African Collection
Gallery Guide
GOD

BIRTH

DEATH

CHILDHOOD

ELDERHOOD

ADOLESCENCE

ADULTHOOD

SPIRITS
Birth and Childhood

Development of crops and offspring are crucial to the success of agrarian societies. Their children are the future producers of food and caretakers of the elderly, who, in turn, are responsible for passing down traditional knowledge. Because of its importance, art is often used in rituals to bolster fertility and safeguard childbirth. During planting and harvesting seasons, communal ceremonies are performed to ensure the continued blessing of nature. Sculpture, displays, and performances (including masquerades) are used to entice spiritual forces, ancestors, and nature spirits to bestow good fortune, abundant crops, and many healthy children.

1. **Bamana Headdress (Chiwara)**
   Mali
   Wood, Brass, Thread, and Feather
   Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Arthur Steinman, 1993.145

   Chiwara is the mythical being who taught humans to turn wild grasses into grain. During the preparation for planting, cavorting male and female antelope figures perform a masquerade entreating Chiwara to bring a bountiful harvest. The elaborate mane on the headdress displayed here distinguishes it as male.

2. **Baule Female Figure (Blolo Bla)**
   Ivory Coast
   Wood and Beads
   Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Alvin Hayim, 1992.280

   Infertility was sometimes blamed on a jealous spirit whose mate left it behind to be born into this world. If a diviner found that this was the cause, he would call for a figure called a *blolo bla* (male) or a *blolo bian* (female) to be made. This effigy represented the deserted spirit lover and would be placed in an inconspicuous shrine where the barren couple slept. One night a week the earthly mate slept elsewhere so that the lonely spirit could reunite with its missing lover. Thus assuaged, they would stop interfering with the earthly couple’s ability to bear children.
Akuaba Figures

A legend of the Akan people of Southern Ghana and the Ivory Coast tells of a woman named Akua who was distressed because she was barren. A diviner told her to have a wooden child made, carry on it her back, and treat it as she would a human child. She eventually conceived and gave birth to a beautiful daughter. Therefore, such figures are called *akua ba*, or “Akua’s child.” *Akua ba* are said to help bring forth attractive children and aid in childbirth.

3 **Abron Figure (Akua ba)**
Ghana
Wood with Patina
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Alvin Hayim, 1992.284

4 **Ashanti Figure (Akua ba)**
Ghana
Wood, Pigment, and Beads
Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Irwin A. Weiser, 2002.147

Disc-shaped heads are characteristic of the Ashanti people’s *akua ba* figures

5 **Two Fante Figures (Akua ba)**
Ghana
Wood and Beads
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Alvin Hayim, 1992.279

Elongated bodies and rectangular heads distinguish the *akua ba* figures of the coastal Fante people.
Yoruba Twin Figure (Ere Ibeji)
Nigeria
Wood, Pigment, and Beads
Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Irwin A. Weiser, 2002.143

The Yoruba people of Nigeria and Benin have the highest rate of twin births in the world. Twins are considered auspicious and bring good fortune, wealth, and success to their family, however they are often born premature and at risk of death. It is believed that if one twin dies, it will try to lure the living twin into the spirit world to keep it company. Thus parents of twins often seek the help of a diviner to keep the living twin happy in the human world. The prescription is most often the creation of a small figure of the same gender as the deceased twin. The mother cares for the effigy, feeding, clothing, and entertaining it in the same way as the surviving sibling so the child will not miss its twin.

Yoruba Twin Figure (Ere Ibeji)
Nigeria
Wood and Beads
Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Alvin Hayim, 1992.281A, B

Twin carvings are often exhibited in pairs in Western collections but do not necessarily represent a pair of twins who both have died. Although such pairs do exist, most often the two figures are displayed together because they are of the same style and may have been carved by the same artist.

Namji Doll
Cameroon
Wood and Beads
Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Arthur Steinman, 1993.134

The Namji people of northern Cameroon often gave their girl children a wooden doll. It was named, fed, talked to, and carried on the back like real baby. It was a plaything but also prepared the girl for her future role of mother. It was sometimes believed that caring for the doll ensured her future fertility.
Coming of Age

Children had to prepare for life as an adult. Adolescent boys were often separated from their family and community and sent to live in male-only camps while girls were often sent to “fattening houses.” Boys, and sometimes girls were circumcised. Inductees of both genders were sworn to secrecy, fed special foods, and were distinctly dressed as initiates. After this important maturation period he or she officially became an adult and was reintroduced to the community as a new person.

9. Ogoni Mask
Nigeria
Wood, Pigment, and Nails
Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Alvin Hayim, 1992.267

The Ogoni and neighboring Ibibio people used masks and puppets to instruct their young men. The Ogoni are especially known for masks such as the one displayed here that has hinged jaws and teeth made of sticks that resemble combs.

10. Zulu Belt And Apron (Isigege)
South Africa
Beads, Cloth, and Raffia
Museum Purchase, 2005.3.2

Zulu-speaking people share a common culture but use variations of beadwork to identify sub-groups and individuals. Zulu children traditionally wore very little except a simple string of beads or a fringed pubic apron. When girls began to mature they would make and wear more elaborate beaded aprons like the one displayed here, as well as beaded hair ornaments, anklets, wristlets, and bracelets.
Mossi Nakomse, Headdress (Zazaido)
Burkina Faso
Wood, Pigment, and Fiber
Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Alvin Hayim, 1992.295

The Mossi people of Burkina Faso make special dance crests or headdresses called zazaido that are used in both secular and religious contexts by young men between the ages of about 15 and 30. The primary function of zazaido masquerade is to honor male and female elders at funeral ceremonies. The zazaido assures the spirits that the deceased was an honored member of the clan and asks for his or her journey into the land of the dead to be eased. The zazaido also bestows blessings on the survivors.

Dan Mask (Deangle)
Liberia/Ivory Coast
Wood, Pigment, Cowry Shells, Teeth, Cloth and Fur
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ronald Barab, 1989.081

Dan masks come in a wide variety but specific types are difficult to identify when taken out of context. The Dan mask displayed here has an oval face, narrow eyes framed with white pigment, and embedded cowrie shells so it is probably a character known as Deangle who often possesses such features. This friendly spirit is connected to boys’ circumcision camps. He laughs and jokes with the audience and cajoles the women to cook and care for the camp’s boys and teachers.

Toma Mask (Landai)
Guinea
Wood, Cowry Shells, and Bird Talon
Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Arthur Steinman, 1993.141

The landai symbolized a legendary character that captured boys to take them to the boys’ camp. As the landai enacted swallowing the boy, he concealed the youngster beneath the voluminous fiber skirts to take him to the camp. Later, he delivered the reborn adult back home.
Leadership

Being an adult member of society meant wearing certain garb, belonging to special associations, and assuming specific roles within the community. Those who assumed leadership roles, whether assigned, elected, or inherited, wore special costumes and regalia.

**Senufo Mask (Kpelie)**

Ivory Coast  
Wood  
Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Irwin A. Weiser, 2002.142

Most of the art from the Senufo region was created for use by the two gender-based associations. Adult men belonged to the Poro and the Sandogo was reserved for women. The Poro association commissioned and used many types of masks including the one displayed here. *Kpelie* is the term most commonly used in the literature for this type of mask, but the term is probably a French version of the word *Kpeli-yehe*. At least six different groups in the Senufo region have been recorded as using the same type of oval shaped *Kpelie* mask.

**Ndebele Woman’s Apron (Mapoto)**

South Africa  
Leather with Beads  
Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Paul Ludwig, 1994.259

The Ndebele people are known for remarkable beadwork used to signify status and wealth. These works are created by and used primarily by women because Ndebele men almost always wear Western style clothing. A young girl wears a tiny belt and apron and moves on to larger and more complex versions as she matures. Married women wear a *Mapoto* apron that is characterized by two panels framed by fringe. Older examples like the one displayed here are primarily white with beads sewn onto animal skin.
Bamana society is governed both religiously and politically by six major initiation societies, the last of which is the Kore. As the initiate moves through these societies he is taught how to assume his role in the community. The specific purpose of the Kore is to teach humans how to recognize and recover that portion of the spirit that was lost through the process of reincarnation. The Kore also connects the cosmos to the community and is associated with successful harvests.

The elaborate events sponsored by the Kore include masked characters representing divine and human wisdom. The character referred to as Koreduga is a buffoon who enters the ceremony astride a stick horse and ridicules the audience. Because he is the embodiment of divine wisdom he can ignore what is considered proper behavior. Thus he dresses in rags, shouts obscenities, and performs antisocial acts.

There are more than 20 different types of Kuba masquerades performed to educate, preserve social order, protect the community, and entertain. Some performances feature masks such as the ones displayed here to recreate the story of the Kuba people’s dynastic history and represent a triad of characters — the founder king, (Mwaash a Mbooy), the king’s sister or lover (Ngaady a Mwash), and the king’s competitor for the attention of the female (Bwoom).
Luba Chief’s Bow Stand  
Democratic Republic of Congo  
Wood  
Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Arthur Steinman, 1993.140

The Luba people of the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo were organized into communities ruled by kings or chieftains. The form of this elaborately crafted object is based on what hunters used to rest their bows and arrows. The leader’s bow stand however is not a utilitarian object. It is used solely to signify authority and symbolizes the mythical hunter hero Mbidi Kiluwe. Royal bow stands were thought to be so potent that they could never be displayed in public even by the king. When he sat in state the king was accompanied instead by a living bow stand in the form of a female guardian with a bow clasped between her breasts. The royal bow stand was kept in a secret spot in the palace along with the sacred relics of past leaders where it was the subject of rituals, prayers, and taboos.

Kuba Skirt (Nshak or Ncak)  
Democratic Republic of Congo  
Raffia  
Museum Purchase, 2000.102

The ornamental skirts adult Kuba women drape around their bodies are often embroidered with black linear designs and outlined with small applique patches of cloth. A long skirt like the one displayed here might be worn with a smaller overskirt. Such cloths are highly prized and often given to establish relationships and repay favors.
Pende Lintel
Democratic Republic of Congo
Wood and Pigment
Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Arthur Steinman, 1993.149

Eastern Pende chiefs built special *kibulu* houses where rituals critical to lineage of the community were performed and where the fertility enhancing powers of the ancestors resided. Although ritual houses varied from region to region, the Pende’s *kibulu* house was usually a four-sided structure with side walls about ten feet long with a central support pole approximately ten feet high. A dome-shaped roof was thatched with a heavy layer of straw, bark or palm fronds, making it distinctive among Pende structures. Relief panels with carvings of male and female figures guarded the door from passersby who were only allowed a glimpse inside. The object displayed here was likely a lintel on such a door.

Bamum Pipe
Cameroon
Wood and Metal
Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Irwin A. Weiser, 2002.009

Pipes for tobacco consumption made of wood or terracotta are common in the Cameroon Grasslands society. The pipes of chiefs and kings however, are extravagantly ornamented and made of precious materials such as brass or ivory. These special pipes are important as ceremonial objects and symbols of status.

Kuba Cap (Mpu)
Democratic Republic of Congo
Raffia and Beads
Museum purchase, 2005.3.1

Important individuals of the Kongo people of the Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola wore caps made of raffia or pineapple fiber known as *mpu* to indicate the religious or political authority of its wearer.
**Fon Lion**  
Republic of Benin  
Copper Alloy  
Gift of Mrs. Edna Beron, 1992.204

Before 1900 the kingdom of Dahomey in Benin enjoyed a monopoly on brass. Because this metal was rare and precious it was used to bolster to power of the king and aristocracy, and artisans belonged to a guild attached to palace. When a king ascended the throne, he was given a special “strong name” that was decided by divination. Glele, the tenth King of Dahomey who ruled from 1858 to 1889 was called Kini Kini Kini meaning Lion of Lions. Therefore lion motifs were common during his reign and were included on wall reliefs in the palace, royal scepters, copper staffs, memorial shrines, and on appliqué banners, pavilions, and umbrellas.

**Yoruba Beaded Sash**  
Nigeria  
Beads and Fiber  
Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Alvin Hayim, 1992.271

The right to wear beaded embroidery or use beaded paraphernalia was reserved for special individuals in traditional Yoruba culture. Kings wore beaded crowns (see no. 31), carried beaded staffs and whisks, and wore beaded robes, shoes, and sashes like the one displayed here.

**Chokwe-Related Group Staff**  
Democratic Republic of the Congo  
Wood and Copper Alloy  
Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Alvin Hayim, 1992.283

**Kerewe Staff**  
Tanzania  
Wood  
Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Alvin Hayim, 1992.287

Kings, chiefs, and those who assumed special positions in the community carried staffs with figures that symbolized their authority.
Akan Stool
Ghana
Wood and Copper Alloy
Gift of Dorothy A. Sturman in memory of George L. Sturman, 2007.29.12

While domestic stools are common in the Akan region of Ghana, chiefs and rulers sat on ornately carved stools to designate their status. When a chief died his stool became a ritual object, was blackened with blood from sacrificial animals, and carefully enshrined in the palace. The motif here is a circular rainbow to suggest that the ruler unifies his people.

Gods

Some African religions have an organized pantheon of gods that connects the creator god to the human community. These examples are from the Yoruba people of Nigeria whose creator god Olodumare or Olorun (Lord of Heaven) manifests himself through divinities known as orisha. These spiritual beings are associated with the energies of nature and were assigned to oversee their realms by Olorun. Most orisha were associated with specific art forms used by worshipers to communicate with and venerate them.

Yoruba Agere Ifa Cup
Nigeria
Wood
Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Irwin Weiser, 2002.027

Yoruba Divination Bag
Nigeria
Beads and fiber
Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Alvin Hayim, 1992.294

These objects are used in the Yoruba divination rite known as ifa. Its purpose is to ask the orisha Orunmila, god of wisdom, to reveal the devotee’s destiny. During the ifa rite, Orunmila’s priest, known as a babalawo, casts 16 special palm nuts on a carved tray. During this procedure the babalawo strikes the tray with an ivory taper to attract the attention of the god. Each configuration of palm nuts is associated with one of 256 bodies of oral knowledge. When their casting is complete the palm nuts are deposited into a special carved cup such as the one exhibited here. The priest then recites the chants associated with the resulting configuration. Babalawos often stored their divination paraphernalia in beautifully beaded bags such as the one displayed here.
**Yoruba Shango Bowl**
Nigeria  
Wood, Camwood Powder, and Washing Blue  
Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Irwin Weiser, 2000.279

Shango is the *orisha* of thunder, storms, and lightning. His symbol is the axe, representing the thunderbolts he hurls from the heavens. Priests venerate him by placing special containers like the one displayed here on altars to Shango.

**Yoruba Osanyin Staff**
Nigeria  
Iron  
Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Irwin Weiser, 2000.190

The *orisha* Osanyin is associated with forests and oversees herbal medicine and healing. This god’s symbol is a wrought iron staff with a circle of 16 birds, (a sacred number associated with divination) and topped by a larger bird. These birds are associated with women whose special spiritual powers can be used for good or evil. The large bird of Osanyin’s staff symbolizes the god’s ability to overcome negative power and promote physical and mental healing.

**Yoruba Oro Efe Gelede Mask**
Nigeria/Republic of Benin  
Wood and Pigment  
Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Alvin J. Curkin, 2000.271

The Gelede society of the Yoruba people of Nigeria and the Republic of Benin exists to honor female deities, spirits, ancestors, and elderly women possessing spiritual powers that could be used for good or ill. Annual festivals are offered for their pleasure and to encourage them to use only their benevolent powers. The evening before the Gelede festival, a masked character known as Efe appears, wearing an elaborate headdress and a voluminous garment made of applique panels. He performs throughout the night, dancing, singing, and making jokes, commenting on society, ridiculing the foolish, and chanting poetry in praise of the women of the community and the female spirits. After an entire night performing, Efe and the audience retire to their homes. Later in the afternoon many other masked figures, both male and female, entertain the spiritual mothers and ask for their blessings.
Venerating Ancestors

After death influential figures were inducted into the spirit world. In return for bringing wealth and fertility to their descendants they expected veneration and proper behavior.

Akan Head
Ghana
Terracotta
Gift of Dorothy A. Sturman in memory of George L. Sturman, 2007.29.30

The Akan people have a long tradition of creating vessels and figures for funerary rites, especially hand-built heads like the one displayed here. These portraits of the deceased and members of their entourage and were used in ostentatious events that bid farewell to the departed dignitary. After the ceremony, the head would be placed on the grave or preserved in a shrine.

Yoruba Crown (Ade)
Nigeria
Beads and Cloth
Gift of Mrs. June Bakalar, 2007.7

The beaded conical Yoruba crown worn on state occasions reflected the spiritual connections of the ruler. The face represents his royal lineage and ultimately the god Odudua, who remained on earth after creation and became the first king. The bird on top of the crown refers to the spiritual power of women and the female spirits that advise and guide the reigning king. Mystical substances were hidden in the crown to assure that the king would be united with the power of his ancestors when he sat in state.
Kissi Pomdo and Figural Container
Sierra Leone
Wood, Glass Beads, Copper Alloy, Animal Teeth, Palm Oil, and Stone
Gift of Ronald and Benita Baird Barab, 1989.079

The Kissi people have lived in small villages throughout the West African coast for hundreds of years. Kissi farmers sometimes find small soapstone figures known as pombo buried in their fields. Exact dating of soapstone is nearly impossible but it is assumed that these figures are quite old. A pombo is believed to be the spirit of an ancestor trying to communicate with the living, so when one is discovered divination is used to determine its identity. After its descendants have been recognized the pombo is placed inside a wooden figure or sealed under fabric wraps and placed in the family shrine. It is not known for sure if a pombo is concealed inside the sculpture exhibited here but the container is typical of that used for the purpose.

Igbo Crest Mask
Nigeria
Wood and Pigment
Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Alvin Hayim, 1992.290

The Igbo people do not have a centralized authority or system of state. They live in hundreds of autonomous villages on either side of the Niger River but are united by a common masquerade culture meant to evoke the spirits but with hundreds of variations. The example exhibited here is a crest to be worn on top of a costumed performer’s head like a hat. Its specific function is unknown because its region of origin is unknown.

Yaka N’kisi Figure
Democratic Republic of Congo
Wood and Cloth
Anonymous Donor, 1997.119

The Yaka peoples of the Democratic Republic of Congo make objects called biteki that are used to house special substances that are inserted into or spread on the surface of the figure. Without the inclusion of these concoctions the biteki have no meaning. Once they have been added or applied the figure becomes an n’kisi and can be used to heal or cause illness when manipulated by a diviner.
Yoruba Ere Ibeji Figure
Wood and Beads
Nigeria
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Alvin Hayim, 1992.274

The Yoruba people have a high incidence of twin births and it is believed that if one twin died it would try to entice the living twin to join it in the spirit world. Parents would have a figure of the dead twin made to keep the living twin company because twin spirits, living or dead, bring prosperity to the kin group. Twins are associated with the thunder god Shango and are seen as feisty and spirited like their patron deity.

Spirits

Various spirits live between the realm of the creator god and that inhabited by human beings. Their powers are perceived as neither good nor bad. It is essential that these spirits be properly approached to ensure that they will act with benevolence and use their powers for the good of the community.

Ijo Water Spirit Mask
Nigeria
Wood, Raffia, and Cloth
Gift of Dorothy A. Sturman in memory of George L. Sturman, 2007.29.51

The Ijo people live in the Niger Delta crisscrossed by rivers and streams. The water spirits that inhabit their world bring wealth and safeguard their environment. Owu, the Ijo word for water spirit, is the same as that used for the masquerade that honors them. The Ijo performer wears a horizontal mask adorned with fish or animals associated with water on top of his head.
Two Dan Masks
Dan Mask (Gunye Ge)
Liberia/Ivory Coast
Wood, copper alloy, cloth, and pigment
Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Alvin Hayim, 1992.291

Dan Mask (Ge Gon)
Liberia/Ivory Coast
Wood, Patina, and Animal Hair
Ms. Merrily C. Baird, 1989.075A

The Dan and related peoples of Liberia and Ivory Coast use spiritually charged masks representing forest spirits known ge for boys’ initiations, preparations for war, and athletic contests. The two masks here may be the characters Gunye Ge and Ge Gon. The former usually has a pleasing oval face with rounded open eyes and wears trousers with a small fiber skirt around the waist. The fastest young men in a family wear Gunye Ge masks in races. Ge Gon masks have beaks, slit eyes, a long jutting nose, and a beard of monkey fur. Ge Gon may represent the hornbill toucan, the first creature to come into existence in Dan mythology. The Ge Gon pecks the soil, flaps its arms, and mimics movements of birds.

Senufo Foot Ring (Tolo Kajin)
Ivory Coast
Copper Alloy
Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Paul Ludwig, 1994.258

Among the Senufo, a wide range of body accessories were prescribed by a diviner to protect against illness or misfortune caused by bush spirits. While most rings and pendants were for such protective or curative purposes, some foot rings were merely for ornament.

Guro Mask (Gu)
Ivory Coast
Wood
Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Arthur Steinman, 1993.126

Among the Guro of Ivory Coast organizations known as Yu employ masks that represent a spirit trio. Zaule, an ancestral spirit, is represented by a somewhat grotesque and coarse animal form mask. He is accompanied by his wife, Zamble, embodied as an elegant antelope mask. The daughter of the spirit pair, Gu, is represented as a beautiful woman, seen in this example. Gu sings the praises of the other two spirits and dances seductively before the onlookers.
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