Pair of Crayfish Claws: The Journey to Immortalization

“Any fish in the river or in the sea, any animal on earth or anything else on earth can be modelled by us.” --Asante goldsmith, name unknown¹

Abrammuo: Pair of Crawfish Claws is a miniature sculpture whose existence raises big questions. This bronze sculpture in the round, which could fit comfortably in the palm of hand, depicts the unnatural fusion of two detailed claws. Cast from life in the Asante Kingdom (present-day Ghana) in the 19th century or earlier by an unknown artist, the pair of claws belongs to an animal that is non-native to the whole of the African continent. The object was part of a system of weights that the Akan, a meta-ethnicity that includes the Asante, used in currency transactions at the time. Its display at the Davis Museum at Wellesley College lacks certain authorship information and a defined date.

From this combination of attributes springs questions including: why, how, and in what form did the original crayfish claws arrive in the Asante Kingdom? Why were they cast as a gold weight? The meaning of this object’s existence ultimately lies in the workings of the interconnected systems and networks it touches: Akan gold weights, pre-colonial trade between Europe and the Akan, and crayfish aquaculture in Europe. This paper will attempt to piece together an historical narrative for this object’s journey into existence from this information. In a critique of Western museum acquisition, research, and display of objects, it will also briefly

address the broader question of why this object's history is so mysterious. The gaps in relevant historical information are taken to be a type of information that contributes to the discussion.

The object (see Fig. 1) measures a mere 3.8 x 4.5 x 1cm and is displayed in the corner of a case on its side, a position which mostly conceals the back of the object from view. The two downward curving claws branch outwards from a thin, 2cm long shaft. The claw consists of several rounded rectangular volumes that culminate in two tapering pincers of similar length and thickness. These projections curl inwards towards the shaft at the base of the object. The overall form of the claws--structurally complex but slender as far as other crustaceans

Fig. 1. Unknown Akan artist, Abrammuo: Pair of Crayfish Claws. 19th century or earlier. Bronze, 3.8 x 4.5 x 1cm. The Davis Museum at Wellesley College, Wellesley MA. From The Davis: http://dms.wellesley.edu/detail.php?module=objects&type=browse&id=6&term=DECORATIVE+ARTS&kv=19449&record=736&page=15. (accessed December 16, 2019)
go--seems to confirm the identification as a crayfish, rather than a lobster, crab, shrimp, prawn, or even scorpion.² (Tail shapes, however, are considered to be more reliable identification markers.)³

The bronze surface of the object is a warm brown, whose soft shine highlights shallow dimples, fissures, plates, and ridges. These textures, together with smoother areas, resemble the surface of a rock, an aerial view of a desert-like landscape, or weathered or pockmarked skin. The level of detail and irregularity in these surfaces is highly naturalistic. The marks suggest points of attachment in the claws and the hardness and durability of their material. Another naturalistic feature is the stark asymmetry of the claws—the one on the left is longer and wider, and it curves inward while the shorter right claw points straight down, illustrating a tendency in crustaceans to develop differently shaped claws as a result of using each for different purposes.⁴

Information in the exhibit explains how this object originated from one of the last centuries of a rich period of artistic production in the West African Akan Kingdom, which encompassed present-day Ghana and extended into neighboring Cote d’Ivoire (see Fig. 2).⁵ It is evident from its naturalism that it was created using the “lost beetle” or direct casting process. This technique was a variation on the more popular lost wax casting process, in which a goldsmith sculpted a figure in beeswax, encased in it clay, and heated it to pour out the melted wax. He then introduced molten brass or bronze into the cavity, and later broke away the clay to

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reveal the finished bronze object. The “lost beetle” method replaced the wax model with a beetle or another combustible found object from nature, which was similarly burned out from the clay mold.⁶ The Akan used these processes prolifically, casting millions of miniature human figures, animals, and everyday objects over the course of seven centuries.⁷ The sculptures, called *mrammuo* (singular: *abrammuo*), served as counterweights to measure quantities of currency in the form of gold dust. The Akan considered gold to be sacred and formidable and mined it in abundance in the region. The *mrammuo*, whose design and meaning were independent from their size, ranged from the weight of a grain of rice (called a seed weight) to around 2.5 ounces.

Wealthy and respected people, like chiefs, priests, merchants, and of course goldsmiths, tended to own weights, which they kept in treasury bags and used with a balance scale.⁸ The weights of

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⁸Ott, *Akan Gold Weights*, 18-26
the king in particular tended to be heavier than others’ as a means of taxation.\textsuperscript{9} The overall system was born in the 14th century out of a rise of commerce and taxes to the King and the arrival of Islamic traders from West Sudan with lost wax casting technology.\textsuperscript{10} 

The \textit{mrammuo}, which additionally served as protective charms, conversation starters, and ceremonial and spiritual adornments,\textsuperscript{11} reflect the values of the Akan and their engagement with the world around them. They show a multitude of people, animals, plants, and implements individually and in combination with each other.\textsuperscript{12} These representations are frequently associated with one or more of the many humorous and elegant proverbs employed regularly in Akan speech.\textsuperscript{13} For example, a person might remark, “if you swear an oath alone in a pit, it still leaks out”\textsuperscript{14} or “the bird caught in a trap sings sweetly (so that you release it)”.\textsuperscript{15} The \textit{mrammuo}’s portrayals of edible plants and animals of the land, sea, and air (and their corresponding proverbs) demonstrate an especially rich understanding of local flora and fauna.\textsuperscript{16} 

\textit{Pair of Crayfish Claws} stands out from this historical context because the animal to which they belong was hardly local. In a 2015 study published in the journal \textit{Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B}, Nadia I. Richman et al. state, “freshwater crayfish (Astacidea) exhibit a disjunct global distribution with the majority of species diversity restricted to temperate latitudes and an absence of native species in continental Africa and the Indian 

\textsuperscript{9}Courtlander, \textit{A Treasury of African Folklore}, 116
\textsuperscript{10}Visonà, \textit{History of Art}, 204-205
\textsuperscript{11}Wistar, \textit{Masterpieces in Miniature}, 5
\textsuperscript{13}Visonà, \textit{History of Art}, 197
\textsuperscript{14}Courtlander, \textit{A Treasury of African Folklore}, 116
\textsuperscript{15}Wistar, \textit{Masterpieces in Miniature}, 14
\textsuperscript{16}Ott, \textit{Akan Gold Weights}, 21
subcontinent.” This absence could be due to interspecies competition within the same ecological niche, an unsuitable environment, or even the timing of the separation of the supercontinent Gondwana, although it remains inconclusive. The earliest that crayfish populations were introduced to any part of Africa was the 1970s, when three species were introduced to South Africa and one to Kenya. Since then, invasive crayfish populations have spread to several African countries, but these have yet to include Ghana.

This absence of the crayfish from the biological record of the Akan Kingdom distinguishes *Pair of Crayfish Claws* from the vast majority of “lost-beetle” casts, which used items found in the local or regional landscape like insects, snail shells, bird feet, peanuts, and seed pods. Single crustacean claws were frequently cast as well and are currently visible in the collections of major museums, including the Detroit Institute of Art, Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. These claws often belong to crab or lobster species native to the Gold Coast. Despite its non-native status, *Pair of Crayfish Claws* is not the only one of its kind—a LaSelle University exhibition in 2000 entitled *Akan Goldweights*:

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18Richman, “Multiple drivers of decline,” 2


20Plass, *African Miniatures*, 12

Masterpieces in Miniature, for instance, featured a crayfish claw. Additionally, Albert Ott writes in the journal article “Akan Gold Weights” that crayfish are among the aquatic animals frequently depicted as weights. This incongruence perhaps raises doubts about the accuracy of identifying crustaceans by only their claws or questions the accepted biological record of Ghana, but for the purpose of this paper, museum information and scientific consensus will be taken to be true. So, the question stands: how did crayfish claws arrive in the Akan Kingdom?

Fig 3. An example in the collection of the Detroit Institute of the Arts of an Akan life cast of a crab claw.

Unknown Akan artist, Crab Claw Gold Weight, 17th or 19th century, brass, 1.9 × 5.4 × 3.2 cm, Detroit Institute of the Arts, Detroit, MI, https://www.dia.org/art/collection/object/crab-claw-gold-weight-105714.

The answer is likely related to the well-established trade relations between several European countries and West and North Africa. Europeans began to cross the Sahara in search of gold in the Middle Ages. By the end of the 15th century, the still gold-hungry Portuguese were

\[22\text{Wistar, Masterpieces in Miniature, 15}\]

\[23\text{Ott, Akan Gold Weights, 21}\]
sailing directly to Ghana. Soon joined by rival Dutch, English, French, Swede, and Danish invader-merchants, they constructed trading posts and forts along the Gold Coast. The emerging gold, ivory, and slave trade lent the Asante Kingdom prosperity and stability, and the state became the center of the gold trade. The Akan managed to conceal their gold mines in the rainforest and had generally good relations with these foreign powers, which they buoyed through gift-giving, diplomacy, and shared meals. In exchange for their highly desired commodities, the Akan received a wide variety of goods. During the estimated 18th to 19th century period in which Pair of Crayfish Claws was created, those imports likely consisted mostly of textiles, manufactured items, alcohol, and guns.

Although a much smaller proportion of imports, aspects of European cuisine were also introduced to West Africa. The crayfish whose claws were later cast may have belonged to this category. Europeans had been eating the Astacus Astacus--known commonly as the European crayfish, noble crayfish, or broad-fingered crayfish, and one of Europe’s five native crayfish species--as a delicacy for centuries. While it may have been eaten as early as the 13th century in Central Europe, it was not until the 19th century, around the time Pair of Crayfish Claws was cast, that a significant aquaculture industry developed to meet rising demand across the continent. As they were frequently traded within Europe, it would not be surprising if a

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24 Wistar, Masterpieces in Miniature, 3
25 Courlander, A Treasury of African Folklore, 129
28 Richman, "Multiple drivers of decline," 2
small number were brought as food by traders from any number of the countries venturing to West or North Africa. The whole body or just parts like the claws may have also been traded as curiosity items, as well. This theory might be especially likely if the claws were fused before they came to the goldsmith who cast them. It should be noted as well that the crayfish part or whole could have arrived in an Asante market by a number of routes—North African-focused trade was, after all, a more robust network than coastal trade directly with Europeans. The crayfish could have, essentially, trickled down to the Asante state. The question of why the claws were cast, however, remains. What might they have signified as a foreign subject cast into the symbolism-rich system of Akan gold weights?

The casting of foreign subjects was actually not uncommon in the later centuries of the period of Akan gold weight production. Trade objects brought to the region by Islamic North Africans and, later, Europeans were incorporated into the repertoire. Artisans relied heavily on ancient designs but, as one experienced goldsmith once explained in an interview, some also cast objects they happened to stumble upon: “when we are travelling and we see a shell for instance, we keep it in our pocket and copy it later on. The spiral we have taken from the mfonfon leaf.” This spirit of spontaneity might explain a goldsmith’s initiative to cast an interesting pair of crayfish claws that he might have found, for example, at the market or discarded from a meal or food preparation. Because crayfish claws would have resembled those of local clawed creatures like crabs, lobsters, and scorpions, the subject could have inherited a similar meaning that encouraged its casting as a gold weight, as well. For example, a crab claw weight was sometimes used in contentious money transactions because it meant “pay

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30 Logan, "A History of Food without History," 251

31 Wistar, Masterpieces in Miniature 7

32 Ott, Akan Gold Weights, 20
what you owe me or I will fight you for it." Animals like crabs and mudfish that could live both on land and water were also thought to be especially powerful as well, and this respect could have been extended to the crayfish.34

Although the scenario appears likely that *Pair of Crayfish Claws* began as a European trade object that an intrigued Asante goldsmith cast into bronze, gaps in relevant academic literature mean the story is neither fully complete nor certain, for now. A lack of thorough information on the history of Ghanaian cuisine, for instance, means crayfish cannot be contextualized as a food item in pre-colonial Ghana. The lost names, too, of artists and workshops whose work was essentially stolen and is now exhibited in museums around the world shroud the biography of this object and many others in a degree of mystery. The 19th and 20th British expansion and annexation of the Gold Coast led to much of this acquisition of Akan objects and their gifting to Western museums. Of the items from which looters selected, the *mrammuo* were especially portable and attractive.35 As a result of this history, many museums—including all of those whose objects informed this paper—often lack authorship information beyond a cultural group and can provide a date of creation only as specific as a particular century or a range of centuries.

The journey of *Pair of Crayfish Claws* to the Davis Museum further adds to its complex biography. The object should be first and foremost considered a product of the Akan people, but as an embodiment of the intersection between biological history, measurement systems, artistic production, trade, travel, and colonialism (at the least), *Pair of Crayfish Claws* is truly a global object.

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33Visonà, *History of Art*, 207

34Ott, *Akan Gold Weights*, 21


Unknown Akan artist, Crab Claw Gold Weight, 17th or 19th century, brass, 1.9 x 5.4 x 3.2 cm, Detroit Institute of the Arts, Detroit, MI, https://www.dia.org/art/collection/object/crab-claw-gold-weight-105714.


