

expo from April 3^d till May 31st, 2008

CONGO GALLERY



ill.2

NIYAMA

AFRICAN ANIMAL SCULPTURES

Even though in Central Africa the representation of humans is more prevalent than the image of animals, one should not underestimate the ritual importance of animal depictions.

In Congolese rural society people basically do not keep pets (occasionally a pitiful tethered monkey), dogs roam around and are considered as being tools not pets. Thus the endearing western image of cute animals does not exist in Congolese iconography. Consequently the vast majority of

animals



ill.4

depicted in ritual sculptures are wild animals or *Niyama hatari* such as buffaloes, antelopes, snakes, saurians etc. These are not to be cuddled but feared and respected.



ill.3



ill.5



ill.6

mud than to carve a figure in wood. I therefore hypothesise that modelling predates carving but am not sure that animals were the first models even though in prehistoric art, specialists believe animal figurations to be far more ancient than representations of humans. One should also keep in mind that there are many zoomorphic sculptures in the field we never see in collections or museums because they were



ill.1

Masks of beings that are half-simian half-human probably refer to a Eastern Congo evolution myth which states that first the world was occupied by animals of which apes, out of these apes arose creatures that were half-human half-ape (chimpanzees), these beings are called *So'o* or *Suku Muntu* when they appear in Hema masquerades dressed in a bark costume (ill.3). The next stage in evolution separated the humans from the apes etc...

Other masks that show a mixture of human and animal elements will show creatures that consist of human faces and discrete references to antelopes, (ill.4) rams, owls etc. It is not clear to me yet what the exact meanings of these complex icons is.

A younger generation of animal masks (post 1950-60) found among the Luba will consist of classical kifwebe masks mixed with animal elements (ill.5). It is believed that for these masks, who depict a large variety of animals (more than 20 different ones), it will be the particularities of each of these animals such as their character or behaviour that will be mimicked or have a didactic message for the masquerade audience. The so-called "Lubaized peoples" such as the Zela and the Lomotwa (ill.6) also use masks

that draw on the animal world for its iconography, in the north of their distribution zone masks will still show many kifwebeoid features but as one goes further



ill.8



ill.9

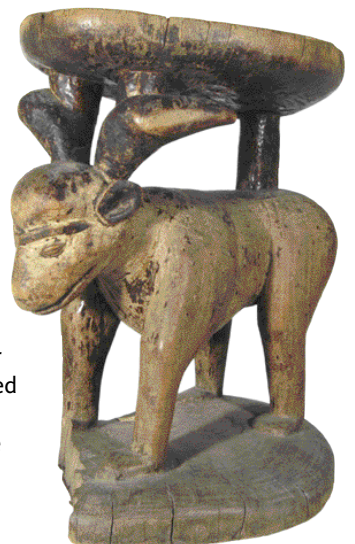
south, masks gradually become more naturalistic (ill.7).



ill.7

I have always believed that the Congolese masking phenomenon's representations of animals predated masks with human features. It is technically easier to model, fashion or shape a three-dimensional figure in malleable material such as clay or

Masks depicting animals will refer to the animal itself or to its spirit, the performance's purpose being to obtain the protection and help of the depicted animal. It is believed that the oldest masks depicting fauna were made on behalf of hunters who, through these masks, either tried to gain control over the depicted animals or established a privileged relation with these creatures so as to favour the hunt. These zoomorphic masks usually represent buffaloes, antelopes, pigs (ill.2), monkeys and birds. Though it is believed that owl representations are rather related to mediation with spirits and divination.



ill.10



ill.11

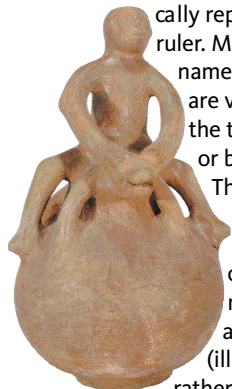
Other masks, generally of the helmet type, that are worn on top of the head can consist of a human face but on top of the head one will find the image of an animal, usually a quadruped (ill.8) or a bird (ill.9) we believe that these animal



ill.12

depictions refer to clan or association symbols.

Often a prestigious powerful animal will euphemistically represent a ruler. Many praise names for rulers are variations of the term buffalo or bull.



ill.13

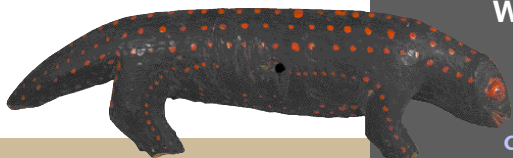
Knowledgeable informers told me in sou-

theast Congo that Tabwa and other buffalo masks (ill.11) in the area danced in pairs with masks representing women, one representing power the other fertility. In some areas of Kasai the ruler will be indicated by ram's horns be it on masks or other ritual objects (ill.12) even though this animal is domestic and not wild. Does this choice refer to civilized versus savage power, or the village versus forest dichotomy?

ill.16



ill.14



In central Africa there are basically no horses because of the tsetse fly, thus horses when represented are often depicted in a manner far removed from reality. In fact the rare figures known of humans astride a quadruped often represent 19th Century traders riding oxen (ill.13)!

Sculpted representations of animals on their own are rare, yet they exist in a variety of materials be it in wood, clay, fibre or ivory, we often have to admit that we do not know with certainty the ritual purpose of these figurines, sometimes we can not even identify the animal (ill.14). We know though that the Kongo used images of dogs (ill.15) to find witches and we think that chameleons (ill.16) refer to omnivision and seers, even the exact use of the ubiquitous birds (ill.17) among the Holo is not certain, but birds are believed to be messengers to the spirits of the above.

Some animals that live in more than one ecosystem such as crocodiles that live on land and in the water, as well as animals that live on and under the ground, like lizards, are considered to be

ill.15



intermediaries between the various spirits that reside in these particular places and human spirit mediums. Snakes moving in a number of different environments are often represented, be it as a freestanding sculpture or their sinuous image being sculpted in relief on a staff, throne (ill.18), vessel or other ritual artefact.

When more than one animal is depicted (ill.19) it often refers to a folktale or a saying, sometimes though, it will refer to relations between different clans. Humans in association with animals often depict the image of a clan founder or leader whose totem is the depicted animal (ill.20).

ill.17



ill.18



ill.19

Animal

representations are also used in the divination realm; they will appear on rubbing oracles of the greater Kuba world in the shape of saurians, dogs and pigs (ill.21). We also find discrete animal references on diviner's slit-gongs (ill.22).

ill.20



ill.21



A quick survey of Congo's fauna reveals that far from all existing animals are depicted, in fact some real mighty characters such as the rhinoceros and hippopotamus are not depicted, elephants appear only rarely (ill.23). and leopards and lions are very discrete. It would be interesting to study why the animals that are depicted have been selected and others not. But I will leave this task to someone else even though my name includes lion and cat.

Marc 26-03-08.

ill.22



ill.23

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Exposition NIYAMA

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2, Impasse St. Jacques - Grand Sablon
B-1000 Brussels Belgium
Wed, Thu, Fri: 2.30 - 6.30 PM
Sat: 10.30 AM - 6.30 PM
Tel: 32 (0)2 511 47 67

congogallery@skynet.be
www.congogallery.be