Baule Blolo or Spirit Spouses



Baule blolo or spirit spouse figure (detail)

The Baule (pronounced bow-lay) people in the Ivory Coast in West Africa believe there is an alternate world running parallel to the world of the living. The Baule call this world the blolo, or otherworld. It is the spirit world, the point of origin for the spirits of newborns and the place where the deceased reside. The Baule also believe each of us has a mate in the blolo, and this mate can be enlisted to help us solve problems in our world, the world of the living.

Among the Baule, the existence of one's otherworld mate is typically encountered by young adults who face specific problems such as infertility, illness, incompatibility with their real life mate or other significant relationships, and even failure to find a real life mate. Once a person is "diagnosed" by a diviner (called a wunnzueyifue and an important member of Baule society), it may be determined the problem can be "cured" or resolved by marriage to a spirit spouse – in which case a "blolo statue", or spirit spouse is commissioned and carved. Male spirit spouses are called blolo bian; females are called blolo bla.



Baule blolo or spirit spouse figure

Authentic spirit spouses conform to Baule aesthetics, revealing a style where physical attributes are neither too pronounced nor too diminutive. For example, the neck should not be too long, short or thick, but instead, elegant, often shown with the desirable feature of natural, horizontal beauty lines. The butt should be plump, but not overly large; rather, just large enough to accentuate the human form. It should rise just above strong, thick legs, which indicate a person with health, stamina and stability. These are features commonly seen in blolo statues, whose actual appearance is determined by a dialogue between the diviner, physical mate and carver, and may even include the physical mate's family and (arguably) the spirit spouse itself.

The four basic attributes which give a blolo statue meaning to its physical mate are 1) age, 2) social status, 3) adornment, and 4) individuality. Age may reference an historical time frame or simply illustrate age in years relative to its earthly spouse; social status may be denoted by hairstyle, traditional or contemporary costume, and professional equipment such as a briefcase or military uniform; adornment references power objects such as amulets and other jewelry worn by the statue; and its individuality is expressed through features such as head gear, coiffure, fashion accouterments, scarification patterns, foot wear, and its color, which may relate to skin tone.

Each sculpted spirit spouse has a distinct and individual personality known to its physical mate. Once the marriage between the physical mate and the spirit spouse takes place it

becomes the physical mate's obligation to give offerings such as food, money, and genuine TLC (tender loving care) to the spirit spouse on a regular basis. In turn, it becomes the obligation of the spirit spouse to cure whatever problem caused the creation of the marriage in the first place.

The relationship between the physical mate and their spirit spouse can be described as active rather than passive. In fact, physical mates were often compelled by the wunnzueyifue to devote at least one night per week to their spirit spouse instead of their real life mate. The resulting communion was meant to take place in the dream state. As Philip Ravenhill clarifies in his book "Dreams and Reverie", the definitive book on the subject, regular nocturnal dream visits by the spirit mate inevitably lead to an ongoing interpersonal relationship with the physical mate. The purpose of this relationship was to elucidate, decipher, explain, and ultimately, to heal.