

COLLECTIONS OF THE RMCA



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COLOPHON

This book was published on the occasion of the temporary exhibition *Unrivalled Art* held to mark the opening of the Royal Museum for Central Africa on 8 December 2018. Rather than being an exhaustive catalogue, the book contains a selection of masterpieces from the RMCA collection.

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Plantes du Congo (Plants of the Congo), Charles Callewaert (1882). Watercolour on paper, 19 × 29 cm. RMCA collection, HO.0.1.3105.

Charles Callewaert (1855-1945) was a commercial agent working in the Bas-Congo region in the 1880s. He was based at the important Vivi station, where he fulfilled bookkeeping duties and was also responsible for sending material to the upper reaches of the Congo River. He made drawings and watercolours of the native population, their objects, the landscape and the indigenous flora and fauna.

The Royal Museum for Central Africa is the guardian and protector of an especially rich and diverse collection of natural and cultural heritage. This heritage provides the basis for academic study, and each year hundreds of thousands of visitors are introduced to it through permanent and temporary exhibitions held in Tervuren, as well as when on loan to other museums in Belgium and abroad.

The museum's collection continues to grow, thanks in part to scientific field research in Africa. This is done within an international context and in collaboration with our African partners.

In renovating and redesigning the AfricaMuseum, we have provided a gallery that allows us to display at regular intervals an alternating selection of exhibits drawn from our many collections. Our first exhibition marks the museum's reopening and is titled *Unrivalled Art*. It presents a unique collection of masks, statues, ivory carvings, metal artefacts and applied art. These objects are among the most important ethnographic artefacts held by the AfricaMuseum. Almost all of them come from the Congo and date chiefly from the 19th and first half of the 20th century. They broach specific questions, such as the concept of beauty in Africa, European perspectives on African works of art, the identity of the artist and the analysis of styles. Many of the works that we are exhibiting here are artistically among the best in the world. Together they provide quite a comprehensive overview of the Congo's artistic wealth, as well as of its numerous and ancient cultures, including those of some other Central African countries.

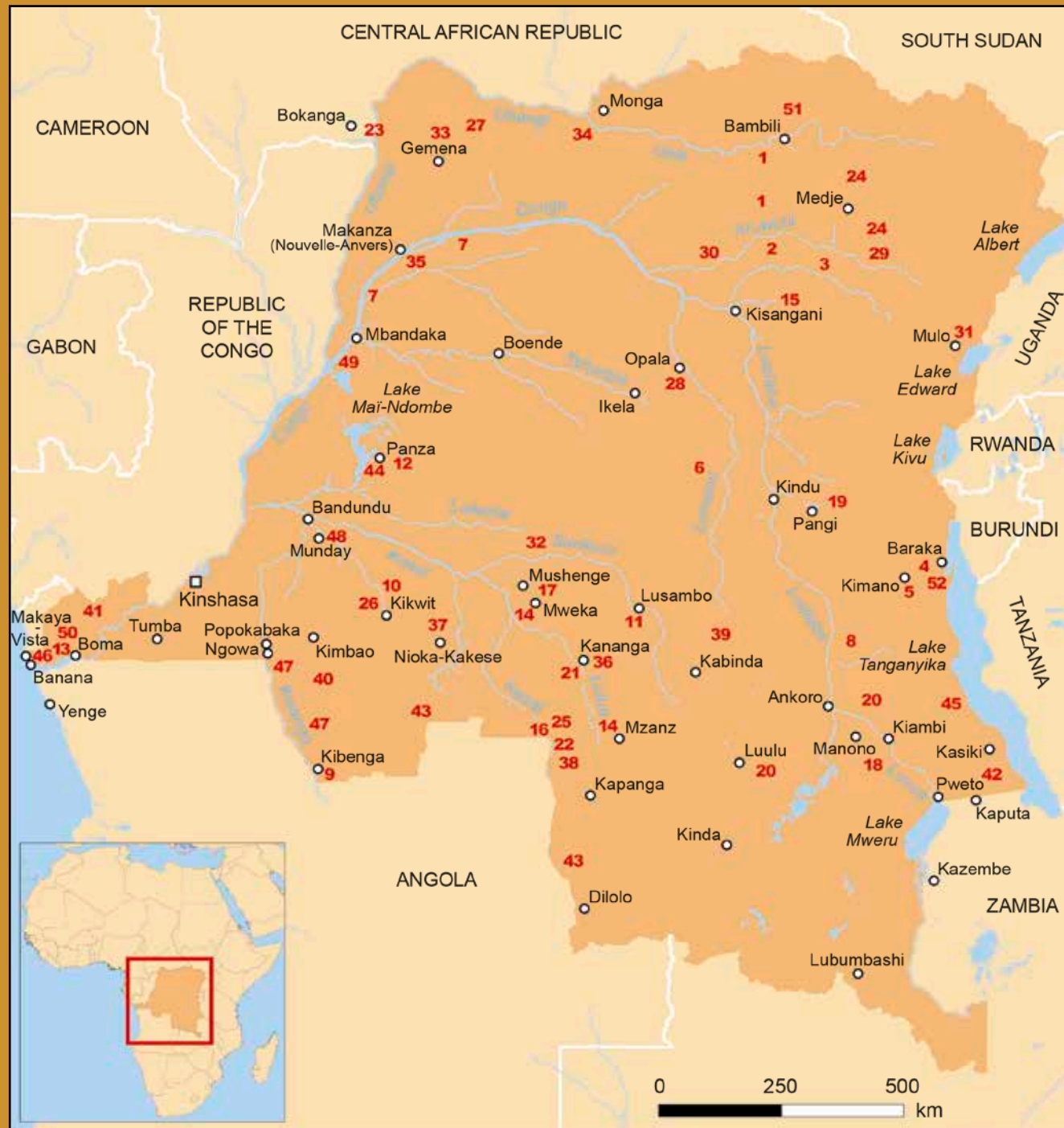
Some of the pieces in this catalogue are part of the permanent exhibition on display at the renovated AfricaMuseum. The unique artistic expression of this collection of important works brings to mind the words of one of my predecessors as director of the museum, Frans Olbrechts (1940, anthropologist, RMCA director 1947–1958): '[...] a journey, not in search of gold or ivory, nor yet of ebony or radium, but in search of that thing which one day may make Africa even more renowned than all the mineral treasures lying in its lap: its art and artists'.

In that context, I should like to extend special thanks to the man who organizes the exhibition *Unrivalled Art*, Julien Volper, researcher and curator at our Heritage Studies service. Largely on aesthetic grounds, he has made a selection of exceptional pieces based on his thorough knowledge of our ethnographic collections from the Congo. Thanks to his expertise and dedication, this exhibition is sure to generate among visitors a very enthusiastic response towards African art and cultures.

I hope you will find the AfricaMuseum every bit as enjoyable to visit as this catalogue is fascinating to read.

GUIDO GRYSEELS

Director General of the Royal Museum for Central Africa



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DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO



Anthropomorphic *nkisi nkonde* statue

JULIEN VOLPER



'Case d'un féticheur' ('Witch doctor's hut') with numerous *nkisi nkonde*. The ethnographic authenticity of the photograph is very doubtful.

Postcard dating from the first decade of the 20th century; F. Boulanger archives. All rights reserved.

Anthropomorphic *nkisi nkonde* statue.

Yombe? Kakongo?, DRC; 1st quarter of the 19th century; acquired by A. Delcommune in the Boma region (in 1878). Wood (*Canarium schweinfurthii*), metal strips, twine, fabric and imported beads.
H.: 115 cm. RMCA collection, EO.0.0.7943 (registered in 1912).

Nkisi nkonde, the famous so-called nail fetishes, are among the most emblematic objects of African art. To the European imagination, these often symbolize 'voodoo' practices and the 'dark arts' of witchcraft. It is important to correct this Hollywood image. Until the first quarter of the 20th century, the *nkisi nkonde* found among various Kongo cultural groups were prestigious and costly objects. Their possession by a village and the fame of their power in a given area can be compared to the faith and pride felt by a Belgian village with a shrine housing the relics of a renowned saint. A *nkisi nkonde* protected the community from various dangers. As the term '*nkonde*' (hunter) indicates, this type of *nkisi* (charm, fetish) served to

track down thieves and sorcerers, and even to kill them with one of the dreaded diseases it controlled. It would be wrong to see these sculptures as simply inert instruments. According to local beliefs, *nkisi nkonde* were endowed with agency that came largely from the souls of the dead, some of whom were linked to human sacrifices practised during the creation of the object.

The *nkisi nkonde* seen here was the property of Ne Cuco, one of the great Boma chiefs who clashed with factory manager Alexandre Delcommune.

This piece was of great importance. Kongo leaders treated its seizure by Delcommune's men as tantamount to a hostage situation, and Ne Cuco was indeed ready to pay ransom for its return.

Delcommune was well acquainted with this famous fetish, having previously made use of its services. On the advice of a local official, the young Belgian had paid Ne Cuco a high price to 'rent' the *nkisi nkonde* in order to help find employees who had robbed him. The European hoped the fear that the *nkisi nkonde* inspired would pressure the population into revealing the criminals – who were, in fact, apprehended.

The *nkisi nkonde* was empowered by a *nganga* ('priest', traditional practitioner), who naturally required payment. This *nganga* activated Ne Cuco's *nkisi* by driving a metal point ceremoniously into the body. According to Delcommune's observations, if the nail held, the client's request was accepted. If, on the other hand, the nail fell, it was understood that the *nkisi* had rejected the request.

¹ In 2016, chiefs from the Boma region shared with RMCA researcher Maarten Couttenier some fairly orthodox information about the function of Ne Cuco's *nkisi*. It could make murderers go deaf and could protect against bullets in war, but it also communicated with chiefs.

Sculpted *santu nzaambi* panel

VIVIANE BAEKE

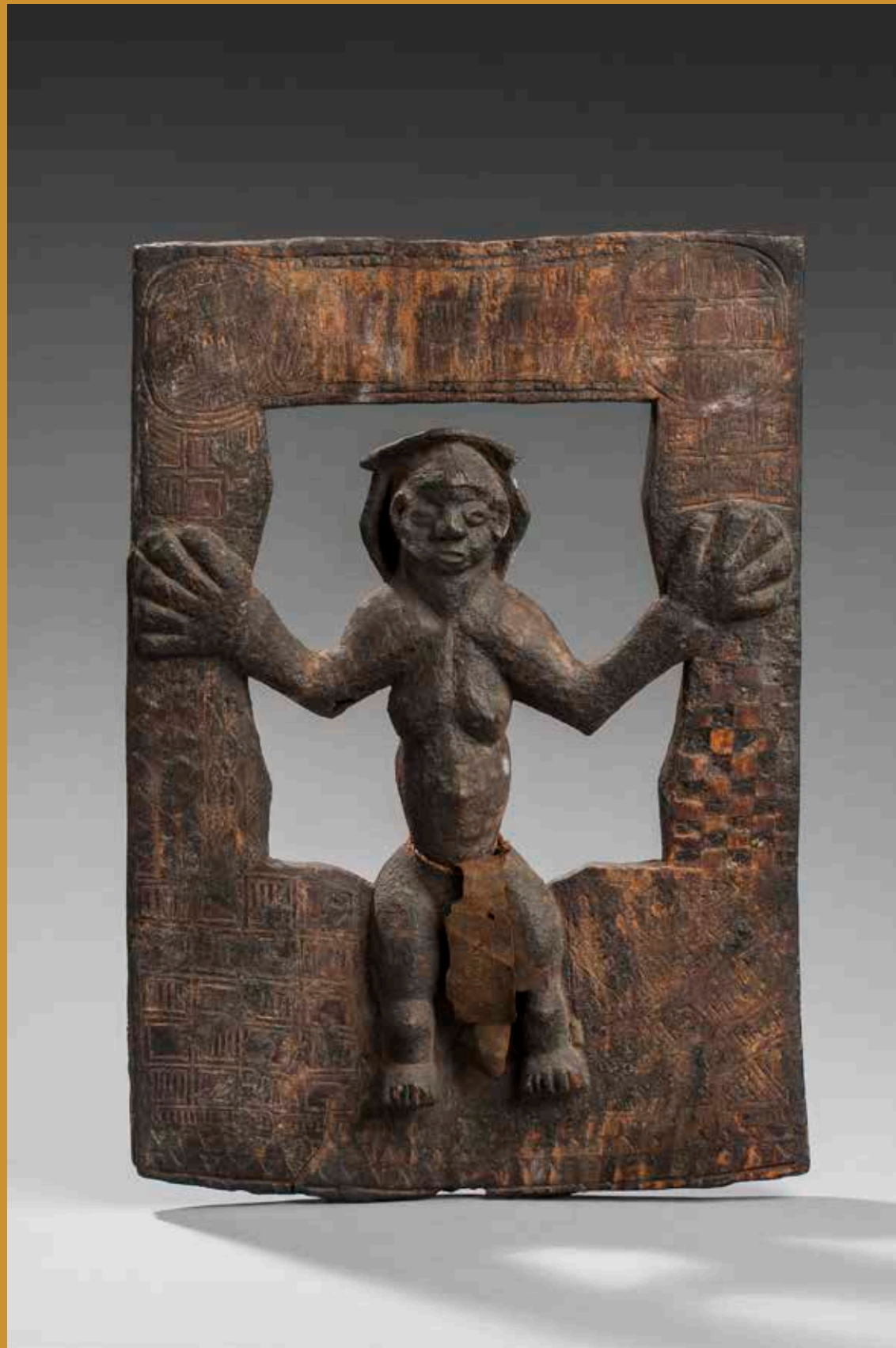
Within this beautiful openwork frame, we see a standing figure with outstretched arms and powerful hands. It was used by the Holo in an affliction cult called *nzaambi*, a term also used in much of the south-western DRC to mean God.

Among the Yaka, where this cult also existed, the term *ndzaambi* refers to the metamorphosis of a primordial egg from which a bird hatches – symbolism that may have led Christian churches to ‘recycle’ the term and use it to designate the Supreme Being.

For a long time, art historians and ethnologists have thus conflated the *n(d)zaambi* cult, an aboriginal ritual institution, with the Supreme Being who, under the influence of missionaries, was endowed with the same name. To muddy the waters still further, the Holo gave the name *santu nzaambi* to objects dedicated to this cult, and their formal structure was clearly inspired by Catholic iconography, not least by images of Christ on the cross.

In the first half of the 17th century, Portuguese Capuchins founded a mission in Sainte-Marie de Matamba (Angola), not far from Holo territory. These monks proselytized by disseminating their *santu* (crucifixes, images and effigies of saints), doubtless inspiring Holo art in the process. The *nzaambi* affliction cult into which they incorporated these features of Christian iconography was addressed only to indigenous spiritual entities and was never dedicated to a monotheistic God.

In the 1950s, when many of the *santu nzaambi* held by the RMCA were acquired, the collective cult of that name was disappearing, and these objects had become the subject of private worship. This specimen was intended to promote the abundance of game; if the hunt proved fruitful, the hunter applied blood from the hunt to the sculpture and its frame. Several other *santu nzaambi* of the same type had a therapeutic function. People could suffer from various diseases sent by *nzaambi* if they had been guilty of transgression or neglectful of that spiritual entity. Patients then had to whitewash the sculpture with white *pemba* clay, which they then used to paint their own chest.



Sculpted *santu nzaambi* panel.

Holo, DRC; 1st third of the 20th century?; acquired by A. Maesen in Kibenga (1950s). Wood.
H.: 41.5 cm. RMCA collection, EO.1953.74.2479 (registered in 1954).



Ndop statue of King Kot-A-Ntshey

DAVID BINKLEY



Kuba woodcarver working on making a *ndop*. The artist was the brother-in-law of the ruler (*nyim*) Kot Mabiinc.

Photograph: C. Zagourski, Mweka, 1930s; RMCA collection, EP0.0.2052.

Ndop statue of King Kot-A-Ntshey. Kuba, DRC; 1760-1780?; Wood (*Crossopteryx febrifuga*), braided plant fibres (necklace). H.: 51 cm. RMCA collection, EO.0.0.15256 (registered in 1913); donated by the Compagnie du Kasai.

Beginning in the 17th century, the Kuba kingdom became a regional power in the Kasai-Occidental region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The kingdom was a confederacy of approximately eighteen distinct ethnic groups, each with its own history of migration into the region. Although the various groups were geographically scattered, they all paid an annual tribute to the politically and numerically dominant Bushoong, whose paramount ruler (*nyim*) resided at a village capital in the centre of his territory.

Discussions about Kuba artistic traditions have focused largely on a small group of figurative sculptures (*ndop*) that portray the Kuba monarch and are considered among the great masterpieces of

African art. Five *ndop* figures have been identified as belonging to an 'archaic' style and are thought to have been created in the 18th century. This would coincide with the rise of the Kuba as a regional power, fuelled in part by the trade in ivory.

All *ndop* are fundamentally similar. They represent the monarch seated cross-legged on a decorated plinth. A different object is carved on each *ndop* to identify the monarch concerned. The figure's oversized head, comprising more than one-third of the entire sculpture, is depicted with its eyes closed. Various prestige regalia are displayed on the seated figure. These include two belts encircling the *ndop*'s waist. The figure's body is further adorned with symbols of elite attire. These include two shoulder rings and an elite headdress in the form of a pillbox-shaped hat with a visor-like extension. The figure is also represented holding a short sword at its left side.

The context for the creation and use of *ndop* figures remains problematic, as there are virtually no analogous Kuba sculptural traditions. One context is suggested by a figurative tradition among the Ndengese, who reside to the north of the Kuba. The Ndengese produced figurative sculpture to honour their deceased rulers (*itoci*) at memorial ceremonies held several months after burial. They also created mannequin-like effigies clothed in the funerary attire of a high-ranking title-holder. The attire included a sleeved vest decorated with cowrie shells and other chiefly regalia, together with a Kuba Mukenga mask placed on the effigy's head. The effigy was assembled to stand in for the deceased chief during his successor's installation rites. Likewise, the *ndop* would be placed near the dying monarch in order to catch his 'life force' and was subsequently placed near the successor during his period of seclusion and instruction so that he would be instilled with his predecessor's life force. Afterwards, the *ndop* would be preserved with other royal objects, being displayed together with royal drums and other items on important ceremonial occasions.

Anthropomorphic *lusingiti* statue

VIVIANE BAEKE

Although the dead often haunt ritual anthropomorphic sculptures, ‘ancestor images’ at the heart of a cult dedicated to family progenitors exist in only one area of the DRC – between the Lualaba River and Lake Tanganyika – inhabited by the Tabwa, Holoholo, Hemba, Buyu and Bembe. The Buyu and Hemba are without question the best exemplars. Hemba *singiti* effigies such as this one, as well as the Buyu statues, are indeed family ancestors in the full sense of the term.

All Hemba lineage chiefs kept a series of ancestral *singiti* statues, related by known filiation, each of which bore the name of a specific ancestor. Resting in the dim light of a sanctuary erected near the house of the head of the family, this line of wooden ancestors established the genealogical depth of the group and legitimized its right to the land it occupied, testifying that the deceased they embodied were the first occupants.

In addition to their memorial function, these effigies were once the focus of extremely important ancestor worship. Even now, funerals, mourning, and ritual communication with the dead are the essential religious frameworks underlying Hemba society. These ancestral figures belong to the category of *miisi*, ‘objects invested with a spirit’. However, there is no magical substance, nor any other addition, to disturb these figures’ pure curves. We are clearly not in the presence of an object of the same type as a Songye *nkishi* or a Kongo *nkisi*.

The Hemba had another type of object, the *kabeja makua*, which symbolized monstrous mythical twins joined at the back. During animal sacrifices, this object had the specific function of activating the powers of the ancestors. Moreover, this figure contained powerful charms placed at the top of its two Janus heads. In this object that symbolized a dreadful disturbance to fertility, the Hemba captured and concentrated the dangers that could potentially affect the world of humans, and they turned it into an effective and operational object. By so doing, they not only protected the living from misfortune, but also preserved and protected their ancestors’ spiritual integrity and benevolent intentions, as expressed through the perfection of their sculpted images.

By dividing ancestral worship into the respective functions of *singiti* and *kabeja makua*, it would seem the Hemba mind-set distinguished the realm of magic from that of religion. It was through the *kabeja makua* that the head of the family activated the ancestors’ power, but he prayed to the *singiti* to do what he had asked of them.



Anthropomorphic *lusingiti* statue.

‘Mbulula Workshop’ (southern Niembo). Hemba, DRC; 2nd quarter of the 19th century. Wood (*Trichilia retusa*). H.: 58 cm. RMCA collection, EO.1972.1.1 (registered in 1972); acquired from E. Deletaille.

Pwo mask

MANUEL JORDÁN



Pwo mask from the Kapanga region (Lunda-Chokwe cultures).

Photograph: J. Gansemans, 1972, © RMCA; RMCA collection, EP.0.0.10129.

This mask represents *Pwo*, ‘the woman’, an *akishi* and primordial female ancestor performed by the Chokwe, mainly in *mukanda* male initiations. In diverse *mukanda*-related performances, *Pwo* highlights the beauty, manners, demeanour and values associated with fulfilled women, a tribute to the initiates’ mothers and grandmothers.

In defining Chokwe conventions of style, Marie-Louise Bastin (1982: 90) explained that ‘the mask must be carved in accordance with the traditional canon and must reflect the collective concept of the ancestral spirits’. Stylistic elements include elliptical eyelids within concave eye sockets. Eyes may be globular with horizontal slits, and the carved mouth is often broad and slightly open, showing pointed, triangular teeth.

This mask retains most of the formality of a Chokwe-style carving, but some of its details feature softer contours. This is particularly evident in the overall outline of the face and in the way that the cheekbone areas below the eyes blend with the geometry of the lower eyelids, as well as in the more naturalistic rendition of the lips and mouth (full, albeit stylized, and not showing teeth). Chokwe carvers often pushed the boundaries of the stylistic canon; this is particularly true of *Pwo* masks, which may have been inspired by the beauty and facial features of a woman admired by the carver.

The mask includes other typical Chokwe features, such as the representation of facial scarification marks, rendered here through the insertion of pieces of metal into the surface to create the different patterns. The cross-shaped symbol on the forehead is called *chingelyengelye*, a Chokwe identity mark imbued with sun symbolism that relates to concepts of regeneration. The curved parallel lines below the eyes are tears or *masoji*. These represent the lament of mothers in ‘losing’ their young boys through initiation to the world of men and adulthood. The vertical line along the length of the mask’s nose is doubled below the mouth; it is called *kangongo* or ‘tail of a mouse’.

The mask’s ears are relatively unusual in being fashioned from leather and attached to the mask rather than forming part of its carving. The beaded forehead band and button, the elaborate fibre coiffure, and the pierced nose and earrings reflect women’s personal sense of style and fashion at the time.

Pwo mask.

Chokwe, DRC; 4th quarter of the 19th century; collected by T. Fourche (1930s). Wood (*Vitex madiensis*), imported button and beads, insect shells, fabric, aluminium tax tokens. H.: 29 cm. RMCA collection, EO.0.0.43143 (registered in 1946).





Kalelwa mask

MANUEL JORDÁN



Kalelwa mask.

Photograph: G.-F. de Witte, Dilolo region, 1931, © RMCA; RMCA collection, HP.2011.62.14-90.

Kalelwa mask.

Chokwe, DRC; c. 1930; collected by G.-F. de Witte in the region of Dilolo (1931). Fabric, wax or resin applied to fabric stretched over a wooden frame; H.: 93 cm. RMCA collection, EO.0.0.33776 (registered in 1931).

In 1931, G.-F. de Witte collected this Chokwe mask and at least seven others in the town of Dilolo (DRC) near the Angolan border. There, Chokwe continue to employ mask characters called *akishi* (singular *mukishi*) as the embodiments of memorable deceased individuals (*áfu*).

Akishi are generally treated as protective ancestors and appear mainly in the context of boys' coming-of-age initiations known as *mikanda* (singular *mukanda*). There are hundreds of *akishi* mask characters, each with distinct physical features, different types of behaviour in (dance) performances, and specific symbolic attributes. *Akishi* masks can be human, animal or hybrid in form and can even take on an abstract appearance.

This mask, called *Kalelwa*, belongs to a category of *akishi* that fulfils a fundamental protective role in relation to the *mukanda*. In performance its wearer often behaves aggressively; he carries a machete or branch as a weapon (see photograph) and, as an enforcer and protector of the *mukanda* initiation camp, he chases people around the village – particularly women and uninitiated males.

Officially, *Kalelwa* bears a tall, broad-brimmed superstructure atop the head (larger than that of most other *akishi* types) to reflect the ancestor's 'larger-than-life' powers and assertive/aggressive personality. The mask's superstructure features a tall central 'tower' that symbolizes a termite mound. Termitaries are considered thresholds between the world of the living (above) and the world of the ancestors (below), because they tower up above ground but also extend underground. *Mukanda* initiation camps are often built in the proximity of termitaries.

The mask's frontal vertical band (arched and narrow) structurally connects its towering element at the top with the edge of the flat brim at 'ground level', while symbolically reflecting the interconnection between worlds or realms. This vertical arch also marks the position of the sun, a reference to time and continuity; it is meant to be understood three-dimensionally and in motion, like a sundial with the sun rotating around the tower. The two rings that confine a series of black, red and white stripes mid-tower are a direct reference to the *mukanda* camp as an enclosure, a restricted and protected ritual space, and a place of knowledge and truth.

The painted (white) motifs on the mask's 'crown' have their own names and meanings. Symbolically, they reinforce themes of protection, while cross-referencing the cyclical nature of the sun as a regenerative force. This crown represents active cosmological forces accessible to *Kalelwa*. Below it, we recognize the face of the ancestor with its characteristic Chokwe-style facial features rendered in strips of red cloth and white paper, including a curved element below the chin which represents a chief's beard. *Kalelwa* is the embodiment of a powerful chiefly ancestor who serves to guard and educate male initiates as they make the transition into adulthood.