

ill. 39

# The BaKuba Empire

**T**In the heart of the Democratic Republic of Congo, over a vast area where lush tropical forest and savannah meet, between the Lulua, Kasai and Sankuru Rivers, (see map) the Kuba peoples have lived for hundreds of years. The Kuba were one of the last groups to resist contact with Europeans, it is not until the beginning of the 20th C. that they allowed visits by outsiders.

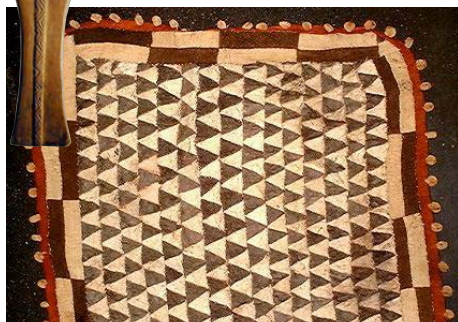
Kuba is a term used to describe the various diverse ethnic groups that comprise the central Kuba Kingdom or Empire: the Bushoong, Bieeng, Bokila, Bulaang, Ilebo, Kayualeeng, Kel, Maluk, Mbeengi, Ngeende, Ngongo, Ngombe Pyaang, and Shoowa. Other prominent peoples in the greater Kuba world are the Ndengese, Binji, Wongo, Mbuun, and the Leele. As they are not part of the Kingdom proper, these peoples pay no tribute to the Kuba King. They have nevertheless been culturally influenced by the Kuba, and vice-versa.

The name 'Kuba' meaning "lightning", is not their own, but was given to them by their neighbors, the Luba, as a reference to the "throwing blades", a type of weapon once specific to the Kuba, but now no longer found.

The exact origins and past routes of migration of the Kuba are not exactly known, but their Kingdom is an ancient one, established since at least the early 17th C. Some say that they originated in the North, but I rather believe that they came from the West, because based on some artistic similarities, I think that at one time they had contact with the Kongo people, but when and where is not clear yet. (Though some of their artistic production also shows similarities with the Bamileke of Cameroun and the Benin Kingdom of Nigeria).

The Kuba were not the first inhabitants of the area in which they currently reside. The fact that Twa (or Chwa) Pygmies must be present during the investiture of the Kuba King (the *Nyimi* Ph 1) indicates that the Twa were aboriginal. The Kuba incorporate bark-cloth and triangular patterns (ill. 1) into their ritual art production, the origin of which is attributed to the Twa. The Kuba also depict Twa on neckrests and masks, thus indicating their ritual importance.

ill. 37



Ph 1



ill. 3

The Kete people predated the Kuba in the area as well; from them they borrowed cultural traits such as a masking tradition. Oral tradition suggests that the dominant and highly successful Bushoong, who enslaved some of them, pushed the Northern Kete southwards.

## The Bushoong

The Bushoong lie at the heart of the Kuba Empire, the peripheral groups radiating outward. These satellite peoples are ruled by Chiefs, who owe allegiance to the Kuba King who exacts tribute from their constituent groups and villages. The pre-cited ethnicities that make up the Kuba empire are culturally and politically diverse; the Bushoong have used their socio-political cohesion to their advantage, bringing a certain degree of unity to the once divided area.

The Kuba are matrilineal, and the King is the focus of all political power. The Kuba King is empowered by the Queen Mother. He is considered a descendant of Woot, the mythical male Kuba ancestor. His power and authority are absolute. Clans (which focus on the sacred relationship with animals and spirits, and which are not necessarily connected with lineage) and male initiation societies play a paramount role in Kuba culture. The Bushoong are renowned for their highly complex and structured legal and judiciary procedures. The Bushoong indeed epitomize what is 'Kuba'.

The Bushoong were not always the dominant group of the Kuba; around the beginning of the 17th C., the Pyaang were in control. However, due to conflict with various other local ethnicities, their position diminished, and the Bushoong took advantage of this situation to seize authority from them by the middle of the 17th C.

The Kuba presently inhabit an area, which spans both flat savannah and dense tropical forest. In occupying a dual ecosystem, the Kuba enjoy a greater variety of resources and means of subsistence, such as reaping, hunting, fishing and farming. This boosted supply of goods and materials allows for a larger and greater population, and gives them economic advantage over their neighbors.

## Geometric patterns and motifs

The Kuba are world famous for their production of objects both sacred and profane that bear myriad complex and refined geometric designs.

ill. 6



ill. 14



ill. 15



ill. 33



ill. 13



ill. 26



ill. 28



ill. 43

ill. 24



ill. 25



ill. 2



ill. 41



ill. 42

The royal Bushoong court in Mushenge is the center of a truly rich artistic tradition.

Virtually everything valuable is covered in rich geometric motifs, which, rather than figurative representation, are the focus of Kuba artistic preoccupations. The Kuba incorporate these designs and patterns into everything around them, from bodily scarification to palatial architecture, embroidery, sculpture and household objects.

Most of the common Kuba geometric motifs are to be found in this exhibition, though the table is by no means comprehensive. Motifs are recognized as symbols of identity, status and power; certain motifs are known to be the right and property of a given royal or noble family, lineage, or clan. The use of a certain motif or pattern is allowed for privileged members of Kuba society only. An object, which bears motifs, is for the employ of the elite; commoners would use undecorated objects. Thus, what may appear to an outsider, as simple decoration will indicate origin and status to a viewer familiar with Kuba symbols and patterns. The more basic the motif, the older it is, and the closer it is to the royal Bushoong court and the King himself. Most motifs have a symbolic meaning, but only a few have been deciphered.

### The exhibition

The majority of items in this show were objects of prestige, and imparted status upon their owners. Of the many categories of objects in this show, several beg a detailed explanation.

Apparel is used to adorn and identify both men and women of rank or title in the Kuba world. Such prestige items will include: appliqué (ill. 2) or embroidered skirts, beaded belts (ill. 3), pendants, bracelets and headgear, as well as metal combs, hair and hatpins.

Similar to most people, the Kuba elite searched for rare and exotic materials to indicate status. Imported beads, cowries and other shells were one of these status symbols, but only during the last centuries because they were not available prior to the 19th C. Copper used for prestige items and decoration has been imported from the Luba since many centuries, whereas feathers and pelts of symbolically important birds and animals have always been reserved for titleholders. The use of ivory was reserved for the elite; they displayed scepter-like fly-whisks (ill. 4) and pendants in this prestigious and symbol-laden material. Wooden scepters and finely carved pipes (ill. 5) were also emblems of rank.

Intricately beaded objects used in ceremonial and ritual contexts are also signs of status and prestige. This exhibition includes Royal beaded items such as a treasure box (ill. 6), beaded headbands, belts, bracelets, headdresses (ill. 7), Mukenga masks, pendants (ill. 8), and other items of regalia. Beaded abstract or figurative charm pendants, and small "power horns" are usually worn around the neck; some are filled with magico-symbolic ingredients and sealed. They may bring protection or luck to the wearer or indicate membership to an association.

Though their tools are basic and traditional (an adze, a crook, and a set of blades), Kuba woodcarvers are skilled in their trade, as can be seen in the highly precise and complex geometric incisions that decorate the majority of their woodwork. Clysters (ill. 9) were carved of wood and used to give enemas for medicinal healing purposes, or for the ritual

consumption of mind-altering drugs (which, taken orally, result in vomiting).

Rubbing oracles (ill. 10) were used by diviners to solve communal problems and disputes. They are usually zoomorphic, (rarely anthropomorphic) which serves to imbue the oracle with spiritual power. Certain animals are believed to possess abilities, which humans normally do not have to detect wrongdoing or witchcraft, or to communicate with certain spirits. Only a few retain their original friction knob, which was rubbed back and forth over the top of the oracle while the diviner spoke names or actions aloud. When the knob became fixed to the oracle, the answer was revealed.

Ritual drinking of palmwine (fermented sap from the *Elais guineensis* palm tree) is taken seriously, as seen by the vast numbers of intricately carved drinking vessels and gourd containers produced by the Kuba. This exhibition includes several cups (ill. 11), chalices, mugs, and drinking horns (ill. 12) used for ritual drinking.

Figurative sculpture is not prominent among the Kuba. The most important are Royal figures (*ndop*), which personify each Kuba king and his attributes, next in line are the rare standing figures from the Shoowa (ill. 13) and Kete. Rubbing oracles take the shape of animals or are decorated with the representation of a human head, so are the pipes (ill. 14). Cups decorated with human representations (ill. 15) are reserved for the elite. The lack of an ancestor cult is probably directly responsible for the paucity of freestanding human effigies.

The use of prestige furniture such as wooden back- (ill. 16), elbow- (ill. 17), and headrests (ill. 18) as well as stools and thrones is reserved for those of high status, if not solely for the Kuba King. These resting devices are placed on raffia mats, into which are woven familiar Kuba motifs.

The Kuba have various beautifully decorated musical instruments, mostly wooden, which are used primarily in ceremonial situations. This exhibition includes drums (ill. 19), pluriarcs (ill. 20); they are the most typical of the Kuba instruments and some miniature ivory or beaded (ill. 21) ones are used as emblems of title. They also use a variety of wooden flutes and whistles, rarely in ivory.

The Kuba employ many types of containers made from wood, terracotta, bark or rattan to store precious goods. A variety of finely woven baskets (ill. 22) served to keep valuables. Wooden pots (ill. 23) and boxes of various forms and sizes were used either to store beads, razors, or *tukula* (explained later in the text).

Palmkernel oil was kept in decorated containers. Some terracotta pots and bowls (ill. 24) were used to hold food for the elite, others were used in ceremonial context. Containers often have a bamboo or metal hook attached by a braided fiber cord for hanging to protect these items against damage from insects and vermin.

### The importance of masking

Masks carry exceptional importance and symbolic power in the Kuba world. Believed to originally have no masking tradition of their own, the Kuba likely adopted masking from the Kete peoples they encountered centuries ago. Since then the Kuba have developed an extensive range of masked characters, such as elephantine Mukenga masks (ill. 25). Other predominant characters include: *Bishuadi*, a warrior, *Bongo*, said to personify a pygmy (ill. 26), *Bwom*, a



Ph. 2

ill. 18

ill. 36



bearded and more regal version of Bongo, *Inuba*, a forest spirit, *Mwaashambwoy*, symbolic of both an old man and the mythical ancestor Woot, *Ngaady a Mwaash*, a female mask symbolic of Mweel, the sister of Woot, and *Shene Malula*, (ill 28) a chameleoid mask. Masks can, among other things, represent spirits of the forest, mythical ancestors, mythical beings, the spirit of a deceased person (mwendu), pygmies, or the King himself. (Ph 4)

Most masks are carved from wood, but some consist of a rattan construction covered with woven raffia or cloth. Many are of the helmet type; others are semi-deep or flat face-masks. Their surface can be embellished with embroidered cloth, covered with metal plates or decorated with elaborate beadwork and cowries, or any combination of the above. Some have a colored surface with intricate designs using various pigments, such as charcoal and resin (black), kaolin (white), earth or ochre (yellow) and tukula (red). A further addition or animal skins, feathers, nutshells and a raffia beard will complete the mask's head. It is crucial to realize that masks are not complete without their full costume; often a lone mask, out of context, will be ambiguous in its identity.

Masks are used in a number of public, ceremonial and ritual contexts, such as: the investiture of a chief or a king (certain masks are, as with many things, reserved solely for the King), initiation procedures, purification rituals, law enforcement or funerals. Men always dance masks, though some female characters are represented.

#### Tukula

Tukula is a red powder that is finely ground from parts of the Camwood tree (*Baphia nitida* or *Pterocarpus*). To the Kuba it is an immensely valuable substance, the Western equivalent of gold. Tukula is both auspicious and prophylactic. Its earthy or purplish red color is used abundantly in decoration, rubbed onto items such as cups, containers, figures, weapons, oracles etc. to honour and beautify them. Tukula is also used to bless people like newborn babies, pregnant women, new mothers, warriors, the diseased and the deceased etc. It is usually applied after having been mixed in a special wooden or clay dish (ill 29) with oil extracted from palm-kernels. Tukula will be preserved in special decorated wooden boxes (ill 30) that can take many shapes. When mixed with a binder, compressed, sun dried and smoked, tukula can be formed into solid objects, such as the massive crowns (ill 31) worn by the Queen Mother and young women during their first pregnancy, or into the famous *bongotol* that are unique to the Kuba. Bongotol consist of pure Tukula sculpted and dried into a shape, they are usually rectangular and decorated with geometric symbols (ill 32). A few will be fashioned into miniature objects, such as gourds, spoons, pillows, houses, boats, etc.... Rarely do they represent humans. Bongotol were used as ritual currency (not unlike gold bars), as grave goods and as prestige gifts. They were given to important people at weddings and funerals. The majority of them bear geometric patterns indicating the family that had them crafted.

In view of the number of different containers used to store tukula, their ubiquitous usage as well as the existence of bongotol currency and tukula crowns, one cannot overstate the importance of tukula in Kuba society and culture.

#### Metalwork and weaponry

The Kuba have a long tradition of metalworking, one King was a smith, whereas another is said to have invented the anvil. Consequently they forge a number of superb weapons and iron implements. Smelting and smithing are privileged and prestigious art forms, and are secret to all, save those initiated into a metal-working association.

Smelting and smithing are complex, the details of which will not be addressed here. Basically, a master smelter and his apprentices use a bellows to stoke a large earthen furnace. The ore is introduced in layers alternating with charcoal, heated, and the molten slag is tapped. Finally, the blacksmiths will forge this rough metal into whichever shape they desire. However, as with all objects, a canon is respected; variations in a given canon do occur, but only over long periods of time. In this exhibition there are axes, knives, daggers, short (ill 33) and long swords (ill 34) of various valuable metals. Some swords are actually used as a form of currency. We also find razors (ill 35), scarification knives (ill 36), hatpins and eating implements all masterfully forged in iron.

Additionally, wooden weapons were carved. Kuba oral tradition relates that an ancient king was murdered by his 'lunatic' brother during a full moon. Henceforth, during a full moon, men are prohibited from arming themselves with lethal weapons; as a man must never be without his arms, substitutes were carved out of wood. There are wooden short swords (ill 37) as well as wooden sickles/emblems in the show.

#### The art of textiles

Finally, one must mention the exceptional Kuba tradition of weaving and embroidering textiles, the craft that rendered the Kuba world famous. Prestige textiles were valuable and therefore kept in special boxes. They are worn as skirts, wraps, and other forms of clothing by Kuba men and women of status. They consist of rectangular or square panels of various sizes; these can be stitched together and surrounded with a complex border to form a skirt. Some skirts used at ceremonials (Ph 3), consisting of more than 20 joined panels can be over 10 meters long.

Textile production is laborious and socially segregated between male and female involvement. It begins with the male work: palm leaves are collected, retted and then beaten until soft, combed into fine strips (at this point called raffia), woven by hand on a 45° loom into panels of maximum 60 cm. (corresponding to the length of the leaf), these panels that are more or less finely woven (depending on final usage) become the basis of the final product and may be further pounded to acquire suppleness.

At this point, the females take over production.

The textile panels are then finely embroidered in complex abstract patterns, worked with short raffia fibers that are, one by one, cut close to the surface creating a velvety texture and appearance, and at the origin of names 'pile-cloth' and 'Kasai velvet' (Ph 2).



ill. 5

ill. 31

ill. 22



ill. 32



ill. 4



ill. 30



ill. 9

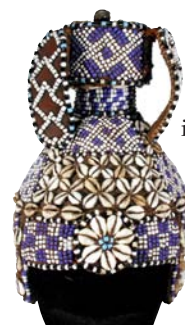


ill. 20



ill. 21

ill. 19



ill. 7



ill. 8



## Currency

It may be useful at this point to reiterate the various forms of currency that the Kuba employ, all of which involve complex processes of production.

Iron, prized for its rarity and strength, was formed into bars that could be traded, reworked and then sold.

The working of iron requires the manipulation of elements and harnessing of forces beyond the ken of normal (uninitiated) members of society. It has long been connoted with mastery over the natural world, and its secrets were passed on to only a few, hence its value.

Tukula is valued for its rarity, color, and prophylactic qualities. In its different forms, tukula simultaneously functions as being tradable currency (in the form of powder, small balls and bongotol), emblems of rank, physical protection of wooden objects against insects, as well as spiritual protection of people or objects against malign forces. As tukula is laboriously produced in small quantities from the Camwood tree, the amount required to fashion a solid object implies wealth and access to resources.

Textiles are esteemed for the beauty and complexity of the patterns that adorn them, and the effort that their fabrication entails. They are therefore used as tradable currency, ritual and daily costume, and are emblems of status as well as a last gift that accompanies the deceased in the grave. Imported beads, brass tacks, shells etc. can also be used as currency

## Geometric patterns and motifs revisited

In conclusion, the objects and materials created by the Kuba in this exhibition all share commonalities; the amount of know-how and time it took to produce them, the wonderfully complex geometric motifs, designs and patterns, which decorate them and the use of tukula coloration. In effect, these decorations are far from mere designs that beautify an object or fill space. They have a meaning that transcends the obvious and can represent multiple facets of Kuba society at the same time. While the interpretation of these patterns and symbols are subjective to the unfamiliar viewer, they hold different levels of meaning to those who recognize them; irrespective of this, their beauty cannot easily be denied. Throughout known history, the Kuba Kingdom has been one of Central Africa's most developed and powerful. Ultimately, this exhibition seeks to bring to light the artistic traditions and splendors of the ancient Kuba.



All this work is incredibly time consuming, as the women must sew each fiber bundle into a single section of the weft one at a time, it can take months to produce one single panel of pile-cloth (ill 39).

Another technique, sometimes called 'appliqué' involves the application, by stitching with dark thread, of small, ecru, odd-shaped patches onto a finely woven textile background of similar color (ill 41). In olden days these patches were sown over accidental holes made in the panels as a result of the pounding. In order to hide the repair, other patches were sown around it so as to create an abstract décor. Nowadays the décor is simply stitched on the simple base-cloth so as to create the illusion of patches. More recent types of appliqué textiles will involve multicolored base panels and patches (ill 42).

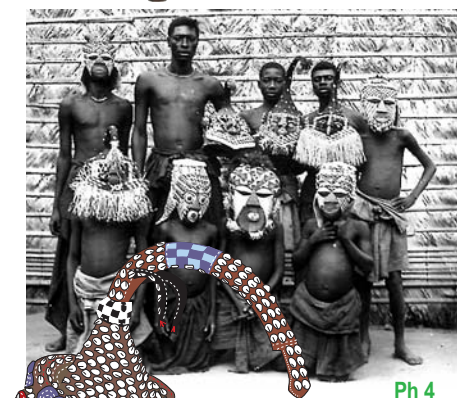
Other techniques used to decorate skirts are "tie-dye" obtained with tying stones or sticks in the cloth before soaking it in pigments. "Claire-voie" is obtained by making holes in the cloth and embroidering the perimeter.

The border that surrounds the joined panel skirts receives extra care in decoration, mixing a number of different fiberwork techniques to beautify it (ill 1).

Among the Kuba Empire, textiles were traditionally (before the introduction of foreign dyeing agents) black, beige, brown, and red (obtained by soaking in tukula).

The Ndenge to the north of the Sankuru River, as well as the Ngeende and Ngongo, in the east of Kubaland, have developed a particular style of textile. In addition to a recognizable style of embroidering with thin parallel lines, these textiles have a distinct purple tint (ill 43), which is obtained from of snail found only in their territory.

ill. 16



ill. 25

Ph 4

## Congo Gallery Exposition Empire Bakuba

partir du 7 juin  
jusqu' au 23 sept 2006

merc.- jeud.- vend.  
14h30 18h30  
sam. 10h30 18h30

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