhere. The name for Sotho images, *kgongwana-tshingwana*, means 'little cow-little field' (not 'child'), a reference to its empowering medicine, which perhaps accounts for some of them being used in divination (Riep 2014: 38, 39).

Child (or nubile female) images, like those of maternities, are markers of transformation in the lives of women and their families. The months of pregnancy are liminal, anxiety-filled rites of passage. These periods call for tangible symbols to aid many women in coping with loneliness and uncertainty as they await anticipated outcomes – a healthy child – in an unpredictable world, with common maternal and child mortality. These figures help absorb the attention of aspiring mothers, channeling their apprehensions as they adorn and care for them. They may not think of the children as works of art, but they clearly make them special and lavish them with love and concern.<sup>19</sup> The biology and culture of birth and nurture are simultaneously reiterated in the forms of these image and in their treatment as children.

Many African child images are believed to have magical potency to promote fertility. Several versions are consecrated with applied 'medicines' empowered by deities or ancestral energy to promote a mother's ritual and biological needs. Materials used to make figures are at times both symbolic and potent. Red ochre is rubbed on many from southern Africa, for example, and is related by scholars to menstrual blood, which of course signals a female's ability to conceive, or to the blood common during childbirth.<sup>20</sup> Reeds that contain water in origin myths are metaphors for the penis and semen. A round calabash or hollow orange, seed containers, represent the womb. Nel and Liebhammer (1998) offer a compelling argument that construction processes using these materials are sexual metaphors: 'the structural union of reed and calabash evokes the notion that the child figure represents the pro-



26. Ntwana Child Figure, South Africa (Southern Sotho)  
Wood, fiber, beads, 32.5 cm  
Collection of W. and U. Horstmann



27. Ndebele Doll/Child, South Africa  
Fiber, beads, 23 cm  
Collection of W. and U. Horstmann



28. Turkana Child/Doll, Kenya  
Doum palm seed, beads, leather, animal hoofs, 22 cm  
Private Collection



23. South Sotho Child  
Wood, beads, fiber, 25.4 cm  
The Cleveland Museum of Art, 2010.208



24. Ambo child Figures, Angola  
Wood, beads, leather, button, metal, fiber, 38 cm  
Collection of W. and U. Horstmann

creative act, an act that would give rise to the child' (ibid: 221). Some figures are made of straight cylindrical bundles of reeds inserted into openings in small round calabashes (gourds) or wild orange shells (FIG. 24, 25). Analogous evocations are present in the sheathing of a figure's (rather phallic) conical or cylindrical form, a legless, armless torso, with bracelets of grass or beaded hoops – the latter being female elements of dress, as in Ntwana images (FIG. 26). Similar sheathings of Ndebele 'children' are beaded rings in graduated sizes fitted on a conical beaded torso, miniatures of rings worn by living females (FIG. 27). No firm documentation attests that Ndebele 'children' were used to induce conception, although they probably were. Thousands of these charming beaded sculptures have been made in the last few generations, primarily for sale (Schneider 1998: 147).

Behaviors surrounding many child figures are modeled on prevailing mother-child interactions. They are variable, yet above all personal and accompanied by affection, hope and anticipation, sometimes with fear, had there been stillbirths or miscarriages. Some of the (mostly) women who wrote for *Evocations of the Child* (Dell 1998) recount stories mothers told about why, when and how they acquired their 'child' figure, and how much it meant to them. But intimate physical, emotional and psychological aspects of these relationships are rarely recorded; after all, they are private, evanescent, multiple, and often not especially memorable.

The concurrent belief that many a 'child' is both alive with potency and will help bring the wanted baby must add greatly to a hopeful mother's relationship with it. Her ministrations underscore ideas of process, agency, volition and transformation as significant in the liminal, in-between states of pregnancy and giving birth. Child figures are far from passive or inert on-lookers, and many survive from long, deep traditions. Acting on behalf of ancestors or other spirits, many surrogate children can be called 'power figures' invoked to obtain lasting, living results for their 'mothers'.

One need not invoke Freud to see phallic shapes in a number of examples (FIG. 23, 24). Turkana child figures from Northern Ken-

ya, made from three-lobed doum palm seeds, echo the shapes of male genitals, a resemblance surely not lost on the Turkana (FIG. 28); that shape must be the reason why this natural seed was chosen for the child's body, later overlain by beaded clothing mirroring that worn by young women. These, like so many figures made from materials other than wood, and some wooden ones, are lavishly decorated with imported beads. In the Turkana case, many beads are made from ostrich eggshells, themselves symbols of fertility and wealth.

Metaphorical relationships of child figures with human genitalia, the womb and sexual relations accord well with the widespread symbolism of African houses, their interior spaces and the activities that take place within. Many domestic houses belong to women alone rather than to men (or both partners), and frequently, adult male visits to these homes are by invitation only. A number of cultures in different parts of the continent (Burkina Faso, Ghana, Benin, and Southern Africa) see these female-oriented interior spaces, often in round houses, as wombs, and their doors as vaginas.<sup>21</sup> The anthropomorphic sexuality of Batammaliba house metaphors in Togo and the Republic of Benin are especially detailed and rich (Blier 1987), and doubtless several other cultures embrace these sorts of symbolism. We will later note that some peoples, such as the Luba and Yoruba, see women as containers of men, as in the sexual act (see p. xx, also Rich 1976: 97ff).

#### Images of Pregnancy and Birth

It is fitting to follow explorations of sculpture created to help women conceive and bear children by examining a few rare works showing pregnancy, plus even more scarce depictions of child-birth, both common situations yet uncommon in art. The earliest sculptures of pregnant women may appear in the IND corpus of terra cottas. Several females with distended bellies exist, but they are not proven to be pregnant, and could instead have a parasitic disease<sup>22</sup>

The expressive carved figures comprising royal entourages royals in Cameroon Grasslands kingdoms occasionally include a



29. Pregnant Woman, Ku N'gan, Bamileke, Cameroon  
Wood, fiber, hair, 82 cm  
Barbier-Mueller Museum, 1018.78





31. Tsaam Female Giving Birth, before 1932, DRC  
Wood, pigment, beads, 68 cm  
Royal Museum for Central Africa, EO.0.0.34018



30. Yoruba Woman Giving Birth, Nigeria  
Wood, 18 cm  
Galerie Ratton



heavily pregnant woman. The figure shown here, however was hidden away by a member of the Bamileke Ku Ngan society that specialized in matters of infertility (FIG. 29). It shows a mother of twins, the first visible between her legs, the second still within her distended womb. As a power figure, it was anointed with medicines also applied to the woman who sought the society's aid.<sup>23</sup> Similar figures were taken to the home of a pregnant woman until she gave birth, were then hidden carefully until needed again. The dramatically exaggerated bellies of these figures are deliberate; ritualists activate their supernatural, magically aided power to facilitate a successful birth (Homburger 2008: 174).

A few Yoruba figures and body masks are known showing childbirth graphically (FIG. 30). This kneeling mother, holding her distended abdomen, has a large child's head and neck emerging from between her legs. The exact purpose of this image is not

known but it may have been a teaching device. The same may be true of a Tsaam figure called Matamu, which its collector said was displayed during dance tours after male initiation was completed (FIG. 31). Nothing more is known about it.<sup>24</sup>

The Chokwe (DRC and Angola) include a birth scene among subjects carved on the rungs of European-style chairs with backs, which are actually chief's thrones (FIG. 32,33). A rung of one chair (that has become separated from it) shows a reclining woman supported by a woman behind her, with a midwife in front ready to receive the child, whose head is just appearing. Birth scenes, while optional on thrones, are among dozens of vignettes of domestic and ceremonial life and other topics presided over by the royal owner of such a throne.

In Conclusion: the evidence assembled here, while brief, proves that African processes of conception and birth are com-



32. Chokwe Chief's Chair, Angola or DRC  
Wood, leather, tacks, 85 cm  
Kulturhistorisk Museum, Universitet, Oslo,  
Gift of Hannibal Kjelstrup, 19.289

33. Chokwe Chair Rung with Birthing Scene, Angola or DRC  
Wood, ca 30 cm wide  
Perinet Collection

plex, deeply cultural phenomena, not simply the biological meeting of live sperm and live egg followed by gestation and birth. African cultures have long sought to influence science, to the extent that we can refer to maternity as a bio-cultural process, a meaningful amalgam that invokes a wide spectrum of thought and activity embracing physiology, aesthetics, psychology, education, medicine, mythology and story-telling, as well as spiritual belief and practice to achieve the desired results: healthy babies who will live from infancy to childhood and beyond. Sculptures called children, and treated as such, are frequently crucial elements in this process. Local belief in their power and efficacy is undeniable. While such images are not ubiquitous, they have been common and for centuries among peoples in varied ecologies and social systems all over Africa from Ambo and Asante to Zaramo and Zulu. These 'children' speak a language now silenced. They once embodied poignant, intimate expressions of love, desire and sometimes loss that we cannot ever truly know or recover, encouraging deep bonds between countless mothers and their children, both surrogate and real.

#### Notes

- 1 The two fullest treatments of this subject are Cameron 1996 and Dell (ed.) 1998, each covering many more cultures than are cited here. Images of children and those of mothers and children are not always parallel occurrences; art incorporating our main subject, maternity, for example, is fairly rare in most pre-1950s southern African cultures, whereas surrogate children are common in that region. My thanks to Rebecca Kenison for helpful suggestions on a draft of this chapter.
- 2 These stereotypes are akin to the 'fertility goddess' label discussed on p. xx. The use of the word 'fertility' is usually correct even if it tends to limit perception of these sculptures.
- 3 Dederen's phrase for 'doll' -- more appropriate than that word, which she also uses (2007:110).
- 4 The treatment of 'child' figures here is selective rather than thorough; that would be another book. Approximately 70 African peoples have traditions of child or doll figures, whereas the sample here is only 19. Those and some others are indicated on the map with an asterisk\* after the name of the

people.

- 5 'The ultimate goal in the life of the Luluwa is procreation.' See also Petrides 1997: 186. See Brett-Smith: 33, Cameron 1996: 28, Dell (ed) 1998: 11ff.
- 6 The controversial subject of female excision (removing the clitoris, clitoridectomy), a widely practiced tradition in female initiation, is beyond the scope of this study. Initiations are complex, but almost always involve a symbolic death and rebirth of a novice to adult status, processes also beyond my concerns here.
- 7 Dederen 2007 gives a much fuller, nuanced reading of this folktale than space allows here.
- 8 The spelling of this ethnic group is T'songa or Tsonga, the former in the article cited here. For consistency I use the latter spelling.
- 9 Indeed, men make most sculpture in Africa. See Thompson 2008: 30. Some terra cotta maternities among Akan, Yoruba, Edo (Benin), Igbo and other peoples, however, were made by women, but often using the prevailing male canon. IND terra cotta makers' gender is not known.
- 10 Ghana's first president, Kwame Nkrumah (1909?–1972), had a long, high forehead said to have resulted from his mother's manipulation of his cranial bones when he was an infant.
- 11 See Ross and Reichert (1983) for a discussion of a well-known Asante late 29th centuryfaking workshop outside Kumasi, the Asante capital. See also the Ross article in Cameron 1996 for a fuller exploration of *akua'ma* in Ghana and elsewhere in Africa, as international tourist forms, and in African-American life.
- 12 Data on Mossi children derives from the extensive field research of Christopher Roy and Thomas G. B. Wheelock (2007: 76–78, 449–52, 2015: 57–63).
- 13 Tom Wheelock (pers. Comm. 2016) says that child figures with an anus have the hole extended vertically through them, terminating in the coiffure, and that some Mossi consider this the alimentary canal.
- 14 The Yoruba made thousands of memorial twin figures, *ere ibeji*, which are sometimes called 'fertility dolls', but normally they have little to do with fertility and are rarely played with as dolls. They have more to do with death than life, as they commemorate the death of twins. They are also more anatomically detailed and naturalistic than most child images. See Chapter 9, however, for exceptions: twin figures sometimes employed to aid fertility.
- 15 Dell et al. 1998. 16 authors wrote 21 essays, with more than 230 illustrations, most of them of 'children' in studios or in context. Only a handful of those 'children' can be included here. See note iv above.
- 16 Dederen 2007: 112, 118) Becker says these figures may be a quite recent (ibid. 121), but the early 20th-century Nsatumuni tale summarized by

Dederen shows there were earlier prototypes.

- 17 Roumequere and Roumequere-Eberhardt as cited in Cameron 1996: 95.
- 18 Van Schailwik 1998: 69; Jolles 1998: 9; Nettleton 1998: 111.
- 19 The mutuality (or love) between a mother and her child – and presumably between a potential mother and her surrogate, as discussed here – are exceptionally complex interactions convincingly elaborated in *Art and Intimacy: How the Arts Began* by Ellen Dissanayake (2000), which, with her earlier books (1988, 1992), has repeatedly been an inspiration in the writing of this book.
- 20 Dederen 2007: 118; Nettleton 1998: 175; Nel and Liebhammer 1998: 225.
- 21 VanWyk 1998: 57, 61; Bourdier and Minh-ha 1985: 155, 160, 173; Blier 1987.
- 22 Van Dyke writes that several possibly pregnant women (nearly 30) in the IND corpus may instead have parasitic diseases that distend the belly (2016:10).
- 23 A fuller explanation of this figure, based on his fieldwork, is in the Pierre Harter caption to its illustration in the Barbier-Mueller Museum's book: Schmalenbach (ed) 1988:185 Collected by Fr. Omar Butaye in Makwati village ca 1931 (see Volper 2015: 33).

25 should be note 24

Outtake:

Yoruba body masks also include examples of newborn children, in this case twins at their mothers' breasts – the torso was worn by a male Egungun or Gelede masker (4.31). During initiation rites Makonde (Mozambique) masqueraders also wear torso masks showing pregnancy and birth, as if men had taken over the role of giving birth. This doubled act of transformation, male as female, and spirit masker 'performing' birth, is a complex rehearsal both of male power and the illusionistic ambiguity of masquerades.