

# WOMYN MOTHER *hood*

The *wakemia*, or “spoon associated with feasts,” is a work of the Dan people, an ethnolinguistic group living in eastern Liberia and western Côte d’Ivoire. Bestowed upon a particular woman in the village, known as *wa ke de*, the *wakemia* is meant to acknowledge the recipient for her generosity, hospitality, caring nature, industriousness, culinary talent, and service to other people. The womb-like bowl of the spoon acknowledges the essential role of Dan women in life giving and sustenance, through both childbearing and nourishment. The holder of the *wakemia* is a woman of great power, both socially and spiritually, and acts in a maternal role within the community.

Within Yorubaland, which spans across Benin, Nigeria, and Togo, one would find maternity figures, sometimes used as offerings to the deity *òrìsà* to ensure fertility and healthy children. This appears to be a work of the Egba people, who live in Abeokuta, a town in western Nigeria. In a culture that emphasizes the bond between mother and child, Yoruba women’s spiritual, economic, and cultural power is communicated through the maternity figure. Holding her breasts, the woman depicted in this maternity figure demonstrates immense, life-giving generosity, and kneels in offering. We bring these pieces together to celebrate the sanctity of the female role as mothers, caregivers, and social leaders in entirely distinct cultures.

For many peoples of Yorubaland, mothers are the bridges between these worlds, as their reproductive power allows mothers “to see and know more than is permitted to ordinary mortals.” The mother’s ability to both create life and take it away renders their status in Yoruba society “comparable to those of the gods, spirits, or ancestors” To celebrate these spiritual powers, the western Yoruba peoples participate in a masking tradition known as *Gelede*. The ceremony honors elderly women in the community, known affectionately as *awon iya wa*, ‘our mothers.’

Stylistic elements of this maternity figure, including the woman’s wide, almond-shaped eyes and the geometric lines carved vertically into her face and hair, suggest that it was produced, more specifically, by the Egba people. These marks symbolize beauty, identity, and protection. Encountering this woman’s direct gaze, one is struck by the power and significance of motherhood within Yoruba culture.

“One night a spoon-spirit appeared in a dream to the first wife of a farmstead, asking her to use and care for him. ‘Willingly, she said, ‘but you are nowhere to be seen.’

The spirit replied:

*’I only hid myself so that you would not sell  
me to the white men. Early tomorrow  
morning go and look in the thatch above the  
entrance to your house, and you will find me.’*

The next day the woman assembled a group of witnesses, and plunged her hand into the thatch, and-sure enough-withdrew the spoon.”

*“Aye l’oja, orun n’ole.”*  
*Yoruba saying*

“The world is a marketplace [we visit], and the  
otherworld is home.”

The *wakemia*, or ritual spoon, is an essential conduit for contact between Dan women and the power of the *dü*. *Dü* is a ubiquitous force that takes shape through people, animals, and man-made objects that were crafted to channel the spirit’s power. This dark, hardwood *wakemia* is carved in an anthropomorphic form, an abstraction of the female body. Intricate carvings around its handle mimic the effect of scarification. It has a deep, wide bowl, for holding rice or small coins during ceremonies. The *wakemia* are bestowed upon the most hospitable woman in the village, known as *wa ke de* (“at feasts acting woman”). The spoon is the vehicle for the spoon spirit, which assists her in performing her womanly duties. Hosting village feasts, leading masquerades, and presiding over festivals and ceremonies, she is also responsible for caring for guests and her extended family.

The *wakemia* is a symbol of power and honor, and is passed on to a successor. The spoon spirit visits the successor in a dream, to acknowledge her as a worthy *wa ke de*.

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

\*\*\*Note:

The *(re)* should be in the accent color of the exhibit

# *(re)presentations*

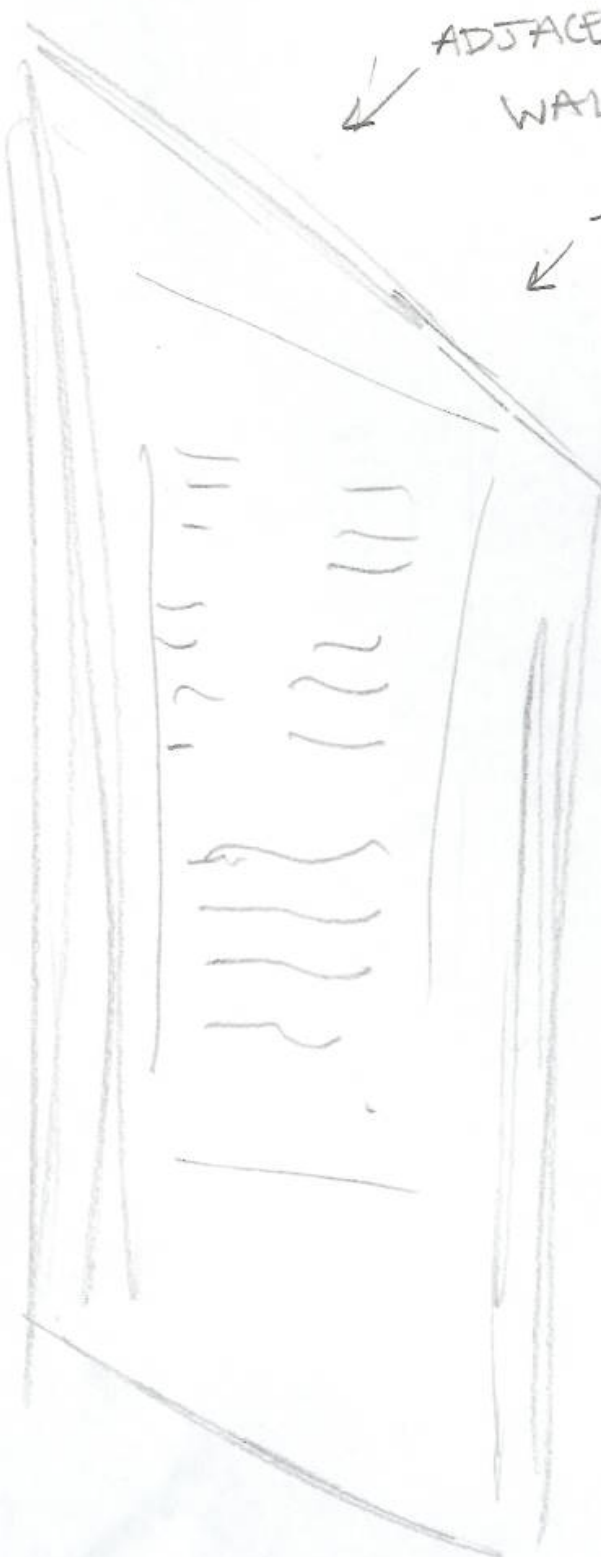
By bringing together these pieces, we aim to call attention to thematic commonalities while attending to contextual differences, in order to precipitate thinking about the artworks' shared evocations of womanhood and motherhood in distinct societies.

However, Western museum curators have a history of doing violence to African art and artifacts through a process of conflation. This may take the form of showcasing large collections of art and artifacts from different styles or regions, and placing them under the umbrella of "African art," contributing to a reductive perception of African visual culture. This act of curatorial erasure through unfounded proximity allows Western viewers to look without **seeing**.

When does proximity *conflate*?

When are *powerful* connections drawn?

How does *context* impact representation?



← ADJACENT WALL

← TEXT about the Maternity Figure + wakenia