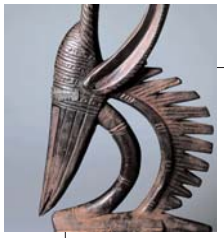
◀ *Chi Wara* helmet, Bamana (Mali). New York, Brooklyn Museum of Art.

Peoples

Western Guinea's Coast
Mande
Volta Populations
Fulani (Peul)
Akan Peoples
Nigerian Region
Kongo
Chokwe
Luba-Lunda
Kuba
Zande
Mangbetu
Lega
Mbuti
Maasai
Kikuyu
Nyamwezi
Makonde
Swahili
Madagascar
San
Shona
Ndebele
Nguni



"When you see a palm tree, the palm tree ... saw you first"
(Wolof proverb, Senegal)

Western Guinea's Coast

Peoples
Wolof, Baga, Bidjogo, Shebro, We

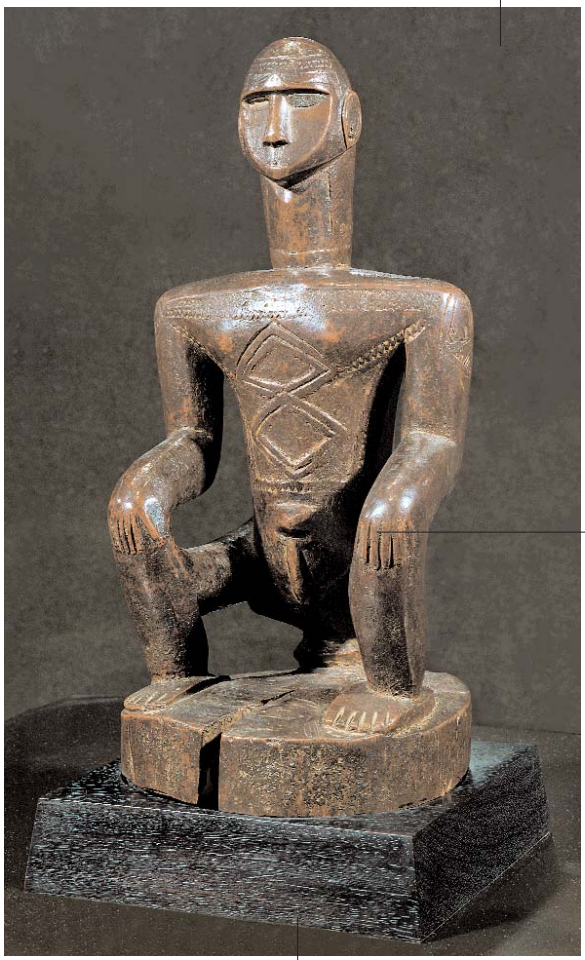
Geographic location
Senegal, Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, Western Africa

Related entries
Mande, Black Islam, farmers, traditional artists

The area stretching from the Casamance region and the Gambia River Valley in southern Senegal down to the Ivory Coast, never had large states such as the Sahel region of western Africa. Still, it was the site of broad historical processes that affected tribes like the Baga in Guinea, the Bidjogo in Guinea-Bissau and the Shebro in Sierra Leone, who were pushed into the area by Mande-speaking people: thus this forest area with a marshy coastline became a haven for them. The Baga live on the coast where the men fish and grow kola nuts and the women grow rice. The Bidjogo today number about fifteen thousand and live on the islands of the Bijagos Archipelago facing the Guinea-Bissau coastline, where they mainly grow rice.

▶ Man standing next to his canoe. Bijagos Islands (Guinea Bissau).

This figure was consecrated by pouring blood from an ox, a noble animal, on it. Young men wear masks with ox-horns as a visible sign of success in raiding cattle, which raises their prestige in their age class and supplies them with the wherewithal to marry.



These statuettes also served as containers. They are topped by a half-length or full-length anthropomorphic figure, or by a seated figure, a position that signified high status.

These Iran *statues are the receptacles of spiritual beings, especially the guardian spirits of clans and villages.*

▲ Statuette, Bdjogo (Guineau Bissau). Paris, Musée du Quay Branly.

The snake is one form under which the fertile spirit of the waters appears; the rainbow (often called "snake-in-the-sky" in Africa) is also associated with the snake, which plays a cosmological role by reconciling the water kingdom with that of the jungle.

The diamond pattern and the alternating colors mark the snake's undulating shape and suggest a hypnotic movement, further heightened by the round eyes.

The snake is positioned vertically on the head of a masked male dancer during the initiation rituals that escort boys into adulthood, or during funerals.

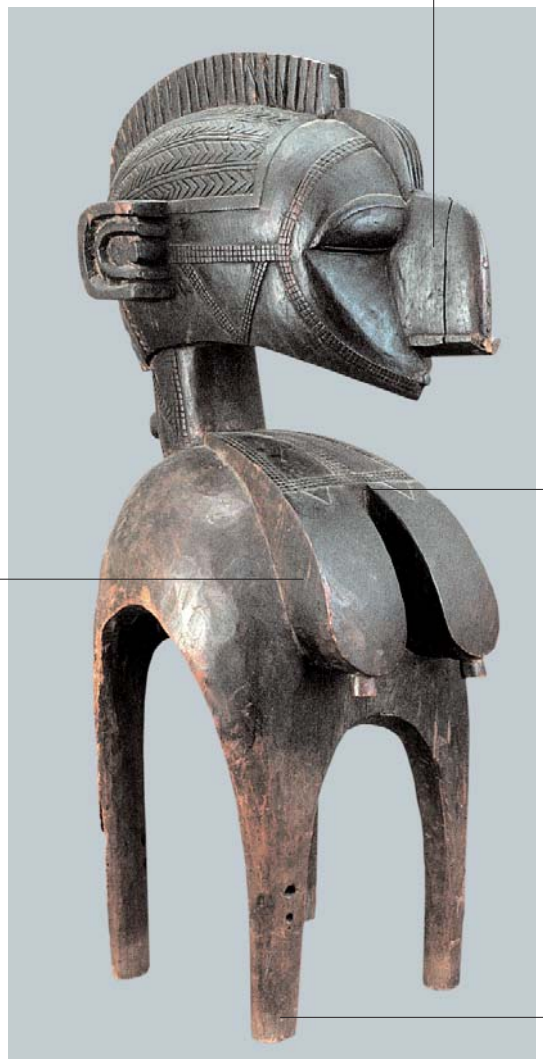
▲Basonyi helmet, Baga (Guinea Bissau). Paris, Musée du Quay Branly.

The mask in the shape of a bird's beak evokes a spirit that moves between earth, water and air.

This mask, worn at harvest celebrations, is an ideal representation of motherhood. The large, elongated breasts that suggest nursing are a sign of mature womanhood; the woman who touches them as the mask dances can expect healthy children and rich harvests.

Two holes between the breasts allow the dancer to see.

The dancer wears the mask on his shoulders, his body hidden from the waist down by a wide raffia-fiber skirt. Its weight and size require unusual athletic skills of the dancer who must move with the appropriate elegance.



▲*Nimba* mask, Baga (Guinea Bissau). Seattle, Seattle Art Museum.

A mask that embodies the terrible jungle spirits; it is used in war, against witchcraft and to mete out justice, which thus finds its legitimacy in a superhuman source.

The hair is made of cowrie shells from the Indian Ocean: used in the past as currency, they were a symbol of power.

The use of human hair contributes to the disturbing look, as it adds a familiar, domestic element to a foreign and faraway reality.

The use of animal elements such as hair reaffirms the distance between men and the jungle spirits.

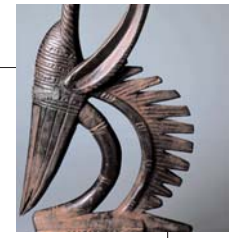
The convex forehead, large bulging eyes, red, dilated nostrils and open mouth all work to project a threatening look.

The sleigh bells increase the size of the mask and with their sound call forth the ancestors to mediate between men and spirits.

The mask enables the spirits to approach men and exercise some control over them, including providing visible, anthropomorphic assistance.

▲Mask, We (Ivory Coast). Private collection.

"Even if you leave it in the river for a long time, a pirogue will never become a crocodile" (Bamana proverb, Mali)



Mande

The term "Mande" designates a broad linguistic family centered in the Bamako region and stretching towards Burkina Faso, Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ivory Coast, and Ghana. Belonging to the Mande family are savannah ethnic groups such as Bamana, Malinke, Diula, Bozo, Kagoro, Marka, and Soninke, and jungle people such as Kuranki, Kono, Vai, Susu, and Dan. They live on millet, sorghum, rice, and maize farming. Cattle is kept primarily for prestige, for paying the "bridal price," and for sacrifices. The Bozo fish along the Niger River, while the Soninke and the Diula are wholesale traders. There is an important distinction between farmers, craftsmen and slaves, though this "caste" structure does allow for some social mobility, such that even slaves can reach powerful positions. There is an important distinction between the Honrow who are tied to the land and to agriculture and consist of noblemen, warriors and farmers, and the Nyamakalaw, an endogamous group that controls the vital forces of nature (nyama). Although wary of each other, they are closely co-dependent, for while the former provide the food, the latter produce the iron, wood and leather implements and cult objects used in everyday life and in rituals.

Geographic location
Bamana, Malinke, Diula, Bozo, Kagoro, Marka, Soninke, Kuranki, Kono, Vai, Susu, Dan, Mali, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ivory Coast, Ghana, western Africa

Chronology
13th-16th century: Mali empire
18th century: Segou and Kaarta kingdoms

Related entries
Sudanese kingdoms and empires, chiefless societies, age-sets and initiation, blacksmiths, male and female, Black Islam, farmers, theater

◀Village on the Niger River, Mali.

The Saga *mask represents a ram, the animal that God sacrificed to wash away Musokoroni's guilt, the female deity that had turned the earth barren. The myth of a primordial fault followed by an act of reparation is also found in the beliefs of other local populations, such as the Dogon.*

These masks are polychrome; some also have metal plate decorations.

The ram's horns symbolize the growth of food plants, therefore fertility.

The Bozo are fishermen who live along the Niger River; a myth narrates that they were generated by the primordial twin sisters who were daughters of the water genie. The masters of the river, they are believed to be the earliest inhabitants in the region.

▲Mask, Bozo (Mali). Seattle, Seattle Art Museum.

The Bamana, about two million people, live in western and southern Mali where they apparently settled in the 17th century. In the late 18th century the Segou and Kaarta kingdoms achieved regional power, but fell under the attacks of the Toucouleur Moslems in 1860. Having converted to Islam only then, they maintain many traditional beliefs. In 1890 Segou fell to the French.

The puppet theater, sometimes performed on pirogues, plays scenes from everyday life

The Bamana live in villages under chiefs whose role is legitimized by their families and the level achieved in their initiation society. Descent is patrilinear, and the choice of a home follows patrilocal principles, with the bride moving into her husband's house.

▲Puppet of the *Sogow* Society, Bamana (Mali). Private Collection.

*These wooden statues, carved by blacksmiths, have multiple uses. When carved as maternity figures (*gwandusu*) with a gently rounded shape, they represent the female deity Musokoroni and are used by the Gwan and Jo initiation societies where women with sterility or pregnancy problems, or whose child is ill, find support.*

The body is highly stylized, reduced to elementary geometric shapes. Particular emphasis is placed on the breasts, the prominent hips, buttocks and navel, all allusions to woman's fertility. Another characteristic is the crest-like headdress.

This type of the statuette reminds the elderly and young girls that the young men are looking for wives. Sometimes they are also used to commemorate dead twins.

▲Female statue, Bamana (Mali), 19-20th century. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The anthropomorphic shapes of the oil lamps forged by Mande blacksmiths contain symbols that are also found elsewhere, as pieces of an initiatory language. For the Bamana, and the Dogon as well, these signs correspond to the divine design, they precede the existence of things and are revealed in myth.

"Son of the tree" refers to the wish for progeny of the recently circumcised boy.

"The keeper of truth" is a symbol found at important meetings.

"The old woman's corpse" sign is used when burying the corpse of a very old woman.

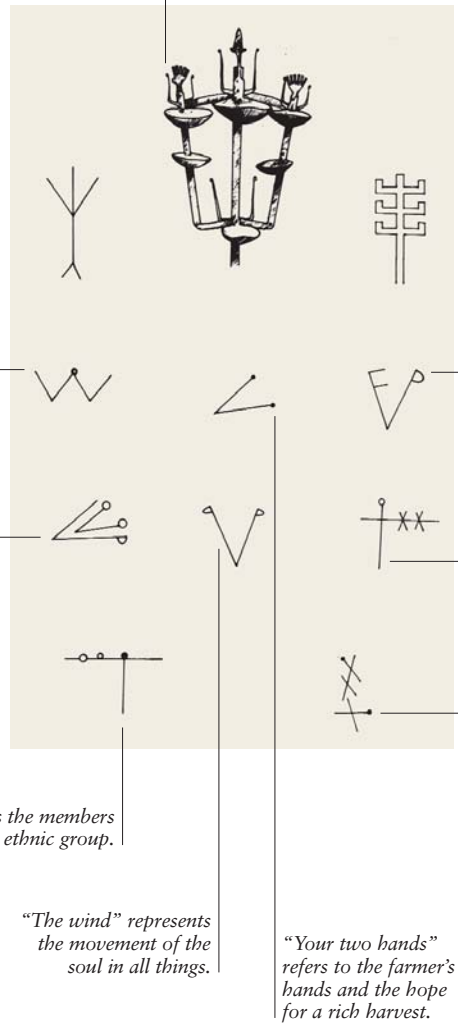
This sign refers to "the sacrificial offering."

This is "the heavenly fire" sign that is placed on the head of the household's altar before readying the fields for sowing; it propitiates the rain.

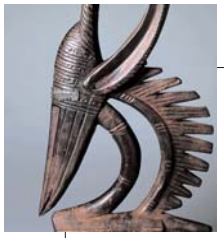
This sign marks the members of the Hausa ethnic group.

"The wind" represents the movement of the soul in all things.

"Your two hands" refers to the farmer's hands and the hope for a rich harvest.



▲Symbolism of textile motifs and Mande lamp shapes, Bamana (Mali) (from McNaughton, 1988).



"Let everyone learn to carry their bundle on their naked head, for sometimes no rags can be found" (Mossi proverb, Burkina Faso)

Volta Populations

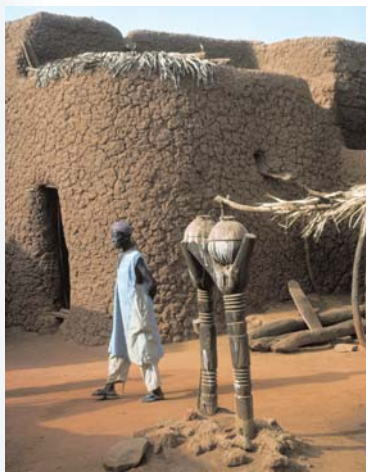
Populations
Mossi, Gurma, Bobo, Dogon, Senufo, Kulango, Lobi

Geographic location
Burkina Faso, northern Ghana, northern Ivory Coast, northern Togo and Benin, western Africa

Chronology
14th century: Mamprusi kingdom
17th-18th century: rise and apex of Mossi kingdoms

Related entries
Fulani, Sudanese kingdoms and empires, chiefless societies, Black Islam, farmers

The people speaking the Voltaic languages live between Burkina Faso and the northern regions of Ghana, the Ivory Coast, Togo, and Benin. They include the Mossi, Gurma, Bobo, Dogon, Senufo, Kulango, and Lobi tribes. Their economy and culture is akin to that of the Mande-language peoples, though unlike them they did not build great empires through conquest, and even Islam had a lower rate of penetration here. But state-type societies did exist in antiquity in this vast region, such as the state founded by the Mossi, horsemen who reached the White Volta River Valley in the 15th and 16th century. Their leader and founder, Naaba Ouedrago (the "stallion chief") was the son of a princess from the Mamprusi kingdom, a state in northern Ghana founded in the late 14th century. As was the case for other parts of Africa, while the ruling dynasty was foreign (the Mossi converted to Islam in the 18th century), the aboriginals maintained sacral power over the land. A centralized, caste-based state controlled the village societies and the clans. Starting in the 17th century, the Mossi split into kingdoms, the leading ones being the Fada N'Gurma, the Ouadagougu and the Yatenga, who reached their apogee in the 18th century only to wane under the *jihad* of the Fulani of Samori first, and French occupation later.



►Family altar (*doba*), Bobo (Burkina Faso).

These statues (bouthiba) are carved under the guidance of priests and soothsayers, often after a dream: they are said to collect the will of the gods (thila), for the gods themselves have dictated what form they are to take.

These ancestor figures act as middlemen between human beings and gods in rituals that try to trace the cause of a disgrace or an illness, usually attributable to a flawed ritual that must be remedied.

The statuettes protect their owner; sometimes, when he is in mourning, they also take charge of his sorrow. For this reason, they are carved with raised arms to stop evil. They can also oppose witchcraft, find a wife, or allow a pregnancy to come true.

▲Female statue, wood, Lobi (Burkina Faso). Paris, Musée des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie.

The Lobi people today number about 180,000, organized in clans without a chief. They grow cereals and raise cattle, the latter is given as dowry or offered in sacrifice. They are known as savage warriors who successfully resisted both Islam's and Christianity's penetration.

Wooden masks are used by families and clans and stand to masks made of leaves like the village stands to the savannah, or competition to cohesion. They impersonate animals such as the antelope, the buffalo, the monkey, the crocodile or the butterfly.

The Bwa people number about 300,000 and live between Mali and Burkina Faso. They lack a centralized authority and live in villages ruled by elder councils. In the 18th and 19th century they were the victims of raids by the Bamana and Fulani people. They were later invaded by the French.

The Bwa religion is based on the clan's ancestor worship. Their god is Do, son of the creator god Difini who deserted men after being hit with a pestle by a woman who was crushing millet. Do is a god of the generating forces of nature; he becomes visible in masks made of branches.

▲Male dancer wearing a butterfly mask, Bwa (Burkina Faso).

The half-circle on top is the "mask moon," alluding to the ceremonial hour.

The protruding hooks allude to the circumcised penis and the rhinoceros hornbill, a bird used in divination.

The "X" shaped motifs signify the scarifications that men and women wear on their forehead.

This mask represents a water or air spirit and dances in agrarian rituals and at funerals, initiations and market days.

The eyes' concentric circles also remind the viewer of the owl, a bird that symbolizes magical powers.

The hole for the mouth and the concentric circles for the eyes recall water ponds.

▲*Nwantantay* mask, Bwa (Burkina Faso). London, Horniman Museum

This type of mask with a vertical fretwork panel and a figure on top of the face is also used by the Dogon of Mali (the masks are called satimbe *and* sirige*). They commemorate events that took place when Mossi horsemen took over the region, pushing some Dogon people to the northwest toward the Bandiagara cliffs. Those who did not leave were assimilated but kept their masks.*

This figure represents a woman ancestor. Masks are a prerogative of the tribes that already inhabited a certain place when a new ruling dynasty took over. The new rulers would use statues instead for worship.

▲*Karan Wemba* mask, Mossi (Burkina Faso), Seattle, Seattle Art Museum.

Kpelye masks represent ideal feminine beauty. Appearing in pairs at initiation rites of the Poro society, they evoke the event of man's creation.

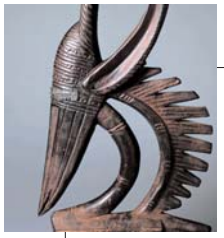
The lateral projections are headdress decorations.

On top of the mask are emblematic figures that mark membership in a social class: here, the rhinoceros hornbill is a symbol of blacksmiths.

The lower extensions would seem to represent the legs.

▲*Kpelye* mask, Senufo (Ivory Coast). Private Collection.

The Senufo people number about one and a half million and live in an area that includes parts of the Ivory Coast, Mali and Burkina Faso. The Poro *society is their central social, political, religious and educational institution: it is organized by age classes, to which all the Senufo males belong. Women belong to the* Sandogo *society.*



If the earth turns, turn with her" (Fulani proverb, Mali)

Fulani (Peul)

Geographic location
Guinea, Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, western Africa

Chronology
19th century: Fulani *jihad*

Related entries
Nigerian region, Black Islam, herders, body arts

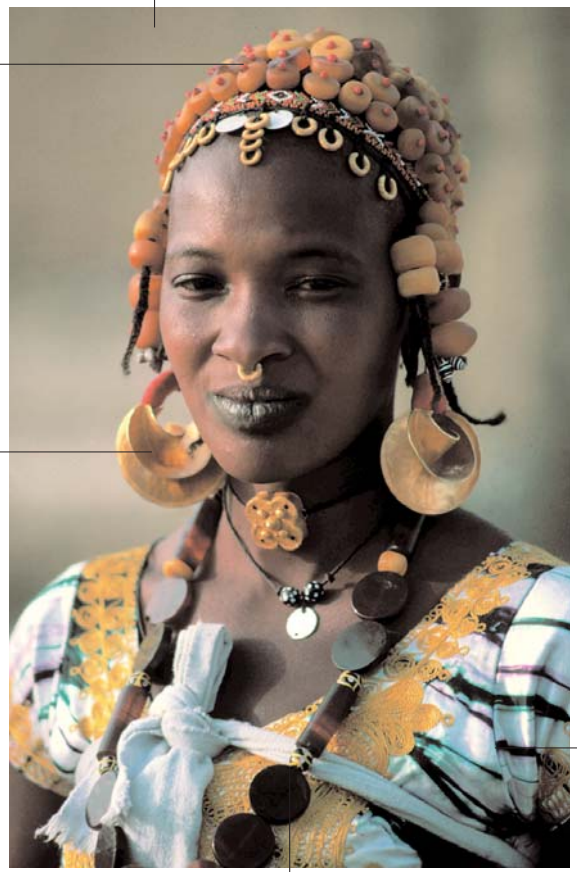
The Fulani (known as Peul by the French and also Fula or Fulbe), are herders and number about six million people, many of them still nomads. They are scattered in western Africa, from Senegal to Cameroon. Because of their physical features and mysterious language, the Europeans were intrigued by their origins, speculating that they must have come from India, or Malaysia, Polynesia, Palestine, ancient Egypt or Ethiopia. Some even theorized an Indo-European, gypsy origin. The Fulani still migrate seasonally with their livestock and follow their traditions, living peacefully side by side with the many tribes they meet in their wandering, with whom they barter milk products in exchange for food staples and craft implements. Their woolen blankets (*khasa*), woven by the Mabube caste, are in high demand. The Fulani who became urbanized and converted to Islam built centralized states ruled by Koranic law, such as Fouta Jallon (Guinea), Macina (Mali), Sokoto (northern Nigeria, where the Fulani are also called Bororo), and Adamawa (Cameroon). In Nigeria in particular, they came to rule over the Hausa city-states born from the re-routing to the east of the trans-Saharan caravan routes, after the Shongay empire was invaded by the Moroccans in 1591.

▼Fulani woman tending cattle (Niger).

Normally, the life of the Fulani is not conducive to producing or owning many material goods because they are a burden to their wandering. They express themselves artistically through poetry and care for their appearance.

The headgear is made of gold, glass beads and amber.

The large earrings are in hammered gold.

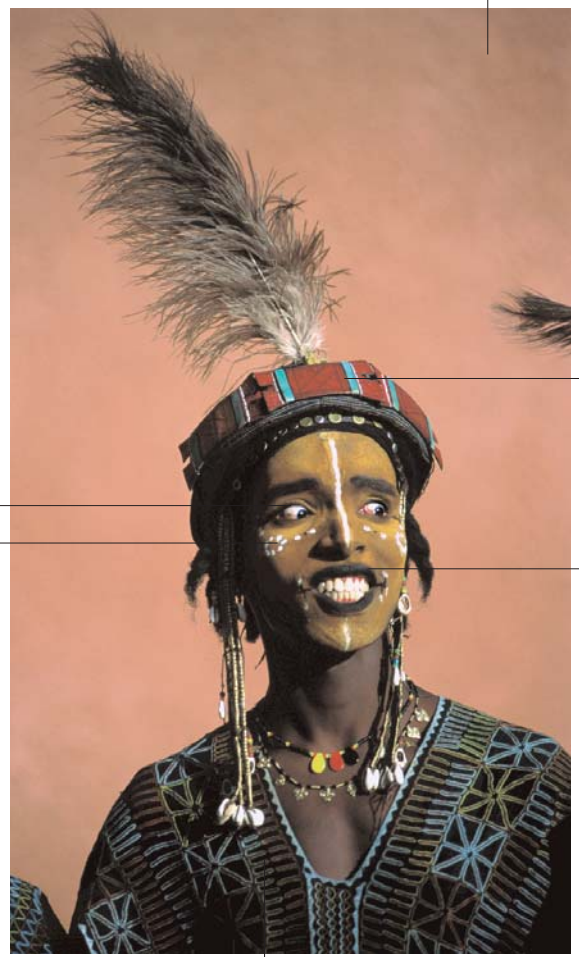


The Fulani take constant care of their hairdo, jewelry and clothing. These aristocrats disdain manual work, preferring to employ craftsmen from other ethnic groups.

Rings, bracelets and anklets of gold, copper or silver identify a woman's age and social status; for each new baby girl, the mother removes some of her rings and gives them to her daughters; she removes all of them when the oldest daughter reaches ten-twelve years of age.

▲Fulani woman wearing traditional garb (Mali).

The care that the Fulani (Bororo) devote to their physical appearance is especially visible during the gerewol, *festivals held in the rainy season, when herders from different clans meet and young men dance in beauty contests to win over their girl.*



A male head covering embellished with a row of cowrie shells and an ostrich feather.

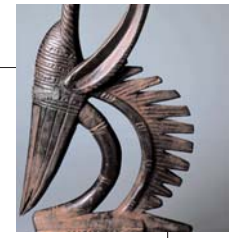
The eyes, another key element of beauty, are kept wide open.

The face is painted and made shiny by spreading butter over it.

Lips are painted black, with lines, triangles and dots painted on each side to heighten the teeth's whiteness, a key feature of male beauty,

The tunic is embroidered by the women with geometric spider and snake motifs.

▲Young Fulani man with painted face, Niger.



"Even a small bird cannot be swallowed whole" (Ashanti proverb, Ghana)

Akan Peoples

The Akan-language tribes live between Ghana and the Ivory Coast. The principal groups are the Ashanti, Fante and Baoulé, Abron, and Anyi. Notwithstanding their historical relationship and the similarity of their art forms (in goldsmithery in particular) and of symbols of power such as thrones and fabrics, there are strong differences in social and political organization. While in the 17th-18th century the Ashanti founded a highly structured monarchy, the Baoulé founded egalitarian, individualistic societies based on the extended family. In the 19th century, two forms of government existed in the Ashanti kingdom: a "federal" structure dealt with relations between the Kumasi king and neighboring chiefs, while a centralized bureaucracy dealt with the subject populations, collecting tributes and organizing manpower in the farms and the gold mines, even using slaves. Originally from Ghana, the Baoulé migrated to the Ivory Coast in the 18th century when the Ashanti came to power, and merged with the aboriginals, from whom they learned to use masks, which the Ashanti did not use. The Akan tribes built their historical identity by incorporating aspects of Moslem culture (though without converting to Islam) to which they were exposed by the caravan traders who crossed the Sahara and the Europeans who used the ports-of-call on the Gulf of Guinea.

Populations
Ashanti, Fante, Baoulé, Abron, Anyi

Geographic location
Ghana, Ivory Coast, western Africa

Chronology
17th-18th century: rise of the Ashanti kingdom
18th century: Baoulé migration from Ghana to Ivory Coast
18th-19th century: expansion of the Ashanti kingdom

Related entries
Mande, hunters and warriors, Black Islam, farmers, trade, Kumasi

◀King (*ashantene*) Nama Opuko Ware II, Ashanti (Ghana).

The seat embodies part of the individual's spiritual essence, therefore must be treated with care and never left unguarded; only its legitimate owner may sit on it. At his death, the seat is buried with him or blackened and used as an ancestor altar by his progeny.

The figured and geometric motifs refer to proverbs, in this case, an allusion to the "knot of wisdom," to problems whose unknotting requires thinking.

Sometimes an empty niche at the bottom hides a protective "medicine."

Ashanti seats are carved from a single piece of wood: they symbolize a nobleman's power and evoke the golden throne of their king who embodies the unity of the Ashanti nation.

▲Wooden throne, Ashanti (Ghana). Private Collection.

Gold weights were made in geometric or figured shapes often associated with adages or moral precepts about the appropriate way of living one's life. They were made of brass using the lost-wax technique first introduced in the northern savannahs by Mande traders in the 14th or 15th century.

The images used for gold weights were usually of wild animals; missing are the domesticated animals or those that live closer to the village such as hyenas. The elephant is a symbol of royal power.

Because of its brightness and incorruptibility, and the advantages of trading it with Europeans, gold was the symbol of the Ashanti king's power and its bedrock. It was a also used for jewelry, using the lost-wax technique or worked into thin sheets that were overlaid on wood sculptures.

▲Gold weight, Ashanti (Ghana). Paris, Private Collection.

Two-faced masks allude to the marriage of the Sun and the Moon, or to twins, their being alike and different simultaneously, as marked by their resemblance and the different details used on each mask such as hairdo and scarifications.

These masks are meant to amuse and are used in dances for happy events, the birth of twins being considered an auspicious event.

Probably the Ashanti have no masks because they lack the male initiation rites where they are often used; masks are very important in the Baoulé culture.

The use of different colors, black and red, may indicate that the twins are of a different sex, though there is no hard and fast association between a color and sex. "Red" skin is considered more beautiful, and is seen as a symbol of purity and excellence.

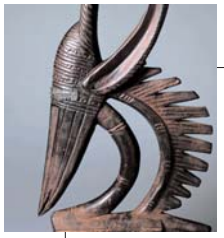
▲Mask, Baoulé (Ivory Coast). Geneva, Musée Barbier-Müller.

The head (the seat of freedom, intelligence and clairvoyance) and sexual features such as a woman's breasts and buttocks and a man's chest or calves are emphasized. These traits do not mark a purely physical beauty, but instead allude to woman's fertility and man's hard labor.

When a Baoulé child is born, he deserts his otherworldly bride, causing her resentment and jealousy. Statues represent this complex relationship. The disagreements with the supernatural brides and grooms are manifested in nightmares or in sexual problems such as impotence or sterility, and cause tensions with one's earthly spouse.

Statues are used to placate a moody, otherworldly spouse, by sacrificing to him or her. The statues adhere to Baoulé beauty canons and their serene, quiet mien is meant to secure the spouse's favor. The sculptor's hand is guided by the soothsayer who receives the wishes of the otherworldly lover about the features to be given to his or her portrait.

▲Sitting male figure, Baoulé (Ivory Coast). Seattle, Seattle Art Museum.



"If the big mask refuses to see the little mask, the latter will refuse to see the former" (Yoruba proverb, Nigeria)

Nigerian Region

Populations
Hausa, Fulani, Igbo, Yoruba

Geographic location
Nigeria, western Africa

Chronology
6th century BC-5th century AD: Nok culture
5th century: Ile-Ife begins to be populated
9th-11th century: Igbo Ukwu culture
12th-16th century: great Ile-Ife sculpture period
17th-19th century: rise of Oyo's Yoruba kingdom
19th century: Sokoto caliphate

Related entries
Nigerian kingdoms, African religions, water spirits, twin worship, Shango the thunder god, Eshu the rogue god, Black Islam, Christianity, Egungun masks, Ogboni cult, literature, African cities

Approximately two-hundred and fifty ethnic groups live in today's Nigeria, though about eighty percent of the population is composed of Hausa and Fulani in the north, Yoruba in the west and Igbo in the eastern part of the country. While the Hausa and the Fulani are Moslem, the Yoruba and Igbo are animists as well as Christians. This difference between the Islamic north and the Christian south is one line of division in today's Nigeria. The Yoruba were never united politically: in the past, they were a conglomerate of kingdoms and cities fighting each other. They were united only in their mythology and in their common lineage traceable to the city of Ile-Ife. The most powerful Yoruba kingdom was that of Oyo, whose military strength rested on the cavalry; it controlled the Middle Niger River down to the coast until the 19th century, when it withdrew before the advancing Fulani *jihad*. The Oyo kingdom was a politically centralized federation of crowned cities and trading towns. The Igbo, on the other hand, were one of the major tribes subjected to the Atlantic slave trade; they were organized in independent villages governed by elder councils and societies that conferred titles of prestige. Like the Hausa and the Yoruba, the Igbo are known for their trading skills. The earliest Igbo artifacts were found in Igbo-Ukwu, an archaeological site that has yielded refined bronze objects from the tenth century.

▶ Sitting male statue. Paris, Musée du Quai Branly.

Findings of the Nok culture that flourished on the border of the southern Nigerian Savannah and was named after the village where the first artifacts were found in 1928, date from the 6th century BC to the 5th century. AD These people knew how to cast iron, having probably discovered the technique independently.

The focus of this statue are the eyes, magnified by the pierced pupils, the wide arch of the eyebrows and the lower eyelids. The navel, ears, nostrils and sometimes the mouth were also pierced.

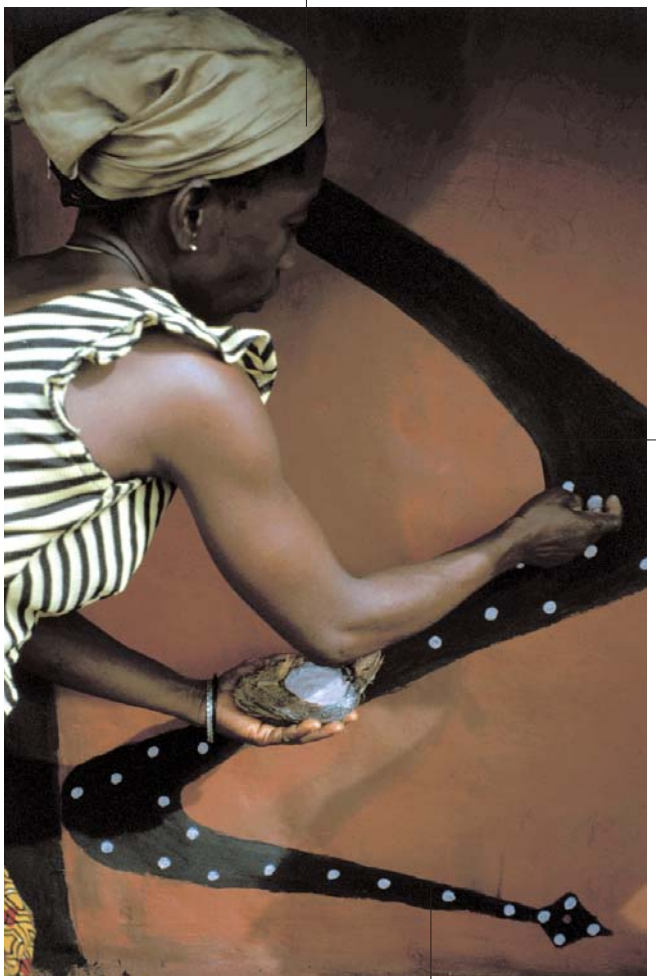
The heads of Nok statues are easily recognizable for their spherical, conical or cylindrical shape and elaborate headdresses.

The size of these statues (this one is 23 inches high) varies from a few inches to almost natural size.

According to some scholars, an analysis of style and iconography would seem to link the ancient Nok culture to today's Yoruba.

▲ Sitting female statuette, Nok (Nigeria). Private Collection.

While among the Igbo only the men are wood carvers, uli painting is women's work: they paint their bodies and the walls of homes and shrines.



Women's painting follows its own aesthetic: while carved objects are mostly angular, women's drawings are curvilinear.

The python, an animal that comes from the depths of the earth, represents the ancestors and links both worlds. The rainbow also joins the sky to the earth, and for this reason is called "python-in-the-sky." A coiled snake alludes to the cyclical time of rebirths.

▲Woman painting a wall, Igbo (Nigeria).

These divinities stand for the elements of nature, and are portrayed in human form with all the attributes of influential people such as headgear, scarifications and decorations.

The statues of the north-central Igbo are moderately realistic, with good proportions and all the bodily parts represented. Made for being viewed frontally, they are symmetrical with the legs slightly apart and the arms away from the body. The volumes are full and rounded, with strong shoulders and vigorous neck.

A recurring element are the palms turned upwards to signify frankness, openness to give and receive, which is the reciprocal relationship between man and god.

The Igbo portray their gods following the family model: sculpted individually, they are nevertheless displayed in groups in the shrines.

The attention to detail is especially visible in the head, while hands and feet are carved summarily on purpose.

▲*Alusi* deity, Igbo (Nigeria). Private Collection.

The bird clutching the snake alludes to the dark power of the "mothers" who can turn into birds at night.

The knives on each side stand for the courage and aggressiveness of hunters and warriors and of Ogun, the god of metal wars. The leather sheaths are a Hausa influence and highlight the importance of the Moslem militia that served under the Yoruba kings.

This mask is used as a headdress, hooked to the costume (that hides the face) through holes at the bottom.

The Efe *gold masks are used in the* gelede *cult, when the "mothers" as "mistresses of the world" are paid homage and beseeched to use their powers to create, not destroy; their assent is required for ritually reordering the cosmos and condemn anti-social behavior.*

▲*Efe Baba Ako* gold mask, Yoruba (Nigeria). Seattle, Seattle Art Museum.

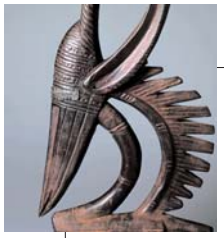
Decorations on building façades in the cities of Kano and Zaria, or in Zinder (Niger) are based on Arabic script and motifs, and are also found in embroidery work. They were built for the Fulani aristocracy by skilled Hausa craftsmen.

The inscriptions carved on doors and windows are meant to protect the home with their magical powers.

Abstract geometric patterns sometimes become figurative, such that the door becomes a mouth, the pinnacles ears, and so forth.

The decorating techniques used include shaping the fresh plaster by hand, carving designs in plaster or painting them on the wall.

▲Building façade, city of Kano, Hausa (Nigeria).



Kongo

"The lizard runs so fast that it overtakes its own den" (Kongo proverb, Congo D. R.)

Populations
Vili, Woyo, Bembe, Yombe

Geographic location
Congo D. R., central Africa

Chronology
13th century: Kongo migration
14th century: birth of the Kongo kingdom
1482: first Portuguese settlement
1491: Nzinga a Nkuwu, the Kongo king, converts to Christianity
16th century: reign of Alphonse I
18th century: fall of the Kongo kingdom

Related entries
Colonialism, African Christianity, trade

The Kongo populations, currently numbering about three million, migrated from the northeast to their current settlements at the mouth of the Congo River, in the 13th century. They are subdivided into several tribes which include the Vili, Woyo, Bembe, and Yombe. In the 14th century they unified the region (Kabinda and northwestern Angola) under one kingdom, probably the most powerful in central Africa when the Portuguese reached it in 1482. Although King Nzinga a Nkuwu converted to Christianity in 1491 taking the name of John I, the population continued in their traditional beliefs, though incorporating Christian imagery. In the 16th century, under the leadership of Alphonse I the kingdom expanded and reached international renown, even sending diplomatic missions to Europe and Brazil. In the meantime, power was becoming increasingly centralized and the powers of the aristocracy were reduced, in the election of the king, to a mere symbolic ratification. The kingdom reached its apogee in the 17th century but was torn apart soon after by succession infighting, the slave trade, and attacks from Angola, which it tried to resist by enlisting the help of the Portuguese. In the 18th century, though still united culturally, Kongo became fragmented politically and was reduced to a Portuguese colony in 1885.

►View of the Congo River (Congo D. R.).

This fabric is made of woven raffia, a fiber obtained from the leaves of the raffia palm; the women then traced the embroidery pattern on it.

The symmetrical design is usually monochrome in the natural raffia color and diamond-shaped.

The Kongo aristocracy used these fabrics as signs of prestige.

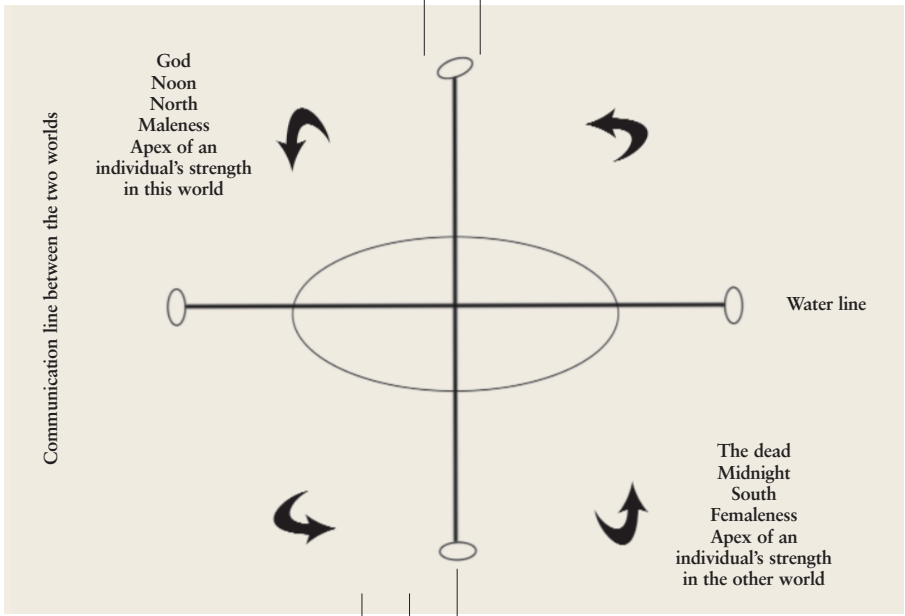
Bakongo weaving design and tradition

These Kongo embroidery patterns are probably European-influenced (adapted from coats-of-arms and priestly garments), grafted on an older tradition that already existed in 1508. A 1611 European report estimated that the city of Loango produced annually about twelve to fifteen thousand high-quality cloths, and forty to fifty-thousand medium-quality ones.

▲Raffia fabric, Kongo (Congo D. R.), 16th century. Rome, Museo Nazionale Preistorico Etnografico Luigi Pigorini.

The vertical axis links the world of the living with that of the dead; the two worlds are separated by the horizontal water line in which the sun sets, only to be reborn in the other world, from which ancestors come back as newborns.

The highest point alludes to the sun at noon, to the kingdom of God, the male element, the king sitting on the highest summit of his kingdom, thus defining himself as the most vital of human beings. It also alludes to the highest point in a human life.



*Crucifixes were used like the local "fetishes" (*nkisi*), to ward off evil and to heal.*

The base of the cross signifies midnight, femaleness, the fullness of one's strength in the afterworld, the summit of the ancestors' mountain.

The Kongo easily accepted the Christian crucifix without implying their conversion, because the cross motif was already part of their tradition, as it signifies the cyclical movement of the sun from east to west in its four principal positions.

▲Cosmogram (*bidimbu*), Kongo (Congo D. R.) (from Thompson, 1984).

These statuettes probably date to the 16th century; they are place on the graves of those who led distinguished lives, thus bequeathing them to memory.

Stone was rarely used as sculpture material in sub-Saharan Africa. This statue is made of soapstone, which is easy to carve.

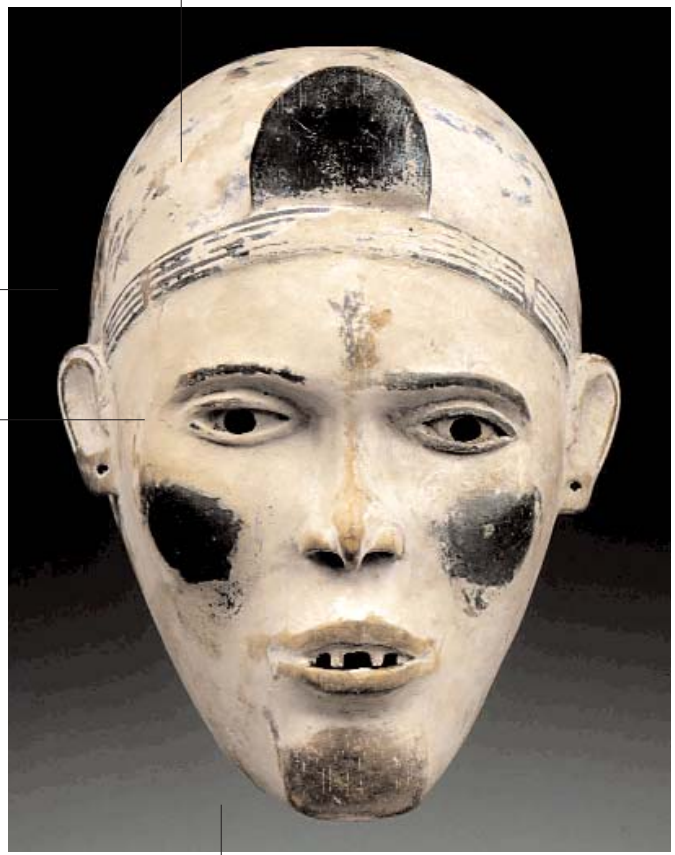
Figures with a hand supporting a head slightly bent seem to depict a "thinker," a chief meditating on how to best achieve the welfare of his people. Or it could express the sadness of someone in mourning.

These statuettes were made in a variety of poses: the arms raised to the mouth signify grief and wailing; when held tightly against the body, loneliness; when crossed on the chest, they express icy silence. Still, once they are removed from their original context, guessing their meaning is not easy.

▲Ntadi figure, Kongo (Congo D. R.). Tervuren, Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale.

White is also used in initiation rituals, when the boys die a symbolic death only to be reborn as adults. Both the dead and children come from the other world and are "white" (note how in effect, at birth, black children have a lighter skin color).

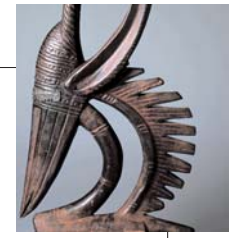
*This mask with obvious female traits was carried by the Kongo priests (*nganga*) who used it to enter the netherworld and benefit from their ancestors' powers.*



The color white is associated with the dead and is used for memorial statues that adorn graves, and for dancing masks at funerals.

When the Portuguese reached the shores of the Kongo kingdom, they were greeted not as foreigners, but as the dead come back to life, as their ancestors, for like the dead they were coming from the sea, spoke an incomprehensible tongue, had superior powers and were white.'

▲Mask, Kongo (Congo D. R.). Tervuren, Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale.



"The coils of a basket always begin with a knot" (Chokwe proverb, Angola)

Chokwe

According to oral tradition, the Chokwe kingdom was born from the fallout of the marriage between Lweji and the Luba prince Chibinda Ilunga who acquired mastery over the Chokwe. The unrest that followed caused part of the local nobility to flee the Lunda kingdom in southeastern Congo around the end of the 15th century, and settle in present-day Angola. Here they subjected the aboriginals, organized them into chiefdoms, each one ruled by a chief-king, and fused with them adopting their customs. Still, the distinction between the descendants of the conquerors and of the subjected natives survived in each village. In the 17th and 18th century the Chokwe kingdom was still under Lunda influence, but a century later it seized more power by, among other things, joining the ivory and rubber trade that had opened on the Angolan coast. Its power was short-lived, for the sudden growth led to fragmentation and the final loss of independence at the hands of the Portuguese.

Geographic location
Angola, central Africa

Chronology
15th century: flight of the Lunda aristocracy who found the Chokwe kingdom
19th century: the Chokwe engage in Atlantic trade

Related entries
Luba-Lunda, hunters and warriors, trade, traditional music

◀Female statue, Chokwe (Angola). Private Collection.

The Luba Prince Chibinda Ilunga is a recurring theme in Chokwe iconography, where he appears as the founding hero who taught his people hunting and the use of magic. He also introduced the idea of the sacredness of the monarchy, and more refined customs at court.

Although he was a foreigner, Chibinda Ilunga is here portrayed wearing the Chokwe headdress known as mwanangana.

*The strap on the chest (*mukata*) is used to hang the pouch containing magic substances.*

*The large-sized hands denote the hero's great strength. In the right hand he holds the traditional insignia of power (*cisokolu*).*

In the left hand the prince holds a flint rifle, a weapon introduced in Angola in the 18th century.

One custom introduced by the prince is the king's solemn walk: slowly raising his foot, he imitates the turtle's walk, the sacred animal of the Luba and the Lunda people; the foot's generous size indicates the hunter's strength as he continuously moves about.

▲Statue of Chibinda Ilunga, Chokwe (Angola). Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum.

The Cihongo *dance masks represent the spirit of plenty, here depicted as a long-bearded elder. In the past, this mask was apparently used to collect tributes from village to village.*

*Drum players (*mukhundu*).*

Mungonge *initiation scene with three elders stealthily advancing so as to frighten the initiates.*

*Sword-carrying drum players (*mukupela*).*

The chair's legs symbolize the support that ancestors give to the king.

The carved figures depict rituals and everyday activities: masks, drum players, elders at initiation rites, monkey hunters, women with children, and men smoking the pipe.

These thrones echo the lines of Portuguese chairs (the first contacts with Europeans date to the 17th century), with the addition of carved figures in the typical Chokwe style on the back and between the legs. This mixture of local and foreign style made it a major symbol of royal power.

▲Throne, Chokwe (Angola). Berlin, Museum für Volkerkunde.

Hunters and warriors used whistles of this type for long-distance communication using agreed-upon sounds or to frighten the enemy.

Whistles come in many shapes: from the total lack of figures to masks and full-length figures.

Applying pressure on the side holes modulates the sound.

The center hole is the mouthpiece.

▲Whistle, Chokwe (Angola). Paris, Musée du Quai Branly.

"The leopard's skin is lovely, but his heart evil" (Luba proverb, Congo D. R.)

Luba-Lunda

The Luba kingdom was born in the southern savannahs of eastern Congo; it reached its zenith in the 17th century but fell as a result of wars against the Chokwe and the effects of the Arab slave trade in the region. The king's sacral power was reined in by several institutions, including the *Bambudye* society (the "men of memory") whose task it was to orally transmit the history of the kingdom and whose interpretation could influence the ruler's decisions. The culture of the Luba kingdom influenced other ethnic groups such as the Kusu, the Songye, the Chokwe and the Lunda. The chieftains of neighboring regions often claimed to have economic and political ties with the Luba kings by displaying objects that might have proved an exchange of gifts, thus diplomatic recognition, with them. Such pervasive cultural influence led to the incorrect belief that it was a true empire in the political sense. According to oral tradition, the union of the Lunda and the Luba began with the marriage of Chibinda Ilunga, son of the first Luba king, to Lweji, daughter of a Lunda lord. The political unrest that followed this marriage led to a diaspora that extended the Lunda's dominance over the region.

Geographic location
Congo D. R., central Africa

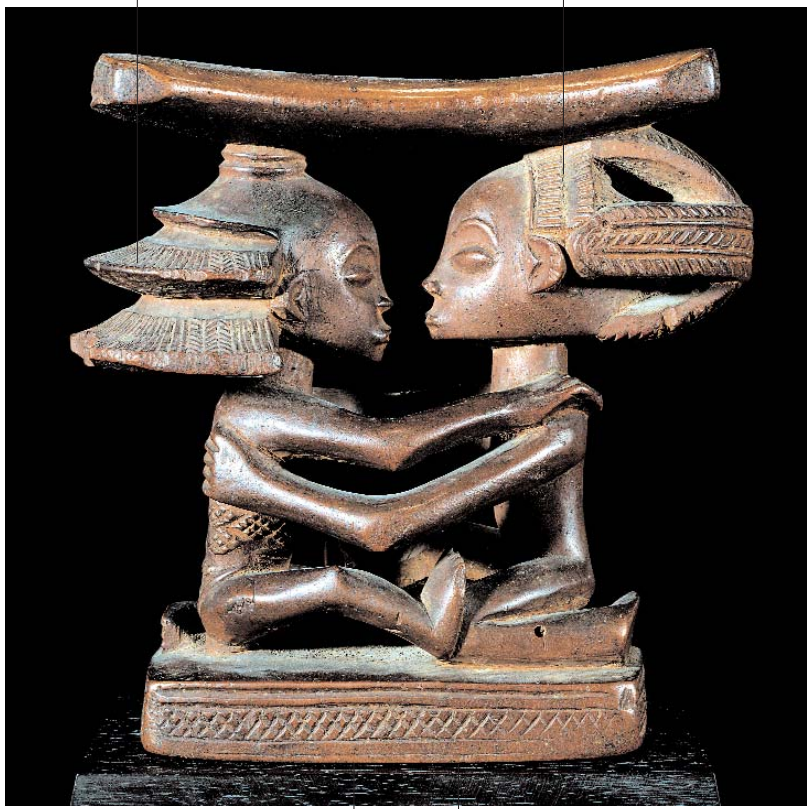
Chronology
16th century: beginning of Luba expansion
17th century: apex of Luba kingdom's power
1870: King Ilunga Kabale dies; the Luba kingdom starts its decline

Related entries
Chokwe, male and female, slavery

◄Arrow holder, Luba (Congo D. R.). Tervuren, Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale.

The "waterfall hairdo" was popular in Luba country from the late 19th to the early 20th century. It was shaped around a reed frame and decorated with hairpins whose shape recalled the sacred anvil associated with the Luba monarchs' power.

Hairdos such as these required up to fifty hours of work; this explains the need of a headrest to avoid spoiling it.



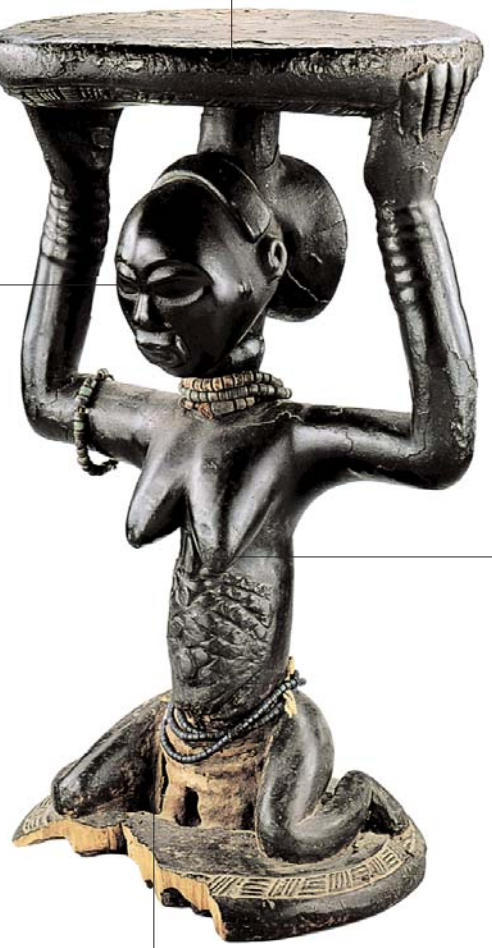
These hairdos were not simply pleasing to the eye, but distinguishing marks of social and professional rank.

An analysis of this headrest's style dates it to the 19th century. The artist has been called "the master of the waterfall hairdo" for he has reproduced a mikanda *(stepped, or waterfall) do.*

▲Headrest, Luba (Congo D. R.).
Paris, Musée du Quai Branly.

The support that ancestors give to their descendants is rendered symbolically by the caryatid supporting the chief's body with her hands and head.

The expression is composed, thoughtful: the eyes and mouth are half-open and the face's projection is balanced by that of the hairdo.



The belly (whose symbolic centrality is highlighted by the scarifications) and the bare breasts allude to fertility.

The female figure appears often on Luba royal insignia and could depict the king's daughters and sisters married to lesser chiefs for the purposes of cementing political alliances. In rendering women, the volumes and curves are accentuated, along with symmetry and balance and neat, polished surfaces.

▲Seat, Luba (Congo D. R.).
Private Collection.

These tablets were memory aids for the wise men of the Mdbye *society who were consulted by kings and noblemen for enlightenment on myths and on the complex rituals of court life.*

The rectangular shape represents the royal court, the human body, and the turtle which is the royal emblem.

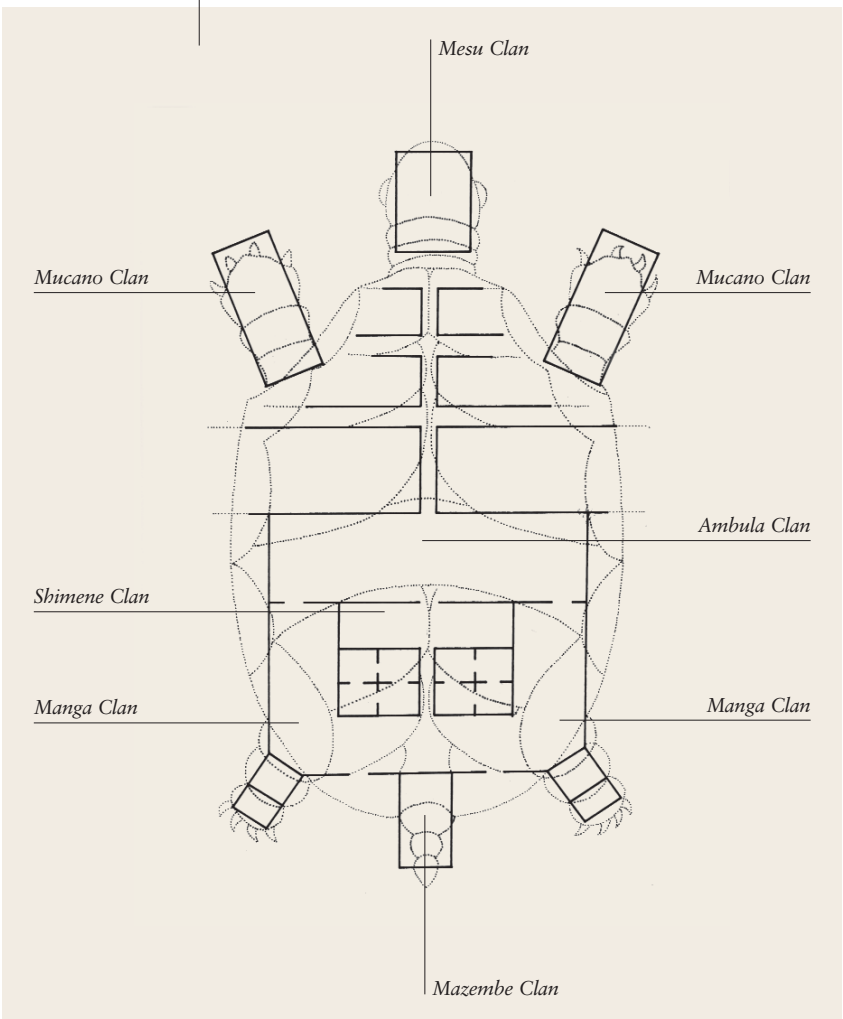
The dividing line in the center is the "threshold" that must be crossed during initiation rituals.

The large round projection in the lower part of the tablet represents the capital of the kingdom.

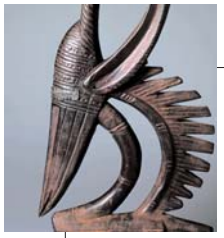
Beads and shells applied on the surface stand, by size and color, for the places and the protagonists of the oral history, thus readying the stage and the characters for the narratives that recount and reconcile the disputes and conflicts of the Luba kingdom.

▲ *Lukasa* tablet, Luba (Congo D. R.). Private Collection.

Musumba, capital of the Lunda kingdom, was built according to a zoomorphic layout that for unknown reasons followed the shape of a turtle. The animal body, like that of humans, allowed for a hierarchical placement of the different clans, stressing each one's role and the organic unity of the whole.



▲ Map of the capital of the Lunda kingdom (from Guidoni, 1975).



"Even a large animal cannot be bigger than the elephant"
(Kuba proverb, Congo D. R.)

Kuba

Geographic location
Congo D. R., central Africa

Chronology
17th century: rise of the Bushongo dynasty
1650: Shyaam aMbul aNgoong seizes power
1750: the Kuba reach maximum power
1870-1890: expansion of the ivory trade
End 19th century: the Nsapo invade the Kuba kingdom

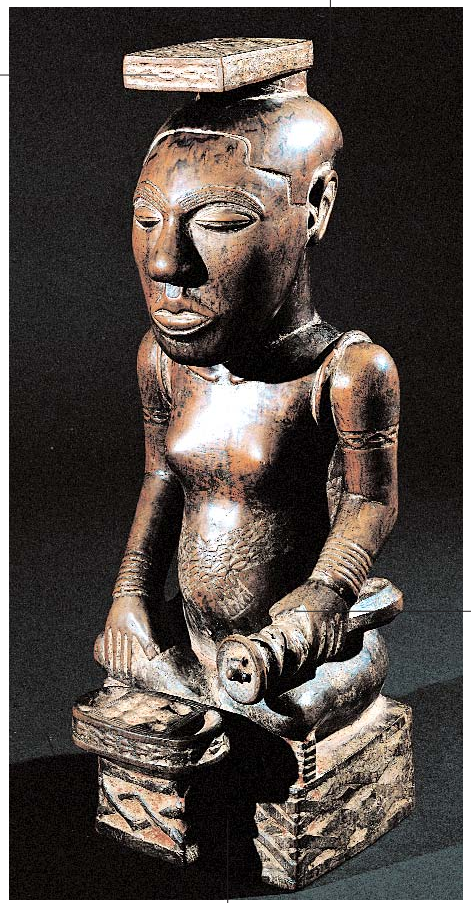
Related entries
Luba-Lunda, weaving and clothing

According to oral tradition, the Kuba settled in the Congolese Kasai region by migrating there on canoes from the Atlantic Congo region. This highly structured society was ruled in the early 17th century by the Bushongo dynasty, the dominant clan that over time had come to rule over the native Kete. The Kuba in effect are not a homogeneous ethnic group but an ensemble of about twenty different clans; this is how the neighboring Luba and the Europeans called them; they referred to themselves as "the king's people." The fate of the kingdom took a decisive turn around 1650 when Shyaam aMbul aNgoong came from the west with a band of adventurers and usurped the throne. He introduced American crops such as maize, peanuts, and tobacco. But the central power was weak, the chiefdoms that made up the kingdom had great autonomy, and this led to frequent uprisings. The king was responsible to a court council of all the chiefdoms. It was believed that the king (nyim) was of divine origin and that his power, drawn from the ancestors and from witchcraft, could influence the weather, the crops and even fertility. The kingdom reached its greatest territorial expansion around 1750, and was still growing wealthy in the 19th century, especially in the 1870-1890 period when it became the main supplier of the ivory sold to Angola.

►King Kok Mabiintsh III, Kuba (Congo D. R.).

This type of statuette had a memorial purpose, but because it embodied the king's spirit it also guaranteed that his power would be handed down to his successor. They might also have been used to propitiate the pregnancies of the king's many wives.

The square pedestal echoes the typical visor-headdress of the Bushongo kings, the dynasty that rules over the Kuba people.



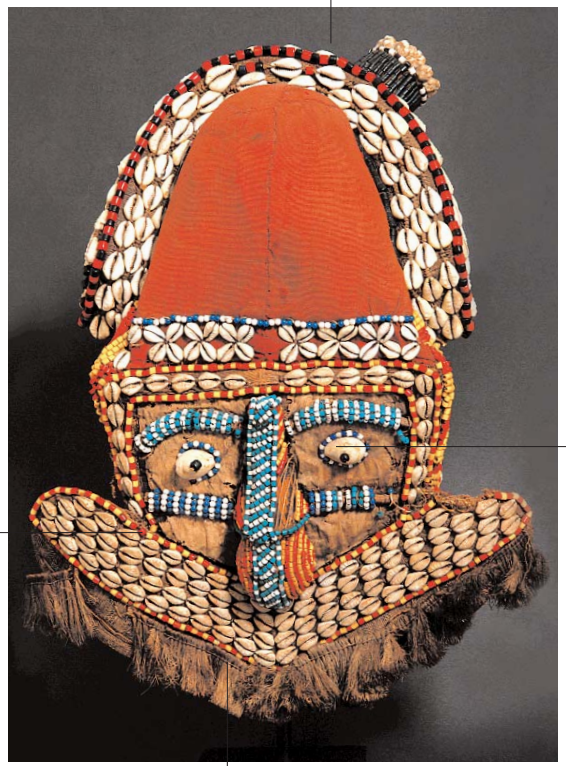
Royal statuettes had a set iconographic repertoire: one arm rests on the knee while the other holds a sword pointed backward; at the center of the pedestal a specific royal symbol identified each king.

▲*Ndop* statuette of a Kuba king (Congo D. R.), 17th century. London, Museum of Mankind.

The emblem of Shyaam aMbul aNgoong, a merchant and medicine man who founded the Bushongo dynasty in the 17th century, is the board of a popular African game, the mancala: the board is divided in two rows of boxes with forty-eight seeds, nuts or pebbles distributed four per box. The player who seizes all the pawns wins.

This mask is associated with Woot, the mythical founder of the Bushongo royal lineage: it is used in many rituals, including the king's funeral.

An animal skin is sown on top of a woven raffia frame and decorated with rows of beads and cowries (the Indian Ocean shells used as currency in Africa) that trace male features and wide jaw.



There are no holes for the eyes, hence the mask must dance in majestic slow motions.

This is the most important of the Bushongo royal masks. It personifies a threatening ngesh *spirit, and is used to maintain law and order. Because it has the terrible powers of blinding those who wear it, it is not worn by the king but by someone close to him. When the mask performs, the king stays at a distance, making believe that he is on a trip.*

▲ *Mwashamboy* mask, Kuba (Congo D. R.). Private Collection.

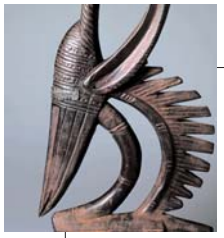
*According to oral tradition, this mask with a broad, convex forehead variously represents a jungle spirit (*ngesh*) or a pygmy, or a hydrocephalus prince; or even the brother of Woot, the mythical ancestor.*

Copper plates, rows of glass beads and cowries, all elements that signify the king's wealth and his power, are applied to the wooden surface of the forehead, cheeks and lips.

The horizontal line of beads highlights the blindness of the mask, even though the dancer can see from the nostril holes.

The strip of animal skin attached to the chin stands for a beard.

▲ *Bwoom* mask, Kuba (Congo D. R.). Tervuren, Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale.



"A snake cannot get around its name" (Zande proverb, Congo D. R.)

Zande

Geographic location
Congo D. R., central Africa

Chronology
18th century: the Zande settle in Uele

Related entries
Mangbetu, hunters and warriors, farmers

The Zande settled in the Congolese Uele River region in the late 18th century subjugating the natives whom they reorganized into kingdoms and chiefdoms. Even though the Zande assimilated dozens of different tribes and peoples, they themselves underwent cultural fusion, for they adopted farming and gradually gave up hunting in the 19th century. This mutual assimilation however was insufficient to remove the social distinction between conquered and conqueror, the originally foreign ruling aristocracy and the common people. Another important social distinction existed between freemen and slaves (prisoners of war, or refugees who had no kin in the village hosting them, or people originally sentenced to death who had been pardoned). There was probably a reciprocal influence between the Zande and the Mangbetu, though the former live in the savannah and the latter in the forest where, in addition to raising cassava and banana trees, they are hunter-gatherers. The monarchy was not a sacred institution and many kingdoms were often set up by princes in exile who had lost the fight for the succession to the throne.

►Pumpkin piece, Zande (Congo D. R.). Paris, Musée du Quai Branly.

The conical-shaped head at the top of the harp's neck identifies it as Zande art.

The ears are perforated and the eyes are made with beads.

The five chords made of plant fibers are attached to the wooden neck under the animal skin.

The soundbox is made of wood sheathed with animal skin, and has two sound holes.

▲Harp with a head shape, Zande (Congo D. R.). Tervuren, Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale.

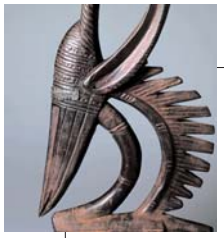
Even though these blades are shaped like throwing knives, they are not weapons but a sort of local "currency" in which copper replaced the original iron.

The blades were not traded on the regular market, but through a network of diplomatic relations between the Zande kingdoms, as luxury objects that contributed to reinforce the bonds between the different realms of the Zande empire.

Weapons are a sign of the importance assigned to wars of conquest among the Zande people; the court pages supplied officers and elite corps to the army.

▲ Ngbandi and Nzakara blades, kingdom of Zande (Congo D. R.), 19th century. London, British Museum.

The Ngbandi and Nzakara people who made these blades live on the outskirts of the Zande area of influence.



"Now I could delight my eyes in the fantastic figure of the king, who, I had been told, ate human flesh every day" (G. Scheweinfurth)

Mangbetu

Geographic location
Congo D. R., central Africa

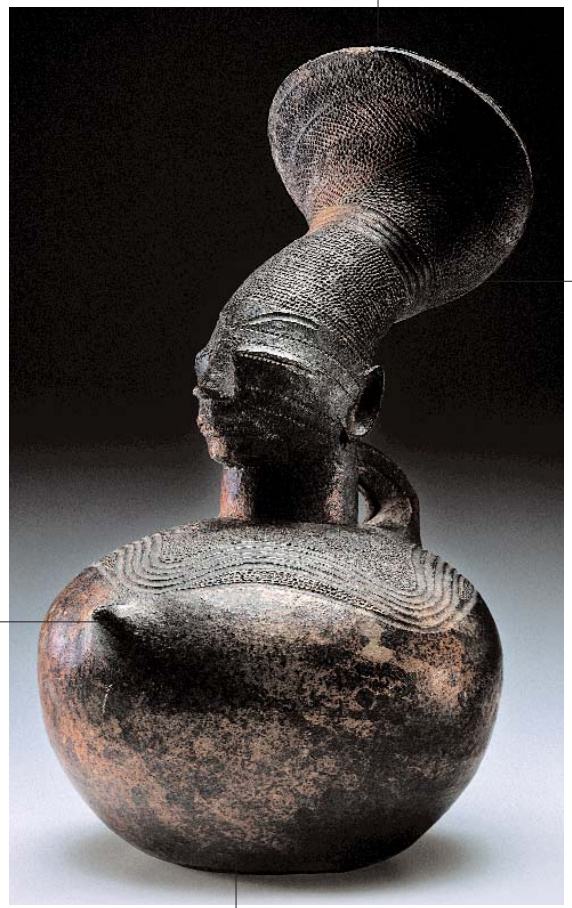
Chronology
19th century: birth of the Mangbetu kingdoms
End 19th century: Arab and Sudanese slave traders arrive; the Mangbetu kingdoms are split into sultanates

Related entries
Zande, slavery

Numbering today about eight-hundred thousand people, the Mangbetu were probably aboriginal to the area occupied by today's Sudan; from there, they migrated to Congo's northwestern forests where they intermarried with the Bantu and the Pigmy (Mbuti) populations. The word "Mangbetu" actually only designates the aristocracy of the reigning lineage, not the entire population. The Mangbetu were mostly hunter-gatherers and manioc and banana farmers. Although forest fruit could be foraged all year round, still the Mangbetu built silos for storing dried or smoked bananas, meat and fish. During the 19th century, chief Nabiembali transformed the government into a kingdom; in the 1850s, weakened by the repeated attacks of the neighboring Zande, the kingdom split in two. At about the same time, the Moslem Nubians began to include the Zande and Mangbetu chiefs in the ivory and slave trade, fragmenting the kingdom into sultanates. At the end of the 19th century, the Belgians, French and English reached the area, driving the slave merchants away and subjugating the Mangbetu.

▶ Human-shaped box, Mangbetu (Congo D. R.). New York, Harold Rome Collection.

Mangbetu vases are an example of court art produced for a political purpose and devoid of religious meaning. First appearing when the Belgians took over the land, they were shown to the invaders to prove the pomp of the Mangbetu courts, thus hoping to become political interlocutors.



The elongated head shape recalls the aesthetically-induced cranial deformations of Mangbetu women, further emphasized by the elongated headdress.

The base also becomes figured, turning into a woman's body.

This "contact art" form developed from two separate currents in the Mangbetu artistic tradition: non-figured terracottas and figurative wooden sculpture. The arrival of the Europeans led to a foreign demand for figured objects, which influenced the local arts.

▲ Water pitcher, Mangbetu (Congo D. R.). Berlin, Museum für Volkerkunde.

The Mangbetu practice of elongating the head for aesthetic reasons lasted until the mid-nineteen-fifties, when the Belgian government outlawed it. To achieve this effect, the heads of the newborns were wrapped with raffia and hair from the day they were born. At first fashionable among the nobility, it became a mark of beauty for all social strata, even among neighboring tribes.

The "basket headdress," which emphasizes the elongated head, is supported by a reed frame and completed with hair extension taken from corpses.

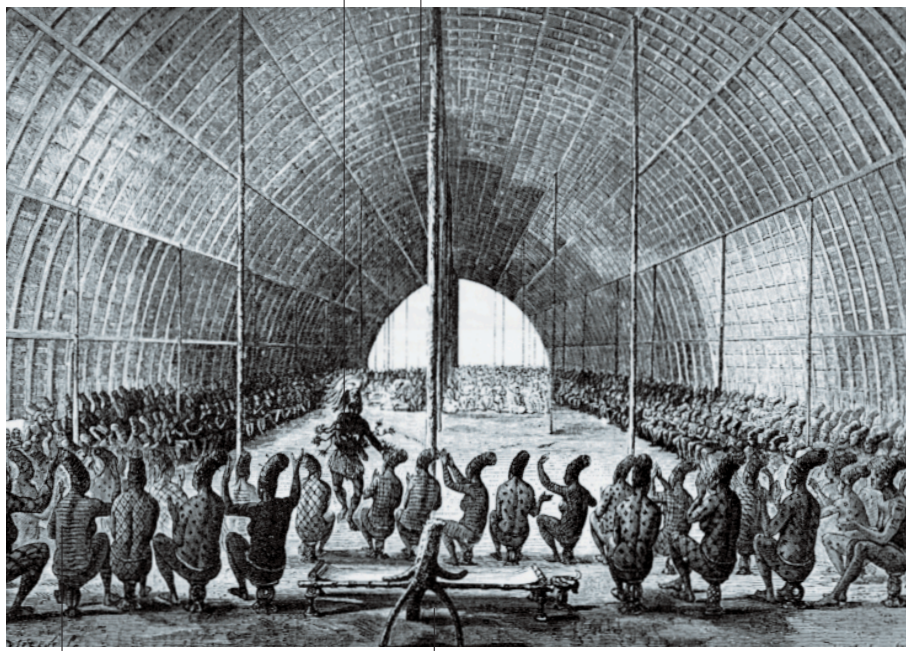
The aesthetic effect is completed with ivory (or bone, wood, brass, iron or copper) hairpins. For men, the pins are used to hold the hat firmly on the head.

In times of mourning, the headdress is "broken"; sometimes the head is shaved.

▲Traditional headdress, Mangbetu (Congo D. R.).

King Mbunza dances before his wives in the audience hall.

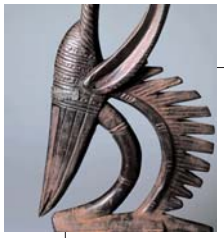
The artist probably exaggerated the size of the audience hall to astonish the European reader. This mixture of reality and fantasy was aided by the Mangbetu themselves who wanted the Europeans to believe that they were the most politically and artistically evolved tribe in the region.



The king's one-hundred and twenty wives sit on sculpted seats: their typical headdresses and geometric body art are clearly visible.

The German botanist Georg Schweinfurth, who spent about three weeks in Mangbetu land, made several drawings that were to be a lasting influence on the Western imagination, contributing to create a stereotype that guided later travelers: the nobility of the Mangbetu kings and the splendor of their court is exalted, but there is also revulsion at their "cannibalism."

▲*King Mounza Dances Before his Wives* (from G. Schweinfurth, *Au coeur de l'Afrique*, 1868-1871).



Lega

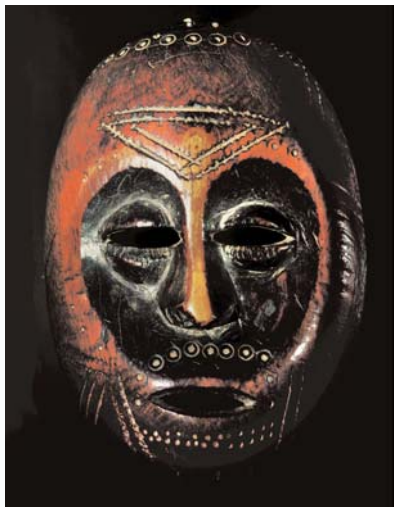
"He who for the first time sees lusembe finds it useless" – Only the initiated can grasp the meaning of a Bwami emblem (Lega saying, Congo)

Geographic location
Congo D. R.

Chronology
16th century: the Lega settle in East Congo
19th century: clashes with Arab traders

Related entries
Swahili, chiefless societies, age-sets and initiation, slavery

The Lega people live in the forests of eastern Congo between the Great Lakes and the Lualaba River, where they migrated in the 16th century from present-day Uganda. In the past they were warriors who subsisted on hunting and gathering, fishing, and banana and manioc farming. Their only known crafts were blacksmithing and pottery (done by women potters), with very little trading (they had no markets). They were ruled by segmented, patrilinear clans with no centralized authority and a lineage-based power structure. Political authority was exercised by a village chief who drew his power from his relationship with the village ancestors. The *Bwami* society filled an important role in each clan and unified them: the society developed and transmitted the clan's ethics, conferring titles of prestige through a five-step initiation system and both secret and public ceremonies in which the entire village was involved. Women also could be inducted and played different roles according to the husband's rank. The region was ravaged in the late 19th century by the slave and ivory trade: the Lega clashed with the Arabs who had come from the northeast to set up commercial outposts along the border with their lands.



►Ivory mask, Lega (Congo D. R.). London, Entwistle Gallery.

These ivory figurines are owned only by the member of the two highest ranks of the Bwami *society.*

A recurring element in Lega figurative art is the heart-shaped face with a long nasal septum.

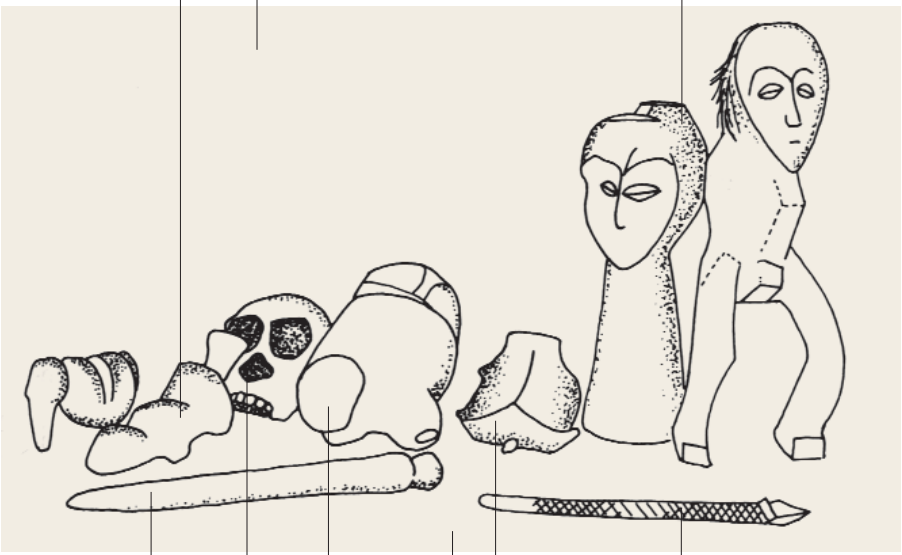
These anthropomorphic ivory figurines are called iginga, *"objects that uphold* Bwami *teaching and precepts." Each portrays a specific character with distinct good or bad qualities, associated with dances or proverbs: depending on the context in which they appear, they assume different meanings and identities.*

▲*Bwami* society statuettes, Lega (Congo D. R.). New York, Friede Collection.

Animal wood figurines. The objects in the basket are associated with sayings that change depending on the context or the collection of objects.

Among the Lega clan-based society, solidarity is reinforced by the Bwami cult society that transmits their values and chooses their leaders. Those who reach the highest level by demonstrating strength and wisdom, receive from their clan the goods needed for the initiation ceremony. Access to authority is temporarily bestowed on an elder whom the group holds in high regard.

Anthropomorphic wood figurines used in Bwami *teaching. They represent characters to which good or bad moral qualities are attributed.*



Scepter-shaped objects made of elephant bone.

Skull of a chimpanzee.

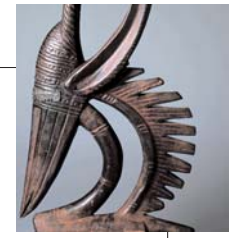
Unidentified figure.

Skull of a boar.

Scepter-shaped objects made of elephant bone.

Several Bwami ritual groups own a basket containing objects made at the initiation ceremony for the highest ranks; it is kept by the last candidate admitted. Upon receiving the basket, he must distribute to all the society members the goods that he accumulated with the help of his relatives to gain admittance to the new initiatory level.

▲Drawing with contents of initiation baskets, Lega (from Layton, 1983).



Mbuti

"Unless it is here and now, it has no meaning" (Mbuti proverb, Congo D. R.)

Geographic location
Congo D. R., central Africa

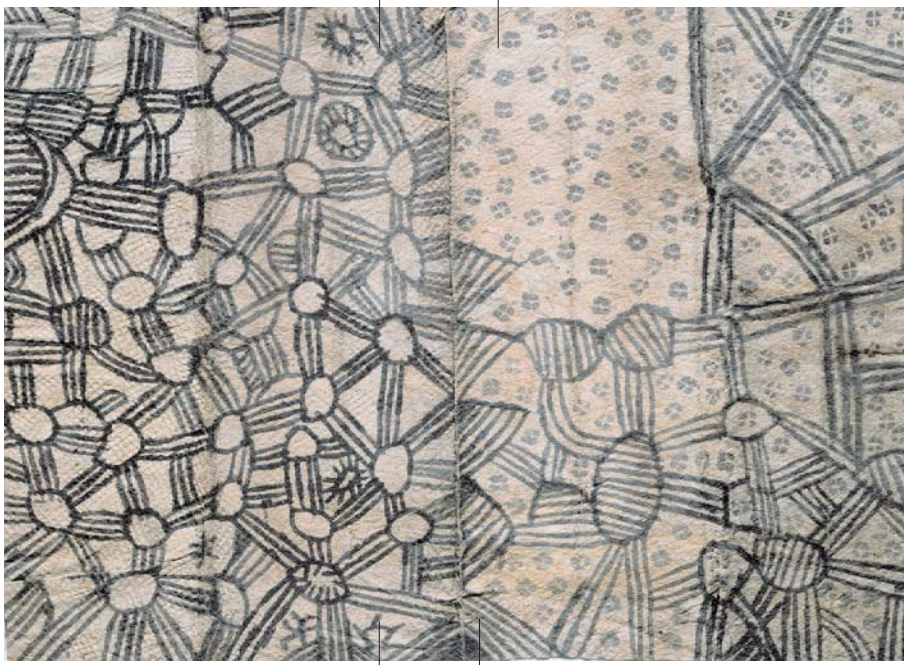
Related entries
Mangbetu, chiefless societies, hunters and gatherers

The Mbuti are one of the rainforest tribes (like the Baka, Bongo, Cwa, Twa, etc.) known as "Pygmies," from a Greek word meaning "short." About forty-thousand surviving Mbuti live in the Ituri region of eastern Congo, organized in semi-nomadic bands that hunt and forage, sometimes bartering wild game with Bantu farmers in exchange for bananas, manioc, salt, and iron tools. Men hunt while women forage, collecting honey in particular, an important food staple; about seventy percent of the food is supplied by women. As a rule, the vegetables are consumed by each family, while the hunted meat is shared by the entire band; in any case, the band practices solidarity so that everyone's needs can be met. Apart from the sex-based division of labor, there is no trade specialty and a fluid, egalitarian social structure prevails: the "bands" may split or regroup, especially for collective activities such as hunting treks. The only solid group is the nuclear family. While some individuals exert authority, it is never permanent or institutionalized, but results from their concrete contribution to the life of the band.

▼Man making a drum, Mbuti (Congo D. R.).

These textiles are produced jointly by men and women: the men pound the inner layer of the ficus tree's bark into a length of fabric, and the women paint it.

A mixture of wood charcoal and the juice of the kange *fruit yields black dye. Red dye is produced by grinding a plant's stem; lemon juice is used to trace the delicate drawings.*



The multi-pattern designs of these fabrics, with their seeming lack of coordination, are almost a visual transposition of the intertwined structure and freedom that inform Mbuti polyphonic songs.

The textile patterns echo body art design and the signs traced on the ground during the hunting rituals. The patterns are divided into two main groups: "forest objects" (animals, trees, lianas, stars) and "camp objects" (mortars, combs, arrows, hunting nets and ropes); zigzag lines can refer to snakes, ropes, or nets.

▲ *Murumba* fabric made of pounded and painted bark, Mbuti (Congo D. R.). Paris, Musée du Quai Branly.

The camps inhabited by bands of a few dozen people each are moved five or six times a year, based on food availability, within a circumscribed territory, thus the camp dwellers return to the same site once the forest resources have regenerated themselves. Moving is also one way of resolving conflict.

The camps are connected by ritual meetings and a continuous coming and going of visits with visitors being accommodated for months at a time.

The wife moves and builds a new hut upon the arrival of her husband's sister's son.

The back entrance is shut on the twelfth day.

The shared hearth is removed on the twelfth day.

The back of the camp is shut on the twelfth day.

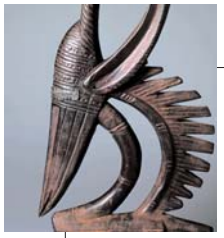
This part is built on the second day; abandoned on the third; reoccupied on the fifth day.

Transferred on the eleventh day.

Moved to another camp.

The camp layout corresponds to the changing composition of Mbuti bands; it does not reflect a hierarchical or family structure, but the status of inter-family relations. The egalitarianism of the Mbuti society is expressed by the ring-like layout of the huts that leaves a free area at the center. The entrance of each hut faces the huts of the friendly families and may change position based on their relationship.

▲ Village, Mbuti (Congo D. R.) (from Guidoni, 1975).



"One head alone cannot contain all the wisdom" (Maasai proverb, Kenya)

Maasai

Geographic location
Kenya, Tanzania, Eastern Africa

Chronology
1895: Kenya becomes a British protectorate
1915: the Maasai are expelled and their lands seized

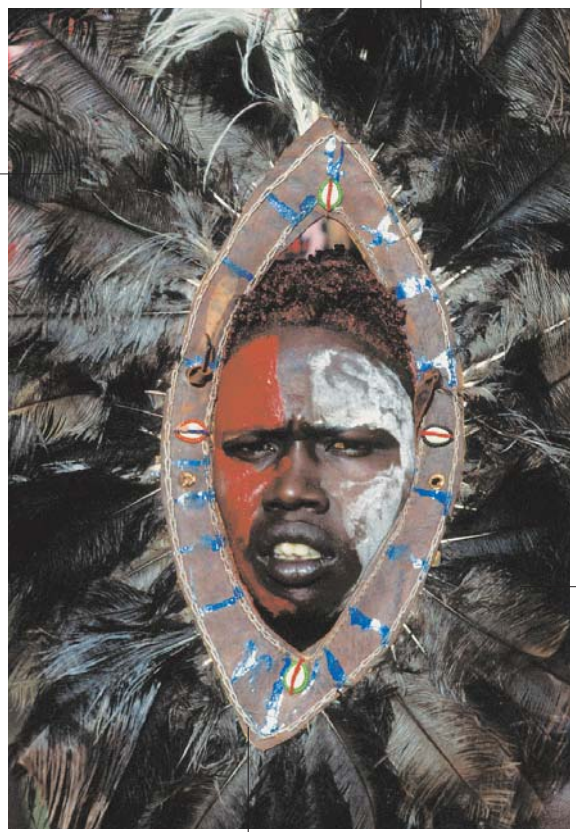
Related entries
Kikuyu, chiefless societies, age-sets and initiation, hunters and warriors, herders, beads, dance

The Maasai are not a homogeneous people, but a conglomerate of distinct tribes of about one-hundred and fifty thousand people scattered in Kenya and Tanzania; they share the Maa language and some socio-cultural traits such as a semi-nomadic pastoralist life. Their wealth is constituted by livestock, a sign of social prestige that is sometimes acquired through raids. The former English colonial government and the current Tanzanian government pressured the Maasai to treat livestock simply as a source of currency (to pay taxes), thus altering social relations, for men have always considered it their own property, not their women's. Theirs is a chiefless society organized in patrilinear clans and a system of age-based classes that groups men in fifteen-year age-sets, the building blocks of the Maasai military organization. These regiments are organized in two groups, based on the method of circumcision. From the age of fourteen to thirty, the young warriors (*moran*) live isolated in the bush where they learn the art of war and the duties of adult life. The Maasai have in turn been allies, traders and foes of the Bantu populations in the area, often forcing them (viz. the Kikuyu) to take shelter in the forest to escape their raids.

► Young Maasai in isolation after circumcision (Kenya).

The Maasai military organization is based on different age-sets, with and entire age group being recruited at a specific time. The fact that the age-set is a closed group for long periods of time, helps develop an esprit de corps *and maximizes the warriors effectiveness.*

*Each age-set is headed by a leader (*labon*), whom the colonial administrators mistook for chiefs, though they role is that of councilors without coercive powers.*



*When induction time opens for a class-set, circumcision rituals are performed for the young men between the ages of fifteen and twenty being inducted in the warrior group (*moran*).*

Striking a balance between elder power and warrior power was not always easy, especially under English domination as the administration gave more power to the former and limited the latter's, preferring to employ the warriors as manpower.

▲ Maasai warrior (Kenya).

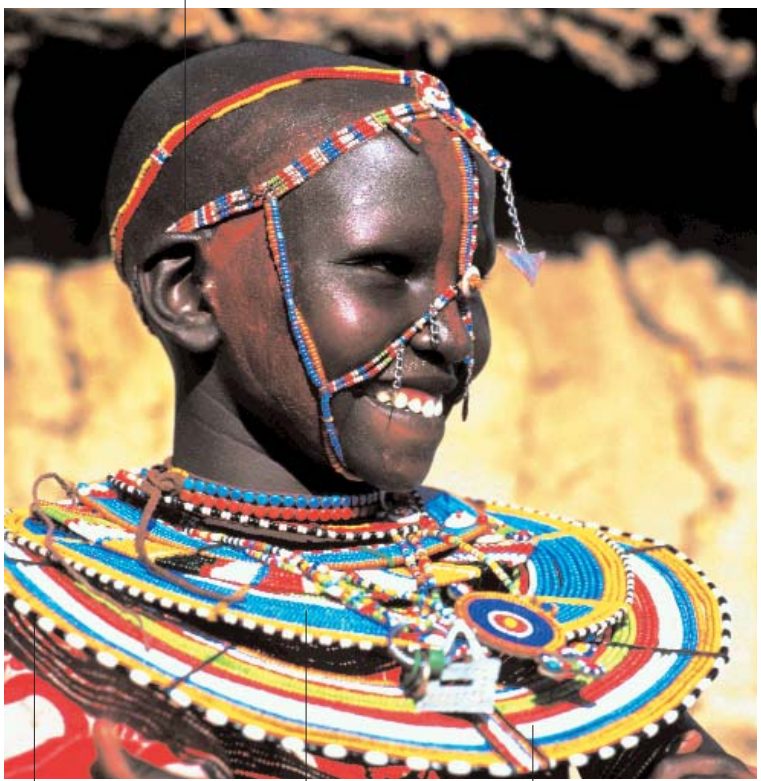
After serving ten years in villages specifically built for them, the young warriors become elder warriors, destroy the village where they lived and marry. The eunoto *ceremony marks this rite of passage, in which the mothers cut their sons' long hair and the ban on eating meat and milk in the presence of others ceases.*

Each generation is divided in two warrior groups: the second group ("the left hand") is circumcised about six or seven years after the first ("the right hand"). Seven years after their circumcision, the "right hand" warriors become elder warriors, moving the incoming group into the phase they just vacated, of adulthood.

*The concluding phase of the ceremony is the White Dance Day, which follows the Red Dance Day: at dawn, the warriors recede in the bush, paint their bodies with white chalk, and march in two files towards the village where the mothers welcome them; then they bow before the sacred hut (*O-Singira*) where a wild olive branch has been planted (the term* e-unoto *comes from the verb* a-un, *"to plant straight"), an allusion to the incoming age-set.*

▲ *Eunoto* ceremony, Maasai (Kenya).

The most popular bead colors of the Maasai are black, white, blue, red and pink, though in the 20th century the array of colors has widened. Of these, red, white and black (or dark blue) have symbolic value: red, associated with youth, the blood's vital force, is the color with which the bodies of the brides and the young initiated are painted;

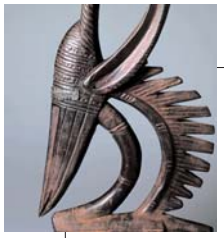


Black is reserved for the elders and for God.

White has protective powers, and is used to paint the body of those undergoing a trial.

Possibly, recently added colors such as orange or green in effect stand for the base colors: orange has replaced red, and green, black-blue.

▲ Woman with bead necklace, Maasai (Kenya).



"When wrath fills the heart, it comes out of one's mouth"
(Kikuyu proverb, Kenya)

Kikuyu

Geographic location
Kenya

Chronology
1952-1956: the Mau Mau rebel against colonialism

Related entries
Chiefless societies, age-sets and initiation, colonialism, farmers

The Kikuyu are a people of Bantu-speaking farmers who live in central Kenya. Theirs is a patrilinear society with a system of age classes that includes the warriors (*anake*) and the council elders (*kiama*). Power is exercised by alternating generations, a method aimed at preventing any one group from becoming entrenched in power: each community is divided into two classes, the *mwangi* and the *maina*, with the children of a *mwangi* generation becoming *maina*, the grandchildren *mwangi* again, and so forth.

They British confiscated the Kikuyu lands in the early 20th century, turning them into "illegal squatters" and confining them to reservations. As a result, the Kikuyu were some of the more active groups in the anti-colonial liberation war already in the 1920s, when they established the Kikuyu Central Association that included Jomo Kenyatta who would become president of Kenya. The Mau Mau, the secret terrorist society made up of the impoverished unemployed, people who had been banished from their lands, and reservation farmers, were mostly Kikuyu.

► Ceremonial shield, Kikuyu (Kenya). London, British Museum.

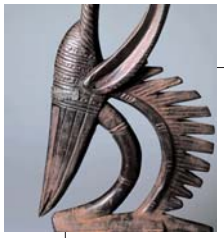
The shields are painted in geometric patterns on both sides; the patterns vary depending on the group of initiates; often the design on the back recalls an eye with eyelid.

The shields which the warriors use in their initiation dances are made of wood or bark, unlike those used in war which are made of animal hide.

The back of the shield has a cavity for the arm, thus it is moved by flexing the arm, not the hand.

▲ Ceremonial shield (back), Kikuyu (Kenya). Private Collection.

When the English invaded what is now present-day Kenya, instead of meeting resistance from the Maasai, as they had expected, they had to fight the Kikuyu warriors. Given the superiority of firearms, the struggle was brief, but left a deep mark in the collective memory of the Kikuyu.



"The wind will not break the tree that knows how to bend"
(Sukuma-Nyamwezi proverb, Tanzania)

Nyamwezi

Geographic location
Tanzania, Eastern Africa

Chronology
18th century: the Nyamwezi join the Swahili trade circuit
1860-1884: birth of the Nyamwezi "empire"
End 19th century: dissolution of the Nyamwezi "empire"

Related entries
Swahili, slavery

The Nyamwezi today number about one million and a half people. They are Bantu-speaking farmers settled in central-western Tanzania, and were at one time divided into small kingdoms. Starting in the 18th century they were active in the ivory and slave trade that linked the hinterland to the coastal areas. From 1860 to 1884 Mirambo, a Nyamwezi military chief, fought the Arabs and the neighboring kingdom of Buganda for control of the long-distance trade routes and built an "empire" by unifying under his rule a number of small kingdoms. He bartered ivory and slaves for textiles (which he distributed to followers and allies) and firearms. He even formed alliances with the sultan of Zanzibar. His reign came apart upon his death. "Nyamwezi" is a Swahili word that literally means "people of the moon," signifying that they came from the west, where the moon rises. The name later was applied to ethnically diverse people whom the Swahili merchants recruited in central Tanganyika to work as porters and mercenary troops.

► Ceremonial insignia, Nyamwezi (Tanzania) (from Rubin, 1985).

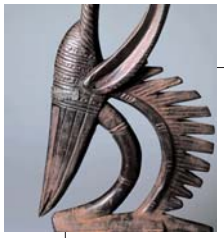
The protruding ears, the prominent lips and the eyes finished with beads are recurring traits of Nyamwezi sculpture.

This seat is carved from a single block of wood, and differs from European chairs that are made of several parts joined together.

These high-backed, anthropomorphic carved seats with clearly rendered sexual features were probably meant to portray the clan's primordial ancestor mother. They were reserved for the chiefs who sat on them to hear and adjudge legal matters.

The three curved legs with three jutting projections are typical of Nyamwezi seats.

▲ Seat, Nyamwezi (Tanzania). Private Collection.



"Multitudes to the wind / the earth is pale / the shout can be ploughed" (Luis Carlos Petraquin)

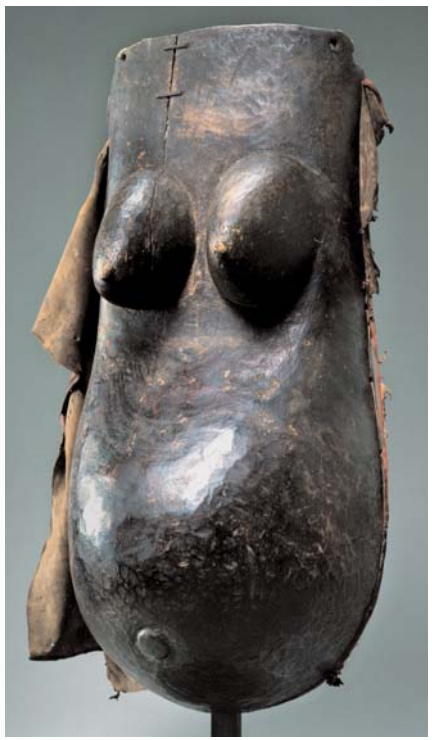
Makonde

Geographic location
Mozambique, Tanzania, Kenya, eastern Africa

Chronology
1910: first contact with Europeans
1960s: war of liberation

Related entries
Swahili, colonialism, trade, contemporary visual arts, dance

The Makonde, over a million people, are a Bantu-speaking tribe settled between northeastern Mozambique and southeastern Tanzania (where they migrated in the 1950s), with small enclaves in Kenya as well. They are a matrilinear society organized in autonomous villages, with no central authority. They practice slash-and-burn farming. Although as coast dwellers they were active in the Swahili trade network, they came into contact with the Europeans quite late, in 1910. They have also resisted Islamic penetration; their religion revolves around traditional ancestor worship. The *Mapico* mask society to which men are initiated fills an important role for this people. In the 1960s, the Makonde joined the Frelimo movement in the struggle for the liberation of Mozambique. In the West they are renowned for their ebony wood carvings (*shetani* and *ujamaa*), a craft that now supplies tourist demand.



►Belly mask, Makonde (Tanzania). Private Collection.

The Makonde masks of Mozambique are worn like helmets and differ from Tanzania's face masks. Real hair is inserted on the top of the head.

Some of these masks have European, Arabic or Asiatic features, perhaps in an effort to capture the foreigners' power, or as a strong form of social critique.

The Mapico *dances also attract spectators from neighboring villages, thus in addition to strengthening cohesion inside the group, they are an occasion for cementing relations with other groups that are not blood-related.*

Mapico *masks are believed to be the dead reincarnate, both men and women. For this reason, although frightful, they are not evil, occupying a category midway between benign ancestors (*machinamu*) and evil spirits (*machatwani*). Associated with the power of the men who have been initiated into their secrets,* Mapico *masks also appear at female puberty rituals.*

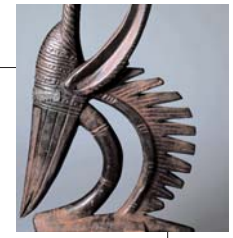
▲Mask, Makonde (Mozambique). Private Collection.

George Lilanga, a contemporary painter, was influenced by the self-taught Edward Saidi Tingatinga (1932-1972) whose style, imitated by other artists as well, gave rise to a true genre, known as tingatinga. *Subjects of this genre are animals (for which there is a high tourist demand), urban life scenes, and historical themes. Another frequent subject are the deformed representations of* shetani *spirits, influenced by Makonde beliefs and European painting, thus satisfying at the same time the exotic and aesthetic taste of Westerners.*

The use of highly contrasting and brilliant pure enamel colors on a monochromatic background is typical of the genre. His "alien" figures, portrayed in African everyday life scenes, lack the frightening quality of the shetani *spirits,*

George Lilanga was born in 1934 in Klkwetu, a village in Tanzania. He moved to Dar es Salaam where he studied art. His work ranges from painting to sculpture. He died in June 2005.

▲George Lilanga, *Women Vendors*, 2000.



"A patient man eats ripe fruit" (Swahili proverb, eastern Africa)

Swahili

The Swahili culture grew over the centuries from exchanges between the native coastal population and Arabs, Persians, and later Indian merchants. This urban culture thrived on trading seaports such as Manda, which reached its splendor in the 12th century, Mombasa, Pemba, Mafia, Kilwa, and Zanzibar. These ports acted as middlemen between the Indian Ocean merchants and the Congo hinterland that sent slaves and ivory tusks. The Swahili economy began to decline in the 16th century when the Portuguese set up trading depots on the coast, to be replaced in turn at the end of the 17th century by the sultan of Oman who lorded over the region for about two hundred years. In the 1830s, Swahili merchants even traveled to Angola where they set up an exchange network that stretched from the Indian Ocean to the Atlantic. The "Swahili culture" rests on a common language but is not homogeneous, as many who identify with the culture do not call themselves "Swahili." The language is a mixture of Bantu and Arabic, with the latter adapted phonetically and syntactically to Bantu. The language of trade, Swahili has become a sort of *lingua franca* in much of eastern Africa and is the national language of Tanzania. The missionaries had no small part in spreading it, having chosen to preach in Swahili. A modified Arabic script is used in Swahili literature that hails back to at least the 17th century.

Geographic location
Eastern Coast (cities of Mombasa, Pemba, Mafia, Kilwa and Zanzibar), eastern Africa

Chronology
17th century: apogee of Manda City
15th century: trade with China
16th century: the Portuguese arrive
17th century: rule by the sultan of Oman
19th century: Swahili traders reach Angola
19th century: apogee of door-carving art

Related entries
Black Islam, trade

◄Swahili craftsmen carving a door, Zanzibar (Tanzania).

These boats of Arabic origin populate the coast of the Arabic Peninsula, India and eastern Africa. They sail by following the monsoons, traveling southward in winter and northward in late spring and early summer.

The dependency on long-distance trade and the failure to diversify their economy are one reason for the decline of Swahili cities after the maritime trade collapsed with the arrival of Portuguese ships.

The Swahili cities derived their power and wealth from the commerce between East and West that passed through the Red Sea. They exchanged goods with the Arab, the Persian, and the Indian worlds, and starting in the 15th century with China as well. This business gave rise to a merchant class that vied for power with the traditional clan authorities; in the early 8th century, it converted to Islam.

▲Swahili boat (*dhow*), Zanzibar (Tanzania).

This dispensary was built by a Delhi architect for Tharia Topan, an Indian merchant who intended to turn it into a hospital for the people of Zanzibar as a homage to Queen Victoria on the occasion of her jubilee. Begun in 1885, the building was completed only in 1894, after the merchant's death. The eclectic style mixes Arabic, Indian, African and European motifs and is symbolic of Zanzibar's multicultural character.

The pointed tympani roofs are reminiscent of European architecture.

The wood railing of the balconies is reminiscent of Arabic shutters.

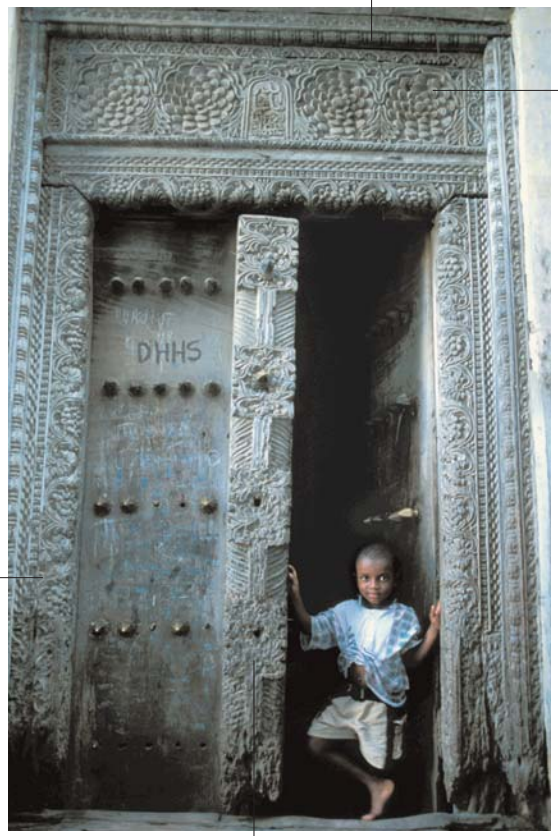
The portico's carved posts on the ground floor and the trefoil arches are in Indian style.

▲The old dispensary, Zanzibar (Tanzania).

The stone houses that filled the Swahili cities testified to the power of the leading families and contrasted dramatically with the surrounding straw huts. The father would build such a house for the daughter when she married. If the parents' and daughter's houses were adjacent, a sky-bridge would connect them.

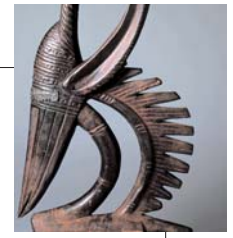
The decorating motifs are partially local (the date palm, the incense cedar, the wave motif) and partially Indian (rosettes, lotus flowers).

It was customary, when a house was built, to start from the door: once it was in place, the house was built around it.



The door-carving tradition on the eastern coast blossomed in the 19th century. The double door opens inward; the central post, the doorjamb and lintel are carved.

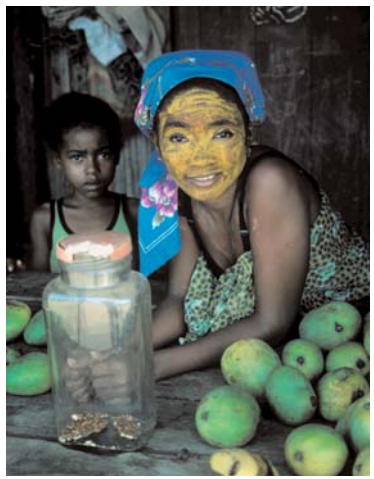
▲The old dispensary, Zanzibar (Tanzania).



"An empty belly is not good company" (Madagascar proverb)

Madagascar

Over the centuries, the culture of Madagascar became layered with Bantu, Arabic, and Indonesian elements. The Indonesians first reached the island in the sixth century. There are several theories about the origins of the kingdoms and chiefdoms that developed in the 17th century in the southwest of the island from the preexisting communities: some claim they were founded by Indonesians, and mention in support of their theory the outrigger pirogue, the rice paddies, and even the Malagasy tongues; others stress the Arabic contributions or the Bantu influence (for example, in the role of magic to maintain the king's power). The plateau is home to the Merina, the Betsileo and the Bezanozano who possibly descend from a single tribe, but who look at the Merina as an aristocratic group whose ancestor hailed from southeast Asia. These populations reached the highlands in the 15th century, driven by the constant influx of small bands from Asia. Traditional lore mentions wars between the newcomers (the Merina) and the Vazimba (the "ancestors," who were Bantu) who were pushed farther inland. However, the Merina kings needed to make peace with the local divinities and thus with the "aboriginal" priests, which led to marriage alliances. The Arabic and Moslem influence touched the northwestern part of the island as the Swahili culture spread along the coast starting in the 11th century.



Population
Merina, Betsileo, Bezanozano, Mahafaly, Sakalava, Zafimaniry

Geographic location
Madagascar, southern Africa

Chronology
6th century: earliest Indonesian presence
11th century: the Swahili expand their influence
12th century: rise of kingdoms and chiefdoms
15th century: Merina, Betsileo and Bezanozano settle on hinterland plateaus
18th century: rise of the Merina kingdom
19th century: the Merina kingdom becomes dominant

Related entries
Swahili, Black Islam

◀Woman at the market (Madagascar).

The use of vertical funerary insignia, extending as it did from eastern Africa to Indonesia, passing through Madagascar, is evidence of the extensive contacts between these different cultural areas.

Like the Sakalava, the Mahafaly who live in the south of the island are renowned for their funerary art. The ancestor tombs are placed inside square areas enclosed by wood or stone fences and filled with stones, into which the funeral insignia are stuck.

The carved scenes illustrate the life and achievements of the deceased, personalizing the figure and creating a memory for the descendants.

The horns of the animals sacrificed at the funeral are arranged on the stones around the insignia. The Mahafaly shape the animals' horns as they grow, into unusual shapes.

▲Funeral insignia (*alo alo*), Mahafaly (Madagascar)

Villages are built on hills. The different altitude of the houses implies a hierarchical and temporal difference for in principle, the progenitors live higher up on the hill, the descendants below. To look at a landscape means to visually reconstruct the history and relations of one's own people in the space where they have made their home.

Man inserts himself in the natural environment, a manifestation of God, and by building his home leaves a lasting mark on the landscape. The success of a marriages is manifested in the house, especially the house of the village ancestors which is sanctified: the central wood post and the three hearth stones become the meeting place of all the descendants.

The Zafimaniry, consisting of about twenty-thousand people, live in eastern Madagascar in a mountainous, wooded area. The progressive cutting down of trees is modifying the landscape as the woodland is replaced by grassland and by rice fields cultivated on irrigated terraces. This is bringing about a change of life style, which the Zafimaniry interpret as a change in "ethnicity": because it is the Betsileo tribe that traditionally has cultivated rice, they themselves are becoming "Betsileo" as their environment changes.

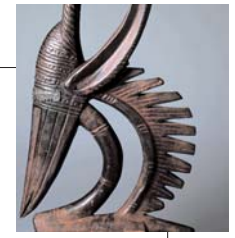
▲Zafimaniry village (Madagascar).

These cloths are commonly used as shawls and to wrap the dead for the "second funeral" when, after a first burial in a temporary grave, the bodies are exhumed, washed and wrapped in the length of cloth, then buried again, this time with the remains of the ancestors.

In the 19th century, fabrics with more complex weave patterns became fashionable among the Merina aristocracy. This was achieved by adding heddles to the looms and coloring the textiles with red aniline dyes imported from Europe.

The Merina kingdom arose in the 17th century in the central tablelands of Madagascar. They were a farming people, divided in castes: a light-skinned nobility, the freemen and the slaves. The expansion of rice farming in the swampy hinterland provided more and better nourishment for the slaves, who became goods to be exchanged for European firearms. Ravaged by civil war at the end of the 18th century, the kingdom was unified again around 1780; in the 19th century it became the political leading force of Madagascar.

▲Silk fabric (*lamba akotofahana*), Merina (Madagascar). London, British Museum.



San

"Soon they shall be reduced to a mere curiosity of nature: already in England and in Paris, there are stuffed samples" (Charles Robert Knox)

The name "San" (and "Bushman") refers to hunter-gatherer clans organized in small villages of usually less than fifty people that the Europeans found when they reached southern Africa. The San created most of the rock paintings and carvings scattered in about fifteen thousand sites in the mountains of South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, and Lesotho. Many of these works of art cannot be dated, while others are recent. The earliest rock painting was discovered in southern Namibia in the early 20th century at the Apollo Site 11, and dates to 25,000 BC: it is the first example of African painting. The paintings and carvings have different characteristics and are found in various places: while carvings are mostly of isolated figures, mostly animals rendered somewhat geometrically, the paintings have a more varied iconography of animals, human figures, deformed beings, hand prints, and abstract forms and also reproduce hunting or camp scenes, sometimes in narrative fashion. San rock art is thought to have had magic-religious purposes: they are representations of past events and propitiatory evocations of trance-inducing rituals through which the San priests and the witch doctors mastered the rain, wild game, and sickness.

Geographic location
Namibia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Lesotho, southern Africa

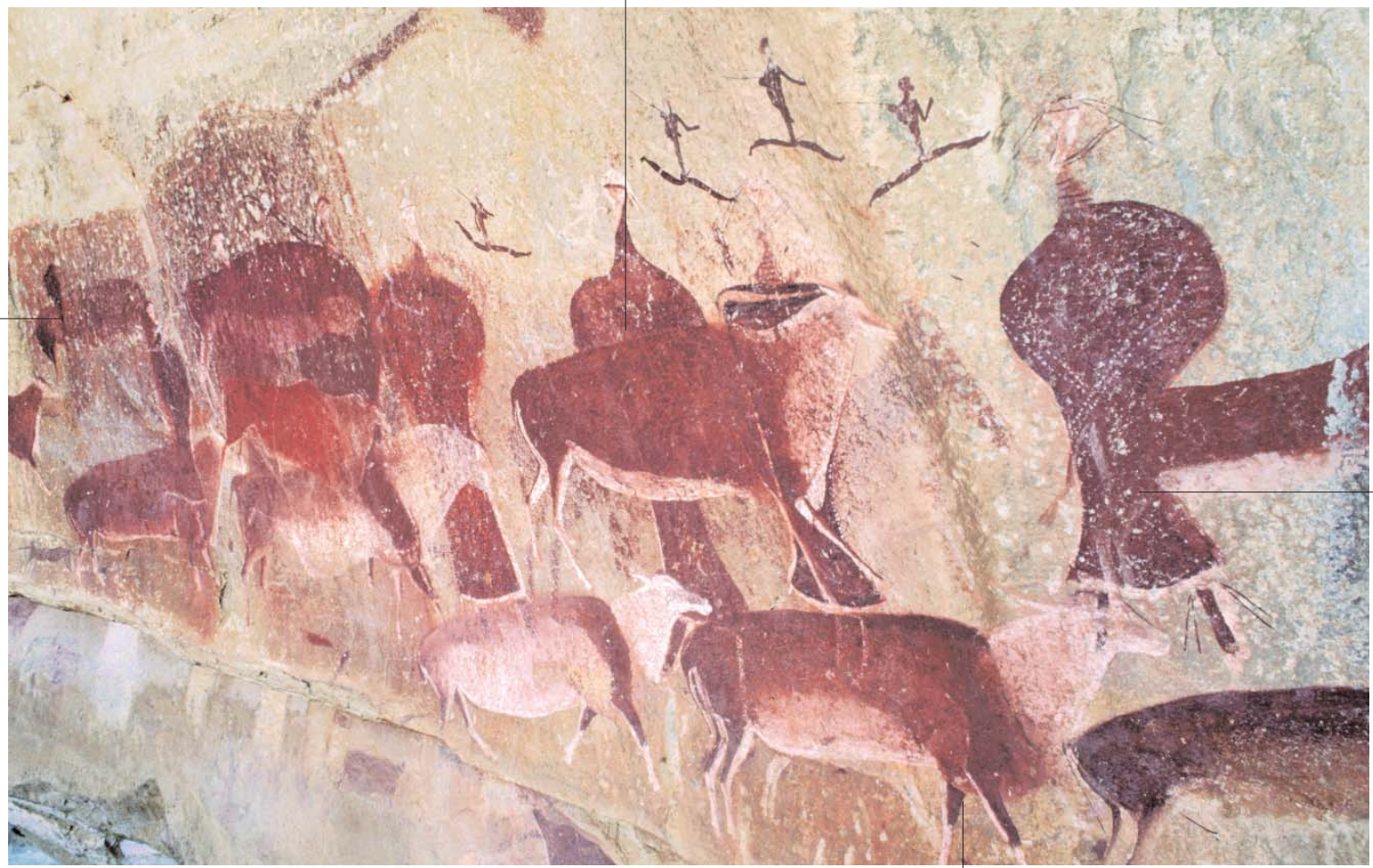
Chronology
25,000 BC: Namibia, oldest rock painting.

Related entries
Hunters and warriors

◀Rock painting, San, Kamberg Natural Reservation (Namibia).

Figures of animals and human beings appear together in interrelated contexts. The alcina antelope is a frequent subject: more than any other animal, it was believed to embody the vital force. Interestingly, traces of blood have been found on these paintings.

About six-hundred rock-painting sites have been found in the Drakensberg Mountains, with about thirty-five thousand works of art.



Colors were made with clay (white), charcoal and manganese for black and ocher for red and yellow.

The beliefs of today's !Kung, a San group that lives in the Kalahari desert, confirm the magical-religious importance of the antelope: they dance trance-inducing dances around the sacrificed animal's carcass, and believe that the shaman becomes an antelope in order to enter the otherworld.

▲Rock painting, San, Kamberg Natural Reservation (Namibia).

Ethnological research on shaman rites among hunting-gathering peoples has been used tentatively to formulate theories about the function of rock paintings and carvings; in particular, the meaning of the giraffe, a recurring motif.

According to these theories, the stylization of the figures should not be interpreted as a lack of realism, but rather as a faithful representation of the altered state of perception induced by the trance.

The importance that the shamans attribute to the backbone as a conduit of the vital force would explain the symbolic importance of the giraffe.

The patches on the giraffe could signify the fragmented state of perception during a trance.

▲Rock carving of a giraffe, 3000 BC - 1000 AD, San (Namibia). Windhoek, Namibia State Museum.

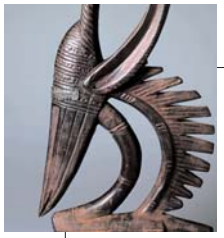
Ostrich eggshells can survive intact for thousands of years; the hunting-gathering San, who until recently were still using them to store water or food, began to use them at least fifteen-thousand years ago.

The patterns traced with stone tools first, then with iron chisels, are made by both men and women: ocher is used for red and charcoal for black.

Usually the designs consist of curves, triangles and zigzag lines. In the 20th century, animal drawings began to appear, though the geometric decoration continued to prevail. No meaning has been found for this art, which could simply have a decorative purpose.

The relative rarity of eggs with traced drawings suggests that they were reserved for special purposes: fragments of traced eggs have been found in funerary furnishings; but they could also have been made for the tourist trade that developed quite early in South Africa.

▲Ostrich eggs, San (Namibia). Private Collection.



"Cross a big lake only once because if you go back, crocodiles will be on the alert" (Shona proverb, Zimbabwe)

Shona

Geographic location
Zimbabwe, Mozambique, southern Africa

Chronology
5th century BC: first settlements in the Great Zimbabwe area
14th-15th century: apogee of the Great Zimbabwe power
16th century: fall of the Great Zimbabwe kingdom
16th century: kingdoms of Khami and Monomotapa
19th century: Ndebele invasion

Related entries
Swahili, male and female, beads

The Shona are a Bantu-speaking people who live between Zimbabwe and Mozambique. When the Portuguese reached this area in the 16th century, they met the Karanga (a Shona clan) from whom they learned about the vanished Great Zimbabwe kingdom whose monumental ruins were still standing: in particular, a stone complex in a highland valley between the Zambesi and Limpopo Rivers. The Great Zimbabwe reached its splendor between 1300 and 1450; its economy was based on agriculture, livestock breeding, gold extraction and trade with the Swahili (as evidenced by Chinese porcelain and thousands of southeast Asian beads found among the ruins). The earliest settlements date to the fifth century bc and the oldest walls to the middle of the 13th century. The compound, which included the royal palace, was probably abandoned after 1550 when the Great Zimbabwe kingdom was displaced by the Khami and the Monomotapa. The main site, surrounded by walls, was home to the royal family, while the twenty to thirty stone houses surrounding it were for the nobility. The image of the Great Zimbabwe as a great empire, however, is incorrect: the abundant land, the small population, and the subsistence economy were not conducive to building great concentrations of power. The Great Zimbabwe was just one of the many kingdoms of about the same size and power that populated the region at one time.

▶ Upper part of the Great Zimbabwe fortified walls (Zimbabwe).

These ruins were built with blocks of granite from rocks subjected to natural cleavage by climatic change, or detached by warming the rock, then quickly cooling it with water.

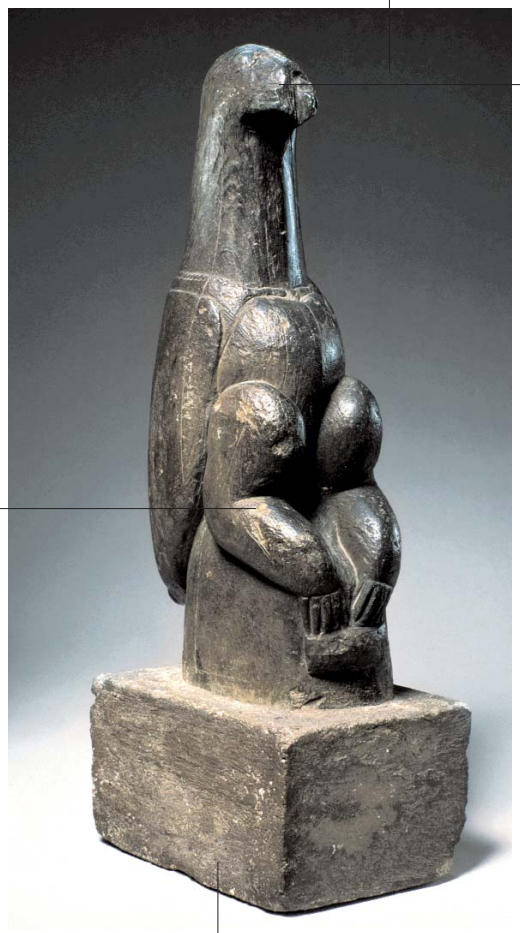
In contrast with their imposing presence, the walls' interior spaces are narrow, which has only increased the mystery surrounding this monumental site, suggesting that it might have been an initiation locale.

The small entrance towers shaped like Shona silos, were probably capped with monoliths in the shape of birds.

The rocks were cut into regular blocks of varying thickness and neatly aligned to build dry walls to a height of thirty feet and a width of fifteen. Their imposing nature seems to suggest they were bulwarks, though the available data seems to rule it out, since there are no clearly recognizable military structures and many walls simply trace short arches around which one can easily walk. Perhaps they had a symbolic function and were signs of royal authority.

▲ Entrance to the Great Zimbabwe fortified walls (Zimbabwe).

Only a few Great Zimbabwe sculptures exist. Because they were found accidentally, we lack precise information about their original sites and their use. They were presumably altar pieces, or stood on top of gates or walls.



This is the upper part of a steatite monolith of a bird, probably an eagle or a vulture, as may be presumed from the broken hooked beak.

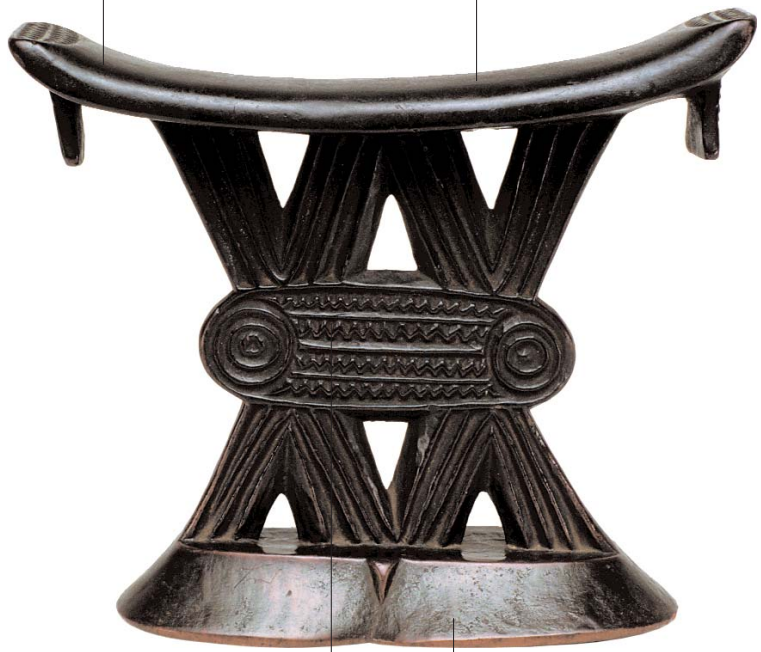
The standing posture and the legs' unusual position suggest that the artist's intent was not to portray a specific bird, but a fantastic being embodied in animal form.

Currently, Shona people consider the birds messengers of the gods or incarnations of ancestors, but we do not know if these or similar beliefs were also part of Great Zimbabwe cults. According to some theories, these statues represented the king, for both the king and the bird link the sky to the earth.

▲Soapstone sculpture, 13th-15th century (Great Zimbabwe). Private Collection.

African headrests are quite comfortable because by reducing the contact surface to a minimum, they make perspiration easier and keep the head cool.

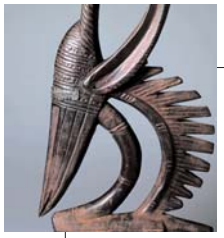
Anyone using this headrest would not flatten or ruin his or her elaborate headdress.



The overall shape and the triangular and circular motifs of the base suggest, apparent abstraction notwithstanding, a female figure with legs, breasts and shoulders showing. By sleeping, the man completes the figure adding the head.

Among the Shone, it is mostly men who use headrests. While they sleep, they visit their ancestors, on whose favors the wellbeing and prosperity of the family depends. Sometimes diviners also use them, to make contact with the netherworld.

▲Headrest, Shona (Zimbabwe). Raleigh, North Carolina Museum of Art.



"The elephant is not burdened by the weight of his tusks"
(Ndebele proverb, Zimbabwe)

Ndebele

Geographic location
Zimbabwe, South Africa, southern Africa

Chronology
1821: the Zulu empire splits and the Ndebele kingdom is born
1893: fall of the Ndebele kingdom

Related entries
Shona, Nguni, hunters and warriors, beads

The Ndebele are a Bantu-speaking group (part of the Nguni population), at one time a nation that split from the Zulu empire under Shaka after Mzilikazi, one of their military chiefs, rebelled in 1821. As a result, the Ndebele migrated to the north and set up a military state based on the Zulu model in the southern part of today's Zimbabwe, where they subjected the Shona people. Their social structure rested on three distinct groups: Zansi, Enhla and Hole.

The first group was the ruling aristocracy that claimed descent from the fellow warriors of the founding hero; the second was more numerous and was composed of the Sotho, Venda and Tswana tribes who had been subjected and assimilated before the Ndebele settled in Zimbabwe; the third, and largest group, included the Shona and other tribes that had voluntarily submitted in exchange for protection from neighboring raids, or prisoners of war who would be forced into the Ndebele regiments or work as slaves. The Ndebele nation fell in 1893 when it was attacked by the English.

► Ndebele woman painting a wall (South Africa).

Nyoka *means "snake," an animal associated with the ancestors, hence with fertility. The different styles of the beaded garments reflect the steps of a woman's coming to maturity and her changing social duties: at one time worn daily, these dresses are now worn only on important occasions.*

The women transfer the designs of their murals to beadwork; an interesting detail is the use of black contours to trace the shapes. In recent decades the characteristic white background has been replaced by colored ones.

The manufacturing of beads in southern Africa has local origins; to these were added glass beads from Europe that acquired the same meaning and use as the native ones.

As in mural painting, some geometric forms take on a figurative identity (such as architectural elements or sections of houses), even composing veritable landscapes. The house is an element of stability for a people that since the end of the 19th century has been forced by war to move time and again.

▲ *Nyoka* garment, Ndebele (South Africa). London, British Museum.

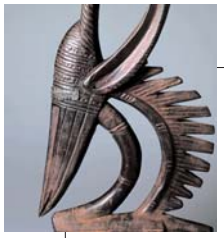
Ndebele houses are decorated in brightly colored geometric frescoes whose shapes are heightened with black outlining. Sometimes they also includes stylized figurative elements such as airplanes, that evoke modernity and the West.

These frescoes were painted by women and express their vision in a society that allows them little decision-making power. The symbolic heart of the compositions are the allusions to fertility, the earth and the cosmic order.

This art was born about one hundred years ago, after the English defeated the Ndebele and dispersed them in Sotho land. Mural painting and its unusual style became an identifying element, a sign of cultural membership in a group in a foreign land.

Only apparently abstract, these compositions are symbolic representations of villages and landscapes and are associated with specific sites, especially in their current revival in urban settings , where they become political and identifying symbols.

▲Ndebele woman in traditional garb (South Africa).



"Hot water doesn't stay hot forever" (Zulu proverb, South Africa)

Nguni

Populations
Nguni, Zulu, Sotho, Swazi, Xhosa and Ndebele

Geographic location
South Africa, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, southern Africa

Chronology
19th century: rise of centralized military governments
1816-1828: Shaka forms the Zulu kingdom
1888: fall of the Zulu kingdom

Related entries
Ndebele, hunters and warriors, male and female, divination, dance

The name Nguni refers to an aggregate of Bantu-speaking peoples who live on the eastern coast of southern Africa, presently numbering about eighteen million. Organized in patrilinear, mostly pastoralist, chiefdoms at the turn of the 19th century, as land was becoming scarce, commerce was intensifying, and the area was racked by political upheavals, the chiefdoms became small, centralized, military states such as the Zulu, Sotho, Swazi, Xhosa and Ndebele, that expanded to the center and south of Tanzania, subjugating and assimilating a number of ethnically different groups. The Zulu state was founded by Shaka: from 1816 to 1828 he turned a small clan into a powerful kingdom that held on to its independence until 1887 when it fell under English rule. Its strength was ensured by a system of age-sets as a basis for forced conscription, and the formation of regiments that progressively included the young men of the conquered and assimilated tribes. A key element in this state-building process was the creation of a symbolic, political unity around the figure of the monarch, who was looked upon as a mediator between the living and the ancestors, thus as a creator of his people's prosperity.

▶ Men dancing in Soweto, Zulu (South Africa).

Spoons such as these, when privately owned, were buried with the owner in his grave, but if they were gifts from the bride's family exchanged during the prenuptial negotiations, upon the man's death they were returned to his wife.

The concave part of the spoon corresponds figuratively to the head.

The elongated shape of the handle suggests a female body with emphasis on the breasts, buttocks, pubis and belly.

Spoons also have a symbolic function: as signs of a person's social status, they can be quite elaborate. In southern Africa artistic forms are generally geometric, but sometimes the link between an object and its owner is made more explicit by figurative forms.

▲ Spoon, Zulu (South Africa), 19th century. Private Collection.

The Sotho number about ten million people, seven of whom life in South Africa, and the rest in neighboring countries. Originally from the Transvaal, they settled in these lands in the 15th century. They are divided into northern Sotho (Puni), southern Sotho and Tswana. Their languages, Sesotho, are similar, though each of the three groups is composed of heterogeneous tribes.

When the white man came and began to occupy the land, many were forced to migrate and to give up herding to work in the mines.

The Sotho kingdom (known as Lesotho), was born out of the resistance to the Zulu invasion: a clan led by Moshoeshoe took the helm of the resistance movement and founded the reigning dynasty. Unlike other Nguni groups who prefer to live in scattered settlements, the Sotho live in villages and towns of several thousand residents, which has increased their defense capabilities.

▲A soothsayer, Sotho (South Africa).

Each year in the spring, thousands of young Swazi women visit the queen mother's village: they dance bare-breasted and offer her in tribute bunches of freshly cut reeds, to show their strength and their adaptability to labor.

The girls wear colored tassels or cloths to indicate whether they are betrothed or still unattached.

On the eighth and last day of the ceremony, the girls appear before the king who offers them meat.

▲Dance of the reeds (*umhlanga*), Swazi (South Africa).

The inclawa *(the king's ceremony), an annual ritual, contributes to reinforce the bonds of solidarity and unity in the Swazi kingdom: first the capital is symbolically plundered and the king is accused of being an enemy of the people; then, during the eating of the first fruits, order and authority is restored.*

*The ceremony is twofold, with the Small Incwala taking place fifteen days before the Great Incwala. In the first ritual, during the new moon, the queens, the priest closest to the king, the princes and the royal regiments sing and dance ritually (*simemo*) disparaging the king. These are followed by other chants that reconfirm the people's support of the king. The second ritual resembles the first, but is on a grander scale.*

The incwala helps to defuse the social tensions caused by the hierarchical structure and by the harvest that suddenly brings to an end a time of hardship, and is at once a ritual of rebellion and of purification.

The king is confined to the cattle pen and watched by his most trusted warriors. There he gains strength from the seawater and the water of the principal local rivers. He reaches maximum strength and transforms himself into Silo, a monster who has no relations with human society and represents chaos, a dangerous state. Then the ritual reintroduces the king into society, ensuring that his powers will be used for the good of the nation.

▲ *Incwala* ceremony, Swazi (South Africa).