

# The King is a Woman

## Shaping Power in Luba Royal Arts

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EXCEPT WHERE OTHERWISE NOTED

Men are chiefs in the daytime, but women become chiefs at night.  
—Luba proverb

Women have long been central to Luba political practices in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and they are depicted prominently in royal arts dating from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries (cover). Luba possessed one of central Africa's most influential precolonial polities that continues to play a pivotal role in Katanga Province of southeastern DRC. Kingship is rooted in notions of the person that are integral to Luba philosophy, namely through the concept of *bumuntu* or humanity, as articulated by Luba scholar Mutombo Nkulu-N'Sengha.<sup>1</sup> "Kingship is the people," he tells us, "and the king's role is to protect the people, to ensure human flourishing, and to serve the spirit." At the investiture of a ruler, the titleholder Twite reminded the king that he was not king for himself but rather for all his people, including those who came before him. "At the center of this is life, and women are the ones giving life. The foundation of kingship is the women," the professor adds.

The iconography and motifs on Luba insignia and related articles of leadership are devised, owned, and deployed primarily by men, yet they allude to women's power both conceptually and literally (Fig. 1). The visual record combined with Luba testimony demonstrates that while men ruled in overt terms, women constituted the covert side of sacred authority and played critical roles in alliance-building, decision-making, succession disputes, and investiture rites. Women also figured centrally in attracting and securing the spiritual allegiance necessary for a state built on the strength of tutelary spirits called *bavidye*.

As spirit mediums, certain women served as guardians of and conduits to the most sacred dwellings of Luba spirits. Most important, the memory of each deceased king was embodied by a woman. The perpetuation of the Luba royal line was attributed not just to conception through the king's mother, but to the reincarnation of the king's spirit in a woman who became the king herself (Nooter 1991:271–75). Processes of exchange and communication between the new king and the spirit mediums of previous kings formed an important dimension of Luba royal practice that will be considered in the final section of this article.

The institution of female spirit mediums created obstacles for Belgian colonial authorities seeking to centralize their power as they exerted hegemony over the Congo in the first two decades of the twentieth century. In effect, spirit mediumship and the entire royal apparatus founded upon the ambiguous gendering of power became a quiet form of resistance in the early colonial period.<sup>2</sup> This article explores the ontological relationships among power, gender, and spirituality to propose that ambiguity is a deliberate and integral dimension of Luba politics and artistic representation. Through a varied range of Luba male and female perspectives and voices, combined with theoretical models of "composite," "fractal," and "relational" forms of personhood, Luba sculpture can be more deeply understood in its complexity and multireferentiality.

### CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE BODY

A purposeful ambiguity defines many institutions of Luba royalty and Luba-related chieftaincy rituals that involve embodiment and transcendence. All Luba rulers descend from the union of the great culture hero, Mbidi Kiluwe, who brought refined kingship practices to the Luba, with the sister of the tyrannical protagonist of the Luba epic, Nkongolo Mwamba. The son of these two was

1 Anthropomorphic water pipe  
Democratic Republic of the Congo, Luba peoples, 19th century  
Wood (*Ricinodendron rautaoanemii*); 61 cm x 14 cm  
Royal Museum for Central Africa, RG 73.73.1 (collected by Comm. Hennebert  
between 1891 and 1900)

The female figure adorning this water pipe possesses the ultimate attributes of Luba beauty created through the elegance of her coiffure and the accumulation of scarification marks. The gesture of hands to breasts alludes to the secret prohibitions of kingship that are women's responsibility to protect and uphold, and her inward gaze is indicative of her role as a spirit receptacle.

Kalala Ilunga, who would become the first legitimate Luba king. Kalala Ilunga is considered the heir of all that is good in his father as the model of civilization and royal bearing. Yet, being the son of Nkongolo's sister means that he also incarnates the extremes of power, and so is a constant reminder that the privileges of leadership can lead to excess and must be contained and controlled, checked and balanced (Mudimbe 1996:246–47).<sup>3</sup> In addition to the inherent paradox of power, kings possess qualities that set them apart from others, intended to reinforce their semi-divine status.

In contexts ranging from gender to kinship and humanity (versus animality), the ruler is constituted outside and beyond the categories of expected behavior. Transcendence of social norms defines him as a semi-divine being. For example, the investiture process of a Luba king requires that he undergo ritual incest in the presence of ancestral relics so as to place him outside of ordinary prohibitions and other social limitations, and to demonstrate his supernatural powers (Burton 1961:21–22). In another kind of transcendence, songs and activities during investiture further suggest that the king is being “smelted” and “forged” with reference to important precolonial technologies of ironworking, affirming the idea that a king is the product of extraordinary metamorphosis (Womersley 1984:71, Dewey and Childs 1996). The king is also closely associated with the Luba culture hero Mbidi Kiluwe, who possessed the stealth and solid qualities of a buffalo. The most iconic object from the Royal Museum for Central Africa merges human and buffalo attributes in a singular mask, reinforcing a ruler's defiance of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic categorization (A. Roberts 1995:22–25; cf. Ceysens 2011) (Fig. 2). And finally, the death of a king is marked by a return to a human body—yet it is that of a woman and her female successors through whom the king's memory is kept alive and his powers are preserved and wielded, thus further challenging fixed definitions of gender (Nooter 1991). Such dis-embodiment and trans-embodiment suggest that Luba royal culture is intrinsically tied to complex understandings of personhood, spirit possession, and body politics.

As Nkulu-N'Sengha explains, the ambiguous gendering of Luba rulership begins with certain basic Luba practices. For example, when a child is born it acquires the name of an ancestor who may have visited the pregnant mother in a dream or vision.<sup>4</sup> Names are not gendered in Luba culture, so a baby boy can be named after a grandmother, or a girl could invoke the spirit of a male ancestor. Likewise, Luba observe patrilineal descent, and yet when a king or chief died, it was not his son who became king but rather the son of his sister, thus demonstrating vestiges of matrilineal logic still organizing the social lives of neighboring peoples such as Hemba and Tabwa. In the professor's words, “the king is often referred to as the wife of a deity, and there is a certain element of women's power found in the personality of the king who embodies both male and female elements. Anything in art that the king touches will always have a figure of a woman. When it comes to life, women have a special connection with the ancestor and with the source of life itself.”

Similar statements were made by Luba individuals in the late 1980s, such as Nsenga Ubandilwa, a Luba male descendent of a chief, who told me in 1988: “The chief will put a female figure on the staff to prove that his kingdom comes from this woman. It is like a sign or a memory of the woman who brought royalty to us.” And in another eloquent commentary on the dual gendering of power, Banze Mukangala, a Luba male officeholder, stated in 1989, “The power comes from women. Even if a man reigns on the throne, one recognizes nevertheless the dignity of the woman as a source of power. It is from her that power emanated.” These examples demonstrate that the deliberately



ambiguous gendering of royal authority stems from culturally specific notions of the complementarity of the sexes and transpersonal identity.

To put these ideas into a broader frame of scholarly reference, the cultural construction of the body has been the subject of important contemporary studies. Comparative cases have demonstrated that African and other non-Western concepts of the body and related personhood are more “composite, multiply sourced, and constituted through reciprocal engagement in a recursively meaningful world” than is usual in Western ideologies (Boddy 1998:271; also see Blier 1995:133–70). Janice Boddy complicates understandings of the body by presenting cultural perspectives that challenge bounded notions of personhood. For example, Nuer male fertility is considered to be “corporate” or communal, and cattle and humans are “linked materially and imaginatively in a plethora of ways” (Boddy 1998:270). As she writes,

in many Melanesian and African societies, *dividual* and relational forms of personhood seem inextricable from conventional understandings of how bodies form from the bodies of others. Bodies encompass and expel one another, corporeal substances move between them. Movement may be continual or episodic as contexts and cultures ordain. Such bodies are composites, not inherently unique or autonomous entities (ibid., p. 263, my emphasis).

The notion of the “composite person” as “dividual” is evident in the deep cultural complexities of the veneration of skulls. Lusinga, a Tabwa chief who emulated and adopted Luba royal practices, was decapitated by the men of the Belgian officer Émile Storms in 1884 and his skull was borne off to Belgium as a trophy of proto-colonial conflict (A. Roberts 2013:215–16). Had it not been lost, Lusinga’s skull would have been kept by his successor, even as his own body was buried under a diverted stream with the skull of his predecessor that he had conserved and consulted when in need of ancestral wisdom. Such “capital visions,” as Julia Kristeva (2012) might have it, were integral to Luba and Luba-related succession and ancestral veneration and find powerful amplification in Alfred Gell’s theorizing of fractal or partitive personhood, as he reflected upon the work of anthropologist Roy Wagner in Melanesia: Any “dividual” person is

“multiple” in the sense of being the precipitate of a multitude of genealogical relationships, each of which is instantiated in his/her person ... A genealogy is thus an enchainment of people .... Person as human being and person as lineage or clan are equally arbitrary sectionings or identifications of this enchainment, [and] different projections of this fractality.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the literature on non-Western notions of the partitive person, a number of Cultural Studies authors have explored provocative spaces of embodied ambiguities, particularly with regard to writing and performing gender in Western contexts. Helen McDonald, for example, traces how artists and feminist critics negotiate ambiguity and how art, as representation, “is a prosthetic, an extension of the body and a point of intercession between one living body and another” (2001:4). This and other works such as that of Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson on performing the body (1999) and the many incisive contributions to *Thinking Bodies*, edited by Julia Flower Mac-



## 2 Male mask

Democratic Republic of the Congo, Luba peoples, 19th century  
Wood (*Schinziophyton rautanenii*); H: 39 cm  
Royal Museum for Central Africa, RG 23470 (collected by O. Michaux in 1896)

A virtuoso work of Luba sculpture, this mask’s regal eminence, horn-like coiffure, and bird at the nape (now missing) may allude to the powerful male buffalo associated with the Luba culture hero Mbidi Kiluwe. The mask blends human and animal attributes, just as a Luba king transcends categories, and its features bespeak the cool composure expected of a sacred ruler.

Connell and Laura Zakarin (1994), have broken new ground in expanding definitions of personhood, the body, and gender. The challenge remains to articulate and express the deliberate ambiguities that define the body in cross-cultural contexts, and to theorize the body through the understandings of indigenous interlocutors. How can one move beyond essentializing categories that restrict and impede understanding of more fluid cross-cultural experiences of dividual embodiment?

By exploring the constitution of networks in the “body politic,” we may arrive at more culturally focused definitions and observations, for this latter implies both macrocosmic and microcosmic levels of identification (Mirzoeff 1995:58–97). In *Memory: Luba Art and the Making of History* (1996), Allen Roberts and I detailed the ways that the Luba body politic is defined by Luba people as a body with just such levels of meaning and association, as visually expressed in the most important of all Luba mnemonic devices, a *lukasa* memory board (Fig. 3).<sup>6</sup> As a library of Luba knowledge and esoteric royal principles, the *lukasa* simultaneously depicts the emblematic royal tortoise, human anatomy, a blueprint of the royal residence, and the entire Luba landscape (Roberts and Roberts 1996:134, M.N. Roberts 2005). As Susan Stewart (1993:131) writes, “forms of projection of the body—the grotesque, the min-



### 3 Memory board: *lukasa*

Democratic Republic of the Congo, Luba peoples,  
19th century

Wood, glass beads, acacia thorns; H: 34 cm

Private Collection

PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM FOR AFRICAN ART, NEW  
YORK

Memory boards called *lukasa* are the pivots of Luba culture. Held in the hand, their configurations of beads are “read” and narrated by court historians versed in esoteric knowledge. By running one’s hand over the surface of the board, the beads stimulate story-telling and history-making in the present.

4 A Luba court historian and high-ranking member of the Mbudy Association—which guards and transmits the historical knowledge of the Luba kingdom—“reads” and interprets the esoteric signs on a *lukasa* memory board. No two recitations of a *lukasa* are ever the same as they depend on changing political circumstances and are performances of memory in the present.

PHOTO: MARY NOOTER ROBERTS, KATANGA PROVINCE (THEN  
SHABA), DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO (THEN  
ZAIRE), 1989



iature, and the microcosm—reveal the paradoxical status of the body as both mode and object of knowing, and of the self constituted outside its physical being and by its image.” Vast though it may be, the body politic is only ever truly experienced by each individual subject, just as the personhood of the ruler ultimately defines the larger body politic (Fig. 4).

Through a range of examples from my field research and available literature on Luba political culture, I hope to illustrate that Luba concepts of the body in the body politic are rooted in a *processual* understanding of embodiment that transcends strict dichotomies of male/female, living/dead, royal/non-royal. Each of these dialectics is mediated without contradiction in the practices and discourses of Luba royal experience whereby a new place of identity emerges as a terrain of composite, fractal bodies constituted to ensure “enchainment,” as Roy Wagner put it, and so cultural continuity and the perpetuation of memory for posterity.

This research has parallels with earlier studies of the politico-spiritual roles of women in leadership and royal arts of Africa. For example, Flora Edouwaye S. Kaplan has explored the history and importance of the Iyoba Queen Mother of the Benin Kingdom, and “both the complementarity and ambiguity of sex and gender roles in Benin” (1997:101). Another useful parallel is the work of Jacob Olupona, who writes of the Ondo-Yoruba people of Nigeria. “Not only do the Ondo themselves insist that the ‘source of ultimate value’ is portrayed as female or a woman-king, political authority and power wielded by a male king is not absolute and is not seen in isolation from an equally significant ritual authority and power which women control” (1997:315–16). Andrew Apter (1992:97–116) also addresses the role of female power in the Yemoja Festival in the Yoruba Ekiti town of Ayede, during which women become chiefs and a Yoruba king is revitalized by being ritually “consumed by priestesses, only to be reproduced with greater power.” Apter’s work demonstrates the multilayered and polysemic meanings inherent to the ritual language of power, and

analyzes the perilously close associations and blurred boundaries between female deities, witches, and kings. These comparative examples inform and extend the Luba case, and offer a wider ethnographic and historical lens for understanding the complex gendering of authority in African contexts.

### THE BODY AS A PLACE OF PASSAGE

On a more philosophical level, Edward Casey’s phenomenological studies of place, memory, and the body offer useful conceptual paradigms for consideration of the Luba processual body. Place aids remembering by being “well suited to contain memories—to hold and preserve them” (Casey 1987:186; cf. Bachelard 1969, Yates 1966, and Roberts and Roberts 1996:84–115). Place memory provides a model for understanding how Luba mnemonics—from scarifications on the human body to royal emblems, choreographies, and narratives of the Luba epic—generate the semantic dynamism and social construction of Luba historical thought. As Pierre Nora has discussed (1989), a locus of memory or *lieu de mémoire* is a landmark around which past events structure present memory. As both actual and imagined places, *lieux de mémoire* can be *topoi*—that is, “both places and topics, where memories converge” (Blok 1991:125). Recollection, as understood by Luba, is never a fixed account nor a pedigree, but a meaningful configuration of selected, negotiated events around “loci of memory,” as the narrative exegesis of the *lukasa* memory boards so clearly demonstrates (M.N. Roberts 1996:116–49, Jewsiewicki and Mudimbe 1993:10).

The ultimate container for holding memories is the body itself, as the vehicle through which the intimate relationship between memory and place is realized. Through the lived body, place and memory are actively joined. Casey discusses the conventional yet misplaced emphasis on memory as a procedure contained within the mind. Yet, as he points out, memory always lies on the border between self and other. The body constitutes the frontier



**5** Caryatid stool  
Democratic Republic of the Congo, Luba peoples, 19th century  
Wood (*Ricinodendron* spp.), fiber; 50 cm x 31 cm  
Royal Museum for Central Africa, RG 23137 (ex-collection F. Michel, acquired between 1898 and 1900)

Stools were and are potent emblems of Luba royal power. The female figure supporting the stool attracted and contained the spirits of Luba kingship through marks of Luba identity and physical perfection, including scarification, an elaborate hairstyle, gleaming black skin, and a serene, composed attitude.

of difference and sameness, and is a sieve through which historical facts are negotiated, reconfigured, and re-presented. Memory is intrinsic to “how we remember in and by and through the body” (Casey 1987:147).

These concepts are essential to understanding Luba notions of the body—and particularly the female body—in the body politic. Here we shall consider perspectives on the ways that the female body, as simultaneous container and surface, undergoes processes of emplacement, inscription, and embodiment as it maps critical and sometimes profoundly esoteric cultural and political phenomena. We shall also investigate personal and spiritual dimensions of the performative body and its metaphorical and actual links to the body politic, to the denizens of the spirit world, and even to the secrets of life itself. The evidence of these roles lies in the artistic emblems of office-holders and their exegeses by Luba people, in ritual practices whereby certain women

perform spirit mediumship, and in the person of the king himself, whose very life, says Professor Nkulu N’Sengha, “is held in the hands of the women who surround him.”

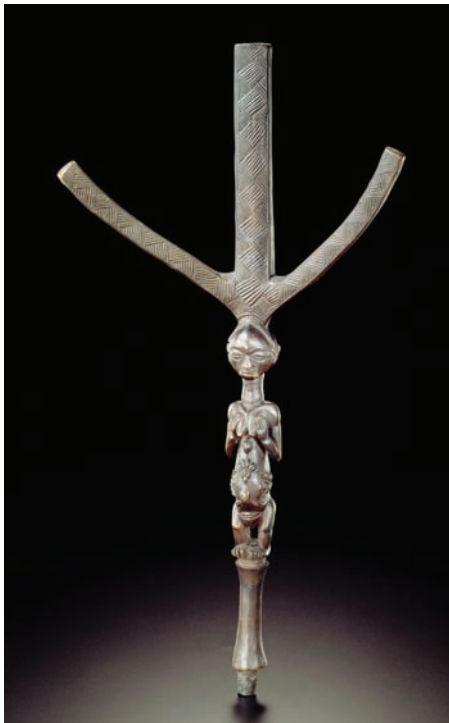
### THE AMBIGUOUS GENDERING OF POWER

In the context of precolonial Luba kingship practices, the body politic was performed in ambiguously gendered terms. Male and female categories were deliberately blurred to foster transformation and transcendence in the person of the king. It should be noted that the use of the term “king” is inaccurate to describe what Luba call *mulopwe*, a word that is not gendered and has no basis in either male or female categories or attributes, but rather refers to the one who possesses the sacred blood of investiture. Furthermore, over the course of my research in the DRC of the late 1980s, statements were made by diverse individuals about the female attributes of the various institutions of royalty that appeared to be male.<sup>7</sup>

Luba royal culture was composed of circulating centers of power (cf. Arens and Karp 1989)—that is, institutions that were linked by a common semantic literacy but whose roles were specialized and served to check and balance one another. These included the institution of kingship (Bulopwe), titleholders (Bamfumu), the Mbudyé association (a historical association that guarded the interdictions of royalty and whose court historians mastered the *lukasa* memory boards), and the Bilumbu, or royal diviners who interceded regularly to offer guidance in the affairs of state and to heal, protect, and litigate. In discussions of politics in the late 1980s, it was common to hear people proclaim that “the king is a woman”; or that Mbudyé, whose highest ranking members are men, is a “woman,” and that her husbands are the king and the diviner; or that Mijibu wa Kalenga—the first royal diviner—was a woman (in spite of the fact that Mijibu is usually described as a man). Furthermore, the king himself was incarnated as a woman after death. “When I die,” said Chief Kabongo, “I will be replaced by one of my sons, but at the same time, I will be incarnated by a woman” (Orban 1916:1).

What factors contributed to this transgendering of power? Why was it established and how did it affect political dynamics throughout the colonial period? The deliberate blurring of categories was not restricted to verbal allusions. It also influenced practices during investiture, during the course of a king’s reign, and following his death; and it impacted production, ownership, and interpretation of royal insignia.

Luba kings and client chiefs of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries validated their claims to power through possession of treasuries consisting of thrones, staffs, spears, bowstands, axes, adzes, bowls, cups, and headrests, all made from wood, iron, and copper (Figs. 5–7).<sup>8</sup> The emblems of Luba sovereignty constitute a remarkable corpus of forms, styles, and visions by artists of many distinct backgrounds, regions, and political affiliations, but one thing characterizes them all: Though owned by male rulers and made by male artists, such objects share a visual grammar based upon the female image. Both figurative elements in the round (including full figures and janus heads) and two-dimensional incised geometric designs are derived from the female body and its attributes. Whether they take the form of a staff of office, a throne, a ceremonial axe, or an ornamental bow



**6** Anthropomorphic bowstand  
Democratic Republic of the Congo, Luba peoples,  
19th century  
Wood (*Crossopterix febrifuga*), metal; 65 cm x 33 cm  
Royal Museum for Central Africa, RG 456 (collected  
before 1907)

Luba bowstands evoke the foundations of kingship and the culture hero's hunting prowess. This object once owned by a male ruler is supported by a female figure holding the secrets of power within her breasts. The bowstand's three branches are incised with female scarification marks, for women's bodies were considered the ultimate receptacles for the spirits of Luba kingship.

**7** Ceremonial axe  
Democratic Republic of the Congo, Luba peoples,  
19th century  
Wood (*Pterocarpus tinctorius*), locally smelted and  
forged iron; 37 cm x 26 cm  
Royal Museum for Central Africa, RG 16887 (regis-  
tered in 1914)

Axes with incised designs on their iron blades and sculpted heads on their handles belong to high-ranking members of society and are worn over the shoulder during ceremonies of the royal court. The sculpted head may hold a female spirit and suggests the ambiguities of power, as kings transcend gender and other human limitations.



and arrow stand, all these regalia are gendered as women. Caryatid thrones are supported by female figures, and staffs are surmounted by one or sometimes two women standing, seated, or, occasionally, arm-in-arm.

#### NARRATING THE AMBIGUITY OF GENDER

When chiefs and titleholders offer exegeses concerning their emblems, it is common for them to assign male identities to the sculpted female figures. Staffs of office, for example, serve as historical documents whose hierarchical composition of two- and three-dimensional forms is intended as a text (Figs. 8–9). Narrations reaffirm connections between verbal and visual arts and lend insight into the ways that individual power-holders view their roles and validate their authority. For example, Chief Ngeleka explained the complex iconography of his staff of office to me and to his family over the course of several days in 1987. He alluded to the female figure at the top of the staff gesturing to her breasts as the spirit of all Luba kings. He proceeded to recount the story of how the king made his voyage through the open lands of the savanna (represented by the unadorned shaft) through a number of critically important administrative centers (shown as lozenge-shaped sections). Janus heads near the top of his staff depict the paired female spirit mediums who embody the Luba tutelary spirits named Mpanga and Banze and represent the king's spirit wives.

Ngeleka explained that the gesture of hands to breasts seen on many Luba works of art refers to the *bizila*, or royal prohibitions, of which certain women are the ultimate guardians. Women guard such secrets within their breasts. The patterns on the figure's abdomen and those on the staff's broad sections (at the top of Fig. 9) replicate women's scarifications. They take this form to signify the secret of the state's success, namely the bringing of power from the royal capital to outlying chieftainships (often

through strategic marriages) such as Ngeleka's own. He added that the scarifications are those of the king's first wife and were often emulated by ordinary women seeking the high fashions of royalty. When people worshipped in the past, he explained, they always removed their clothes. "All the women had scarifications, and spirits responded above all to women; they were more favorable to women than to men."

Other cases further underscore how Luba people speak of gender in deliberately ambiguous terms with regard to royal emblems. A renowned diviner named Bwana Kudie identified his bowl-bearing figure—a carved wooden sculpture of a woman bearing a bowl, used to hold chalk and beads (Fig. 10)—as Mijibu wa Kalenga, the first Luba diviner who, by most narrative accounts, was a man. When asked why Mijibu was depicted as a woman, Bwana Kudie explained in 1989 that "women are represented in sculpture more than men because they are superior: they brought us into the world, and they have an intelligence, a power that supercedes that of men. Women have power."<sup>13</sup> Indeed, a bowl-bearing figure of this type was a multireferential symbol, for while it embodied the spirit of the first Luba diviner for Bwana Kudie, another diviner said that it represented the wife of his possessing spirit.

One must never assume the gender of an anthropomorphic emblem, then, even if it seems to be obvious. As a female divination specialist named Keuzi asserted in 1987, what appears to be a woman's head could well be a depiction of the king himself. Kings were known to don women's coiffures on the days of their investitures, since for the rest of their reigns they would occupy a status that transcended gender as well as human limitations. Carved wooden cups used in investiture rites by the king and his entourage to drink palm wine and sacred substances may have been shaped as human heads with women's coiffures for this same reason (Fig. 11).





**8 Staff of office**  
Democratic Republic of the Congo, Luba peoples, 19th century  
Wood (*Pterocarpus tinctorius*); 163 cm x 16 cm  
Royal Museum for Central Africa, RG 80.2.150 (ex-collection J. Walschot, registered in 1980)

**9 Staff of office**  
Democratic Republic of the Congo, Luba peoples, 19th century  
Wood (*Pterocarpus tinctorius*), copper; 140 cm x 14 cm  
Royal Museum for Central Africa, RG 34585 (registered in 1932)

For Luba rulers and titleholders, staffs affirm and convey status and hold sacred powers that can heal and promote positive transformations. Staffs are also memory maps, provoking accounts of migration, genealogy, and land rights, and the female figure at the top may signify the king himself or a founding female ancestor.

#### FEMINIZING THE SPIRIT VESSEL

In Luba culture, femininity was constituted through the stages of a woman's life. Through scarifications, coiffures, the filing of teeth, and the elongation of the genital labia,<sup>9</sup> the body was a vessel to be created and beautified as a work of art. Traditionally, only by fulfilling this process of beautification did a woman become attractive and marriageable. Likewise, royal insignia became effective spirit vessels through their embellishment. During my research, Luba interlocutors asserted that beauty was not innate, but rather was created over the course of a lifetime. A woman was judged not by her natural-born features, but by those that had been culturally enhanced, as when teeth were filed to points and the skin was oiled, or one demonstrated one's beauty through the manner of walking, dance, and ritual performance.

In addition to the many ways that Luba women were deemed beautiful, bodily transformations such as scarifications and elaborate hairstyles rendered them effective vessels to capture and hold potent spiritual energies and so establish communication with the other world. Luba were renowned for their intricate coiffures that could take days to complete and last for over a month. Not only were hairstyles indicative of a person's identity and status, but they also could serve as repositories for protective amulets. The head as a locus of power was enhanced and the face was beautified by the enveloping crown of a virtuoso coiffure. As Ngoi Ilunga stated in 1988, "In our ancestors' days, women were always expected to tress their hair in order to make the face radiant; a woman with a beautiful hairdo was married quickly." And in order to protect such adornments, some high-ranking Luba individuals used carved wooden headrests as pillows for the neck. The figures portrayed in sculpturally dynamic headrests by the artist known in the West as the "Master of the Cascade Headrest," reflect one of the most popular styles of the latter part of the nineteenth century, called the "step" coiffure and worn in the Shankadi region around the towns of Kamina and Kabondo Dianda (see de Maret et al. 1973, Vogel 1980). It is conceivable that the persons using such headrests, which were extremely intimate personal belongings, may have worn a coiffure similar to the type depicted in the sculptures (Figs. 12–13).<sup>10</sup>

Every detail of the sculpted female figure was inscribed, whether through the artful arrangement of the hair or the embellishing of the body with scarification patterns that were both pleasing to the eye and stimulating to the touch.<sup>11</sup> Luba consider these not only ideal features in a woman, but attractive and meaningful to the spirit world. A Luba verb used with reference to scarification is *kutapa*, "to pierce or incise"; another is *kulemba*, "to draw, paint, or inscribe," but extended since the colonial period to mean "to write" (Van Avermaet and Mbuya 1954:678, 169, 349; Roberts and Roberts 1996:102; A. Roberts 1988:41). Luba scarification was an efficacious "writing," though, as achieved through the act of inscription (*kulemba*), as well as meanings assigned to and associated





#### 10 Bowl-bearing figure

Democratic Republic of the Congo, Luba-Hemba peoples, 19th century

Wood (*Ricinodendron rautanenii*); 44 cm x 22 cm

Royal Museum for Central Africa, RG 14358 (Collected between 1891 and 1912, gift of A. H. Bure)

Bowl-bearing figures are central to Luba divination, for their placement next to the medium provides spiritual presence, while their bowls contain white chalk applied to the diviner's face to instigate enlightenment through the symbolism of moonlight and the beneficence of the ancestors. The expressive quality of this figure from northeastern Luba-related peoples is characteristic of works by the so-called Buli Master, the first identified workshop and still among the most celebrated in all of Africa.

#### 11 Royal cup

Democratic Republic of the Congo, Luba peoples, 19th century

Wood (*Trichilia emetica*), pigments, copper pins; 15 cm x 19 cm

Royal Museum for Central Africa, RG 23439 (collected by O. Michaux between 1890 and 1897)

Anthropomorphic double-chambered royal cups were used in investiture ceremonies and other rites to honor Luba ancestral spirits. The gender of the cup is not fixed, as a king sometimes wore a woman's coiffure during his enthronement ceremonies as he was transformed into a sacred ruler.



with the resulting patterns (M.N. Roberts 2007:69).<sup>12</sup> The body's interior meanings and exterior communications were joined with a tactile dimension adding to the aesthetic impact. Indeed, inscription of significance led to what Jean-Luc Nancy has called "exscription," insofar as the medium extended the person to those privileged to "read" the skin's signs and symbols (Nancy 1994:24, M.N. Roberts 2007:59).

The full implications of female transfiguration and spirit embodiment emerge when one learns that the Kiluba verb *kunenanya* not only means "to embellish and beautify," but "to render harmony, order, rank, and hierarchy," and a synonym is "to decorate, adorn, arrange, order" (Van Avermaet and Mbuya 1954:352). In other words, the fashioning of the female body is an act of civilization that superimposes order, form, and meaning over superficial realities (cf. Rubin 1988). One is reminded of the word "cosmetic" in English. Just as practices that Luba

might describe using the verb *kunenanya* adorn and create order on and through the body, so "cosmetic" alludes to preparations "designed to beautify the body" as derived from the Greek *kosmētikos*, "skilled at arranging," which in turn is ultimately from *kosmos*, or "order" itself (Morris 1969:301). Following such comparative logic, scarification and the "skin-scapes" produced through it are therefore cosmological by definition (Nooter 1991:262–63, 2007:55).

Among Luba-related peoples, complex interrelationships exist between corporeal semantics, social identity, physical perfection, and cosmological principles. Analysis of the Luba pattern called *nkaka* shows how scarification functioned (as it still does to an extent) as a cognitive cuing structure that triggers a barrage of associations, contexts, and meanings. *Nkaka* consists of a row of isosceles triangles and is similar in form to the ubiquitous Tabwa *balamwezi* pattern, which refers to "the rising of the new moon" (A. Roberts 1985). The pattern is often located across the chest above a woman's breasts. In nature, an *nkaka* is the scaly anteater or pangolin. Pangolins are sacrificed for ritual and magical use of their scales, which are considered resistant, durable, and strong (Nooter 1991:255; cf. A. Roberts 1990, 1995:83–87).

The *nkaka* pattern appears on objects whose purpose is to contain power. For example, it adorns the rims of ceramic vessels that potters describe as "female bodies" and would not think of leaving "unscarified." Pots may house ancestral spirits in the family shrine, where they are worshiped every month at the rising of the new moon. The pattern also decorates virtually all Luba royal emblems in which the ruler's possessing spirit resides: the rims of stools, the backs of *lukasa* memory boards, the branches of bowstands, the handles and blades of axes, and the edges of headrests serving as conduits to inspired dreams (Fig. 13). *Nkaka* is also the name of the beaded headdress worn by Bilumbu diviners and Mbudye Society members when they enter a state of spirit possession, "to catch and hold the spirit within" (Fig. 4).

Significantly, the *nkaka* pattern of scarification is often located in the same place where certain women wear a special cord encircling their chest called *lukuka* when they are "in the taboos." This emblem signals that women hold the *bizila*, or prohibitions of royalty within their breasts. As Mwema Kapanda explained to me in 1988, "to wear the *lukuka* carries great power: it is a powerful sign, indicating that she who wears it carries the goodness and the greatness of the spirit."





**12** Anthropomorphic headrest  
Democratic Republic of the Congo, Luba peoples,  
19th century  
Wood (*Crossoptherix febrifuga*), beads; 14 cm x 12 cm  
Royal Museum for Central Africa, RG 54.77.5 (regis-  
tered in 1954)

**13** Anthropomorphic headrest  
Democratic Republic of the Congo, Luba peoples,  
19th century  
Wood (*Crossoptherix febrifuga*); 17 cm x 12 cm  
Royal Museum for Central Africa, RG 23473 (col-  
lected by O. Michaux between 1890 and 1897)

Sculpted headrests preserve intricate coiffures and keep the head comfortable in sleep. These headrests were most likely carved by the same artist or a work-shop active in the nineteenth century, referred to in the West as the Master of the Cascade Headrests. Headrests were sometimes conduits to messages from the ancestors as conveyed through the prophecy of dreams.

The multivalent meanings of the triangular *nkaka* design inform the enigmatic signs of the most esoteric of all Luba emblems, the *lukasa* memory device. As the key to Luba political organization, the *lukasa* embodies the principles and precepts upon which the state was founded. The “inside” of a *lukasa* is studded with tiny glass beads of different colors, or sometimes incised with motifs; in either case, the device is “scarified” through processes of “exscription” just considered (Fig. 14). Complex data sets are assigned to particular beads as well as configurations, and when memorized, this information can be recalled during narrative performances. In this way, a *lukasa* serves as an archive for the topographical and chronological mapping of political history. Incised on the back or “outside” of every *lukasa* are incised *nkaka* triangles that refer to the shell of a tortoise, a secretive animal that the Luba equate with the kingdom itself (Fig. 15). The scales (or “scutes,” in herpetological terminology) of the tortoise’s carapace symbolize the sacred villages of the kingdom’s most important rulers, and the striations within each of these refer to the deeds of the king, and even more specifically to the taboos and restrictions of his office. These interdictions, called *bizila* and protected, as we have seen, within the breasts of royal women, lie at the very root of Luba power, for the paradox of power is that supernatural agency can be harnessed only through strict abstinence and observance of ritual procedures. As Luba water healer Ngoi Ilunga told me in 1988–89, “scarifications have interdictions: that is why they signify the title and rank of chieftaincy”; and as a man named Papa Laza added in 1989, “the scarified designs found on the royal emblem indicate that it belongs to a chief, and that this chief is invested, owns this land, and has this rank.”

#### FEMALE EPICENTERS OF POWER

Luba entrust women to be the stewardesses of these interdictions, to ensure that male officials strictly adhere to them. This is evidenced by the crucial roles they played as political and religious mediators in Luba royal history. This delegation of enormous responsibility to women at the court meant that the king’s person became enveloped in their vast web of duties. The boundaries between his roles and theirs were so intertwined and interdependent that the institution of kingship was itself regarded as feminine. As Papa Laza stated, the culture hero “Mbidi Kiluwe was discovered by women; women divulged the hiding place of Nkongolo (the cruel, tyrannical despot), leading to his demise; and women keep the secret of life.” The king’s mother, called Mfyama or “the hidden one,” and his first wife were critically important advisors and counselors at the court. They were paid homage as one would to a king, and the first wife often acted as a surrogate in the king’s absence:

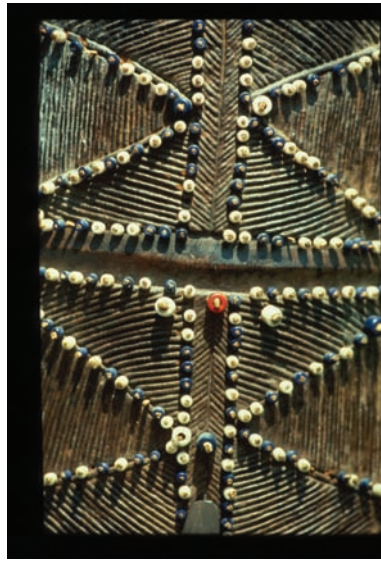
The wife of a chief has *bizila* (prohibitions) and *mikishi* (power objects), for example, she cannot talk while collecting water or preparing food because she is working with the spirits in the sacred dining house called *mbala*. The wife of a chief is respected even more than a man (Ngoi Zaina, 1989).

The cooking fire is sacred. It is given by the king to a chief or titleholder at the moment of investiture, and he is never allowed to view it—on pain of death. That is why a woman does all the food preparation. There are all kinds of prohibitions: changing the position of the wood, collecting water, which must be done at night, without looking behind or talking. There is a special salutation for a chief’s wife, and they touch the earth (Mfumu Inabanza, 1987).

When a chief takes office, he will have sculpted representations made of his first wife. She is highly respected. The sculptures are intended to protect the chief against his enemies. The day a chief travels, his first wife takes a mat outside and sits with his figures to protect them until his return (Ngoi Ilunga, 1988).

Another key female actor in the theater of kingship was Mwanana, often the sister of the king who became a princess. Nkulu-N’Sengha asserts that the ruler’s first wife, his sister, and his mother were all very powerful and together played critical roles in decision-making. In 1989, titleholder Kioni of Kabongo offered this account of Mwanana:

It is she who enters the *kobo ka malwa* [an enclosed house in which the king was required to have incest with a female relative during the investiture rituals]. The chief’s mother or aunt may also enter. When the sister exits from the house, she becomes Mwanana. If there is no sister,



**14–15** Details of the *lukasa* memory board shown in Figure 3. The beaded bumps on the “inside” or front of the *lukasa* convey the tactility of women’s scarifications that are both erotic and autobiographical, even as they elicit historical knowledge of the kingdom and serve to map sacred sites. On the back, or “outside,” the scarification patterns of isosceles triangles are associated with the most secret royal prohibitions called *bizila*, and link Luba concepts of beautification with notions of arrangement, order, and cosmological perfection. PHOTO: MARY NOOTER ROBERTS, 1989.

**16** Royal bowl: *kiteya*  
Democratic Republic of the Congo, Luba peoples, 19th century  
Wood (*Ricinodendron rautanenii*); 28 cm x 44 cm  
Royal Museum for Central Africa, RG 3861 (registered in 1911)

The most important tutelary spirits of Luba kingship are twins called *bavidye*. This remarkable bowl used in investiture rites of a ruler is held by two figures, possibly twinned spirit guardians of Luba royal knowledge and sacred authority. Lizards depicted on the lid refer to earth spirits and arcane powers a king must master.

then a niece may enter. When Mwanana exits, she is enthroned just like her brother, and begins to reign also. The mother is responsible for overseeing the king and if she determines that he has an infirmity that might interfere with his ability to rule, then it is Mwanana who rules in his place. In the old days, Mwanana stayed at the king’s side just like his wife. It was not until Ilunga Kabale’s reign that the king began to send the Mwanana to distant regions to rule because he had had many daughters. Mfyama [the mother] and Mwanana stay at the king’s side and they are delegated portions of land where they receive their own tribute. The Mfyama lived outside the royal compound, but near it. The women who were sent away were sisters, acting in the role of Mwanana in other zones, but none were the Mwanana of the *kobo ka malwa*.

Historian Thomas Reeve (1981) recorded numerous accounts of the roles of royal sisters and daughters sent as emissaries to foreign chiefdoms. There they settled alliances, intermarried with client chiefs, and perpetuated the royal line in distant territories. Reeve asserts that the intermarrying of these women from the royal Luba line with chiefs from outlying matrilineal polities was one of the most important mechanisms of Luba expansion. These founding ancestresses are often remembered by name and are commemorated on royal staffs. Several are said to have become influential and autonomous leaders and warriors in their own right, reflected in a few cases in which a woman surmounts rather than supports the royal stool.

In the religious sphere, spirit mediums were almost always women in the past. As diviners, healers, and custodians of sacred sites, they devoted their lives to the guardianship of the great spirits of Luba kingship. The two spirits most frequently incarnated are Mpanga and Banze: As Vincent Mukangala stated in 1988,

When a woman takes possession of a spirit, she arrives at a lake crying and plunges in. She stays underwater for four days, at the end of which she emerges holding a ball of chalk. One knows then that it is the spirit of Mpanga and Banze who possess her. Mpanga and Banze were twin sisters (*mwanana*) of Mbidi Kiluwe’s lineage.

Such spirits often inhabited important fishing places and salt springs, the exploitation of which required the spirits’ consent. That women were the conduits to this authorization was a source

of considerable power, for these natural resources constituted the economic foundation of the Luba state. Since Luba spirits become manifest as twins, mediums often live in pairs, and are frequently depicted that way in art (Fig. 16). There are certain Luba sculptures made as pairs that represent the twinned *bavidye* spirits, such as those seen in Figures 17 and 18, in which the female figure is shown with her body inverted so that the head and feet face one way while the rest of her body faces the other. This highly unusual iconographic innovation may indicate that this is a representation of a spirit and her twin, able to see in both directions simultaneously. And the addition of medicinally charged horns in cavities at the top of the further supports the probability that these figures are representations of spirits.

Twins hold an important place in Luba culture, where they are called “children of the moon” (M.N. Roberts 2011, Theuws 1968). The moon, for all Luba and Luba-related peoples of this region, harkens hope and rejuvenation, and each month on the night of the new moon, family shrines are cleansed and offerings are made while participants sing the sacred songs for twins in deference to the twinned spirits of Luba kingship. Not only are twins felt to have extraordinary powers that connect them to spirits in a special way, but so are their mothers. Called Kapamba, the







**17** Female figure: *nkisi*  
Democratic Republic of the Congo, Luba peoples, 19th century  
Wood (*Vitex madiensis*), cloth, beads, duiker horn; H: 50 cm  
Royal Museum for Central Africa, RG 53.85.4 (registered 1912)

**18** Male figure: *nkisi*  
Democratic Republic of the Congo, Luba peoples, 19th century  
Wood (*Ricinodenron spp.*), cloth, beads, duiker horn; H: 38 cm  
Royal Museum for Central Africa, RG 53.85.5 (registered in 1912)

Luba twin spirit figures possess features that signal their connection to the other world. The female figure's body is reversed from her head and arms, and both bear tiny antelope horns packed with medicinal substances to enable healing and problem-solving. These spirit figures are *nkisi* power objects that not only see into the beyond, but may go there as well.

mother of twins is regarded as an omnipotent force. Her exceptional fertility and strength give her a special status in the royal court whereby, as Nkulu N'Sengha explains, she is given the opportunity to openly critique the king. When she expresses herself to the king, it is considered to be the spirit communicating directly with the ruler, and opens up a space of critical discourse as an institutionalized form of regulating the behavior of a king in much the same way that the Mbudye association has the right to dethrone a king should he transgress the royal prohibitions and codes of conduct.

Kapamba is also the title given to the wife of a male diviner, and one of her roles is to sing the sacred "songs for twins" in order to summon the *bavidye* spirits for the duration of her husband's consultation with a client. Diviners can be male or female, and their possessing spirits may assume the same or opposite gender. Some diviners have as many as five spirits who can "mount their head," but if the diviner is male prior to possession, then his wife is instrumental in calling the spirits and sustaining

their presence as healing and/or other activities are performed. The association between mothers of twins and the diviner's wife is purposeful, both representing exceptional abilities vis à vis the spirit world, which in turn render them politically and socially efficacious (M.N. Roberts 2011) (Fig. 19).

### EMPLACING SPIRIT

One form of female spirit mediumship became a veritable political institution and a power to be reckoned with by colonial authorities in the early twentieth century. From the nineteenth century, and possibly earlier, deceased Luba kings were incarnated by female spirit mediums who took custody of the insignia and perpetuated the reigns of the dead. The appointment was sanctioned by the spirit world: at some point following the king's death, a woman would enter a state of dissociation, exhibiting convulsions and fits of hysteria and intoning the dead king's name. If deemed legitimate, the woman was officially bestowed the title of Mwadi and was installed in the deceased king's former residence with his entourage of titled officials at her service. Since the Mwadi was seen as the king himself, she never married or bore children, and like the king, she had her own coterie of wives to care for her and prepare her food. She cared for the deceased king's stools, staffs, bowstands, and other insignia, and most important, she preserved the *dikumbo* basket holding his skull and other most powerful relics and devices (Nooter 1991:272). Two photographs taken by Thomas Reeve show the last Mwadi of a Luba king who died in 1931 (Figs. 20–21).<sup>13</sup>

The king maintained a ritual relationship through gifts given to the Mwadi as his father incarnate. She took these to a grove so sacred that only she could enter, and even then, she wore an iron bell on a long cord fastened to her waist that she rang to announce that she had reached the site of offerings and the king's spirit had accepted the gifts. If no one heard the bell, it was known that the mission had failed and the Mwadi had died from the king's wrath. Her body would be pulled from the grove using the rope around her waist (Nooter 1991:280).

The Mwadi and her village maintained their independence from the king's successor. She was exempted from all tribute and the king was forbidden to set foot in her territory. At the onset of colonialism in the early 1900s, there were at least four Mwadis still governing their respective principalities and wielding greater authority than their male counterparts. Each of their residences was referred to as a "spirit capital," or *kitenta*, and was represented on the *lukasa* memory boards as the most sacred of sites. Accounts from my field and archival research describe the many roles and attributes of the Mwadis, and demonstrate the critically important part they played in perpetuating the memory and person of the king for posterity.

The presence of these autonomous sacred village groupings bewildered Belgian colonial authorities as they struggled to impose their regime upon the mystical attributes of these women leaders and the people they nurtured. In the early part of the twentieth century, colonial officers were charged with the task of consolidating chiefdoms under administrative centers. As they became more familiar with Luba political practices, they realized the complexity of the indigenous structure, which emphasized circulating centers of power. An unpublished colonial document in the archives of the Royal Museum for Central Africa (Tervu-





**19** (far left) The wife of a male Bilumbu diviner is called Kapamba, the same name given to the mother of twins who is considered to possess extraordinary fertility and capacity. The woman summons the spirits by singing the “songs for twins” and sounding an iron bell to ensure that the spirits are present through the course of the diviner’s consultation. PHOTO: MARY NOOTER ROBERTS, KATANGA PROVINCE (THEN SHABA), DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO (THEN ZAIRE), 1989.

**20-21** (near left, bottom) The last Mwadi spirit medium is shown in these photographs taken in the mid-1970s. She sits on a stool with an axe over her shoulder and a flywhisk, surrounded by her “wives” and several titleholders who serve her as the living embodiment of king Kasongwa Niembo who died in 1931. The Mwadi spirit medium was ordinarily succeeded by another woman in her lineage, in order to perpetuate the king’s memory for posterity in the body of a woman. PHOTO: COURTESY OF THOMAS Q. REEFE.



mand, particularly when he himself, by observance of tradition and belief, willingly imposes on himself the obligation to honor these female chiefs and their cachet of independence? (Ramoiseaux 1915).

This extraordinary account reveals the power that Mwadis wielded, both for local rulers and for the Belgian administrators who witnessed the strength of their influence. Although we do not have records of how Ramoiseaux’s plea was answered by his superiors, it reflects the degree to which *bitenta* spirit capitals formed places of quiet resistance, not only to the overt power of living Luba kings, but also to colonial rule. By the time of my doctoral research in the late 1980s, there were no longer any living Mwadis, for the last known one, possessed of the spirit of King Kasongwa Niembo who ruled in the early twentieth century, had passed away in the mid-1980s.

#### ENVOI

The ultimate container for memories is the body itself, as the vehicle through which the intimate relationship between memory and place is realized (Casey 1987). Earlier generations of Luba perceived kingship to be feminine, and though kings were men, the source of royal authority resided in the fluid border zones between maleness and femaleness, life and death, this world and the other, and the tenuous extremes of power embodied by the protagonists of the Luba epic. Royal arts and practices preserved and perpetuated the secrets of sacred rule by virtue of this purposeful blurring and blending of gender, and by their ability to join place and memory through the vehicle of the lived body and the transcendent identity of the king. Luba arts reify constructions of gender that transcend any closed or limited definitions and provide an indigenous paradigm for understanding the body in composite and multiply sourced ways. Among the most powerful evocations of this idea can be seen in overtly hermaphroditic sculptures, however rare they may be (Fig. 22).

Dr. Mutombo Nkulu-N’Sengha stresses that in Luba culture it is women who are the givers of life. If a child has a quarrel with

ren, Belgium) conveys a sense of the Mwadi’s roles in the period prior to the eventual discontinuity of this political institution:

The study of power organisms in the Territory of Kabongo gives rise to the following considerations, which ... are in opposition to the administration’s instructions for the maintenance of a single chiefdom. Therefore, I submit the problem to the highest deliberation of the District Commissioner .... As the histories of various independent chieftaincies reveal, there exist in the Territory of Kabongo four completely distinct authorities, who are free of all obligations of vassalage to Chief Kabongo .... These four principalities are governed by female chiefs invested by the spirits of the forebears of the ruling dynasty .... What gives even more credence and force to these institutions is the complete recognition on the part of the *grands chefs* of these women whom they view as the very incarnation of their forebears, and to whom they refer as “father” or “grandfather.” The result is that these female authorities are called *mulopwe* [a title carried normally only by those of the ruling dynasty], and of a degree superior to that of the two ruling male chiefs.

How, then, given the incompatibility of this situation with that of an obligatory dependence, can we submit these principalities that are completely and exclusively independent of Kabongo, to his com-



**22** Hermaphrodite figure: *nkisi*  
Democratic Republic of the Congo, Luba peoples,  
19th century  
Wood (*Crossopterix febrifuga*); 22 cm x 8 cm  
Royal Museum for Central Africa, RG 520 (registered  
1908)

Male figures are rare in Luba art, yet here one is shown with mixed attributes, reflecting a Luba sense that gender and power are inherently ambiguous. Male and female elements merge in leadership as men wield overt authority and women assert secret sides of the same processes.

**23** Female figure: *nkisi*  
Democratic Republic of the Congo, Luba peoples,  
19th century  
Wood (*Lannea discolor*); H: 29 cm  
Royal Museum for Central Africa, RG 26633 (registered in 1922)

Luba ritual specialists use an array of figures for divination, healing, initiation, and litigation, empowered by medicinal ingredients held in cavities in the tops of their heads to address particular tasks through arcane powers. This figure was carved by the celebrated Warua Master, an artist whose deft hand can be seen in a constellation of Luba royal emblems.

its father, such a moment can be tolerated; but if the same child should insult or in any way be rude to its mother, repercussions could last a lifetime. The spirits will ensure that such behavior is never permitted, just as they ensure that a king is abiding by royal prohibitions and exhibiting the most important qualities of dignity, which includes a good heart (*muchima muyampe*) and a spirit of generosity. Only in the deliberate merging of male and female qualities can the ruler attain these ideals, for it is through the women of his world that he rules with balanced authority and equanimity (Fig. 23). In the realm of Luba royal culture, then, and its epistemological underpinnings, the king remains a woman.

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#### Notes

Dissertation field research was carried out from 1987–1989 in Katanga Province (then known as Shaba) in southeastern DRC (formerly Zaire), and was further informed by archival work in 1982 and 1988 at the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium (see Nooter 1991). All field quotes from Luba participants are from interviews conducted during this time. Support from the American Association of University Women, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the Belgian-American Educational Foundation, a Smithsonian Institution Predoctoral Fellowship, and a Wittkower Fellowship from Columbia University's Department of Art History and Archaeology is gratefully acknowledged. The project culminated in a major traveling exhibition and book funded by the US NEH and NEA entitled *Memory: Luba Art and the Making of History* (Roberts and Roberts 1996), organized by the Museum for African Art, New York. Thanks to Allen Roberts for editing assistance in preparing this paper, and Elaine Sullivan for help with object captions. For my parents, Nancy and Robert Nooter.

The photographs of works of art illustrating this article have been generously provided by colleagues at the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium, as a component of our collaboration on an exhibition entitled "Shaping Power: Luba Masterworks from the

Royal Museum for Central Africa" on view at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) from July 7, 2013 to January 5, 2014. I wish to thank Dr. Anne-Marie Bouttiaux, Chief Curator of the Section of Ethnography and my co-curator for the exhibition, as well as RMCA Director General Guido Gryseels and his staff for making this project possible. I also wish to thank LACMA Director Michael Govan, Deputy Director Nancy Thomas, and my other LACMA colleagues for their support and creative contributions to this project that inaugurates the museum's new African gallery and related programming.

**1** Dr. Mutombo Nkulu-N'Sengha is a professor of Religious Studies at California State University, Northridge, who hails from Kabongo, a seat of Luba authority. Sincere thanks are extended for our ongoing collaboration. All quotes from Dr. Nkulu-N'Sengha are from an interview conducted by the author on January 25, 2013 and filmed by Agnes Stauber.

**2** Research conducted on my behalf in 2003 by Mutonkole Milumbu Kennedy, my research associate from the late 1980s, offers an extraordinary glimpse of the roles of women during the past twenty years of civil strife in the DRC. Indeed, details of twenty-first century conflict in the Collectivity of Kinkondja portray the intricately complex dynamics of women in contemporary Luba politics and ongoing modes of political representation.

**3** V.Y. Mudimbe (1996:246–47) writes that "the contemporary institutions of Bulopwe (imported sacred royalty) and Bufumu (indigenous social order) reenact in their architecture the complementary yet conflictual inheritance of founding fathers Mbidi Kiluwe and Nkongolo Mwamba, an inheritance symbolized in Kalala Ilunga and actualized in the body of a Luba king .... A more telling illustration is the third category that fuses masculine and feminine, elder and junior beings and elements, and transmutes these primary ordering into absolutely new concepts."

**4** "It" as used here reflects the fact that central Bantu languages such as Kiluba do not determine gender through pronouns or prefixes that otherwise denote human being and agency. At issue here is "nominal reincarnation" as studied for many years among central African peoples; see Stefaniszyn 1954:131 and passim.

**5** Again, "dividual" is from Boddy 1998: 263. Gell 1998:140, citing Wagner 1991:163, as cited and discussed in A. Roberts 2013:215; cf. Fowler 2004.

**6** I wish to thank the owners of this remarkable *lukasa* memory board for their willingness to lend the work to the "Shaping Power" exhibition at LACMA and for permission to include it in this article, and the Museum for African Art in New York for granting me ongoing permission to publish its photograph.



7 The present article reflects lectures and conference papers I have given over the years and is based upon the fifth chapter of my dissertation (Nooter 1991) on "Female Transfiguration and the Aesthetics of Power." While much of *Memory: Luba Art and the Making of History* (Roberts and Roberts 1996) is also based on my doctoral dissertation and elements of this argument further appear in a subsequent book (Roberts and Roberts 2007), I have preserved the particular thrust of this research for a future publication for which the present paper serves as an overview.

8 For detailed analyses and descriptions of these object types, see Roberts and Roberts 1996 and 2007.

9 For information about this latter practice, see Nooter 1991:247–50. The elongation of labia is a process that prepares a woman for marriage and is intended to enhance sexual pleasure for both partners. There is no surgery involved, only the use of herbs and the bark of a root called *kimami*. It is a quality that can be seen in some Luba sculptures as one of many forms of female beautification.

10 For more information on Luba hairstyling, see Nooter 1991: 251–54.

11 While some Luba women continue scarification and related practices meant to perfect the body, they generally do not do so in the evident ways of earlier generations, and many have ceased altogether due to missionary and other social pressures of contemporary life. See Roberts and Roberts 1996:98–112; cf. A. Roberts 1988.

12 Scarification was achieved by creating small incisions in the skin with a locally forged razor and then inserting medicinal herbs into the wound. The propensity to form keloids—that is, overproduction of scar tissue—would lead to bumps on the skin, created to form beautifully rendered motifs with specific names and allusions; see Nooter 1991:244–47, Roberts and Roberts 1996:98–115, A. Roberts 1988.

13 I wish to thank Thomas Q. Reeve for sharing these images with me early in my academic career, and for granting me permission to publish them in my work. His encounters with the last known Mwadi spirit medium in the 1970s represent a powerful moment in the history of an important institution that is crucial to understanding the nuances of Luba political practice, ideology, and aesthetics.

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