

african arts

Regents of the University of California

Southern Kuba Initiation Rites: The Ephemeral Face of Power and Secrecy

Author(s): David A. Binkley

Source: *African Arts*, Vol. 43, No. 1, EPHEMERAL ART II (SPRING 2010), pp. 44-59

Published by: UCLA James S. Coleman African Studies Center

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29546085>

Accessed: 27-10-2016 15:11 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



Regents of the University of California, UCLA James S. Coleman African Studies Center are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *African Arts*

Southern Kuba Initiation Rites

The Ephemeral Face of Power and Secrecy

David A. Binkley

**"TELL MY MOTHER I WON'T COME AGAIN.
I'M A NOVICE NOW. I'M A NOVICE NOW.
I'M NOT A MUSHINDU."**

(opposite)
1-2 Initiation wall and sculpture erected at
Northern Kete community of Dihaki.
PHOTO: CHARLES ROSS JR., 1968.

Kuba political organization, with its complex system of titleholding, is among the most elaborate in all of Africa. The development of Kuba visual arts was directly tied to the increasing complexity of the political structure during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and to the economic success of many Kuba as partisans vied for advancement within the system. With the large number of titles there developed a corresponding series of prerogatives, insignia, emblems, and objects that differentiated an individual's rank and corresponding status within the hierarchy. The desire to display one's achieved status and monetary success was nurtured by the highly competitive economic environment and the ingenuity and creativity of Kuba artists who made decorated objects that were acquired with relish.

Economic growth was spurred on by the increase in food production among the Kuba and by the expansion of internal and regional trade (Vansina 1978:175–85). The increase in regional trade, which included the decorative arts, directly impacted the range of objects that were produced and traded to neighbouring peoples. This in turn influenced artists in bordering regions to produce Kuba-style objects, as not only Kuba objects but Kuba style was exported.

Trade became even more lucrative for Kuba elites with the unprecedented rise in the demand for African ivory beginning in the early nineteenth century. The Kuba were strategically situated geographically to benefit from the increased demand and spiralling prices for ivory. The Kuba hunted elephants on their own lands, but more importantly served as middlemen, acquiring ivory in quantity from hunters and traders north of the Sankuru River to sell at markets established in the southern Kuba region (Vansina 1978:192–95; Binkley 1993:278–79). While the Kuba *nyim* and other eagle-feathered chiefs (*kum apoong*) were its principal beneficiaries, as the ivory trade increased, the income of the rural populations distant from the elite centers may have also risen, resulting in an increase in the acquisition of decorative arts in these chiefdoms as well (Vansina 1978:195).

As individuals obtained titles or advanced within the hierarchy, they marked their success by acquiring objects and symbols that publicly acknowledged achievement within the political sphere (Vansina 1978:16, 184–86, 195–96). Artists from throughout the region produced extraordinarily beautiful objects that

were readily acquired by a demanding clientele seeking new and innovative forms. By the late nineteenth century Western explorers, missionaries, and ethnographers were astonished by the proliferation of Kuba titled positions linked to the display of an immense variety of insignia, prestige regalia, and decorated objects. They unanimously extolled the distinctive style and virtuosity of Kuba decorative traditions, considering them among the greatest achievements on the African continent.

Even today it is the accumulative nature of Kuba costuming, prestige ornamentation, and display that is characteristic of Kuba display at the highest level. As a numbers of objects and insignia may announce a person's title, rank, and status within the hierarchy, it is fundamentally a balance between an individual's prerogatives related to attained rank, achievement, and individual preference or taste that results in the seemingly endless array and variety of objects and insignia displayed by Kuba titleholders (see Darish and Binkley 1995; Cornet 1982).

In contrast, the arts associated with Kuba initiation rituals, while visually dramatic and intended to extol the virtues and prestige of initiated men, are by their very nature, both secret and ephem-





(this page)

3 Southern Bushoong initiation wall erected at Mapea. The choice for the quickly made and short lived reflects an implicit aspect of initiation-related arts that speaks to their secret nature and to the symbolic and metaphorical associations of *nkaan* and *buadi* that juxtapose the wild, untamed forest world to the civilized world of the community, where materials are selected for translation into beautiful, highly prized works of art and then conserved by their owners.

PHOTO: JAN VANSINA, 1953. AFRICA FOCUS, A UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN DIGITAL COLLECTION.

(opposite)

4 Photograph taken one year after construction of wall at the Northern Kete community of Sungi Muneye in 1954. Note that one section of the wall is on the verge of collapse.

PHOTO: BORIS KEGEL-KONIEZKO, 1955.

eral; they are intended for brief display on certain circumscribed occasions before they are purposely destroyed or allowed to disintegrate at the conclusion of the rites. Indeed, Kuba arts associated with initiation rites, in contrast to the prestige arts associated with titleholding for adult men and women, assert a paradox that juxtaposes the playful, impermanent, and transitory nature of childhood and youthful exuberance while instilling the enduring values of adult pursuits and responsibilities.

A verse from a song sung by the novices during Southern Bushoong initiation declares, “Tell my mother I won’t come again. I’m a novice now. I’m a novice now. I’m not a *mush-indu* (uninitiated.)” Sung at the onset of initiation, the phrase expresses the abrupt transition experienced by the novices from identification with their mothers and other female relatives to the sphere of influence of their fathers, other adult males, and peers as they are initiated through the men’s initiation rites in the region.

Southern Kuba initiation rituals (Tshikete *buadi* and Bushoong *nkaan*) are by their very nature ephemeral, not just in the sense that performances eventually come to an end, but that members of the initiation camp, including the novices and instructors, create costumes, masks, masquerade figures, and other paraphernalia that is, by choice of raw materials and methods of fabrication, deliberately impermanent—lasting only until the conclusion of the rite (approximately six weeks or even less in some communities.) The objects, intentionally disposable, speak

to the improvisational atmosphere of the forest camp where the time spent in manufacturing initiation-related paraphernalia is limited and many of the tools and techniques of the community are not utilized. The choice for the quickly made and short lived reflects an implicit aspect of initiation-related arts that speaks to their secret nature and to the symbolic and metaphorical associations of *nkaan* and *buadi* that juxtapose the wild, untamed forest world to the civilized world of the community, where long-lasting materials are selected for translation into beautiful, highly prized works of art.

The remainder of this essay discusses the ephemeral nature of Southern Kuba arts associated with initiation rituals. These include the construction of an immense initiation wall and sculpture, as well as the fabrication of raffia costumes, masks, and other paraphernalia in the forest initiation camp that are displayed on several circumscribed occasions, but ultimately discarded. While the arts created for initiation rites express some of the same core values as other Kuba decorative and prestige arts that acknowledge rank and status within the local political structure, their improvisational and ephemeral nature contrasts dramatically with Kuba decorative arts that are renowned for their technical virtuosity. Instead, these arts of initiation are intended to serve as important visual markers of transition for the novices participating in the rite, and to demonstrate the esoteric knowledge they have acquired from their instructors in the forest camp.

SOUTHERN KUBA INITIATION RITES: SEPARATION OF VILLAGE AND FOREST DOMAINS

Southern Kuba initiation rites are practiced in Bushoong, Northern Kete, Cwa, and Bulungu communities, located in the southern portion of the Kuba region, south of the administrative center of the territory at Mweka. There have been at least 400 years of cultural interaction among the various peoples living in this region, resulting in similarities in the organizational structure and content of men's initiation rites. Kuba oral traditions attribute the introduction of initiation rites (*nkaan*) among the Kuba to the paramount ruler Mboong aLeeng (before AD 1680) (Vansina 1978:180, 204). He adapted the practice from Northern Kete and Cwa initiation rites (*buadi*) in this region.¹ This occurred at approximately the same time as a number of communities in the southern part of the region were designated *matoon* and placed under royal control.² The name of Mboong aLeeng is still recounted during initiation and funeral rituals in the region.

Southern Kuba initiation rites are distinguished from those practiced among central and northern Kuba, which are enacted in the community and in an enclosure at the residence of the *kikaam*, the chief of initiation. For Southern Kuba men, there is a critical distinction between village and forest domains as initiation rites can only take place outside of the community in the forest. The terms *buadi* and *nkaan* mean both initiation rite

and also secret: secrets that must be kept from the uninitiated (*mushindu*), especially women. Each individual, upon becoming a novice, receives a strip of raffia thread to tie around his neck signifying the aphorism, "Initiation is tied, it hasn't been untied" (Binkley 1987b:113). This speaks to the strength and efficacy of the institution and its secret nature, which is protected by rules and prohibitions.

Titleholding among Southern Kuba emphasizes the separation of authority between the affairs of the community (the *malaang* or community council) and secret affairs relegated to the forest (*nkaan* and *buadi*).³ In community affairs, it is the headmen (Kete *shanshenge* or Bushoong *kubol*) who exercise the highest authority. They preside over village council meetings composed of twelve or more titled individuals where the day-to-day affairs of the community are debated and decisions taken (Vansina 1978:111–12; Binkley 1987a:78). However, any discussions related to the men's initiation society, such as the enactment of initiation or funeral rituals and the appearance of masquerade figures, are closed to public debate. These discussions, presided over by the chiefs of initiation (Kete *cimikaam* and Bushoong *kikaam*), take place in a secret forest location called *yaal nkaan* (Binkley 1987b:25–26).⁴

The specific feathers (*lashal*) worn by these titleholders make visible their contrasting domains of responsibility. Eagle and owl feathers, representing community and initiation chiefs respec-





tively, are thought to symbolize the differing realms of authority attributed to these titleholders. In the Southern Kuba region, eagle feathers are worn by community headmen precisely because they exercise their authority during daylight hours in the same way that eagles are seen and heard in the daytime sky. In contrast, owl feathers are worn by initiation chiefs, because owls are associated with similar powers and authority but in the forest realm and only at night (ibid., pp. 24–25).

As soon as the novices gather at the home of the *kikaam* at the beginning of the rite, elders select certain novices to hold titled positions in the forest camp.⁵ The titles and the individual responsibilities within the camp mirror in some respects the responsibilities of their counterparts on the community council. Titled novices direct the collection of raw materials needed for the fabrication of dance costumes and masquerade figures and supervise the gathering of firewood and palm wine that is consumed mostly by themselves. They also have warmer sleeping accommodations, with bedsteads set up under a roofed enclosure that is open on one side, facing fires that are kept burning throughout the night. The novices obey directions given to them by their titled superiors without hesitation or they are punished. Titled novices preside over meetings held each evening which discuss the next day's activities, and fines are levied for breaking camp rules. They also serve as spokesmen for the initia-

tion group when meetings are held with instructors and village elders. In this way those novices who hold titles and those without titles learn their respective responsibilities of either giving or following orders within the supervised camp environment (Binkley 1987b:88–90; Vansina 1955:148).

INITIATION WALL COMPLEX

The authority and prestige associated with holding a title in both the community and the forest camp is emphatically expressed by the construction of an immense initiation wall erected shortly after the establishment of the forest camp (Figs. 1–4). The wall is intended to be ephemeral—surviving for several weeks to a month or so and subsequently allowed to decompose and disintegrate following the conclusion of the rite (Binkley 1987b:90–94).

The name for the initiation wall in Kete communities is *lunda* and in Bushoong communities *mulalanci*.⁶ The term *lunda* stems from the verb *kulunda* meaning to grow or increase in size, importance or success. The wall, once constructed and displaying the masks and other sculpture created in the forest camp, is in part a visual statement announcing that initiation is nearing completion and the novices will soon return to the community to celebrate its successful conclusion and their new status as members (*babieen* and *badi*) of the initiation society (ibid., p. 90).⁷

(opposite)

5 Model of Mulwalwa mask, Kamak-
engu ka muana mask, and sculpture of
animal caught in a trap displayed on wall
at the Northern Kete community of Nsunyi
Makese.

PHOTO: CHARLES ROSS JR., NOVEMBER 1968.

(this page)

6 Model of Mulwalwa mask with a figure
of a palm nut cutter in an oil palm tree in
front of a wall at Dihaki.

PHOTO: CHARLES ROSS JR., 1968.



The wall is conceptualized as a literal and figurative point of demarcation, an emphatic boundary separating the civilized and ordered community of women and uninitiated children from the disorder and chaos of the forest world, which includes both initiated men and the novices. These metaphoric and symbolic themes of opposition run throughout Southern Kuba initiation-related oral and visual traditions.

In the nineteenth century, the wall seems to have been constructed in proximity to the residence of the initiation chief (*kikaam* or *cimikaam*), allowing him direct access to the forest camp established in a secret location some distance from the community. In addition, shortly after the onset of the colonial period, community headmen, following compulsory regulations established by the colonial administration, were required to relocate their communities to principal roads, in part so that the roads could be maintained by community residents; this and other forms of corvée labor were often completed by members of the initiation society. In addition, by the late twentieth century, Bushoong and Kete communities often do not exhibit the neat horizontal grid pattern described by late nineteenth century travelers to the region. Since that time, a number of religious movements spread into the region. Adherents to a new faith often segregated themselves spatially by establishing residences or compounds adjacent to but at oblique angles to established

Kete and Bushoong communities. As a result, any original spatial or directional orientation of the initiation wall to the community which existed has been lost. Initiated men discussing recent wall constructions describe the wall's location relative to a main road rather than to a specific side or end of the village.

The wall's construction is conceived of as a group project undertaken by the novices in collaboration with elders who instruct the novices in its fabrication. The wall is built from raffia palm fronds horizontally lashed to a grid supported by immense wooden posts set into the ground. The support posts for the wall, which may reach twenty feet in height, are made from "living trees," i.e., tree trunks that, when planted in the ground, soon take root and grow.⁸

The wall incorporates a passage or door covered with raffia fibers in such a way that its precise location is obscured. The passage facilitates movement of the novices and instructors and is the only means by which the novices may enter the community on their way to and from the forest camp. Once completed, the passageway may also be protected by an intentional hazard. One side of the passage allows unobstructed movement through the wall while on the other side a deep hole is dug. The branch of a bush placed near the entrance is tied in such a way as to nonverbally direct the novices to the correct direction/entry. This cue is a secret given to the novices participating in the rite.



After the wall is erected, objects described as ornamentation (*binhungu*) that are created by novices and their instructors in the forest camp are displayed along its top edge, principally at the summit or gables (Fig. 5). A model of an oil palm tree is often placed in front of the wall and the figure of a palm nut cutter is fabricated and placed high in the tree (Fig. 6). Other sculptural groupings may also be placed in proximity to the wall (Binkley 1987b:92–94; Vansina 1955:150–51).

Both Southern Bushoong and Northern Kete initiation walls present similar forms and meanings although some differences do exist. The elevation of *lunda* and *mulalanci* walls resemble, although on a much larger scale, a succession of gabled walls of Kuba raffia houses placed adjacent to one another (Fig. 7).⁹ In general, it seems the Kete *lunda* wall is typically longer and displays more gables—from one to as many as five are documented in photographs and illustrated in drawings of walls made by initiated men. The number of gables on the *lunda* directly relates to the number of village headman (*shanshenge*) residing in a Kete community. As Northern Kete communities may have more than one *shanshenge* and larger communities may have more, this explains differences in the number of gables for the *lunda* wall (Binkley 1987b:91).

The elevation of the Southern Bushoong *mulalanci* is more standardized than the *lunda* wall. It is composed of three gables, the central gable being somewhat taller than the other two (Fig.

(this page)

7 Decorated end wall of the guard house at the entrance to the royal enclosure, Nsheng.

PHOTO: DAVID BINKLEY AND PATRICIA DARISH, 1982.

(opposite)

8 Two instructors preparing sculpture for initiation wall at the Northern Kete community of Kasenga.

PHOTO: CHARLES ROSS JR., JULY 1969.

3).¹⁰ A tunnel is also constructed on the forest side of the wall which is hidden from public view. Rich symbolism surrounds the passage of the novices through the tunnel; the novices die as children only to be reborn as transitional beings who will be transformed into initiated youth.¹¹

THE INITIATION WALL AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION

While the initiation wall serves as a demarcation between the settled community and the untamed forest world, it also serves as a monumental schematic of the local political organization: acknowledging those key title holders who constitute the community council and those titles awarded a small number of novices in the forest camp. The support posts for the *mulalanci* erected at Mapea in 1953 were named for the titles of members



on the community council (Fig. 3) (Vansina 1955:150).¹²

While titles associated with membership on the community council may be acknowledged on the wall, research suggests that the principal support posts for the walls are for the most part named for titles given to novices who direct forest camp activities. For example, at the Kete community of Bena Nsamba (ca. 1969), a wall was erected with a single gable whose central support post, surmounted by the raffia mask Kamakengu, was designated *mukulu wa badi* (initiation elder), the honorific designation conferred upon the novice appointed as the head and chief spokesperson representing all the novices in the forest camp.¹³ In the Southern Bushoong community of Boganci-ala (ca. 1979), the nine support posts for the wall were named after titles conferred on a small number of novices who wielded authority over the untitled novices in the forest camp. The titles employed in the forest were identical to those held by members of the community council. These included titles for representatives of the right and left halves of the village (*mbeen* and *mbyeeng*) and a number of warrior titles (*iyol* and *shesh*). Thus, the prestige and status of these titleholders (from both the community and the forest camp) were emphatically affirmed on the wall (Binkley 1987b:91–92).

WALL DECORATION

After the wall is erected, rudimentary sculpture created by the novices and their instructors are displayed on it. These are described as decoration or ornamentation (*bihinga*) and include masks, models of masks, figural carvings representing various birds and animals and other objects such as animal traps (Figs. 5–6). Models of masks are wooden sculptures that resemble actual masks but are somewhat smaller in size than masks intended to be worn and are not hollowed out. Instead, a hole is made in the bottom of the model so that it can be attached to the top of the initiation wall's vertical support post.

The objects are carved from wood and combined with other materials such as hide and raffia and then painted before their placement on the wall (Fig. 8). As objects are produced in the forest camp they are added to the wall during the ensuing weeks. Accompanied by great fanfare, those novices selected to climb the wall and affix the objects to the top edge of the wall accrue prestige.

The order of objects displayed on the Bushoong *mulalanci* is more firmly established than that of those displayed on the Kete *lunda* wall. This is especially true concerning the positioning of objects on the three peaks. Models of masks usually take the principal position on the highest peaks of the wall. At the Bush-



(this page, clockwise from top left)
9 Model of Bwoom mask carved for the initiation wall at Mapea, 1953.
 H: 38.3cm (15")
 Royal Museum for Central Africa
 EO.1954.40.75.
 PHOTO: © RMCA TERVUREN

10 Sculpture of janus head carved for initiation wall at Mapea, 1953.
 H: 56.2cm (20½")
 Royal Museum for Central Africa
 EO.1954.40.76.
 PHOTO: © RMCA TERVUREN

11 Sculpture of bird made for initiation wall at Mapea, 1953.
 L: 51.2cm (20")
 Royal Museum for Central Africa
 EO.1954.40.54.
 PHOTO: © RMCA TERVUREN

(opposite)
12 Instructor helping a novice fabricate an initiation skirt from *makadi* fiber in a forest camp at the Northern Kete community of Kambash.
 PHOTO: DAVID BINKLEY, JULY 1981.



oong community of Boganciala ca. 1979, a model of a Bwoom mask was displayed on the central peak (Fig. 9). The Bwoom mask, with its pronounced forehead, large nose, and shell, bead, and metal decoration, is among the most recognized Kuba mask types. It was flanked on the two shorter peaks by a model of a Mulwalwa mask (a large brightly painted mask with pronounced conical shaped eyes resembling those of a chameleon) and on the other peak by a janus-head sculpture named *mbishi buaala boshi ikaam* (Fig. 10).¹⁴ This name refers to the proverb taught to novices: “back sickness, front problem.” The sculpture depicts a foolish individual who ignores a problem when initially confronted with it, only to find that the problem follows him and causes far more difficulty in the future. The janus-head also

underscores the power of initiated men to control both village and forest domains. When mounted on the wall, one face points toward the community while the other points toward the forest camp. The janus head thus represents those titleholders who enforce initiation rules requiring peace and tranquility in both domains, backed by sanctions and significant fines.¹⁵

Small sculptures of animals such as birds, leopards, and turtles or of other objects such as animal traps and termite mounds are positioned in locations that reinforce the emphasis on titleholding or reinforce a proverb or aphorism taught to the novices. As noted above, the display of bird feathers (*lashal*) is the prerogative of key Southern Kuba titleholders. Sculptural representations of certain birds are placed at the summit of the ver-



13 Instructor and novice painting the face of the raffia mask Kamakengu in a forest camp at Kam-bash.

PHOTO: DAVID BINKLEY, JULY 1981.

tical support posts given the names of these particular titles. For example, a guinea fowl (*numakang*) refers to two important community titleholders (*Mbambi* and *Mbengi* for Kete; *Mbeem* and *Mbyeeng* for Bushoong) who wear guinea fowl feathers in their hats (*luket*). In a similar manner, the representation of a parrot (*kos*) is placed on top of the support pole representing the *cikala*, another important titleholder, who wears a parrot feather in his hat (Fig. 11) (*ibid.*, p. 93).

COSTUMES AND MASQUERADE FIGURES

The overall visual impact of the wall, appropriating elements from the forest world, resounds with other features of initiation, including costumes, masks, and related paraphernalia. From the onset of *nkaan* and *buadi*, the novices are completely identified with the forest realm. Initiation songs and recitations describe the novices as forest animals or insects and characterize them as invisible, dead, or rotting beings—individuals not fit for community life (*ibid.*, pp. 57–67). Initiation rules dictate that, except

for certain prescribed occasions, the novices and raffia initiation masks may not reenter the community until the close of the rite. Even casual contact with women is strictly prohibited.

Initiation costumes (including long skirts, overskirts, headbands, and necklaces) that are worn by the novices and the raffia masquerade figures that are constructed entirely in the forest camp are made from the *makadi* raffia palm (Figs. 12–13). *Makadi* is a species of uncultivated raffia palm that grows wild in the region's gallery forests near lakes, rivers, and streams. It is distinct from the cultivated raffia palm (Tshiluba *mabondo* and Bushoong *mabuoon*), which provides fiber for the woven raffia squares that serve as foundation cloth for the extensive variety of decorated textiles that the Kuba are renowned for (*ibid.*, p. 58).

Prohibitions surround the use of the *makadi* raffia palm and the novices and masked figures who wear costumes made from this material. *Makadi* raffia fiber is believed to affect the health and fertility of women, especially during their childbearing years. Great care is taken to make sure that women do not come into contact with even a single leaflet from the *makadi* palm nor even a small strand that may have fallen from an initiation skirt or a masquerade figure's costume. The fear of possible harm inadvertently caused by the novices and their costumes, and

even by the *makadi* palm refuse that accumulates on the ground during the fabrication of costumes and masked figures, is one of the reasons the initiation camp and its contents are burned at the close of the rite (*ibid.*, p. 77–78). Indeed, in this case, the ephemerality of these charged materials is directly related to the well-being of the women and the uninitiated.

The costumes worn by the novices and those worn by a number of masquerade figures are composed of a two-part skirt that includes a shorter overskirt resembling a ruff worn over a knee-length skirt. When worn, the longer skirt is wrapped around the waist of each novice followed by the ruff at the waist, creating a distinctive profile that resembles that of the woven decorated skirts worn by adult initiated men (Fig. 14). However, initiation skirts are technically unsophisticated and intentionally ephemeral, as they are not woven but made from unprocessed leaflets that are simply tied to a long cord following the directions of initiation camp instructors (see Darish 1990:181).

In addition, initiation necklaces (*lundelemba*) and headbands are fabricated by each novice from *makadi* palm leaflets with attached raffia tufts (Fig. 15). The headbands worn by non-titled individuals display two or three small tufts and a small tuft is displayed on the pendant suspended from the braided necklace. Novices who have been awarded titles display three

or four significantly larger tufted adornments depending on the particular rank of the individual. The larger tufts serve to visually distinguish novices who hold titles from those who do not. Wearing their raffia costumes, novices perform to the larger community, which wins them recognition and approval from spectators, especially family members.¹⁶

Initiation costumes are temporary garments worn when each novice demonstrates his skill in a special initiation dance (*keke*) performed in a community's central dance ground. Near the end of the third and final dance marking the close of initiation, the temporary initiation costumes are discarded and replaced with the long, finely woven raffia textiles typically worn by initiated men for ceremonial occasions (Fig. 16). It is only during the concluding dance that additional masks made of wood, sculpted in the forest camp, perform together with the raffia masks (Fig. 17).

Great effort is expended during the last several weeks of the rite to produce as many masks made of wood as possible.

14 Novices wearing two-part skirts and in order of rank entering Kambash for the first community dance.
PHOTO: DAVID BINKLEY, JULY 26, 1981.





Increased prestige is accorded the initiation group who displays the most masks at the final dance of *buadi* and *nkaan*. During *buadi* at Kambash in 1981, I visited the initiation camp at Kabao several miles distant from the camp at Kambash. The novices at Kabao (numbering more than eighty) boasted that they had already created more raffia masks than Kambash and would soon produce more wooden masks and thereby gain far more status at the final dance.

The evolution from the fabrication and appearance of solely raffia masquerade figures made from the *makadi* palm at earlier dances, to the performance of masks carved from wood, is analogous to the novices discarding their quickly made raffia costumes and donning the beautifully woven textiles that vividly demonstrate the successful conclusion of the rite and their new status as full-fledged members of the men's society (compare Figs. 14 and 16). As noted earlier, the dramatic, culminating step of *buadi* and *nkaan* in many communities occurs when camp officials gather the paraphernalia made from the *makadi* palm, including the masks and costumes in the forest camp, and set it all aflame.

FROM THE TRANSITORY TO THE PERMANENT

As described at the beginning of this essay, a core and enduring value for men in Kuba culture is competition for advancement within the local political structure. This interest develops at an early age as Kuba children, especially boys, imitate adult men by creating informal groups and taking titles based on constituent membership on the local community council whose meetings are held in full public view (Binkley 2006:107–108). They witness the great care taken at council meetings to ensure that each person sits in his prescribed place and that each speaks in proper order according to his rank in the hierarchy (Binkley 1987a:78). Various elements of regalia, such as hat, feathers, or staffs, are often worn or displayed daily to acknowledge one's position within the political hierarchy.

Even though initiation rites are temporary (lasting for six weeks or so), similar deference is given to those individuals within the forest camp who hold titled positions. They receive a greater share of game caught in forest traps and receive a larger measure of palm wine tapped at night when the community is asleep. As noted, they have warmer sleeping accommodations during the cold nights in the forest camp. Titled novices also

(opposite)

15 Novices in a forest camp wearing necklaces and headbands denoting rank. Northern Kete community of Kabao.

PHOTO: DAVID BINKLEY, AUGUST 5, 1981.

(below)

16 Novices wearing woven raffia textiles for final dance concluding initiation at Kambash.

PHOTO: DAVID BINKLEY, AUGUST 15, 1981.

wear larger and more visually dramatic elements of regalia, move to the front of the line that forms as the novices enter the village to dance, announce their respective titles before speaking in prescribed order during evening meetings in the forest camp, and have the importance of their titles acknowledged before the entire community by the creation of a monumental wall. These expressed values and prerogatives, which may appear magnified during rites of passage, are analogous to the concern among Kuba men for rank and acknowledgement of achieved status in daily life.

The attention to rank and prestige, where the accumulation of prestige emblems and objects acknowledge a man's rank before his peers, stands in stark contrast to the improvisational, almost on-the-fly quality of the visual arts accompanying initiation rites. While Kuba artists are renowned for their creativity and technical virtuosity across a variety of artistic traditions, initiation-related arts emphasize the quickly made, the ephemeral, and the playful. Virtually none of the time-consuming surface decoration that is a hallmark of Kuba design is applied to

initiation arts. There is little processing of materials used in the construction of costumes nor is great care lavished on sculpture created in the camp for display on the initiation wall. Within the camp, more effort is expended by novices in mastering the esoteric lore presented by instructors—including riddles, aphorisms, and extended recitations—than is spent in the production of objects that are only designed to last until the close of the rite.

This contrasts with the extraordinary care and skill that attends most Kuba wood carving and textile production and suggests that many initiation objects are considered “first attempts” made by the novices themselves or are produced by elders within a context of instruction in this specialized activity (Figs. 8, 13). The coarse and quickly made quality of these objects fits in well with the overall temporary nature of the initiation wall and its sculpture; the objects accentuate and reinforce key elements or themes in the overall presentation but are not intended for further use or preservation. As a result, only rarely are initiation-related objects, including masks, musical instruments, costumes and other paraphernalia, found in Western collections.

The visual contrast between initiation arts that are quickly made and impermanent and those that are produced with great care and subsequently safeguarded in the lineage storehouse speaks to the differentiation in Kuba thought between the civilized world of the community, where consummate craftsmanship reigns, and that of the wild, untamed world of the forest, where the rudimentary nature of craft production is at its most elemental level.

For the most part, the visual arts of initiation are hidden from





17 The wooden masks Ngulungu and Kayeke dressed and waiting to enter Kambash for the concluding dance of initiation.

PHOTO: DAVID BINKLEY, AUGUST 15, 1981.

(the voice of the initiation mask Kamakengu) and the roar of the friction drum, a secret musical instruments that symbolizes the power of the rites by evoking the growl of a leopard.

Initiation rites are also transitory. Like childhood itself, the materials used during initiation are short lived and are intended to demonstrate the gradual acquisition of initiation lore by each novice. The construction of the immense initiation wall and its sculpture visually underscores the secret nature of the rite and the separation of the novices from the community while extolling the virtues of titleholding, including those titles held by novices during the rite. The periodic dances held in the community provide evidence that the novices made their own raffia costumes, learned the required dances, and participated in the creation of the raffia masks. The display of woven textiles worn by the newly initiated youth at the final dance, which also includes the participation of wooden masks, confirms the acquisition of this knowledge at the point when the novices are admitted as full-fledged members of the men's society. The ephemeral wall, raffia costuming, and masked figures publicly acknowledges the achievements of the novices and of those elders who participated as instructors and sponsors.

At the conclusion of the rite, the newly initiated youth take an oath promising to never divulge what they have learned in *buadi* or *nkaan*. A favorite response of Kete novices if asked even a single question by a *mushindu*, an uninitiated person, is to respond, "If you want to know about *buadi*, go and see for yourself." This reverberates with the experiential nature of Southern Kuba initiation rites, which characterize themselves as both elusive

view. Southern Kuba initiation rites themselves are rare events, with upwards of fifteen or more years between occurrences.¹⁷ Therefore, the uninitiated see little of the arts associated with initiation rites except during funeral rituals for initiated men, where a number of the visual and oral traditions associated with *buadi* and *nkaan* are reenacted. But even on these occasions, some of the activities transpire at night, as when a member of the deceased's lineage circulates in the community to extol the virtues of his deceased relative. This is accompanied by the sounds of a whistle

and all encompassing. Two phrases from a recitation accompanied by a special rattle state: "Initiation is like a rotten hanging vine. When a climber is watching the rotten part in the tree, there are thorns near the ground that can hurt him." This alerts initiated men that the acquisition of initiation lore is a life-long pursuit and even an initiated man may fall afoul of the rules if he is not vigilant. Or, "Initiation is like a cassava plant. There is food that is visible (cassava greens) and food that is hidden (cassava tubers)." This alerts the newly initiated of the all-encom-

passing nature of the knowledge available for those who aspire to acquire it. The body of initiation-related oral and visual traditions underscores the ephemeral and secret character of the rite, which can only be understood by those who have willingly accepted the challenge, undergone the rite themselves, and who, under the watchful eyes of the instructors, assume more adult responsibilities that are intended to prepare them for assuming leadership roles in the community (Binkley 1987b:115).

Thus the visual arts of initiation, like the esoteric knowledge presented during the rite, emphasize both the experiential and the ephemeral. The transient nature of their materials, the rough techniques of their production, and the potential harm that certain forest materials pose to the uninitiated reflect components

of initiation esoteric lore that juxtapose the concrete and the intangible, the permanent and the impermanent, and the visible and the invisible. In this way, ephemerality is constitutive of one of the most profound and lasting social distinctions in Kuba culture—that made between youth and maturity.

DAVID BINKLEY is an independent scholar whose doctoral research was on Kuba masking traditions associated with initiation rituals. He was Chief Curator and Senior Curator for Research and Interpretation at the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution. He was also Curator of the Arts of Africa, Oceania and the Americas at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, and Research Associate Professor at the University of Missouri, Kansas City. dabinkley@verizon.net

Notes

1 See Torday and Joyce 1910:82, 89, and Binkley 1987b: 18, n. 21, and 19, n. 23 for origins of initiation among the Kete. Emil Torday notes that initiation rites were no longer practiced at the capital when he visited Nsheng in 1906 and had not been practiced since the death of Mbop Mabiinc c. 1885 (Torday and Joyce 1910:33, 81).

2 For a discussion of *matoon* communities see Vansina 1978:139–40.

3 In Northern Kete communities, the community council is the *kibanza*.

4 *Yaal nkaan* means literally “garbage or refuse pit of *nkaan*.” It refers to the notion that all discussions involving the initiation society are not fit for public debate and must be held in secret.

5 Jan Vansina (1978:16–17) notes that, except for certain key positions, titleholding is not entirely ascriptive as “achievement mattered more than birth.” The only exceptions are “the king, ritualist, and territorial chiefs.” While I was told that novices were selected to hold titles in the forest camp according to their abilities, it seemed that the sons of senior titleholders in the community were often given titles even if they were only honorific and did not include/relate to any direct responsibilities.

6 Research in the Southern Kuba region in 1981–82 and 1989 included interviews with Bushoong, Kete, and Bulangu men who described their own initiation experiences, including the construction of initiation walls. Some initiated men made drawings of the walls constructed during their initiation. Research was supported by grants from IIE–Fulbright–Hays, Samuel H. Kress Foundation, and the Wenner–Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research.

Jan Vansina (1955) describes the form and symbolism of a wall created during an initiation he participated in at Mapea, a Southern Bushoong community which is one of ten *matoon* or royal villages located in the region.

7 I was initiated, together with twenty-seven other novices, during the dry season of 1981 in the Kete community of Kambash. Approximately one month into the initiation sequence at Kambash, there were several meetings of initiation camp titleholders to discuss the feasibility of creating an initiation wall. It was finally decided to forgo wall construction and expend the effort on producing additional wooden masks that would participate in the concluding dance celebrating the reintegration the novices into the community.

8 A Cwa initiated man noted a relationship between certain species of “living trees” utilized for the vertical support and specific titled positions in the community hierarchy.

9 Vansina (1955:150–52) refers to the peaks of the wall as “hills” and describes the symbolic meaning of this term during the initiation rites at Mapea. I found

no such corresponding tradition in the Southern Bushoong communities in which I conducted research.

10 The number three and multiples of it, especially six and nine, are important numbers in Southern Kuba thought. For example, during initiation at Kambash, an initiated man would pass through three raffia barriers to enter the forest camp; there were three dances in the community, the last dance coinciding with the close of initiation; and three female raffia masquerade figures (Kamakengu) were made which represented the three wives of the principal initiation mask Munyinga. Further elaboration on make and female raffia masks can be found in Binkley 1987b, 1990, 1996.

11 See Torday and Joyce 1910:82–85, Torday 1925:185–91, and Vansina 1955:141–42, 147–48 for discussion of the initiation tunnel.

12 Mapea was not the only instance where the support posts of the *lunda* wall were named for important community leaders. At the Bulungu community of Kapimbi, the central post of the wall erected c. 1978 was given the name *nyinimwaan*, the title of the chief or headman of the Cwa section of the community who directs the men’s initiation society (Binkley 1987b:96, n. 10).

13 The head novice during *buadi* at Kambash was also given the title *mukulu wa badi*. He was among the three oldest novices (in his late twenties) and was the son of a *shanshenge*.

14 See the photograph of a Bwoom mask in Verswijver et al. 1995:158 and the photograph of a Northern Kete Mulwalwa mask in Beumers and Koloss 1992:141, which is wrongly attributed to the Binji.

15 Vansina (1955:150) refers to a janus-like mask called Kaloongoalong mounted on the wall at Mapea. In this instance it is described as overseeing adherence to initiation rules in both the community and the forest camp.

16 The novices who hold titles in the camp are arranged according to rank when they enter the community and when they perform their *keke* dance before the spectators.

17 Southern Kuba initiation rites take place only once in each Bushoong community during the reign of a Kuba *nyim* and in Kete communities during the period in office of a *shanshenge*. This explains the large differences in ages of the novices taking part. At Kambash novices ranged in age for approximately twelve to almost thirty years of age.

References Cited

- Beumers, Ema, and Hans-Joachim Koloss, eds. 1992. *Kings of Africa: Art and Authority in Central Africa*. Collection Museum für Völkerkunde Berlin. Utrecht: Foundations Kings of Africa.
- Binkley, David A. 1987a. “Avatar of Power: Southern

Kuba Masquerade Figures in a Funerary Context.” *Africa* 57 (1):75–97.

_____. 1987b. A View from the Forest: The Power of Masks in Southern Kuba Initiation Rituals. Ph.D. thesis, Indiana University.

_____. 1990. “Masks, Space, and Gender in Southern Kuba Initiation Ritual.” *Iowa Studies in African Art* 3:157–76.

_____. 1993. “The Teeth of the Nyim: The Elephant and Ivory in Kuba Art.” In *Elephant: The Animal and its Ivory in African Art*, ed. Doran H. Ross, pp. 276–91. Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History.

_____. 1996. “Bounce the Baby: Masks, Fertility, and the Authority of Esoteric Knowledge in Northern Kete Initiation Rituals.” *Elvehjem Museum of Art (Madison WI) bulletin/annual report 1993/1995:45–56*.

_____. 2006. “From Grasshoppers to Babende: The Socialization of Northern Kete Boys to Masquerade.” In *Playful Performers: African Children’s Masquerades*, eds. Simon Ottenberg and David Binkley, pp. 105–115. Edison NJ: Transaction Publishers, Rutgers University.

Cornet, Joseph. 1982. *Art royal Kuba*. Milan: Sipiell.

Darish, Patricia J. and David A. Binkley. 1995. “Head-dresses and Titleholding Among the Kuba.” In *Crowning Achievements: African Arts of Dressing the Head*, eds. Mary Jo Arnoldi and Christine Mullen Kreamer, pp. 158–69, 182–83. Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History.

Darish, Patricia J. 1990. “Dressing for Success: Ritual Occasions for Ceremonial Raffia Dress among the Kuba of South-Central Zaire.” *Iowa Studies in African Art* 3:179–91.

Torday, Emil. 1925. *On the Trail of the Bushongo*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott.

Torday, Emil, and T.A. Joyce. 1910. *Notes ethnographique sur les peuples communément appelés Bakuba, ainsi que sur les peuplades apparentées les Bushongo*. Annales du Musée du Congo Belge: Ethnographie, anthropologie, sér.3, documents ethnographiques concernant les populations du Congo belge. Brussels: Ministère des colonies: en vente chez Falk fils

Vansina, Jan. 1978. *The Children of Woot: A History of the Kuba Peoples*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

_____. 1955. “Initiation Rituals of the Bushong.” *Africa* 25:138–153.

Verswijver, Gustaav, Els De Palmenaer, Viviane Baeke, Anne-Marie Bouttiaux-Ndiaye, eds. 1995. *Treasures from the Africa-Museum Tervuren*. Tervuren: Musée royal de l’Afrique centrale.