

# Coming to Terms with Heritage

## Kuba Ndop and the Art School of Nsheng

Elisabeth L. Cameron

In 1989, I was in Zaïre (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo) doing pre-dissertation fieldwork and trying to find the perfect research topic. The Kuba kingdom was an irresistible draw and I spent several months in the area exploring various topics. I was especially privileged to stay at Nsheng,<sup>1</sup> the capital of the Kuba kingdom, as the guest of the king's mother. One evening a young man approached me and gave me an *ndop*, a carved figure representing the seventeenth century king Shyaam aMbul aNgoong (Fig. 1). He introduced himself as Musunda-Kananga from the Sala Mpasu area and heritage and explained that he had aspirations of becoming a contemporary artist. He had applied to go to the Institut des Beaux Arts in Kinshasa but had decided to come to its sister school, the Institut des Beaux Arts in Nsheng, originally founded by Josephite priests forty years previously in an effort to preserve Kuba artistic heritage, because it was closer to home and cheaper. When Musunda-Kananga arrived, he was dismayed to discover that, while officially a government-sponsored art school, in reality he would be taught how to carve Kuba-style figures and cups. The Kuba *ndop* carved by a Sala Mpasu artist through a Flemish Catholic instructional heritage in a Zaïrian secular government fine art school seemed to epitomize the tensions of loss and renewal common to discussions of heritage.

An *ndop* is an officially commissioned wood portrait figure of a specific Kuba king—originally only one *ndop* was produced for each king. Scholars differ on the exact number of surviving *ndop*, but perhaps eleven original figures are housed in European and American museums.<sup>2</sup> All the known *ndop* are very similar in form: measuring between 10 and 30 inches tall, they represent the king seated with crossed legs on a cube-shaped pedestal, holding a ceremonial knife in his left hand, and *ibol* or the king's individualized and identifying symbol attached to the pedestal at his

feet. For example, Shyaam aMbul aNgoong banned gambling and introduced the *lyeel* game (Vansina 1978:60). He is also credited for bringing a time of peace that gave people leisure time to play games. Therefore, he chose the *lyeel* game as his symbol. The *ndop* was used during the king's lifetime as his surrogate when he was absent from the capital. At his death, the incoming king slept with the *ndop* of the previous king to absorb his *ngesh* or bush spirit.<sup>3</sup> The *ndop* then became a memorial figure that was kept by the king's surviving wives and occasionally displayed. When the African American missionary William Sheppard arrived at the court in 1892, he described the scene:

On an elevation were statues of four former kings. These statues were carved from ebony. They were highly prized and regarded as sacred. One of them represented King Xamba Bulngungu [Shyaam aMbul aNgoong]. On his lap was something like a checker board. King Xamba's dearest amusement was in playing this native game. Another had a blacksmith's anvil before him, for he loved the art of blacksmithing (1917:112).

*Ndop* were also given as gifts to visiting dignitaries or purchased by visitors like the ethnographer Emil Torday (Fig. 2). The *ndop* figure became well known in Europe after four collected by Torday were put on display at the British Museum.

The meaning of *ndop*, both to the royal Kuba themselves and to those outside the royal family, whether Congolese or European, changed throughout the twentieth century. Torday recorded that the *ndop* was originally commissioned by Shyaam aMbul aNgoong "so that his successors would be able to remember him and his laws" (Torday and Joyce 1911:27). Jan Vansina, a historian, records the spiritual uses of the figure during the lifetime and immediately following the death of the king (Vansina 1964:100–101, 108, 113; 1978). Vansina states that "the king's personality resides in it





as much as in his body” (1964:101). Joseph Cornet, on the other hand, suggests that the figures were made postmortem, except that of Mbope Mabiintshi maKyeen, the king who died in 1969, who had his made before his death because he was convinced that, in the modern world, no one would commission his after his death (Cornet 1982:58).

This debate among scholars about what the *ndop* is to the Kuba may or may not reflect the reality of Kuba perceptions and beliefs; it does reveal the changing character of the *ndop* outside the Kuba area. The contemporary painter Cheri Cherin, for example, in a painting titled *Mystique Congolaise*, exposes and critiques the occult and evil forces that many assign to the Congo (Fig. 3).<sup>4</sup> A series of dangerous vignettes include a leopard man masquerading as a priest, witches flying over a cemetery, a “traditional medicine” practitioner offering to cure AIDS, sorcery, and domination. In the corner, Mami Wata chats on a phone and, in the center of the painting, there is a carefully articulated *ndop*. A snaggle-toothed figure wearing 666, the Christian symbol of the Antichrist, holding a sharp spear and flexing his long sharp claws, arches over all the different objects and scenes. In this work, the *ndop* is revealed as an evil, possibly demonic object, a very different interpretation of the work than when it is presented in a museum as a fine work of art.

Whether it be the *ndop* produced in a fine art school representing Kuba pride and heritage, the *ndop* displayed in major



1 Contemporary *ndop* representing Shyaam aMbulo aNgoong carved by Musunda-Kananga, a Sala Mpasu carver. Democratic Republic of the Congo; 1989. Wood; 35 cm. Collection of the author.  
PHOTO: © POPPY DE GARMO (POPPYDEGARMO.COM)

2 One of the *ndop* purchased by Emil Torday displayed by Misha Pelyeeng a-Ntshay. (Hilton-Simpson 1911:f. 204).  
PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE ROSS ARCHIVE OF AFRICAN IMAGES

European museums as the epitome of African sculpture, or *ndop* used as a symbol of paganism, tribalism, and backwardness, the changes in meaning, as suggested by Rambelli and Reinders, are a form of iconoclasm (2007:27). The effect of forcing new meaning on artworks as seen in Emil Torday’s expedition, in which a large quantity of Kuba art was removed and re-presented in the British Museum, forced European artists, art historians, and museum professionals to forge a new understanding of the objects and the Kuba themselves. It is also seen in the arrival of Flemish priests imbued with European ideas of preserving heritage into the Kuba capitol, which forced the Kuba themselves to move to new production and profoundly changed the meaning of the *ndop*, making it export art. Finally, it is seen in post-colonial reinterpretations of historical beliefs and practices seen in contemporary paintings that reflect the tensions between “ancient” beliefs and practices and the modern world.





3 Cheri Cherin (Kinshasa, b. 1955)  
*Mystique Congolaise* (1999)  
 Painting, 62 cm x 96 cm  
 Collection of Werner Horvath, Austria.  
 PHOTO: COURTESY OF WERNER HORVATH

### RECEPTION OF KUBA ART IN THE WEST

The Kuba peoples are a confederation of different ethnic groups, each with their own language, histories, and traditions, who are bound together because they all pay tribute to a single king (Vansina 1978:140–42). The kingdom itself is located on the edge of the equatorial rain forest between the Sankaru and Lulua Rivers. Taking advantage of the resources from the savanna and forest and being on two key navigable rivers, the Kuba developed into an important entity that controlled a rich trade network.

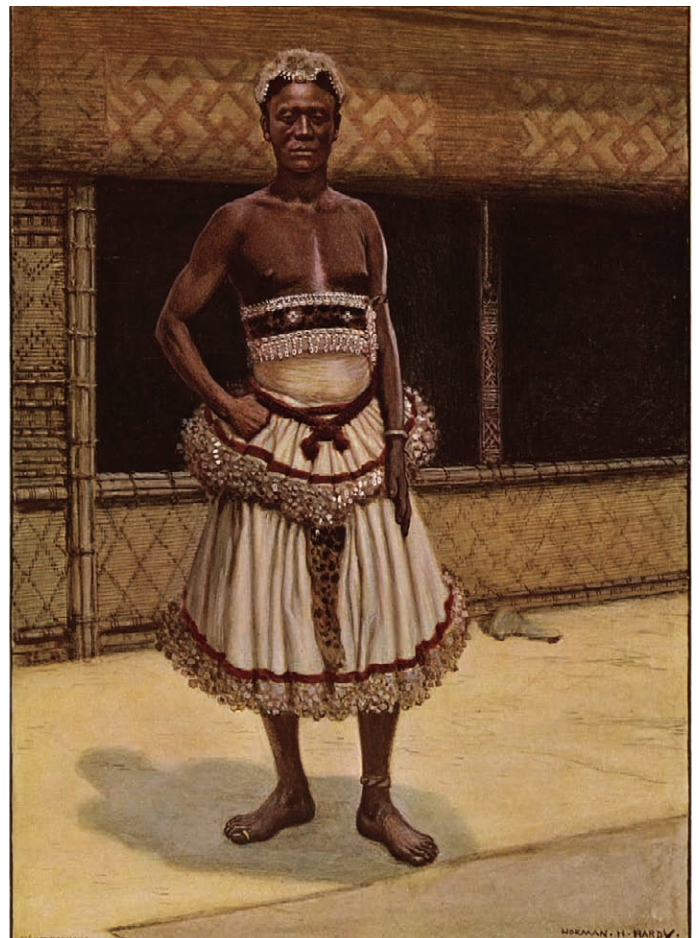
This inland kingdom was remote to late nineteenth century Europeans and Americans and its inaccessibility to all but the most intrepid Western explorers drew the attention of colonizers and art lovers. The court qualified as ancient—king lists carefully kept through oral traditions date the foundation of the current Matoon dynasty to Shyaam aMbul aNgoong, who ruled in the mid-seventeenth century (Vansina 1978:245). Elegant forms, figurative sculptures, and complex dense patterning on works made for royal Kuba patrons were visually accessible and attrac-

tive to Europeans, who were, in turn, impressed by the refined court art and regalia produced by specialists.<sup>5</sup> Collections of this art and tales of the civilized, ancient kingdom in the “heart of darkness” soon reached Europe and America, bringing the Kuba peoples and their arts to the attention of the broader world.

First drawn to the elaborate court, missionaries, travelers, ethnographers, and colonial officials learned of the intricate political and legal systems that, on superficial levels, resembled European courts and protocols. As eloquently stated by Pagan Kennedy, “the Belgians had been trying to gain entrance to this African Shangri-la, this hidden utopia rumored to be rich in ivory, gold, and rubber” (2002:70).

Ludwig Wolf, in 1885, described the Kuba as a “superior civilization,” and declared it to be descended from the Pharaonic Egyptians (Vansina 2010:43). Europeans and Americans especially were impressed by the refined court art and regalia produced by specialists and thought they supported the idea of Egyptian roots. T.A. Joyce comments in a 1910 article on an *ndop* given to Torday by the king (Fig. 4): “The art of portraiture in the round, as far as Africa is concerned, has usually been supposed to be confined to Ancient Egypt. Among the large material brought back from the Kasai district by Mr. E. Torday—material which makes it necessary for ethnographers to reconsider their former opinions on the subject of native African art—are four portrait-figures in wood ...” (Joyce 1910:1). Jean-Paul LaFitte responds to this description: “The statue of Shamba Bolongongo,





(clockwise from top left)

4 Photograph of *ndop* collected by Emil Torday that was published in numerous publications around 1910. (Joyce 1910, between pp. 1–2).

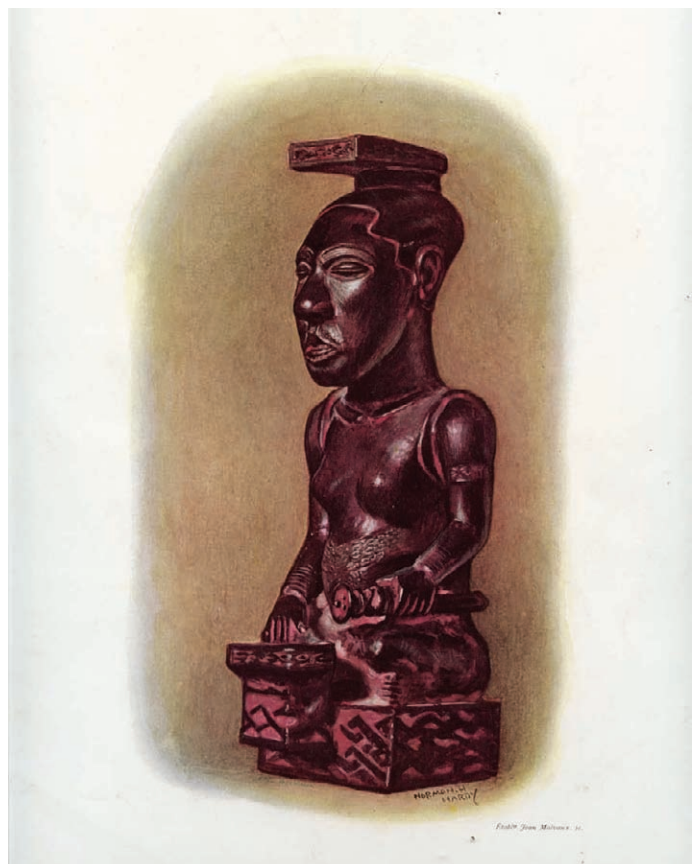
PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE ROSS ARCHIVE OF AFRICAN IMAGES

5 “Kwete Peshanga aKena, Current Chief, in ceremonial costume.” [*Kwete Peshanga kena, Chef Actuel, en costume de cérémonie.*] Painting by Norman H. Hardy.

TORDAY AND JOYCE 1911:PL. II

6 “Shamba Bolongongo, 93rd Chief, contemporary statue of this chief (around 1600)” [*Shamba Bolongongo, 93E Chef; Statue Contemporaine de ce Chef (1600 Env.).*] Painting by Norman H. Hardy.

TORDAY AND JOYCE 1911:PL. 1







(this page, top–bottom)

**7** Art school temporarily housed in old saw mill.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE INSTITUT DES BEAUX ARTS, NSHENG

**8** Institut des Beaux-Arts, Nsheng.

PHOTO: ELISABETH L. CAMERON, 1989

(opposite)

**9** Detail of designs painted on art school building.

PHOTO: ELISABETH L. CAMERON, 1989





which was brought back from a recent voyage by M. E. Torday and which is now at the British Museum, proves that at least at a certain era the Congolese artists weren't inferior to their northern colleagues" (1910:306).<sup>6</sup> This Egyptian connection gave Kuba art and culture legitimacy in the eyes of the Belgian colonial authorities (Vansina 2010:43) and identified it, like the Egyptian pyramids and sculptures, as a heritage that had to be protected.<sup>7</sup>

Kuba art was first displayed in Europe at the 1897 Brussels International Exposition in the Colonial Palace, which had been built especially for the Exposition on the king's private estate in Tervuren (now the Royal Museum of Central Africa or the Afrika Museum). While most of the display space in the Palace was dedicated to ethnography, flora, fauna, etc., the Salon d'Honneur at the entryway to the Palace and the Salon des Grandes Cultures at the exit of the building were dedicated to art, and the Kuba were well represented. In describing the arts of the Kasai, Th. Masui calls the Kuba "masters of the art of wood-carving" (1897:6) and in addition to the Kuba textiles, several Kuba carvings are included in the limited number of works displayed as "art" (Vansina 2010:182).



The museum at Tervuren continued to promote the Kuba as an advanced civilization with extraordinary artwork (within its geographical and racial limits) through publishing monographs of the explorations of Emil Torday, a Hungarian who was head of a scientific expedition and traveled throughout the savannas of Congo Free State (now the DRC). He spent three months (October through December 1908) in Nsheng, the capital of the Kuba kingdom, during which time he amassed ethnographic information, oral histories, and a large collection of Kuba art. One of the artistic prizes he collected is the *ndop* of Shyaam aMbul aNgoong discussed above. According to Melville Hilton-Simpson, the photographer who traveled with the expedition, Torday diplomatically asked the king about obtaining the figure and, when he found out that the king was amenable, he managed to convince the royal court to sell them (Hilton-Simpson 1911:209) (Fig. 2). With great delight and anticipation, Torday shipped the objects, along with others he had obtained in the surrounding areas, to T.A. Joyce at the British Museum (Mack 1990:16). Some pieces were immediately put on display and *The Times* reported that the exhibition highlighted art of "one of the most remarkable tribes of Africa" (ibid., p. 17).

Torday's volume that followed in 1911, *Notes Ethnographiques sur les peuples communément appelés Bakuba, ainsi que sur les peuplades apparentées. Les Bushongo*, coauthored with Joyce, was published by the Belgian Minister of Colonies and was well received in the arts community in Brussels, making, as Vansina described it, "quite a stir" (2010:182). Franz Boas, in his review for *American Anthropologist*, stated that "the most important portion of this part of the book is the chapter on art with its wealth of illustration and of information ..." (1911:480). Torday took with him on his expedition Norman Hardy, a well-known painter who specialized in ethnographic work, and W.H. Hilton-Simpson, who was a photographer among other qualifications. Torday himself also used a camera but without much success (Mack 1990:31). Hardy sketched while traveling and then created paintings based on his own sketches and Torday and Hilton-Simpson's photographs (ibid., p. 57). These opulent and detailed paintings were included as plates in Torday's book (Fig. 5). One of the paintings was of the *ndop* that Torday collected and is now in the British Museum (Fig. 6).

Kuba art appeared in the 1923 Brooklyn Museum exhibition titled "Primitive Negro Art Chiefly From the Congo," where the curator, Stewart Culin, intended that "the entire collection, whatever may have been its original uses, is shown under the classification of art; as representing a creative impulse, and not for the purpose of illustrating the customs of African peoples" (Culin 1923:1). Culin had traveled throughout Europe collecting the pieces for this exhibition and was offered several collections of "Bushongo" art, a term which had come to mean any well-carved piece from the Congo. In conjunction with the exhibition, the New York department store Bonwit Teller and Co. developed a line of cotton dresses based on Kuba geometric designs that they displayed in the store windows on Fifth Avenue ("Cotton Frocks" 1923). Although these pseudo-Kuba fashions were short-lived, Kuba art became stock for exhibitions of African art and for designers who freely borrowed Kuba designs.





### THE EUROPEAN HERITAGE MOVEMENT AND THE CREATION OF THE ART SCHOOL

In the Kuba kingdom itself during the first half of the twentieth century, colonial and missionary powers were making themselves felt. The horrific rubber atrocities<sup>8</sup> encroached on the kingdom and, in 1908, the American Presbyterian Church Mission (APCM) began to publicize its terrible effects on the Kuba peoples.<sup>9</sup> The Presbyterians, therefore, were not in good favor with the Belgians and the state-sponsored Catholic Church was given control over the core Kuba area.

Although the Presbyterians arrived first, in time the Kuba king formally converted to Catholicism. The Mweka Diocese was opened by missionaries of Scheut who were given the special assignment of fighting the influence of the Protestants at Luebo, the main location of the APCM (Mbiyangandu 2004:19, 20). The Catholics had problems beginning work in the Kuba area. The first Catholic mission was opened at Mushenge in 1906 but, due to a skirmish in which one of the priests was killed, closed in 1908. It was reestablished in 1914 but closed again in 1926. The Order of St. Joseph of the Sacred Heart arrived in the Kuba area in 1936 (Herbers 1959:53) under the guidance of Father Martin Miserez. Catholic nuns stationed at Nsheng, the Kuba capital, followed the Presbyterian lead of tapping Kuba arts as a revenue

source and between 1938 and 1951 raised money for their own school for women by exporting “Kasai velvet.” They paid a group of Bushoong women a set amount to deliver a specific number of textiles per week (Vansina 2010:275). Antonin d’Haenens traveled in 1950 from Louvain, Belgium, to the Belgian Congo to take up his post at Nsheng, where he would work alongside Cyprien Herbers, who arrived later, to preserve Kuba heritage and stimulate artistic production.

Both priests had lived through World War II and its aftermath and the many discussions of destruction and heritage that raged throughout all of Europe. During that war, there had been contradictions in policy and execution of policy regarding the fate of the cultural heritage of Europe. On August 20, 1943, President Franklin D. Roosevelt established the American Commission for the Protection and Salvage of Artistic and Historic Monuments in War Areas (called the Roberts Commission) and gave them the task of identifying, protecting, and returning “historical works of art and artifacts” in Europe. They advised in the formation of the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives (MFAA) Section of the War Department, the military group responsible for carrying out the Roberts Commission’s mandate, and helped select officers for the MFAA (Records of the American Commission 2007:1–3). The British Committee on the Preservation



(opposite, left–right)

**10** Thirty-six carved posts on the exterior of the art school building.

PHOTO: ELISABETH L. CAMERON, 1989

**11** Detail of carved post, showing openwork and sculpted head.

PHOTO: ELISABETH L. CAMERON, 1989

(this page)

**12** Catholic Church in Nsheng. Collection of the author.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF FATHER JAAK GEYSELS



and Restitution of Works of Art, Archives and Other Material in Enemy Hands (Macmillan Committee), with a similar mission, was established in 1944 (Lambourne 2001:122). Through the work of these two organizations, officers were given special training in how to identify and protect protected sites. Soon after these organizations began their work, however, Allied saturation bombings destroyed the cultural centers of cities like Warsaw, Cologne, and Dresden, demolishing churches, archives, and museums previously identified as protected. It has been suggested that many cathedrals, ranging from St. Paul's Cathedral in London and the Cologne Cathedral in Germany, were spared not because of their protected status but rather because their large structures dominated the sky and therefore acted as location markers for either German or allied bomber pilots.

International outcry over the destruction of European artistic heritage intensified after the war ended in 1945, resulting in pressure to protect cultural monuments from future acts of war. The Roberts Commission continued to work through 1946, documenting the destruction through descriptions, maps, and photographs; identifying monuments that needed continued protection; and reporting on what had been done to restore stolen cultural property (Records of the American Commission 2007:1). In 1954, the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Properties in the Event of Armed Conflict (also known as the Hague Convention) was signed by 123 States. The Hague Convention focused on immovable property (monuments like cathedrals) and movable property (mainly museums or archival collections) (Ruggles and Silverman 2009:4).

### HISTORY OF THE ART SCHOOL

It was in this postwar atmosphere of actively working to protect the cultural and artistic heritage of Europe that, in 1950, Antonin d'Haenens arrived in the Kuba capital, prepared to find

this vaguely Egyptian vibrant artistic heritage being practiced; instead he found three elderly carvers working under the shade of the trees. Most of the earlier works of Kuba art had disappeared, having been taken to satisfy the insatiable appetite of European museums and collectors (Binkley and Darish 2009:51). Father Antonin sought to fill this void by starting a carving workshop in the nearby colonial center of Mweka, where the ten students who enrolled were Luba and Bena Lulua and not Kuba at all.<sup>10</sup>

Within six months, the school was transferred to an old sawmill in Nsheng where the king could keep a watchful eye on the new institution and new school buildings were constructed (Fig. 7). One provision of the new building complex was the assignment of a Josephite missionary qualified as an artist (Herbers 1959:54). Cyprien Herbers, with academy training at the Academy of Louvain and the Institute Saint Luc de Gand, arrived in 1955 (Mbiyangandu 2004:162).

The Fonds du Bien Etre Indigènes, a colonial fund used primarily for public buildings that would increase quality of life in rural areas ("Documenta" 1949:107), helped fund the new art school buildings, which opened in 1957 with thirty-six (presumably Kuba) students (Herbers 1959:53–54). The priests designed and built European-style buildings to house their school, but wanted to make visual connections to Kuba architecture, where designs are integrated into the exterior house walls (Fig. 8). Because Kuba architecture is basically mat work, the designs tend to be very regular and repeated and in muted tones.

The priests adapted the designs to the new plastered surfaces by using ruler and protractor to draw similar regular designs that were, in contrast to the originals, brightly colored (Fig. 9). These rigidly geometric designs were appropriate for a royal venue, since such regular patterns were reserved for the Bushoong (Washburn 1990:25). In addition, thirty-six carved columns were placed on the verandas, a prerogative given only to





royal buildings and those sponsored by the king (Figs. 10–11). A church was also constructed where the king, who had become Catholic, worshipped. The decorations followed the same principles as those of the art school (Fig. 12).

The students were exposed to “ancient” Kuba art through a collection made by Father Cyprien and housed in the school museum and the main teacher, interestingly not seen in any of the school’s photo albums, was Jules Lyeen, the court carver and a royal himself (Vansina 2010:294). I would assume that this was a strategic appointment as both a master carver and the king’s source of inside information.

The Flemish artists/priests researched Kuba art and wrote a textbook titled *Elements d’Art Bakuba* (Herbers 1959), with text in French and Tshiluba, neither of which are spoken by the Kuba. In the textbook, Father Cyprien cites published sources and had access to Lyeen, a royal carver, yet he describes the *ndop* as *nkengu*, a Tshiluba or Tshikete term—used by outsiders and not the royals themselves—for the king (Fig. 13).

The priests also taught Kuba men how to make Kuba art using European tools (cover). The students learned how to sculpt in wood and ivory but took lessons in French, anatomy, arithmetic, and religion as well. Their art history lessons examined the arts of Europe, Asia, and Africa (Mbiyangandu 2004:161, Herbers 1959:54). Father Cyprien also placed his own cement sculptures

(this page)

**13** Page from *Elements d’Art Bakuba* (Herbers 1959).

PHOTO: COLLECTION OF THE AUTHOR

(opposite, left-right)

**14** Sculptures on the grounds of the art school by Father Cyprien.

PHOTO: ELISABETH L. CAMERON, 1989

**15** Photograph displayed by Father Cyprien in his office of a bust he sculpted in ivory.

PHOTO: JONATHAN M. CAMERON, 1979

throughout the campus (Fig. 14) and used local materials, such as ivory, to carve figures such as the bust in Figure 15, which is now in the collection of the Vatican.

The art students, during their tenure at the school, constructed notebooks of geometric designs carefully drawn on graph paper with the design name written next to it. The design was rigidly drawn, resembling architectural and royal designs. Students also sculpted copies of various *ndop* and other personal and utilitarian art forms, like boxes and drinking vessels.

The same rigidity of design was expected in the wood sculptures as seen in the building itself. In addition, the edges of the engraved designs were sharp (Fig. 16). This was a departure from older carved forms, where the design could flow and the edges smoothed and rounded with time and use (Fig. 17). Carvers schooled in the old apprentice system would not trace their pattern onto the wood. They could begin in one place and carve the pattern as if it were being revealed as a whole. If the piece was round, when they returned to the beginning the patterns would match. Students in the art school, on the other hand, had to carefully pencil their pattern onto the wood, making sure everything lined up on the other side before making the first cut. Vansina suggests that the sculptures of the art school were at best “inspired by Kuba art but were actually something else altogether” (2010:275). Mbiyangandu notes that the art produced in the school was made “increasingly perfect and inspired by Bakuba art” (2004:161), implying that the art coming out of the school was placed in a different category than “ancient” Kuba art.

If something else, what are the works produced in the school? When the school was founded, the priests clearly saw their work as a way to preserve Kuba heritage. Each carved piece, whether a seemingly utilitarian box made to hold cosmetics or embroidery razors or an *ndop*, might be made with new types of tools and in a different environment, but was based on a Kuba form rooted in history. The form itself, though, changes with the introduction of new tools, training, and markets. *Ndop*, for example, were once made only for the king himself, and the artist who produced the king’s *ndop* was executed during that king’s funeral (Vansina 1964:113). Now many *ndop* were made and sold on the open market, the most popular being that of the culture hero and founder of the current dynasty, Shyaam aMbul aNgoong (Fig. 18).

Once the art school works arrived outside the Kuba area, however, the differentiation was often lost. The school, for example, participated in the Exposition Universelle de Bruxelles in 1958,





displaying works by Antonin D'Haenens and several Kuba students (Mbiyangandu 2004:164, Herbers n.d.:57) in the pavilion dedicated to Catholic Missions in the Congo. Critics have noted that many of the artworks on display in the Congo section were by European artists (Stanard 2005:283), such as the works by Father Antonin. This makes it all the more significant that artworks by Kuba artists, even though they were products of the art school, were among the few works by Congolese artists displayed during the Exposition. I feel sure that the many visitors who viewed the priest's works did not see the works as "something else altogether" but as Kuba art by Kuba artists.

A similar situation had occurred earlier with the "Kasai velvet" exported by the nuns stationed at Mushenge. The textiles were expected to look like those found in mats and architecture, resulting in enlarged and flattened patterns (Vansina 2010:275). Textiles done for internal use and not controlled by the Sisters have been compared to jazz improvisation, with a lively rhythm appearing in the textile through many variations of the design and color (Louie 2011). Geometric analysis of Kuba patterns suggests

Kuba women create patterns of mathematical complexity and beauty by deviating from static structures with their own personal logic of improvisation.... Analogous to the African-American idiom of improvisational jazz, improvisation in Kuba cloth makes their design motifs unique in Western textiles (Bhakar et al. 2004:310).

This design rhythm disappeared in export textiles with the resulting disappearance of the individuality of the artist.

The Belgian Congo gained its independence in 1960 and the art school continued apace. The following decade of revolution and rebellion did not seriously affect the school, which continued to train Kuba men to carve. Mobutu Sese Seko, however, established a policy of *authenticité* that changed how the school functioned. In his *Manifesto of N'Sele* in 1967 he proclaimed:

*Authenticité* has made us discover our personality by reaching into the depths of our past for the rich cultural heritage left to us by our ancestors. We have no intention of blindly returning to all ancestral customs; rather we would like to choose those that adapt themselves well to modern life, those that encourage progress, and those that create a way of life and thought that are essentially ours (Meredith 2005).

At first *authenticité* meant giving up Christian or European names and abandoning the suit, tie, and brassiere. *Authenticité*, by 1973, became a means for Mobutu to take over foreign-controlled institutions for his own gain in the "Zairianization of the economy" (Adelman 1975:111). He abolished all churches (forcing them to register as Communities), declared himself to be Messiah (Roberts 1994:137), and banned Christmas. By 1975, he had nationalized church-run schools, including the Josephite Art School, which was folded into the nationwide Institut des Beaux Arts. Father





**16** Art school box with sharp design and edges.  
PHOTO: COLLECTION OF THE AUTHOR

**17** Box  
Kuba peoples, Democratic Republic of Congo, Early-  
mid 20th century  
Wood, camwood powder, plant fiber; 7 cm x 32.4  
cm x 15.2 cm  
Bequest of Eliot Elisofon. 73-7-427.  
PHOTO: FRANKO KHOURY, NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN  
ART SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION



Cyprien, the only Josephite priest still actively teaching, left the school and a director appointed by the government took over.

I arrived more than a decade later to find that not much had changed. Father Cyprien had retired and moved to Belgium. The director of the school was from Kinshasa and had been trained in the Institut des Beaux Arts. He had accepted the headship of the school at Mushenge because he had high blood pressure and thought that rural life would be less stressful. The school, though, had become informally reaffiliated with the Josephites and the original curriculum was still being followed. Students, even those from outside the Kuba area, were being trained in Western art history and Kuba carving. No other “contemporary” arts, such as sculpture or painting, were being taught. Our friend with whom this story began, Musunda-Kananga, even though he

was from a completely different ethnic background, was being carefully taught to sculpt Kuba *ndop* for sale to an active national and international trade.

The economic, artistic, and historical pressures that had been put into play almost a half century ago still control the art school today. A recent Josephite newsletter boasted of the vigor and success of the school. But what is it that the school actually produces? Is it “something else altogether,” as Vansina suggests? Or is it the new form of Kuba sculpture formed in the colonial crucible and forged in the postcolonial dictatorship? For Museunda-Kananga, it has become his future: a Sala Mpasu man, fiercely independent, carving Kuba sculptures to pay for his existence and ambitions as a contemporary artist.





**18** Student carving *ndop* in art school workshop.  
PHOTO: ELISABETH L. CAMERON, 1989

## REVIVAL OR STAGNATION?

### TANGIBLE AND INTANGIBLE HERITAGE

Kuba artwork has long been a staple of export art and souvenirs for tourists throughout Africa. It could be found in bulk alongside the roads and railroads and in craft markets in major Congolese cities, other African cities, and in Europe and the US. Carvings from the art school fed this trade and became sources of income for the artists and their families. When the art school began to actively produce a large quantity of artwork in the early 1960s, the king and the priests created a cooperative in which the artist received 90% of the selling price of the artwork.<sup>11</sup> The king also passed laws setting minimum values and forbidding artists to undercut those prices (Vansina 2010:294). But by focusing on salable artwork and therefore moving into the realm of tourist art, the works do become un-tied from previous Kuba practice. Patricia Darish documented women overseeing mass creation of Kuba tourist textiles, but also making intricate pieces with vibrant patterns for their own (Darish 1989).

Father Cyprien, in 1959, declared that Kuba art had become “stagnate”—that is, an art that was only looking to the past and never to the future—and almost died because of the rigidity of the designs that result from “the lack of developed spiritual life and also the lack of a better degree of prosperity” (1959:43). Yet it is the

school itself that has produced much of the rigidity about which Cyprien himself complains. He celebrated the “new more lively compositions that now adorn the boxes, bowls, and some panels, as we find them on the doors and the pulpit in the Musheng church” (Herbers 1959:43) (Fig. 19). (It is interesting to note that many of the designs he identifies as innovative are his own.) He also praises the Sisters for introducing the bright new dyes for the textiles. His hope for the future of Kuba art was that “the teaching of design brings to life the rigid lines of ornamentation” because the artist is driven by a “more noble sentiment” (1959:44).

Were Fathers Cyprien and Antonin iconoclasts? Bruno Latour, in *Iconoclasm*, describes one type of “vandal” as follows: “they had absolutely no idea that they were destroying anything. On the contrary, they were cherishing images and protecting them from destruction, and yet they are accused later of having profaned and destroyed them! They are, so to speak, iconoclasts in retrospect” (2002:25). Cyprien loved Kuba art. He spent much of his life studying it and collected many examples of older carvings, which are now in the Josephite Museum at Geraadsbergen, Belgium. He only left the school in 1975 when Mobutu’s regime nationalized all the mission schools and the art school became an Institut des Beaux Arts with an academy-trained Zairian teacher from Kinshasa as the new director. Even so, and much to the frustration of students coming from a distance to become contemporary artists, the curriculum has not changed and will not as long as the market still exists for the art school’s product.

Cyprien promoted the multiple creation of *ndop* by including it in the textbook that he wrote for the school students, by drawing the *ndop* on the blackboard of the school workshops, and by moving the *ndop* produced by the students onto the art market. Instead of the *ndop* being singular figures representing specific kings and Kuba heritage, they now became fairly common statues that remind the viewer of the ancient history of the area.<sup>12</sup> *Ndop* also remind of an “exotic” and dangerous past in which the





19 The pulpit of the Catholic Church at Nsheng.  
PHOTO: COLLECTION OF THE AUTHOR

kings slept with the figures to absorb the previous king's *ngesh* or bush spirit. They become a sign of non-Christian beliefs—or perhaps Christian beliefs of demons—blocking the country's move to modernity. The changes in production and meaning of the *ndop* throughout the twentieth century produce both loss

and gain, something that Lowenthal suggest is inherent to preservation of heritage: “We also need to realize that destruction along with creation and preservation is inherent to heritage ... We are all iconoclasts at one time or another, and not only when we make war” (1999:8).

ELISABETH L. CAMERON is the Patricia and Rowland Rebele Chair in the History of Art and Visual Culture, University of California at Santa Cruz. She is author of *Isn't S/He a Doll: Play and Ritual in African Sculpture* (1996) and *Art of the Lega* (2001). [ecameron@ucsc.edu](mailto:ecameron@ucsc.edu).

## Notes

Funding for this research project was provided by the Christensen Fund through the Fowler Museum at UCLA, the Arts Research Institute, Arts Division, and the Senate Committee on Research Faculty Research Grants, both at the University of California, Santa Cruz. My thanks go especially to the Presbyterian missionaries who facilitated my travel, my gracious Kuba hosts in Bulape and Mushenge, especially the late mother of the nyim, and to Father Jack Geysels.

1 A variety of spellings for Nsheng appear in print and are derived from the different European and American missionaries and the different Kuba areas in which they worked. The two most common spellings are Mushenge, the Kete pronunciation spelled with an American English orthography, and Nsheng, the Bushong pronunciation spelled with a Flemish orthography. Mushenge is found on most maps but Nsheng is most common in academic literature.

2 See Cornet 1982 for a list and discussion of the identification and authenticity of *ndop* in museum collections.

3 The king was considered to be a nature spirit of *ngesh* and expected certain rituals and worship not due ordinary mortals. The king's wives are the main priestesses in the cult of the *ngesh* king, daily singing to him, dancing, and performing libations. The transformation of the king into nature spirit takes place during the installation when the new king is secluded with the *ndop* of the previous king so that the bush spirit can “incubate” within him (Vansina 1972:50).

4 My thanks to Peter Probst who drew my attention to this painting.

5 John Mack argues that most African sculpture known in Europe during the first decades of the twentieth century was “angular [and] resistant to interpretation” in contrast to the softer and more naturalistic sculpture of the Kuba (1990:17). For an excellent discus-

sion of the early reception of Kuba art in Europe and the United States, please see Binkley and Darish 1998.

6 Translation provided by the Ross Archive of African Images.

7 Europe has had a love/hate relationship with Egypt probably since the days of the Greeks and Romans. In the nineteenth century, European representations of Egypt were both chaotic and idealized. See Mitchell 1991 for Europe's understanding and representations of Egypt and Said 1978 for discussions of Orientalism.

8 The rubber atrocities and the international outcry is well documented in Hochschild 1999.

9 William Sheppard and William Morrison were investigated and Sheppard was sued for libel by the Belgian government. Sheppard won (Benedetto 1997).

10 Other Catholic priests in Africa started art schools. See, for example, the work of Kevin Carroll in Lagos, Nigeria. In contrast to Carroll, who wanted to



create a Yoruba Christian art form, the Josephite mission at their Art School was to preserve and teach the Kuba art form itself.

11 This was the figure reported to me by the head of the school in 1989.

12 The mass reproduction of an object has been the center of a lively academic debate. Perhaps the best known is Benjamin's argument that the original work of art has an aura that is lost with multiple copies and the further the viewer is away from the original (Benjamin 1969). In a recent rebuttal, Latour and Lowe argue that multiple versions and copies creatively embellish the aura rather than diminish it (2011).

## References cited

- Adelman, Kenneth Lee. 1975. "The Church-State Conflict in Zaire: 1969–1974." *African Studies Review* 18 (1):102–16.
- Benjamin, Walter. 1969. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, pp. 217–51. New York: Schocken Books.
- Benedetto, Robert, ed. 1997. *Presbyterian Reformers in Central Africa: A Documentary Account of the American Presbyterian Congo Mission and the Human Rights Struggle in the Congo, 1890–1918*. Studies in Christian Mission, vol. 16. New York: E.J. Brill.
- Bhakar, Sushil, Cheryl Kolak Dudek, Sylvain Muise, Lydia Sharman, Erick Hortop, and Fred E. Szabo. 2004. "Textiles, Patterns, and Technology: Digital Tools for the Geometric Analysis of Cloth and Culture." *Textile* 2 (3):308–27.
- Binkley, David A., and Patricia Darish. 2009. *Kuba*. Milan, Italy: 5 Continents Editions.
- . 1998. "Enlightened but in Darkness: Interpretations of Kuba Art and Culture at the Turn of the Twentieth Century." In *The Scramble for Art in Central Africa*, ed. Enid Schildkrout and Curtis A. Keim, pp. 37–62. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Boas, Franz. 1911. "Notes Ethnographiques..." *American Anthropologist* n.s. 13 (3):478–80.
- Cornet, Joseph. 1982. *Art Royal Kuba*. Milan: Edizioni Sipiel.
- "Cotton Frocks Shown by Bonwit Teller & Co. Related in Design to African Art." 1923. *Women's Wear* April 14.
- Culin, Stewart. 1923. *Primitive Negro Art Chiefly from the Belgian Congo*. Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum Department of Ethnology.
- Darish, Patricia. 1989. "Dressing for the Next Life: Raffia Textile Production and Use among the Kuba of Zaire." In *Cloth and Human Experience*, ed. Annette B. Weiner and Jane Schneider, pp. 117–140. Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- "Documenta: Le Fonds du Bien-être Indigène." 1949. *Aequatoria* 12:107–109.
- Herbers, L. 1959. *Elements d'Art Bakuba*. Unpublished ms.
- . n.d. *Kuba-Kunst/Art Kuba*. 2d ed. Oisterwijk, the Netherlands: W. Ravensloot.
- Hilton-Simpson, M. W. 1911. *Land and Peoples of the Kasai: Being a Narrative of a Two Years' Journey among the Cannibals of the Equatorial Forest and Other Savage Tribes of the South-West Congo*. London: Constable.
- Hochschild, Adam. 1998. *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Joyce, T.A. 1910. "On a Wooden Portrait-Statue from the BuShongo People of the Kasai District, Congo State." *Man* 10:1–2.
- Kennedy, Pagan. 2002. *Black Livingstone: A True Tale of Adventure in the Nineteenth-Century Congo*. New York: Viking.
- LaFitte, Jean-Paul. 1910. "Histoire d'un roi nègre." *La Nature: Revue des sciences et de leurs applications aux arts et à l'industrie* 38 (1er semestre), no. 1925.
- Lambourne, Nicola. 2001. *War Damage in Western Europe: The Destruction of Historic Monuments during the Second World War*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Latour, Bruno. 2002. "What is Iconoclasm? Or Is there a World Beyond the Image Wars?" In *Iconoclasm: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion, and Art*, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, pp. 14–38. Karlsruhe, Germany: Center for Art and Media.
- Latour, Bruno and Adam Lowe. 2011. "The Migration of the Aura, or How to Explore the Original through its Facsimiles." In *Switching Codes: Thinking Through Digital Technology in the Humanities and the Arts*, ed. Thomas Bartscherer, pp. 275–97. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Louie, Elaine. 2011. "Weaving by African Women at the Textile Museum." *The New York Times*, October 12. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/13/garden/weaving-by-african-women-at-the-textile-museum.html>.
- Lowenthal, David. 1999. "Heritage Stewardship and the Amateur Tradition." *APT Bulletin* 30 (2/3):7–9.
- Mack, John. 1990. *Emil Torday and the Art of the Congo 1900–1909*. London: British Museum Publications.
- Mbiyangandu, François. 2004. *Histoire du Diocese de Mwaka*. Kinshasa: Imprime Mediaspaul.
- Meredith, Martin. 2005. *The Fate of Africa: From the Hopes of Freedom to the Heart of Despair*. New York: PublicAffairs.
- Mitchell, Timothy. 1988. *Colonizing Egypt*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Rambelli, Fabio, and Eric Reinders. 2007. "What Does Iconoclasm Create? What Does Preservation Destroy? Reflections on Iconoclasm in East Asia." In *Iconoclasm: Contested Objects, Contested Terms*, ed. Stacy Boldrick and Richard Clay, pp. 15–33. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- United States National Archives and Records Administration. 2007. *Records of the American Commission for the Protection and Salvage of Artistic and Historic Monuments in War Areas (The Roberts Commission)*. 1943–1946. M1944. Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration.
- Roberts, Allen F. 1994. "'Authenticity' and Ritual Gone Awry in Mobutu's Zaire: Looking Beyond Turnerian Models." *Journal of Religion in Africa* 24 (2):134–59.
- Ruggles, D. Fairchild, and Helaine Silverman. 2009. "From Tangible to Intangible Heritage." In *Intangible Heritage Embodied*, ed. D.F. Ruggles and H. Silvermans, pp. 1–14. New York: Springer.
- Said, Edward. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Sheppard, William H. 1917. *Presbyterian Pioneers in Congo*. Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication.
- Stanard, Matthew. 2005. "'Bilan du monde pour un monde plus déshumanisé': The 1958 Brussels World's Fair and Belgian Perceptions of the Congo." *European History Quarterly* 35:267–98. Downloaded from ehq.sagepub.com on June 24, 2011.
- Masui, Th. Lieutenant. 1897. *Guide de la section de l'Etat indépendant du Congo à l'Exposition de Bruxelles-Tervuren en 1897*. Brussels: Imprimeire Veuve Monnom.
- Torday, Emil, and T.A. Joyce. 1911. *Notes ethnographiques sur les peuples communément appelés Bakuba, ainsi que les peuplades apparentées, les Bushongo*. Annales du Musée du Congo belge. Ethnographie et anthropologie, ser. 3. Documents ethnographique concernant les populations du Congo belge, t.2, fasc. 1. Brussels.
- Vansina, Jan. 1964. *Le Royaume Kuba*. Annales, Serie In-8, Sciences Humaines, 49. Tervuren, Belgium: Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale.
- . 1978. *The Children of Woot: A History of the Kuba Peoples*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- . 2010. *Being Colonized: The Kuba Experience in Rural Congo, 1880–1960*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Washburn, Dorothy. 1990. *Style, Classification and Ethnicity: Design Categories on Bakuba Raffia Cloth*. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society.