



TEFAF CLAES

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KONGO ivory

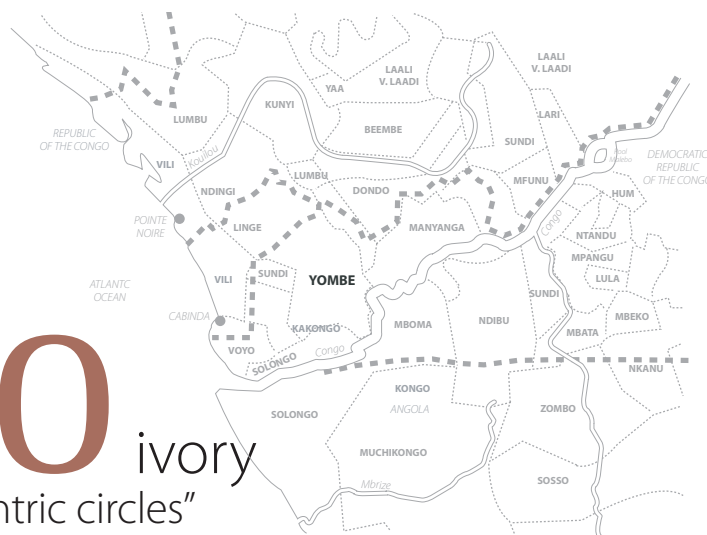
by “the master of frontal concentric circles”

text by Marc L. Felix

Unfortunately the majority of African artists will forever remain anonymous; luckily now and then the production of an artist is so marked by individuality that we can immediately recognise his hand.

Such is the case of the work made by a 19th century Mukongo ivory carver whom I have named “the master of the frontal concentric circles” because the four small ivory sculptures we know by him all depict a seated or crouching women whose forehead is decorated with an engraved circle-dot motif. His style for rendering human faces is also particular: circular, narrow-set eyes made of lead, arched full lips, an open mouth showing four teeth filed to points. He also enhances the ladies’ necks with a choker that has a large bead as centre point. This “master of the frontal concentric circles” made the well-carved honey-coloured ivory finial figurine under study here. It is rather large (17.5 cm/7 inches) and depicts a regal seated lady who is obviously of high status, since she wears a necklace and her chest is decorated with protruding geometric keloids indicating membership of a major lineage. The other three figures by the same master are in famous collections (Malcolm, Kerchache, and the Dapper museum in Paris).

For this figurine, by good fortune, we have an established early acquisition date: we know that its previous owner worked in the Lower Congo between 1920 and 1935. Based on this acquisition date, and also judging from the powerful style and the wear seen on its soft surface, I am convinced that this finial dates from the 19th century. Looking at its cylindrical base, we see that it features apertures through which a peg was once driven to fix the finial to a ritual tool.



Democratic Republic of the Congo
ivory
H 17,5 cm

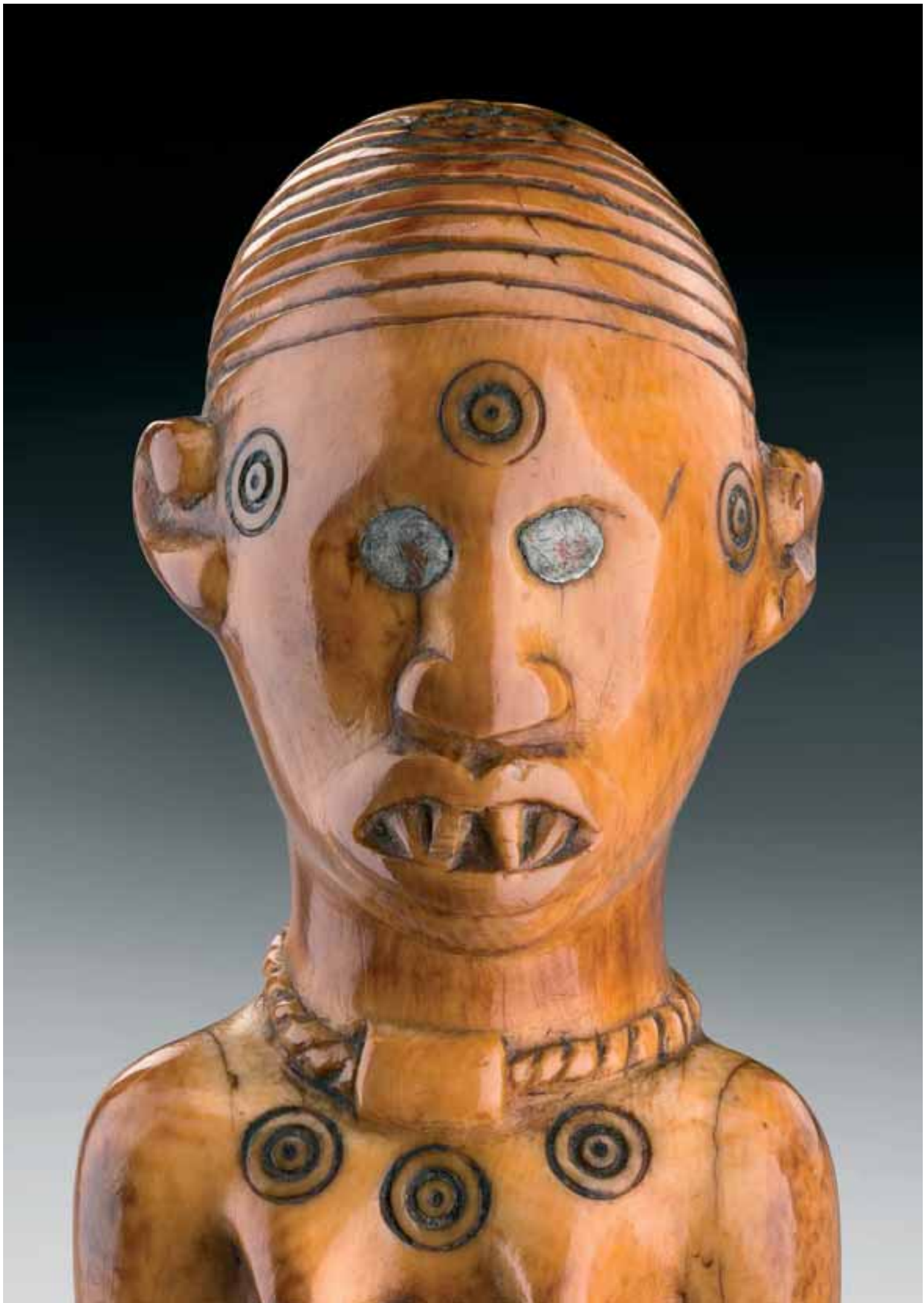
Acquired by Raoul Servais, Belgian businessman employed by the *Société de Colonisation Agricole du Mayombe au Congo Belge* between 1920 and 1935. Transmitted through inheritance and retained by the family until 2002. Private collection, USA

Publication
White Gold, Black Hands. Ivory Sculpture in Congo, Brussels, Tribal Art sprl, 2010, fig. 187 a&b, p. 148.

The indent that circles its base shows traces of a metal ring that once firmly held the finial to its “business end”. Some people believe that our finial once graced a sceptre (the KONGO made no sceptres decorated with ivory finials); others instead think it once decorated the top of a staff, and for a while it was therefore displayed on a substitute staff. None of this is certain, however: the figurine might as well have decorated a sword or a prestige or execution knife (see *White Gold, Black Hands*, Volume 1 & 2). What is sure is that this finial once empowered an important emblem of rank or title.

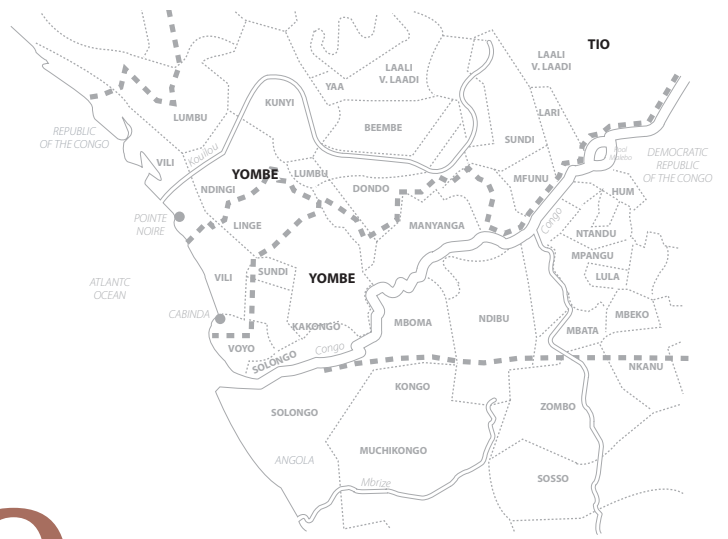
The depiction is rather disconcerting because the represented young woman has her hands tied behind her back, making me believe that she is a prisoner (a common icon among the BAKONGO). We can speculate about who this particular prisoner is: she could be a high-ranking woman from another group who was taken prisoner during conflict, a noble woman who has committed an offense, or a woman of status who is going to be offered to the spirits during a ritual execution, such as the women that are depicted on the handles of execution knives (see *White Gold, Black Hands*, Volume 2).

The style of this figure is typical for an area situated north of the Congo River, where the YOMBE and SUNDI people live. It is in excellent condition, even though both feet are slightly chipped. It has received no repairs or restorations, but it was probably cleaned to remove its crusty dark surface after its acquisition in Congo.









KONGO /YOMBE

figure

In the 14th century, the KONGO kingdom united the Lower Congo (DRC), the Cabinda region, and north-western Angola. The Tio (TEKE) kingdom, located on either side of the Pool Malebo, developed at around the same time.

As in the TEKE kingdom, the KONGO institution of royalty is defined by the importance and permanence of its ancestral traditions. In this sense, *nkisi* objects doubtless offer one of the most remarkable aspects of the different cultures of the region.

The sculpture shown here is a *nkisi*, a “power-object”, *bwanga*, in the shape of an anthropomorphic statue to which a ritualist, *nganga*, has attached magic cargo. Fragile mixtures of organic materials, these cargos have since disappeared, leaving behind only the outlines on the head, belly, and back of the statue. The nails, always driven into the body, recall the ritual use to which this type of figure would have been put. Driving a nail helped wake the called-upon spirit of the *nkisi* and establish a link to its actions.

The “aggressive” posture of the figure, upright, the body leaning forward, one hand on its hip, is characteristic of magico-religious KONGO statuary. The right hand doubtless held a stick or weapon long since lost. More than the posture, it is the powerful expression on the face, accentuated by the white and red polychrome, that demands attention: mouth open to show sharpened teeth, the gaze created with mirrors. This iconography directly recalls the magical vocation of this *nkisi*, which would have protected its owner and his household from sorcery.

Democratic Republic of the Congo
wood, metal, cloth, glass, pigments
H 60 cm

—
Anspach collection, New York

—
publications and exhibitions

- *African Tribal Sculpture from the Collection of Ernst and Ruth Anspach*, exhibition catalogue, New York, The Museum of Primitive Art, 1967.
- *Arts d'Afrique noire-Arts premiers*, Arnouville, n° 116, winter 2000, p. 53.
- F. Neyt, *Fétiches et objets ancestraux d'Afrique*, Milan, 5Continents, fig. 2, pp. 20-24.





KONGO/VILI

Raoul Lehuard linked this *nkisi* figure to a workshop-specific sub-style of Kongo statuary which he believed should be called “the Mpili style”.

It was in the village of Mpili, situated to the north of Pointe-Noire, near Diosso, that the *nganga* Lisunga identified from photos statuettes which, according to him, were previously placed under a small straw roof at the entry to the village as protection against sorcery (Lehuard, 1989, pp. 240-243).

The piece shown here has the face characteristic of these pieces, with an oval head and a relatively pointed chin which highlights the cheekbones and flattens the cheeks. This emaciated look is further accentuated by the open mouth displaying teeth filed to points. Glass beads are embedded in the eyes. The aquiline nose with its flaring nostrils and the ears have been treated in some detail.

Almost all the statuettes of this sub-style have, like this one, a cranial magic cargo adorned with feathers. Below is another *bilongo* consisting of a mirror-covered compartment so large it takes up the entire body.

The legs, while proportionally short compared to the rest of the figure, demonstrate the elongation typical of sculpture from this village.

In this specimen, the rather matt red and dark-brown patina contrasting with the shine of the mirror gives this *nkisi* and its user the gift of clairvoyance.

statuette

Democratic Republic of the Congo
wood, glass, feathers, resin
H 28 cm

—
D^r Robert Mandelbaum collection,
New York
Merton D. Simpson collection, New York
Mickael Oliver collection, New York
Stanislas Gokelaere collection, Brussels

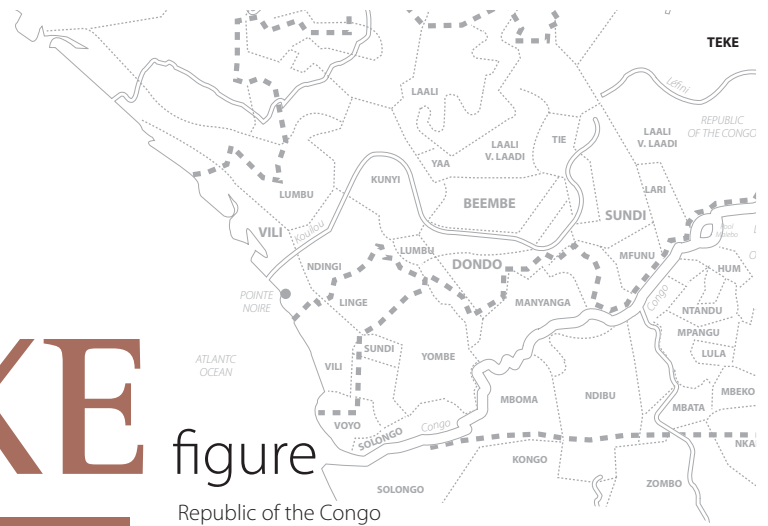
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publications and exhibitions

- Raoul Lehuard, *Art Bakongo. Les centres de style*, Arnouville, ed. Arts d'Afrique noire, 1989, V.1, p. 242, n° D-5-2-2.
- *Kongo*, exhibition catalogue, Paris, Galerie Bernard Dulong, 1991, n° 19.
- Marc Léo Félix, *Art & Kongos. Les peuples kongophones et leur sculpture biteki bia bakongo*, Brussels, Zaire Basin Art History Research Center, 1995, V. 1, p. 95, n° 12.
- Ezio Bassani (dir.), *Africa. Capolavori da un continente*, exhibition catalogue, Turin, GAM, Florence, Artificio Skira, 2003, p. 272.
- *Empreintes d'Afrique. L'art tribal au fil des Fleuves*, Milan, 5Continents, 2011, fig. 45, p. 114.



TEKE

figure



Republic of the Congo
wood, vegetable fibres, cloth,
ritual mixture
H 40 cm

Gift of Monseigneur H. Friteau to the
Musée de l'Abbaye Notre-Dame
de Langonnet (France), in 1921.
Armand Charles collection, Paris

publication
F. Neyt, *Fétiches et objets ancestraux d'Afrique*, Milan,
5Continents, fig. 21, p. 78.

The piece presented here comes from the musée de l'abbaye Notre-Dame de Langonnet in Brittany (Morbihan), which received it in 1921 as a gift from Monseigneur Henri Friteau (St-Etienne-en-Coglès, 31 December 1884 – Langonnet, 17 May 1956).

A major church figure in Loango (now the Republic of the Congo, then a part of French Equatorial Africa), Father Friteau was appointed vicar in 1919. He soon became administrator and then, in 1922, apostolic vicar. For over 30 years he travelled a vast territory – mostly on foot – to oversee the training of local clergy. Msgr. Friteau left Africa for the last time on 1 May 1947, and retired to the abbey at Langonnet. Meanwhile, the collection of the small missionary museum, evidence of the long relationship between the Holy Ghost Fathers (the Congregation of the Holy Spirit) and Africa – a relationship that was particularly intense in the 19th century – was put on display at the 1931 international colonial exhibition in Vincennes.

This exhibition marked both the peak of the colonial enterprise and the end of the first third of the century, which saw the transformation of the ethnographic status of African objects – previously of primarily documentary value – into veritable works of art.

Thus, in 1955, when the collector Armand Charles, recently settled in Paris, became interested in African art, probably under the influence of his neighbour and friend, gallerist Charles Ratton (1895–1986), he was willing to buy many of his works from missionary museums, in particular a rich set sold in 1960 by the abbaye Blanche de Mortain in Normandy.

This statue, acquired by Armand Charles, reveals his strong interest in the magico-religious statuary of Central Africa, and demonstrates the extent to which his taste was both wise and bold.

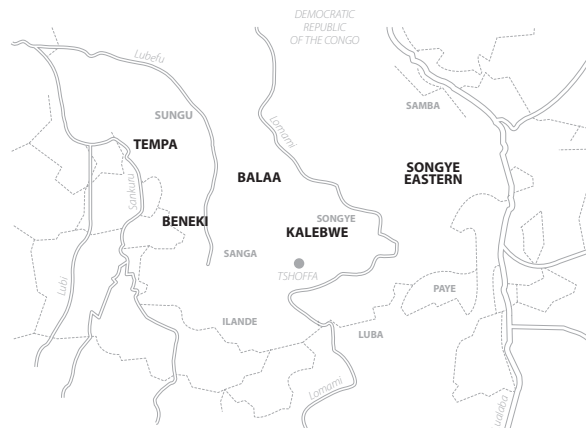
This statue represents an ancestor – almost certainly a chief, based on the imwu hairstyle with flattened circular bun. It has many features characteristic of TEKE statuary: the frontal posture, and the fine scarifications on the temples and cheeks.

This is a *buti*, whose magic resided essentially in the ingredients and symbolic medicines contained in the magic cargo held around the torso, where it formed a thick coating of composite materials. This is hidden from view by the accumulation of several nets attached to the statue's neck. The resulting small bundles of material evoke the spirits of the natural world.

All these elements are covered in a finely cracked crust whose colour comes from kaolin (white clay). The familiar symbolism of this colour links it to the ideal home of the ancestors, and therefore to good, bounty, and purity. This statue apparently served a positive ritual purpose proceeding from the will of the ancestors to ensure the well-being of their descendants, especially the children and grand-children of the patrilineal line.

The similar treatment of hairstyle and the anatomical details of the chest and the knees as flattened domes demonstrates the level of sculptural coherence of this piece, whose power rests in the striking contrast between the face, delicately sculpted in red hardwood, and the rough but fragile white "shell" covering the body.





SONGYE

The SONGYE in eastern Congo occupy East Kasai province, as well as parts of Katanga and Kivu. This territory is cut in two by the Lomami River.

To the west are the great TEMPA, EKI, KALEBWE, BALAA, TSHOFA, and ILANDE chiefdoms. The eastern SONGYE, on the other hand, consist of more modest groups, although they alone describe themselves as SONGYE.

The statuary of these various populations have a good deal in common: mostly representations of men, they share certain major iconographic consistencies and an angular, robust style.

SONGYE sculpture workshops fabricated a variety of products, including *kifwebe* masks for use by secret societies, which were central institutions. These masks controlled social interaction, reinforced the power of the chiefs and notables, and served as judiciary and coercive instruments. Statues, meanwhile, acted as village or clan guardians.

The statue presented here is wearing a double feminine *kifwebe* mask (*kikashi*) as the white pigmentation highlighting the parallel striations indicates. Able to see in two directions, and with a second sight that extended into both the past and the future, it provided protection from sorcery. A horn has been attached to the top of the statue to hold magic ingredients that strengthen its power. Hairs from an elephant tail hang across the faces. A raffia-fibre skirt covers the lower part of the figure.

Known by the generic term *buanga*, sculptures of this type belong collectively to a village; each such statue received its own name.

Visually, these rare white-faced figures, found only in the eastern part of SONGYE territory, bring together the two great sculptural traditions of this people: *kifwebe* masks and *nkishi* magico-religious statuary.

figure

Democratic Republic of the Congo
wood, horn, metal, leather, teeth,
elephant hair, kaolin
H 50 cm

Private collection, New York
Duponchel collection, Belgium
Private collection, Paris

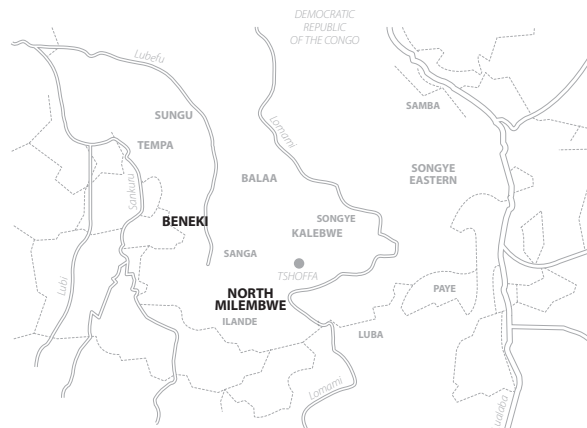
Publications

- *Arts d'Afrique Noire*, n° 81, 1992
(pub. Gallery Impasse St. Jacques).
- F. Neyt, *Fétiches et objets ancestraux d'Afrique*,
Milan, 5Continents, fig. 55, p. 182-185.









SONGYE

This sculpture comes from a workshop associated with what F. Neyt called the “second western SONGYE tradition” (F. Neyt, 2011), in the territory occupied by the northern MILEMBWE, the BELANDE, and the EKI.

Its small size suggests that this statuette is an *nkishi* intended for private use and would have served to protect its owner and his household.

The ritualist (*nganga*) filled the horn on the top of the head with a mixture of ingredients (*bishimba*). This statuette’s magic nature is accentuated by the metal spike pointing out of the belly and the copper ring around the neck. It would have been handled using the attached twisted iron post, as the statuette itself could not be touched after it was empowered by the *nganga*.

The geometric handling of the body, upright on its round stand, continues up into the facial features, making the smile – typical of the western SONGYE, and especially the Belande and Eki – appear even more sardonic.

statuette

Democratic Republic of the Congo
wood, horn, copper, iron, brass,
ritual mixture
H 20 cm

Private collection, Belgium

publication
F. Neyt, *Fétiches et objets ancestraux d’Afrique*,
Milan, 5Continents, fig. 61, p. 199.





LUBA

Caryatid stool

by the Master of Kabongo

text by François Neyt

Secretive, vulnerable, and fragile, the LUBA woman carries within her the incomparable force and vitality of her people. The caryatid presented here is a sign of power and authority, beauty and seduction, holiness and the gateway to invisible forces; it illustrates with its sculpted body the beliefs and history of an entire people.

The caryatid stool, measuring 48 cm high, is carved from semi-hard wood, probably *Chlorophora excelsa*, covered in a brown patina with dark tints. The figure squats on the floor, body erect and arms lifted to hold the seat of this chiefly pew. The triangle of the nose stands free of the slightly tapered face and extends into the plump, arched lips. The eyes, with their visible lids, are decorated with small glass beads embedded directly in the wood. These white beads evoke the gaze of the ancestors, those who see beyond the visible and watch over the living. Above the elongated ears, several rows of small lozenges making up a dotted line represent the hair. In the back, the hairstyle consists of a large cupped bun decorated with rows of chevrons. Beneath this, another trapezoidal decorated bun seems to complete the composition. This hairstyle was found throughout the Kabongo region, capital of the LUBA kingdom, and Mwanza, in the heart of Upemba.

The large and powerful neck is there to support the seat, which rests on the central, spreading column formed by the cylindrical body. The modelled shoulders balance the posture of the barely flexed arms, while the smooth forearms rush up to the fingers of the slender hands, perfectly framing the upper half of the caryatid. The pear-shaped breasts occupy the upper chest; the gentle swelling of the umbilical zone is decorated with scarifications of two varieties. The first consist of a group of small lozenges forming a set of open triangles and descending between the breasts to surround the body above the belly.

Lower we see another type of scarification: keloids, thicker, generally filled with charcoal, are arranged in a flange shape from the belly to the genitals. Around the kidneys, we find these keloids repeated in an arc, surmounted by two small projecting vertical slits. These are the classic scarifications worn by LUBA women.

Another morphological indicator is found in the posture of the lower limbs, bent at the knee, the feet pointing straight towards the ground. The position of the feet varies from one workshop to another. Frans Olbrechts first drew researchers' attention to this characteristic indicator of known workshops. This position indicates a workshop in the Kabongo region. It is worth noting as well that the woman's genitals rest directly on the rounded, cylindrical base. This recognises the extent to which female fecundity is linked to that of the earth. She is fecund because she gives life; she is also nourishing, raising and feeding her offspring. These two essential aspects make the LUBA woman an intermediary between the spirit world and the world of the living. She is the necessary gateway to life, key to the world. The collar, bracelets, and belt in blue and white glass beads complete the symbolism of the LUBA woman as presiding over sacred forces of divination and those of political power, in which she plays a secret and active role. >>>

Master of Kabongo workshop
Kabongo region, capital
of the LUBA Kingdom

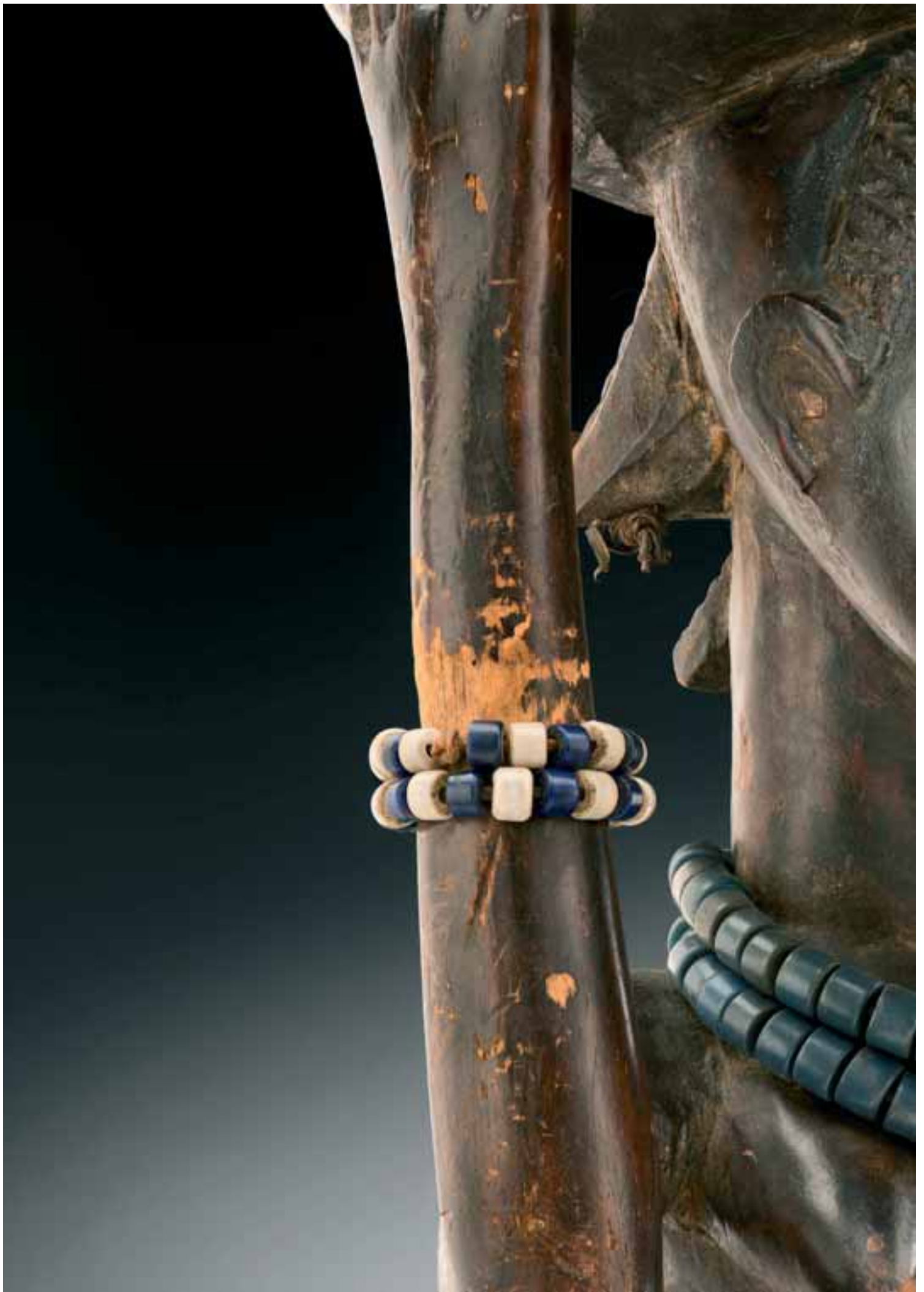
Democratic Republic of the Congo
wood, glass beads
H 48 cm

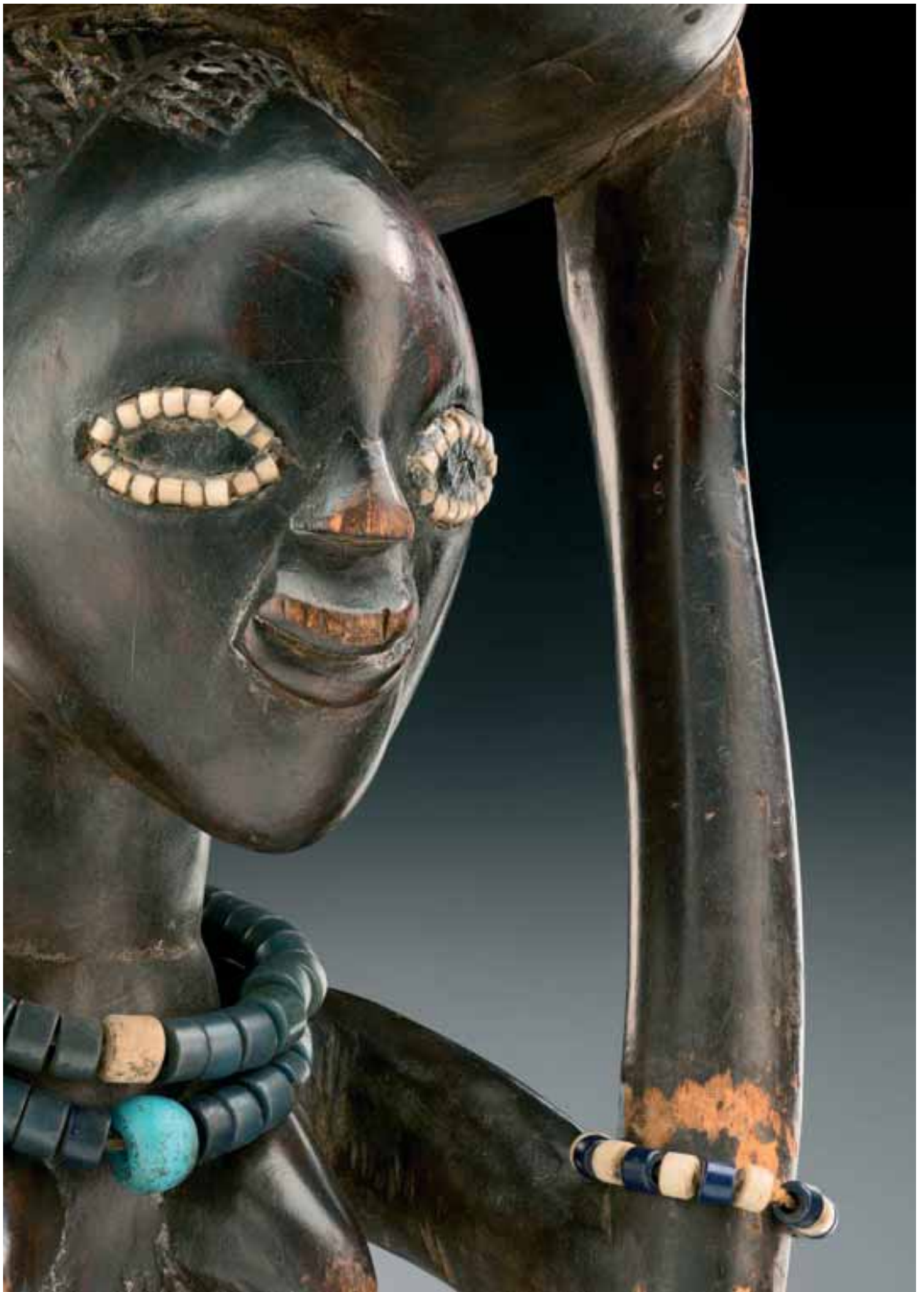
J.R. Van Overstraeten collection, Brussels

publications & exhibitions

- François Neyt, *Luba. Aux sources du Zaïre*, exhibition catalogue, Paris, Musée Dapper/Antwerp, Ethnographic Museum, 1993-1994, Paris, Éditions Dapper, 1993, p. 74.
- J.R. Van Overstraeten, *Regards noirs et blancs. Œuvres signées et non signées*, Belgium, privately printed catalogue.







The isometrics of the various parts of the caryatid demonstrate the mastery of the sculptor: the position of the arms, seen directly or in profile, the agency of the upper and lower limbs seen from the side, the position of the body as a whole, gently leaning forward, the enlarged head holding the seat in the rear on its hair which overflows to the rear. The mix of curves and counter-curves completes the ensemble, especially the slightly shifting planes from top to bottom.

This beautiful caryatid comes from a workshop that was close to the Kabongo capital. Several specimens have the same characteristics: the position of the body, arms held aloft, legs bent. The treatment of the diadem, the hairstyle, the morphological elements of the face, the eyes encrusted with glass beads, as well as the richness of the necklace, bracelets, and belt. In these workshops, certain caryatids included a child at the mother's side. Several specimens were included in *Luba, aux sources du Zaïre*¹. The place of origin is supported by the hairstyle, which was common throughout the region: flattened, overlapping buns, known as the "cascade" or "shankadi" style of the central LUBA. It was known in Kabongo, in Mwanza², and especially in Kikondja. The seat shown here carries the imprint of these various traditions.

Caryatids depicting a mother with child appeared during the reign of Ilunga Sungu (1780–1810), during which LUBA territory expanded. To the west, he created a buffer state between the LUNDA and the LUBA, the KANYOK kingdom, located between the rivers Mbuji to the west and Lubilsh to the east. KALUNDWE families also lived there, near the Lubilash and the Leumbe River. In the work *Fétiches et objets ancestraux d'Afrique* can be seen several sculptures illustrating the development of certain hair styles among the Kalundwe in the western Bena Sugu region³.

It was to the east, however, that Ilunga Sungu furthest extended his kingdom, into the region to the south of the Lukuga and the Luvua. His troops went as far as the shores of Lake Tanganyika.

With this political influence came cultural influence, and the emblems of power, such as sceptres and caryatid stools, as well as the spread of hairstyles and traditions such as scarification.

What is the significance of this presentation of a woman supporting the seat of the princely stool? The stool in and of itself already evokes the idea of carrying; the caryatid, far from the Greek and Western conception, reinforces the idea of power. It is the vector between heaven and earth. It confirms the authority of the chief seated upon it and strengthens this power with a sacred authority, reaching across the forces of the universe to the spirits of ancestors and past kings. Historic presence, document of history, it give shape here in space and time to the incontestable authority of the prince who dominated the region. This sculpted work represents as well the cultural refinement of the central LUBA from the Kabongo area near the capital of the kingdom.

The LUBA woman is essentially a genie, embodying the energies of the universe. Omnipresent on all such types of object, she expresses by the fullness of these forms, the expression of power contained and of interiority, of refinement by her hairstyle, eyes open on another world, that of genies and the spirits. In bowl-bearers, through her gift of sight, woman watches over the integrity of the kingdom. Her upheld arms invite the spirits and the genies of the universe to reside in this place. She serves to link the heights of heaven and the depth of the earth.

References

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¹ François NEYT, 1993, Musée Dapper, Paris, p.73-77.

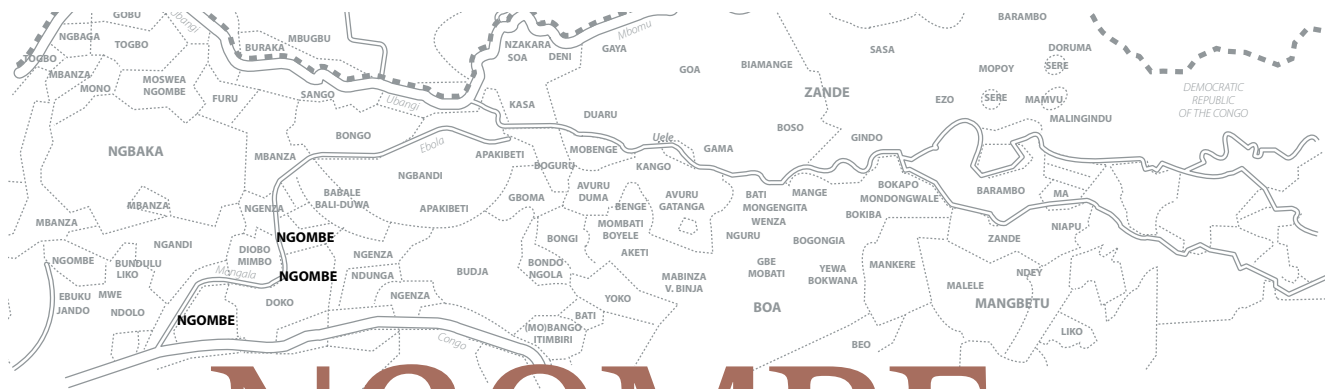
² See the photo taken by W.E.P. Burton in Mwanza, NEYT, *ibidem*, 1993, p. 176.

³ François NEYT, 2013, 5 continents, Brussels, p.124, 128-129.









NGOMBE

This NGOMBE chief's stool, sculpted from a single piece of wood, is completely covered in brass nails. The six feet are decorated with a three-lined chevron motif, and the curved seat has a pattern of semi-circles.

These suggest the concentric circles that form on the surface of water, and symbolise waves. Indeed, the NGOMBE living near the equator (north-eastern DRC) have strong ties to the Congo River. "People of the water" according to Burssens, they fished on the river, cultivated its banks, and traded both up-stream and down¹. These chief's stools were even used for sitting in the boat when travelling by canoe.

It was the sober and efficient elegance of these NGOMBE stools more than their symbolism that attracted the attention of French cabinetmaker Pierre-Emile Legrain (1889-1929) when fashion designer Jacques Doucet (1853-1929) commissioned him to build furniture inspired by African objects for his apartment at 46 avenue du Bois, in Paris. The lacquered wood, horn, and gold stool dated 1923 (now in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts) was one of the beautiful results; it was displayed at the *Exposition internationale des Arts décoratifs et industriels modernes*, held in the Grand Palais in Paris in 1925, when the French Art Deco movement was at its height.

¹ H. Burssens, *Les peuplades de l'entre Congo-Ubangi (Ngbandi, Ngbaka, Mbandja, Ngombe, et Gens d'Eau)*, 1958.

stool

Democratic Republic of the Congo
wood, brass nails
H 60 cm

Private collection, France

Alain de Monbrison, catalogue de l'exposition, Biennale des Antiquaires, Paris, Grand Palais, 20-29 septembre 2002.

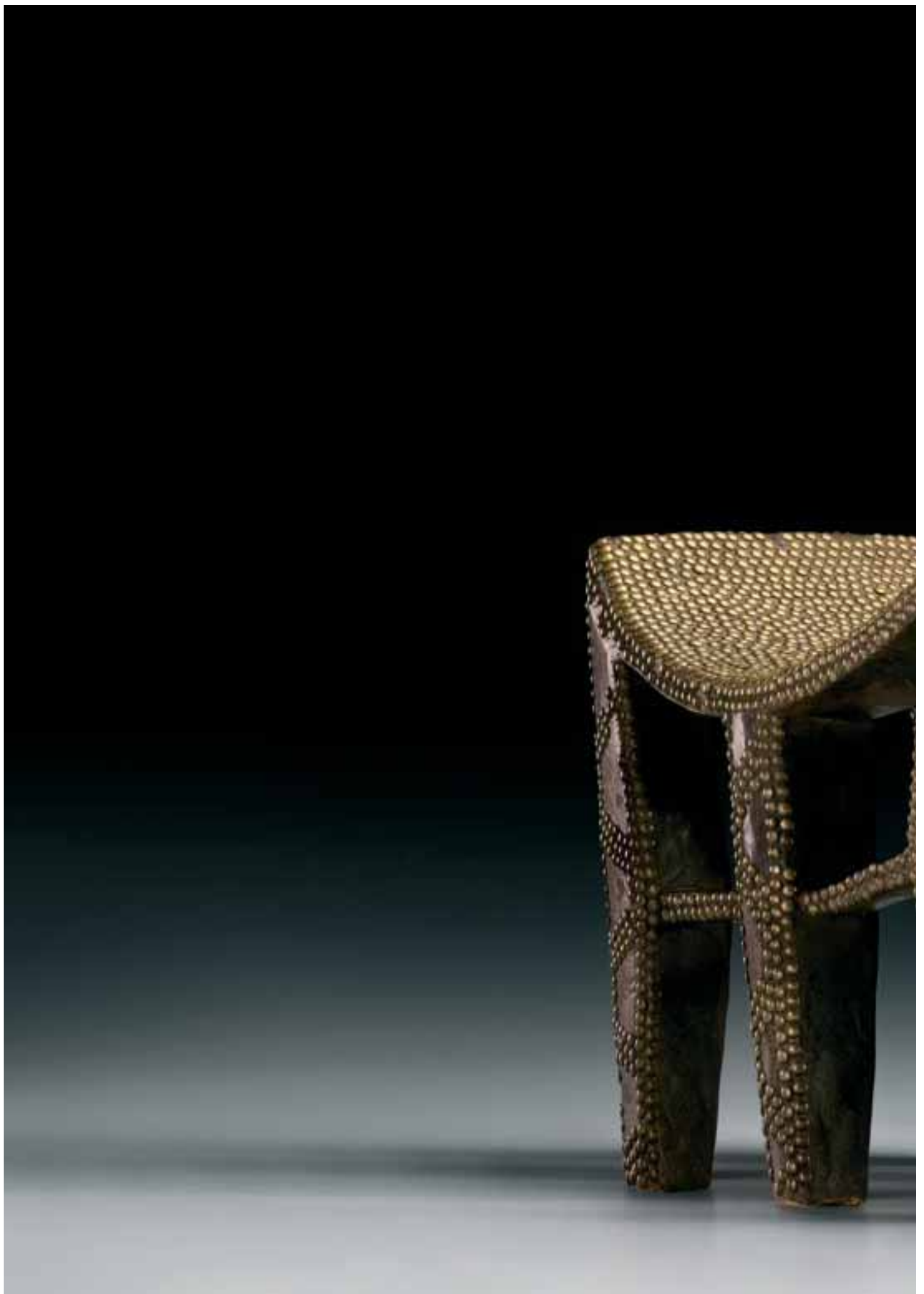


Pierre Legrain
Tabouret, ca. 1923

Lacquered wood, horn, gilding
201/2"H x 101/2"W x 251/4"D
52 cm x 26.6 cm x 64.1 cm

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond.
Sydney and Frances Lewis Endowment Fund.
Photo: Travis Fullerton © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.







CHOKWE

text by Manuel Jordán, PhD

This figure belongs to a corpus of CHOKWE royal arts developed at the peak of their cultural and political achievements during the last quarter of the 19th century.

These included the representation of (mainly) male or female chiefs, as well as royal couples. Most were portrayed as standing figures; others are seated on folding chairs, thrones, or on stools (Bastin: 1982; Jordán, ed. 1998). The identifying symbol for most of these figures is the crown, made in a variety of styles, with the largest and most elaborate reserved for the *mwanangana* ruler or “over-seer of the land”.

The stance and gestures of CHOKWE chief figures are precise and purposeful. Figures representing Chibinda Ilunga, an historic CHOKWE hero – renowned hunter and civilising force – generally carry a flintlock musket and hooked walking stick (Bastin: 1978). Others may hold antelope horns used in divination and healing, carved figurines from the *hamba* ancestral cult, or musical instruments, such as thumb pianos, to emphasise the chiefs’ role as communicators. This figure carries none of these, yet the bent-at-the-elbows arms and carefully articulated details of the hand (fingers and joints) imply for the CHOKWE a sense of readiness for action, and reflect the abilities of chiefs actively to engage on behalf of their people. The flexed legs and firm torso with forward-jutting shoulders play on the same theme, highlighting the strength and abilities – or prowess – associated with important political and historical figures.

Marie-Louise Bastin wrote extensively on CHOKWE chief figures, providing a comparative analysis of regional styles (Bastin 1982, 1988). From her work it is evident that the brilliance of CHOKWE chief figure carving rests mainly in the play of human body proportions, and the articulation and (degrees of) stylisation of anatomical parts and details. There is a significant range and formal flexibility within the CHOKWE stylistic cannon.

chief figure

Democratic Republic of the Congo
/Angola
wood
H 38 cm

Cesar L. Scaff collection, Cleveland
(the figure was acquired in the in the
1960s in NY)
Private collection, USA

Some figures have particularly large or “over proportioned” heads, arms, and feet; some are relatively short and stocky, while others are tall or elongated. Within that there is significant freedom of interpretation in the details and play of naturalistic versus stylised elements.

This figure represents an eloquent and successful balance of naturalistic and stylised elements, carved with an effective feel for proportions – suggesting those of an actual human figure. The figure is “firm and frontal”, yet the flexed and thus angled legs and arms create a form of mirrored upwards-dynamic effect in relation to the vertical trunk of the figure, particularly if seen from the side. The rounded/arched shoulders play on the curvilinear elements of the crown, adding to the soft, sinuous overall feel of the figure. The figure’s face is also defined in soft contours, with a three-dimensional diamond shape curved at its points (chin, top of head, behind ears) serving as a base for the facial features. The face/head is partially framed by the space created by the crown’s arches. >>>



The rendition of the figure's eyes, with a slightly raised delineation of the contours around the orbits, extends typical CHOKWE-style elements to suggest reference to details found on masks (Bastin 1982; Jordán, ed. 1998; Félix and Jordán 1998). That kind of detail, along with the overall shape of the face and the particular clean/sharp outline of the chin and jawline, are elements that Bastin identified as referring to a Muzamba type or style of carving (Bastin 1982). Muzamba is a region in central-eastern Angola identified as the CHOKWE "country of origin", and a place where some forms of royal art developed before travelling to other territories. This figure therefore probably originates from one of the most important CHOKWE cultural and political centres. Notable (documented) paramount chiefs came from that general area.

The x-shaped motifs and the chevron patterns incised on the figure's upper chest and below the waist (front and back) represent scarification marks that are also found in other Muzamba figures. These indicate that the represented chief is considered an adult who has undergone different forms of initiation; they also mean that he is a fertile individual. These marks are important because they are prominent enough to tell us something about the intent for this figure. Considering the figure overall, it is clear that it represents a chief at his physical prime, strong and able; the scarification marks are meant to be beautiful and attractive, suggesting he is ready for marriage for the purpose of having children and securing the prosperity of a royal lineage or bloodline. Stylistically, all elements are artistically rendered to support the image of a virile, strong, young CHOKWE royal male.

The prime physical attributes, reinforced aesthetically through this elegant sculpture, find another dimension in relation to the crown. Chiefs' crowns are receptacles for (universal) forces that are at the disposition of rulers, who have the ability to engage the supernatural on behalf of their people. The powers they amass are symbolically reflected in the forms they take: the elements on a crown relate to a universe in motion with the sun, *tangwa*, as a cyclical marker. The arches may be interpreted as the sun on the horizon at sunrise and/or sunset, metaphors for life and rebirth (dawn) and death (dusk). An able chief, and particularly a paramount

chief, is responsible for maintaining the stability of a royal bloodline, retaining a sense of continuity between past, present, and future through lineage, and guarding and ensuring the sustenance and prosperity of his people, while serving as a spiritual leader. This figure translates all of that into a compelling and elegant art form that was once housed in the private treasury of an important CHOKWE chief, and managed by a titled ritual expert.

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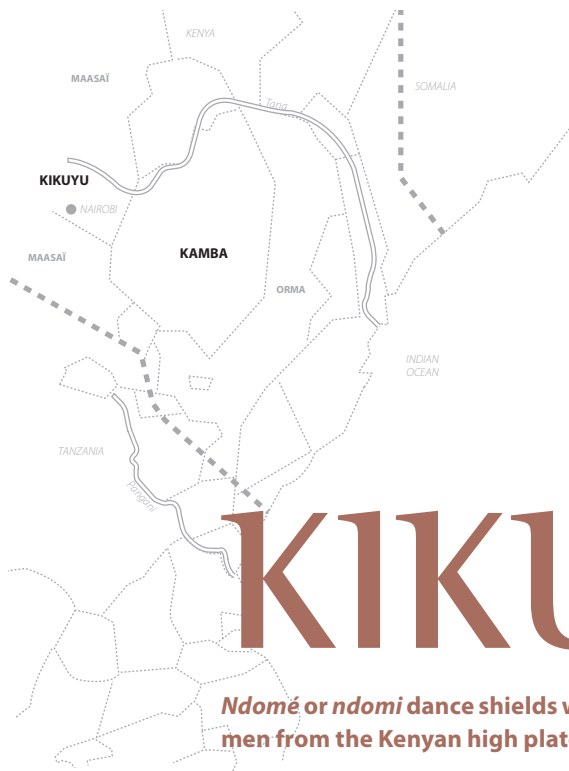
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KIKUYU

shield

Ndomé or ndomi dance shields were used by young Kikuyu men from the Kenyan high plateaux.

Kenya
wood, pigments
H 64.5 cm

Private collection, USA

Sculpted from a single piece of soft wood, these are in an unusual mandorla shape with an opening at the centre through which dancers would peek during their performances. Young KIKUYU men wore these shields by passing their left arms through a conical opening in the bottom rear portion.

The rear surface is decorated with lightly engraved concentric chevron patterns painted with natural colours (white, red, and black) while the front in this case is decorated using only paint organised around a central rib; polychrome provides the only asymmetry, resulting in a surprising optical effect.



Linked to the motifs drawn on the bodies of their carriers, these shields offered a fascinating show of colour during initiation ceremonies on the occasion of adolescent circumcision.

These bracelet-shields were handed down from father to son or from elder to younger members of a brotherhood. Their decoration was updated between generations of initiates with a new pattern.

The originality of the decoration is especially admirable given the simplicity of the abstract motifs traditionally used.





DINKA shield

The DINKA occupy a region near the upper part of the White Nile and are, along with the SHILLUK and the NUER, the largest tribe in South Sudan.

Sudan
wood, glass
H 40 cm

Acquired by Captain Henry Evered Haymes (1872-1904), photograph showing the object in his home.

This small DINKA shield is unusual, first because of its size; the few other known specimens are much taller.

The fact that this shield is so short highlights the beautiful central swell, behind which is found the handle. An engraved outline surrounds exceptional beadwork in a mandorla pattern. The beads are small, "glued" into the wood with a dark mortar. The use of white and red beads animates the abstract geometry of the motif.

Both the shape of this shield and its ornamentation argue against its use in combat; it was more likely decorative, used as a prop in dance.

This shield is from a set of pieces that once belonged to Henry Evered Haymes (1872-1904), most of which he apparently acquired himself. While a sergeant in the Royal Army Medical Corps in Egypt, he volunteered in 1900 to join Colonel Sparkes's expedition to South Sudan, about which little was then known, but which interested Western powers. Leaving Khartoum in November, the expedition followed the Bahr-el-Ghazal river as far as Tonj and Wau, where Haymes then spent several months setting up a trading station. From there, they again moved south into the territory of Sultan Tambura of the Niam-Niam tribe (ZANDE). Haymes eventually turned this nine-month journey into a piece for *The Wide World Magazine*, which in April 1903 published his descriptions of the populations he encountered, including the DINKA, and the stories of his travels.

Promoted to captain in 1902, Haymes helped to establish and oversee political boundaries in the region. His post allowed him to hunt; he sent some of the animals he bagged to British museums. Photos show that his home was decorated above all in hunting trophies, with a few ethnographic pieces – mostly weapons, with some basketwork and pottery. The shield presented here can be seen in a photo of a collection of objects, exhibited on a white sheet, taken outside Henry Haymes's house. This image, which perhaps documents the extent of the captain's collection at the time of his death, dates from around 1904, the year Haymes died at Tonj of wounds received during an expedition in the country of the ZANDE people.



KOTA/ MAHONGWE

Boho-na-bwete reliquary figure

Text by Louis Perrois

Between the years 1920 and 1940 soldiers and dealers in tropical goods found the most beautiful specimens of *boho-na-bwete* ("face of the ancestor *Bwete*") in Upper Ivindo, where eastern Gabon meets the Republic of the Congo.

The most remarkable series (of more than 20 pieces) was found in 1966, however, pulled by the gallerist Jacques Kerchache (cf. catalogue *Le M'bouéti des Mahongoué* with text by Claude Roy, Paris, 1967) from a ditch into which proselytising Catholic missionaries, in an attempt to eradicate traditional religions, had them thrown not long before the Second World War.

The group included both "large" and "small" figures with distinct and recognisable facial features. The reliquary figure shown here was a part of that group; at 53 cm, it is a large has been dated to the very beginning of the 20th century. >>>

Equatorial Africa, Eastern Gabon
wood armature, sheets and strips
of copper and brass, rough patina
H 53 cm

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Jacques Kerchache collection, Paris, 1967

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publications

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- *Arman et l'art africain*, exhibition catalogue, Musées de Marseille/MAAOA, 1996, n° 90, p. 120.



Large figures, with their stylised, bullet-shaped, almost two-dimensional heads, represented the founders of important lineages or clan chiefs; small figures represented less important but nevertheless notable allied persons.

The two, often linked, would be placed on top of large reliquary baskets containing the skulls of important people, objects of propitiatory familial-style worship. Each group carefully conserved such reliquaries, and regularly made offerings to the spirits of the dead, especially around important events in the life of the village (hunting or fishing expeditions, initiation rites, unexplained illnesses, etc.). Identifying this very specific “Kota” style as from the Ivindo basin (the Djaddié, Liboumba, and Mounianghi River valleys) and the region of Odzala-Kellé in neighbouring Congo took quite some time. While the few Europeans who had travelled to these hard-to-reach places beginning in the 1930s knew that so-called “naja” figures with flat faces decorated in thin metal strips in fact came from MAHONGWÉ and sometimes SHAMAYE villages, most Parisian “specialists” in the “negro arts” continued as late as 1970 to attribute these strange sculptures to the *Ossyeba*... The KOTA-MAHONGWÉ style is now clearly identified, both ethno-geographically within the “Kota” group, and in terms of its socio-religious context (cf. Perrois 1970 and 1979).

This MAHONGWÉ *boho-na-bwete* represents the chief of a defunct lineage. It is a particularly refined and successful piece, despite its “rough” patina.

One feature makes it stand out from known MAHONGWÉ work: the repoussé decoration of the forehead with a superimposed lozenge motif. Another interesting trait is the stunning arrangement of the metal strips on the upper portion of the head in several juxtaposed sets of curves. This is, to my knowledge, unique.

The fine strips decorating the wood armature are made from imported European brass wire that reached the African coast in the early 19th century (the wire of the cylindrical section is meticulously hammered flat in order to improve the joining of the strips – a technique that was slowly lost after the 1930s). “Neptunes” (metal plates) and bobbins of brass wire were used during the colonial era as money for buying slaves and local products such as ivory and wild rubber. It is possible that earlier objects were decorated with iron.

The semi-spherical eyes sit about halfway up the face (the eyes on small figures are a good deal

lower). A thick, pointed blade projects to form the nose, and long symmetrical “moustaches” extend to the rectilinear base of the face. The long cylindrical neck is wrapped in a spiral of metal wire; it widens into a longitudinal bulge just where the base ends.

A fragment of the original bun still remains at the top; this, along with the projecting crest which runs down the back of the head, represented the hairstyle (called *bakani*) traditionally worn by MAHONGWÉ chiefs. It consisted of a large braid that ran along the head and hung to the neck (*ibenga*), always decorated with a red parrot feather (an emblem of holiness). In the rear, unadorned metal plates were stapled to the wood armature; only some of them remain. It is worth noting the finesse with which these sheets were hammered smooth, and the placement of the staples in a frieze of triangles (alternating shorter and longer strips), some trace of which remains.

Its shape, the great care with which the metal elements were constructed and assembled, and above all the extremely rare repoussé lozenges decorating the forehead, give this KOTA MAHONGWÉ reliquary figure a powerful presence.

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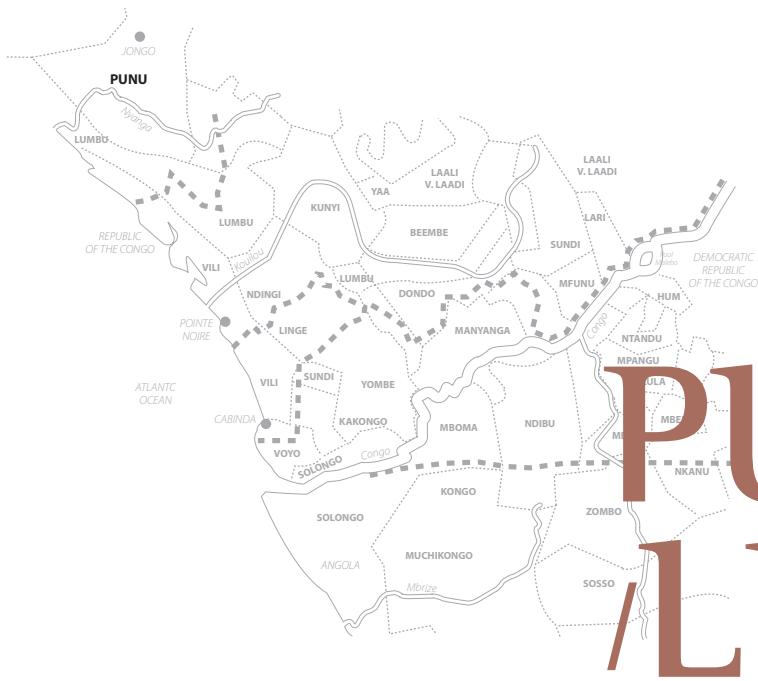
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PUNU / LUMBU

text by Louis Perrois

If the black and white PUNU and LUMBU dance masks of southern Gabon have in common a face of idealised beauty, their contrasting colours nevertheless evoke radically distinct entities.

If the black and white PUNU and LUMBU dance masks of southern Gabon have in common a face of idealised beauty, their contrasting colours nevertheless evoke radically distinct entities. The black of certain PUNU masks, identified by ethnologists A. Raponda Walker and R. Sillans (Walker & Sillans, 1962, p. 143) as *ikwara* (or *ikwara-mokulu*, meaning “night mask”), symbolise their link to disturbing and feared forces of the world of the dead. The dark face of the *ikwara* responds to the soft, pale beauty of the dead women of the *okuyi* as an evocation of a *masculine* entity (according to LaGamma, 1995, p. 148), perhaps a great society member already dead. >>>

Ikware dance mask

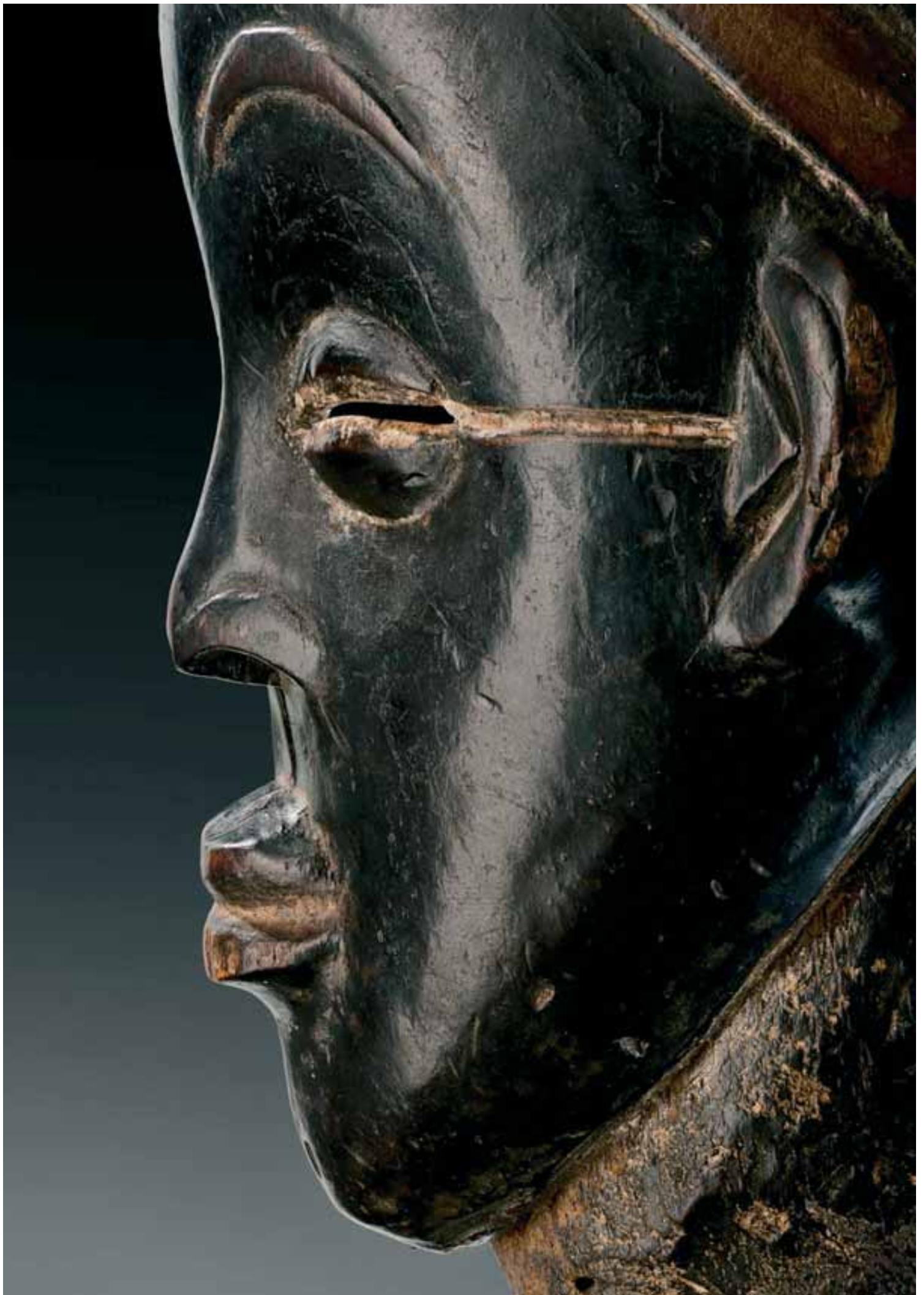
Equatorial Africa, Southern Gabon
Wood, black, white, and red-ochre pigments
H 26 cm

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Arman collection, New York

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Publications

— Sotheby's catalogue, sale of 14 November 1995, New York, lot n° 59 (ill.).





Ikwara masks, which for a long time served a judicial function (similar to that of the Fang *ngil*), danced only at dusk or during the night, perched on small stilts (*mugèla, muri-ditengu* – Walker and Sillans, 1962, p. 144), outside the village in an enclosure into which the uninitiated were not allowed to enter. The masked dancer and his associates acted as “magistrates”, resolving serious disputes that were difficult to resolve in the normal manner. After the judgment, the *ikwara*'s assistants enforced the sentence.

Black PUNU masks are not often found in museums or collections, probably because they were kept hidden from Europeans due to their potentially dangerous nature; if found they would not have been surrendered lightly. Their functional importance also explains why certain specimens have been so carefully preserved by villages; it is this care that gives them their almost lacquer-like patina.

In the case of this black PUNU mask, 26 cm, formerly in the Arman collection, we immediately note her *transversal bun hairstyle*, handled in the manner of a wood diadem over the forehead. It is carved with fine vertical lines representing braids arranged in a crown, covered in a thick patina from use. This type of hairstyle is rare in PUNU masks; PUNU works more often have “nut-shaped” hairstyles, but other styles, featuring thick braids or buns, also existed.

An early male hairstyle from southern Gabon – resembling that of the mask presented here – can be seen in an engraving reproduced by the historian A. Merlet in his history of Loango (Merlet, 1991, p. 79). This diadem-shaped bun recalls various hairstyles sculpted by the artists of Ngounié, including the “visor” hairstyle of ancient masks from the Ogooué valley, such as the specimen in the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford (1875), or the “mortar” style that evolved from a cultural blending with the TSOGO (cf. Perrois and Grand-Dufay, 2008, pp. 140–141, Pl. 41 and 40).

The shape of the face is also unusual, a lovely oval with a large, curved forehead above hollow orbitals with slightly projecting eyebrows, which themselves highlight the heavy-lidded “coffee bean” eyes. The mysterious gaze is accentuated by the light-coloured horizontal linear scarifications extended from the eyes to the temples.

The rounded swell of the forehead is emphasised by a thin red-ochre band decorated with a triangle pointing down the centre of the face. The thin nose and flared nostrils are handled with realism, as are the pursed, fleshy red lips.

Everything about this mask – from the idealised anatomical details to the subtle play of chromatic contrasts between the black ground and the red and white decorative elements – demonstrates the sculptural mastery of the artist. It is interesting to note that these masks could only be seen by initiates, and then only at night. We should bear in mind that masks appreciated in the West as “beautiful” were understood *in situ* to be “good”, meaning efficient representations within their symbolic sphere, corresponding as closely as possible to the mental image shaped by the norms of tradition, the visible reflection of the spiritual power of the entity.

This *ikwara* mask, with its thick patina from long use, comes from southern Gabon. The scarifications indicate a stylistic relationship with the TSENGI, whose faces were always heavily decorated (cf. Perrois et Grand-Dufay, 2008, p.141, Pl. 45 to 47). It can be dated to the beginning of the 20th century.

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BAMILEKE

mupo statuette

The Bamilékés are Cameroon's largest ethnic group. They live in the the Bamenda Grassfields, a western region, which they share with the Bamoun and the Tikar, to whom they are linked by common ancestors, shared social structures, and language.

Cameroon
wood
H 17,3 cm

—
Pierre Vérité collection, Paris

The use of magic statuettes is widespread in the southwestern region of the Cameroonian high plateau.

These statues, called *mupo*, were used by BAMILÉKÉ healers during health rituals or to cast spells. Believed to incarnate the patient, they often represented a woman with rounded features, perhaps as an allusion to fertility, as in the maternity statuettes from the region.

Mupo came in different sizes. The largest were displayed in the main court of the chiefdom before ceremonies, while smaller ones such as this were held in the hand during propitiatory rites.





KEAKA figure

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 (in his book *A Sudanese Kingdom: An Ethnographical Study of the Jukun-Speaking Peoples of Nigeria*, London, Kegan Paul, 1931 & N.Y., Humanities Press, 1950), 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.

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" (cf P. Harter, 1986). They were likely used prophylactically and were doubtless linked with therapeutic rites (cf V. Baeke, 2004).

Nigeria/Cameroon
Wood, sacrificial crust
H 58 cm

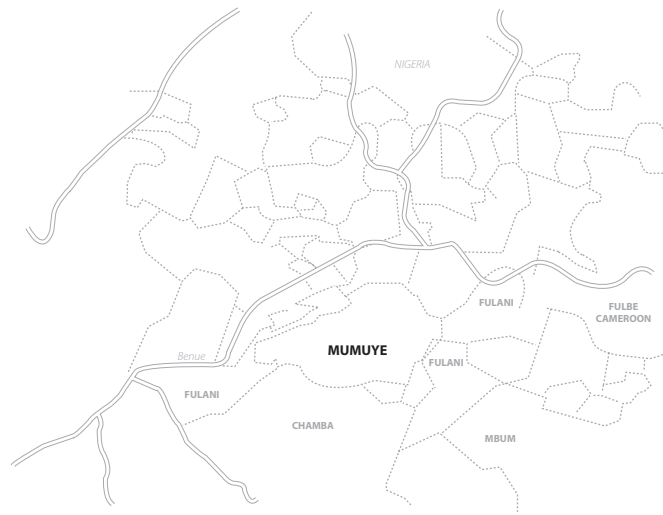
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Alain Dufour collection, Paris, ca. 1980
Private collection

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Publication and exposition
Arts du Nigeria dans les Collections privées Françaises,
exhibition catalogue, 24 October 2012 - 21 April 2013,
Québec, Musée de la Civilisation, 2012, p. 185.

The relatively large sculpture presented here demonstrates all the features characteristic of KEAKA statuary. The chin is reduced to nothing more than the hole of the mouth and a triangular beard. We note that this specimen also has small ears. On the body, with its half-bent limbs, can be seen a sculpted belt and the male sex organ.

With its "cubist" simplification of forms and powerful expressionism, KEAKA statuary demonstrates aesthetic approaches and a creative vocabulary that influenced Western art at the beginning of the 20th century.





MUMUYE

The MUMUYE live on the left bank of the Bénoué River. They survive on agriculture practiced in a region of high plateaux dotted with mountainous, rocky islets, natural butresses around which their villages were usually built as defence against the FULANI.

The MUMUYE are organised according to family groupings called *dola*, consisting of 5 to 15 households. In these assemblies, one isolated hut, *iagalanga*, is reserved for statues and another, equally sacred, *java*, is occupied by an important member of the family. This person often possesses magico-religious powers intensified by the sculptures, which are entrusted to his care.

MUMUYE sculptors are best known for stunning wood statues with elongated bodies measuring between 30 and 160 cm. They feature small faces, usually with pierced ears. Representing a guardian spirit rather than an ancestor, they watched over people's well-being.

figure

Nigeria
wood, kaolin
H 75 cm

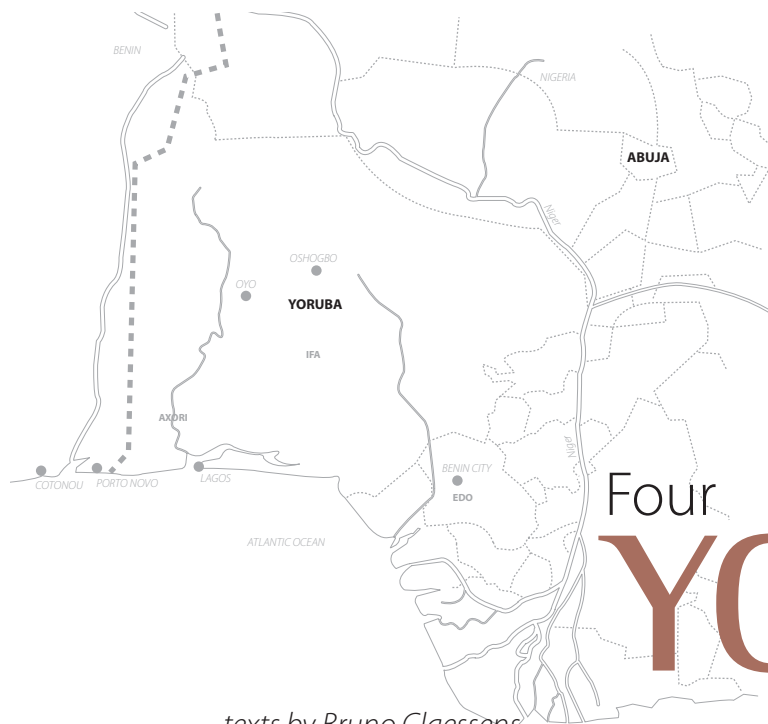
—
Jacques Kerchache collection, Paris
Michel Perinet collection, Paris

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publication
J. Kerchache et al., *L'art africain*, Paris, Mazenod, 1988,
fig. 937, p. 546.

The statue presented here seems to have been (roughly) carved with an adze. The head has a slight sagittal crest. The engraved eyes and ornamental motifs of the face – scarifications, hairstyle – are highlighted with kaolin. The disproportionately large pierced ears indicate a female and recall the ancient tradition of decorating the ears with wooden disks as large as 8 cm in diameter. In terms of handling, their size is made possible by the absence of arms, which they seem to replace. Extreme simplification reduces the body to a cylinder, flaring at the bottom to form a circular base into which the legs are inserted.

Despite its highly original appearance, this sculpture nevertheless fits perfectly within the traditional MUMUYE statuary canon.





Four YORUBA

Ibeji pair

texts by Bruno Claessens

The Yoruba of southwest Nigeria are one of the African continent's largest ethnic groups. They are widely known for their particularly high number of twins, four times more than anywhere else in the world.

Nigeria
wood, pigments, metal (aluminium),
glass beads
H 20 cm

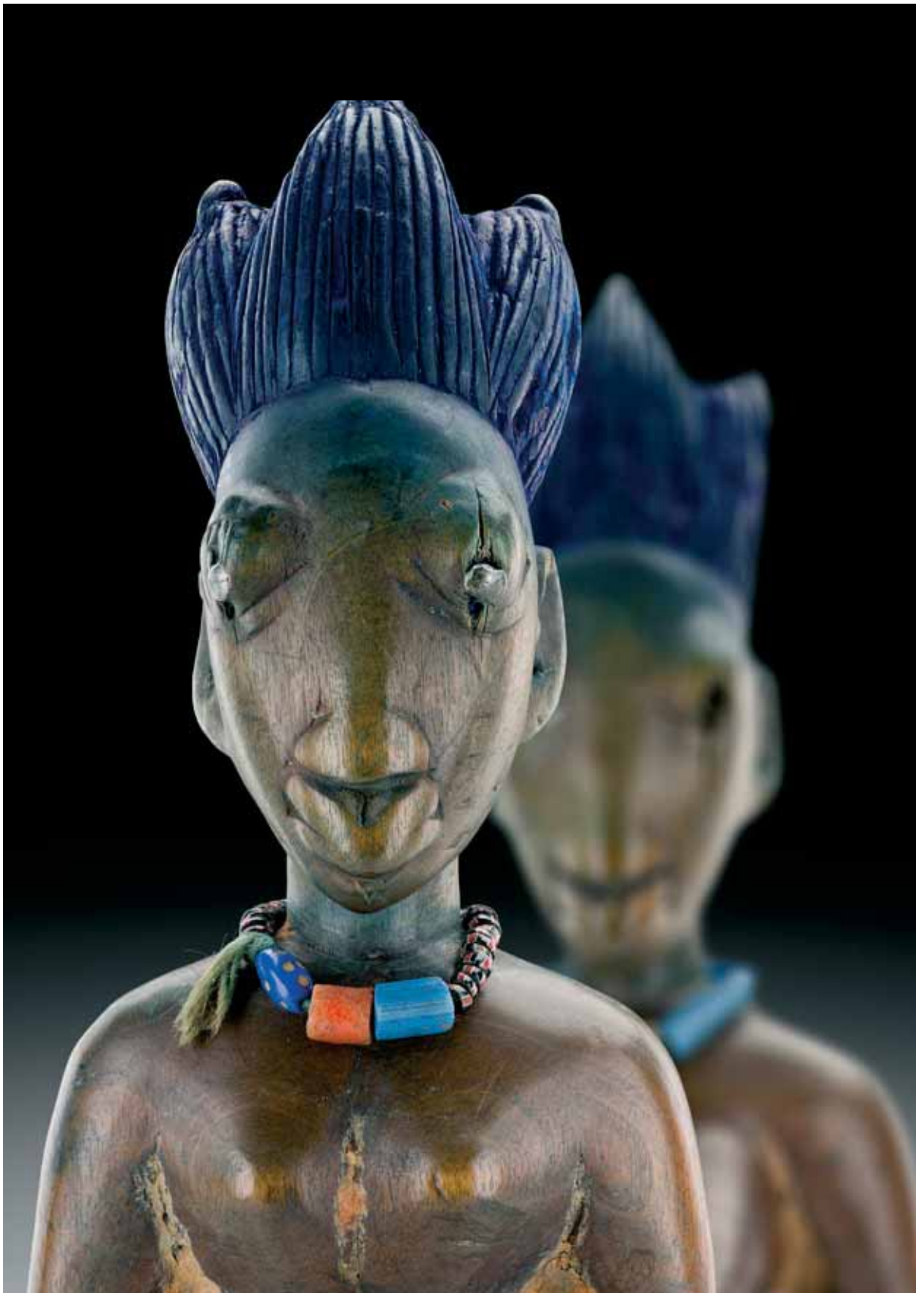
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Alan S. Katz collection, Boston (USA)

The reason for this phenomenon remains unknown, though some studies point to nutritional and genetic factors. It must be noted that in Nigeria as a whole, perinatal and infant mortality has in the past been extremely high. Twins, given their tendency for prematurity and lower birth weight, were particularly vulnerable, and ran concomitantly high risks in terms of survival. As in many other cultures, the Yoruba saw the birth of twins as a special event. They ascribed particular powers to twins, and the death of one or both of the twin-pair was considered a disturbance of the natural balance. As a result of this, the middle of the 18th century saw the rise of an extensive twin cult, wherein an important role was played by the wooden statuettes presented here, the *ere ibeji*. This term may be freely translated as holy representation (*ere*) of a twin (*ibi* = born, *eji* = two).

Just as the birth of twins was greeted with happiness and joy, the death of one or both of the twins plunged the whole family into gloom and mourning. Appeal was made to a sculptor to carve an *ere ibeji*. Such a figure in fact presumed that the soul of the deceased twin continued to live on, and found a home in a wooden statuette until the moment it ultimately returned to earth in the body of a newborn baby.

The dead child remained present amongst the living, with – and by grace of – the *ibeji*, a symbolic representation of what the deceased child would have become in young adulthood. When both twins died, the carving of two *ibeji* was commissioned. These then usually remained together as a pair. The fact that many such pairs exist is explained simply by the unfortunate fact that given the high incidence of perinatal mortality, it was quite often the case that both twins died instead of only one.

Families, in particular the mother, would take the utmost care of their *ere ibeji*. This would assure that the deceased, whose soul now resided in the *ibeji*, could not feel slighted in the least. Any disrespect might engender unpleasant consequences. Accidents, sickness and – mainly – infertility of the mother were greatly feared. *Ibeji* were treated with the same loving care as living children. They would be washed, clothed, and fed, and the figurines would often accompany the mother everywhere. A great deal of all this attention was, of course, based on fear. As the examples illustrated here demonstrate, in just one type of object (a figurine measuring around 25 cm), Yoruba artists have succeeded in displaying an enormous wealth of invention and creativity.



YORUBA *Ibeji* pair / 1

This female *ibeji* pair originates from Ede, an Oyo Yoruba town. A notable characteristic is the important coiffure which consists of two upward conical sections of hair, with the tops joining.

Nigeria
wood, pigments, glass beads, cowries
H 28 cm
—
Private collection, Germany

Indicating an influence from Yoruba groups more to the north-east, such a hairstyle was a form of aesthetic expression and a manifestation of wealth and status. To further underline its beauty, the hairdo is dyed blue. Blue is seen by the Yoruba as a “cool” color, here acting symbolically to cool the head (and so, too, the mind and mood) of the *ibeji*.

The face is covered with scarifications and the mother's frequent washes and caresses have given it a fine patina. A small nose sits between protruding diamond-shaped eyes. The eyelids have clearly visible carved lashes and the upper eyelids divide the eyes in half. The mouth consists of two simple worn horizontal lips. The ears are positioned low and towards the rear of the head. The necks of these statuettes are long and slender, enabling the mother to attach strings of beads. The pointed breasts of these female *ibeji* stand high on the torso.

Their prominent place indicates individuals in the prime of life. The long arms are slightly bent at the elbow and the naturalistic hands are placed flat against the legs. From the protruding abdomen emerges a fan-like scarification pattern descending to the genital area, which is decorated with small triangles. The buttocks are very prominently carved. The legs get progressively thinner as they descend from the forward-projecting thighs towards the short feet.

The strings with black palm nut discs around the waist served as a preventative measure against Abiku spirits. If a particular woman had the misfortune to lose several children, it was said that she was visited by these malevolent spirits.

Around one wrist is a string of cowrie shells. These cowries symbolise the prosperity that the statuettes have brought, or are expected to bring, to their family. The entire body shows traces of reddish camwood powder (*osun*). The facial characteristics of these splendid *ibeji* make it possible to attribute them to the workshop of Abogunde of Ede, one of the foremost Yoruba carvers in the eastern Oyo region active at the end of the 19th century.



YORUBA *Ibeji* pair / 2

The beautiful patina of these statuettes testifies to their long ritual use in the twin-cult, and the many feedings and face washings to which they were subject.

Nigeria
wood, pigments, metal (aluminium),
glass beads
H 20 cm

—
Alan S. Katz collection, Boston (USA)

The stylised hairdo is decorated with fine vertical lines and consists of different conical volumes. The hair show traces of blue pigment, which was used to cool down the *ibeji's* temperament. It transitions fluently into the harmoniously designed face.

The big, lozenge-shaped eyes with large upper eyelid are very worn. The original metal eye-pins are only still present in the male statuette of the pair. The scarifications on the cheeks are, owing to the extensive wear, just barely visible. The mouth is positioned very low on the face and is particularly pointed, with hanging lips. On the female *ibeji*, the small nose mirrors the shape of the lips. The neck joins the head at a slight angle, so creating a supple connection with the torso, enabling the mother of the twins to decorate the neck with a string of beads. The arms hang from rounded shoulders and are carved free from the body. The hands, with spread fingers, bend at the wrist at a 45° angle, and the fingertips touch the hips at the same angle. The thumbs sit parallel to the other fingers. The breasts of the female *ibeji* are well developed, large and protruding. They are evidence of vitality and health, and symbolise fertility. The male figure has pyramidal-shaped breasts.

Both *ibeji* show scarifications consisting of three sets of three lines that emerge from the protruding navel. The genitals are rendered schematically, and the short, slightly spread legs stand on a round base. The neck, wrists, and waist are adorned with strings with beads imported from Europe (particularly from Venice and Bohemia). These strings of beads were, however, not purely for decoration; they were often specially chosen to venerate a particular god (*orisha*). The cult groups of the different *orisha* each had their respective colour or colour combination. Additionally, both figures show traces of many ritual rubbings with camwood powder (*osun*). The same powder was often smeared on children to protect them from illness. This pair's specific combination of morphological elements unfortunately makes it impossible to attribute these *ere ibeji* definitively to one of the fifteen significant YORUBA subgroups. The triangular pointed mouth and shape of the body might indicate that this enigmatic pair originated in the city of Oshogbo (Oyo Yoruba).



YORUBA *Ibeji* pair / 3

This male *ibeji* pair comes from Oke Odan, an Awori YORUBA village. The principal identifying characteristic is the long apron, or *bante*, with a decorated outer rim.

Nigeria
wood, pigments (kaolin), iron, glass beads
H 17,3

—
Private collection, Belgium

Typical for southwest-land, this apron is held together in front by a finely fashioned knot. As the seat of the life force, the head is enlarged. Both male figures wear a special type of headdress known as a "dog-eared cap" (*fila eleti aja* or *abeti aja*) high on the head and covering the ears.

The statues have three vertical scarifications on the forehead and two rows of four diagonal incisions (*ila*) on the cheeks. The almond-shaped eyes have accentuated eyelids. All four eye-pins (representing the pupils) have been lost. The nose is sculpted true-to-nature. The large, fleshy mouth features a carved groove in the middle of the upper

lip. The arms (separated from the torso) descend from robust, rounded shoulders. Only the fingertips touch the hips; the thumbs point straight down. The copper alloy bracelets probably refer to Oshun, a YORUBA god whose primary function was to bring forth children. The nipples and navels are rendered with a carved circle. A fan-like form radiates from the navel with a triplet of three lines, a typical YORUBA scarification pattern.

The lower body shows clear traces of frequent rubbings with camwood powder. Short legs ending in flat feet with carved toes stand on a thin rectangular base rounded at the corners.

These *ibeji* can be compared with two male *ere ibeji* acquired in 1854 by the British Museum, the first to enter a Western museum.



YORUBA

Ibeji pair / 4

These twin figures are classic examples of one of the carving styles from Oshogbo in north-west YORUBA-land. Similar *ibeji* were also collected in the nearby city of Erin, also part of the former Oyo kingdom.

This particular style is easily recognised by its formal characteristics, including the finely incised double-lobed hairdress. This high, upright hairdo extends the long forehead and shows remnants of an application of blue pigment. The YORUBA originally used indigo, which inevitably dulled over time. A more effective alternative came in the middle of the 19th century: Reckitt's blue. Imported from England, this was a bluing agent containing ultramarine, primarily sold as a textile whitener.

Noteworthy in this pair are the large diamond-shaped pierced eyes. The original aluminium eye-pins are only still present in the male statuette of the pair. The pins of the female figure probably disappeared over the course of years after many ritual washings and anointments, or subsequent relocations. On both eyelids the lashes are indicated. Beneath the worn nose of each figure, the upper lip shows a small slit in the middle. The mouth is placed low on the face and the chin is almost absent. The hanging cheeks are typical. They are decorated with multiple very fine diagonal and vertical lines which form a particular type of scarification. Lineage signs (*ila*) such as these were originally used as a form of regional identification. From the front, the ears are barely visible. They are positioned to the head's rear and their shape further emphasises the jawline.

Nigeria
wood, pigments, metal (iron, aluminium),
glass beads.
H 26 cm

—
Loed Van Bussel collection, Amsetrdam
Private collection, Belgium

The female figure has pendulous breasts without nipples, while the male *ibeji* has a triangular-shaped pectoral. The long and fluid arms, carved loose from the body, hang from rounded shoulders. The hands rest on the legs. The belly button is clearly indicated. The genitals are rendered in the typical form for this style. The short spread legs are supported on a round base.

Both figures have strings of beads around the neck, waist, and left arm. White beads referred to Obatala, the creator of earth and mankind, while devotees of Oshun, whose primary function was to assure fertility, wore blue beads. Both figures wear open iron anklets (*aro*). Reminders of clotted camwood powder are visible between the arms and the torso, between the legs, and on the round base. During periodic rituals the figurines were coated with an oily mixture made from this powder. Afterwards the hardened layer was removed in anticipation of the next ceremony. A residue of the paste nevertheless remained in the hard to reach spots, and over the course of years a crust of this substance permanently caked the figure.

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WE *gla* mask

The WE live in south-western Côte d'Ivoire, near the Liberian border. They have many masks, *gla*, linked with ancestral spirits and the spirits of the bush.

This double relationship with the troubling, untamed world of the bush and with death make *gla* particularly dangerous. More recently, the *gla* society has devoted itself to personal power and contentment, and a level of personal success in the “modern” world (Jean Girard, *Dynamique de la société Ouobé*, 1967, pp. 154–155). The masks’ occult role consisted of defending villages from sorcery, and they were used during funeral services for notables, as well as for official festivals. They would appear with a large entourage consisting of guides, singers, and musicians playing drums and calabash rattles (Verger-Fèvre, 1989).¹

In southern WE territory, the OUBI (WOBÉ) possessed *gla* society “war” masks. Their morphology recalls that of a spider, specifically the tarantula, after which these masks are named. The animal’s destructive power perfectly suits these masks, which were intended to provoke terror and suggest warriors’ invulnerability.

The dangerous nature of these “warrior masks” is clearly visible in their composition, laden with multiples pairs – eyes, ears, and horns. Two narrow slits hid the wearer’s gaze, while allowing him to see. In this specimen, the vivid polychrome (white and red) and the inclusion of unexpected materials – the rope hairstyle, a beard of braided human hair decorated with pins, metal teeth in a mouth lined with red cloth – complete the sculpture and lent this face an expression of the utmost ferocity.

Côte d'Ivoire
wood, pigment, cloth, vegetable fibre,
hair
H 45 cm

—
Private collection, France

—
Publication
J. Kerchache et al, *L'art africain*, Paris, Mazenod, 1988, fig.
367, p. 383.



Reference

¹ VERGER-FEVRE, 1989. Marie-Noël Verger-Fèvre, *Masques faciaux de l'est de la Côte d'Ivoire dans les collections publiques françaises*, Paris, thèse de Ecole du Louvre, 1989, 245 p. (T.1).



Three BAULE figures

The BAULE occupying central Côte d'Ivoire make up one of the country's largest tribes. Originating from among the Akan, a people of eastern Côte d'Ivoire, this population takes its name from a legend dating back to the 18th century, when the queen, Aba Pokou, led her people to the gold mines further east.

During this exodus, she had to sacrifice her son to the god of the Komoé River to secure their passage. Her people were then called *Bauli*, meaning "the son is dead". In the 19th century, the BAULE had no centralised structure, and lived in villages run in a fairly egalitarian manner by councils of elders.

BAULE statuary is separable into two major types by use and function: the representation of a genie, *asie usu*, or, more commonly, the representation of a "spouse from the beyond", *blolo bian*. The BAULE believe that before birth, each person is already married, and thus abandons someone by coming to the world. This unhappy neglected partner can resurface in the memory, causing various psychological or sexual problems in adolescence and later. The sufferer consults a seer-healer who, having identified the cause of the problem, advises the patient to have a statuette sculpted according to a set of very precise instructions. Once the figurine is empowered by the ritualist, the patient takes it home, houses it carefully, and makes regular offerings, hoping for improved health.

The surfaces of the statues presented here show traces of the attention they received (shiny, polished sections) and the ritual handling to which they were subject (a fine crust is clearly visible in the furrows along the scalp).

The privileged status of these statues also explains the great aesthetic care taken in their manufacture: the details of the hairstyles and the finely rendered beards, the harmony of the various scarifications. But these remarkable aspects as well as the large size of these pieces might also suggest they are flattering representations of genies. Spirits, *asie usu*, ugly and maleficent, can nevertheless provide good harvests and successful hunts if properly honoured. They express through a seer their desires to be associated with a human; a statuette is then made, and worshipped in the house of the designated person, receiving libations that would give them their characteristic patina.

Without a specific function, but present at rituals, the exceptional character of these statues therefore served, above all, to impress the user and focus his attention.

Asie Usu figure (?)
Côte d'Ivoire
wood
H 65 cm

—
Paolo Morigi collection,
Magliaso-Lugano, Suisse
Galerie Ratton-Hourdé, Paris
Marc Larock collection, Paris

—
Asie Usu figure (?) (page 74)
Côte d'Ivoire
wood
H 41 cm

—
Private collection, Paris
Philippe Ratton collection, Paris

—
publication
F.Neyt, *Fétiches et objets ancestraux d'Afrique*, Milan,
5Continents, 2011, fig. 81, p. 215.

—
Blolo bian figure (?) (page 75)
Côte d'Ivoire
wood
H 46 cm

—
Auboux collection, France
Hourdé collection, France

—
publication
F.Neyt, *Fétiches et objets ancestraux d'Afrique*, Milan,
5Continents, 2011, fig. 79, p. 210.







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