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Northern Kongo Ancestor Figures

Author(s): Kavuna Simon and Wyatt MacGaffey

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Northern Kongo Ancestor Figures

KAVUNA SIMON

translated by
WYATT MACGAFFEY

Kavuna Simon was an evangelist and leading member of the Swedish Protestant Mission in Lower Congo at the turn of the century. He was one of a number of members of the newly emergent literate class who undertook ethnographic research in collaboration with the missionary K.E. Laman between 1916 and 1917, when he may have been about 35 years old (MacGaffey 1991:1–7). The project, as Laman put it, was intended to record Kongo culture for future generations of the people (Janzen 1972:12–28; MacGaffey 1986:263–79). It resulted in 10,000 manuscript pages, in Kikongo, of which a digest appeared in English as the four volumes of Laman's *The Kongo* (Uppsala, 1953–1967). The manuscripts repose in the National Archives of Sweden.¹

Little is known about any of the authors, except that they were leading evangelists in the pioneering expansion of Protestantism and that they wrote in a spirit of enthusiasm for an ancestral culture whose transformation they were experiencing. We know that in 1910 Kavuna wrote an article in the mission bulletin on the nationalistic theme of respect for the Kikongo language. His writing is often extraordinarily vivid in its evocation of Kongo culture as it was at the beginning of this century. In the text that follows he writes about the form and composition of two well-known and related types of Northern Kongo art, muzidi (pl. mizidi) and the much larger kimbi (also bimbi), generally known in the ethnographic literature as niombo.² The text shows that the smaller was prepared by an expert, nganga (pl. banganga), in a dramatic ritual performance, when a family

believed itself to be in need of protection; kimbi, whose construction Kavuna does not dwell on, was a huge bundle of red blankets and other materials containing the remains of a chief or other wealthy person whose body had been smoke-dried for several months. Each was deemed to contain and be empowered by the spirit or ghost, called nkuyu in this dialect (pl. bankuyu), of the individual in question.

As a container of spiritual force, these reliquaries resemble the most numerous and best-documented types of Kongo art, minkisi (sing. nkisi). The difference between them is that the clients of an nkisi are persons who have been afflicted by the misfortune that the particular nkisi is believed to control, or else those who seek benefits from it. Muzidi on the other hand is composed, as Kavuna tells us, by a family in need of protection, and its animating spirit is that of an ancestral figure rather than one identified with a particular disease or other problem. Kimbi is composed by a local group to make the remains of their deceased chief into a kind of guardian spirit.

The empowerment of an nkisi was effected by the incorporation of “medicines” (bilongo) which specified its particular capacities to control this or that disease, for example, but a kimbi or muzidi included a force particularized by name and by its relationship to the group. Kimbi contained the actual bones of the deceased chief, but the ancestral presence in muzidi had to be induced by the ritual Kavuna describes. Once this spirit had been “captured” in an anthropomorphic wooden or cloth-bound figure, the figure was no longer called muzidi but nkuyu (pl. minkuyu).³ Medicines were not necessary, although some of the wooden versions now in museums have medicines attached to them, probably because the figure had been converted from its original purpose. Once a figure was deemed to be no longer effective (because the ancestral spirit had “left”), it reverted to the status of an ordinary object.⁴

Wyatt MacGaffey

Opposite page: 1. Reliquary figure (kiteki). Bembe, Northern Kongo, Republic of Congo. Wood, breath of departed ancestor; 56.9cm (22.4”). Völkerkundemuseum der Universität Zürich.





Muzidi

Why are they prepared? They are made to look after their clansmen who have set them up, since it is the *bankuyu* who safeguard living people from diseases of all kinds. They look after the livestock and the houses of their fellow clansmen. They especially care for the lives of their relatives so that they shall not be cursed or hexed by witches.

Bankuyu have the power to curse people, the power to hex people and to inflict disease and to remove it. People understand about witchcraft and sorcery and therefore are eager to prepare *minkuyu* and keep them in the houses where they sleep or in special storage places. They think that having an *nkuyu* guarantees the body against dangers by protecting it and sacralizing it and the life of the person. For in *minkuyu* there is great benefit for the body and blessing for both people and animals; in them there are safeguards for the body.

Not everybody in the village has *minkuyu*, only those who have had luck or physical problems. For example, their crops or their livestock are not doing well, they have no luck killing animals in the bush when hunting, or when buying and selling goods, or they are not able to have children. If someone has been married a year or two and has not been able to have children, then he wants to know why this is. Or maybe he has had children but he can't count on it, the children keep dying off; then too he will want to know what's the matter. Or suppose he hunts with a gun but is unable to track game and kill it, or though he finds game and shoots it the animal just leaves blood and doesn't die, then too he will desire to know the reason.

Sometimes one is just not well: he's sick off and on, he has nightmares and bad dreams. Later, things startle him night and day and he has no strength in his body; impotence in a man, for example. It may happen that a man has been well able to sleep with a woman but later his penis no longer seems to have any strength, it's dead, it can no longer hold itself up or, it does when he's hot but when he turns to his wife it droops and goes limp. On this account quarrels and anger break out daily between husband and wife. Finally the problem becomes public. For this reason a man will want to know why his penis has died. Likewise a woman who fails to stop bleeding at the time when she menstruates and should have stopped will want to know what the matter is. However the problem arises, one wants to know the reason.

To know the reasons they will also need a diviner to explain them. They cannot buy or order a *muzidi* from one who puts them together if they do not know the hidden resentments in the village. So thinking, they seek out a diviner. When the diviner has sniffed and smelled through the whole village, the women and the men, the living and the dead, on whichever side he experiences trembling, there he knows there is trouble. If among the dead, then he must discover who it is and why he is angry that he should be coming back to the village to make trouble in this way. When the diviner understands that such and such a dead person wants a *muzidi* or a wooden figure (*kiteki*), then they need permission to order the *muzidi* or figurine made; [that will cost] a "chicken" [in the form]⁵ of one raffia cloth (*lubongo*), 50

Top: 2. Reliquary figure (*niombo/kimbi*). Bembe, Northern Kongo, Kolo region (north of Kingoyi), Republic of Congo. Cloth covering, 43cm (16.9"). Ethnography Section, Royal Museum of Central Africa, Tervuren, 75.62.1.

Bottom: 3. Reliquary figure (*niombo/kimbi*). Bembe, Northern Kongo, Mubiri village, Republic of Congo. Cloth covering, 68cm (26.8"). Ethnography Section, Royal Museum of Central Africa, Tervuren, 63.42.1.

PHOTOS: AFRICA MUSEUM, TERVUREN

centimes these days. The cost of the *muzidi* will be a "chicken" of three raffia cloths, or one and a half francs today.

What are they made of? There are two kinds, of wood or of grass and leaves. When they want to make a *muzidi* they need palm-leaf ribs. They split them, scrape them thoroughly to make them supple and thin, then weave a little piece of fiber which they twist inside and arrange so that it strengthens the *muzidi* and makes it stiff. Next, cut dry banana-leaf fibers, weave some into the trunk and others into the arms and legs. With others they make the neck. At the head they put bunches of *ndubi* leaves which have been scraped with a knife.⁶ Then they crush dry leaves and put them in the head and the neck. Then they stitch a bag out of local *mbadi* cloth or palm fiber. That's how they make a *muzidi*. It is made in the image of a person. They put a nose, eyes, and for pupils in the eyes they put bits of the *mbungu amputu* beetle or small white or red shells, or some other color. Then ears and a mouth and teeth are made from *mbota* roots; they carve them carefully, split them and put them in the mouth in the upper and lower jaws. Legs and arms and five toes on each foot, five fingers on each hand. They do the same with a *kiteki*, putting hands and feet, a head, eyes, penis, testicles, fingers and toes, nose and mouth, but no teeth.⁷

They make figurines out of wood, *nlala* [orange] wood or *nlembanzau* [*Gardenia jovicostantis*] or *luhete* [*Hymenocardia acida* Tul.=*Euphorbiaceae*]. *Muzidi* and figurine are made in the same way, and for the same purpose, to look after people and to curse. *Muzidi* and figurine are the houses *minkuyu* prefer to settle and stay in. When a *muzidi* is vacant, when no *nkuyu* has entered it, it is just a shell, commanding no respect or confidence. It cannot be put near crops to scare off animals that come to eat a woman's harvest. But a *muzidi* when an *nkuyu* has entered into it is called *nkuyu*. The *muzidi* itself is not the *nkuyu*. Similarly, in the case of a wooden figurine, if no *nkuyu* has entered it is just an image, but when a spirit of the dead has entered it then it is called *nkuyu*. When the *minkuyu* are in the figurines or *mizidi* it isn't finished, because they then seek some sort of protective device, such as one of several sorts of little basket, a bag, or a carrying sling for a child. These things are used to protect and to carry the *minkuyu*.

Catching the *Nkuyu*

It may happen that the *nkuyu* arrives, under the influence of the medicated palm wine and the food that have been put out for him, but refuses to be fixed by the *nganga* or his assistant, who is in a state of possession. He flat refuses to go in, and hides wherever he feels like, perhaps in the house, under the drum, under plantain roots in the forest, maybe under the feet of those of his living relatives who are sitting around at the ceremony. He torments the *nganga* and gives him a really rough time of it. When the *nganga* has failed, by humble inducements and presents of food and drink, to make him go in, at last he goes after him himself with his *mpiya* [diviner's whisk] in his hand.⁸

If the *nkuyu* is exceptionally coy, two *banganga* help each other to catch him. While one of them goes after him the other watches when he draws near so that when he is close to the basket he can grab him and tie a piece of cloth over the opening and shut it tight.

When he is fixing it he shakes his *mpiya* this way and that, wherever the *nkuyu* goes. He is in trance during the operation, so that whether the *nkuyu* goes way up high or way down low the person in trance follows him. Even though he should leap to a housetop or climb a tree, it is no problem for the *nganga* to follow, because he has his *mpiya*, into which has already entered a tough, strong, wily and smart *nkuyu* eager for the pursuit.

Therefore the *nganga* cannot fail to catch and grab the *nkuyu*, on account of the *nkuyu*-strength in *mpiya*.

When he puts him in, the *nganga* may hold him tight in his hand or in a packet of green banana leaves, or perhaps in a peanut basket. If the *nkuyu* is scared of the noise made by the *nganga* and the *nkuyu*-powers in the *mpiya*, the *nganga* may be obliged to go in with it himself. That is the kind of difficulty the *banganga* may have if the *nkuyu* does not want to enter.

That is what happens when *nkuyu* is to be put in a small basket. When they put one in a *muzidi* or *kiteki*, this is what they do. They find a diviner, *nganga ngombo*. When he comes he first divines to find out whether the *nkuyu* wants to enter a figurine or a *muzidi*. If he learns that it is a *muzidi* he tells someone who can do so to bring one. The *nganga's* fee for a *muzidi* is a chicken, male or female; dishes of plantain and peanuts, a packet of squash seeds, pork, and a calabash of palm wine. Then the *nganga* makes a large funnel of banana leaves and puts in it all the food and the figurine or *muzidi*. Then he pours the wine into a little African bottle and puts it in the funnel, so that the *nkuyu* will feel moved to enter quickly when he sees all those things he likes in the funnel. The *nganga* whistles to call to him, and the singing and drumming begin.

When the *nkuyu* hears songs pleasing to him and the drumbeats resounding, he comes closer, cautiously. When the *nganga* sees that the *nkuyu* has come closer, he pours out the potion around the funnel to calm all the approaches and escape routes, and tells the singers and drummer to redouble their efforts. When the *nkuyu* hears the crescendo of the song and the noise of the drum he comes closer, but dancingly, dodging here and there until he can see the group of people. The bystanders cannot see him, however, only the *banganga* and those who are in a state of possession. At last he enters the funnel himself, the *nganga* seizes him and transfers him into the *muzidi*. They do not remove the funnel until he has eaten all his food.

It is necessary to inspect the food the *nkuyu* has eaten because in fact it may not really have been eaten, because it looks just as it did when it was put in. When it has indeed been eaten it is evident that the food is just an empty shell or husk; its essence has been consumed. *Nkuyu* just eat its taste and goodness. We can know that they just eat the goodness of something because the *banganga* eat the remains after the *nkuyu* has finished, and when they do it is apparent that the food has no taste; it has become tasteless, insipid, not worth eating. The *banganga* have to eat this food so that the *nkuyu* does not become annoyed and fail to remain in the figurine or *muzidi*, thinking that they have put something of poor quality in the food, or that they gave it in anger, otherwise why would they fail to eat the provisions?

How Do We Know It Worked?

How do we know he has gone into the figurine or *muzidi*? From the food he eats and from the way he talks in the packet of leaves in which they have caught him, because when they seize the packet and open it they hear something rustling. Also they can tell by the weight of the object; when they pick it up and heft it, and find that the *muzidi* has become heavy, they know the *nkuyu* is in it. And that's not all, because they can interrogate it. They take the *muzidi* and bend over it, holding it in both hands, and ask it questions, like this: "Have you truly entered this *muzidi* as you were asked to? How are we to know that you went in for sure?" Then if he is inside they will see the *muzidi* move about in its owner's hands. "*Sika-sika*," he says, "at your service, all in place; *sika-sika*, all in place, at your service."



PHOTO: AFRICA MUSEUM, TERVUREN

4. Reliquary figure (*niombo/kimbi*). Bembe, Northern Kongo, Kingoyi region, Republic of Congo. Cloth covering, 60cm (23.6"). Ethnography Section, Royal Museum of Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium, 3368.

Then they ask a second question: "Eh, tell us truly whether you are not just deceiving us, leading us vainly on. Have we built an empty house? Is this a false appearance of weight? If you did not go in, tell us how come it seems to be heavy, as though our *nkuyu* had entered, whereas in fact nothing. This heaviness, is it yours, our brother, or did witches do it? Maybe the *nganga* has cheated us for the sake of his profit? Or are you having us on? Well now, are you in there?" Then they see it moving about again: Hoppity, hoppity... "Is that you in there?" "*Sika-sika-sika...*" When they notice this response they know that the *nkuyu* has really entered and is in there. Or else they see that the food has not been eaten, because when they taste it they find that it still has its flavor, then they know *nkuyu* has not entered. Likewise, if they heft the *muzidi* and it seems to have no substance but just floats about; if they blow palm wine on it and there is no quivering in response, then they know there is no *nkuyu* in it, he hasn't entered.

There are many reasons why the *minkuyu*, once entered, may leave again. Perhaps on account of anger, or because people have not observed the taboos, since when they enter *mizidi* or figurines they have their rules. The prohibitions include: A stranger may not put his hand in the basket or other container where the *nkuyu* is. When a man and wife have their *minkuyu* in the house they may not put their hands into such a container; the husband may not touch the wife's *nkuyu*, nor she his. So the reasons are that their owners have failed in their observances, or that a stranger has put his hand in where the *minkuyu* are; or in other instances, after the *nkuyu* has entered and settled down, its owner is stingy

with the meat, squash, peanut sauce, plantains, manioc pudding, salt and pepper that he had had plenty of during his lifetime; or failed to make for him an appropriate home; or failed to hang on to it a knife, machete, hoe or some other thing he wants. If they withhold it, the *nkuyu* is annoyed, becomes angry, and quits.

Sometimes *nkuyu* is angry on account of the inheritance he left, when he sees that the heirs are quarreling and arguing over it and cannot deal with it properly. For this, too, he may become angry and quit, or because they are making miserable the little children he left behind, or his sisters or wives. When he sees that they have failed to look after what he left both inside and outside the house, he is upset and leaves. For these reasons and for any sort of dispute that breaks out in the village that he doesn't like, he may be upset and depart.

There are signs by which the *banganga* know that the *minkuyu* have left, and also they know by their art, without signs. The signs are these: The *nkuyu* himself makes the matter known through diseases and frights, since after his departure witches come to attack his brethren. If there is witchcraft and disease and scares and livestock dying off, then they know the *nkuyu* is responsible, has come out. Or perhaps the packet they put in the butt of the *muzidi* or figurine has fallen off, or when

they try the weight of it and find it has none, they know the *nkuyu* is no longer there. Sometimes when what they put out isn't eaten and his clansmen have bad luck, getting nothing when they go hunting or trading, the same. Or when they go to look at the *muzidi* which they left upright and find that it has tipped over or fallen down, then they know he's left. Or if his container, formerly closed, has opened, they say: "He's gone, he has opened the container." Sometimes the owner finds himself irritable and nervous, that's a sign. When they see no signs, they know that the *nkuyu* is still in place, hasn't come out.

It is known that the *minkuyu* were properly put in when things improve in the village for man and beast, and there are no scares, accidents, bad luck, nasty events or quarrels. Also when they see that the food that they put out is eaten, and the *muzidi* seems to be in good shape, not rotting or falling apart, and the meat they have given it hasn't bred maggots.

An *Nkuyu* Put in with His Bones

When they put other *minkuyu* in *mizidi* of exceptional size, they do not go about it as they do to put them into small *mizidi*. For entry into large *mizidi* the procedure is somewhat different. This kind of putting-in is called *tombula*, that is, to "raise" him up as it were whole, with his body. His body is his bones. The reasons for this, the problems and the explanations, are the same as those for *minkuyu* which they catch to put in, just the soul without the bones of the body. The difference is this: they have a very large *muzidi* made, the girth and height of a person. The *nkuyu* they raise up is that of a man who expressed the wish for it in his lifetime; when he was not yet dead he exacted a promise that he would be raised up. People who are performing *tombula* make a great funerary festival. They slaughter many animals and all kinds of people come to the feast. Women and men, girls and boys dance. Then the *nkuyu* comes to enter in where they have put his bones, from delight at the feast they have prepared for him. *Minkuyu* of this kind are not put in by the *nganga za nkuyu*. They dance the *muzidi* during the festival. The people who do it, two by two, are freeborn members of his clan, not slaves.

These are the usages and procedures they follow in other areas in the case of bodies that are "sat with" while they are smoked for burying. An *nkuyu* of this kind that has been raised up and put in a large *muzidi* is called a *kimbi*. When they have completed the festival they then bury him, but this time for good. They cannot return and raise him up again. Those that are buried in this way must not be buried in graves that have been used before, but in new graves dug for the occasion. Such a grave is round and large and deep, the height of the person to be buried. When they dig it, it is not like other graves, but like this: when they have dug it properly to the right depth they hollow it out above and bury the *kimbi* in it. But when they finish burying it they lay out many sticks and palm ribs and *nkwala* mats. Then they fill up the hole with earth to close it, treading it and packing it in. They do this so that the body should not be immediately exposed and rot in the rain. □

Notes, page 91

Top: 5. Reliquary figure (*niombo/kimbi*). Bembe, Northern Kongo, Kingoyi region, Republic of Congo. Cloth covering, 65cm (25.6"). Ethnography Section, Royal Museum of Central Africa, Tervuren, 35754.

Bottom: 6. Reliquary figure (*niombo/kimbi*). Dondo, Northern Kongo, Muyonzi, Republic of Congo. Cloth covering, 58.7cm (23.1"). Ethnography Section, Royal Museum of Central Africa, Tervuren, 67.63.480.



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MacGAFFEY: Notes, from page 53

[This article was accepted for publication in November 1994.]

1. For a copy of the Kikongo text, on disk or printed, write W. MacGaffey, Haverford College, Haverford PA 19041.
2. The only extensive treatments of these figures are Söderberg 1975, vol. 13:21-33 and vol. 14:14-37; Thompson & Cornet 1981:55-64; Manker 1932, vol. 2:159-72.
3. At least one *muzidi* combined the wooden and the cloth-covered forms (Nooter 1994:62).
4. More information about *minkisi* and about Kongo culture can be found in works listed below. It seems proper that Kavuna's distinctive voice not be drowned here by a lot of officious anthropological commentary.
5. Ritually significant payments are stated in terms of live-stock, "a chicken" being the smallest denomination; the highest is "a pig." In 1915, as the text shows, cash equivalents, adjustable for inflation, were beginning to come into use.
6. A pun here on *ndubi*, a tall plant with long leaves, and *dubi*, an image.
7. No explanation is offered for this difference, which is confirmed by the figures themselves.
8. The *mpiya* is itself empowered by having a *nkuyu* incorporated in it. MacGaffey (1991:23-26) gives Kavuna's description of *mpiya*.

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SCHNEIDER: Notes, from page 58

1. In 1963 I earned a Ph.D. in linguistics based on my studies in Africa and accepted a position in the Department of Linguistics at Ohio University, where I lectured for twenty-six years. I have started the Intercultural Education Services (417 NE 52nd Ave., Portland, OR 97213), a desktop publishing resource company that focuses on my fieldwork in Cameroon.
2. For this essay, the images were printed full-frame on Kodak Polycontrast fiber-based paper by my son Evan, a professional photographer.

FERNANDEZ: Notes, from page 72

1. Annie E. Coombs, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994.
2. Robert D. Kaplan, "The Coming Anarchy," *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 273, no. 2 (Feb. 1994), pp. 44-76.
3. "On Thinking the Black Public Sphere," editorial comment by A. Appadurai, L. Berlant, C. Breckenridge, M. Diawara in *Public Culture*, "The Black Public Sphere" (special issue), vol. 7, no. 1 (Fall 1994): pp. x-xiv.

BROWN: Notes, from page 87

1. I choose to use the term Ocha to avoid offending the authors, who find "Santería" offensive, and because my own sources use Ocha interchangeably with Santería. Oddly, nevertheless, the authors retain and foreground "Santería" in the book's title.
2. The book's back cover blurp says that "here for the first time the focus is upon the artistry of garments and altars that are intrinsic to Santería." González Huguet (1968) focuses exclusively on Afro-Cuban altars; Brown (1989, 1993 [which is cited, but incorrectly, in the bibliography]) focuses intensively on altars, garments, and thrones; and Thompson (1993) devotes a significant part of a chapter to altars and thrones.
3. I am grateful to Michael Atwood Mason for the phrase "chronicle of intention."
4. I am grateful to Michael Atwood Mason for this suggestion.
5. We are told that the "traditional way" of presenting male

c o n t r i b u t o r s

articles

HENRY J. DREWAL is Professor of Art History and Afro-American Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison, and a Consulting Editor of *African Arts*.

MARY ANN FITZGERALD is the Collections Manager of the Helen Louise Allen Textile Collection at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

W.A. HART lectures in philosophy at the University of Ulster at Coleraine and in the early 1970s was a lecturer at Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone. He has made a study of the art history of the Upper Guinea coast.

WYATT MACGAFFEY teaches anthropology at Haverford College. He is currently working on similar texts, by Kavuna and others, describing chiefship rituals.

MOYO OKEDIJI, a member of an Egungun lineage, is an instructor in the Department of Afro-American Studies and a graduate student in the Department of Art History, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

GILBERT D. SCHNEIDER is a retired linguist living in Portland, Oregon, where he has started the Intercultural Education Services, a desktop publishing resource company.

Z.S. STROTHER is a post-doctoral scholar in the Michigan Society of Fellows at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. She is currently finishing her manuscript "Inventing Masks: Structures of Artistic Innovation among the Central Pende of Zaire."

departments

LISA ARONSON is Associate Professor and Director of Art History at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, and a Consulting Editor of *African Arts*.

DAVID H. BROWN is Assistant Professor of Art History at Emory University in Atlanta. He teaches and writes about African Diaspora arts.

ELLEN F. ELSAS served as curator of African, Precolumbian, and Native American art at the Birmingham Museum of Art from 1984 to 1992. She currently works as a consultant for nonprofit organizations and small business.

JAMES W. FERNANDEZ is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Chicago. His articles and essays on African art are collected in his forthcoming book, *Keeping Faith with the Ancestors*.

EMILY HANNA-VERGARA teaches art history at Spelman College in Atlanta and is a Ph.D. candidate in the School of Art and Art History at the University of Iowa in Iowa City.

MANUEL JORDÁN is Curator of the Arts of Africa and the Americas at the Birmingham Museum of Art.

PETER MARK is Associate Professor of Art History at Wesleyan University in Middletown.

PHILIP M. PEEK is Professor of Anthropology at Drew University in Madison, New Jersey.

PHILIP L. RAVENHILL is Chief Curator, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., and a Consulting Editor of *African Arts*.

ROBERT T. SOPPELSA is Professor of Art History at Washburn University in Topeka. He specializes in the arts of West Africa.