SPECTACULAR DISPLAY
The Art of Nkanu Initiation Rituals

DAVID A. BINKLEY

In 1999 the National Museum of African Art acquired an important set of Nkanu wall panels that provided the impetus for "Spectacular Display: The Art of Nkanu Initiation Rituals," which opened at the museum on December 16, 2001, and will run through March 3, 2002. This is the first exhibition devoted to the complex visual arts created during men's initiation rituals by the Nkanu peoples of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Angola. It is organized by the National Museum of African Art (Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.) and curated by David Binkley, who selected works from the Royal Museum for Central Africa (also known as the Africa Museum, Tervuren, Belgium), the Institut für Ethnologie der Universität Göttingen, Abteilung Völkerkundliche Sammlung (Germany), and several private collections in Belgium and the United States.

"Spectacular Display" is accompanied by a catalogue written by Annemieke Van Damme and with an introduction by Binkley (96 pp., approx. 78 color photos, 2 maps; $29.95 softcover), published by the National Museum of African Art in association with Philip Wilson Publishers.

Nkanu art is relatively rare in Western collections, and during much of the twentieth century it was often erroneously attributed to the neighboring Yaka. As a consequence it has been little discussed in the literature on African art. The Belgian art historian Annemieke Van Damme conducted research among the Nkanu in 1990-91. She interviewed men and women who had participated in men's initiation rituals called nkan-da, asking them to interpret photographs of all initiation objects extant in Western museum collections. Dr. Van Damme also filmed two ritual specialists as they created a mask and a wall panel. Through her research we have gained a better understanding of the creative intentions and symbolic content of art traditions associated with nkan-da in the twentieth century. Unless otherwise cited, the information provided here has been distilled from Dr. Van Damme's research presented in "Spectacular Display."

Men's initiation rituals of the Nkanu are similar to those practiced by other peoples in eastern Angola, the southwestern Democratic Republic of the Congo, and western Zambia. Nkan-da (known as mukanda by other peoples in the area) is accompanied by an artistic complex that includes a variety of sculpture, masquerades of fiber and wood, elaborate costuming, special dances, and musical accompaniment. Nevertheless, nkan-da initiation varies across this region in form, aesthetic content, and frequency owing to historical circumstances and cultural preferences.

Following the structure of rites of passage described by the French anthropologist and folklorist Arnold van Gennep, nkan-da is organized into distinct phases: separation, transition, and reintegration. A dominant theme is the symbolic death and rebirth of the individual, who enters nkan-da as a child and at its conclusion re-enters society as an adult. For boys and young men, the period of separation in the initiation camp also marks a major social reorientation away from the world of women and toward that of men.

Nkan-da candidates are secluded for several months in a compound outside the community, where they are circumcised, acquire specialized knowledge, and learn the skills necessary for adult life. During this time of physical and psychological transformation, sculptors, who are also ritual specialists well versed in the esoteric knowledge and symbolic visual language of nkan-da, create polychrome wall panels, figural sculpture, and masks. By observing—and perhaps by helping carvers in small tasks—initiates learn about the images and meanings of initiation arts.

Most of the works created in the nkan-da are destined for public display at the conclusion of the initiation cycle, when an elaborate celebration is held to reintroduce the initiates to the community as adults. To promote recognition of their new status, a spectacular array of the ritual sculpture is presented in a kikaku—a three-sided roofed
structure placed at a crossroads outside the initiation compound. The youths wear distinctive costumes and perform nkanda dances, accompanied by masked figures representing ancestral spirits, whose presence is required to protect them and to sanction the activities. The celebration is also a time of recognition for the guardians, instructors, and artists who have brought nkanda to a successful conclusion. Afterwards, some masks are kept so the newly initiated can perform with them during the subsequent one- to two-year reintegration period, when they circulate among neighboring communities to demonstrate their nkanda training and to receive gifts of food and money.

Wall Panels and Figures

Nkanu initiation arts combine human and animal images with two-dimensional floral and geometric patterns that convey meaning through color and symbolic imagery. These elements work together in one or more narratives that reflect the activities and teachings of nkanda as well as events that occur within the community during the initiation cycle.

Two important photographs taken at the beginning of the twentieth century, from the photographic archive of the Africa Museum in Tervuren, Belgium, illustrate the arrangement of sculpture in the kikaku (Figs. 2, 3). They show how as many as six or eight panels—carved, painted, and lashed together to form a single composition—were installed
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Top: 2. Nkau wall panels and sculpture displayed inside the enclosure called the kikaku. Photograph by A. Mahieu, 1905. Photographic Archive, Africa Museum, Tervuren (Belgium). 4005. The kikaku and its contents—wall panels, floor sculptures, guardian figures, head posts—formed the backdrop for the public celebration marking the end of the initiation cycle.

Bottom: 3. Kikaku with nkanda wall panels and sculpture. Photograph by L. Michel, Tumba, 1903. Photographic Archive, Africa Museum, Tervuren, 49.1.3275. While each figural character tells its own story through clothing, posture, and gesture, the assemblage of panels and sculptures relates a broader narrative that can be read by those educated within nkanda.

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5. Set of wall panels, with a bird in flight represented at left. Wood, pigment; height 112.5cm (44.3"). Africa Museum, Tervuren, RG26.3178/1-RG26.3178/8.

Opposite page:
6. Leopard figure. Wood, pigment; height 43.5cm (17.1"). Africa Museum, Tervuren, RG48.27.43. Animal sculptures as well as anthropomorphic figures were set on the floor of the kikaku in front of the wall panels.

against the walls of the roofed structure. In some examples, figures are carved in such high relief that they seem about to step out from the background (Fig. 1). Freestanding figural sculptures appear in front of the wall panels.

Among the distinctive elements of nkanda art are its bright earthen pigments, whose adherence to the wood is ensured by the application of a gesso-like undercoating. Through polychrome decoration the artist delineated facial tattoos, clothing, jewelry, and symbolic designs. In these vibrant works, the painted patterns serve as the landscape from which emerge the human and animal figures of nkanda lore. Together the wall panels and figural sculpture function as a visual language that can be read by those educated within nkanda. These images speak of rebirth, emotional and sexual maturity, death and the spirit world, and community values.

A study of the extant panels and freestanding figures reveals several repeated themes. In Nkanu initiation arts, carved representations of domesticated and wild animals teach cooperation, friendship, mutual respect, and regard for the authority of the traditional chief and the ancestral spirits. When two or more animals are depicted together, the message often concerns conflict and resolution. For example, one of the wall panels in the exhibition shows a Gaboon viper that has captured a small antelope.
In Nkanu folktales the latter is a cunning and rather cheeky character that usually manages to outsmart larger animals. In the context of nkanda, this animal often symbolizes the initiates. For Anemieke Van Damme, this panel is a warning, speaking not only of the initiates’ abilities to use their wits to avoid the dangers encountered during initiation but also of their reliance on the protection of the traditional chief.

Another panel, part of a complete set, has a bird in flight carved in relief (Fig. 5). Van Damme suggests that it is the purple heron, a bird known to lead flocks of black storks. Nkanda initiates are often referred to as black storks; they darken their bodies and imitate the bird’s behavior at certain stages of the rite. The nkanda leader, identified with the purple heron, leads his “flock” outside the compound to wash in the river or to farm, and the group returns to the enclosure in the same way.

Designs on the panels reinforce the symbolic power of birds within the context of nkanda. Van Damme interprets the concentric circles on the back of the heron as the sun. Rectangles enclosing half circles may represent the moon; dots may be stars or descen-
dants. The bird flies over linked diamond designs that suggest the earth or the skin of the Gaboon viper. Triangles that touch at the tip or base refer to sexual intercourse.

Two other panels in the composition depict an Nkanu man and woman, both carved in high relief. The man's squatting posture is like that of an initiate about to be circumcised. The woman's gesture of hands on belly suggests that she is pregnant and, in the words of an informant, "speaking with the child" in her womb.

Animal sculptures are also displayed in front of the wall panels in the kikaku. Leopards, genets, civets, and other spotted cats symbolize traditional leaders who have the right to wear the hides of these feline predators. The floor sculpture in Figure 6 would have reminded initiates and the community at large to respect those in authority.

Another animal sculpture in the exhibition portrays a coiled Gaboon viper threatening a growling dog; a spotted civet or genet looks on (Fig. 7). According to Van Damme, the dog represents the uncircumcised boy, the feline is the circumcised individual, and the coiled snake is the male organ. Two chickens and a rooster drawn on top of the tray-like base flanking the viper recall an Nkanu proverb: "You don't want a cock; you don't want a guinea fowl; then who's going to warn you at the break of day?" This can be put another way: "You don't want to listen to good advice, but who, then, is going to lead you?" As with much of initiation art, this sculpture instructs the
initiates and the community in matters of dispute resolution, sexual maturity, and good judgment.

Musicians are an important subject in nkanda art. One set of wall panels shows a drummer and two men playing side-blown elephant-tusk horns (Fig. 8). The musicians' buttoned vests, trousers, and caps attest to the popularity of Western attire. Two additional panels in this set feature animals: the checkered body of a snake holding its prey is said to symbolize emptiness and death; the birds refer to the group of initiates who leave the enclosure to bathe and work and return together in the evening. Various painted patterns that fill the background symbolize the male and female principles and sexual intercourse, and allude to the crossroads as an intersection of different worlds.

In keeping with the idea of the initiates' symbolic rebirth as adults, fertility is a dominant theme in these artworks. Panels depicting an Nkanu woman and an Nkanu or a European man are often placed next to each other, with the woman usually to the man's
right. Van Damme’s research allows a more complete interpretation of these images. In one panel in the exhibition, the figure is shown in a provocative dance pose that conveys a woman’s pride, vitality, and sexual maturity (Fig. 9). Her body has been adorned with a mixture of palm oil and red pigment. Her beaded bodice and skirt indicate that she has been promised in marriage, or as the Nkanu say, “The fence has been closed.” Within the context of male initiation, this image reminds young men of their future roles as husbands.

A companion panel, probably created by the same artist, portrays a European man with light yellow skin, a mustache made from tufts of animal hair, and a Western-style hat, waistcoat, trousers, and shoes (Fig. 10). The figure squats and claps his hands—a gesture of greeting or acceptance. In this case, Van Damme was told, it probably indicates that he acknowledges his fatherhood of a child. Sexual references fill the patterned background. The subject and juxtaposition of the two panels may have meant to be satirical or perhaps to reflect problems associated with European-African relationships.
This page:
Smaller figures like this example might have been used outside the context of nkanda, perhaps to help a woman conceive.


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Other representations of fertility are more direct. One panel depicts a woman giving birth; the child’s head is emerging from the womb (Fig. 11). The mother sits on a mat, legs spread and knees bent, clenching her teeth as she bears the pain of labor. In the next panel, a European man in colonial attire, probably the father, claps his hands.

*Nkanda* artists distinguish European subjects through skin tone, dress, and posture. Representations of these regional administrators, tradesmen, and missionaries are generally painted with pink, yellow ochre, or orange pigment. Whitened faces, however, suggest a distinctive facial decoration (*n’ganzi*) that was worn by many Nkanu men and women. While Western attire—colonial helmets, vests with buttons, trousers, shoes—typically identifies European characters, it is also seen in the depictions of Nkanu who served in the military or with Europeans in some other capacity.

The exhibition includes a five-part sequence of wall panels that is full of power references (Fig. 1). The central figure, sporting a white suit, colonial helmet, and boots, is a European colonial administrator. His authoritative presence is emphasized by the two flanking Congolese soldiers (La Force Publique) who present arms; they are identified by their uniforms consisting of a red beret, a short buttoned vest, and trousers. One soldier’s upraised leg suggests the pose of circumcised initiates, who must find
their balance by standing on one leg. Another interpretation of this stance relates to sexual potency and virility.

Figural sculpture was not relegated solely to display within the kikaku. Judging from their large size, a male-female pair probably functioned as guardian figures (biseki zi makanda) flanking the entrance gate to the initiation enclosure (Figs. 12, 13). The male figure holds one hand to his mouth and raises the other. Van Damme suggests that this gesture refers to the secrecy surrounding the initiation process and to the initiates’ promise not to reveal what they have learned in nkanda.

The female figure places her right hand on her stomach and in her left hand holds a bundle of twigs that may refer to that part of the initiation rite in which the young men are chastised with twigs. Linear patterns in white and tan pigment depict bracelets, a skirt with strings of beads, and a beaded bodice that was fashionable among the Nkanu during the early twentieth century.

Both figures wear raffia skirts, which are meant to hide their detailed genitals until they are suddenly revealed, to the great amusement of the initiates. While such behavior would ordinarily be considered offensive, these reservations are set aside during nkanda, which, after all, revolves around the concept of fertility.

Smaller figures perhaps were included within the kikaku display, but they were used in other situations as well. The image of a mother carrying a child on her hip (Fig. 14),
for example, might have been prescribed by a ritual healer to be placed in the home of a person with fertility problems.

**Nkanda Masks**

Masks worn by *nkanda* initiates are distinctive for their large size and elaborate surface decoration (Fig. 15). The masks educate the youths in aspects of human behavior, both desirable and undesirable, as a way to prepare them for their roles as responsible, productive adults in Nkanu society. The most important ones also represent ancestral spirit forces that sanction the initiation process and protect the initiates during the rite. Like other *nkanda* art, masks are made from the lightweight wood of the umbrella tree. They consist of a human or animal face attached to a large, bulging superstructure or headress that is painted with elaborate patterns. A raffia collar, suspended from the lower edge of the mask, hides the dancer’s face. Among the variety of human and animal masks that are made, several are mandatory. These include the masquerade figures Nkoso, Kakungu, Kisokolo, and Makemba.

*Makemba* represents a sorrowful pregnant woman or a mother of one child or twins (Fig. 16). Van Damme notes that songs that accompany the performance ask Makemba to rejoice in motherhood. She interprets three vertical lines under each eye as a mother’s...
tears. The sadness may relate to the symbolic death of the initiates in nkanda or to the pain of circumcision. Makemba’s white face links her to the world of the ancestral spirits. This mask and several other objects in the exhibition were made by the same artist who carved the famous drummer figure in the collection of the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RG 200 6/5).

The masquerade figure Kisokolo (Fig. 17) represents the dandy or the womanizer. This joyous male character is identified by his white face, rectangular ears, and heavy-lidded, half-closed eyes. His prominent upturned nose suggests an elephant’s trunk but is also a phallic symbol. Kisokolo’s fiber headdress, made of twigs and woven cloth, includes a raised raffia crest and horns tipped with fiber tassels. A costume consisting of a thick raffia collar and skirt, a coarsely woven jacket, and two braided fiber strands ending in raffia pompons completes the ensemble. Kisokolo dances with Makemba in a performance accompanied by sensual movements and erotic songs. Kisokolo’s exuberant performance contrasts with that of Makemba, who is embraced by onlookers who wish to share in her sorrow.

Nkanda head posts have the same facial characteristics as important initiation masks. Two examples in “Spectacular Display” represent the head of the Kisokolo mask (Fig. 18). The posts serve a protective function, ensuring the initiates’ fertility and combating the evil intentions of others. An Nkanu healer might also erect smaller head posts inside the home of a male or female patient.

Animal masks entertain and instruct the nkanda initiates. Among the few known Nkanu examples are the leopard, antelope, hippopotamus, wild boar, domestic pig, elephant, and buffalo. Each animal has a particular significance. The leopard is a metaphor for leadership and the authority of the traditional chief; like the animal’s representation on wall panels, the mask reminds the initiates to respect the authority of elders, local leaders, and ancestors. The hippo alludes to someone looking for an extramarital relationship; the hippo mask thus serves to admonish initiates and the general public about inappropriate behavior. The pig mask symbolizes the impurity of a man who has not been circumcised (Fig. 19), and it is also associated with sexual promiscuity, an undesirable trait in a responsible adult. Sexual references are encoded in the triangular and cowrie-shelf designs that embellish the headdress—cowrie shells, for example, indicate good fortune and fertility. As with much nkanda art, the masks address both the positive and negative aspects of human sexuality in order to educate initiates in the norms of appropriate adult behavior.

The goal of nkanda and its spectacular display of masks, wall panels, and sculpture is to instruct the Nkanu youth who take part in the rite. The art also has a protective function: to ward off malevolent forces that might harm the initiates in their ritual rebirth. The context in which these objects function lost a great deal of its impact during the twentieth century. Certainly the long history of colonialism and its oppression of traditional cultural institutions affected the Nkanu, as it did many other African peoples. Western education, health, and religious practices have also tempered the vitality of local practices. Van Damme observes that until recently, participation in nkanda was required for any pubescent Nkanu boy. Today it occurs only sporadically among the Nkanu living in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, though nkanda rituals still take place in the northern Angolan Nkanu territory. Congolese Nkanu parents often send their boys to be initiated in Angola, but sometimes they prefer to have their sons circumcised when they are just a few months old, in a short ritual known as the mukanda mu guta, “nkanda in the village.”

The exhibition “Spectacular Display” includes a section that addresses the influence of African rites of passage on African American churches and organizations in the Washington, D.C., area. Such rites increasingly resonate with families and communities in the United States who are looking to African cultures for educational models. Churches, volunteer associations, and other civic organizations are creating programs that help adolescents of both sexes prepare to be productive and responsible adults. Web sites and community cultural centers are additional sources of information about African-inspired rites of passage. This development demonstrates how very relevant African arts and rituals remain in our contemporary world. They also underscore the enduring richness of the continent’s cultural heritage, which serves as a wellspring of creativity worldwide.
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BRINCARD: Notes, from page 78

3. Toma Muteba Lutumbuwa was the first Congolese artist to have been elected to the Academy of Sciences not only to participate but also to take on an active role as a guest curator for the contemporary section. In Le Musée de Lutumbuwa, Lutumbuwa asked Cullinan, a museum curator, who had just retired, to choose the contents. Tellingly, none of the selected pieces were related to her experience of discovering the objects and history of the Congo.

ALLARA: Notes, from page 82

1. I thank Elizabeth Court at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London for reading this essay and providing helpful suggestions. I would like to note that the encyclopedia is compiled by a team of experts from various fields and that the entries were not only to participate but also to take on an active role as a guest curator for the contemporary section. In Le Musée de Lutumbuwa, Lutumbuwa asked Cullinan, a museum curator, who had just retired, to choose the contents. Tellingly, none of the selected pieces were related to her experience of discovering the objects and history of the Congo.

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