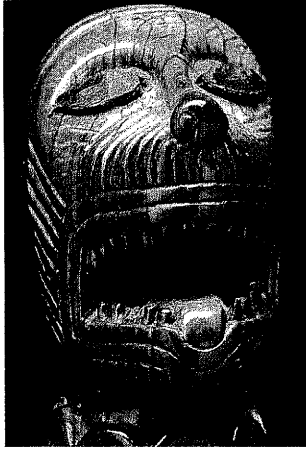


## FIVE



159. Kuba-Bushoong (Dem. Rep. of Congo). King Kot a-Mbweky III in his royal attire, 1971.

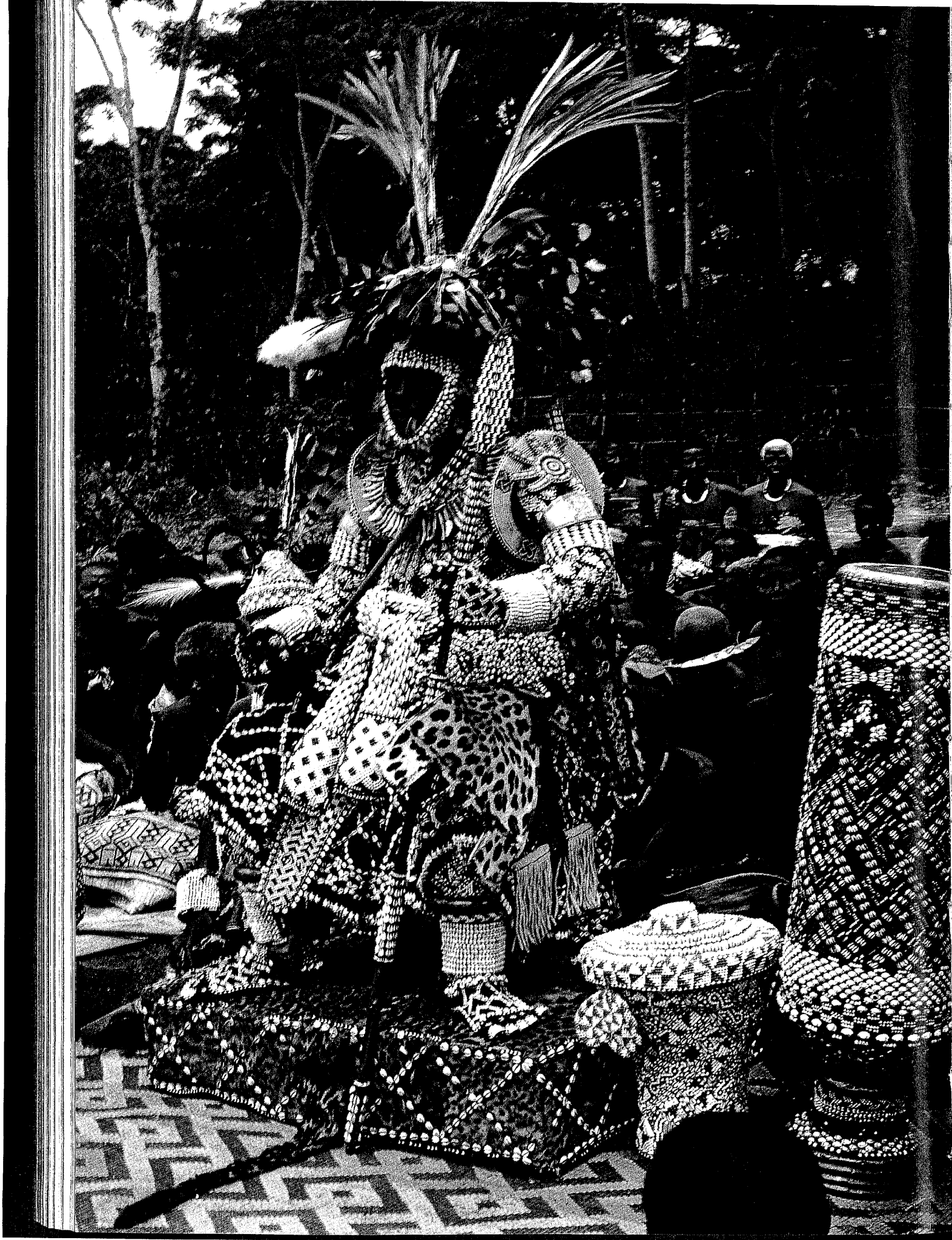
At the center of the royal headdress (and those of other regional rulers) a shell spiral (*myuush*) is displayed to symbolize authority, chieftaincy, and power. The concentric circle design worn on the king's shoulders is said to allude to a gourd stopper to keep the king's spiritual essence from leaving. Another important feature of regalia is the carapace of a weevil secured in a decorative oval surround. This insect alludes to the sacrosanct nature of the dynasty since the term for weevil (*ntshyeem*) is also the name for the supreme deity.

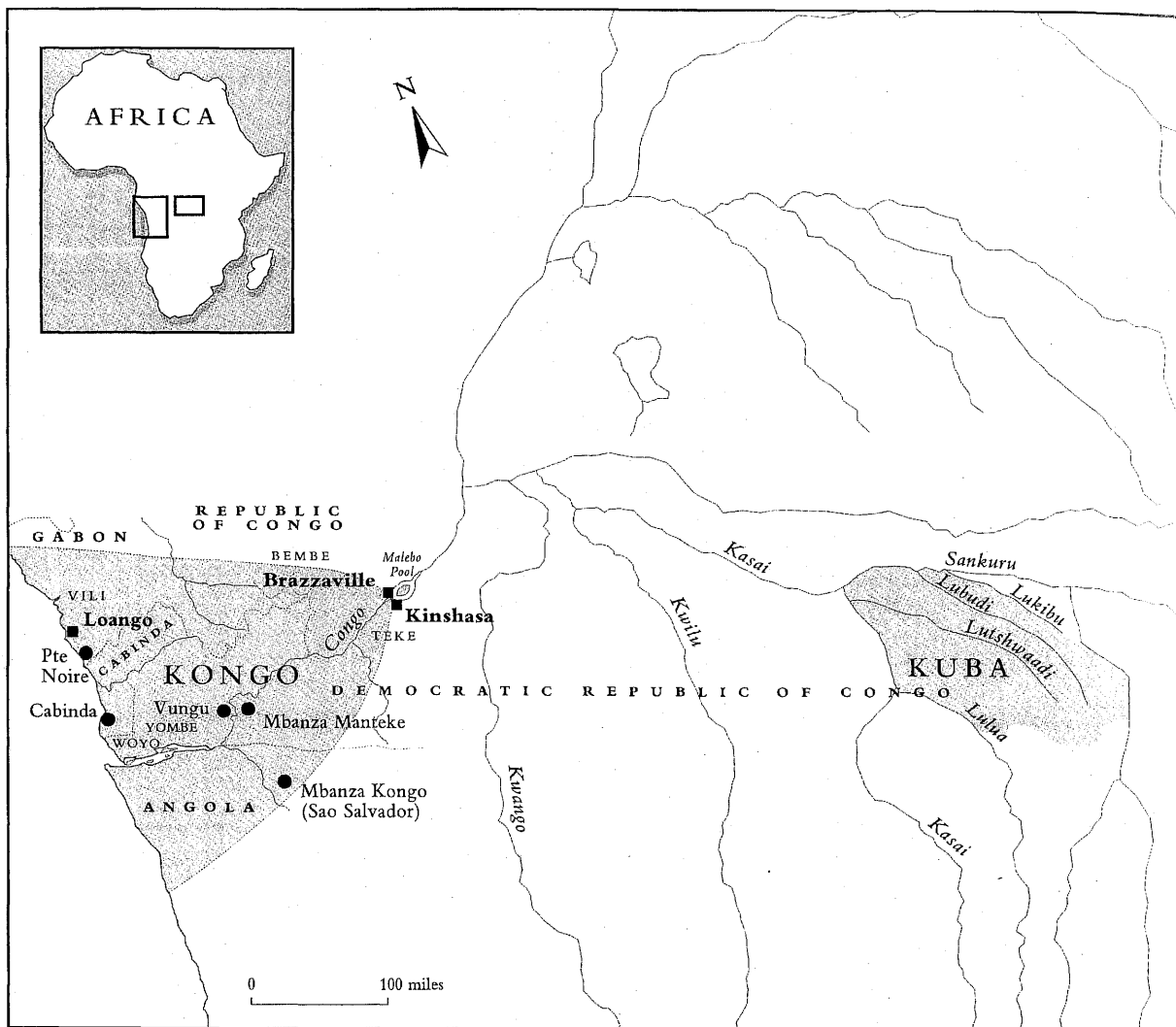
# *Kongo and Kuba: The Art of Rulership Display*

## THE KONGO KINGDOM

The powerful kingdom of the Kongo, founded by a hunter named Nimi a Lukeni perhaps as early as 1400, had its hilltop capital at Mbanza Kongo (now in Angola; FIG. 160). In 1556 the Kongo was described by Camões as “the greatest of kingdoms” of Africa’s west coast. Known for its beautiful ivories, sumptuous textiles, powerful sovereigns, and its well-organized state structure, the Kongo retained its symbolic importance long after it had lost its identity as a unified state in the eighteenth century. The kingdom of the Kuba, which developed to the east in the savanna-forest area of the Democratic Republic of Congo, east of the Kongo states, not only was a much smaller polity, but also was still a thriving monarchy when it was first visited and described by Westerners at the end of the nineteenth century. These two kingdoms, though distinct culturally and politically, display royal artistic idioms which in certain ways are complementary.

At its height, the Kongo kingdom was vast, spanning between 50,000 and 115,000 square miles (130,000 and 300,000 sq. km), its economy based on a complex system of exchange between the coast, the interior, the equatorial forests to the north, and the broad savanna plains to the south. Today, the affiliated cultures – not only the Kongo but also the related subdivisions of the Sundi, Yombe, Bwende, Vili, Woyo, Lwangu, Kunyi, Mbata, Kamba, Nkenge, Boma, and Bembe among others – live in the modern



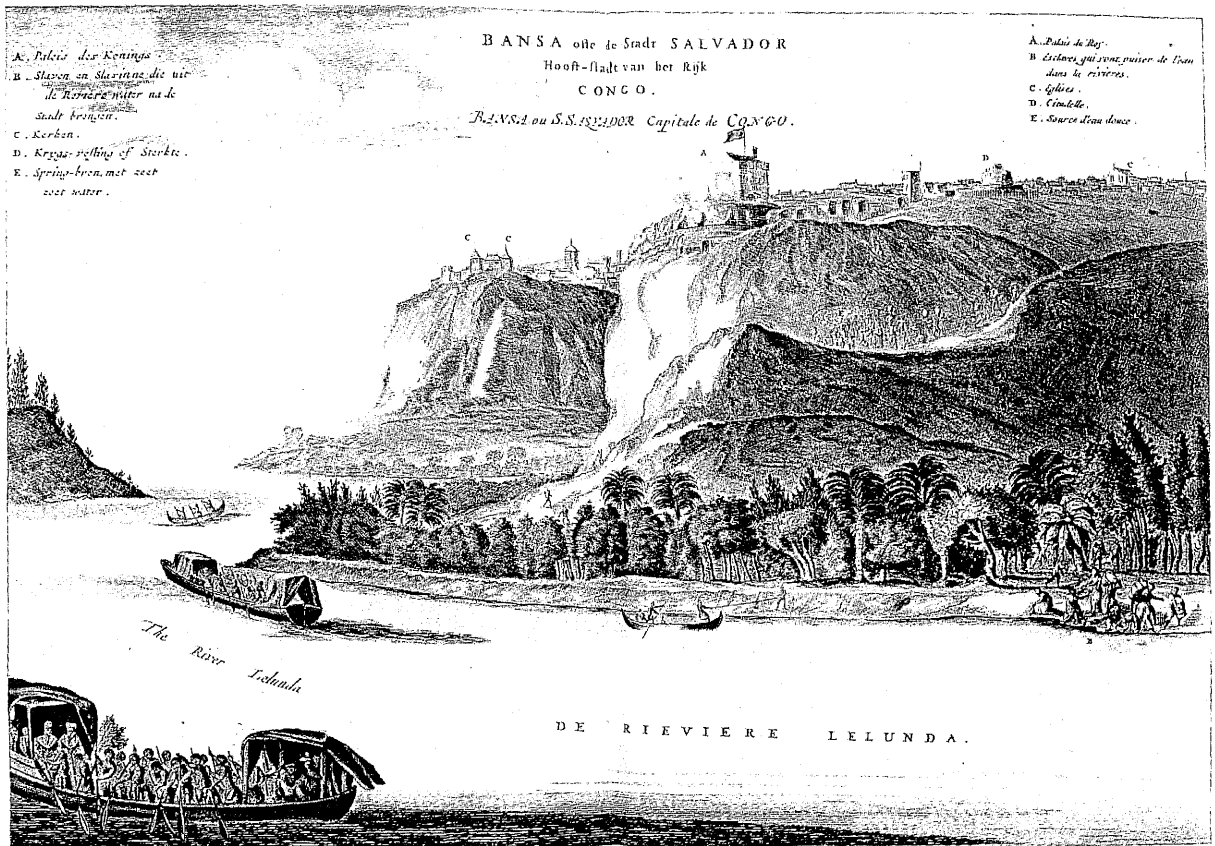


KINGDOMS OF KONGO  
AND KUBA

nation states of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, Republic of Congo, Cabinda, and Gabon. Despite periods of declining political authority and changing social factors, the Kongo sub-areas share important art and cultural traditions.

### *The Architecture of the Capital: Framing Time and Place*

One of the many shared beliefs in the Kongo concerned the world of the dead. It was widely held that after leaving the earth, a person who died would travel across a great body of water to reach the place of the ancestors, an area submerged in the water beneath the earth. Conversely, the residence of the Kongo king was positioned at the top of the highest mountain in the realm, where the humid equatorial climate was somewhat tempered by cooling breezes. With its two to three million inhabitants, the capital city of Mbanza Kongo (*mbanza* means residence of the king) was a royal center of striking visual interest.

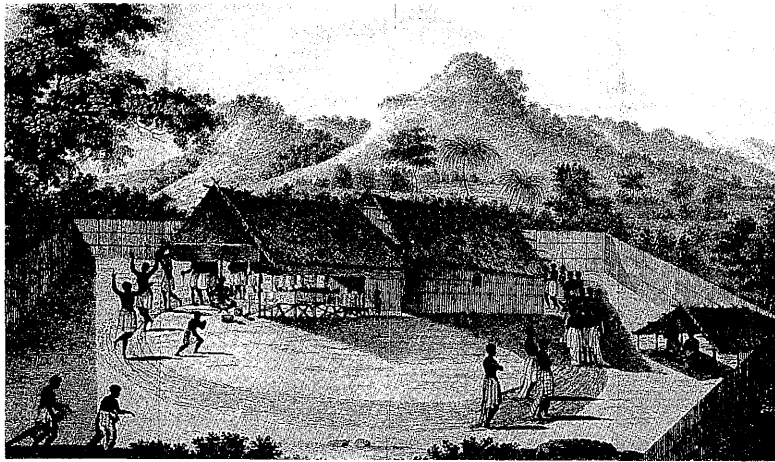


In addition to royal residences, Mbanza Kongo (which was renamed Sao Salvador by the Portuguese) also included a forested hilltop cemetery where former kings were buried. On the south side of the palace was a large square where people gathered to honor the king and to attend various dances or military reviews. Justice, a central component of Kongo society, was dispensed within a special royal court called the *mabazi a mambu* (*mambu*, “argument”). By the end of the sixteenth century, a separate quarter for the Portuguese had been established in Mbanza Kongo along with a number of churches; by 1665, internal conflict, invasions, and increased Portuguese intervention in the area resulted in the fragmentation of the kingdom and the abandonment of its capital. The memory of this ancient religious and political center nonetheless remained strong.

Security was an important concern at Mbanza Kongo as well as at regional chieftaincy centers. Not only were most towns built on hills or away from the main roads, but in the capitals, guards and trumpeters marked the gates. And, according to Cuvelier’s description of Mbanza Kongo, straight lines of access were avoided in favor of maze-like roads running in all directions; while a mass of plants and trees surrounded key residences to hide them. These trees also had important economic and ritual functions.

160. Kongo (Angola). View of the royal capital of Mbanza Kongo (known to the Portuguese as Sao Salvador), published in Olfert Dapper’s *Description de l’Afrique*, 1686.

The Kongo royal house, built at the apex of the mountain here, served as a potent center from which the king could address social and religious concerns. Because of his role in promoting births through his ties to the ancestors, one of the king’s many titles was Matombola, the “one who summons spirits from the land of the dead.” This illustration well conveys the importance of height in royal architectural planning.



161. Kongo (Cabinda). The house and funeral of the court minister of commerce, the Ma-Kayi, of Cabinda, c. 1787, from L. Degrandpré's *Voyage à la Côte Occidentale d'Afrique Fait dans les Années 1786 et 1787*.

Fences or screens (called *lumbu*) of poplar and other trees delimited the external spaces of palaces and the homes of provincial governors and dignitaries. Indeed, the term for the royal court (*luumbo*) takes its name from these screens. The house of a high-ranking individual became that person's tomb, for which a *lumbu* fence served as a boundary marker separating the house-tomb from the land which surrounded it, as here in a 1787 engraving showing the funeral of a powerful local minister of commerce, the Ma-Kayi of Cabinda. Over the years trees would cover the entire area of an abandoned site, eventually transforming it back to forest.

Among the more widespread were figs (*figus*, linked to fertility and hence propagated in every new village), palm trees (an important source for cooking oil, textiles, cosmetics, and wine), and various medicinal plants ("male" species being planted on one side of the town, "female" on the other). Scale and distance from the palace defined social status, with the most important dig-

nitaries living nearest the palace. Among the many residents were the sons of Kongo nobility from around the kingdom who came to the capital in order to learn about judicial procedures, public affairs, court etiquette, and military arts.

Royal residences like most other domestic structures in the Kongo were rectilinear (FIG. 161). Traditionally, the roofs and walls were made of woven raffia palm which covered a substructure of poles. Architectural construction in this way shared key attributes of both basketry and weaving with the verb *tunga* meaning at once "to build" and "to weave." Entire houses could be disassembled and reassembled on relatively short notice, for example when a prince was traveling. Although made of similar materials to commoner houses, the residences of nobility were distinguished by their increased height and more solid construction. Beautifully interwoven designs often marked the gable ends. Carved support poles and elaborate wall paintings or matting sometimes embellished the interiors and sleeping areas of princely houses.

### *Kongo Kings as Leopards: Rulers of the Forest*

The ever dangerous king of the forest, the leopard, was the most important symbol of Kongo royal authority and military might, signifying the real and sacred violence associated with rulership. Like the leopard, the king had the power to take human life, most importantly in war and by capital punishment. Human and leopard attributes are joined in royal staffs such as the Yombe ivory staff, cane, or fly-whisk top (FIG. 162). Both the king's real and potential danger are suggested by this open-maw feline. The inlaid eyes allude to the ruler's physical and metaphysical power, and royal prestige is conveyed through the cowrie necklace, a reference to wealth. The bracelet carved in relief on the

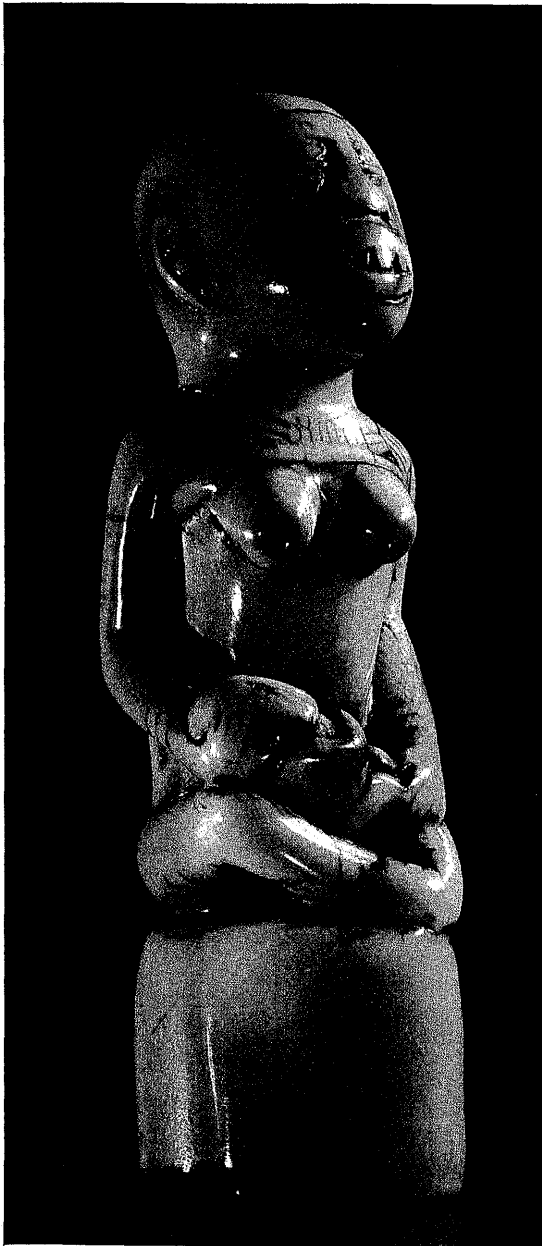
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162. Yombe (Dem. Rep. of Congo). A cane finial in the form of a human-leopard, nineteenth–twentieth century. Ivory, height 17¾" (19.6 cm). Former collection of Paul Tishman.

The leopard's snarling jaws, prominent fangs, and protruding tongue suggest royal force as being ready to devour (stop) any and all opposition. The ivory from which it is made also suggests power, for elephants (the source of ivory) are at once large, dangerous, and linked to plenty.



163. Kongo (Dem. Rep. of Congo). An ivory staff finial, nineteenth–twentieth century. Height c. 15" (c. 5.9 cm). Schindler Collection, New York. A seated mother and child surmount this royal staff finial. Women as founders of the lineage in the matrilineal Kongo society were frequently depicted in royal staff finials as symbols of the polity.

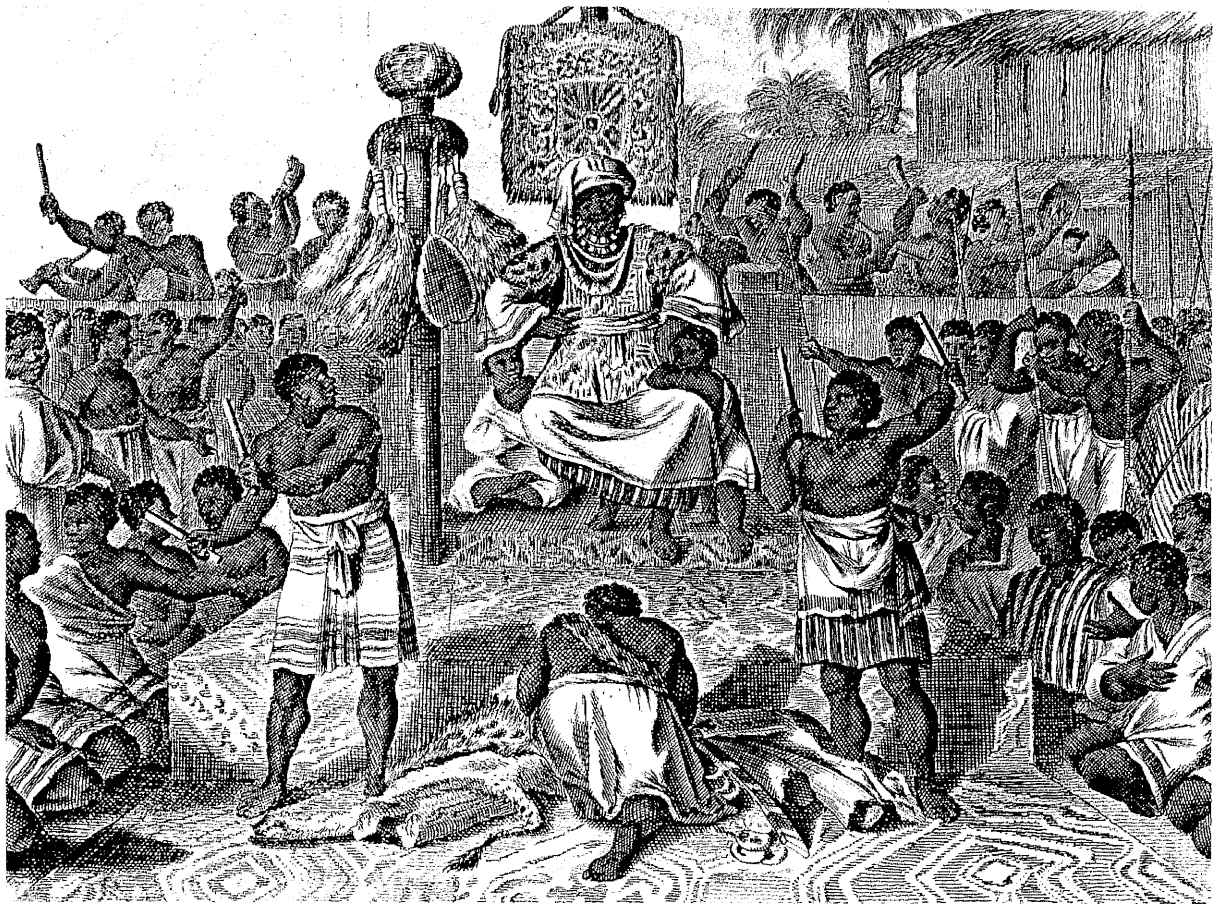


figure's two wrists suggest the iron bracelets commonly worn by kings.

Elite cane finials (such as this and FIG. 163) complement in certain respects Kongo royal staffs known as *mvwala*; such objects draw on the power of the earth and the ancestors to aid the ruler in governance. When the chief placed the staff in the ground, those around him became quiet, a sign of his authority and control over occult forces. The pointed iron shaft of the *mvwala* reinforced the close ties between kingship, smithing arts, and ideas of penetrating the earth to gain access to the power and knowledge of those now dead. The staffs were primarily used in judicial proceedings and in ceremonies for rain and investiture.

From the inception of the kingdom, Kongo royalty were linked with the arts of smithing: the sounds of smithies and foundries were especially audible in and around the capital, as iron was being shaped into hoes, axes, and weapons; the strength of the Kongo kingdom was compared to iron, with both chiefs and smiths undergoing similar initiations; and before building any new royal residence, a smith purified and protected the site with forge water and blasts from his bellows.

An illustration of a Loango king from the coastal area published by Olfert Dapper in 1668 (FIG. 164) shows prominent Kongo regalia symbols of authority and power. In this engraving the king wears a leopard skin over a cloth garment and a cap crown (*mpu*); he sits on a special fabric-covered box throne, so that he can be seen clearly by all in attendance. Similar box thrones (which also contained royal relics) are depicted in many forms of Kongo sculpture. The king's throne rests on locally manufactured textile mats, in accordance with the tradition that rulers should not touch the ground. *Lumbu* mat screens also demark the space. An animal-skin banner is positioned behind the king's head and fly whisks made of the tails of buffalo and other powerful animals hang from a standard to his right. In front of the king a man prostrates himself on yet another leopard skin, which covers several elephant tusks. Standing nearby are guards and an escort of musicians, who play bells, ivory trumpets, and drums.



### *Early Missionary Contacts: Kongo Crosses and Saint Figures*

Following the conversion of local kings and dignitaries to Christianity by the Portuguese beginning in the fifteenth century, the cross – a prominent indigenous symbol of transition between earthly and otherworldly realms – took on new meaning. Christian icons such as crucifixes (*kuluzu*, *klistu*, or *nkangi*; FIG. 165) and saint sculptures (*santu*) were used for both political and spiritual purposes. Kongo rulers, as the earthly representatives of the sky god Nzambi Mpungu, employed Christian arts as another, potentially more direct, route of contacting both gods and ancestors. In keeping with this, on visits to the graves of the royal dead, the crosses were washed in sacred palm wine and presented to the people. Indigenous and Christian crosses in this way marked the sacred locus where humans and spirits came together in ritual and prayer. Cruciform icons were used in judicial decisions, rainmaking, and as talismans to assure favorable outcomes, in the last case for such activities as hunting, conception, and travel.

The Kongo linking of Christian ritual with power is evident in the arts of religious revitalization movements. In the early

164. Loango (Dem. Rep. of Congo). The king and his court, c. 1668, published in Olfert Dapper's *Déscription de L'Afrique*, 1686.

While most of the royal symbols in this illustration are indigenous, Kongo regalia early on incorporated a range of Portuguese and other European elements. These include crowns, chairs, candelabra and textiles.



165. Vili (Dem. Rep. of Congo). A crucifixion plaque, from the Loango area of Pointe Noire, collected in 1874. Ivory, 3¼ x 2¼" (8.5 x 5.5 cm). Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin.

Kongo crucifixes, while based on Portuguese models, show indigenous attributes in the treatment of the hair, physiognomy, and body type, as well as in the deeply cut eyes and navel. Here, the linear pattern of the hair, which is draped behind the ears, and the long flowing beard recall local coiffure traditions. The beard in particular is a sign of eldership, high status, and the transmission of wisdom. The prominent demarcation line between Jesus' face and coiffure complements the forehead bands worn by Kongo nobility as a symbol of authority and wisdom, and to beautify the face by visually shortening and rounding it. The textile wrapper worn by Jesus recalls the royal manner of wearing cloth. The two subsidiary kneeling figures who hold this garment are presented in the Kongo pose of respect, alluding to the tradition of kneeling upon entering or leaving the enclosure of an important person. In raising their hands to touch the cloth of Jesus, they draw our attention to the importance of textiles as Kongo symbols of wealth, status, and regeneration.



years of the eighteenth century, a young Kongo princess named Kimpa Vita promoted a new form of Christianity in order to bring the Kongo kingdom back into prominence after a long period of disintegration. Under the baptismal name of Dona Beatriz, Kimpa Vita began a religious and political movement later called Antonianism. This sect was focused on St. Anthony of Padua (1195–1231; a Portuguese-born saint) as both intercessor and the source of Kongo salvation. St. Anthony in his role as the traditional protector of children and mothers no doubt had special

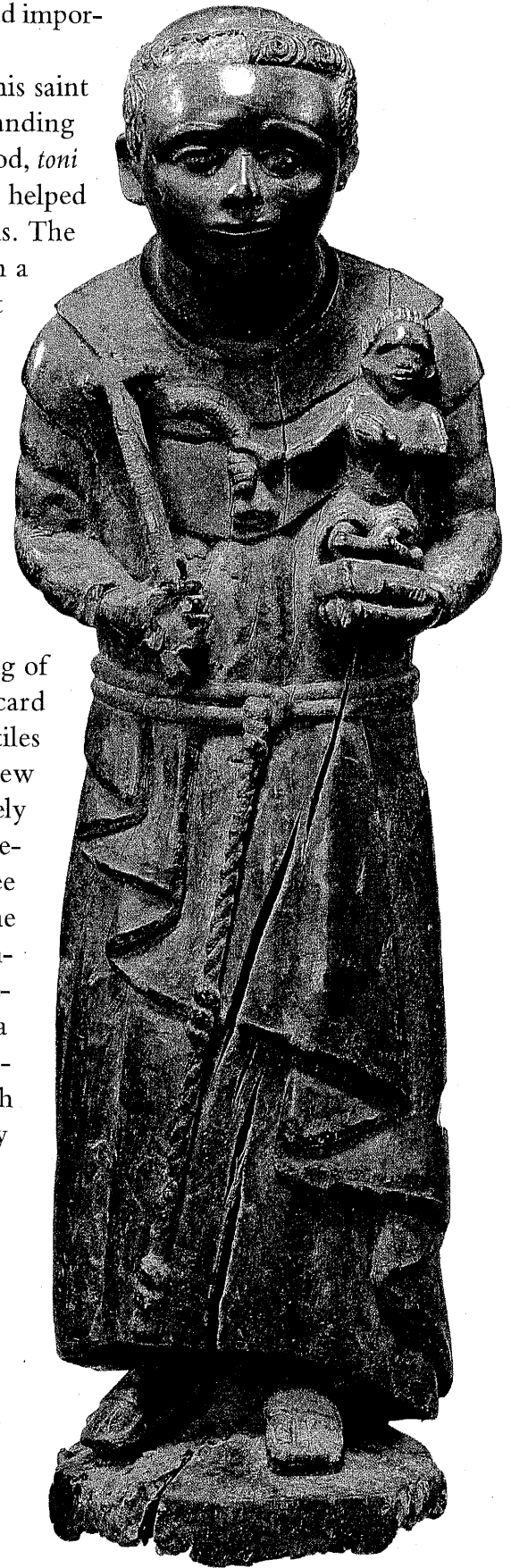
saliency in the Kongo where themes of motherhood had important religious and political significance.

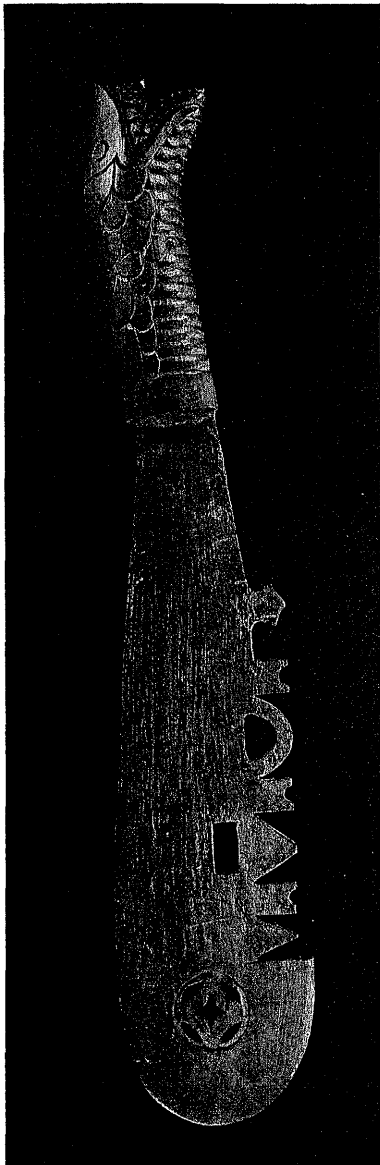
Kongo images of St. Anthony (FIG. 166) show this saint carrying a cross in his right hand and a seated or standing infant Jesus in his left. Made out of ivory, brass, or wood, *toni malau*, as these Kongo personal guardians were called, helped to safeguard users from ill health and other problems. The figure of Jesus carried by St. Anthony is seated on a box throne, similar to those used in royal Kongo art and ceremonies (see FIG. 164); this replaces the book that supports Jesus in European versions. The asymmetrical posture of Jesus, the left foot positioned above the right, is also characteristic of Kongo art. In his right hand Jesus holds a royal fly whisk, and his other hand crosses over to touch his shoulder, a place where medicine bundles were sometimes secured.

These sculptures complement the role of Kimpa Vita in promoting the reunification and strengthening of the Kongo. Kimpa Vita asked her followers to discard imported cloth and to wear indigenous fig-bark textiles to promote fertility and well-being. Predicting a new golden age, she called for a rebuilding of the then largely abandoned capital of Mbanza Kongo, hoping to recreate there a revitalized civilization that would be free of discord. Yet Kimpa Vita was opposed by both the local nobility and the Christian church and was eventually burned at the stake for heresy. Her efforts nonetheless did bring about a certain resettlement of Mbanza Kongo, a renewed interest in local textiles, and a short-lived reunification of the Kongo kingdom – which required an army of 20,000 soldiers to suppress her many followers.

166. Kongo (Dem. Rep. of Congo). A figure of St. Anthony with Christchild, possibly nineteenth century. Wood, height 20½" (51 cm). Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin.

St. Anthony's face has been smoothed with red palm oil, in conformity with local cosmetic practice. The wide religious shawl around St. Anthony's neck suggests the special net capes that were worn by Kongo nobles. The cross in his right hand is similar in shape to the iron swords (modeled on sixteenth-century Portuguese types) that served as Kongo political symbols. Dancers in ceremonies to renew allegiance to the king and his governors brandished these swords.

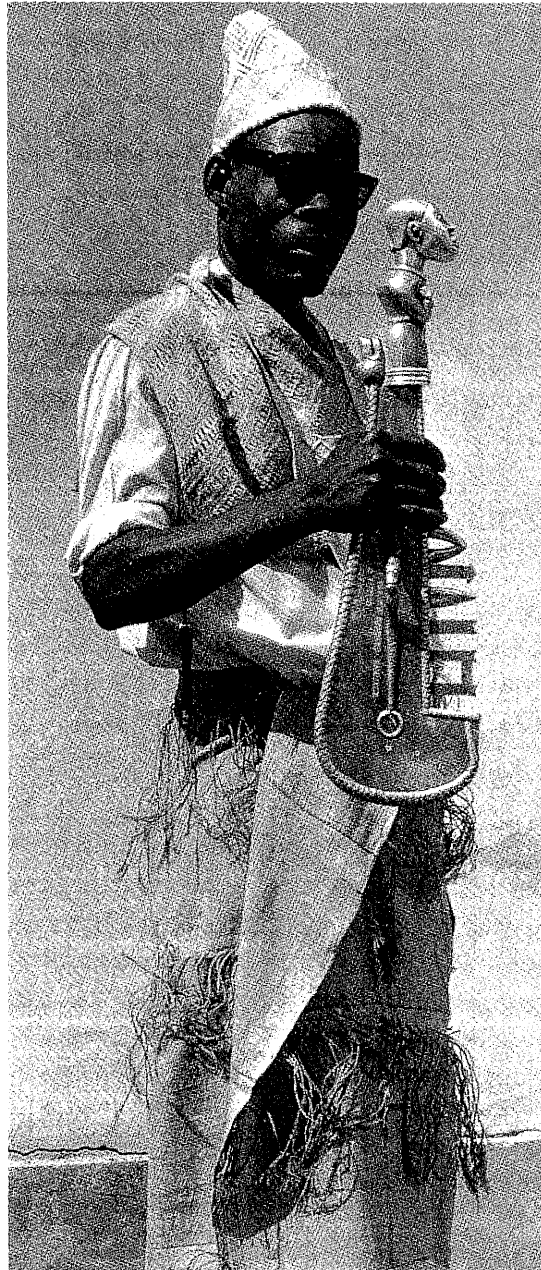




**Left**

167. Woyo (Angola). A chieftain's knife (*cimpaba*), collected in 1878. Wood, length 20 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (53 cm). Sociedade de Geografia, Lisbon.

The articulated blade of the *cimpaba* shows a range of chiefly symbols: on the tip is a circular design punctuated by four outer shapes and a central hole, a widespread symbol of chieftaincy in its broadest sense of comprising both the ruler and his people. This meaning is partly supported by the identification of similar motifs as signifying the four corners of the chief's domain. Lightly incised in many *cimpaba* blades are other symbols of political power, including radiating stars (the chief as the light of his people), concentric circles (among the Woyo suggesting generational succession, with the ancestors at the center), and triangles (referring to the ruler and to death).



**Right**

168. Woyo (Angola). A chief holding his silver *cimpaba*, twentieth century. This knife, closely modeled on local knives, was given to a Woyo chief by the Portuguese king Dom Carlos at the end of the nineteenth century. Other royal signifiers are the chief's textile cap and his woven cape and wrapper.

## The Language of Royal Knife Scepters and Vessels

One of the most important forms of regalia in the coastal Woyo area of the Kongo consists of elaborate knife scepters called *cimpaba* (or *tshimphaaba*; FIGS 167 and 168). At one time these knives were the most precious objects in a ruler's possession. Their ivory or wooden handles incorporate images of female lineage founders and serpents, both of which allude to royal succession and regeneration. As markers of authority and judicial process, *cimpaba* knives are complemented by the Woyo tradition of carving the lids of serving vessels (*taampha*) with icons of cultural and political importance (FIG. 169) symbolizing, among other things, the power of the ruler. Similar vessel tops incorporating proverb images were used by women to transmit messages to their husbands about social concerns and family problems.

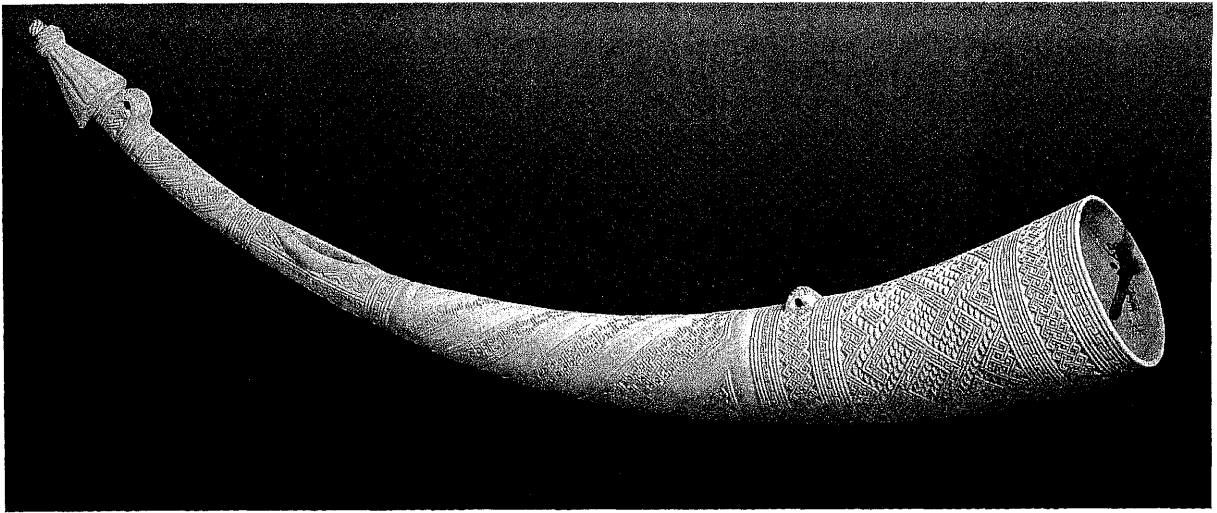
### Ancestral Music and Horns of Ivory

Among the earliest objects sent by the Kongo king to the king of Portugal in the early sixteenth century were horns of carved elephant tusk (called *mpungi*; FIG. 170); they were played at court and were placed on royal graves. They were also sounded in war, both as signals to the warriors and as a means of calling up supernatural aid in this dangerous endeavor. A chronicle written in 1491 on the occasion of a Portuguese missionary expedition to the Kongo provides insight into the early use of these royal ivory horns. According to Cuvelier's account of this source, when the Portuguese arrived, a group of local musicians played ivory trumpets in order to "sing the praises of the king of Portugal and the great ones; "produce[ing] a sound so melancholy that its like has never been heard." These Kongo horn players, naked to the waist and their bodies painted white in memory of the ancestors, repeated their song twelve times in order to honor the twelve generations of kings since the kingdom's inception. As this concert reveals, the early Kongo thought of the Portuguese as voyagers from the land of the dead, with the Portuguese king assuming the part of the Kongo ruler's otherworldly complement. As musical instruments whose notes were believed to be understood by the dead, these beautiful ivory horns offer insight into the ritual importance of court music.



169. Woyo (Angola). The lid of a royal serving vessel, nineteenth or twentieth century. Wood, diameter 7" (18 cm). Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal, The Netherlands.

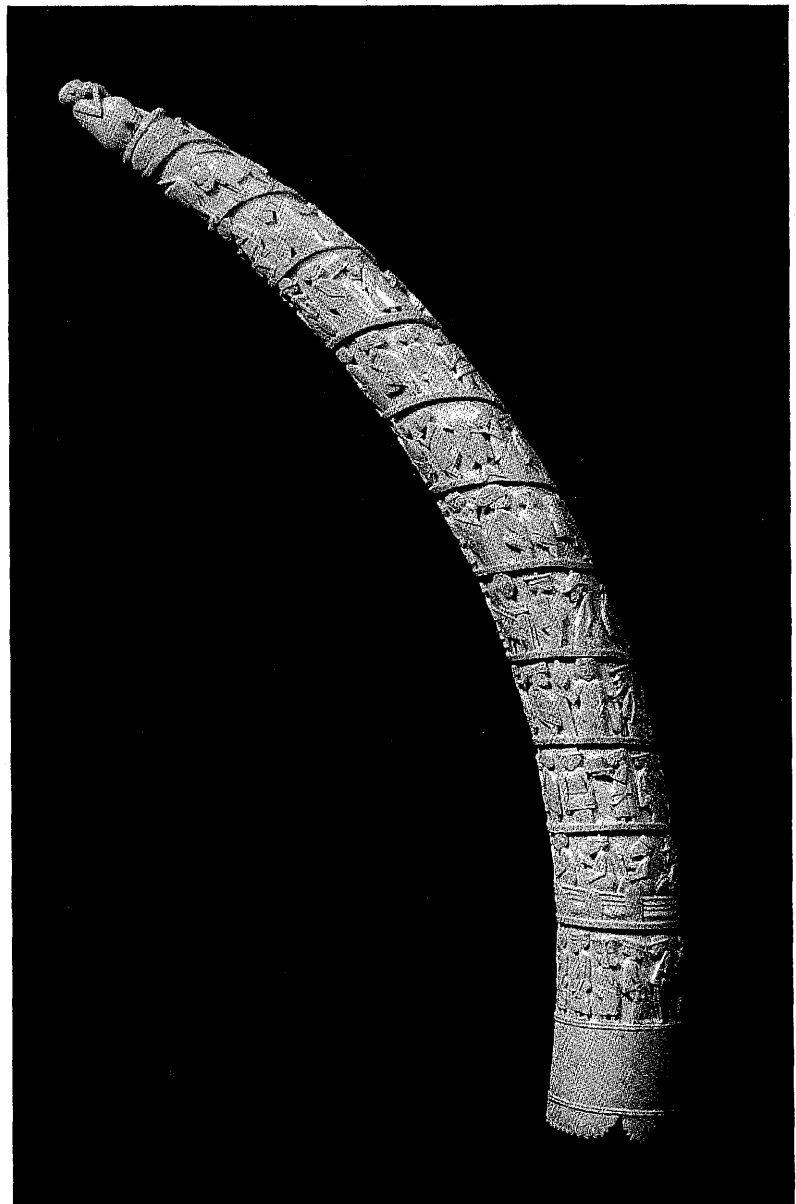
The motifs incorporated into the vessel lid all serve to reinforce the status of the ruler. In the center is a double gong (compare FIG. 17) which symbolizes royal authority. Starting with the cross and moving clockwise are portrayed the following objects: the bellows of a forge, a weapon, two shells, a seed, the moon and sun, a chief's knife (see FIG. 167) a drum, a seed, and a forked stick. The forge and weapon indicate the links between royalty and ironworking, and drums refer to the authoritative voice of the ruler because they were used in court announcements.



**Above**

170. Kongo (Dem. Rep. of Congo). An ivory horn, collected before 1553. Length 32½" (83 cm). Museo degli Argenti, Florence.

In this and other early Kongo horns, several features stand out, particularly the framing devices, which recall the architectural and ritual importance of woven *lumbu* fences; and the compositional use of an open spiral or serpentine form, suggesting perhaps the winding route to the world of the ancestors. In certain ceremonies, the horns were used to call up important ancestors in the royal line. When the horns were portrayed in other arts, such as royal vessel lids (see FIG. 169), they are said to indicate that the king is all-knowing.





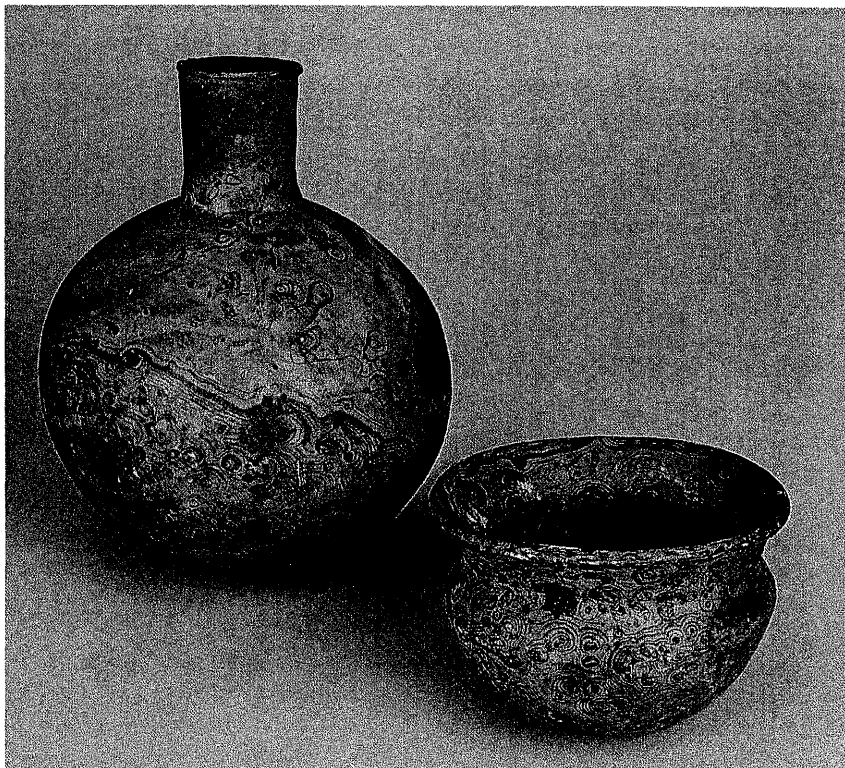
**Left and above**

171 and 172. Loango/Kongo (Cabinda/Dem. Rep. of Congo). A souvenir, ivory, collected in 1914. Length 27" (68.5 cm). Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde, Munich.

A range of individuals, both local and foreign, are represented here. Together they suggest an *imago mundi* (world view) in this colonial Kongo setting. In the bottom register, a woman carries a produce-filled basket on her head as two formally attired Europeans (perhaps a trader and a missionary) converse. In the scene above a European colonial officer in a pith helmet is transported upstream in a long canoe by local oarsmen. Moving higher, we see other activities and interactions involving Africans and Europeans, including the transportation of elephant tusks and huge fish. Near the top are several scenes of elegantly attired women with bolts of cloth. At the summit, a lively group of animals surveys the scene under the weight of a monkey who eats an ear of corn. The rotund and somewhat comical monkey is an appropriate cap to the tableau, pointing up the forces of economic consumption (and, indeed, sometimes gluttony) that shaped the Kongo world at this time.

173. Kongo (Dem. Rep. of Congo). Terracotta vessels, collected c. 1910. Fired clay, heights 9½ and 4¼" (24 and 11 cm). British Museum, London.

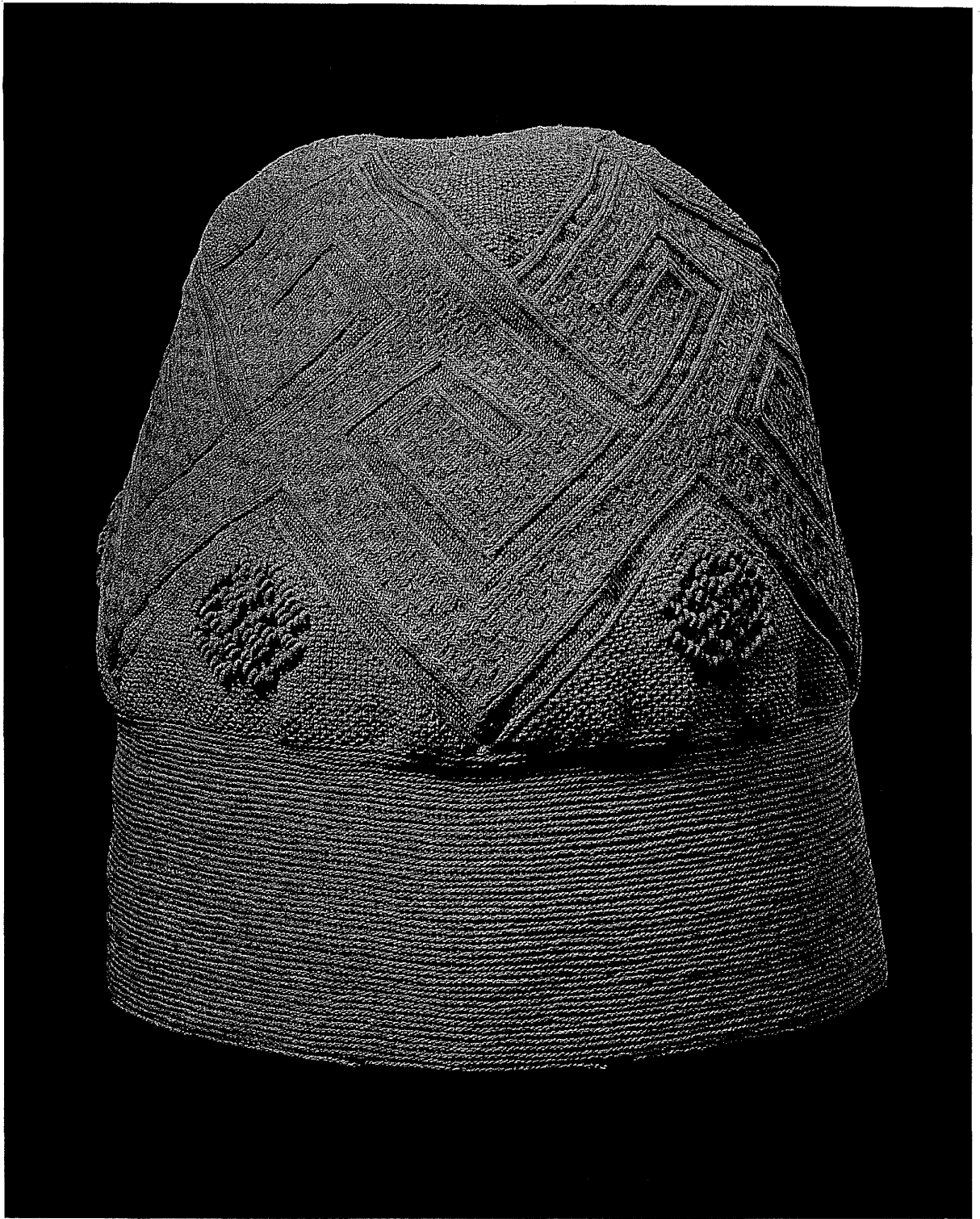
The beautiful swirling surfaces of these pots are achieved by splashing them with vegetable materials while the yellow clay is still hot from the kiln; these leave a wood-like grain as the vegetable matter rapidly boils away. While the patterns may be purely decorative, they are shared by other Kongo arts associated with spirit world and the land of the dead.



Spiraling compositional lines are prominent both in such early horns and in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Kongolese ivories, which were made for wealthy local or European patrons as souvenirs (FIGS 171 and 172). They incorporate figural scenes from everyday life and ceremony, suggesting an *imago mundi* (world view). Similar spiraling patterns cover local pottery (FIG. 173).

### *Textile Arts and Themes of Transition*

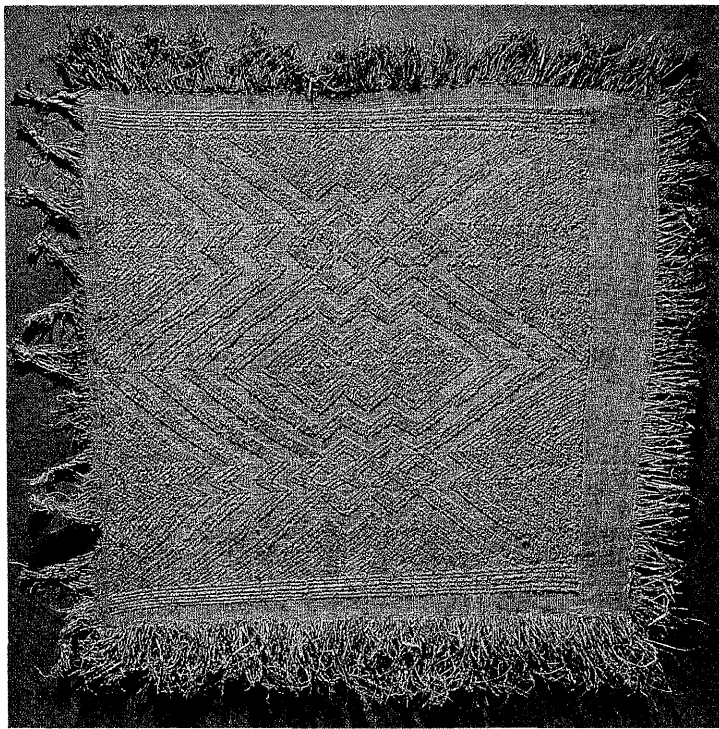
Like ivory horns, the hats (*mpu*) of Kongo kings and chiefs (FIG. 174; see also FIGS 164 and 168) embody a spiral composition. Each hat is constructed from a single thread worked in a helical pattern, beginning at the center of the crown and moving in enlarging circles to the edge. Kongo rulers may have sought to reinforce ideas of health and longevity through the wearing of these caps, the word for spiral, *zinga*, also meaning long life. In some hats, including the one worn by the king of the Soyo at his meeting in 1490 with the returning Portuguese, themes of life, longevity, and renewal are reinforced by representations of snakes. Not only is the serpentine rainbow an important marker of fecundity, but certain exceptional babies are believed to be brought to life through the intervention of spirits (*simbi*), who are sometimes represented as snakes. In addition to serpentine patterns, icons of physical force such as leopard claws are also incorporated in these caps.



174. A royal Kongo hat, collected before 1674. Fiber, height 7¼" (18 cm).  
Department of Ethnography, The National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen.

The cruciform icon here, similar to that found on royal knives, symbolizes chiefly authority. In other caps, the fangs or claws of leopards were attached to the crown to suggest not only the cardinal directions but perhaps also the open maw or readied talons of this powerful feline.





175. Yombe (Dem. Rep. of Congo). Textile, eighteenth century? Raffia palm, 19 $\frac{5}{8}$  x 20 $\frac{3}{8}$ " (50 x 51 cm). Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde, Munich.

Europeans compared these textiles to fine silk, velours, and brocades, as in a description by Father Laurent de Lucques at the beginning of the eighteenth century: "The fabrics of these regions ... are truly beautiful ... Some of them closely resemble velvet, others are so richly adorned with various decorations and arabesques that it is a wonder that anyone working with leaves ... could make such fine and beautiful fabrics, which are every bit as good as silk." In addition to being beautiful, these raffia textiles were lightweight and waterproof.

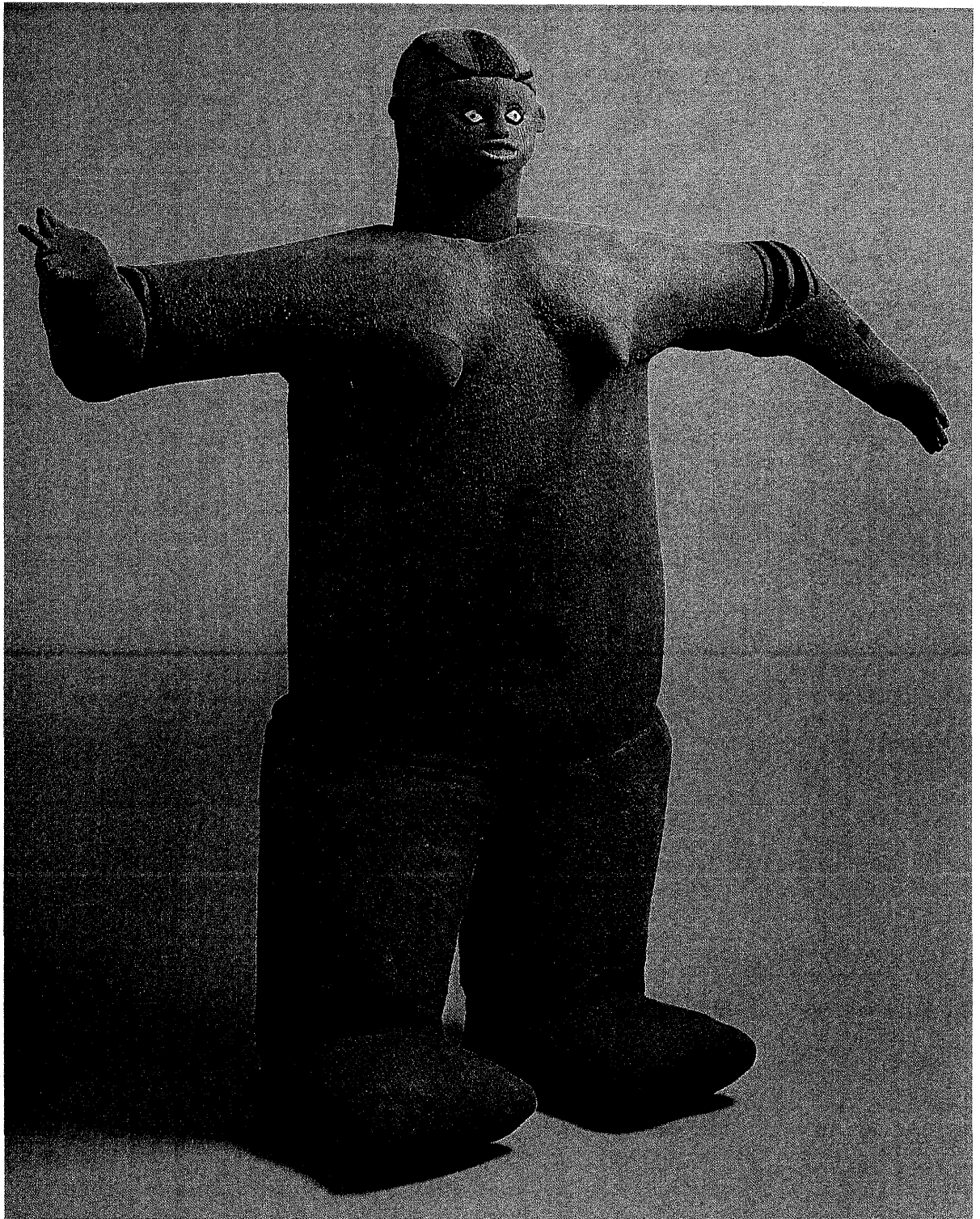
Beautifully decorated raffia cloths (*lubongo*; FIG. 175) were of critical significance in Kongo daily and ritual life. Closely associated with royalty – kings wore the richest weavings as shawls and wrappers (see FIG. 168) – Kongo textiles served as a form of currency and taxation. Their red color and raffia construction reinforced royal power: so politically and symbolically important were these textiles that kings were once prohibited from wearing imported fabrics. In addition to being markers of status, they were associated with spatial and social transition. According to legend, chiefs were once able to cross rivers on raffia mats, and ceremonies

of marriage and death were not complete without raffia cloths. Several hundred cloths might be used to cover the body of an important person before burial, in a royal expression of conspicuous expenditure; they were intended to show the dead that a newly deceased person was rich and should be treated well.

In the nearby Teke traditions, northeast of the Kongo heartland in the Republic of Congo, textiles functioned as symbolic maps to guide the deceased to the afterworld. Constructed of three pieces of cloth suggesting the sky, earth, and water, such textiles were folded and rolled before being placed in the tomb as instructive seats for the dead. Textile imagery in horns and other arts may also have functioned like symbolic maps. It is explained for the Teke accordingly: "Thanks to this cloth, the deceased is rich in words of the ancestors' and guided by them he knows the route to follow to rejoin directly the village of the dead. This cloth is also an assurance of the living against the dead: showing them the road they must follow, so they will not join the errant spirits who come to torment men."

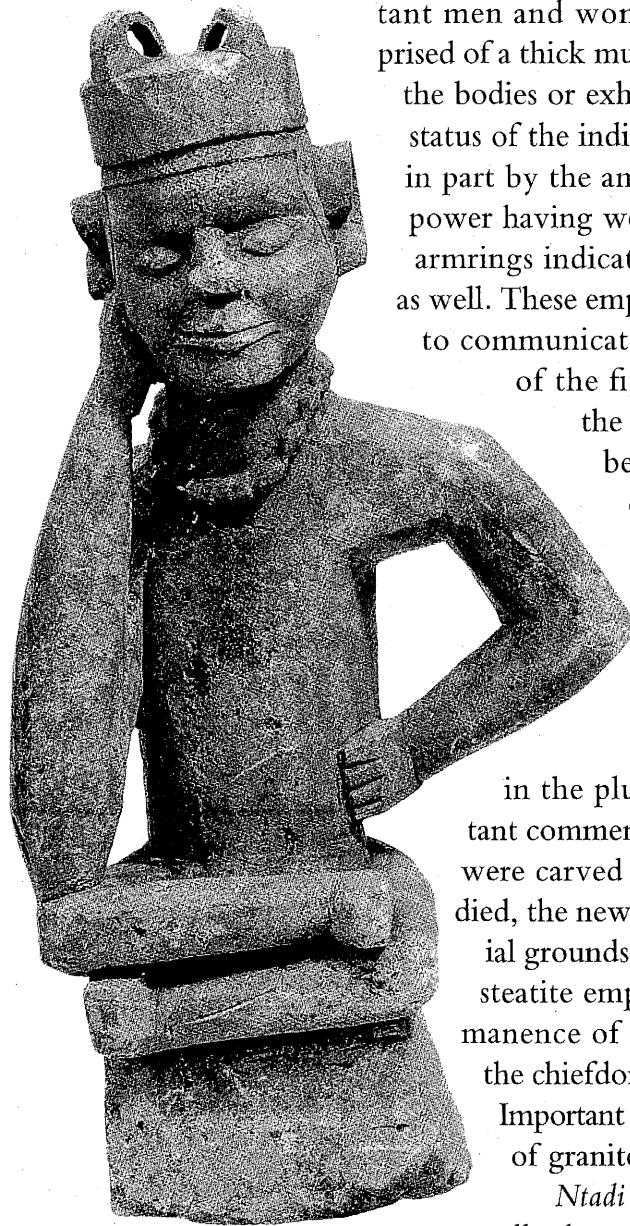
### *Royal Mannequins and Memorials to the Dead*

In the northern Kongo area, among the Bwende, special textile-enclosed funerary mannequins known as *niombo* (FIG. 176) were made. These works, and miniature versions of them known as *muzindi* or *kiimbi* ("reliquary mannequin"), commemorate impor-



176. Bwende (Dem. Rep. of Congo). A funerary mannequin, called *niombo*, by Makoza of Kingoyi, acquired in 1938. Height 5'10 $\frac{7}{8}$ " (1.8 m). Göteborg Museum, Sweden.

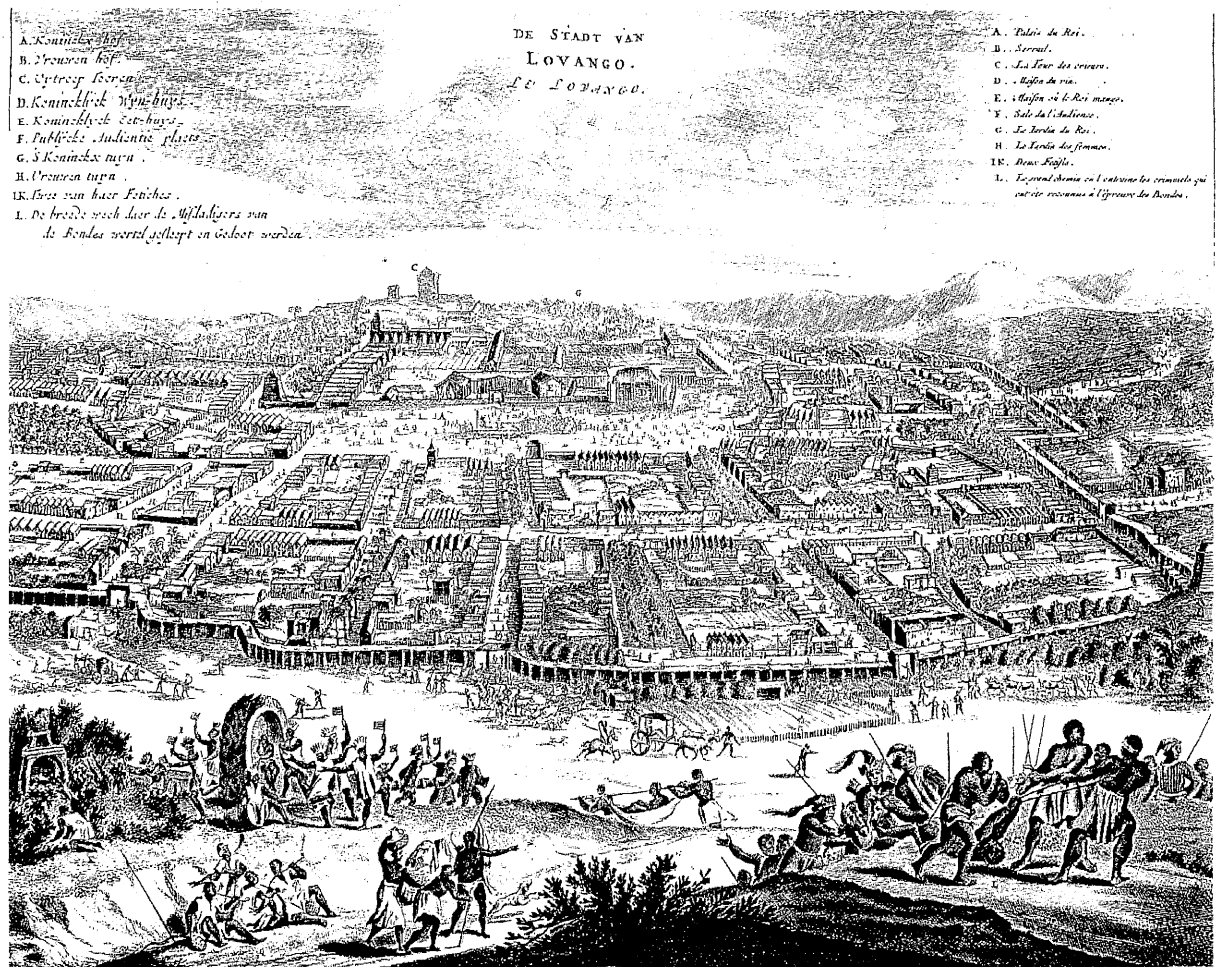
*Niombo* and their miniature complements were made in great numbers in the first decades of the twentieth century. Makoza was one of the most famous artists of these works. He went to the bedside of a dying person to note distinguishing facial features such as tattoos or filed teeth, later building the sculpture over the mummified cloth-covered body of the deceased.



tant men and women. Funerary figures of this sort are comprised of a thick mummy-like wrap of textiles enshrouding either the bodies or exhumed relics of high-ranking individuals. The status of the individual portrayed within the *niombo* is marked in part by the amount of textile covering, persons of greater power having works of larger size. The chiefly hats and brass armrings indicated in these works serve as markers of status as well. These empowered royal images were thought to be able to communicate with the living; the movement or shifting of the figure was said to indicate a last goodbye or the deceased's views about those who might have been responsible for the death. Some of these cloth sculptures display tears to suggest the sadness at the loss of loved ones. The chests sometimes incorporate encircled crosses or circumscribed X's, identified variously as the cycle of time and the authority of rulers over lands in all directions.

Royal guardian sculptures called *ntadi* (*mintadi* in the plural; FIGS 177 and 178) also served an important commemorative role. These works of soft dense schist were carved under aristocratic patronage. After the ruler died, the new sculpture (and others) was placed on the burial grounds to represent the deceased and his retinue. The steatite employed in these works may allude to the permanence of chieftaincy, for on his death the founder of the chieftom was said to have become embodied in stone. Important Kongo tombs were thus often marked by blocks of granite or hard rock.

*Ntadi* sculptures served as a sort of portrait (originally they were painted); indeed, legends maintained that *ntadi* once were able to walk and talk. Chieftains' caps, jewelry, and throne plinths are among the many *ntadi* status attributes. Persons of lower rank were often shown kneeling in the position of devotion or submission. The visual power of these *ntadi* rests to a large degree on their combined elements of monumentality and compositional asymmetry, the latter indicated by features such as a tilting head or the diagonal alignment of arms and legs. Here, the chief is seated, his head resting heavily against an uplifted hand in a characteristic Kongo posture of sadness or sorrow. Gestures from royal adjudications are also displayed in *ntadi* sculptures, thus underscoring both the prominent functions of rulers as judges and the royal tomb as a court of last appeal. Related to this idea, the eyelids of *ntadi* are often shown lowered as if in deep thought.



### Opposite

177. Kongo (Dem. Rep. of Congo). A guardian figure (*mintadi*) representing a mourning ruler, nineteenth century? Stone, height 16¼" (41.3 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The hat worn by the ruler displays four inward-curving claws or fangs of the royal leopard, suggesting the feline's readied talons and teeth. The Kongo chief Patrice Loemba suggests that the four perimeter claws/fangs may refer to the quadripartite structure of Kongo political rule, composed most importantly of: 1) the ruler as earthly potentate; 2) the ruler as final arbiter of the state judiciary; 3) the ruler's eldest son as future monarch; and 4) female lineage heads (and women generally) as holders of knowledge about family secrets. The center of the *ntadi* royal headdress thus may be seen to represent the ties between the ruler and the invisible world of the ancestors and spiritual forces.

### Above

178. The Kongo regional capital of Loango, c. 1668, with royal altars in the foreground, published in Olfert Dapper's *Déscription de l'Afrique*, 1686.

In the left foreground, a shrine with the requisite memorial sculptures appears to be depicted on a wooded hilltop sanctuary outside the capital. This shrine locale, which in principle represents the home of a past Loango ruler, is here the focus of a lively ceremony. Other details of the drawing include the palace (A), the royal wives' quarter (B), the storage house of the king's (palm) wine (D), the royal dining house (E), and the public audience hall (F).

## Portraits of Royal Women in Stone and Wood

Some of the most extraordinary Kongo stone funerary monuments are the stele found in the Solongo area (FIG. 179). They, like *ntadi*, convey ideas of chiefly power through the steatite from which they are made. But certain visual disjunctions, with their heads in profile but their bodies frontally posed, and the spatial compression, add to their emotional power. If the contained and largely frontal postures of the seated *ntadi* figures suggest stability and the distancing of danger, the stela shown here, in contrast, appears to display instability and peril, which is appropriate for the stela's function of commemorating those who died in pregnancy or childbirth.

As royal mothers, Kongo women played critical roles in family and local politics, foreign relations, and ritual affairs, and their frequent depiction in Kongo royal art reflects this. Handsome wooden figures of women (FIG. 180) were carved as memorials and symbols of chiefly power. They represent women as founders of the dynasty and regents who temporarily replaced deceased kings. Since the Kongo word for mother was applied to chiefs and other male heads of descent groups within this matrilineal society, these female images assumed important cross-gender identity. They became particularly popular in the coastal Yombe area in the nineteenth century in conjunction with an association called *pfemba*, which addressed female reproduction concerns.

Both female and male memorial figures show elaborate scarifications. While the forms vary, some patterns suggest through their "eternal knot" motifs and angular line-and-dot designs themes of life, death, and renewal. Crosses terminating in angled arms are said to signify the jaws of a crocodile, an animal identified with the watery realm of the dead and hence the ancestors.



**Opposite**

179. Solongo (Angola). A funerary stela, excavated in 1904. Steatite, 24½ x 8½" (61.5 x 21.5 cm). Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden.

These work's were positioned near the tombs of women who died while pregnant or during childbirth and served as their memorials.

**Right**

180. Yombe (Dem. Rep. of Congo). A mother and child effigy figure, nineteenth century. Wood, and mixed media, height 10¼" (25.7 cm). National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

The prominent icons of royal power on this maternity sculpture include the royal cap, leopard-claw necklace, and raised box throne. The cross-legged, seated posture is said to evoke respect, continuity, and stability.

Sculptures such as this generally represent women who are either nursing or holding a child (shown either living or dead), themes linked to married women and their roles in assuring continuity in the lineage. In life, cowries or other shells filled with empowered substances were often attached to the back of the cloth (*dika*) above the breasts to augment fecundity and lactation. When a woman was working she would lower the cloth; while nursing it was raised.





181. Kongo (Dem. Rep. of Congo). A funeral cylinder, nineteenth–twentieth century. Terracotta, height 18½" (46 cm). Peabody Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

The richness of the patterning on such vessels shows the wealth of the deceased. A large interlace pattern is said to symbolize the python, linked to renewal and regeneration. Scales refer to the skin of a serpent or fish, both associated with the watery world of the dead, and animal tracks indicate the path to the afterworld followed by the deceased.

Themes of family continuity are suggested through body scarification in other ways. The first such markings were generally made on a young girl to encircle the navel. After her first sexual relationship, the area above the breasts was decorated with further marks to promote conception. These and other body patterns were linked to the strength and pain that women must bear in delivery. The rich red surfaces of these carvings comes from the use of camwood powder and palm oil, used as a cosmetic in life from the age of puberty to make the skin soft, shining, and healthy-looking. Red camwood, which was expensive because it came from the interior of Africa, was a symbol of transition in chiefly and funerary rites of passage. Rank and wealth are suggested by the number of brass bracelets, anklets, and neck rings which are worn, these in life sometimes weighing up to 25 pounds (12 kg).

Whereas figures in stone, cloth, and wood served as high-status memorials in many Kongo areas, terracotta cylinder jars, called among other terms *sa kya boondo* ("drum-shaped pot"; FIG. 181), marked the tombs of wealthy and socially important individuals in the Boma and Yombe areas. Like the royal ivory horns, these works emphasize compositional registers, architectural *lumbu* frames, and textile patterning, all of which may be associated with transition and the afterlife. Many of these terracotta cylinders incorporate cruciform motifs associated with the passage from the living to the dead. Cylinders that include representations of human figures are called *fikula* and identify the deceased by particular physical traits, occupations, or talents, such as drums, guns, and musical instruments.

### *Arts of Power, Protection, and Popular Response*

Healing was linked to chieftaincy in many parts of the Kongo area, with the investiture of a ruler assuming key features of a treatment or cure as various medicines were applied to him. Chiefs, in turn, used their healing prerogatives to combat malevolent forces, among these sorcery, for both themselves and their subjects. A striking relationship thus exists between chieftaincy and the empowered sculptures known as *nkisi* (plural *minkisi*), meaning "medicine" (FIG. 182). At royal investitures *minkisi* not only safeguarded the new ruler but also helped to assure that the ancestral laws were followed. Historically, there were two types of *nkisi*, public and



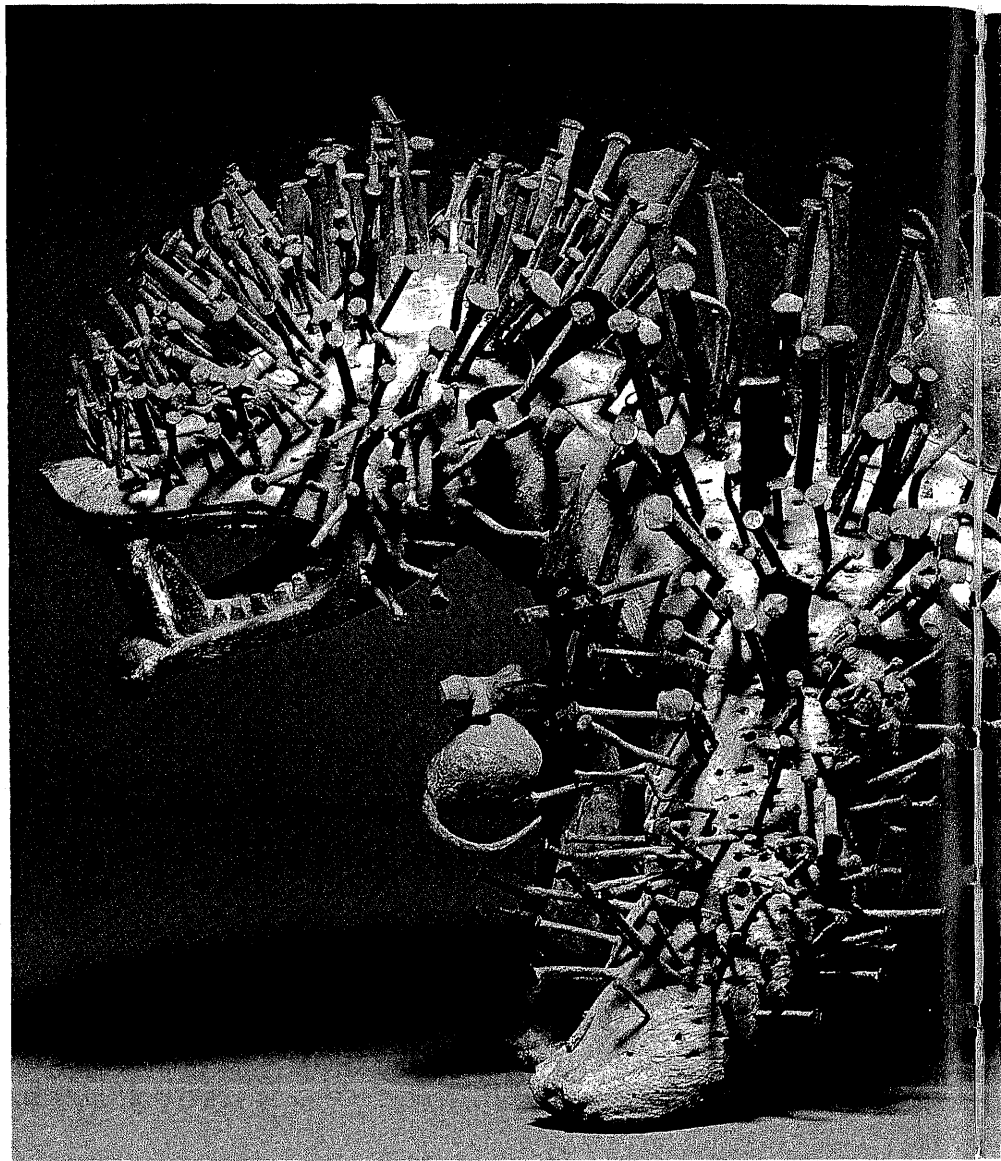
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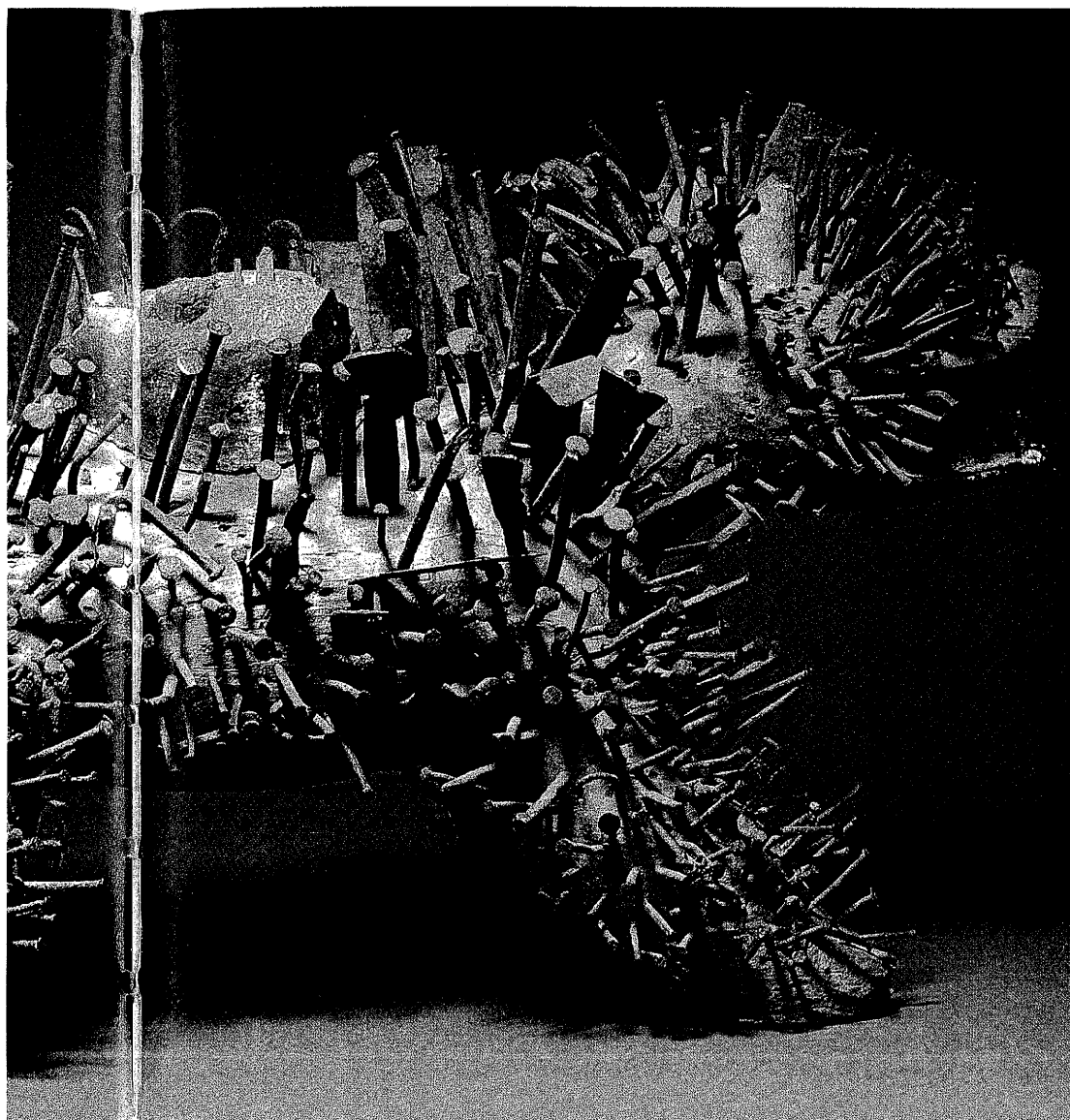
182. Yombe (Dem. Rep. of Congo). A *nkisi* empowered figure of the *nkondi* type, collected c. 1905. Wood, metal, glass, and mixed media, height 38½" (97 cm). Barbier-Müller Collection, Geneva.

The medicine pack on the belly of this *nkondi* identifies the stomach with both well-being and sorcery (since sorcery is said to swell the intestines). The enclosing mirror or shell is sometimes said to serve as a portal into the world of sorcery and anti-sorcery. Loss of will may be suggested by the binding of the figure's hands or feet. The open mouth refers to the "feeding" of the *nkisi* to arouse it to undertake a particular action. Although male *nkisi* are considered more dangerous than female, most objects are shown sexless.



private, with some having vital democratizing roles, as sources of empowerment for rural residents and individuals outside the court.

At its most basic, the *nkisi* represents a container of empowering materials or "medicines" (*bilongo*). In figural *minkisi* the "medicines" are generally secured in cavities in the stomach, head, or back to activate the work with an empowering agent, usually an ancestor or the spirit of a person who had died. Tomb earth, river clay, camwood, and objects with a characteristic shine were especially important. The cavity was closed with a mirror or more rarely a cowrie. When incorporated into effigies and other figures, mirrors, cowries, and medicines indicated that these sculptures also functioned as empowered *minkisi*. Mirrors served divinatory functions, with *nkisi* specialists looking into their reflective surfaces to determine the source of a given problem.



183. Vili (Angola/Dem. Rep. of Congo). A double-headed *nkondi* animal figure collected before 1912. Wood, iron, and mixed media, length 5'8½" (1.74 m). Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde, Munich.

Dog *nkondi* call to mind the ways in which *nkisi* spirits, like hunting dogs, track their prey. Because dogs are identified as mediators not only between humans and animals but also between the realms of the living and the dead (they are believed to have four eyes) it is assumed that they readily communicate with the human and spiritual realms. In such works, empowering medicines are added to the animal's back, ears, and mouth.

Sculptures known as *nkondi* (plural *zinkondi*), from the word for hunt (*konda*), constitute a special class of *nkisi* figures thought of as particularly effective hunters of danger. Distinguishing *nkondi* features include a raised arm in whose clenched hand a lance or knife is held. This gesture suggests challenge and readiness to attack. In human *nkondi* and other *nkisi* arts, the face is often intentionally threatening, an expression thought to be both defensive and aggressive. The drawing back of the lips (and the extended tongue in some works) underscores this powerful image, suggesting devouring and the spiritual cannibalism in related cases of harm. Reinforcing this idea, the chin is often thrust forward to indicate readiness to attack a problem. Some of the most striking of these figures depict animals, especially dogs (FIG. 183), with either single or double heads.

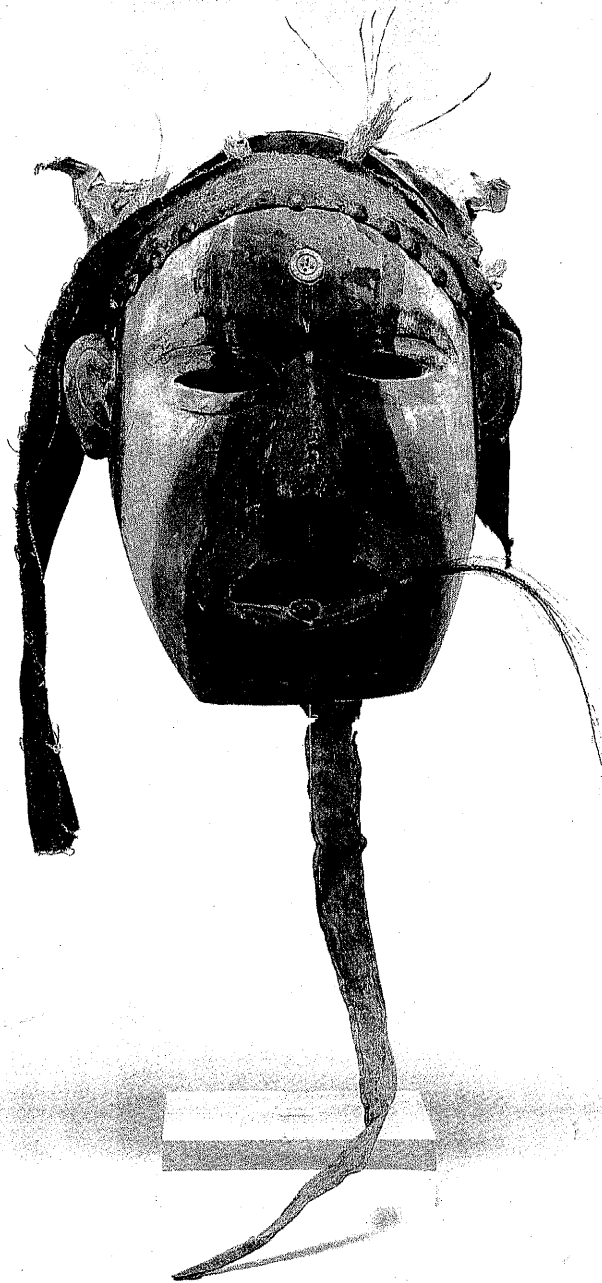
Among the most important of the additive materials in both animal and human *minkisi* are the piercing pieces of metal (blades, then later nails or screws) and wooden peg or thorns. The type, number, and placement of these additions refer to empowerment and the intended function of the work. Each piercing element connotes a particular commitment and desire for action. When the nail is wrapped or knotted with fiber it is said to serve as a reminder to the *nkisi* of a pressing problem.

The process of making and employing *nkisi* necessarily brought together the talents of both the carver and ritual specialist. The latter, called *nganga*, was an expert in medicines and ritual power. Because *minkisi* are empowered by potentially lethal spirits, the process of making these sculptures was fraught with danger: when an element was inserted, it activated the figure and signified a desire for protective or aggressive action. Speech and saliva assume critical empowerment roles, with individuals being asked to lick the figure's eye, brow, or iron blade so that the empowering spirit will be able to respond to any broken vows. This emphasis on speech and saliva is underscored by traditions of carving the mouth open, sometimes emboldened by red pigment.

Although the aims of a *nkisi* vary considerably, social and psychotherapeutic concerns predominate. The most common functions include ending a dispute, making an agreement permanent, creating a mutual aid pact, healing oneself of an affliction, distancing or disempowering an enemy, protecting oneself against or finding out thieves, and assuring security when traveling away from home. As objects of personal battle, *nkisi* attributes often incorporate military attire such as feather headdresses, thick iron chains, and bells attached to belts; similarly, before use, each *nkisi* was "awakened" by the ignition of gunpowder.

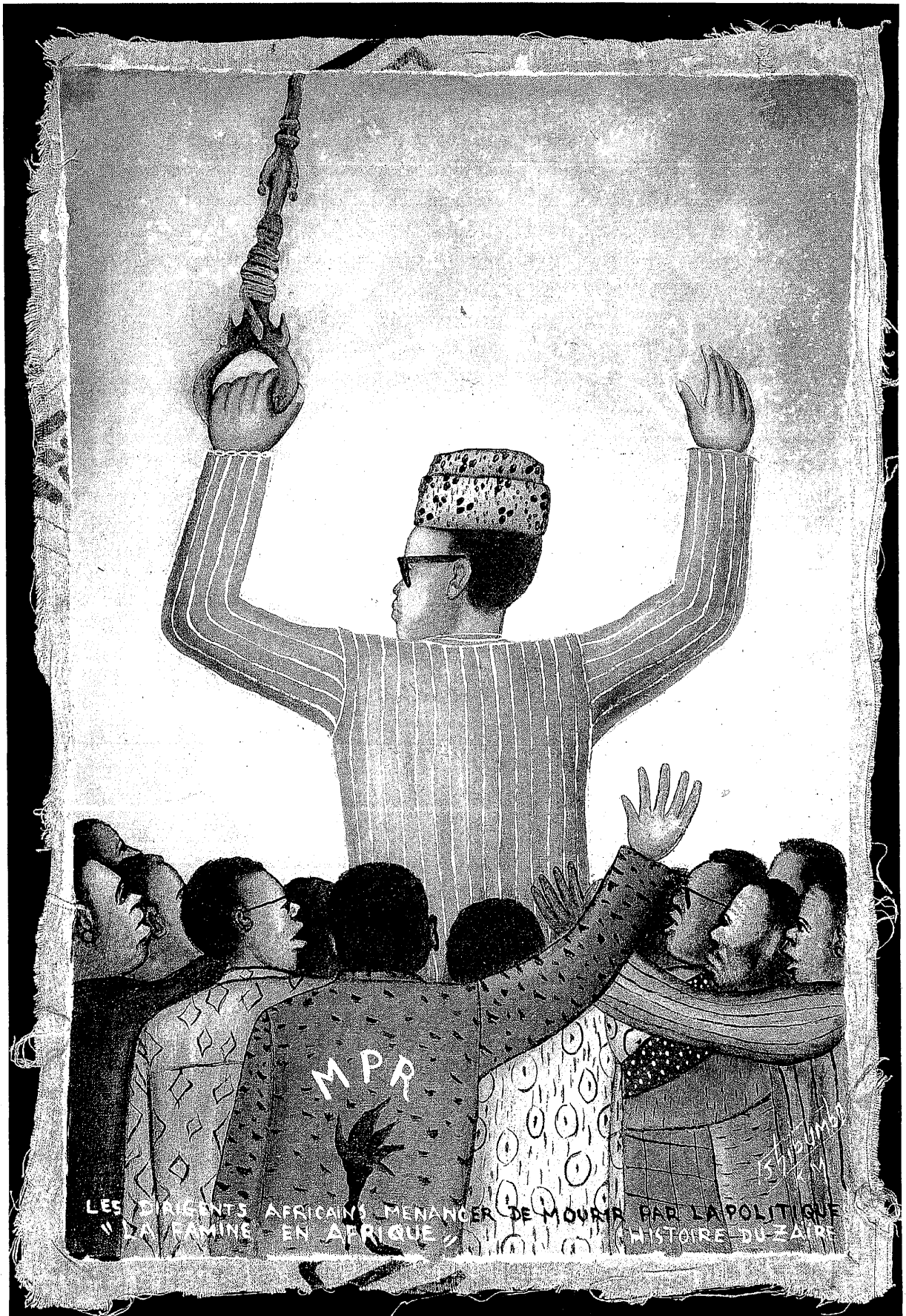
Special masks called *tombula* ("to bring up the spirits"; FIG. 184) were sometimes worn by *nganga* during divinations, healing rites, and adjudications. Costumes were fabricated from dried leaves, recalling the belief that maskers represent powerful spirits of the earth. This mask is said to have once been linked to a water *nkisi* and may have been used for witchcraft detection. In the course of the choreographed swirling movements of related dancers, the leaf costumes helped to sweep away dirt (and danger) from the community. Feathers of vultures and other powerful birds are sometimes placed around the edge of the masks, recalling the attire of both warriors and ritual experts and thereby evoking both death and well-being. In their judicial functions masks might be employed by an all-male institution called Ndunga that intervened as a royal counsel, most importantly to punish

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184. Vili (Angola). A mask, nineteenth–twentieth century. Wood, pigment, cloth, and mixed media, height 10¼" (26 cm). Museu Nacional de Etnologia, Lisbon.

Color served in part to convey meaning in these masks, whose faces are defined by bold, brightly painted patterns. Black has been identified with the land of the living (referring to the family and the fireplace). Red is generally associated with blood, danger, war, sorcery, and rites of transition. White suggests the powers of the ancestors, along with spirit force. Together these colors may refer to the seen and unseen worlds of Kongo existence. The extended tongue displayed in some masks, like those on royal staffs (see FIG. 162) and *nkisi*, suggests the sacred role of speech and ideas of devouring associated with malevolence. A button is secured in the center of the forehead of this mask, a part of the body closely associated with authority and intelligence.



wrongdoers at the behest of the ruler. Ndunga maskers appeared at chiefly investitures, at funerals of important individuals, and during crises such as epidemics or the upheavals accompanying an interregnum.

Since the 1950s concerns with colonial history and nation state politics have proved to be an important source of artistic inspiration. Like Kimpa Vita, Mobotu Sese Seko, the former president of Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), pressed for models of authenticity (FIG. 185). At the same time, however, he opposed all local cultural and political forms that he saw as a threat. Appearing in public in a leopard-skin hat and serpent cane that recalls the *mwala* staff, Mobotu drew on a range of royal Kongo power motifs to promote his own authority. From the 1960s, abuse of the population by both colonial and governmental authorities has been an increasingly important focus of popular paintings. Men and women are often shown as subordinate to a largely predatory state for which there seems to be no way out. The themes of power and political abuse also hark back to the often sad history of Kongo and European relations in which slavery, missionary activity, and colonial interests were closely interrelated.

## THE KUBA KINGDOM

### *Competing for Status in Courtly Art*

East of the Kongo heartland, at the interface of forest and savanna in the central Kasai area of the Democratic Republic of Congo, lies the kingdom of the Kuba. This monarchy comprises various groups (Ngeede, Ngongo, Kete, and others), of whom the Bushoong (or Bushong) were accorded the privilege of choosing the paramount king (*nyim*), to whom the others paid tribute. The vast majority of royal Kuba arts thus more accurately could be called Bushoong or Kuba-Bushoong; similar forms were shared by several unrelated but nearby groups (Shoowa, Leele, and Kel, to name a few).

The Kuba kingdom reached its apex in the years 1870–90, deriving much of its wealth from the export of ivory, along with raffia, camwood, and a diversity of local arts. A dynamic ruler named Shyaam the Great (Shyaam aMbul a Ngoong) founded the present Kuba-Bushoong dynasty around 1625, overthrowing a rival chief and unifying the area's chieftaincies into a more cohesive polity. While Shyaam's origins are debated (there are some suggestions that he was the son of a slave adopted by a local queen),

185. TSHIBUMBA KANDA-MATULU (d. c. 1980)  
*Les Dirigents Africains* (The African Leaders), 1970s.  
Paint on flour sack, 17¾ x 14½" (45 x 36 cm).  
Collection Bogumil Jewsiewicki, Quebec City.

Here, the artist shows Mobotu, the former president of Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), with key attributes of a king, as part of his "Histoire du Zaire" series. A sense of irony and despair is evidenced both in the composition itself (Mobotu's back is to us and his people) and in the text written along the bottom, which reads (in translation): "Hunger in Africa: African leaders at risk of dying through politics."



186. Kuba-Bushoong (Dem. Rep. of Congo). A statue attributed to Prince Myeel, seventeenth century? Iron, height 17 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (19.5 cm). Musée Ethnographique d'Anvers.

One of the most famous royal Kuba artists was the seventeenth-century prince Myeel who became a smith after taking charge of the royal iron mines. Although the attribution of this forged iron sculpture to Myeel has rightly been questioned, the endurance of royal legends linking Kuba kings to artistic production makes it a work of continuing interest. The enormous size of the figure's hands in relationship to the rest of the body in this work is striking. While the scale of the hands may reinforce ideas of the smith's artistic primacy, it also calls to mind the importance of metal hands as symbols of protection in Kuba royal costuming.

royal accounts maintain that early on he traveled to foreign courts, including the Kongo and Pende. After being fortified there with new mystical powers, he made a reappearance in full regalia to claim the throne. His sudden arrival in the royal robes was said to have so shocked the Bushoong ruler that he fled the capital without a fight, leaving the throne to Shyaam.

### *Artist Kings: Expressions in Iron and Costume*

Artistic creativity was a vital Kuba royal concern. As in the Cameroon grasslands, several of the kings are said to have been artists themselves, working in media as diverse as smithing (FIG. 186), weaving, and carving. One such royal artist, King Mbopey Mabi-intsch ma-Kyeen (1939–69), is said to have created his own portrait sculpture (*ndop*) because he had little faith in the artists of his period. Each Kuba king commissioned or helped to design art works specific to his reign – drums, masks, costumes, objects of daily use, as well as one or more design patterns.

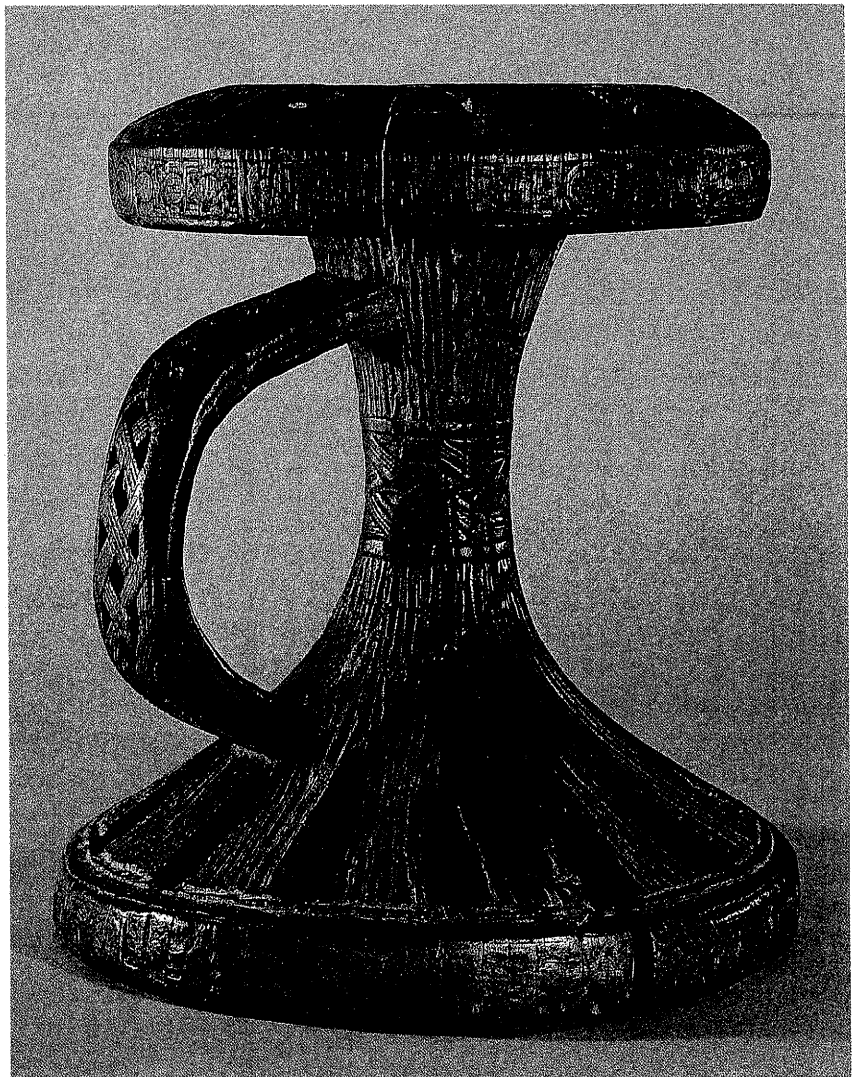
During important royal ceremonies, Kuba kings appeared in an elaborate attire (see FIG. 159) comprised of expensive fabrics, beads, metals, and cowries. The prominent display of cowries in the royal costume emphasizes the ruler as by far the wealthiest person in the kingdom, so wealthy indeed that he purportedly ate pulverized cowries as part of his diet. With costumes constituting an important part of the royal wealth, their weight sometimes reached around 185 pounds (84 kg). Parts of rare and powerful animals, birds, and plants were integrated into the costume, including a leopard-skin wrap, leopard-tooth necklace, and the feathers of eagles and parrots.

Each king owned a wide variety of costumes which complemented his diverse royal functions as warrior, priest, and head of the judiciary, to name but a few. Because many costume elements were buried with the king, his successor had to create new ones at the beginning of his reign, aided by the royal tailor. Not surprisingly, costumes were critical to the Kuba enthronement, the king being ritually dressed in stages by his brothers after first being robed in a simple white cloth. The 130 titled individuals at court also had their own costume forms. The extraordinary richness of Kuba courtly costumes was made possible by a combination of relatively high living standards and the considerable free time accorded Bushoong nobles by the labor of non-royal villagers and slaves. They supplied the palace with essential services and goods (most importantly water, food, wood, and palm wine) as a form of tribute.



## *Dynastic Myths and the Symbolism of Thrones*

Kuba royal prerogative was reinforced by complex mythic narratives, whose meanings and importance have been hotly debated by anthropologists, historians, and others. In the creation myths, the king is usually linked to the creator sky god (Mbwoom) and to the first man (Woot), whose incestuous union with his sister (Mweel) brought forth not only the first children but also illness, death, and disunity. Woot is said to have fled the area after this sexual act, taking with him the vital “basket of knowledge” which held the necessary knowledge and emblems for rule. A Pygmy found this basket and gave it to a Bushoong man, thereby according him and all Bushoong thereafter the right to rule. In keeping with this tradition, each Bushoong-Kuba king was identified with two such baskets (see FIG. 159), one red and one blue, the surfaces of both beautifully decorated with cowries and beads. The



187. Kuba-Bushoong  
(Dem. Rep. of Congo).  
Throne from the capital  
Nsheng, collected in 1909.  
Wood, height 17¾" (45  
cm). British Museum,  
London.

This royal Kuba throne is elegantly supported by a branching pedestal with a looped handle. It was draped with a leopard-skin before being used.

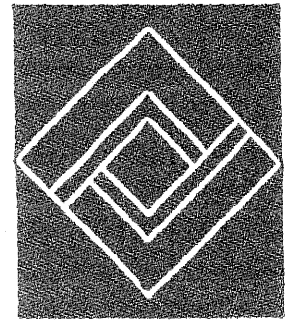
red basket was passed down within the royal line, the blue basket, which each king commissioned for himself, was buried with him.

The Kuba royal throne (*ipon*; FIG. 187) incorporates a figuration of the sun on its upper surface, a motif that appears frequently in other Kuba royal arts, serving as an icon for Woot, kingship, and social well-being. The base of this throne displays a cluster of palm fronds secured together at the center and splaying outward at both ends, the latter suggesting the importance of raffia palms in Kuba myth and economy. This tree provides essential raw materials for textiles, buildings, cooking oil, and wine. Dynastic associations are also important: in the same way that the Kuba hero Woot's mythic inebriation with palm wine is said to have introduced a series of catastrophes which led ultimately to the foundation of the Kuba kingship, the dynastic founder, Shyaam, is said to have climbed a raffia palm then named himself after it (*shyaam* means raffia palm). Shyaam noted that just as the palm tree never stops producing wine, so the king's knowledge is inexhaustible.

### *Royal Portrait Sculptures*

The dynastic symbol of King Shyaam the Great is the game of *lele*, the well-known African game of capture (known as *mankala* in the West). It was purportedly introduced to help diminish disputes in the kingdom: the person who repeatedly won the game was acknowledged to have good decision-making capabilities. Shyaam is credited with discovering this game during his early travels to courts outside the area. Other innovations include new textiles, a plan for the capital, and a range of new court positions, among these the leaders of important artist compounds, especially sculptors, smiths, and costume designers.

The earliest extant Kuba portrait sculptures date to the beginning of the eighteenth century when the genre (known as *ndop*) is believed to have been introduced by King Misha mi-Shyaang a-Mbul. Following his example, each subsequent king oversaw the creation of his own *ndop* portrait. In later years, similar works were created to personify earlier dynastic rulers. As a group, however, they share a relatively consistent form. One of the most beautiful of these royal figures represents Shyaam (FIG. 188). Shyaam's identity as hero and Woot complement is denoted by the inclusion of three rows of cowrie shells in his belt (in many *ndop*, only one or two cowrie rows were indicated) and by the incorporation of an open square pattern known as "Woot" on the upper surface of the royal cap.



MOTIF FOR WOOT (THE FIRST MAN)



WOOT PATTERN

188. Kuba-Bushoong (Dem. Rep. of Congo). A royal portrait figure (*ndop*) commemorating the early seventeenth-century dynastic founder King Shyaam the Great, late eighteenth century. Wood, height 21½" (54.5 cm). British Museum, London.

Kuba *ndop* figures show the king seated crosslegged, supported on a square platform (*yiing*). This platform recalls the decorative box thrones employed by both Kuba and Kongo rulers. The design along the base of this platform is known as *naam* (creeper vine).

The king's headdress represents the royal *shody* hat. Its unusual hoe shape and cowrie decorations suggest an incident in the founding myth when some of the sons of Mbwoom who were disputing power wore a hoe on their heads in order to be recognized by their supporters. Since Mbwoom is identified as a Pygmy in Kuba royal performances, it is tempting to speculate that the hoe-form royal headdress alludes to the power struggle which took place between agriculturalists moving into the area and the indigenous Pygmy hunters, with the former eventually assuming the leadership and the latter retaining ritual authority.

Royal *ndop* portraits owe much to Kongo *mintadi* effigies (see FIG. 177) as suggested by similarities in pose and platform. Kuba traditions that Shyaam visited the coast underscore the likelihood of this source; that a number of the new crops Shyaam is said to have introduced came from the Americas (corn, manioc, tobacco, for example) also supports Bushoong connections with the coastal Kongolese rulers.

Rigidly frontal and symmetrical, with arms positioned tightly against the sides, these portraits evoke ideas of composure, calmness, immobility, solidity, dignity, and detachment. The closed eyes and general lack of expression adds to this quality of majestic distance. In visual terms, the *ndop* sculptures suggest interesting counterfoils to the intense competition for titles and jealousies which helped to produce the boldly innovative designs that characterized many Kuba courtly arts. In the *ndop*, we see the king as someone who through his office and spiritual power is largely above the fray. The avoidance of individualizing features in these works – a quality of African portrait arts in general – suggests the privileging of office over individual.

In the *ndop* portrait, the king is shown to be full-bellied and breasted. The head is also proportionately larger than the rest of the body, a feature consistent with the importance of the head in much African art. The distinctive cowrie shape of the eyes reinforces ideas of royal wealth. Key regalia are also shown, with a few small elements suggesting the larger whole. The royal *ndop* shaving of the coiffure at the temples replicates the hair patterns worn by royals on important ritual occasions. The sword in the figure's left hand represents the short knife carried by the king in major ceremonies. Other distinctive *ndop* elements include a circular neck ring, cane shoulder hoops known as "hippopotamus teeth," a cloth plaque covering the buttocks, and the unusual forward-extending royal headdress.

During the enthronement rites, when each king announced his formal name, he also delineated his personal symbol (*ibol*) in the form of a proverb. This *ibol* is prominently displayed at the front of the *ndop*: Shyaam's is the game of capture, *lele*, as we have seen, which obliquely refers to Shyaam's cunning and intellect in gaining the throne. Other *ibol* include an anvil (for the late eighteenth-century blacksmith king, Mbopelyeeng a-Ntshey), drums (for three eighteenth-century kings – Misha mi-Shyaang a-Mbul, Kota Ntshey, and Kota a-Mbul), a slave (the nineteenth-century king, Miko mi-Mbul), and a flywhisk and "basket of knowledge" (the nineteenth-century ruler Mbopey Mbiintsch ma-Mbul).

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Placed next to the dying king, *ndop* were said to be empowered with the ruler's soul or life force. Before investiture, the new king would sleep beside his predecessor's *ndop* sculpture so that its power would pass to him. Another important *ndop* audience comprised the ruler's wives. Kept in the women's area of the palace, these sculptures were positioned near a woman during childbirth to help her in the course of delivery. Rubbing the surface of the work appears to have served as a means of activation. The red palm oil applied to the *ndop* (which has helped to preserve the sculptures over time), is associated with ideas of fertility, increase, and nobility. In other contexts, these sculptures functioned as substitutes for the ruler when he was away from court. After his death they became memorials. A Kuba king explained the function of these works: "When they look at this statue they will be able to remember me, and think that I watch over them, consoling them when they are sad, giving them inspiration and courage anew."

### *Initiation and Funerals: The Art of Dynastic Masking*

Kuba rulers underwent a complex initiation (*nkaan*) as part of the larger process in which knowledge related to the environment, religion, and history was revealed to them. After his own initiation, the king supervised the initiation of the youth of the capital, appearing himself in the mask known as Mwaash aMbooy (or Moshambwooy or Mukenga; FIG. 189). The mask also personifies Woot, the first human, bringer of civilization, and complement to Shyaam. Chiefs presenting themselves in this mask thus symbolized the continuity of the royal line. The masks were worn during important funerals in the Kuba area and were placed on the royal mannequin representing the ruler at his death.

Created from leather, such masks are distinguished by their rich display of surface beads, shells, feathers, leopard skin, and textiles. Color is an important part of the mask meaning, with red being said to suggest at once suffering and increase, white referring to mourning and religious purity, and blue suggesting high rank and the contributions of individual leaders. As the property of the king, these "friends of the king" masks, as they were known, were guarded in the palace.

Before being worn, the masks were enthroned with ritual chants. Each ruler "performed" a new mask the first time it was worn and when he died it was sometimes buried with him. After the initial performance, the ruler would then lend the

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189. Kuba (Dem. Rep. of Congo). A royal elephant mask called Mwaash aMbooy, twentieth century. Mixed media, height 15¾" (40 cm).

Mwaash aMbooy masks represent the ruler as an elephant, the trunk and tusk appearing at the mask's upper surface. The red feather shown often at the end of the "trunk" mirrors the feather carried in the mouth of the king in important rites (see FIG. 159). Said to represent water or forest spirits, such masks underscore the mystical liaison between rulers and the forces of nature. The elephant is also important as an animal of great size, strength, and financial resource, for much of the royal wealth was derived from the ivory trade. In the southern Kuba area, this elephant mask (known as Mukenga) appeared in the funeral dances of aristocratic members (generally worn by the dancer personifying the deceased), and the rich display of beads and shells underscored their status. Important symbols of leadership such as the interlace pattern also appear prominently in the mask decoration.



190. Kuba (Dem. Rep. of Congo).  
A royal mask called Mbwoom, late  
nineteenth–early twentieth century. Wood,  
shell, and beads, 11½ x 15" (29.2 x 33 cm).  
The Brooklyn Museum, New York.

Such masks are distinguished by their huge  
copper-covered foreheads, a feature which  
is also said to commemorate a prince  
distraught after killing his predecessor's  
son. In Kuba royal myth, Mbwoom is  
identified with the Pygmy.

191. Kuba (Dem. Rep. of Congo). A mask  
representing the woman Ngady aMwaash,  
nineteenth century. Wood, pigments, beads,  
cowrie shells, and fiber, height 13" (33 cm).  
Peabody Museum, Harvard University,  
Cambridge, Mass.

As is characteristic of the Ngady aMwaash, her  
face is painted in a bold pattern of white and  
black triangles, said to suggest hearthstones and  
domesticity. The tears displayed prominently on  
her cheeks are thought to evoke the importance  
of such masks in funerary contexts and the  
hardship of woman's life (particularly as a  
pawn, who is pledged to work).



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192. Kuba (Dem. Rep. of Congo). A divination figure, called *itombwa*, in the form of an animal. Wood fibers, length 10¼" (26 cm). Private collection, Brussels.

During divination, the flat back of this beautifully carved "rubbing oracle" called *itombwa* (from *itoom*, "diviner") was moistened with an oil and water mixture, then rubbed by the diviner with a wooden disk; when the disk "stuck" it signified an affirmative response. Whatever was being referred to by the diviner at the moment the disk stopped was thought to be significant for the client. If, after turning the *itombwa* upside down, the disk still adhered to the oracle, the truth of the statement was reinforced.

These divination figures have important visual and functional complements with Kingo/Vili animal-form power figures (see FIG. 183); both draw on the power of local nature spirits to aid humans in locating and distancing potential problems. And, like the royal Kuba-Bushoong *ndop* sculptures (see FIG. 188), the primary means of *itombwa* activation is through "rubbing," a process which encourages users to insert themselves more fully into the art viewing experience.

mask to other dancers, although especially talented performers were given the right to commission works on their own. In southern Kuba areas, a huge wall was built during initiation at the periphery of the town. Here masks, figures, and other *nkaan* arts were displayed alongside important insignia.

Another mask in this performance, called *Mbwoom* (FIG. 190), personifies a Pygmy, the king's younger brother, and commoners in general. Performing usually during men's initiation rites, *Mbwoom* engages in a mock fight with the king (*Mwaash aMbooy*) for the affections of his sister. She is personified by a masked persona known as *Ngady aMwaash* ("pawn woman of Mwaash"), who represents the sister (alternatively, mother) of *Woot*, the wife (and sister) of the king, and women in general (FIG. 191). In the context of Kuba masquerade performances, this work is the subject of a vivid and essentially incestuous rivalry between *Mwaash aMbooy* and his brother *Mbwoom*. This woman's paradoxical role



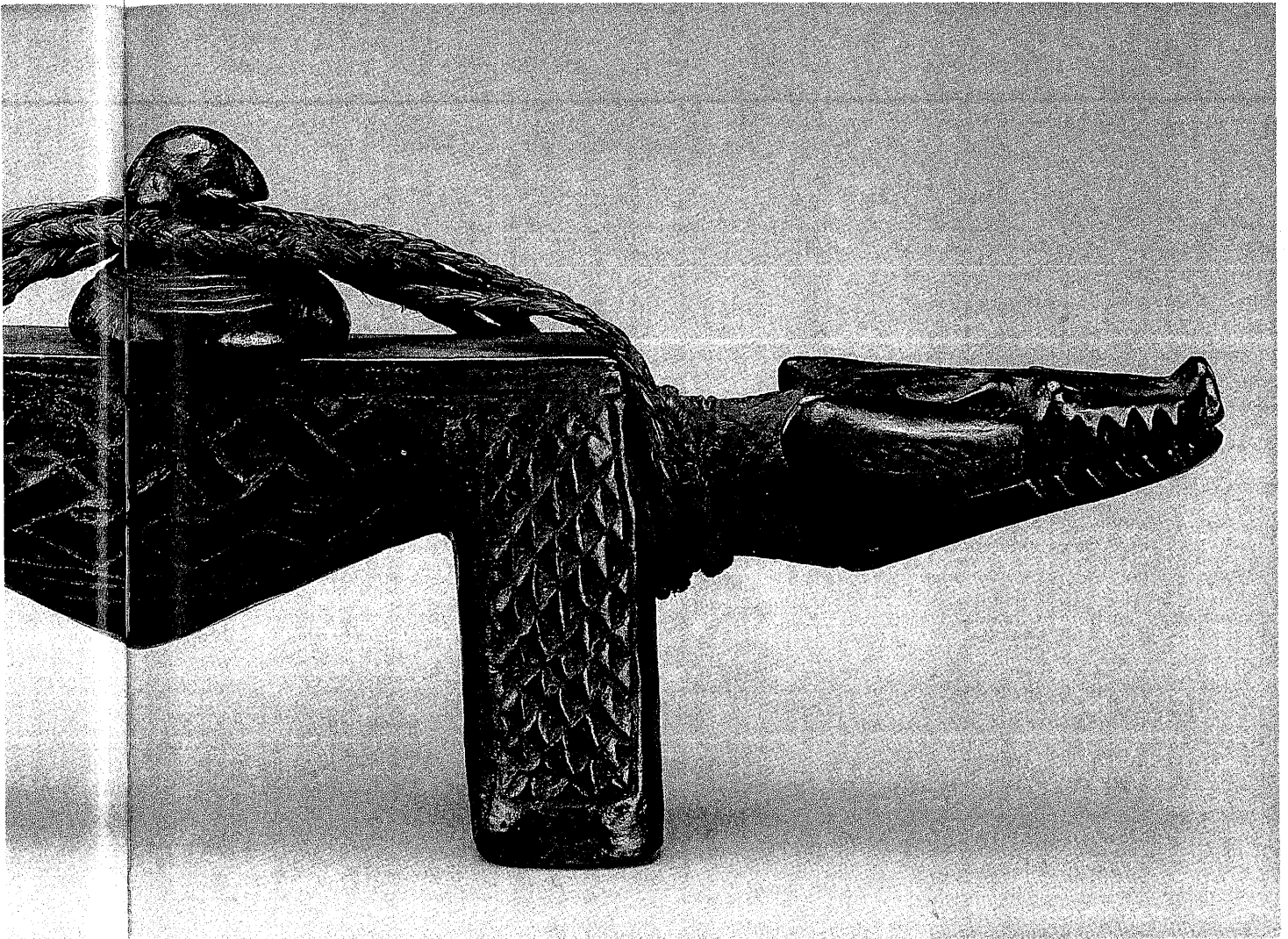
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in attracting followers for her master while also being suspected of posing a witchcraft threat may be alluded to by the tears on her cheeks. These three royal masks together form a performance triptych that acts out the mythic story of royal power, deception, and conflict.

### *Royal Divination Arts: Communicating Nature's Insights*

The important place of both myths of origin and nature spirits in the lives of the Kuba finds expression in divination objects in the shape of animals – mainly crocodiles (FIG. 192), dogs, lizards, and warthogs. Problems addressed through these objects range from illnesses and their related treatments to the discovery of thieves. Diviners were called on to interpret the wishes of the wisdom-filled yet fickle *ngesh* nature spirits for humans. Because they



193. Kuba-Bushoong (Dem. Rep. of Congo). The plan of the royal capital, by King Mbopey Mabiintsch ma-Kyeen (1939–69).

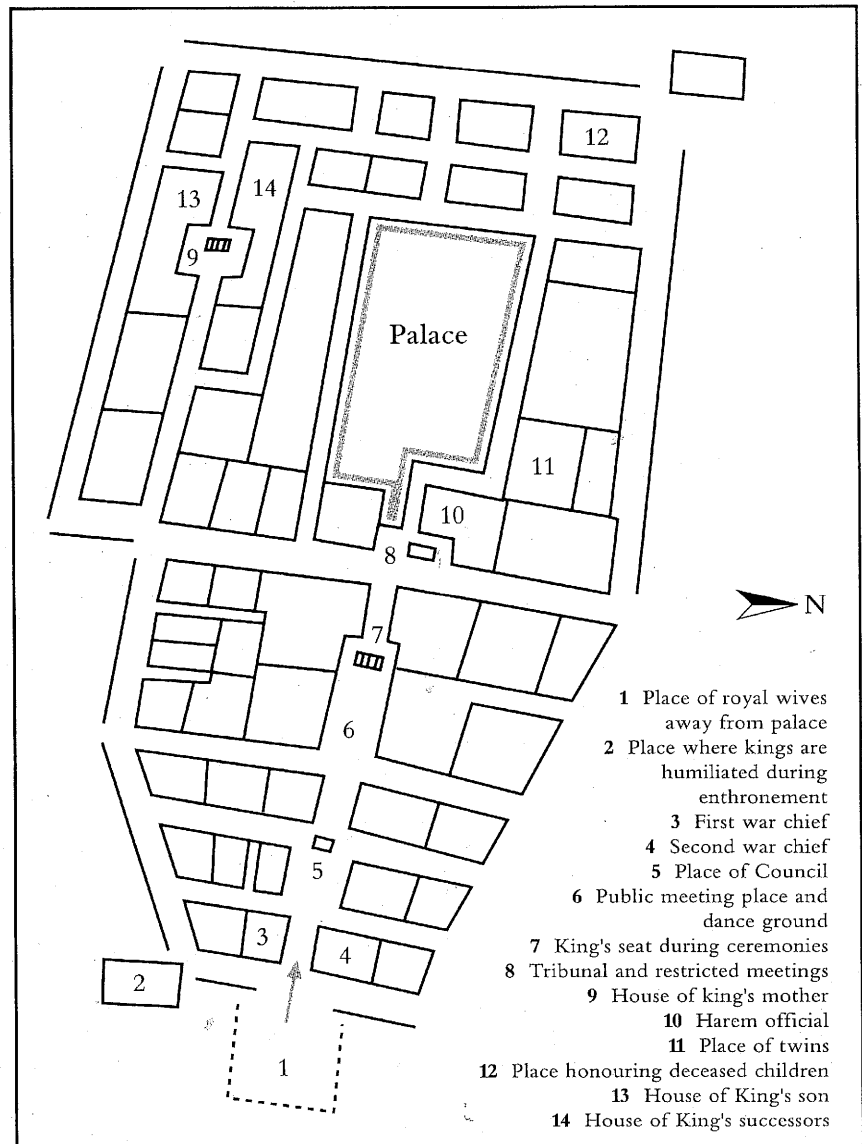
Originally conceived as a square, the plan was extended in time into a rectangle, associated measurements being made by an official known as the "chief of the rope." Protective charms were planted at the corners and center of the capital, which spanned an area of around 12,000 square feet (3,657 sq. m). The main entrance, which faced east, was guarded by two war chiefs. When the king died, his palace became his tomb and burial precinct. While some buildings were transported from the earlier site (the mat walls – like those of the Kongo – were quite transportable), others were constructed new in the subsequent ruler's own capital.

The houses of royal subjects were located in the upper area of the capital and toward the east of the palace; the royal guards' residences were positioned "below" and toward the west. Underscoring these spatial divisions, here, as in grasslands Cameroon, one entered the royal city conceptually from above, moving downward toward the palace and the houses of the king's close family members. Positioned beside the palace entry was a residence set aside for twins.

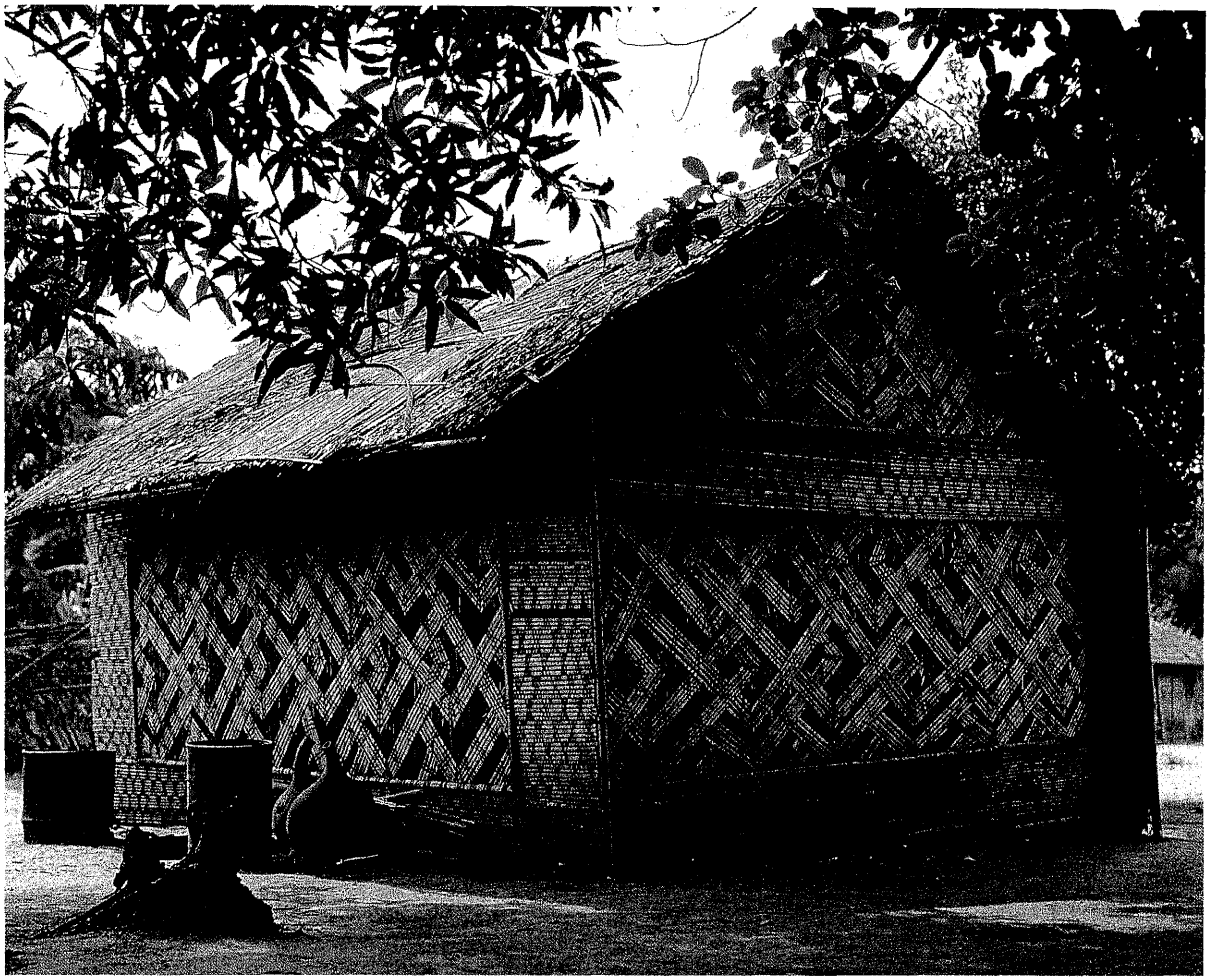
are especially linked to streams and springs, water animals are thought to assume key roles as emissaries of the other *ngesh*. Another animal appearing prominently in divination is the dog because of its ability to sniff out prey during the hunt.

### *The Architecture of Weaving: Palaces and Spatial Patterns*

In addition to creating masks, portrait sculptures, drums, baskets, and other arts, each king also designed his own capital (*nshyeeng*; FIG. 193). After selecting the site and providing it with a distinctive name and slogan, the king supervised the construction of the new palace. In the 1880s the Kuba capital had a population of roughly 10,000. Lushly patterned mat-like walls separated the



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different sections of the capital, defining perspectives, and framing areas in a play of horizontals and shifting axes which emphasized at once successive vistas and the harmonious demarcation of open spaces. The main avenue leading into the palace was the dominant focus, traversed by smaller streets, at the junctions of which were positioned the houses of the main court officials.

So important was the royal building program that the new king's enthronement rites were timed to coincide with the inauguration of his capital. On this occasion the king was carried around the new city on a special palanquin. (Sometimes the king moved the palace site during his reign in response to serious problems such as epidemics.) Although impermanent (many buildings lasting only about ten years), key buildings in the palace were carefully maintained so that they would remain standing for more than thirty years. The relative fragility of this architecture necessitated a ready supply of workers, these largely provided by the affiliated non-royal villages, who also supplied the essential raw materials. The prominent place of mats in Kuba capital

194. Kuba-Bushoong (Dem. Rep. of Congo). The king's sleeping room (*mwaan ambul*).

The walls of the palace and other capital buildings provided a rich backdrop for court ceremonies. The geometric designs complement textiles and body decorations. Each pattern had a unique title and meaning. Some recalled the names of the kings who invented them, reflecting the pressure on rulers to demonstrate their creativity through the invention of new designs.

buildings (FIG. 194) finds conceptual parallels in mythic accounts that the creator god Mbwoom laid a mat flat in the sky to organize space and fix the cardinal directions. Because the capital plan faced east, the rising sun would first illuminate the residence of the king. Not only was the king believed to control sunlight and life, but through his use of potent charms he was thought to be able to transform himself into a force of nature who could take human life.

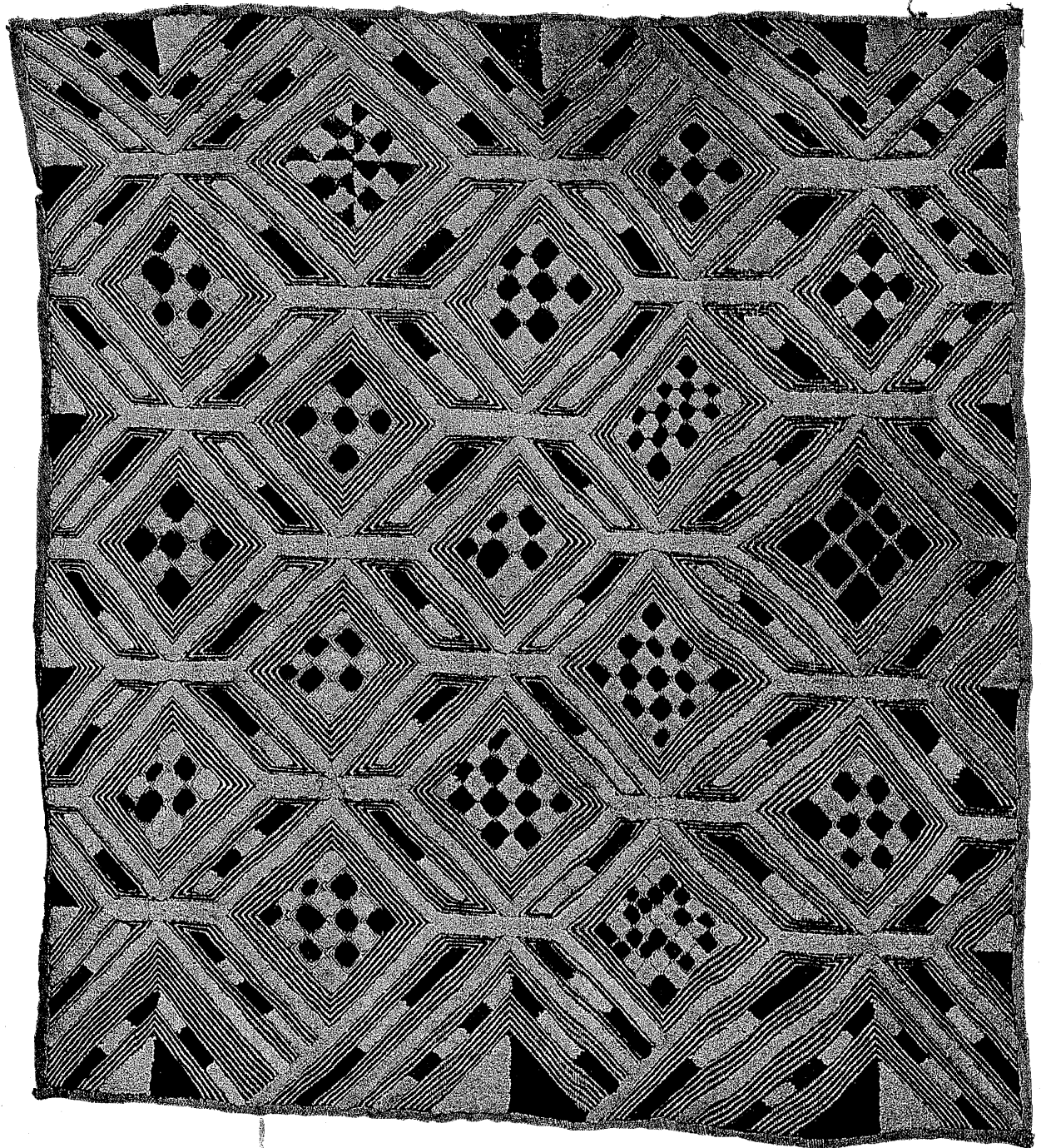
Generally positioned along a stream, the royal city also was divided into upstream and downstream segments, each under the supervision of a noble. This upstream-downstream positioning complements both migration histories in which the royals are said to have arrived in the area from a place “downstream”

195. Kuba-Bushoong (Dem. Rep. of Congo). King Kot aPe, painted by Norman Hardy from a photograph, published in E. Torday and T. A. Joyce, *Notes Ethnographiques*, 1910–11.

King Kot aPe stands in front of one of his interior palace buildings with its rolled-screen closure and broad threshold panel which provided a degree of privacy; similar threshold panels are used in Cameroon grassland palaces (see FIG. 146).



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196. Kuba-Bushoong (Dem. Rep. of Congo). A raffia pile cloth, twentieth century. 28¼ x 25½" (72 x 65 cm). Fowler Museum Museum of Cultural History, University of California, Los Angeles.

The number of distinct textile patterns is extraordinarily high: one study of Kuba patterns suggests that two-thirds of all the formulaic variations possible in design are represented in the Kuba textile corpus, which suggests the primacy placed on artistic innovation in this area. Textile names refer to individuals such as the king or the talented embroiderer who first created a design. Others (like the wall patterns) recall elements in nature such as smoke, fish, crocodile backs, and eyebrows. The most elaborate Kuba cloths were worn at court funerals; the corpses of royals and important officials were also wrapped in long lengths of cloth.

and ritual traditions that the king's soul returns "downstream" following his death. The Kuba practice of burying the king in a canoe also reflects this idea.

As in Kongo and many other African royal capitals, the palace (*yoot*) was decidedly like a maze, necessitating continual shifts in direction when moving through the interior. The palace was divided into two main sections, that of the king at the south and rear, the houses of his wives toward the front and north. The women's residences occupied roughly a third of the palace and it was here that the king was eventually buried. From the entrance at the southeast corner one passed through two successive courts between which were placed cages of living eagles, symbols of royal power, that complemented the vital political roles that local "eagle feather chiefs" (*kum aphoong*) played in court affairs. From this second court, one passed into a larger court shaded by a tree with commemorative and protective functions. Here was located the throne room and behind it the king's sleeping room. There were no windows but a sizable central door allowed light as well as access into the interior. For greater privacy, the king's portal also sometimes included blinds and/or a broad lintel panel, this latter feature recalling grassland Cameroon forms (FIG. 195).

The decoration of the palace buildings shares important features with textiles known as *mbal* or *nimm* (FIG. 196); here too virtuosity and originality were highly prized. These rich, velour-looking Kuba cloths were made from the young shoots of raffia palm dyed to warm earthen colors ranging from deep red to rust, ochre, and black. While the Kuba king Shyaam is credited with introducing these textiles (purportedly from the Pende in southwestern the Democratic Republic of Congo), close parallels can be seen in Kongo cut-pile textiles (see FIGS 164 and 175). Accordingly, the Kuba term *ncak* ("woman's dress") is a Kongo loan word. To create a woman's wrapped skirt, several cloths were sewn together. For men, only a strip of this material was used as a border.

Weaving throughout the Kuba area was done by men, but it was women (historically, princesses and the wives of the king; FIG. 197) who both designed and sewed the complex embroidery designs, working exclusively from memory. They also cut the surface to give the textiles the soft pile. One of the most striking features of these beautiful and iconically complex fabrics is their variation in design. Whereas the Bushoong prefer balance and relatively regularized

197. A Bangongo-Kuba royal woman in one of the court dance costumes. Painted by Norman Hardy after a photograph, published in E. Torday and T. A. Joyce, *Notes Ethnographiques*, 1910–11.

Women were among the most important artists in Kuba art, particularly in the fabrication of richly patterned textiles. The undulating patterns at the lower and upper periphery of her garment add to its striking sculptural interest.



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**Left**

198. Kuba (Dem. Rep. of Congo). A palm-wine cup in the shape of a drum, nineteenth century. Wood, height 7¼" (18.5 cm). Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin.

The royal drum depicted in this palm wine cup represents a type known as *bukit*. A similar drum appears on the *ndop* sculpture of King Kot a-Mbul, the warrior king who ruled at the end of the eighteenth century.



**Right**

199. Kuba (Dem. Rep. of Congo). A palm-wine cup, nineteenth–twentieth century. Height 7½" (19 cm). Werner Forman Archive, London.

Visual puns are a prominent feature of many such cups. Here a human head serves as a vessel. In other cases, an image of an arm or hand is added to the handle, or the vessel itself takes the shape of a stomach.



patterns, the nearby Shoowa tend to prefer irregular, unexpected, and even juxtaposed designs. Frequently, several quite different patterns are placed side by side, as if competing for our attention and praise.

Two important art forms identified with competition between titled court members are carved palm-wine drinking cups (FIGS 198 and 199) and elaborate boxes (FIG. 200) for razors, costume items, jewels, and the red camwood paste smoothed on the body during ceremonies. With half of all Bushoong men holding titles in the 1880s, competition for influence was sometimes fierce, and found expression in the elaboration of these essentially commonplace household objects into works of extraordinary beauty. Because Kuba individuals of high status signaled their largesse by distributing great quantities of palm wine to their friends and affiliates to attract a following, the complexity of such art came under public scrutiny. If, as the myths maintain, the inebriation caused by drinking palm wine led eventually to the formation of the royal line, drinking thus provided the social setting in which office holders were able to play out through art the precariousness of their own positions within this heatedly contested milieu.

200. Kuba-Ngongo (Dem. Rep. of Congo). A lidded box, acquired in 1908. Wood, height 18½" (46 cm). British Museum, London.

Beautifully carved lidded boxes held the expensive red tucula powder which was used as a cosmetic. The unusual shape of this box appears to derive from a rubbing oracle used in divination, the small circle at the center of the lid recalling the disk which is slid along the oracle's surface.



# The Royal Arts of Africa

*The Majesty of Form*

Suzanne Preston Blier



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**Frontispiece** Banga (Cameroon). Figure of a king, page 168 (detail)

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