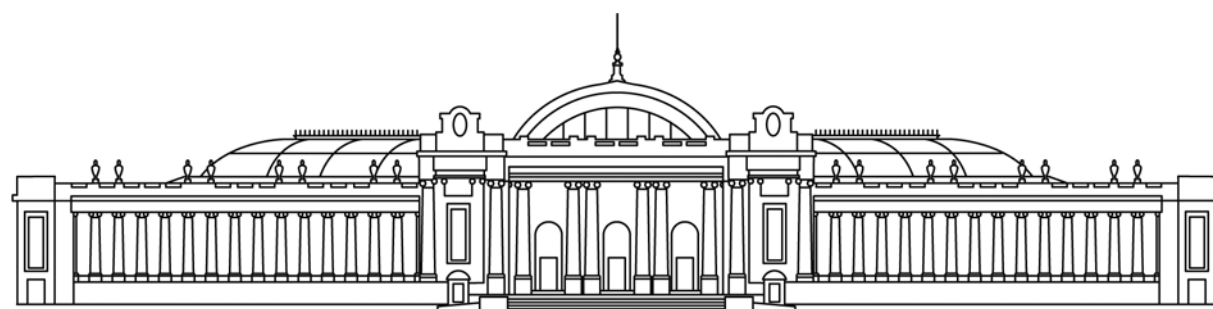


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XXVII^e Biennale des Antiquaires

Grand Palais - Paris
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BAMANA

kono mask

The BAMANA are Mali's largest ethnic group. They occupy the whole of the savanna-covered centre of the country.

The BAMANA kingdom was established during the 17th century. It had weakened by the 19th, and finally collapsed under the yoke of French colonisers in 1892.

Despite the long-term presence in the region of Islam, BAMANA culture is structured around several large animist secret societies.

The *Kono* mask shown here belongs to one of these societies. According to J.P. Colley (2001), it is a highly stylised representation synthesising several "wild" animals, notably an elephant (wisdom, intelligence) and a bird (spirit, ubiquity); the mask's principal qualities result from this polymorphism.

The impressive composition of this helmet-mask (it was worn horizontally on the head; the dancer looked out through the muzzle) is abstract, with an upper section featuring small horns and large ears, and a lower section with a long, open muzzle. These elements all project from the sculpture, and provide structure by casting shadows across the uniform surface of the wood, which is unfinished and almost completely covered in a sacrificial crust that accentuates the imposing nature of the piece.

Mali

— wood

H 88 cm

—
Nadine Vinot Poetry collection,
France





YORUBA

ibeji statuettes

The YORUBA of southwestern Nigeria are one of the largest ethnic groups on the African continent, with more than a dozen identified sub-groups.

As they each developed their own sculptural style, these statuettes can be attributed to the IGBOMINA, a population living in the Oro and Omu Aran regions in northern YORUBA territory (Bruno Classens, 2013).

Twin-worship, which seems to have developed in the 18th century, is well established in YORUBA culture; it involves the creation of a statuette in the event that one twin dies prematurely.

Known as ere *ibeji*, these pieces belong to the YORUBA world of emblematic sculpture. That they are fairly common is the result of an unusually high rate of twin births, unfortunately accompanied by similarly high death rates. The visual quality of these representations, objects of mourning and maternal love, is an expression of dutiful worship.

The three figures shown here are a rare variation: triplet children represented as the accomplished young women they would have become had they lived to adulthood. The sculptor has assiduously respected the canons of YORUBA statuary, and the associated female attributes: elongated heads and faces with hair worn in high, banded buns lined with kaolin (the small braids at the top of the head show traces of indigo), triple scarifications on the cheeks, generous bosoms, and a belt sculpted around the waist. They are also abundantly adorned: pierced ears, beaded collar and belt, heavy brass rings as bracelets, and metalwork anklets. The richness of this ornamentation demonstrates a deep desire to represent the deceased children at their most beautiful.

Nigeria

wood
H 27 cm

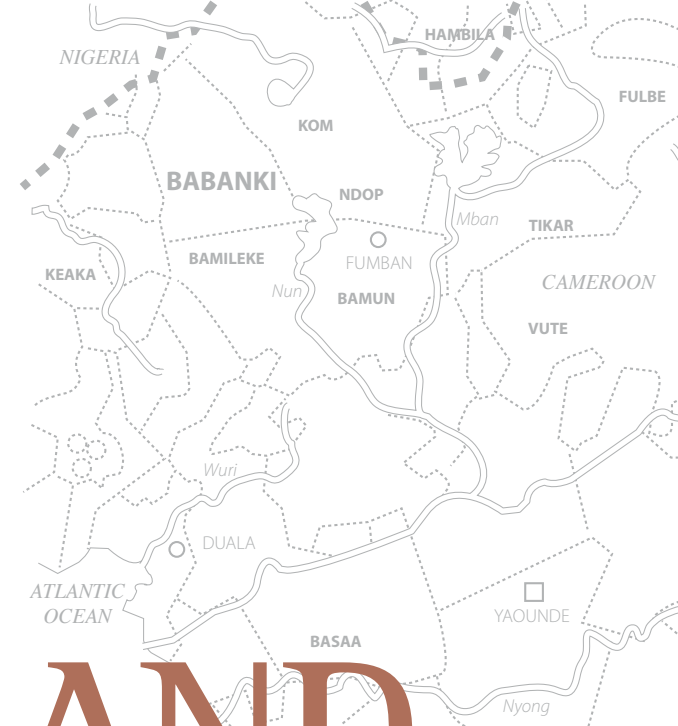
Alain de Monbrison, Paris
Marceau Rivière collection, France

The shiny, polished surface of the statuettes shows the care that was taken to keep the spirits they housed happy: food, baths, and oils were applied, both literally feeding the material and gradually erasing the details of the figures through regular polishing. Signs of these substances can still be seen in the crevasses, particularly under the arms and breasts, as well as around the toes.

The relief of the sculptures' "diamond point" eyes, as well of the noses and mouths, are particularly smooth, softening their expressions.

This attractive wear allows us to estimate the date of these to the 19th century, which makes these three pieces, which have remained together since they were sculpted, unusually old.





Royal effigy from the GRASSLAND

Babanki style

by Louis Perrois

Anthropomorphic representation that celebrates the majesty and strength of kings (*fon*) can be seen across the Cameroonian Grassland in architecture elements (veranda pillars or doorframes); furniture (thrones, ceremonial beds); or actual statues (stored in the king's palace, the "treasury", or the royal cemetery *ngumba*).

These include representations of kings and queens, queen-mothers and princesses, as well as some of their servants (*nwala*). Such commemorative effigies would be exhibited during important community ceremonies, such as enthronements and royal funerals.

The figure of someone carrying a drinking horn is common among the BAMILEKÉ. One of the important roles played by a king's sister or aunt, the *mafo tshu shwe* ("the surveyor of the mouth") protects royal food and, especially, drink from poisoning. In royal sculpture, this emblematic role is expressed through the motif of the drinking horn (usually from the buffalo *nya*, inscribed with symbolic carvings) or a gourd of palm wine, held by a servant, a princess, or a concubine. >>>



Cameroon

— wood
H 61 cm

— Martial Bronsin collection, Brussels
(acquired in the 1970s)



Although covered in a thick, crusty patina that hides much of its engraved decoration, this venerably old effigy of 61 cm, apparently female, clearly presents two poses from royal etiquette: the right hand holds a drinking horn, and the left hand is placed, fingers apart, on the belly (possibly pregnant) as an evocation of royal fertility. The two forearms and the ankles are decorated with monoxyle bracelets. A sort of cape (cf. Bettina von Lintig's discussion of the "pilgrim" style in Cameroun, Galerie Dulon, 2006, p. 54), worn over the shoulders, blends with the upper arms and is the figure's only clothing.

The head is beautifully sculpted, both full-face and in profile. The rounded face has a wide forehead, large bulging eyes rimmed with oblique oval eyelids, full cheeks, and a flat nose with a mitred bridge and levelled end. The open mouth projects in a slight muzzle to show menacing teeth filed to points. The ears each have a large concha and a highly realistic tragus in relief.

The flattened bonnet hairstyle, reminiscent of a wimple, of great sobriety, is wrapped tightly around the forehead and skull, in contrast with the mullioned cotton-ball hairstyle worn by other important figures from the group of effigies to which this sculpture belonged. Seen from the side, the head forms an extended oval, with the rounded hairstyle separated from the ears by an angular outline, in a sugarloaf shape recalling some Egyptian sculptures and engravings.

Stylistically, this statue resembles BABANKI work from the Ndop region in northeastern Grassland. The KUJEM group, which included several related chiefdoms such as the BIG BABANKI and the BABANKI TUNGO, occupied the area around Mont Oku in the 17th century. As the Oku and Kom kingdoms expanded, the BABANKI moved further south. This group is known for having developed a refined style of statuary that spread across a large part of Grassland during the 18th century, giving many royal pieces from Oku or Kom and even BAMOUM country a "family resemblance". Renowned for their skill, BABANKI artists, including several "sculptor-kings" from the family of Aseh Yufanyi, worked to embellish their own palaces, but also those of neighbouring (and even sometimes more distant) chiefdoms. They produced sculpted pillars, doorframes, beds, seats, thrones, and, of course, innumerable masks for the secret societies. This is why it is difficult to know to which chiefdom certain statues, including this one, belong.

We can nevertheless compare it to part of a throne from the chiefdom of Bagam, situated to the north of Mbouda in BAMILÉKÉ territory, acquired by pastor Christol in 1925 (Museum of Mankind, British Museum, London). This magnificent royal stool represents the king (*fön* or *fyon*) seated in majesty, with large arms resting on two figures; the one on the right resembles exactly in handling, gesture, and hairstyle that shown here. The throne was made by the sculptor-king Phuonchu Aseh of Babanki-Tungo (active from 1909 to 1918). This leads us to believe that this statue came from the same workshop and was sculpted in the beginning of the 20th century, before 1920.

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FANG/ MABEA

statue



The MABEA, who occupy the coastal regions where southern Cameroon borders Guinea-Bissau, produced reliquary figures very similar to those created by the FANG in neighbouring Gabon, in a vast territory where relic worship is extremely widespread.

The MABEA style is characterised by a clear, reddish patina, and subtly modelled bodies typically with pronounced clavicle hollows. The eyes are generally almond-shaped, the ears large, and the mouth open to display teeth filed to points, accentuating the emaciation of the cheeks. In this case the hairstyle, traditionally coloured black, is composed of three longitudinal sculpted crests decorated with brass screws. The same decoration underlines the virility of the pectorals.

In the specimen shown here, the realism typical of the MABEA style is found essentially in the expressive stare of the glass eyes.

The use of shiny materials calls to mind certain FANG byeri which shimmer because of their thick patina and the use of metal elements. Indeed, these pieces, which were attached to the covers of reliquaries, were usually kept in an enco

This figure doesn't feature the customary "post", however, which would serve to hold it to the cover of a box made of sewn bark. It seems such figures could be attached to a "package" of relics, or even simply placed in the immediate vicinity. As Louis Perrois (Sotheby's – 2014) suggests, some might also have been linked pairs, linked pairs.

It is equally possible, on the other hand, that large statues with a foot of this type played a different role in ancestor worship than that of guardian; they might have been used in male initiation rituals, during which they would have been revealed to young men.

Before it joined the prestigious collection of the artist Arman, this piece was part of a collection in Hamburg, Germany's largest port city. It was through Germany – which, at the end of the 19th century and through 1916, was extending its influence in southern Cameroon – that most of the MABEA figures known today first came to Europe.

As Louis Perrois recently reported, the oldest known specimen is now housed in the Museum für Völkerkunde in Hamburg (inv. C.677).

Cameroon

—
wood, brass, mirror
H 43,8 cm

—
Schesca Kotchouko collection, Hamburg
Merton D. Simpson collection, New York
Corice & Armand Arman collection, New York

—
Publications and exhibitions

- *African Arts*, July 1978, vol. XI, n° 4, p. 1 (Merton D. Simpson Gallery)
- *Arts d'Afrique noire*, winter 1979, n° 32 (J.-L. Forain & D. Hourdé)
- *Arts d'Afrique noire*, spring 1983, n° 45 (cover)
- Louis Perrois, *Byeri Fang. Sculptures d'ancêtres en Afrique*, exhibition catalogue, Marseille, Musée des Arts d'Afrique, d'Océanie et des Amériques, 1992, pp. 108–109
- *African Faces, African Figures. The Arman Collection*, exhibition catalogue, New York, The Museum for African Art, 1997, fig. 71, p. 106







MAHONGWE

reliquary figure

The MAHONGWE occupy the area of Gabon adjacent to Congo-Brazzaville, a region of dense rainforest between the valleys of the Ivindo, the Lébango-Likouala, and the Lékona.

Relic worship was known by the MAHONGWE and their KOTA cousins as *bwete*. Reliquary figures were, to them, the “face” of the *bwete*.

Several small reliquary figures of this type would have surrounded the principal figures atop baskets containing ancestor relics. This one nevertheless exhibits a very classic style: the success of MAHONGWE art is the result of the perfect balance between the height and width of the bullet-shaped head and the slight concavity of the face. Just as remarkable are the precision and regularity of the technique. The copper wire has been delicately hammered to create perfect joints (a skill lost in the 1930s, according to Perrois – 2014) on either side of a central plate that is now almost completely corroded, exposing the wood core.

Small rounded eyes are nailed above a nose made from a thin metal blade surrounded by numerous brass wires that flare at the bottom. The neck, wrapped in a brass wire, is broken above the perforations by which relics would originally have been attached.

Gabon

—
wood, metal
H 38 cm
—

Jacques Kerchache collection, Paris
Merton D. Simpson collection, New York
Philippe Guimiot collection, Brussels
Private collection, Belgium

The whitish crust that covers the whole is evidence of the turbulent history of this type of piece; in the early 20th century, people were often forced to dispose of them. Some were found in ditches or waterways, such as the important group of 23 reliquary figures acquired by Jacques Kerchache and exhibited in his Paris gallery in 1967.

Although the piece shown here was not among the first to be found (which were documented in Claude Roy's 1967 catalogue), it was among the works later handled by Kerchache, whose name is synonymous with this type of sculpture.





KOTA/ SANGU

reliquary figure

Figures of the type presented here are both distinct and rare, even among the rich iconography found in Kota reliquaries in Gabon.

They were produced by the SANGU or SANGO, a population living in the Ogoué belt, where the predominant style is one verging on abstraction.

Like their TSOGHO and DUMA cousins, the SANGO call reliquary baskets *mbumba*. They are differentiated by their small faces and round bone eyes, which thus appear proportionally large. Most often, fine arched eyebrows reinforce their expressivity.

This piece has a flat face on which the horizontal bands – vertical on the forehead and chin – are therefore extremely regular. On the rear, the hairstyle and neck are covered in stippled metal plaques. Broken above the usual lozenge base, the long neck is wrapped in brass rings. These elements have been nailed to a wooden structure, which can be seen where the plating has come away from the sculpture.

Gabon

—
wood, metal
H 20,5 cm

—
Sotheby's, London, 9 April 1984, lot 129
Rudolf and Leonore Blum collection,
Zumchon (Switzerland)

This is simplified in the extreme. Other than the hairstyle, only the nose and ears show even the gentlest relief. The long cylindrical neck is also handled in a volume-based manner that has nothing to do with the naturalist anthropomorphism of the TSOGHO, NDZABI, and TSANGUI further south. This demonstrates SANGU artists' desire to express themselves in a specific vocabulary for objects with the same function.

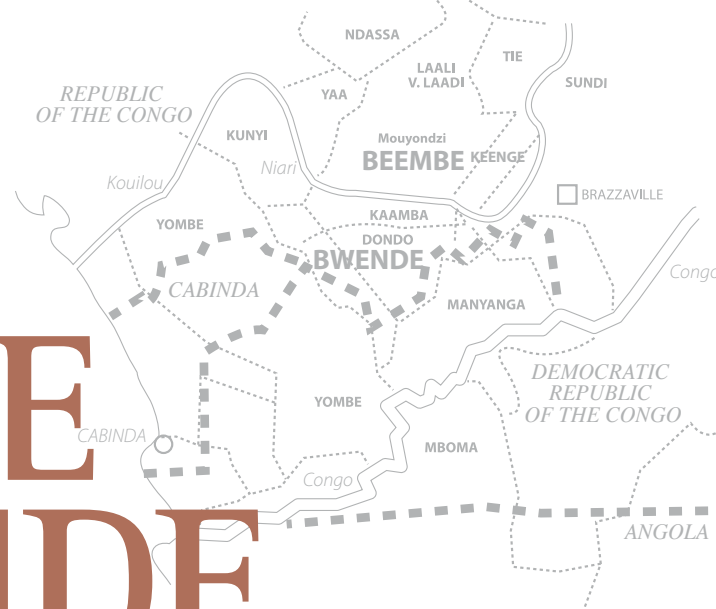
An examination of reliquary baskets of the type this figure would have guarded shows that skulls, sometimes broken into smaller or larger pieces, were accompanied by a collection of small objects in metal or other material as well as shells, cowries, dried plants, and bones from other animals (monkeys, rodents, snakes, etc.) with symbolic or magic qualities.

Rituals linked to the *mbumba* consisted essentially of propitiatory offerings to satisfy the deceased of the lineage, who were a constant danger to the living. When young people were initiated, the skulls were taken from their baskets, then exhibited and identified before being anointed with the blood of sacrificed animals and red pigment.

Despite its abstraction and small size, this figure possesses intense expressivity: its wide eyes evoke perfectly the vigilant watch it keeps over the clan relics under its protection.



BEEEMBE & BWENDE statuary



The territory at the heart of the Republic of the Congo occupied by the BEEEMBE neighbours that of the BWENDE, whose equally refined statues have the same hieratic appearance.

The iconography of BEEEMBE statuary is testimony to its important role in ancestor worship. The masculine statuettes in this group almost all represent a bearded man (sign of the status of elder) with a body covered in scarifications (indicating his rank), with the exception of the figure whose body is covered with a massive magical cargo.

The others possess symbols of power and prestige: rifles, knives, sceptres, etc. These elements create the portrait of honoured ancestors: renowned hunters or powerful ritualists (*nganga*); eyes generally rendered in white materials (kaolin, mother-of-pearl, glass, ceramic) suggest a supernatural vision expressive of their power.

The statue dominating this group of figures (see overleaf) is one of the largest in the known statuary of this people. Besides being of unusual size, its power is indicated by the blade *baaku* and medicinal horn *mpoka* it brandishes. According to Farris Thompson (*in* Dapper, 2002, p. 63), the warrior spirit invoked symbolises the spiritual combativeness, the perpetual war (*mvita*) against evil.

A statue of similar dimensions resides in the collections of the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren (E0.1951.75.1) and Raoul Lehuard has documented another in a very similar style, especially in the handling of the mouth, open to display teeth filed to points, which was previously in the collection of Charles Boer (1989, p. 342, n° G. 2-2-2). This one has kept its metallic ornaments as well as the grass skirt – rarely preserved – in which BEEEMBE statues are normally dressed and which sometimes hid additional magic cargo.

Republic of the Congo

— overleaf, double-page spread, from left to right

— 1 / wood, composite materials / H 21 cm

— Acquired *in situ* before 1940

Private collection, Belgium

— Publication

- François Neyt, *Fétiches et objets ancestraux d'Afrique*, Milan, 5Continents, 2013, fig. 18, p. 62

— 2 / wood, metal, mother-of-pearl / H 33 cm

— Private collection, France/Belgium

— 3 / wood, glass beads / H 16 cm

— Alberto Costa collection, Spain

Herraiz collection, Spain

Private collection, Belgium

— Publication and exhibition

- *Africa. La figura Imaginada*, exhibition catalogue, Barcelona, Fondation La Caixa, 2004, n° 100, p. 137

— 4 / wood, glass, pigments / H 18 cm

— Sol and Josephine LeWitt collection, New York

Private collection, Belgium

— Publications

- Bettina von Lintig, *Empreintes d'Afrique. L'art tribal au fil des fleuves*, Milan, 5Continents, 2011, fig. 43, p. 112

- François Neyt, *Fétiches et objets ancestraux d'Afrique*, Milan, 5Continents, 2013, fig. 17, p. 61

— 5 / wood, glass beads / H 18.5 cm

— Private collection, France/Belgium

— 6 / detail, opposite

wood, composite materials, glass, pigment / H 20 cm

— Acquired *in situ* by a colonial French administrator, 1920

Transmitted through inheritance

Private collection, Belgium

— Publication

- François Neyt, *Fétiches et objets ancestraux d'Afrique*, Milan, 5Continents, 2013, fig. 19, p. 65





YOMBE

The YOMBE occupy the coastal region of the ancient kingdom of Kongo, which, from the 14th century, included the lower Congo (Democratic Republic of the Congo), Cabinda, and northwestern Angola.

Their art exhibits many characteristics shared with the BEEMBE, the Vili, the SUNDI, and the DONDO. In the statue presented here this influence can be seen in the use of glass for the eyes, and by the shape of the teeth, filed to points. While the theme of "maternity" (*phemba*) is familiar throughout KONGO territory, it is most common among the YOMBE. The naturalism of these sculptures results to some extent from the influence of European tastes and models, which were fashionable in the region starting in the 1860s.

The face is handled with particular care, and the solid body displays a number of astonishingly precise details, notably the modelling of the vertebrae and the detail of the cowries on the belt. The oblong hairstyle, fashionable in Mayombe at that time, was worn by both sexes. Here it testifies, along with other ornamentation – earrings, necklace, belt, scarifications on the back, shoulders, and bust – to the representation of a woman of high rank.

The sculptor has also paid particular attention to the seated child the mother holds with one hand. Her other hand is placed palm-up on a receptacle, doubtless of pottery. It is a gesture symbolic among the KONGO of vigilance and generosity.

The purpose of these sculptures is uncertain. According to some authors, maternity *phemba* were linked, among other things, to a cult of fertility. The community's oldest midwives would have acted as their ritual experts.

Strength and dignity emanate from the figure, clearly affirming the exceptional status of this character.

phemba maternity

Democratic Republic of the Congo

—
wood
H 28,5 cm

—
Acquired *in situ*, 1915
Dr Paul Pastiels (1889–1976) collection,
Brussels





KONGO

statue

This KONGO statue, upright on its hexagonal pedestal, features handling of rare finesse.

As usual, the sculptor has paid special attention to the head and face: the eyebrows with their rope motif, the eyes open wide (but with the upper lid indicated), the aquiline nose with delineated nostrils, the mouth with its bevelled edges, the scrolled ears. The pointed hairstyle, common in KONGO statuary, is decorated at the back with an interlaced geometric pattern reminiscent of woven or embroidered hats, recalling body scarifications. The stylised back is powerful.

A large circular mark on the abdomen testifies to the presence of a magic cargo *bilongo* that has since disappeared. This either broke or was removed from the figure, which was apparently scrubbed on its arrival in the West to remove the traces of its ritual use (a fine crust can still be seen in some places).

There is no doubt this is a magico-religious statue *nkisi*, the power of which resided not only in its ritual amalgam but also in a coded iconography linked to the expression of lineal power.

In fact, this figure is biting a *munkwisa* root, a therapeutic plant believed to strengthen the powers of clairvoyance represented by the mirrored eyes. This plant, believed to be ineradicable, also symbolised chiefs' association with their land. In the left hand, a sceptre, "fetishized" at the extremity with a ball, represents an additional charm.

These two accessories (and, to a lesser extent, the suggestion of a woven hairstyle and earrings) are chiefly attributes frequently found on power objects such as ivory enthronement sceptres from the ancient kingdoms of the KONGO.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

wood, metal, mirror
H 29 cm

Acquired *in situ* by Alexis-Joseph Laurent (1843–1910), administrator, Compagnie du Chemin de Fer du Congo, from 1902 to 1910
Alexis van Opstal collection (1874–1936), administrator, Agence Maritime Internationale du Congo, Brussels

Publication

- *Catalogue de la collection d'objets provenant du Congo Belge et appartenant à Alex Van Opstal*, Rhode-Saint-Genèse, 1933, cat. 8

In some rare cases, the chief (or other figure) is shown wearing a European jacket, which explains the presence of sleeves at the wrists of this figure (the front of the figure and his clothing would originally have been hidden by the cargo *bilongo*). The feet are fully detailed, with indications of the ankle, finely sculpted toes (joints, nails), and decorative metal rings around the ankles.

A small medallion with the number 8 can also be seen. This corresponds to the numbering from a sumptuous catalogue privately printed in 230 copies in 1933 by Alexis van Opstal, owner of an African collection of almost 900 pieces. To exhibit some of these, he created in 1932 a thematic hall at the "Maison Blanche", his vast home in the Brussels region. It seems that most of the work displayed there was acquired in the Congo by Alexis-Joseph Laurent (1843–1910), associated with King Leopold's African project from 1883, and long-time family friend of the van Opstals'.

Organised by category and intended to present a complete panorama of Congolese art, these works illustrate the taste of this alert collector. The work we present here reflects that elegance and refinement.



KONGO

statuette

This sculpture compensates for its small size by its imposing oblong hairstyle, made from a reddish ritual mixture to which feathers are attached, giving a sense of length to the short silhouette.

The three-dimensional strength of this KONGO statuette is impressive. It doesn't have the frontality usually found in African statuary. Upright on a circular base, the figure is turning its head resolutely to the right. The gripping effect is due not only to this position; the double cargo *bilongo* on the stomach and back accentuate the difficulty distinguishing between the front and back of the figure. Furthermore, the arms are hidden by an impressive necklace made of fabric-wrapped rings from which hang multiple pendants made from wood beads, grains, insect cocoons, a piece of bone, a tooth, and a metal bead.

This profusion of accessories makes the position of the feet on the base hard to see, further disorienting the viewer. The feet are nevertheless finely detailed, with toes that stand out from the base. The viewer's gaze is thus drawn towards the ankles, then a knot-shaped amulet.

The attention to detail is also found in the use of colour. The polychrome – predominantly red, and notably present in the areas with magic mixtures, especially the head – is underlined by a motif of white dots on the abdominal and dorsal cargos.

Because the figure is so small, one must look closely to find the symbolic signs from which it obtains its power: the most obvious is the rare "turned head" iconography, the face, with its elongated almond eyes, wearing a comforting expression. The inclusion of a white material in the eyes, contrasted against a large black pupil, highlights the intensity of the gaze.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

—
wood, feathers, mirrors, vegetable fibres, cocoons, cloth, grains, metal, tooth, bone
H 23 cm

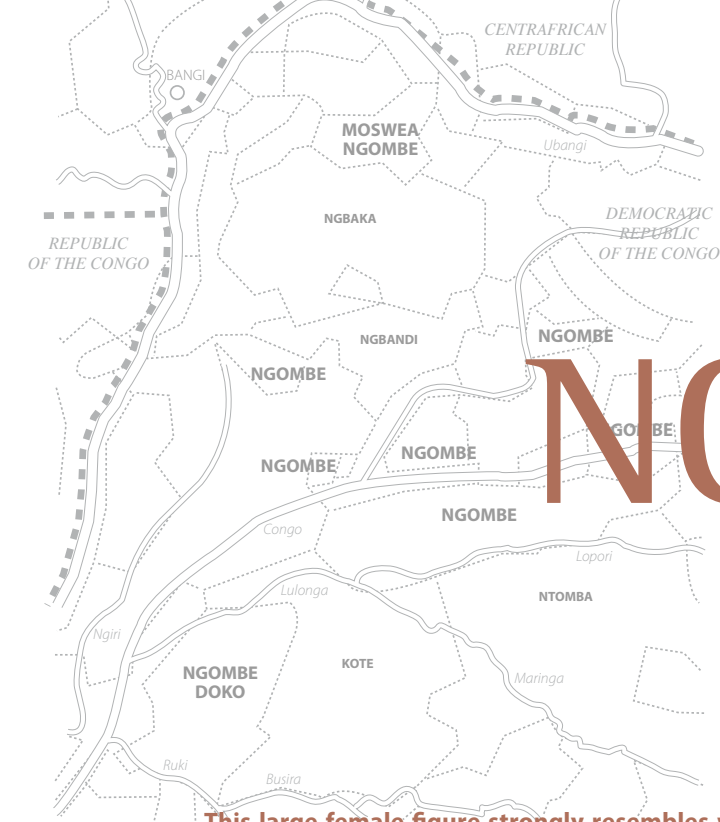
—
Irwin Smiley (1928–2001) collection, New York

—
Publication

—
- *Discoveries. African Art from the Smiley Collection*, exhibition catalogue, Urbana-Champaign, Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois, 1989, pp. 66–67







NGOMBE

statue

Democratic Republic of the Congo

wood, feathers, vegetable fibres,
anteater hair (?), grains,
ritual mixture
H 61 cm

Acquired *in situ* by a Belgian colonial
administrator
Ralph Nash collection, London
Alan Brandt collection, New York
(inv. n° 7273 25)
Allan Stone, New York (1973)

Publication and exhibition
- *Power Incarnate: Allan's Stone Col-
lection of Sculpture from the Congo*,
exhibition catalogue, Greenwich,
The Bruce Museum, 2011, p. 45,
cat. 22

This large female figure strongly resembles work made in the vast Ubangi area in northern Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The geometric nature of the sculpture and some of the decorative elements suggest an association with the western part of this area, home, *inter alia*, to the NGOMBE, a Bantu population that migrated north from Lake Victoria in eastern Africa in the 17th century. In the 19th century they settled the banks of the Lualaba (the name given to the Congo river upstream of Kisangani) and beyond. They were violently driven back, but the MOSWEA-NGOMBE nevertheless remain around the small city of Bosobolo, near the Ubangi River.

The NGOMBE are not believed to have a sculptural tradition of their own. According to this theory, their limited artistic production has been largely influenced by their NGBAKA and NGBANDI neighbours, and consists above all of magic statuettes, most likely hunting fetishes. This assertion is based on the work of the American anthropologist Alvin Wolfe. In the 1950s, among the MOSWEA-NGOMBE, Wolfe met a hunter, Bosokuma, who had begun sculpting ritual figurines previously unknown among his people.

The statue presented here probably belongs to this category of statuary, more magic than spiritual. Large ritual poultices have been inserted in to the rectangular cavities near the pubis and buttocks, as well as along the spine, where grains have been added to the ritual mixture.

The presence of such large magic cargos is surprising, perhaps even unique among the statuary of the region. Beyond its possible influences, the sculpture is of an atypical style. >>>



To our knowledge, the only specimen to which we might link this one is a figure of 51 cm (see illustration) belonging to a private collection, and acquired among the NGOMBE in 1906 by a Belgian traveller (E.F.). We know that sculptures – including those for ritual use – sometimes circulated and might be acquired somewhere other than their place of origin. Because of the ethnic origin mentioned, however, we might in this case consider a shared regional provenance.

These two pieces demonstrate a very similar flattened relief (for example the front and back of the heads, the shoulders) as well as similar treatment of certain details (auricular piercings, circular relief on the chest and the navel, etc.).



In the sample offered here, the face is flattened, with a nose in only the slightest relief and slits for the eyes and mouth. The ears are circles. The same simplicity characterises the torso, where the chest and navel are only lightly noted. The arms and legs are straight and slightly apart, and solid feet offer stability.

If the sculpted ornamentation is limited to deep parallel grooves in the sides and the back of the hairstyle, the added decorative elements are an opulent collection: feathers on the head, cords knotted through the multiple perforations around the ear, strings knotted around the neck, wrists, and ankles. Long brown-red animal hairs are attached at regular intervals to the wires surrounding the thin cords wrapped around sticks driven into the hairstyle as well as the shoulders (one of these elements is missing, but the stick is still there) forming light, airy tassels. A pair of loincloths is tied around the waist; the first, made of a fringe of cords, covers another made of beaten bark (tapa). Bracelets made with large metal coils surround the wrists, and heavy anklets decorate the legs. Among the NGOMBE and neighbouring peoples, this type of jewellery was used as money for women's dowries.

This enigmatic sculpture is an example of a little-known statuary. Characterised by the geometric treatment of the body, here associated with magic substances and abundant ornamentation, this specimen is surely a masterpiece.





MONGO

sceptre

The MONGO occupy the central area of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Cuvette Centrale basin, a long depression draining into the Congo and Tshuapa Rivers and their tributaries.

This people in fact consist of around forty large independent groups, including the SENGLE, NGATA, ELEKU, NTOMBA, LIA, NGANDU, EKONDA, KUNDU, KUTU, MBOLE, YABELIMA, BOOLI, OOLI, KELA, YELA, YAMONGO, NGANDU, SAKA, HAMBIA, JONGA, NGENGLE, and, furthest to the west, the TETELA.

The MONGO made very little statuary, and are instead known for producing everyday objects of high quality from wood. This unusual piece is a marvelous example. Probably a sceptre-cane for rituals or dances, it consists of a long "palette" with grooved vertical décor and a bifurcated "handle" partially wrapped with metal strips.

If this piece offers few clues to how it would have been used, one detail in the decoration suggests an explanation for its surprising shape. On either side, two small horizontal marks in the middle of the palette might indicate a pair of eyes. The piece would therefore be a stylised human figure reduced to only a head and two of its appendages, either arms or legs.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

—
wood
H 85,5 cm
—

Acquired *in situ* by a colonial administrator for Haut-Congo, prior to 1935

Another specimen of the same type, smaller and with no metal elements, was placed with a private collection by the famous Brussels dealer Marie-Jeanne Walschot (1896–1977). But it is to another piece, formerly belonging to the collection of the Belgian Raoul Blondiau, established in the early 20th century, that offers a new explanation. This is a TETELA gong, the handle of which ends in a double point. When set on its base, the instrument's handle appears to represent the head of a horned animal.

We can look at this object in two ways, then. But the purely abstract shape means only the most attentive observer will be able to see, depending on which way up it is held, an anthropomorphic or zoomorphic figure.





ZANDE harp

Occupying northeastern Congo, near the border with the Central African Republic and Sudan, the ZANDE were a war-like kingdom with a strict hierarchy. Their aristocracy enjoyed everyday objects of prestige, and established an exchange of influences with the court arts of their neighbours, notably the MANGBETU.

If the cordophones known as “arched harps” are present throughout Congo, the anthropomorphic decoration is more typical of the northern part of the country, specifically the region called Ubangi-Uélé. The harp presented here is a good example of these instruments, the elegance and decoration of which seduced the earliest Western explorers of the regions in the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. At the heart of this vast territory, ZANDE harps were generally considered, as Stephen Chauvet underlined (in *Musique nègre*, 1929), as the most beautiful from an artistic point of view, evidence, if any were needed, of the refinement and culture of this people.

Sculpted at the end of the yoke, this harp has the sought-after anthropomorphic head, which has the characteristic rounded hairstyle above a slightly concave heart-shaped face. The dotted cross pattern represents scarifications found among the NGBANDI: a horizontal line on the forehead and a vertical line from the base of the hairstyle to the nose. The half-closed eyes underlined with white material (a regional style found among the NGBAKA and others) and sketched mouth give the face an inspired, deferential look.

The five pegs are attached to the left of the yoke which, like the curved wooden soundbox, is a stylistic constant among the ZANDE.

According to some authors, the sculpture at the end of the yoke is not just ornamentation, but shows the sculptor's desire to turn the instrument into the representation of an ancestor whose voice it will then transmit. Among the ZANDE, these harps seem to have had as much secular as ritual use. They belonged to people of high rank, to whom their elegant sculpture imparted great distinction.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

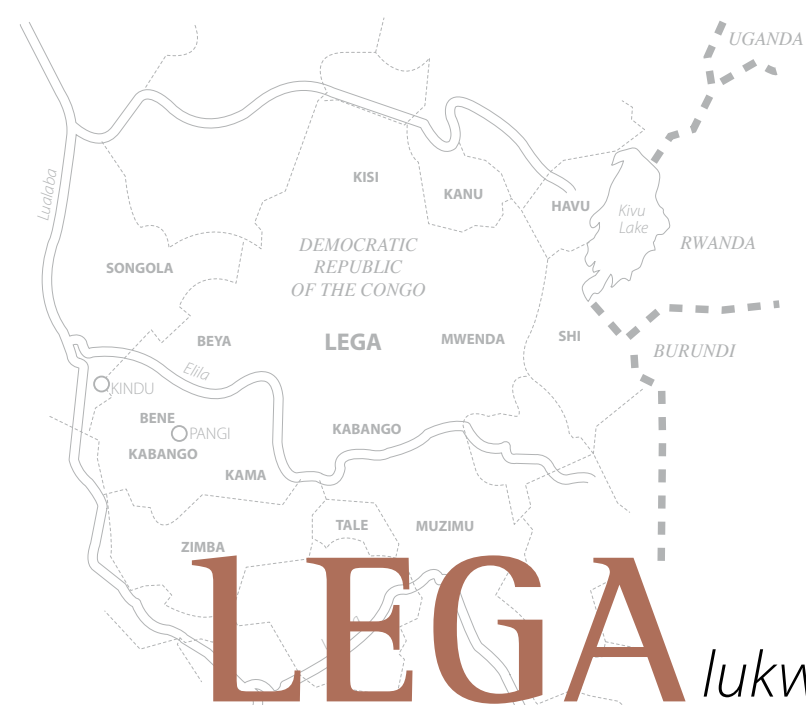
— wood, leather, vegetable fibre
H 45 cm

— Gokelaere collection, Brussels

— Publication

— *Arts d'Afrique Noire*, winter 1992, n° 84
(Galerie Impasse Saint-Jacques)





LEGA *lukwakongo* mask

In the east of what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo live the LEGA, who occupy the forests of South Kivu and Maniema, in the regions of Mwenga, Shabunda, and Pangi.

At the heart of LEGA culture stands the Bwami, which plays a dominant central role – with economic, political, religious, and philosophical functions – across all of society. All forms of LEGA art are in some way linked to this body.

This little mask would have been commissioned by a member of the Bwami for the later stages of initiation. Called *lukwakongo*, this category of wood “maskette” was designed for high-ranking members, just below the highest rank.

These pieces measure between 11 and 18 cm. The asymmetrical eyes, which are a constant in LEGA art, are here placed either side of the bridge of the nose, which is marked by two recesses. On the sides are two perforations through which a string would have been passed for hanging the object; the mask was not worn on the face, but rather the shoulders, or else was hung from a wall or pole.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

—
wood, kaolin
H 16,5 cm

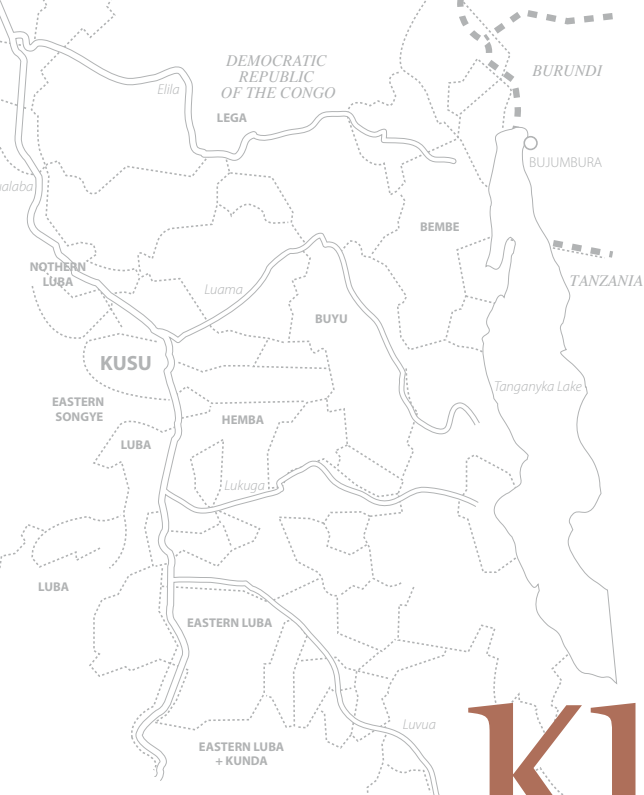
—
Private collection, Belgium

Similar openings on either side of the small mouth (small vertical grooves represent teeth) would have been used to attach a long beard of vegetable fibres. The object would have been dragged by the beard during danced performances.

The thick layer of kaolin that covers the upper portion of the face is also linked to the use of the object, which was covered in white clay for each new initiation rite.

When exposed on the plinth (*pala*) specially erected for the occasion, *lukwakongo* masks surrounded a larger mask (*idimu*) representing the ultimate patriarch, the primordial founder, and the other figures the generations of initiates that followed him.





KUSU bellows

The Kusu, living along the banks of the Lomami and Lualaba Rivers in the middle-eastern region of what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo, numbered around 60,000 at the end of the 20th century. Their art is strongly influenced by that of their southern neighbours, the HEMBA and LUBA.

The sculpture presented here clearly demonstrates this influence, both in its rounded shapes and the handling of the face, apparently female, with its hairstyle in multiple buns.

The very typology of a bellows with anthropomorphic décor is much appreciated among the LUBA. This specimen is of solid wood. The four circular chambers would originally have been closed with leather pockets and alternately handled to suck in and expel air through a double central tube, the far end of which would have been placed near the fire.

The delicacy of the décor suggests this bellows wasn't intended for a smith. This type of object would have been made exclusively for the king or chiefs. It illustrates the privileged relation between LUBA sacred royalty and metalworking. The material held a place of great importance throughout southeastern Congo, where it symbolised a power and strength to which might also be attributed a therapeutic function.

Indigenous restoration by nailing a piece of iron to the outside of one of the four chambers demonstrates the importance of these objects. Such repairs were often made to such objects, which were kept in secret and could be extremely old.

Anthropomorphic bellows are rare and the sculpted head of this specimen shows superb composition in the play of the curves of the hairstyle, the ears, and the rounded forehead. The eyes are represented by small metal nails, with the nose, mouth, and chin, seemingly erased, clustered in the lower part of the face.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

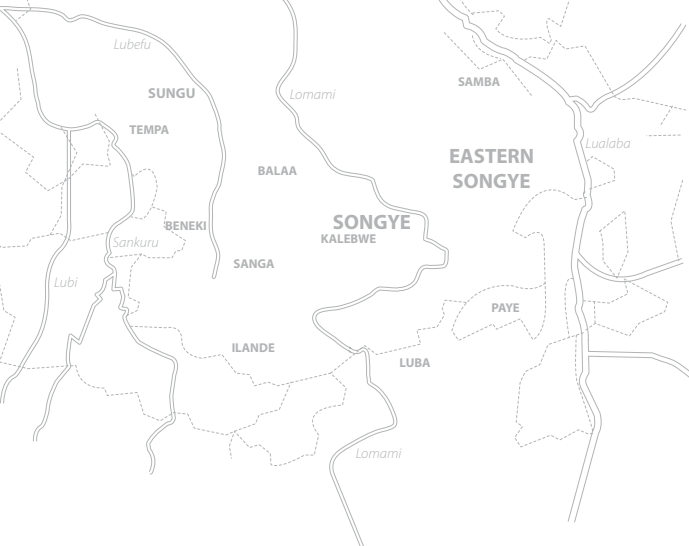
—
wood, iron
H 60 cm

—
Jacques Kerchache (1942–2001)
collection, Paris

—
Publications

- Jacques Kerchache, Jean-Louis Paudrat, Lucien Stephan, *L'Art Africain*, Paris, Citadelles & Mazenod, 1988, p. 442
- Karl-Ferdinand Schaedler, *Encyclopedia of African Art and Culture*, Munich, Pantera Verlag, 2009, p. 358





SONGYE

statuette

The SONGYE live in the east of what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo, mostly in eastern Kasai, in Katanga, and in a small part of Kivu.

The Lomami River, which crosses their territory from the north to the south, separates the great western chiefdoms (TEMPA, EKI, KALEBWE, BALA, TSHOFA, ILANDE) from the smaller groups known communally as the EASTERN SONGYE

This elegant, carefully styled male statuette is characteristic of southern KALEBWE workshops. As with their larger figures, a small horn is attached to the head, in this case held in place by four sticks. The features of the face, sensitively rendered, are comparable to those of a mask: high, full, curved forehead; almond eyes; hollowed cheeks; rectangular mouth and horizontal chin. The profile shows a particularly admirable purity of line, with a perfectly vertical nose. Attached to the head by a long neck, the small cylindrical body is wrapped in antelope skin beneath which can be seen a raffia cloth and a piece of red textile.

The tawny highlights of the fur contrast with and underline the intensely dark patina of the face.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

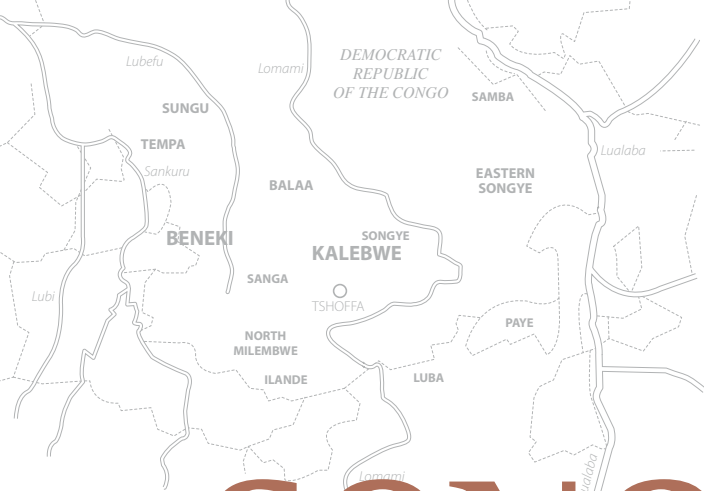
—
wood, horn, fur, raffia, cloth
H 18 cm

—
Private collection, United States
Private collection, Belgium

—
Publication

- F. Neyt, *Fétiches et objets ancestraux d'Afrique*, Milan, 5Continents, 2013, fig. 60, p. 194





SONGYE

nkisi statue

This large anthropomorphic sculpture, upright on a cylindrical stand, presents the most common iconography in SONGYE statuary: a man standing, in a frontal position, hands generally resting on the belly.

The unusual treatment of the face is linked to the KALEBWE YA NTAMBWE, style, from the centre of the SONGYE cultural zone near Tshofa (the centre of the stylistic area, according to François Neyt – 2004).

The piriform head, into which a number of iron blades have been driven, has a concave, heart-shaped face decorated with shiny metal elements – brass nails and a stippled plate – and characterised by large, rounded eyes which appear especially bulbous in their deep sockets.

François Neyt identifies several features common to sculpture from this region: the reddish wood, the height of the figure, the high quality of the sculpture (and of the smith, for the metallic elements), bent arms, swollen belly.

A final aspect is the accumulation of symbols of authority and magic typical of this style of figure. In the specimen presented here, the ritualist would certainly have placed a mixture of ingredients in the horn fixed to the top of the head, surrounded by blades and feathers stuck in the pelt cap that forms the hairstyle. There are two amulet-rings in reptile skin, around the neck and the chest, above a ventral cargo sealed with a cowry. Other elements have been added: an ivory tip filled with a white amalgam attached to the arm, a caprid (?) horn sealed with a web of string and two cowries nailed to the side, two anklets in braided string, and one in leather decorated with a seed pod.

As the literature reminds us, all these elements reinforce the sculpture's power either by their names (metonymy) or their nature (metaphor). Its large size indicates that it was intended for collective use, for the protection of a village community.

These communal magico-religious statues were kept in a shrine, usually in the centre of the village, and guarded by an old woman or old man who determined the time and manner of the rituals in which the statues would take part. Their powers could be ritually re-activated on the night of the new moon by taking them from their shrines to be carried in procession through the village.

This figure's power originally came from those parts that we can't see. If the aesthetic aspect was secondary, the visual effect certainly played a role, especially the play of light and dark across the volumes of the face, which still today exerts a profound influence on the viewer.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

—
wood, horn, leather, feathers, iron,
copper alloy, reptile skin, ivory, cowries,
vegetable fibre
H 95 cm

—
Klaus Clausmeyer (c.1887–1968), Koln
Henri L. Schouten, Amsterdam, 1983
Private collection, Belgium







SONGYE

statue

This SONGYE sculpture belongs to the broad category of macigo-religious statuary nkisi. It does not have the typical magic cargo, elements, and attributes in composite materials, however.

The bovine horn usually attached to the top of the head has, in this case, been sculpted in wood, the cone inverted, in a quasi-abstract manner so as to appear a geometric addition to the hairstyle. This formal approach allows the viewer fully to appreciate the specific style of this statue, two similar specimens of which are housed in the Tervuren Museum (inv.E0.0.0.23466-2 et E0.0.0.18804). >>>

Democratic Republic of the Congo

—
wood
H 30 cm
—

Acquired *in situ* by a Scheut missionary
prior to 1905
Private collection, Belgium



E0.0.0.23466-2, collection MRAC Tervuren ; MRAC Tervuren ©



E0.0.0.18804, collection MRAC Tervuren ; MRAC Tervuren ©



The first of these pieces was acquired in 1887 by the Reverend Father Constant de Deken (1852–1896) and donated to the museum by the Scheut missionary order in 1914. The second was acquired by Oscar Isidore Joseph Michaux (1860–1918) and donated by his widow in 1919. The resemblance between these three statues links them without any doubt to the same hand or, at the very least, the same workshop.

All three represent an upright female in a frontal position on a stand that merges with the figure's wide feet. Around the neck is a sculpted rope which hangs down the back; this could suggest the representation of a high-ranking captive, a theory supported by the prominent scarifications on the belly and, above all, the back. Other, more discrete scarifications are seen above the pubis and on the buttocks. These motifs, as well as the hairstyle, the areolas, and, in our specimen, the eyes have been blackened, creating a polychrome effect that contrasts with the light wood. The perforation of the pupils might suggest that brass nails – or some other metallic element – were once attached, giving the figure an added sparkle, but the comparison with the pieces in Tervuren leads us instead to suspect white mother-of-pearl inlays, perforated at the centre to indicate the pupil.

Although similar in appearance, our statue nevertheless presents some supplementary details, notably the finely rendered teeth, with the upper incisors chiselled to points. Another atypical element that sets this statuette apart is the hands, which are usually placed on the stomach, but here hold a pair of small cups.

These elements suggest a possible typological conflation with a little-known category of SONGYE statuary. Some specimens of standing cup-bearers are known among the SONGYE (usually male figures, unlike the famous kneeling caryatids made by their LUBA neighbours), and some bear similarities to this piece (cf. Tervuren Museum inv. E0.0.0.16628).

This figure marries a typical style with rare iconography. Belonging to a regional sculptural typology, it nevertheless demands interpretation within the rich symbolism of the SONGYE.





SONGYE *kifwebe mask*

The **SONGYE** term *kifwebe* term *kifwebe* is a generic word for “mask”, but it is customarily used to describe this specific type of object, characterised by half-closed eyes and facial striations.

The formal perfection of this mask links it to two other similar specimens (illustrations below) held in the Penn Museum at the University of Pennsylvania (inv. AF 115) and the musée du quai Branly in Paris (inv. 71.1947.91.53).

These three pieces share the same structure, with a large semi-spherical forehead curving into the hollows of a concave face, and the same decoration of parallel lines, concentric around the eyes, and straight along the sides of the mask.>>>

Democratic Republic of the Congo

—
wood, kaolin
H 35,5 cm

—
Joseph O’Leary (1911–1993) collection
Private collection, United States



Songye mask (D. R. Congo) — gift of Webster Plass to the Musée de l’Homme (inv. 71.1947.91.53)
QB15691 © 2014. Musée du quai Branly, Photo Sandrine Expilly/Scala, Florence
QB15692 © 2014. Musée du quai Branly, Photo Patrick Gries/ Bruno Descoings/Scala, Florence



The regularity of these carved motifs and the remarkable harmony of their shapes allows us to suggest that the three pieces be attributed to the same hand. They are evidence of the sculptor's great mastery of his art.

In our specimen, as in the mask housed at the Penn Museum, the figure-eight-shaped mouth is inserted into a rectangular block.

Black is used in all three masks on the large vertical band down the forehead and nose, the eyes, and the mouth. The striations have been coloured with kaolin.

This colour scheme as well as the flattened, barely raised bridge of the nose, indicate that all three are the female mask *kikashi*. In fact, *bifwebe* (plural of *kifwebe*) were generally used in pairs. Incarnating the spirits of the dead, supernatural forces, and mysterious beings, these masks are directly linked to an important SONGYE secret society, the *bwadi bwa kifwebe*.

The facial striations on these objects might therefore symbolise the labyrinthine trials of male initiation. Some authors see an evocation of animal pelts, possibly the striped antelope bongo.

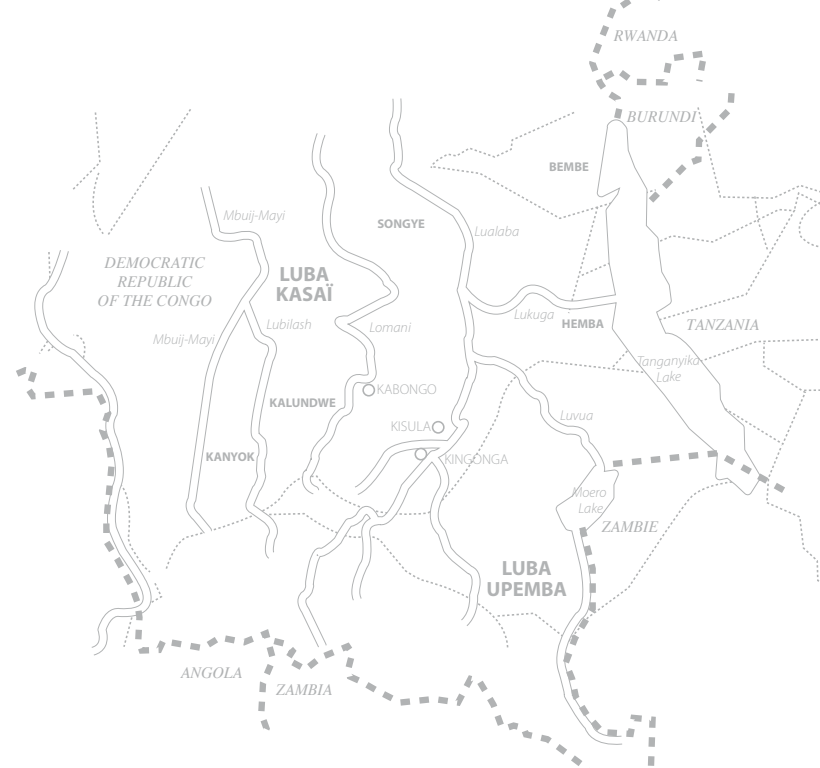
Dunja Hersak (RMCA Tervuren, 1995) found an overwhelming formal homogeneity among SONGYE white female masks. It seems that these were the first to be sculpted in each new chapter of the *bwadi* society; this would have promoted the creation of works very similar to the original model. In this way, SONGYE female *kifwebe* would embody continuity and uniformity.

If we bear in mind that, for the sculptors, this process inspired the perfection of the cubist stylisation of the face and the extreme graphism of the motifs, we can also see how it played its part in the success in the West of this type of mask, which are among the icons of African art.



Songye mask (D.R. Congo),
purchased by the Penn Museum from H. Vignier in 1921(inv. AF5115).
Courtesy of Penn Museum, image #150520





LUBA mask

Even today, the LUBA are one of the largest socio-cultural groups in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. According to specialists, the LUBA Empire was founded in the Upemba Depression in the southeast of the country in the 15th or 16th century.

It brought together different groups, all of who paid tribute to the LUBA king. These entities each created their own styles, which are generally categorised into three main groups: the LUBA KASAI, the LUBA Empire, and the EASTERN LUBA.

LUBA masks are rare, and were mostly made in the east. Many see a strong similarity to the *kifwebe* of their SONGYE neighbours, but they can usually be recognised by their rounder shapes.

The mask shown here presents a striated décor mirrored symmetrically on either side of the large nose. But the concentric motifs from the upper part of the face are only partially reproduced below the horizontal line of the eyes; oblique parallel lines frame – but do not approach – the tubular mouth. This mixed motif accentuates the hybrid character of this mask: curves above, and a much more elongated, rectilinear shape below – a direct evocation of SONGYE *kifwebe*.

This formal ambiguity explains why round striated eastern LUBA masks were often believed to be a form of *kifwebe*. The vague terminology used to describe “striated masks” as a whole refers specifically to the SONGYE *bwadi bwa kifwébé* society, which produced similarly decorated masks.

If it is clear that the LUBA “borrowed” their mask tradition from the SONGYE, it seems round masks nevertheless existed before this influence. Their round shape has a particular aesthetic resonance for the LUBA. It evokes the moon, a feminine connotation which the LUBA associate with the spirit world. Based on the SONGYE model, the black-and-white colour scheme and the slightly flattened nose of this specimen make it a female mask.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

—
wood
H 34 cm

—
Jacques Kerchache collection, Paris
Jean Cambier collection, Belgium
Sotheby's, London 29 June 1987,
lot 65
Private collection, Belgium

—
Publication

— « Les arts primitifs (à Paris et en Belgique) » in *Le Marché des Arts et des Antiquités*, 1974, reprinted in *Anonymous Collectors*, 2007





LUNTU statue

Originating among the LUBA, the LUNTU migrated west and settled in the Kasai region in the middle of what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Their migration led them to settle in LULUA territory, from which they chased the PYGMIES. Their sculptural traditions are therefore linked to those of the LUBA, but incorporate LULUA and SONGYE (NSAPO-NSAPO) influences.

This female statue is stunning. Its elongated silhouette and black patina clearly recall LULUA figures. The handling of the head, with a hemispherical helmet hairstyle that comes to a point in the rear, suggests this represents a chief or warrior, both common subjects in the statuary of this people.

The treatment of the body is frankly original, notably the handling of the torso and the arms: the points of the shoulders, far back, protrude horizontally; the vertical arms extend from them without obvious joints. The same goes for the hands, which rest on the hips with no anatomical relation to the wrists. This approach gives an odd and strangely powerful posture to this figure. There are also powerful accessories. A horn containing magic material is attached to the head. Brass nails line the chest and the facial features (eyes, horizontal line on the forehead and vertical line along the bridge of the nose, curving around the cheeks and coming together again below the mouth).

The presence of metal is a reminder of the therapeutic power traditionally attributed to this material by the northern SONGYE, particularly the EKI, among whom the NSAPO-NSAPO originated. Furthermore, the umbilical cavity, hollowed to hold a magic cargo, is a constant in SONGYE statuary, as is the horn. As for the woven raffia loincloth (held in place by a cotton belt), it recalls the fibre skirts, chiefly attributes, found on some magico-religious SONGYE statues.

Attribution of this sculpture is therefore complicated: it combines stylistic elements associated with the NSAPO-NSAPO specifically and the northern SONGYE more generally, its structure links it LULUA statuettes borrowed from the style of the BAKWA NDOLO. According to François Neyt (2013), this work comes from a LUNTU workshop, where it was made in the early 20th century.

Democratic Republic of the Congo
—
wood, horn, raffia, brass, metal, cloth
H 56 cm
—
Heinz Ryser collection, Zurich
René David collection, Zurich (1980)
Private collection, Belgium
—
Publication
- F. Neyt, *Fétiches et objets ancestraux d'Afrique*, Milan, 5Continents, 2013, fig. 66, p. 210





KALUNDWE

statue

text by Bruno Claessens

KALUNDWE territory sits between the Luembe and Lubilash (upper Sankuru) Rivers in the Kaniama region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The KALUNDWE are a sub-group of the Western LUBA, as can be seen from their sculptures: black figures carved from light wood with bulbous foreheads and hairstyles in multiple, symmetrically placed buns. The iconography of a figure holding a knife, common throughout the region, originated with the LUBA. But we can also find SONGYE and TSHOKWE influences in the formal language of KALUNDWE sculpture. In this figure, the position of the arms, the hands, and the large feet are clearly of TSHOKWE origin. The face recalls SONGYE masks and figures, with their protruding open mouths and angular chins. The KALUNDWE are known above all for their chief's clubs, a tradition that confirms LUBA influence. The KALUNDWE style therefore inevitably emerges from a socio-political mix of these three groups (LUBA, TSHOKWE, and SONGYE). In the past this heterogeneous style often led to attribution errors and an underestimation of KALUNDWE artistic production. >>>



Democratic Republic of the Congo

—
wood
H 51 cm

—
Private collection, Switzerland



Because of the immense power of the LUBA kingdom, chiefdoms along their border imitated and adopted their customs, leading to regular reproduction of royal emblems across the region. The LUBA archetype of the “cup-bearer” represents a female figure (*luboko*) seated or kneeling, very occasionally upright. Among the LUBA, chiefs’ wives and seers *mbudye* kept these cup-bearers, which were invested with such sacred and political power that they conferred upon their owners an incontestable authority.

In daily LUBA life, the cup-bearer was principally an instrument of divination. The creation legend of the LUBA kingdom offers several clues to the function of these cups. King Kalala Ilunga sent a representative to the seer Mbayo wa Kubungwe to obtain sacred insignia that would consolidate his authority. Among these was a gourd *mboko* containing white clay (*mpemba*, directly linked with authority). This clay was often kept in the shape of a ball; gourds or, later, the receptacles held by the cup-bearer were therefore perfectly shaped to hold this sacred material. The symbolism of the colour white evoked sacred order and divination. None of the bowls carried by the three KALUNDWE figures known to us shows any trace of *mpemba*. Their creator was likely inspired by LUBA iconography and their successive owners never put them to their traditional use. It seems that these figures never belonged to a seer practicing rituals, but rather served as objects of chiefly prestige in a KALUNDWE society, in which each person would have known precisely his social position.

We don’t know whom this cup-bearer is meant to represent. The standing position might be linked to ancestor figures or be the result of TSHOKWE influence. The invasion of KALUNDWE territory by the TSHOKWE at the end of the 19th century might have exposed the sculptor to TSHOKWE artistic traditions, such as figures of Chibinda Ilunga (a mythic ancestor), symbols of rank confirming the power of important TSHOKWE chiefs. Elements of influence in this figure include the oversized feet and the position of the arms, bent, pulled back, and possessing oversized hands with remarkably detailed fingers. The size of the hands and feet expresses an idea of action and the capacity to act. We can also interpret it as a sign underlining the importance of the spirit or the ancestor represented, both respected and feared.

This figure was created by a KALUNDWE artist from a workshop situated on the western border of the LUBA empire. Far from the centre of royal power, he was free to take inspiration from its artistic conventions. By using LUBA, TSHOKWE, and SONGYE elements, he created a piece that testifies perfectly to the links between these peoples during a tumultuous period.

We know of other standing figures holding a cup that came from this workshop, which was also known for its splendid chief’s clubs. Nineteen canes have also been identified as coming from this workshop. Most have at the top a standing male figure sculpted in a similar style. A minute examination of these objects leads us to believe that this workshop brought together several sculptors who shared similar styles over generations. Like this figure, most of the works were certainly created by the same talented master-sculptor. Given the power of these figures and the information available, the workshop seems relatively old, and prospered from the beginning of the 20th century until around 1925–1930.

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CHOKWE combs

In the 15th century in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo, a LUNDA queen married a LUBA prince. Several LUNDA notables disapproved of the match, and migrated south into what is now Angola. There they founded several kingdoms, including the CHOKWE, which extended as far as Zambia.

CHOKWE (*cisakulo*) combs can be divided into two broad categories: combs consisting of a series of wood blades bound together with vegetable fibres or a metal wire; and combs sculpted from solid wood. Some of the latter types are decorated with a sculpted figure which serves as a handle.

These precious decorations are indicative of the prestige of the owners of these objects which, beyond their use for hair, served as ornamentation for men, who wore them in their hair.

The four combs presented here are exceptional specimens of this miniature statuary. The figures sit directly atop the rectangular platform above the teeth (which are usually an odd number). This intermediate section is decorated on both sides with rich engraved abstract motifs. Chevrons, diamonds, striated checker patterns occupy these surfaces in perfect harmony.

The handling of the figures are a testament to the great balance of the composition. One, extremely stylised, embraces the cylindrical shape of the handle (no arms, circular head and hairstyle); the other three are more anthropomorphic, and take specific postures, both seated and standing.

The hairstyles suggest the figures are female. One of them has her hands on her hips, elbows akimbo in a manner similar to so many figures adorning the stiles of CHOKWE chairs. The other two are seated, elbows on knees. This complex position creates a lovely openwork silhouette when seen in profile. These two figures wear ornamentation made from brass wire. In one case this is simply wrapped around the ankles; in the other, these are complimented by bracelets and sumptuous scarification on the back.

The shiny yellow metal elements contrast with the generally dark red of the wood, polished by many long years of use.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

—
from left to right

—
1/ wood
H 19 cm

—
Private collection, Brussels

—
Publications

— *Bruneaf*, catalogue covers, 2000-2004
— *Tribal Art* magazine, Spring 2004, p. 34

—
2 / wood, brass
H 16 cm

—
Corice and Armand Arman collection, New York
Private collection, Brussels

—
Publication and exhibition

— *Hair in African Art and Culture*, exhibition catalogue, New York, The Museum of African Art, 2000, cat. 133, p. 139

—
3 / wood
H 18 cm

—
Samuel Dubiner collection, Tel Aviv
Baudouin de Grunne collection, Wezembeek Oppem
Private collection, Brussels

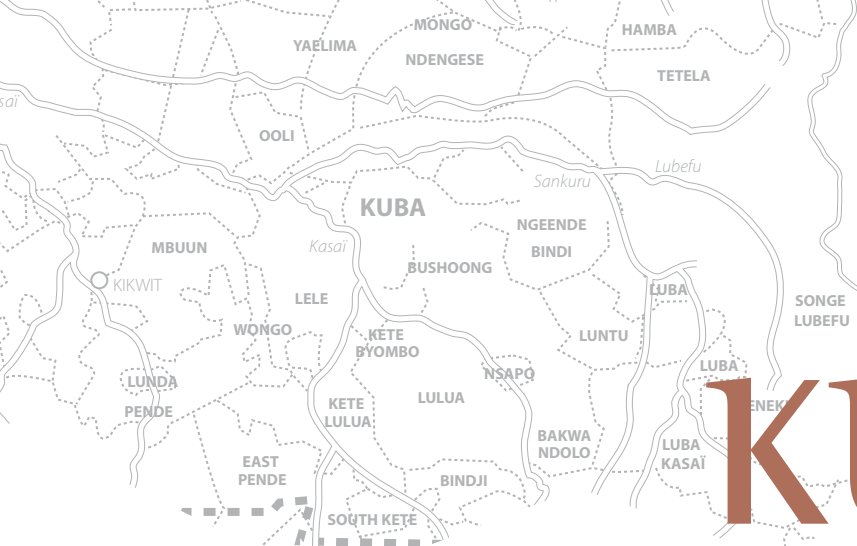
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Publications and exhibitions-

— *African Art. Collection Samuel Dubiner*, exhibition catalogue, Israel-Japan, January 1960-June 1961, Tel Aviv Museum, Jerusalem, Bezalel National Museum, Tokyo, National Museum, 1960, fig. 151
— P.A. Mihailescu, *Intilnire cu arta Africana*, Bucarest, éditions Meridiane, 1968, fig. 173

—
4 / wood, copper
H 17 cm

—
Private collection, Spain
Private collection, Brussels





KUBA cup

In the 16th century the KUBA settled between the Sankuri and Kasaï Rivers in the centre of what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Consisting of several groups (including the NGEENDE, the KETE, the LELE, the BINJI, the DENGSE, the MBUUN...), all KUBA paid tribute to the *nyim*, the chief of the BUSHOONG royal clan. If the BUSHOONG ruler and his court, which lived in a sealed palace (*mushenge*), created a specific royal style, each clan also possessed its own style, and certain typologies, such as cups sculpted in wood, were produced throughout the kingdom.

This exceptional KUBA cephalomorphic palm-wine cup has two bowls, each in one of the two opposite-facing heads. The great balance of the composition and the delicacy of the faces – with almond eyes and eyebrows that meet

Democratic Republic of the Congo

—
wood
H 18 cm

—
Félix Fénéon (1861–1944) collection, Paris

the bridge of the upturned nose above a small, rectangular mouth – make this cup a remarkable piece, even given the KUBA's rich production of objects of personal prestige. It is unsurprising that this piece should come from one of the most famous collections of African art, that of the critic, editor, art dealer, and collector Félix Fénéon (1861–1944). >>>



Theo van Rysselberghe (1862–1926), *La Lecture*, 1903, oil on canvas. Gent, Musée des Beaux-Arts. Listening to Émile Verhaeren, Belgian socialist poet, are the painter Cross, the writers Maurice Maeterlinck, André Gide, and Francis Vielé-Griffin, the biologist Henri Gheon, the doctor Félix Le Dantec, and Félix Fénéon, shown smoking a cigarette and leaning on the mantelpiece. © 2014. White Images/Scala, Florence.



In a recent article, Marguerite de Sabran (2014) noted the unexpected presence in this Parisian collection of objects originating from the Belgian Congo. It seems that Félix Fénéon's publishing activities in Belgium and his familiarity with the Brussels avant-garde (see painting on page 70) provided him with access to objects from Central Africa from the end of the 19th century on.

In this cup we can see the aesthete's taste for objects of such formal perfection that still today they represent, at the heart of the same typological production, the quintessence of a style.

For the piece presented here, this aspect is even more significant as KUBA art came quickly to be appreciated by Westerners for its refinement (the woven raffia known as "Kasai velvet", the powder boxes *ngula*, etc.). Reserved for chiefs and other notables, these objects, including cephalomorphic cups, feature complex decorations created in a spirit of aesthetic escalation intended to reflect their owners' prestige.

Perhaps even more than masks and statues, the cephalomorphic cup is the perfect illustration of the KUBA iconography of the human head: cross-hatched hairstyle, acute angles on either side of the fore-scalp, scarifications around the temples which would originally have been used to relieve headaches and progressively became a symbol of group identity.

Once sculpted, palm-wine cups were handed over to women in the workshop to be treated with palm oil and red powder. This last touch provided the burnished patina seen here.

Apart from the smooth, rounded shapes and the beautiful expressions of these two heads, the decoration remains admirably simple: the circumference of the foot and upper flanges share the same simple ring motif, expressing the artist's own fully harmonised vision.





PENDE

ikhoko pendant

Numbering around three hundred thousand, the PÉNDE live in the provinces of Bandundu and Kasai southeastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. Léon de Sousberghe's work (1958) led to the identification of three large cultural zones, including the central PÉNDE, settled between the Kwilu and the Loange River.

The production of ivory pendants *ikhoko*, among the most famous objects in Congolese art, is linked primarily to this group. Their small size and the preciousness of the material explains their frequent acquisition by Westerners as of the early 20th century. Zoe Strother (2008) notes that they were used right up until independence, a sign of resistance to Belgian colonialism.

The iconography of these pendants was traditionally linked directly to the large corpus of PÉNDE masks *mbuya*, carved in wood with raffia hairstyles, which were produced at the end of male initiation ceremonies *mukanda*, representing some of the main typologies in miniature.

Strother claims (*pace* other authors) that it would have been impossible to carve actual portraits on these objects, if only because among the PÉNDE, as among other African peoples, the representation of a specific person was viewed negatively, and associated with witchcraft.

The piece presented here represents the mask Fumu (the Chief), as indicated by the hairstyle with its multiple buns above a bulging forehead. The facial features, including the usual half-closed eyes, the up-turned nose, and the pout of the mouth, are part of a triangle formed by the continuous horizontal line of the eyebrows and the contours of the cheeks, which meet at the point of the chin.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

—
ivory
H 5,8 cm

—
Hans Coray collection, Switzerland
Irwin Smiley (1928–2001) collection, New York

—
Publication

—
- *Discoveries. African Art from the Smiley Collection*, exhibition catalogue, Urbana-Champaign, Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois, 1989, p. 69

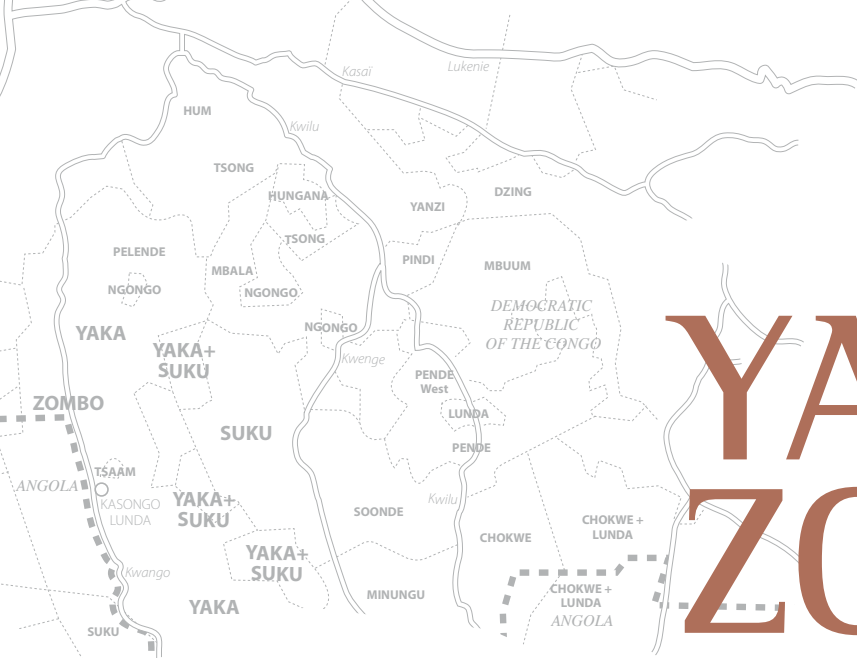
Other than their secondary role in circumcision rituals, it seems that some important masks *mbuya*, including Fumu, were used in therapeutic rites. Moreover, they were dangerous to whoever came in contact with them (sculptor, guardian, etc.). The *ikhoko* would have served as a protective amulet.

In this specimen, the two perforations allowing the piece to be worn are flanked on either side by an ornate double-band of chevrons sitting below the hairstyle. The front of the piece is polished and the features softened by use, the ivory yellowed. In the rear, the material is rough, the colour dark brown, with visible traces of the dental canal.

The central hollow is almost certainly the cavity left by the pulp, indicating that this piece was sculpted deep in the tusk, doubtless at the neck.

The obvious age of this piece and the atypical hairstyle make it an exceptional specimen.





YAKA & ZOMBO

statuary

Sculpture from Kwango, from the southwest of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, is among Central Africa's most expressive.

The four specimens of this figurative statuary presented here are YAKA and ZOMBO, with a characteristic hairstyle in a sagittal crest (an attribute denoting power), a fairly up-turned nose (which recalls the morphology of masks used for initiation rites, where the appendage is both a phallic symbol and a representation of the elephant) and a profusion of ornamentation. This accumulation of widely different materials attached to the sculpted object is prevalent throughout the sub-region and determines the function the piece served.

As is often the case in central Africa, the statues – called *biteki* – are used to hold and carry magic mixtures.

The largest of our figures is female: a cloth attached beneath her breasts holds the ritual amalgam. Another, smaller, doubtless male figure with a red and white bichrome face has magic ingredients in two containers worn on a cord around its neck: one small basket filled with a kaolin-based mixture, and a canvas bundle, tied with a cord, from which emerge two figurines. This sculpture apparently belongs to the category of objects called *phuungu*, kept by lineage chiefs, who used their apotropaic qualities to protect their families from witchcraft.

The two other sculptures feature bodies reduced to simple wood cylinders emptied at the centre. These are slit drums *n-koku*, the sculpted heads of which offer some artistic interest. These drums, used during divination rites, were mostly used to accompany chants. The drumstick is sometimes tied around the figure's neck, but is missing from these specimens, which are so small that their use is ambiguous. The interior of the larger figure's "belly" has been filled with ingredients. In fact, some of the magic objects were used as mixing bowls for preparing and distributing magic medication.

The YAKA were not the only ones to use slit drums during divination ngoomb. The tradition is found among their eastern Congo neighbours (KONGO, HOLO, KWESE and PENE); the sculpted heads show a huge diversity of styles across the various ethnic groups.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

— from left to right

1 / wood, vegetable fibres, mother-of-pearl button (?)
H 16 cm

— Private collection, France/Belgium

2 / wood, cloth, glass paste, brass, horn, vegetable fibres, pigments (kaolin)
H 40 cm

— Musée missionnaire des pères scheutistes in Kangu (Bas-Congo)
Pierre Darteville collection, Brussels
Dr Lorée collection, Antwerp
Private collection, France/Belgium

— Publication

- F. Neyt, *Fétiches et objets ancestraux d'Afrique*, Milan, 5Continents, 2013, fig. 29, p. 96

3 / bois, agglomérat rituel, fibres végétales, pigments
H 29 cm

— Erwine Hersy collection, New York
Private collection, France/Belgium

— Publication

- F. Neyt, *Fétiches et objets ancestraux d'Afrique*, Milan, 5Continents, 2013, fig. 27, p. 93

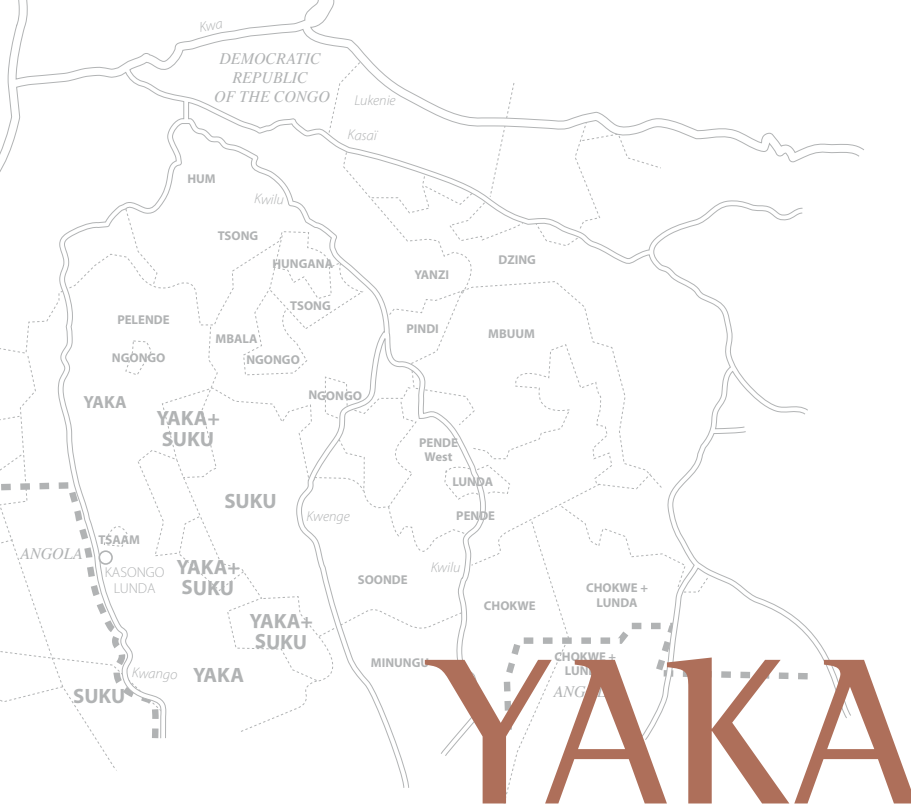
4 / wood, teeth, gourd, fruit shells, insect shells, vegetable fibres, pigments
H 27 cm

— Private collection, United States
Private collection, France/Belgium

— Publication

F. Neyt, *Fétiches et objets ancestraux d'Afrique*, Milan, 5Continents, 2013, fig. 31, p. 100





YAKA combs and hairpins with figurative decoration were among the first YAKA items acquired by Westerners (travellers and colonial administrators) in the Kwango region. By 1930, hundreds of such combs and hairpins had been brought to Europe.

While they seem to have been sculpted near Popokabaka and further south, their use spread across the entire country, even reaching the *kyambvu* court in Kasongo Lunda. YAKA notables wore these combs as ornamentation. Sculpted from solid wood, they decorated hairstyles or, according to some sources, could be worn as pendants.

Such combs are all in three parts: the teeth (in this case, three, or four in one specimen), the engraved panel decorated with abstract motifs (different on either side), and the anthropomorphic head with the upturned nose, characteristic of YAKA imagery.

One of these pieces is unusual in that it possesses a Janus head; the others all have a hairstyle consisting of a rounded zoomorphic figure.

This is the imagery found in YAKA initiation masks, whose crests offer a profusion of often picturesque scenes in coded iconography.

The great balance of the composition can be appreciated when seen in profile, with the curves calling from one figure to another.

combs

Democratic Republic of the Congo

—
from left to right

—
1 / wood
H 16.5 cm

—
Private collection, Belgium

—
2 / wood, beads
H 17.5 cm

—
Lawson Mooney (member of the Catholic Relief Services humanitarian organization in Zaïre, circa 1975) collection, Montauban
Private collection, Brussels

—
3 / wood
H 15 cm

—
Private collection, Belgium
Private collection, Belgium

—
4 / wood
H 18 cm

—
Acquired between 1899 and 1922 by Iwan Grenade (1873–1932), magistrate in the Congo Free State, then a judge in the Belgian Congo
Private collection, Belgium

—
Publication

—
Arthur P. Bourgeois, "Du nez au phallus. Imagerie masculine chez les Yaka du sud-est du Congo", *Tribal Art magazine*, summer 2011, p. 113



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Bruno Claessens graduated from the University of Ghent in 2005 with a Master's in history, and served as assistant to Guy van Rijn from 2007 to 2010. In 2010 he organized *Vlijmscherp*, an exhibition of African weapons from the Ethnographic Collection at the University of Ghent. Between 2010 and 2012, he was archivist of the Yale University-van Rijn Archive of African Art. He currently works as an independent expert, advisor, and curator. His book on the Dos and Bertie Winkel collection of Yoruba twin figures was published in 2013.

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Ethnologist Louis Perrois specialises in the traditional cultures and arts of equatorial Africa. Formerly a director at the Musée des Arts et Traditions du Gabon in Libreville, he spent 20 years conducting field research in Gabon and Cameroon. He taught at the Sorbonne, and has published widely on a variety of topics, including funerary rites and beliefs and ancestral art in Gabon. He is the author of exhibition catalogues for a number of major exhibitions, including at the Musée d'Aquitaine in Bordeaux and the Musée de l'Homme in Paris.

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