



Regione Toscana



In the Heart of the Congo (R.D.C)



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of the Congo
(R.D.C)



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Regione Toscana - Presidenza



Museo Africano di Verona

Vicolo Pozzo 1 - 37129 Verona

www.museoafricano.org

info@museoafricano.org

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Introductory panel exhibition

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Presentation

I find it of particular significance that this exhibition, which offers us a rare artistic and cultural overview of the Democratic Republic of Congo, is hosted in the rooms of Palazzo Strozzi Sacratini, home of the Presidency of the Region of Tuscany. Of and in itself this is further confirmation of what surprises art can hold for us all, and what bridges it can build between very distant countries with very different histories and civilizations.

Of the Congo, in fact, over recent centuries it has not been difficult to know the country's troubled history, marked by colonialism and many other tragedies. Yet today it is another history that we have before our eyes; a history, moreover, that also gives us a measure of the many identities that coexist in the Congo, with exhibits covering twelve different cultural groupings.

With this exhibition we enter into the heart of African art and gather insights of great significance concerning, for example, spiritual existence; the relationship with nature and the world of the ancestors; and material culture.

I would like to sincerely thank all those who have made it possible to create this exhibition which is unique to the city of Florence.

Eugenio Giani

President of the Region of Tuscany

Welcome to the exhibition IN THE HEART OF THE CONGO.

An exhibition presenting the culture of this wonderful country, the Democratic Republic of Congo, where more than 250 ethnic groups live with an impressive cultural richness that we can enjoy thanks to Mr Bordallo Huidobro who has worked and lived in this country and has appreciated and loved its people.

From this love and respect was born the beautiful collection we offer you below.

The exhibition brings together a sampling of pieces from 27 villages in the D.R.C. It is a spiritual, religious and magical art. The sculptor's essential function is to represent ancestors or life forces through fetishes and sculptures that are both symbol and habitat.

Sculpture is rooted in the earth, in the environment and, rather than describing, translates feelings. Sculptures are made for use rather than for contemplation. Aesthetic values are not absent, but the effectiveness of the object is sought above all.

The sculptures are intended for use in ceremonies. The mask is an added element of the costume worn during the ceremony. Various substances are inserted into the sculptures. When not in use, they are stored in the family home or hidden in special huts.

It is also true that certain socio-political occasions favored the development of court art, decorative and more detached from the magical and sacred, as in the case of the kuba.

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SONGYE

The Songye are a large group inhabiting a vast region crossed by the Lomani River. The Songye are an ethnic group of Bantu origin with close ties to the Luba, with whom they share mythical ancestry. They were originally part of the Luba kingdom, but political disagreements led to a series of migrations that took them out of their area of dominance.

The Songye are a patriarchal group. They have different types of associations, such as the male secret society Bwidi Ka Kifwebe, which exercises social control, and the religious society Bukhisi, which cultivates traditional customs and controls witchcraft, an activity that plays a more important role among the Songye than ancestor worship.

Fetish bwanga (medicine)

The Songye cultural complex is known for the abundance and variety of a type of magical figures, called Nkisi (plural mikisi) and translatable as 'God's medicine'. An nkisi is a spirit from the invisible land of the dead, who has chosen to submit to a certain degree of human control through ritual ceremonies.

At least ten different styles of nkisi have been identified in Songye iconography. All are dominated by male figures, possibly due to the predominant patrilineal character of the Songye. Most commonly, the horizontal, rectangular shoulders are joined by vertical arms, forming a right angle with the forearms, with the hands pointing towards the abdomen at the height and sides of the navel. This is because the navel is considered the key that opens the door to the world and the first opening of the body through which the new man makes contact with the universe. The hands on either side of the navel indicate to



everyone that the ancestor is the source of the lineage and that, even though dead, he is still part of it and watches over it.

The mouth is one of the elements of Songye sculptures that offers the most variety. The chin is square. The neck is elongated so that an abundance of necklaces can be worn. The feet are huge when they exist, because many sculptures are cut off at waist height.

Its characteristics: large head, open mouth, usually has 1 to 3 horns on its head. His hands near his navel, where he would carry the magic substance, may also carry it on his horns and back.

Striking is the frequent application of metal bands and studs on the figures, usually on the face. Their presence on an nkisi is an indication and a warning of the tremendous energy it contains and its ability to protect against the evil arts of sorcerers.

The effectiveness of the nkisi depends on the power of the magical charge carried by the figure, not on its appearance. The contents of this charge are called *bijimba*, and are always hidden in a cavity dug in the abdomen at navel level, in the head, where horns are usually inserted at the base, giving these figures a very distinctive appearance. The horns are stuffed with *bijimba*.

The large figures are commonly used, especially to ensure the fertility of women and fields, and are often passed down from generation to generation. They are usually carved by famous artists and activated by renowned banganga the specialists of the sacred (nganga in the singular) and are kept in small huts built for them, from which they do not come out except when it is necessary to use the strength they possess. Smaller ones are for family or private use, often made by local craftsmen and are not necessarily operated by famous banganga.

They are used for personal, family or divinatory purposes and are kept in baskets or gourds. Because they have a great magical and potentially dangerous charge, these figures are not to be touched and are moved with the help of sticks, ropes or irons attached to their arms or the belts that adorn them, and are cared for and maintained with frequent applications of oils, sometimes even tukula powder.



They are worshipped, with ceremonies and sacrifices, especially at the time of the full moon, which the Songye consider the primordial womb and the symbol of fertility and the power to procreate. These rituals renew their powers and maintain harmonious

relations with the ancestors, as both the ceremonies and the blood shed in the sacrifices restore the subtle energy that the spirits expend in their performances.

In conclusion, Songye art has parallels with Luba art; the sculptures are characterized by the enormous addition of magical elements and the desire to break down the human figure into geometric volumes. Metal is used in plates to cover the navel, part of the head and the face. Fetishes are made to promote fertility and certain human activities. There are fetishes intended to benefit the entire village and personal fetishes. The large sculptures are cared for by the priests and are owned by the entire community.

Maschere Kifwebe



Songye masks generally have human faces, but the male or female face has been reduced by some sculptors to the most simplified features. The transformation of the head is radical. Kifwebe have more or less constant types: the male masks have a central ridge that divides the skull into two hemispherical sections or cubic volumes. This ridge extends to form the geometrically triangular nose. The mouth, in the shape of a parallelepiped, projects forward and ends in a cross-shaped hollow or is pierced by two holes. The eyes are hemispherical, cylindrical or conical, very prominent, positioned at the end of a geometric shape.

The volumes thus distributed are made more vigorous by the polychromy of the wood. All these masks are very colourful. The colours white, blue and red alternate in the concentric or parallel stripes that decorate the entire surface of the mask as in the luba masks. An abundant raffia collar completes the appearance of the mask.

Size differentiates the male mask from the female mask. The female mask is smaller and the eyes and mouth are less prominent. A plume of feathers usually surmounts the crest of the female

mask, while the crest practically disappears, being reduced to a smooth band that extends from the skull through the forehead and ends at the nose. The eyes are pierced at the end of the protruding forehead and the mouth, also pierced, has a parallelepiped or flattened shape, like a short bird's beak. The stripes and colours are the same as in the male masks.



Male Kifwebe mask, in the permanent collection of the African Museum

In the dance, these masks form a pair. The spirits of the male and female ancestors are invoked to take possession of the masks, which are meant to preserve the life force of the village founders for the benefit of the descendants.

The masks are carved in secret in the forest, where no one can see the artist. The person entrusted with the custody of the mask is then chosen from among the initiates. Only the notables, after passing the initiation tests, are allowed to wear them at the appointed times.

YAKA



The word Yaka means strong, so the Yaka are called a 'strong people'. They live in the savannah between Kwango and Kwilu provinces and speak dialects belonging to the Ki-kongo group of Bantu languages. They were once feared warriors and participated in the conquest of Mbanza-Congo (a city in Angola called Sao Salvador by the Portuguese) in 1568.

In the 18th century, they were invaded by the Luwa, a branch of the Lunda people, who strongly influenced the organisation, terminology and rituals of the Yaka's political power, although some matrilineal nuclei retained their status as the primary owners of the land. The men are responsible for hunting, while the women take care of the various crops.

The initiation of *Makunda* boys is marked by circumcision, after a year of training, through historical narratives, songs, dances and a rehearsal. The young initiates are called *tudansi* and participate as adult members of society. When they wear costumes and masks, they represent the spirits and cannot be denied any wishes, by virtue of an ancient right of these supernatural forces to ask for what they want without being denied. Otherwise they would become enraged and act against the population. The young people to be initiated are confined to a place forbidden to the rest of the villagers, in an enclosure called a *mukanda*. Depending on the ceremonies of the initiation rite, different masks are worn, which thus take on a great variety of forms.

Yaka art is largely defined by masks, mainly of the helmet type, representing supernatural forces. The headgear is made of basketry and raffia and is covered and painted with resins and natural pigments. Only the faces are carved in wood. Various geometric motifs are placed on this base.

Mwelo or Mweelu mask, serves as an attribute for the master's assistants in initiation and circumcision. They are made of fabric and wicker or lianas, circular in shape with protruding eyes attached to the ends of small cylinders made of bamboo or gourd trunks. The nose is replaced by a bird's beak.

Ndeemba masks (like the two presented in the adjacent photos) are made of soft, light wood. They are carved by *tudansi* members, in complete freedom, so the shapes are very varied. The carved part, the face, is quite small. The face is framed by a protruding edge like a visor. It is decorated in shades of white, grey, black and red. An abundant raffia collar gives it a voluminous appearance and enhances the small proportions of the sculpted part. The most striking feature is the huge, curved, trumpet-shaped nose, which rises towards the forehead and can be joined to it. When it is not



twisted, it is usually huge. In some Ndemba masks, the human face has been replaced by the snout of a stylised animal, often a buffalo or an antelope. In the enormous variety of masks, some types are repeated depending on the headgear.



Some end in a sort of overlapping discs of decreasing size from the bottom upwards, surmounted by a piume. Others have a hairstyle that tries to reproduce that of young girls, which they call an antenna hairstyle. They are used in circumcision rites. They are polychromatic. The bright colours emphasise the facial features. The hairstyle is made of lianas cut into strips and covered with raffia cloth and smeared with blackish resin.

Aryan but have in common the characteristic upturned nose. They are concave masks, with closed eyes and a pearl in the centre. The eyes are globular and protruding.

The mouth has a row of teeth or is half-open with a groove embroidered in black and white, in other cases in red. The cheeks are painted white. Masks with overlapping circle trim have a nose curved towards the forehead. The almond-shaped eyes protrude from a slight hollow. The huge raffia necklace encircles the neck and completes the lower part of the face. The upper finishing hoops are made of raffia fabric stiffened by impregnation with resins. They are danced during ritual ceremonies and those marking the reintegration of the initiates into normal village life.



The helmet mask, wood is the preferred material for carving the human face of these masks. The mask can be worn like a helmet. They are usually made in one piece. The eyes are identified by a curved, perforated slit and are topped by a zoomorphic sculpture, which fits the curved shape from top to forehead.



The decoration can be completed with metal nails and tattoos. These masks are difficult to identify, as the Suku have similar masks.

LEGA

The Lega are found in the northern regions of the middle Ulindi river valley, in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo. They come from the lands of Uganda, from which they left in successive migrations during the 16th century, arriving in their present territories two centuries later. They were a very warlike people who subjugated the indigenous peoples of the region, appropriating many of their customs.

The sculptures tend towards abstraction and schematism.

They are executed with very simple techniques.

Figure with a hole in the flat body, called **Katanda** 'the red ant scare', i.e. of evil. The colours of these figures range from red-orange



to yellow, made by adding natural pigments, leaves and earth. White clay and black charcoal are also used for colouring.

The masks are oval with almond-shaped eyes pierced by slits of the same type. The mouth is placed at chin height and has an elliptical design. The face is heart-shaped and usually slightly concave. The masks, like the sculptures, are usually painted.

The bwami group is the one that controls the running of the society in all its aspects, including moral issues. It is not a secret society, but is open to men and women and, in principle, everyone must belong to it to have a role in the community. To enter it, initiation was required, with the respective circumcision. The rules of social behaviour were transmitted through proverbs, and through these small anthropomorphic statuettes (**igingas**) that personified cultural and educational values on both an individual and collective level.



Iglinga statuettes in the Museum's permanent collection

CHOKWE

The Chokwe occupy two distant regions. One is located southwest of Katanga and the other on both banks of the Lulua River, where they mix with the Lunda, and on the left bank of the Kasai River, where they join the Pende of Kwilu Province.

Chokwe art is characterised by the production of objects associated with the prestige of their owners. The models of the sculptures are repeated, such as standing or seated chiefs, thrones with seated figures, but the artist is free to improvise. The sculptures may materialise the following concepts: Mahomba, symbol of the depersonalised spirit of the ancestor; Wanga, protector against evil powers; Tuponya, a term used for any male figure, particularly **Chibinda Ilunga**.

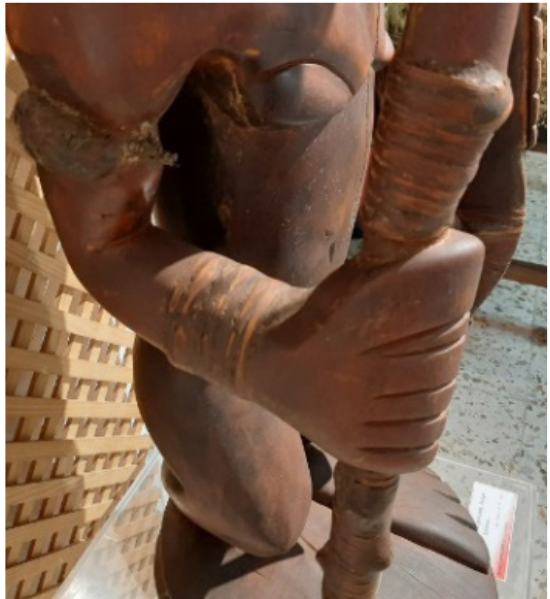
The chiefs sought out the best artists to produce quality works. They are considered among the best in African art. Chokwe art is considered a court art. Chokwe sculpture can be reduced to two main types: statuary made by cult specialists, with cylindrical figures whose faces have rough features, and other sculptures, made by professionals, depicting heroes or ancestral chiefs. The latter have a courtly



character and present examples of a high artistic level.

Chokwe sculptural production is influenced by the neighbouring Kuba, Luba and Kongo peoples. From the Kuba comes the decorative zeal applied to objects. They use two types of motifs: one completely geometrie and the other inspired by natural forms. Even when the sculptor takes natural motifs, his imagination interprets them freely and tastefully: dots, straight lines etc.. Their grouping seems to respond to a symbolic explanation.

The tuponya, blackened human figures, are figures of ancestors. Sometimes they are chiefs, hunters turned heroes, as in the case of **Chibinda Ilunga**. A figure who founded the Lunda empire by marrying the daughter of a Lunda chief and, according to the Chokwe, the individual from whom all their chiefs are descended. He can be recognised by the fact that they wear a rounded royal hat, tilted backwards. Some interpret this type of headgear as a sacred Cinkungu mask, because they are sculptures made for ancestor worship, for the dead chief. The **Chibinda Ilunga** sculptures are characterised by their grandeur and realism and are carved in rounded shapes. They appear with the typical headdress and in their hands they hold the attributes of command and power: a staff and a sceptre. The face is expressive and is intended to convey the strength of a hero, which leads to a certain rigidity of the figure. The hands and feet are often enlarged to emphasise physical strength, an essential quality for a leader.





The figures have long beards because they embody the wisdom of elders and ancestors.

The Chokwe chiefs sought out talented sculptors and favoured them to produce only works of quality and beauty, even if they were intended as ornaments or everyday tools. The naturalistic tendencies of the Chokwe style are due to the fact that they are copies of the living model. The sculptor chooses models famous for their beauty and helps himself by taking measurements of the face in order to reproduce it faithfully, although this does not mean that one can speak of a portrait. The faces of the masks are adorned with the decorative elements of sculptures. The term used to describe a beautiful work of art is *Utotombo*, which means 'executed with skill, love and meticulous care'. The same term is used by the Chokwe to describe a tattoo, a beautiful appearance. Their sense of beauty is highly developed.

The **Cihongo mask** represents the male ancestor. It was once danced by the chief himself, in a culture of nobles close to that of the Lunda, from whom they took their political organisation and managed to dominate in the 19th century. A noble elder, a male ancestor representing power and prosperity, the masked



man has judicial powers. In antiquity, this mask was worn by the chief or his son, who went around their territories and collected offerings in exchange for the protection offered by the mask. Today, it accompanies the pwo (female mask) in festive dancing.

These finely crafted wooden masks add to the charm of their forms with careful polychromy; the wood has been flushed and the eyes, eyebrows and lips are marked with light tones. The teeth are white. The eyes see into the beyond. Striking are the three colours used, the most common in black

animist expression. Red, which represents power, white, which is the colour of ancestors, daylight, gods, and black, which is the colour of death and destruction. The symbolism of colour relates light and shadow, in an attempt to confront the unapproachable. The cross on the forehead can have different meanings: the four cardinal points, openness to the cosmos, cosmic spirituality.

The wooden beard is a sign of masculinity. The globular eyes remain half-closed, agonised, but alive in the dance: this is a dance mask, the masked person is dressed in a vegetal net and a wide skirt of wavudu fibres (the same material worn by the tundANJI initiates during the ceremony of returning to the village). They are often adorned with feathers.

The **Mwana Pwo** masks accompany the Cihongo mask. They symbolise the woman, the village mother, and occasionally evoke the young woman. The wearer, however, is a man dressed entirely in a suit of woven fibre with fake breasts, attempting to imitate the feminine graces. The Mwana Pwo mask is made of

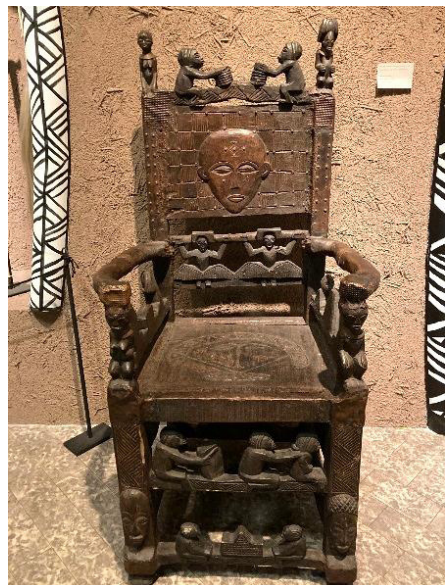


wood, but there are also masks made of fibres hardened with resins.

They are among the most beautiful and naturalistic of the Chokwe masks, for which the sculptors used the most beautiful women of the region as models. The sculptor defines the female face with finely sculpted features to give an expression of serene and peaceful melancholy. The deep orbits with globular eyes are

visible and the cheeks are softly rounded. The eyes, half-open, protrude just enough and the eyebrows accentuate the upper eyelid to form a soft relief that continues with the thin, straight nose. The chin is rounded and the lips well drawn. The harmony of the whole is completed by the reproduction of tattoos, based on reliefs on the forehead in the shape of a cross, on the cheeks and on the chin, in the shape of circles and dotted lines. These tattoos show the bodily transformations young women undergo to enhance their beauty.

The two masks are danced during mukanda ceremonies, but are watched and applauded by women. During mukanda, a male initiation ritual, the mask of the ideal woman is constructed, agreed upon



Chokwe throne in the Museum's permanent collection

by men and women. The integration of women, the need to survive and to be fertile.

The pwo mask belongs to the set of spirits of deceased ancestors, evoked with a mask, who offer protection to each individual. This protection is felt at the most important moments in life, such as initiation: the period marked by the circumcision of children and the long apprenticeship leading to adulthood.

The end of initiation is celebrated with the dance of Pwo, who appears publicly to ask the chief to take the newly circumcised boys back to the village.

In his performances, the mask enhances femininity by performing a sensual dance in which he alternates small steps with suggestive hip movements.

Since the art of the Chokwe is a court art, they also make other prestige objects such as royal chairs, thrones, imitating European furniture, with male and female figures representing group characteristics and scenes of life.

ZANDE

Historians disagree about the invasion of the Zande or Azande. According to more recent history, it can be said that around the middle of the 17th century, a great empire led by a dynasty began: the Avongaras.

Thanks to their strength and cunning, they succeeded in conquering vast territories, uniting many peoples and spreading their language and culture.

The name Azande (plural of Zande) is a word coined by the



Azande shields and spears in the
Museum collection

Avongara princes, meaning 'he who lives permanently in his territory'. European colonisation divided them into three countries:

the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan and the Centrai African Republic.

Two shields, oval and rectangular in shape, admirably crafted by weaving plant fibres, and embedded with a wooden handle. They are very light, an essential feature to facilitate the agility

of the warriors who carried them. These pieces are now kept as prestige objects or as weapons of defence.

Spears were mainly used for defence and hunting, but in many villages they were also a symbol of social and economic prestige, so much so that their accumulation indicated to everyone the economic level of the owner. These functions were accentuated from the 17th century onwards, after the introduction of firearms on the continent: those forged in metal were valued more for the material used in their manufacture than for their real utility. Weapons could be used as individual currencies along with other currencies, cauri shells, cloth, etc., and were mainly used for major transactions, such as marriage payments.

The manufacture of spears, axes and other weapons and tools was the responsibility of blacksmiths, respecting the techniques and ornaments of the community. After the arrival of Europeans in the area, and again from the 17th century onwards, bladed weapons began to be imported from Portugal, England and Spain, spreading along the trans-Saharan trade routes to the West. Craftsmen then imitated their decoration, creating new models that merged the two traditions. As the weapons lost their utility and took on a symbolic character, the amount of metal used in their manufacture was reduced, the original dimensions were modified and the shapes became more varied, simplified and aesthetically pleasing.

Their appearance became more important, while their practical utility disappeared.

Having admired the geometries of weaving in the Azande shields, we also point out the manufacture of mats, used for culinary tasks, such as the one hanging in the yellow section

of the permanent collection, shown in this photo. And also the beautiful anthropomorphic earthenware pots, used for preserving drinks (in a tradition very similar to Mangbetu art).



Kpinga throwing knives
in the Museum collection



For the Azande, music plays a very important part in religious life. We find in the music section of the Museum, many Azande musical instruments, such as the gugu or slit drum, a harp, rattles used in healing and witchcraft ceremonies, and some *sanza-mbira*.



Finally, also very interesting are the divination tablets used by Azande diviners to answer questions about life and village issues, which can be found in the traditional religions section of the museum.



KUBA

The term Bakuba is used to define a confederation of tribes comprising eighteen ethnic groups. The former kingdom included the Bambala, Babinji, Bangende, Bashobwa, Pianga and Gangongo. But some neighbouring peoples were also influenced by the Bakuba, such as the Ndengese, Yaelima and Bankutshu in the north, the Bakele in the south-east and the Bawongo and Bashilele in the west. Despite the unity of the Bakuba, each of the groups retains its own identity and develops a particular art, which, however, was unified at the height of its splendour in the 17th century. Collectively, they are known as kuba, the name by which they were called by the Lunda, meaning 'lightning', because of their fearsome 'shongo' knives.

The organisation of the state was typically connected with the



Bwom helmet mask in the Museum's permanent collection

court environment, with a hierarchy of ministers and officials and a social stratification based on court aristocrats, freemen and slaves.

All Bakuba peoples paid homage to the Bushoong king as monarch of the dominant group. The Bakuba kingdom took its final form at the beginning of the 17th century, when the various existing artistic manifestations were unified and put at the service of court power. Sculptural art was oriented towards man, but towards a powerful man: the king.

It was an art that placed great value on geometrie motifs, groupings and initiatory or funerary societies, where masks played an important role. The mastery of form and the embellishment of surfaces are characteristics of this art, the carver is highly respected and the carving is appreciated.

The main characteristics of Bakuba masks are as follows: large head, pronounced temples, hairstyle or skullcap, almond-shaped or spherical closed eyes surrounded by a series of holes, a wide nose often connected to a triangular or rhomboid mouth. Almost all faces have geometric ornaments, based on triangles.



Pwoom Itok masks are characterised by conical eyes surrounded by small holes and a feather headdress indicating elevated status. They are used at dances, funerals, initiations and entertainment festivals.

The sculptures show elongated bodies, decorated with multiple scarifications, and are usually supported by a pedestal at the expense of the lower extremities.

Commemorative figure of a king, Ndop

It is a portrait sculpture of a divine ruler. It is believed that the first monarch to have such a figure carved was Shamba Bolongongo, the 93rd king of the Bakuba dynasty, who reigned from 1600 to 1620.

The figure is depicted seated on a kind of plinth,

with his legs crossed. His body is rather stiff and he wears royal



ornaments, a belt imitating rows of cauri shells and bracelets on his arms and sometimes on his legs. He rests his right arm on his knee and holds a wand with the other hand. His face has a grave and meditative expression.

The nose is well drawn, the eyes are closed, with broadly striped eyebrows. The lips are full and precise. The hairstyle imitates the visor-shaped headdress adorned with cows and pearls worn at the time of the investiture.

These images do not faithfully reproduce the physical characteristics of the subject in question, so the characters are distinguished by their royal insignia, consisting of sophisticated clothes and prestige objects, and by a figure called the **Ibor**, carved in relief on the front of the piece.

The *Ibor* was chosen, along with other emblems, as decorative designs and dozens of names of praise, at the time of the king's coronation. During these rites, the new ruler would isolate himself with the image of his predecessor so that it would give him the life force of his

previous possessor. The figure was considered the king's double and, as such, reflected the monarch's state of well-being. This aspect has led to the assumption that the carving was done from life, but the representation of the sovereign as an idealised young man makes the piece a general commemorative object, a prototype that does not represent individualised images, except for the symbolism provided by the *Ibor*. These figures developed following the abolition of ancestor worship, which shifted religious attention to the living king and his predecessors.



The pieces were kept in palaces as commemorative figures and, in the absence of the king, their representation was taken care of by the royal wives. About 20 prototypes are known.

Objects of everyday use were decorated with carvings and bas-reliefs of plant, anthropomorphic, zoomorphic and geometric inspiration; many carvings are true masterpieces that give prestige to the owner.

Minyoya fabrics or Kasai velvets

These are pieces of cloth woven from yarns of plant fibres. The coloured threads are knotted on a woven base to form concentric rhomboid patterns. According to tradition, it was **Shamba Bolongongo** who introduced the production technique at the Kuba court.

The men weave the bases on which the women embroider the



designs, presumably from memory. The patterns are classified by name and are composed of various natural colours. Velvets are used by the chiefs to exchange objects of prestige or by the rest of the population as clothing and in ceremonial costumes. They are also used to cover royal seats or to wrap deceased rulers. The Kuba regard these fabrics as works of art, designed to be displayed in volume rather than flat.

Weaving Ntshak

There are two distinct styles of ntshak weaving: a style based on the repetition and variation of combined or interwoven geometrie patterns, and a style that works by juxtaposing separate and different geometric patterns. The latter have a more limited spread. These were ceremonial skirts worn by kings, which they wore around the waist and could be up to 6 metres long. The ornaments depicted the most important aspects of cosmogony.



DENGESE o NDENGSE

The Dengese live east of the town of Dekese in Kasai Province, on the right bank of the upper reaches of the Lukenie River, in the central parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo, being part of the Mango people, and have experienced the same vicissitudes in their movements to the habitat they occupy today. Artistically, they have much stylistic influence with the Kuba.

The ternale sculptures were made far the funeral honours of a high-ranking member of the totshi class, but curiously, women were not allowed in this society. The placement of the hands on the belly refers to the common origins of the king's subjects and symbolises the cooperation that should exist between them.



There are numerous scarifications engraved on the neck, elongated torso and arms, the meaning of which alludes to phrases of praise among the Denguese. Most of them are legless and their bodies rest on a circular base, the front of which apparently shows sex, symbolising the vitality with which those depicted contribute to the survival of the people. The motif of concentric circles on the chest, temples and arms takes on different meanings depending on their placement and



the number of circles; when there are three, it refers to the principle of cohesion between the king, the nobles and the people.

If we look at a Dengese sculpture and a Kuba sculpture together, we can see the extraordinary influence the latter had on the former. In both cases, a certain degree of naturalism is achieved through the depiction of broad shoulders, muscular breasts and rounded torso and arms. The close association between the two is further suggested by the intricate geometric scarification patterns on the figures, reminiscent of the decorative motifs with which the Kuba adorn their raffia fabrics and wooden objects.

LUBA

The Luba are linguistically divided into three subgroups: the Luba of the Kasai region, the Luba of the Katanga region and the Luba-Hemba.

Tradition has it that the Luba kingdom was founded by the legendary hero **Kalala Ilunga**. According to legend, he annexed the lands of Chief Kongolo to the small Bantu chiefs to form a powerful military confederation. This hero became King Bulopwe and was considered a divine figure with supernatural powers. This kingdom, with a sophisticated court culture, was weakened by internal political disagreements and was conquered in the 19th century by the Chokwe and the Yaka.

Luba art can be divided into various styles, but basically its characteristics and prototypes are repeated. Most objects have the function of confirming the status of their owner.

Masks are few and limited to the north-western region.

Large, rounded, fluted masks appear to be a means of power transmission.



They are controlled by the men's association for use at chiefs' funerals and other ceremonies associated with the office of chief.

Female figures stand out in the sculpture.

They symbolise the mother goddess and, by extension, the queen mother, also surrounded by a certain sacred character. In almost all her works, but especially in the stools and headrests resting on caryatids, the essential theme of Luba's sculpture is the female figure. Conceived in her

perfect forms, she alludes to the omnipresent fertility symbol, but also, through it, to a certain gallant spirit.

The seats of the caryatids are the exclusive property of chiefs and notables and are a receptacle for the members of their person. They are not objects of everyday use: the chief only sits there when he has to mediate between the world of the living and that of the ancestors.



Stools with caryatids are the most important symbol of Luba royalty, as the monarch's spirit rests on them. These emblems are often kept in a place away from the royal residence to prevent theft. The object, wrapped in a white cloth, is kept under guard at all times and is only taken out on rare occasions to express the king's power.

The keeper of the sacred stool belonging to the chief was the chief's wife and she had the privilege of carrying it with her on her travels.

Caryatids can be standing, kneeling or sitting. If there are two of them, they look at each other, embrace each other or are close behind. A horizontal piece rests on their heads. If the figure is single, they raise their arms to hold a circular piece, reproducing an everyday gesture of women carrying bundles on their heads, holding them with their hands. When they kneel, they adopt a curious way of bending their knees.

As Luba society is matrilineal, the characters depicted, as already mentioned, are female, recognising the founding role of women. The fluidity of the lines and the wide spaces suggest a total absence of effort, typical of the power of the female ancestor, and the composure of the face, the absence of muscular contractions, the fingers of the hand holding the weight with the tip, contribute to this feeling.

Very common is the figure of the woman holding her breast, showing her fertility: with this gesture, the sculptures celebrate the founding ancestor and at the same time emphasise the sensuality of the human body.

The beauty of the stools with caryatids reinforces their symbolic value. The figure's naked body is covered with delicate scarifications that, according to the aesthetic canon of this people, increase the woman's attractiveness. Their hair is tied up in a sophisticated bun, in line with the Luba ideal of beauty. Early European explorers christened them 'the people of the headdresses' in honour of their complex hairstyles. The figures and mounts are carved from a single piece of wood. Some figures are carved and joined at the back, while stools with women and men are rarer.

The **lukasa** memory tablet (visible in the permanent collection of our museum) is a kind of conceptual map for understanding and passing on the fundamental aspects of the culture and history of Luba society. It is the representative and exclusive object of the Mbudye association, a kind of council of men and women charged with the transmission of Luba knowledge and values. The central reference to the turtle animal evokes the spirit of Lolo Ina Nombe, the founding ancestor who exists in the form of a turtle.



KETE

The Kete live mainly north of Lake Malebo, in the Republic of Congo (Brazzaville), and there are also groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Gabon. They are closely related to the Vili and the Kongo, as all three peoples claim descent from the same ancestor, the Ngunu, and have even formed parallel kingdoms.

Wood and fibre mask, with raffia border. Beautiful polychromy, with bands of black and white lines and triangles, circles and chequered patterns reminiscent of the neighbouring Kuba. The headdress has three projections. The decoration is completed by plates. These masks are linked to the ritual of initiation.



MBOLE

The Mbole are located in the Lomami River region. They are a people who were pushed by the Zande to occupy this region. Culturally and artistically, they are influenced by the Leagues and the Mongo.

The Mbole have an initiatory association, called Lilwa, the leopard society. Only the sons of the notables belong to it. The okifa are sculptures made for use in various rituals of the Lilwa society. In one of their ceremonies, the sculptures are tied to a kind of crutch and paraded among the candidates, as in a procession. The characteristics of these ritual sculptures are striking for their strong symbolism. They are made of wood and depict hanging corpses, with their feet tied and the rope still around their necks. The initiates who cannot keep the secrets of society thus learn what their fate will be. It is striking that the faces of these figures do not have expressions of terror or try to inspire it, but rather an expression of sadness and resignation dominates.

Particular care has been taken in the carving of the head, which is oval in shape, with a double crescent protruding; the nose and mouth are carved in a concave heart-shaped surface bordered by eyebrows and cheeks. The eyes are small and protrude into the concavity of the eye sockets. The mouth is also small and protrudes into a concavity. These concave surfaces testify to the influence of the alloy people. Schematism is the predominant feature of the rest of the body. The narrow torso is arched and the arms fall to the sides, inert, or





Ankle ornament (used as actual currency in trade, and especially as a prestigious dowry object) in the Museum's collection.

are supported by the hands at the beginning of slender legs ending in feet reduced to geometrie volumes.

These are generally male figures. In many figures the upper limbs are parallel to the lower ones and the elbows and knees are articulated in the same way. The sculptor is forced to twist the shoulders and arms, a rhythmic detail common to African art.

To give the impression that the figure has been hanged, the sculptor takes care to make the feet oblique and the body appear to hang. The sense of death is accentuated by the white paint on the face.

As already mentioned, these sculptures represent a person hanged for committing crimes against Lilwa society.

The condemned were buried in the forest without the right to a funeral. It is a case that can be considered unprecedented in African sculpture.

PENDE

The Pende used to live in the north of Angola and the Kwango River territories. Following a migration in the late 18th and early 19th century, they settled between the Kwilu and Kasai rivers. This group, which was in close contact with the Baluba kingdom, is traditionally divided into two sections, one eastern and the other western, which, while sharing many aspects, developed different styles.

Masks constitute the largest group, with a wide variety of designs. The Eastern style is characterised by schematic and colourful geometrie patterns, while the Western style is much more naturalistic.

The phumbu a ufumu mask is a giant mask, which can reach up



to one metre in height, has a tubular appearance and a rather abstract design. It represents an ancestor of the chief and its presence always carries great political weight.

It appears when a village has to be built, when important decisions have to be made or at important events such as the funeral of a chief, a catastrophe or the outbreak of a contagious disease.

Each mask has its own name, characteristics, song or dance depending on the character it represents.

The hanging sculptures show a very expressive face, conceal part of the

abdomen with the arms, bend the legs, and the volumes are well cared for, especially in the proportions of the hairstyle above the neck. Their realism is very deep.



BEMBE

Bembe means 'people of the east'. They inhabit a region around the high savannahs on the western shore of Lake Tanganyika. The Bembe are historically related to the Lega group and are believed to have incorporated and assimilated many influences. The main institutions of this patrilineal society encourage and utilise art in ancestor worship, in cults of water and forest spirits, and in associations such as the Rlanda, the Alungo, and the Elanda that control masks and circumcision rites.

Bembe art is characterised by geometric and abstract shapes, with powerful angular contours and elongated heads.

The mask we will discuss is an initiation mask of the Elanda society, called Eluba. It represents a flat-faced mask used, as already mentioned, by the Elanda society to control circumcision ceremonies or Butende rites. This prototype, called Eluba or Emangungu, is one of many used in these celebrations. It is fastened over a costume made of large banana leaves and strips of bark from the same tree, or sometimes attached to a conical bark hat.



Mask not in exposition

NGATA

Although the most common practice was to bury the dead in raffia cloths, sometimes the bodies were placed in wooden coffins. In this case, however, the coffin, made from two small canoes, was to serve as an image of the deceased and was kept in the home as a souvenir. The human physiognomy is not completely modelled: the essential human features are simply added, as reliefs, to the rectilinear shape of the box, perhaps to suggest the rigidity of the corpse.



KONGO

The large Kongo cultural complex extends over part of the savannah, but most of its peoples live in the dense tropical forest between the Atlantic Ocean and the Congo, Kwilu, Dande and Lake Dembo rivers. Between the 14th and 17th centuries, they farmed a powerful and extensive kingdom that subjugated many peoples by force of arms, while others submitted voluntarily. The Yombe, Woyo and Mbomo can be included under the generic name of Kongo art. Kongo art has a naturalistic realism that places great importance on the treatment of the face. Fetishes proliferate in Kongo art. The fetish can be considered an impersonal instrument of life force control for good or bad purposes. It may be a carved or uncarved object containing grains or seeds, hair, teeth, nails or other matter endowed with magical power.



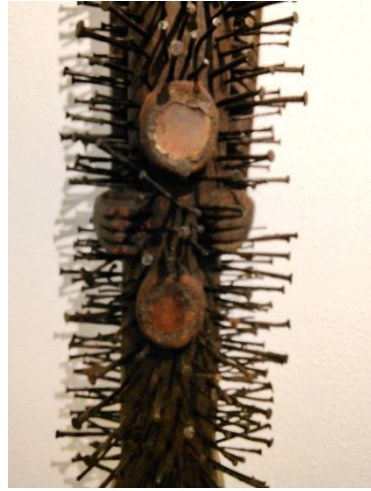
Early European travellers translated the word nkisi as fetish. The Kongo call nkisi not only a figurine, but also a horn, a shell, etc. For the Kongo, the nkisi is a sign of the presence of a spirit or the soul of the deceased. Natural fetishes owe their magical virtue to the forces that inhabit them and that come from nature. Fabricated fetishes are sculptures that acquire their power through the operations performed by a being endowed with special powers, the mganga.

In this way, the figurines appear as mere supports or conductors of magical power. The person who possesses them, if they know this power, can use it to act on others or to defend themselves.

Fetish sculptures are identified by the fact that they carry some sort of container for the magical matter or substance.

Similarly, another well-known species of nkisi is the nail fetish.

The **nkisi kongo** are sculptures that contain a magical material placed in a cavity in the head or belly of the carved figure. Enclosing



the cavity are pieces of cloth or a mass of resin, surmounted by a piece of mirror or shell.

Some sculptures are almost completely covered by the substance that overflows from the carving. It only has power to the extent that it has been transmitted by the mganga, through appropriate rituals and the recitation of certain formulae, which specify the beneficial or malefic rale of the fetish.

The magical elements are called bilongo. Especially important in this respect is the small box made of resins and filled with bilongo substances,



which is usually placed in the abdomen. White kaolin, known as pembe, plays a special role, probably because it comes from the earth where the dead rest.

Nkisi are very varied and can be classified according to their human or animal character, and according to their beneficial or malefic function.

Nail fetishes are of the nkondi type and are generally human in form. All are pierced by nails, metal blades, knife blades, screws and other metal objects with sharp ends. Only one part of the fetish is free from such objects, to allow it to be touched by the person performing with the fetish.

The style of these sculptures is similar to that of the ancestor sculptures, but of less perfect workmanship. They are usually large in size and in some cases only the head is treated. The face has an eerie appearance, with mirrored eyes, marked pupils and a half-open mouth.

They are deformed and appear to have diseases intended to transmit evil.



MANGBETU

The Mangbetu are a group living in north-east Congo, near the border with Sudan. Their villages are located near the Boomokandi River, where they settled in the 18th century. They form a kingdom that has inspired luxurious art. They were influenced by the Sudan and the Zande. Mangbetu art, inspired by the court, generated luxury production.

Consequently, all their objects are related to the demonstration of the prestige or status of their owners, although the specific purpose of the pieces is often unknown. This group shows many similarities with the Zande, a people with whom they sometimes exchanged artists, which led to a syncretism of forms.



Zande/Mangbetu anthropomorphic vases in the Museum collection

A key feature of this art is the heads, represented by elongated skulls and, in the case of women, adorned with hooped hairstyles. To achieve this effect, Mangbetu women plait their hair with wicker. In this way they express their idea of beauty, developed especially among the nobility. The elongation of the skulls is a consequence of the swaddling to which children are subjected from birth. This deformation is compared and related to Egyptian models.

Mangbetu or kundi harps derive from Zande sculptures and are

characterised by a whole human figure carved into the neck and a sound box made of bark or leather. The instrument's thin strings are made of vegetable fibre, while the thicker ones are made of giraffe hair, although other materials can be used. The tuning pegs are carved out of wood. These instruments, especially in the past, were objects of status and were owned by kings, soothsayers, storytellers or oral historians who resided at court, but could also belong to itinerant musicians who accompanied their songs with these harps.

The absence of masks in the Mangbetu art scene is interpreted as a confirmation of the Mangbetu's Sudanese origin. The Mangbetu are also known for their skills as blacksmiths.

In this regard, they make intricate pieces, called Kpinga (see above in the Zande section), which they sell outside their tribal region, mainly to the Zande.

Kpinga is very similar to the weapon depicted in a mid-19th century engraving of King Mbunza of the Mangbetu. However, the hilt is longer and more straight. This is the model of the Mangbetu sickle knife that essentially had a prestige role, especially when it was equipped with a carved wooden or ivory handle. Knives of this shape, made entirely of copper, were the exclusive privilege of the king. They had no sacrificial function.

The holes in the blade correspond to the number of wives of the chief, the protrusions to the number of sons.



Zande/Magbetu knives in the Museum collection

