



WEDNESDAY 5 TO SUNDAY 9 JUNE 2013

# BRUNEAF XXIII

didier CLAES



## LUBA

The round striated masks of the Eastern LUBA have long been associated with the *kifwébé* society. This vague terminology, used in discussing striated masks as a whole, in fact refers specifically to the *Bwadi bwa kifwébé* society found among the neighbouring SONGYE, whose masks share the same typology of shape and ornamentation.

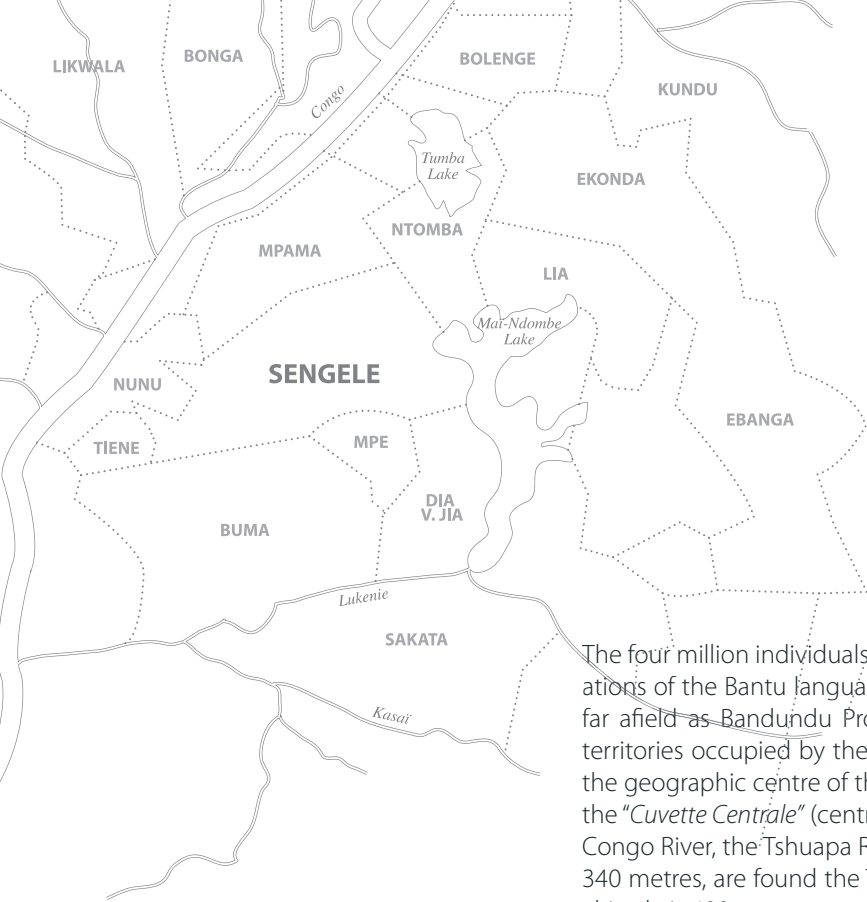
While it is well established that the LUBA “borrowed” this mask tradition from the SONGYE, recent research indicates that they certainly had round masks before any such influence. Their shape, doubtless inspired by gourds (or wood vessels sculpted to resemble gourds), takes on a resonance specific to the LUBA in their aesthetic production: it evokes the moon, which for the LUBA has feminine connotations and is associated with the spirit world. It is possible that this type of mask once belonged to a specifically LUBA society predating the *Kifwébé*, possibly the *Bukas-andji*.

That these masks, with their half-closed eyes and sense of great gentleness, are linked to a brotherhood violently criticised by the colonial powers for necrophagous practices, makes these rare – but often-copied – emblematic works of African art the subject of constant attention.

LUBA mask  
Democratic Republic of Congo  
wood, kaolin - diameter 43 cm  
late 19<sup>th</sup>–early 20<sup>th</sup> century (carbon dating carried out 1 February 2010 by Brussels Art Laboratory)  
private collection, the Netherlands  
François Neyt, manuscript stylistic study dated 27 December 1980  
Jean Willy Mestach, manuscript expertise note dated 21 November 1997  
photo © Philippe de Formanoir

### Note

1 Julien Volper, *Pour qu'en bas on l'entende. Les masques ronds striés des Luba orientaux*, Brussels, Momentum Publication, 2012



# SENGELE

## context

The little-known SENGÉLE occupy the edge of the great MONGO migrations, which has led to a certain amount of integration, although their peripheral geographic position places them in the margins of that vast cultural entity.

The four million individuals who make up the MONGO people speak variations of the Bantu language Lomongo, dialects of which are found as far afield as Bandundu Province and the Mai-Ndombe District – the territories occupied by the SENGÉLE. Broadly defined, the MONGO occupy the geographic centre of the Democratic Republic of Congo, known as the “*Cuvette Centrale*” (central basin), an immense gorge drained by the Congo River, the Tshuapa River, and their tributaries. At its lowest point, 340 metres, are found the Tumba and Mai-Ndombe lakes. The average altitude is 400 metres.

According to geologists, there was an inland lake here at the end of the Tertiary Age, about ten million years ago. Today, the area’s 800,000 km<sup>2</sup> are covered in evergreen rainforest. The Congo River forms a natural border to the west and north, the Lualaba to the east, and the Kasai and Sankuru rivers to the south. MONGO cultural borders are somewhat

more restricted: the “Umongo stylistic zone” ends at the Lukenie River to the south and is bordered by the Lomami River to the east.

The last several thousand years have seen the biotope in the basin change repeatedly, alternating between wooded savannah and forest. It was during the same period that the region became populated. While no skeletal remains have been found, some anthropologists sug-

gest that the earliest inhabitants were pygmies, although others believe they were bigger; in either case, they were hunter-gatherers who also fished the lakes and rivers.

Archaeologists have established that about 40,000 BP, the first inhabitants carved Lupemban-type stone tools which evolved, around fifteen thousand years ago, into Tshitolian stone carving. Vestiges of a Neolithic culture dating from 2,500 BP have been found in the region, notably elegant and richly decorated pottery. Ironwork appeared about four hundred years later.

Linguists believe that Bantu speakers from Neolithic cultures in Cameroon and Nigeria gradually settled the basin beginning around 3,000 BP.

The migrants would have mixed with local people, thus creating the different MONGO peoples we know today. Made up of about forty large independent groups with no centralised power, they were ruled locally by chiefs and counsels of elders.

Approximately seventeen thousand SENGÉLE live in Bandundu Province, the western-most part of this vast body, with the Congo River to their west and north and Mai-Ndombe Lake to their east.



*Ebandja, chef Mosengele du village de Penge, 1913-1914*  
 APO.0.14159 MRAC Tervuren collection  
 photo : Philippe Tits (J. Maes mission) MRAC Tervuren ©

## Statuary

Certain populations throughout the MONGO area make paired figures.

The KELA especially, in the east of the territory, make remarkable paired male and female statues. The same kind of production is even found among the western MONGO, where figurative statuary is less common.

The two SENGÉLE figures presented here are therefore extremely rare. The only comparable figures are six sculptures held by the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren (see p.3), five of which were donated by Mr. Pochet on 12 June 1913. It is possible that they were acquired during the expedition undertaken in 1913 and 1914 by Joseph Yvon Maes (1882–1960) to the area around Lake Léopold II (now Mai-Ndombe Lake). Information offered at the time suggests they were funerary figures to be placed on tombs.

*The two Sengéle figures presented here are extremely rare.*



pair of SENGÉLE figures  
 Mai-Ndombe District, Democratic Republic of Congo  
 wood - height 53 cm & 55 cm  
 acquired *in situ* by E. Couplet, (circa 1907)  
 photo © Philippe de Formanoir (idem page 3)



# Description

These statues, like all the known specimens, represent a standing man and woman. They have been sculpted with rigorous symmetry, and their postures are stiff and static. The position of the small arms pulled up against the body, from which the hands are detached, is unusual, however.

As in most cases, the head is round, but the hair, generally striated, is smooth in this case. The triangular nose is handled in low relief, and the mouth is hardly more than a simple groove below which is a small, pointed chin. The surface of the face, fairly plain, has a vaguely heart shape. The legs of these figures are slightly apart, and the feet have been rather abruptly carved.

Minimal ornamentation is found on the female piece: a bonnet hairstyle indicated by two parallel lines carved around the head, and linear scarification on the belly.

This slightly rough general look is reinforced by the overall dark, "dry" colour of the whole, which contrasts with the lighter protrusions. This is typical of such figures, which, although used for rituals, would not have received libations.



Detail of an illustration from the *Annales du musée du Congo Belge* with the six Sengele figures from the Tervuren museum

## Eugène COUPLET, officer (1881-1909)

Eugène Couplet enlisted in the 1<sup>st</sup> Foot-hunters Regiment when he was sixteen years old. He was promoted to corporal on 18 April 1897, and was a sergeant major when he successfully sat the officer's exam in 1904, advancing to second lieutenant on 11 January 1905. He immediately joined the Force Publique, leaving from Antwerp for the Congo Free State eight days later. He arrived in Boma in early February, and was assigned first to the general staff before moving on, in July, to join the company at Lake Leopold II. He was named company commander on 4 January 1907, and promoted to full lieutenant the next day. On 16 February 1908, his first tour completed, he left for furlough in Belgium.

It was almost certainly during this first trip, between his arrival in the Lake Leopold II region in July 1905 and his departure for Belgium in February 1908, that Eugène Couplet acquired the two Sengele statues we present here. He might even have used his trip as a chance to bring them home.

Several months later, in November 1908, he left to take up his post in the brand-new colony: on 15 November 1908, the Belgian Parliament had voted to annex the Congo Free State, and taken control of its administration. This time, however, his trip would be cut tragically short. Couplet fell ill in July of the following year, and had to be evacuated to Boma. He died aboard the steamer *Delivrance III*, somewhere near Kwamouth, before they were able to reach the capital.

According to the biographical notice published by A. Lacroix on 15 December 1948 (see bibliography)

## Style & iconography

In his recent study of Congo River art, François Neyt (2010, p.194) established a stylistic link between SENGELE statuary and that of regions further north.

He highlights in particular that, in these zones, the arms of ancestor figures always form a rhombus, with the elbows as the obtuse angles. This recurring morphological element links sculptures of completely different styles, and indeed is found in sculptures made by the MBEDE, the KOTA, the NGBAKA, the NGBANDI, the BANDA (MOBAYE), the NYAMUSA in Sudan, the SARA in Tchad, and the CHAMBA in eastern Nigeria.

Some of these groups, situated in the Ubangi Province, even make paired ancestor figures similar to those shown here. According to Georges Meurant (see 2007, pp. 141–229), these sculptures illustrate the passage from initial funerary commemoration into symbol and myth, with the representation of a male-female/brother-sister pair, founders of the culture.

It appears that SENGELE couple statues were marginal in this evolution towards ancestor worship. The two figures are therefore a vestige of an ancient funeral rite of which they are now rare examples



## Bibliography

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- Meur, C., *Peoples of Africa. Ethno-linguistic Map*, Brussels, Institut royal colonial belge, 1951, col. 199-200
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Democratic Republic of the Congo

# LWALWA

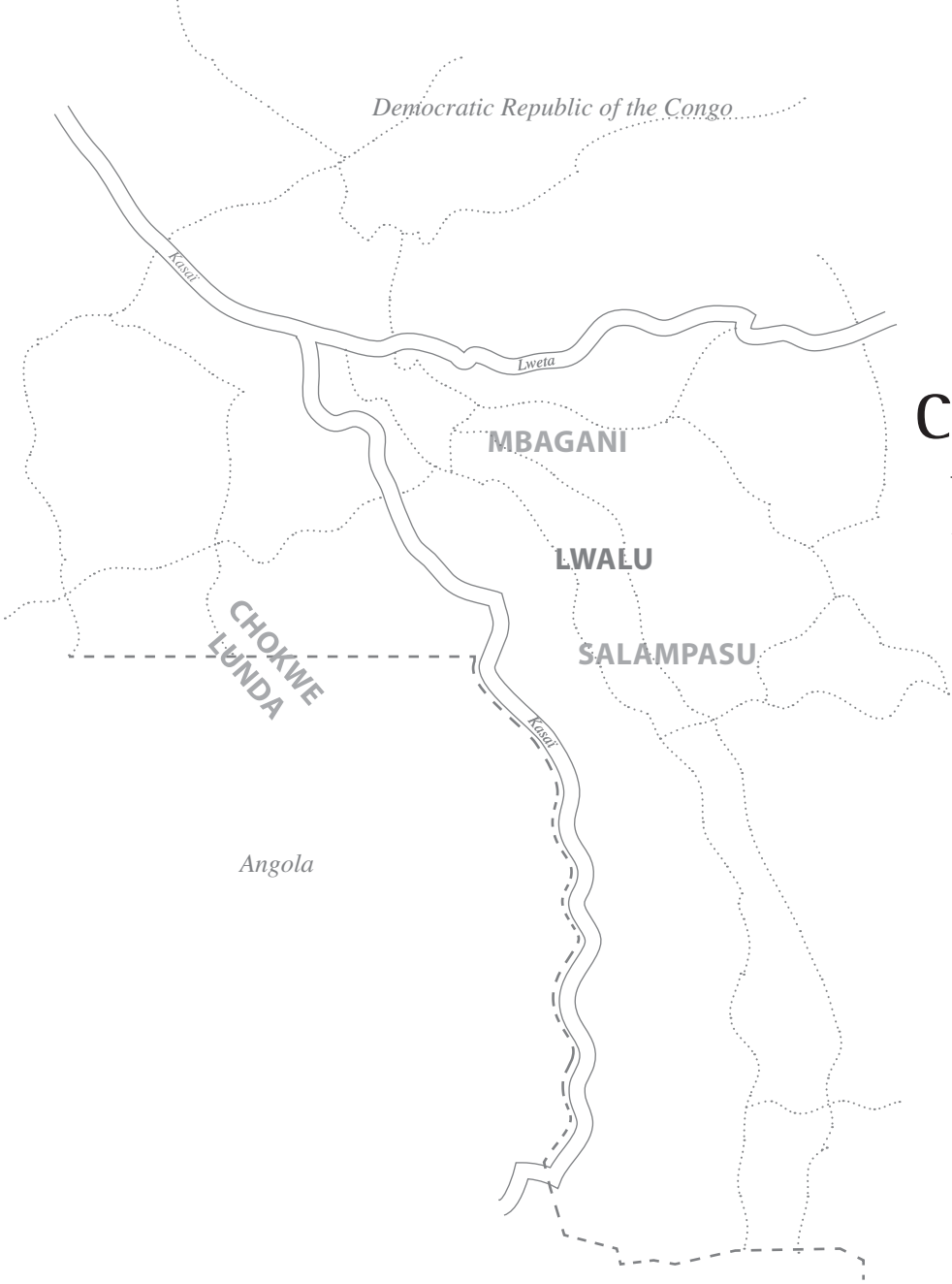
## Context

The LWALWA live in the southern Democratic Republic of Congo, on the border with Angola, in the western Kasai region, at the heart of the fertile territory between the Kasai and Lueta rivers.

Their environment led them gradually to abandon hunting as their principle activity in favour of agriculture. Beginning in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, they developed a long tradition of interaction with other Central African populations, notably the MBAGANI, SALAMPASU (cultural and linguistic links), KETE (with whom they share a common origin), LUNDA (shared religious system), YAKA, SUKU, and KONGO (from the name given to the LWALWA in Angola).

Masks of exceptional character and style have made LWALWA art famous, although it remains little known beyond these stunning objects. This mask is a remarkable example.

The symmetric composition of the rhombus face is balanced by the horizontal line formed by the eye slits – lined in kaolin – and prolonged by the scarifications at the temples and the small ears, and by the vertical line drawn by the movement of the sagittal crest into the prominent nose and tubular mouth. The relief of these elements is heightened by the concave surface of the face. The beautiful bronzed patina would have been made using a kakula-seed pigment mixed in oil (Ceyssens, 1995, 327); the hairstyle, decorated with a carved grid and circles filled with kaolin, is somewhat darker.



*Masks of exceptional character and style have made Lwalwa art famous.*



LWALU (LWALWA) *Nkaki* mask  
Democratic Republic of Congo  
wood, kaolin - height 31 cm  
acquired in situ by the missionary Willy V., before 1950  
private collection through inheritance, Belgium  
photos © Philippe de Formanoir (idem p. 5)



If the classification of LWALWA masks offered by Paul Timmermans (1967, pp. 73–90) remains uncertain, it nevertheless helps in telling feminine masks, with their complex hairstyle, from masculine masks such as this one. These can be divided into three categories, differentiated mostly by the shape of the nose, the aquiline profile of which can be associated with this population.

The long, thin bridge of the nose rising into the base of the hairstyle allows us to classify this piece as belonging to the nkaki category of masks. According to Ceyskens (1995), this characteristic face is inspired by the beak of a woodland bird living near rivers, after which the masks are named. They are sometimes mistaken for mfondo masks, which have a shorter nose.

The scarifications – edjindula or kankolo – decorating the temples are also specific to masks made by the LWALWA and related groups.

The perforation above the nose was for a string that the dancer would hold in his teeth to keep the mask in place.

Long ago, these masks would have been used during important rituals linked to circumcision and initiation societies, or in ceremonies dedicated to the hunt and fertility. Women and children were therefore forbidden to see them. More recently, they have been used in entertainment, worn by young dancers who go from village to village, performing in exchange for food and drink.

Beginning in the 1930s, LWALWA masks – specifically of the type presented here – were much sought after for their near-abstract aesthetic qualities. The stylised handling of the face instantly conjures the African influence on modern art.

The purity of this piece, with its russet patina, places it on a level with the most beautiful examples of LWALWA art known from museums (the musée Dapper in Paris, the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, etc.) or prestigious private collections (Willy Mestach collection in Brussels).



Picasso, Pablo (1881-1973)  
*La femme qui pleure*, 1937. Paris, musée Picasso  
 painting 55 x 46 cm  
 © Picasso Administration - SABAM Belgium 2013

*The purity of this piece places it among the most beautiful examples of Lwalwa art known from museums and prestigious private collections.*

#### Bibliography

- Anne-Marie Bouttiaux, *Persona. Masques d'Afrique : identités cachées et révélées*, exhibition catalogue, Tervuren, RMCA, Milan, 5 Continents, 2009, pp. 248-249  
 Rik Ceyskens, *Trésors d'Afrique. Musée de Tervuren*, exhibition catalogue, Tervuren, RMCA, 1995, pp. 328-329  
 Jean Cornet, *A Survey of Zairian Art. The Bronson Collection*, exhibition catalogue, Raleigh, North Carolina Museum of Art, 1978, pp. 178-183  
 Constantin Petridis, *Face of the spirits*, exhibition catalogue, Antwerp, musée Ethnographique, 1993, pp. 100-102  
 Paul Timmermans, « Les Lwalwa » in *Africa Tervuren*, n° 13, 1967, pp. 73-90



# HEMBA



HEMBA *Soko-mutu* mask  
Democratic Republic of Congo  
wood - height 18 cm  
private collection, the Netherlands  
photo © Philippe de Formanoir

The HEMBA are best known for their majestic ancestor statues. Less common – and less commonly held in Western collections – are their masks, which have only recently been the subject of study<sup>1</sup>.

This small mask, with a fine, dark, and slightly crackled patina, represents *Soko-mutu*, an ambiguous figure, half-man, half-monkey. He is probably an allegory of death, belonging at once to the world of the village and to that of the bush.

Because they are so small, these masks were sometimes believed to have been belt ornaments. Even if these objects mostly remained in the home, where they played a protective role, they were also used in mask rituals, essentially during important funerary ceremonies.

*Soko-mutu's* usual costume – consisting of a headdress made from black and white monkey hide and a long beaten-bark “jacket” covering the whole body – gives an idea of the grotesque and terrifying effect the appearance of this mask, with its enormous mouth, would produce. The choreography was just as impressive. The mask at first gesticulates in a disorderly fashion, respecting none of HEMBA society's prohibitions. Then he reverts to a certain orderliness of movement and more civilized conduct. During the first phase of his appearance, women and children flee from him in fear, and everyone, even old men,

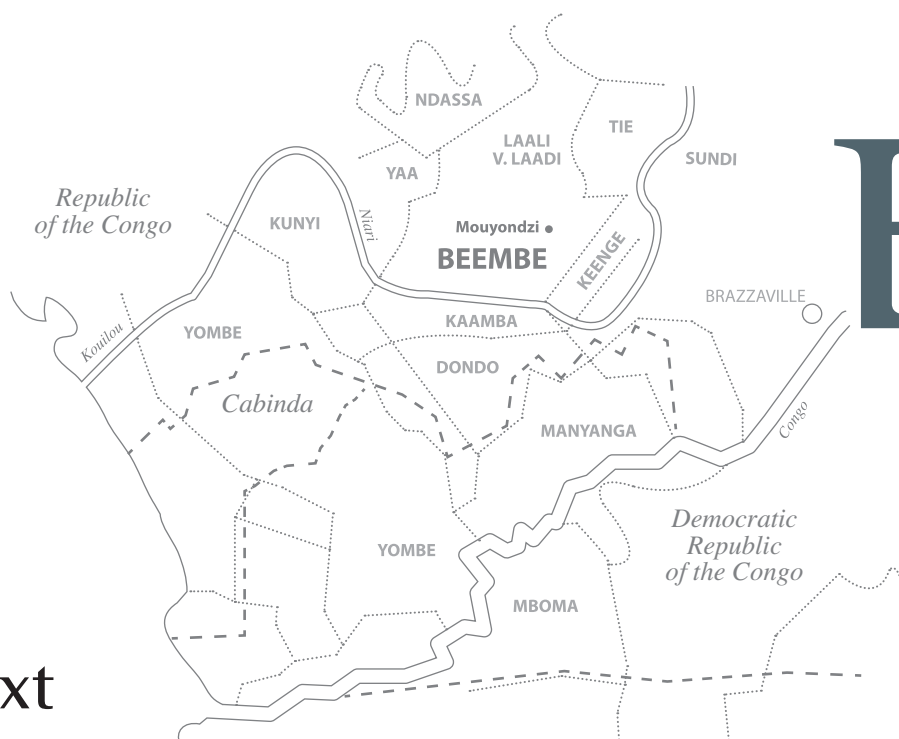
avoids his gaze. During the second phase, the audience, “reassured” by his semi-domesticated behaviour, return to watch *Soko-mutu* perform his dance.

As in many other African societies, these simian representations are paradoxical and transitional. For the HEMBA, *Soko-mutu* arouses a strange confusion of feelings, between terror and fascination. Associated with fertility but taking part in funerals, he is both beneficial and disruptive<sup>2</sup>.

Out of context, the harmonious oval face of this small, smiling mask means Western eyes will mostly see *Soko-mutu's* attractive and amusing side.

## Notes

- 1 In his 1977 reference book, *La grande statuaire Hamba du Zaïre*, François Neyt barely mentions these masks, and illustrates only one specimen with this typology. A few years later, in *Arts traditionnels et histoire au Zaïre* (1981), he discusses them more specifically (p. 282). The standard work on Hamba *Soko-mutu* masks is an article by Thomas D. and Pamela A.R. Blakely, “So'o Masks and Hamba Funerary Festival”, which appeared in 1987 in *African Arts* (vol. XXI, n°1, pp. 30-37) following an important field study dedicated specifically to these objects.
- 2 Anne-Marie Bouttiaux, *Persona. Masques d'Afrique : identités cachées et révélées*, exhibition catalogue, Tervuren, RMAC/Milan, 5 continents, 2009, p. 132



## Context

Living away from the axes of European incursion, the BEEMBE remained practically unknown until the beginning of French colonisation. The few Westerners to have entered their territory before then left few accounts concerning their sculpture.

This unawareness, coupled with a lack of interest in small statuary among European collectors and museums, meant it wasn't really identified until much later. Bertil Söderberg's is surely the first major study of the subject<sup>1</sup>, compiled using unpublished notes written by his colleagues at the Stockholm mission. Raoul Lehuard's scrupulous research then helped distinguish several distinct stylistic areas, and highlighted that most BEEMBE art-production centres were found in or around Mouyondzi, a city “which the Beembe rightly consider their regional capital”<sup>2</sup>.

## Description

Despite Raoul Lehuard's formidable work on BAKONGO statuary styles, it is hard to assign the piece presented here to a specific centre.

With its ovoid head, in which the face appears as an ovular intaglio, this piece could theoretically be linked with the MINKENGE sub-style. As for the body, it is almost entirely covered by material, hiding any possible accessories (rifle, bell, etc.) or scarification motifs typical of this kind of statuette. Only the extremities remain visible. These are treated in characteristic BEEMBE style: the head proudly raised, with glass shards for eyes, and the solid feet, with their finely rendered toes, guaranteeing the sculpture's stability.

The body is wrapped with a cloth to hold the “magic cargo”. To the front is a group of sachets and knots surrounding a metal spike stuck in the middle of the “paunch”.

While BEEMBE statuettes are most often linked with ancestor worship, the large

“cargo” and other attributes mean this figure was almost certainly used in a ritual therapeutic context, and might represent the nganga himself, as suggested by the way he gazes towards the beyond.

Presumably made by two different people – the sculptor and the ritualist – this is nevertheless a work of aesthetic homogeneity, the beauty of which resides in its dominant spherical forms (head, body, accessories), particularly the successive circles which lead from the head (the crown of hair, the round face, the necklace of beard) all the way to the feet.

## Notes

- 1 Bertil Söderberg « Les figures d'ancêtres chez les Babembe » in *Arts d'Afrique noire*, n° 13, 1975
- 2 Raoul Lehuard, *Statuaire Babembe*, Milan, 5 Continents, 1989, p. 326

# BEEMBE



BEEMBE statuette  
Republic of the Congo  
wood, composite materials - height 21 cm  
estimated date: late 19<sup>th</sup>–early 20<sup>th</sup> century  
acquired in situ before 1940  
photo © Philippe de Formanoir



# KEAKA

## Context

South of the Donga River are several small groups – neighbours of the MAMBILA – to whom the Germans gave the Fulani name KAKA.

Living on the high plateaux near the Cameroon–Nigeria border, they were only really identified in the 1970s. Although C. K. Meek in 1931 noted the existence of a KAKA group, which he placed in Cameroon, it is difficult to know if this is really the same ethnic group, as the border between the two countries was at the time mostly theoretical.



KEAKA statue  
Cameroon / Nigeria  
wood, sacrificial crust - height 41 cm  
private collection, the Netherlands  
photo © Philippe de Formanoir



KEAKA statue  
Cameroon / Nigeria  
wood, sacrificial crust - height 47 cm  
Lore Wymer collection, Rosenheim, Germany  
photo © Philippe de Formanoir

## Description

The art of the KEAKA (as the KAKA are now known) was deeply influenced by their neighbours in the Nigerian grasslands.

Their statues and masks, like those of the BANGWA of Cameroon, are covered with a thick, grainy crust, suggesting repeated libations.

While we don't know their exact functions, these statues are sometimes called "ancestor figures". They were likely used prophylactically and were doubtless linked with therapeutic rites.

The two pieces presented here are of different styles. The more abstract of the two has a triangular face with fine hatching to indicate the hair and beard. Facial features have been reduced to a square mouth, opened wide. The arms are folded against the cylindrical body, the bent legs form a marked angle, and the toes of the large feet are indicated on the side, in the same direction as the hands placed on the belly.

The second piece is characterised by a more detailed handling of the

head. The hairstyle is rendered with five lines engraved lengthwise, the eye sockets are deeply carved, the open mouth shows pointed teeth.

These two sculptures demonstrate perfectly the way in which KEAKA art is, to some degree, a transitory style between those of the CHAMBA and the MUMUYE on the one hand, and that of northwest Cameroon on the other.

With its "Cubist" simplification of forms and its powerful expressionism, KEAKA statuary demonstrates aesthetic approaches and vocabulary which influenced Western art at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### Note

1 C.K. Meek, *A Sudanese Kingdom: An Ethnographical Study of the Jukun-Speaking Peoples of Nigeria*, Londres, Kegan Paul, 1931 & New York, Humanities Press, 1950



# DOGON

During his research among the DOGON, the French anthropologist Marcel Griaule (1898–1956) identified over 70 different masks, representing animals, anthropomorphic figures, and abstract motifs, which together offer a sort of synopsis of the DOGON mythical universe.



Dogon *Walu* mask  
Mali  
wood - height 54 cm  
private collection, France  
photo © Philippe de Formanoir

Among these, *Walu* antelope masks are certainly the most popular, both for their beauty and their theatrical performance during dances.

The structure of this zoomorphic mask is symmetrical and very architectural. The eye slits on either side of the broken line of the nose rest in a long rectangular depression that extends to the bottom of the mask, towards the chin, below the conical mouth. If the face is very abstract, the two straight, relatively short horns which rise from the head belong without any doubt to the mythic antelope *Walu*.

While every DOGON mask illustrates a form associated with their rich mythology, only the highest-ranking members of the *Awa* society know their full significance.

In the rich DOGON repertory, there are several versions of this mask's story. After Marcel Griaule, Germaine Dieterlen offers one of the most complete tellings<sup>1</sup>, which explains that the antelope *Walu* was ordered by the creator, *Amma*, to protect the sun, which was coveted by the pale fox. The fox sought revenge by digging holes in the ground to trap the antelope. Although cared for by one of the eight ancestors given to man by *Amma*, *Walu* succumbed to his wounds. This is the story told in the *Walu* mask dance.

Dressed in a costume consisting of a fibre hood, skirts, bracelets, and vegetable fibre shoulder sashes worn crossed over the chest, the *Walu* mask eloquently enacts the story. The dancer carries a stick to support his walk and, sometimes falling back from the procession which accompanies him, he mimics the act of using his horns to drive away the fox. In the town centre, he advances, still fighting, then falls, wounded. The "healer" mask representing the ancestor *Dyongou Sérou* arrives to care for him. *Walu* rises and leaves the scene, visibly limping.

This mythological episode, which tells the story of the antelope's moving walk towards death, is also represented in cave paintings in several rocky shelters in the cliffs where young initiates are trained and where, between ceremonies, the masks were stored, hidden from sight.

The mask is heavily worn, suggesting its great age. The semi-aridity of the DOGON plateau helps preserve masks, which offer a direct link between the people and their myths. Created as part of the *Dama*, a ritual mourning ceremony to liberate the spirit of the deceased so he may join his ancestors, they are worn as part of an impressive mask ceremony during with the DOGON re-enact the story of their mythical ancestors in order to conjure the dead and restore order to their world.

#### Note

<sup>1</sup> Germaine Dieterlen, "Mythologie, histoire et masques", in *Journal des africanistes*, 1989, volume 59, book 1-2, pp. 7-38

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