



This 33” wooden statue originates from the Dogon group in Mali, dated to around 1900. It depicts a male-and-female couple and is a religious object. This ancestral couple is charged with “creative energy” and has sacrifices made to it each year. The man and woman together represent the balance between masculine and feminine energies; both are equally powerful and important, and their union is a source of great strength. Because of our western interpretation of gender equality, it may be surprising that the Dogon group’s enduring culture actually puts great importance into gender roles. Diverse religious beliefs of Christianity, Islam, and a great deal of animism (belief that all things, from animals to stones to weather, are interconnected and have life and spirituality) can be found among the religiously tolerant Dogon, but the community at large has their own unique set of beliefs. Aside from their incredible woodworking prowess, rituals like their elaborate funeral ceremonies are one of the most important aspects of Dogon culture.

Social organization is shaped by the system of gender roles detailed in the Dogon creation myth.

These roles align generally with the archetypal designation of men working in the fields and construction, and women taking care of carrying water and processing food (Dogon women are free to take to the fields as well, once their own tasks are completed). The patriarchal system is also present as men are considered the heads of their family, and there are other customs pointing toward inequality, such as women living in huts on the edge of villages during their menstrual cycles. However, these facts do not necessarily contradict the meaning of this statue. Dogon society has specific duties and roles for each gender, but women are not considered to be lesser. Both genders have private spaces in their communities, where the other gender cannot enter. Single women are free to own plots of farming land, and although marriages are polygamous (one man with multiple wives), wives have their own rights and can divorce their husbands after bearing him one child. The balance of gender in Dogon culture is quite different from what we experience, but boils down to the same basic truth: women and men have differences, but those differences are equal in significance and are what make society and individuals strong. The wooden statue of a couple is from a time over a century ago, but its message is still carried by its group today.

Much of Barack Obama’s legacy relates to equality, whether it has to do with gender, sexuality, race or socioeconomic class. We live in a much different world than Mali--early 20th century and now--but our societies must grapple with the same questions that come with--real or perceived--

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differences between individuals. The United States still needs plenty of improvement with inequality, but we saw promising federal progress in this matter during Obama's presidency.

Works Cited

Wikle, Thomas. "Living and Spirtual Worlds of Mali's Dogon People." *Focus on Geography*, vol. 59, 2016.