

Cup

circa 1890

Kuba peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo

wood, copper, and cowrie shells

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This wooden cup is known as *mbwoong ntey* by the Kuba peoples who created it. The Kuba kingdom is located in the now Democratic Republic of Congo in Central Africa. This society is hierarchical with the *nyimi*, or “king,” at the top. Around the king is the royal court from the Bushoong group. This group selects the king and is an intermediary between the king and people, protecting the people from the King’s power.

These cups play an important role in Kuba culture. Owners of these cups use them to drink palm wine at social events and to communicate prestige. The motifs and materials used on the cup communicate to others the power and wealth held by the owner. This cup has cowrie shells inlaid in the handle and at the hairline. Cowrie shells are a common motif that the Kuba use to display wealth.

The intricately carved hair in this piece is indicative of the Bushoong hairstyle for men, where shaved heads are common. Many cups like this have human features carved within. Many were created between the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

This cup and the Kuba kingdom help refute the stereotype that Africa is a country. This stereotype is rooted in the idea that all of Africa is the same and therefore Africa contains homogenous cultures. The Kuba culture demonstrates that there are different sub-ethnicities through differences within their art.

written by **Nate Arringdale**