The Use of Animals in Birth Protection Rituals and Possible Uses of Stone Figurines from the Central Sahel

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all photos by the author, except where otherwise noted

This article will use fresh ethnographic testimony from the Sahel concerning the role of animals as spiritual protectors during births to advance an hypothesis that figurines in several groups of stone sculptures from the south-central Sahara or the adjacent Sahel may have been used in historic, protohistoric, and even, in the case of one group (IV), prehistoric times as birthing amulets. It will also try to answer questions about the true origins of the lacquered artifacts, which have been sold with vague or even misleading proveniences by dealers in Europe and Africa (Cotter 2012). The purpose of this effort is to give researchers, institutions, and governments a better idea of where illicit excavations might be taking place, so they can refine their efforts to find the sculptures’ sources. Unless this is done with considerable urgency, the sites where the figurines are coming from will almost certainly be sources. Unless this is done with considerable urgency, the sites

The recent appearance of numerous anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines in museum catalogs (Cohen 2008:26, Leloup 2011:350) and sales literature (Levy 2006, Dartevelle 2009) with descriptions indicating that they are Neolithic and were found in the Azawagh (Le Quellec 2006). Even if one admits that camels may have reached the area encompassing Niger, the Azawagh, and Senegal some years before that, the camel figurines and their group (II)—not to mention Group III, which overlaps its corpus iconographically (Caldwell 2013a)—may have been made within the last two millennia.

The next pieces of information concerning proveniences involve the entirety of Group III (Figs. 5, 3Q). This group—in which I have placed all thirty figurines acquired by a single owner from one seller (Figs. 3A–V, X–Y, 3Q), another one that the same collector obtained from a second source (Fig. SW), and a final specimen that appeared in a New York Times article about the impoverished archaeological legacy of central Mali (Cotter 2012)—shares a family likeness with the dark hardstone statuette in Group II (Fig. SW), and a final specimen that appeared in a New York Times article about the impoverished archaeological legacy of central Mali (Cotter 2012)—shares a family likeness with the dark hardstone statuette in Group II (Fig. SW), and a final specimen that appeared in a New York Times article about the impoverished archaeological legacy of central Mali (Cotter 2012)—shares a family likeness with the dark hardstone statuette in Group II (Fig. SW), and a final specimen that appeared in a New York Times article about the impoverished archaeological legacy of central Mali (Cotter 2012)—shares a family likeness with the dark hardstone statuette in Group II (Fig. SW), and a final specimen that appeared in a New York Times article about the impoverished archaeological legacy of central Mali (Cotter 2012)—shares a family likeness with the dark hardstone statuette in Group II (Fig. SW), and a final specimen that appeared in a New York Times article about the impoverished archaeological legacy of central Mali (Cotter 2012)—shares a family likeness with the dark hardstone statuette in Group II (Fig. SW), and a final specimen that appeared in a New York Times article about the impoverished archaeological legacy of central Mali (Cotter 2012)—shares a family likeness with the dark hardstone statuette in Group II (Fig. SW), and a final specimen that appeared in a New York Times article about the impoverished archaeological legacy of central Mali (Cotter 2012)
2 A sampling of the anthropomorphic figurines in Group II of the CSSC, plus a terracotta specimen (O). The only figurine in Group II for which there is an eyewitness report placing it in a specific region is N, which was first seen 25 km to the southwest of Diébélé, Barkina Faso. The best known terracotta figurine (D) with a similar stance and oval head, comes from the same region, Yatenga. N is the same shape as a gneissite statuette in the Bancker-Mueller Museum and shares the upper body structure of M. Also note the similarity of J to groundstone axes, which have continued to be made and used as amulets into historic times, and to the axe-shaped fig- urses of Group II-B below. Figures K and P are said to have been found about 20 km east of Menaka at the southern end of the Azawagh watershed. Although Group II does not show pregnancy as con- sistently as Group III, at least seven of the Group II-7 figures have seated bellies (B, E, G, H, I, U, Y, C, F, K, L, P, W, X, and K) and are all made of amphibolite.

The “seated” family includes one subset (Group IIIi), which consists entirely of anthropomorphs in seated or kneeling positions (Fig. 5A–J) that are made of dense silicified bone—appar- ently from dinosaurs! Having discovered dinosaur tracks myself on the Bandiagara Plateau (which I hope to describe once the area becomes safer for Western visitors, since the trackways often occur together with petroglyphs), it would not be surprising to find a major fossil deposit in the same area. If such an out- cropping can be located, the origin of these seated figurines will probably follow.

What is strange about the second or “standing” family in Group III (Group III-1–6, and the other with extended legs and ogival heads, which I will call the “standing” family (Group III-7) is also a bit of an artifice, since it contains two distinct subsets—one with seated, squatting, or bent legs, generally dis- tinguished by their rounded horns or eyes of the “animals” while their bellies are formed by the humps of the “animals.” Although Group II is more diverse than Group III, both in having a higher rate and differential erosion, which is missing on many other figures, and differential erosion, which is missing on many other figures, and diversity of zoomorphs and in the variety of its anthropomorphs, a great many of its human figures also have swollen bellies (Fig. 28, E, G, H, I, U, Y).

THE AGE AND CULTURAL ASSOCIATIONS OF GROUP IV

Although one figure in the last group of figurines in the CSSC (Group IV) has been linked to the Azawagh (Dartevelle 2006), the other two figures (Figs. 6–7) in the small family have been linked by two anonymous sources to equally desertic regions farther to the east, around Agadez. The three figurines (Figs. 6–7) share the following two commonalities, which set them apart from the rest of the figurines in the CSSC.

• unusually light-colored rocks, which are quite different from the darker stones of the other sculptures.

Two of the figurines in Group IV (Fig. 6, left and center) are also unusually big for the CSSC, suggesting that they might have been used differently, while a second pairing (Fig. 6, center and right) has steatopygic buttocks, grooves around their ankles, and differential erosion, which is missing on many other figures in the southern groups. The strong resemblance between the last two figurines even makes it likely that they were found in the same vicinity—a possibility which is reinforced by the fact that they were traced back through various owners to the same source, who had sold them at the same time to separate clients in Brussels.

were purchased by their owner from the same African source at the same time as the first set. This family seems to fall between the seated subgroup and Group II, with which it has stylistic affinities (Caldwell 2013a).

More important for the purposes of this study, Group III is composed almost entirely of anthropomorphs—many of which are highly pregnant (Fig. 5A–J, L–P, S, W)—with just three zoomorphs (Fig. 5V, X, and an illustrated “elephant”), two of which (Fig. 5V, X, Y) can also be read dor-sally as the torsos of pregnant women. The breasts of these “torsos” are formed by the rounded horns or eyes of the “animals” while their bellies are formed by the humps of the “animals.” Although Group II is more diverse than Group III, both in having a higher rate and diversity of zoomorphs and in the variety of its anthropomorphs, a great many of its human figures also have swollen bellies (Fig. 28, E, G, H, I, U, Y).
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4 Various cultures have expanded into the Sahara, creating a web of influence. The map would be even more complex if enough information was known to map cultural flows back more than five or six centuries. From Marchant 1979:482.

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In conclusion, the three figurines in Group IV probably have the best chance of any of the statuettes in the CSSC of being Neolithic. If they are old, then they may be the ancestors of the groups often placed at a transitional position between Groups II and III, the descendants of a south-central Saharan sculptural tradition, as opposed to northern ones described by myself (Calwell 2012) and Le Quellec (2008), among others.

VOL. 48, NO. 4 WINTER 2015

Another aspect of two green amphibolite figurines in Group II (Figs. 2F, 3B), which turned up when they were studied microscopically by Dr. Erik Gonthier at the Museum national d’Histoire naturelle in Paris in the presence of the author, is that their gloss and shiny crusts, which had often been interpreted as wind gloss, turned out to be caused by a combination of human polishing and a wax substance mixed with fine silica dust, suggesting that they had been heavily handled or that the wax laden with abrasive silica was even a remnant of polishing. One of the
anthropomorphs (Fig. 4F), which did not have signs of either being fake or being very ancient, had such intense wear, including discoloration, on the top of its head, as opposed to its face or the invisible. For without the accord of the ancestors, we believe that such customs might have existed in the zone inhabited by the Gurma (also called the Gourma or the opening of the birthing hut feet first, with a tether from the pasture tied to her ankles. Before putting her down, the participants say “Come child in serenity!” (twelve times) and “Come child in serenity!” (twelve times) again, with divination, making wishes, ensuring veracity, successful childbirth, and overcoming sterility (Hachid 1998:148–53). —

The problem with this line of speculation in the case of the CSSC: protuberant buttocks, a groove differentiating “ankles,” light-colored as opposed to dark stone, and differential erosion. Unlike the majority of figurines, which are reputed to come from the Azilijousha in the case of Group II and central Mali in the case of Group III, the two figures on the right are said to come from the Agadez region. Left) 14.8 cm x 5.5 cm x 5.9 cm. Right) Approx. 2.5 x 3 cm. Private collections.

6 Group IV of the CSSC, which consists of just three lights-colored, female figurines with fused peglegs. The left figure (H: 16.5 cm) is tentatively placed in Group II because of its unusually large size, tapering bottom, and light-colored material. The two female figures on the right have four unusual characteristics for the CSSC: protuberant buttocks, a groove differentiating “ankles,” light-colored as opposed to dark stone, and differential erosion. Unlike the majority of figurines, which are reputed to come from the Azilijousha in the case of Group II and central Mali in the case of Group III, the two figures on the right are said to come from the Agadez region. Left) 14.8 cm x 5.5 cm x 5.9 cm. Right) Approx. 2.5 x 3 cm. Private collections.

7 A polypidic figure in Group IV appears to combine references to a woman’s body (A), a phallicus (B), and a herder’s head with an ear and horn projecting towards the right (D). 14.8 cm x 5.5 cm x 5.9 cm.

8 These two figurines, which reached the market separately from each other and any others, each show characteristics that indicate that they may be outliers. The one at left (H: 8.5 cm x B: 4.5 cm x D: 5.9 cm at the hips), which was sold by a Tigoula instead of a Malinke, is similar in structure to two other figures, one in Group II (D) and another in Group III (F), since it has a groove up the middle, but it differs from them in having extended arms and more jutting and glossy than any other sculpture in the group. The second one is an irregularly shaped bone that was exposed to extensive wind erosion. The figure on the right (B: 3.25 cm H x W: 3.1 cm D) has a globular head and indented belly like the majority of figurines in Group II’s “seated” family but differs from them in its material and stylistic conventions. Although it is made of fossilized bone like the figurines in Group II, the bone isn’t nearly as dense or silicified, suggesting that it comes from another outcrop. Another difference is that its small bulbous legs don’t appear to be knurled or seated. The figure is also among the few figurines with a globular head and big belly that does not have arms. Together, these specifics suggest that this figurine, which has abrasions around the neck indicating that it was used as a pendant, is an outlier with a close affinity to Group III.

BIRTHING AMULETS

When Randall White and Michel Bisson looked for an explanation for the small sizes and mannal polish on another corpus of feminine figurines—this time the fifteen Gravettian sculptures, the sculptures were associated with successful pregnancy and childbirth (Hachid 1998:148–53), while the name suggests that the site had been used in recent times for female initiations. The presence of a recently Neolithic statues, whose features reflect those of both humans and owls, at Tabelbalet, on the northern edge of the Tassili-n’Ajjer, by Tuareg women who painted the statues’ eyebrows with paint and make-up (Camps-Faber 1996:260–61) and associated the sculptures, once again, with divination, making wishes, ensuring veracity, successful childbirth, and overcoming sterility (Hachid 1998:148–53). —

The problem with this line of speculation in the case of Groups I, II, and III would seem to be that they include zoomorphs, although some of the zoomorphs (Figs. 5.I, 5.II, 5.IV, 5.V; 3.A, 3.G) look like pregnant women from certain angles. But oral testimony from African informants revealed that references to animals were common in birth-protection rituals in the central Sahel until the mid twentieth century.

DOCUMENTATION FOR THE WIDESPREAD USE OF ANIMALS IN BIRTH-PROTECTION RITUALS

Some of the most common associations of childbirth with animals involved rites in which an animal was brought into a birthing hut to provide a mother and her baby with an animal’s supernatural protection. According to Dramane Uoboa, a source in the zone inhabited by the Gurma (also called the Goeruma or Gourmantché), which roughly corresponds to the Est administration region, who was a traditional midwife named Marie-Jeanne Barkamba-Yoni, known to her family as “Aunt Jeanne,” used to bring a sheep or goat into the birthing hut to make sure the birth was successful. She practiced this ritual in Niamey in the early 1940s, then in Fada Ngourma, and finally in the 1960s in Bogandé. Another informant named Daouda Diallo, who is a Peul-Rimita, from Bangor near Quagdougou, recorded his maternal great-grandmother Kumbà Diallo’s description of her people’s traditional birthing practices in the following words:

Part II—What happens in the hut: The woman is carried into the interior of the birthing hut feet first, with a tether from the pasture tied to her ankles. Before putting her down, the participants say “Come child in serenity!” (twelve times) and “Come child in serenity!” (twelve times) again, with divination, making wishes, ensuring veracity, successful childbirth, and overcoming sterility (Hachid 1998:148–53). —

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...
be used to define him as "anti-Islamic"), Diawando Peul—who claimed, by the way, to be descendants of indigenous medical practices with some experimentally proven benefits (Helwig 2005, Mackraj and Ramesar 2007).

Finally, Dr. Katimou Maga, who is Songhai and a medical doctor, reported that Songhais would bring a horse into the birthing hut when a woman was having trouble giving birth and would name the child Barkèré, meaning "under the horse," if the child survived. He went on to say that only people over 40 or 50 years old have this first name, although the name has sometimes become a family name. Dr. Maga is the brother of Abdoulaye Maga, who was the Director of the Institut de Recherche en Sciences Humaines (IRSH) in Niamey, which Jean Rouch founded, so it is interesting to note that even such a great Africanist as Rouch apparently never learned of or mentioned such birth protection rituals using animals.

A linguist at the IRSH named Aveymatou Mazou stipulated that the name Barkèré is neutral and was given to both boys and girls. She also reported that two other names were used in association with such births under the protection of a horse: Veronica, meaning "mater," for girls, and Kangy, which refers to the post to which a horse is tethered in a hut. She also thinks that the practice was "just a custom" and not a relic of "animist" thinking.

Be that as it may, the widespread use of animals as spiritual guardians, maternal surrogates, or targets of inflamed menace during birthing rites across much of the Sahel suggests that the practices must have ancient antecedents. The presence of squatting in conjunction with animals in rock art just to the north, in the Sahara, suggests that those antecedents may even be prehistoric, in which case the insight provided by recent testimony might provide an avenue for interpreting such ancient scenes as:

- an engraving of a woman and "baby" from Wadi Alamas in the Messak, which has been interpreted as a birth scene (Gauhier and Gauthier 1994-95, fig. 1), and
- a woman in the "gynecological position" next to a bovine connected to a "placenta" and ewe connected to another possible placenta in the Messak Mellet (Pezzan) (Le Quellec and Gauthier 1992-93:39-40).

The rituals that we have examined from the Sahel are especially reminiscent of Henri Lhote's impression of a painting at Sefar, Algeria (of a pregnant anthropophorom, whose labia are distended as if in childbirth, overlapping a giant antelope), which was expected to follow the odd Ewa (Figs. 1-10).

Finally, there might be an explanation why some of the artifacts exhibit a strange combination of polish and ferruginous clay deposits in dimples left by pecking as well as repeated ref-erences to figurines being found on the surface after hard rains.

The use of amulets that could be clench in a woman's fist(s) as she gave birth might even exemplify a set of small prehistoric artifacts with parallel grooves across their base and rounded backs (Fig. 10), which Yves and Christine Gauhier found in a surface area that could have been covered by a single tent or hut. Upon seeing this manuscript, Yves Gauhier wondered whether the enigmatic objects could have been held by women in a birth- ing hut, since the domed backs fit neatly into the palm of a hand, while the grooves provide a firm grip for one's fingers—some-thing like the grooves between the anomalous number of knobs along the bases of the fused bovine (Fig. 2) and elephant (Fig. 5). Although the use of such Saharan objects and figurines in the southern group as birthing or any other kind of amulet cannot be proved yet, such uses must be considered, given their small size, resistance to breakage, and intense polish. Reduced both the expected value and the probability.

[In the left of a huge horned man] five women were walking one behind the other in a sort of procession. Their hands were raised towards the main figure, apparently in supplication. To the right was a large antelope in red ochre and a woman lying on her belly. Her legs were apart and her belly so swollen that she seemed upon the point of giving birth. This scene certainly has a magic character connected with some fertility or maternity cult. The women, whose whole atti-tude showed clearly enough fear of, and respect for, the main per-sonage, could only be praying to become mothers or to have easy delivery (Lhote 1939:110).

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Three examples of possible visual puns between a woman's anatomy and animals. Such puns appear to be a frequent theme in the CSSC, but seem to be absent among western Saharan zoomorphs.

A) Seated anthropomorph; B) Same figurine as a zoomorph; C) Zoomorph; D) Same figurine from the bottom, with front legs that read as breasts; E) Dorsal view of a quadruped in Group III, which is suggestive of breasts above a seaweed belly. F) Same figurine seen from the side.
Some of them could have been hidden in niches within termite mounds, which often serve as “altars,” between rites for objects and their newborns, indicating that its association with the mother is transferred to the child, who will benefit and will probably continue to enjoy its protective power until death. First, termite mounds are associated with femininity by at least one people, where birth is not possible without the consent of one’s ancestors and a link to animals, which commune with them, since animals are seen as being alert to the visible and invisible. This implies that imagery fusing feminine and zoomorphic features may be an iconography of the living and dead and as sentinels against visiting spiritual beings. These beliefs in which women have been kept together to vary objects and concepts of what is symbolic representation. Although all those people have been incredibly kind, they are in no way to blame for my conclusions or mistakes. 

While we wait for answers, it is also worth determining whether the relational animals as protectors or supernatural substances for imperial women and their babies during childhood extend beyond the Sahel and whether such practices have had an impact on other kinds of African imagery than the ones suggested here. In the meantime, some things have become clearer: the figurines in the CSSC appear to cluster into several stylistically and lithically coherent groups, several of which seem to be related to one another, and indicators place them in the Sahel rather than the Sahara. However, the blacksmiths of the Dogon for example use termite clay to make the refractory aeroplane pipes and furnaces of their furnaces, since the high temperatures of the fire are often very resistant when baked (Huysecom et al. 1997). They also believe that the primitivist blacksmiths, who spread from the umbral cord of the fifth millennium when that being was sacrificed by the celestial deity Amma (Landa 1973, Giraud and Dieterlen 1986), landed upon the Earth with the sacrificed nommos’ “penis and testicles, which he used to make the pipe and bellows of the first forge” (de Heusch 1985:155). The apertures of the blowpipes, in turn, was associated with the vagina and fecundity, uniting male and female principles into a single powerful instrument. If the figurines were indeed hidden in termite mounds with such a rich symbolism, the laying of a figurine by theSahara, rather than the of enigmatic objects in Algeria, and Dr. Erik Gonthier, especially grateful to Jacques Maurel for providing me able testimony concerning disappearing practices. I am also grateful to Ahmadou Amadou Bâ, of the University of Lomé for sharing his testimony concerning disappearing practices. I am also grateful to Ahmadou Amadou Bâ, of the University of Lomé for sharing his testimonies. Some of them could have been hidden in niches within termite mounds, which often serve as “altars,” between rites for objects and their newborns, indicating that its association with the mother is transferred to the child, who will benefit and will probably continue to enjoy its protective power until death. First, termite mounds are associated with femininity by at least one people, where birth is not possible without the consent of one’s ancestors and a link to animals, which commune with them, since animals are seen as being alert to the visible and invisible. This implies that imagery fusing feminine and zoomorphic features may be an iconography of the living and dead and as sentinels against visiting spiritual beings. These beliefs in which women have been kept together to vary objects and concepts of what is symbolic representation. Although all those people have been incredibly kind, they are in no way to blame for my conclusions or mistakes. 

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