

le JOURNAL de CLAES

n°1



LE SALON INTERNATIONAL DES ARTS PREMIERS

parcours 2013
des mondes

10-15 SEPTEMBER - 36 RUE DE SEINE - 75006 PARIS

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Editorial

For this first publication to mark the Parcours des Mondes, we have chosen to present a selection of works from Congo.

This vast country's creative output cannot be confined to any one artistic category. Rather, it brings together a variety of remarkable, deeply original styles, and an abundant creativity, as demonstrated by the four works presented here.

The monumentality of this superb **SUKU** statue arrests the viewer: both its size and its outstanding sculptural quality make it one of the finest specimens known, comparable to the masterpiece in the Tervuren collection.

Rarity and delicacy are represented by one of the few privately owned **LULUWA** statuettes.

Despite its small size, this **SONGYE** statuette exudes exceptional strength through its perfect combination of expressive form and the power of its function.

Lastly, a **LEGA** mask, the refined classicism of which borders on abstraction...

Didier Claes

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SUKU statue
Democratic Republic of the Congo
wood - height 64 cm
private collection, Antwerp
Armand Charles collection, Paris



SUKU

statue

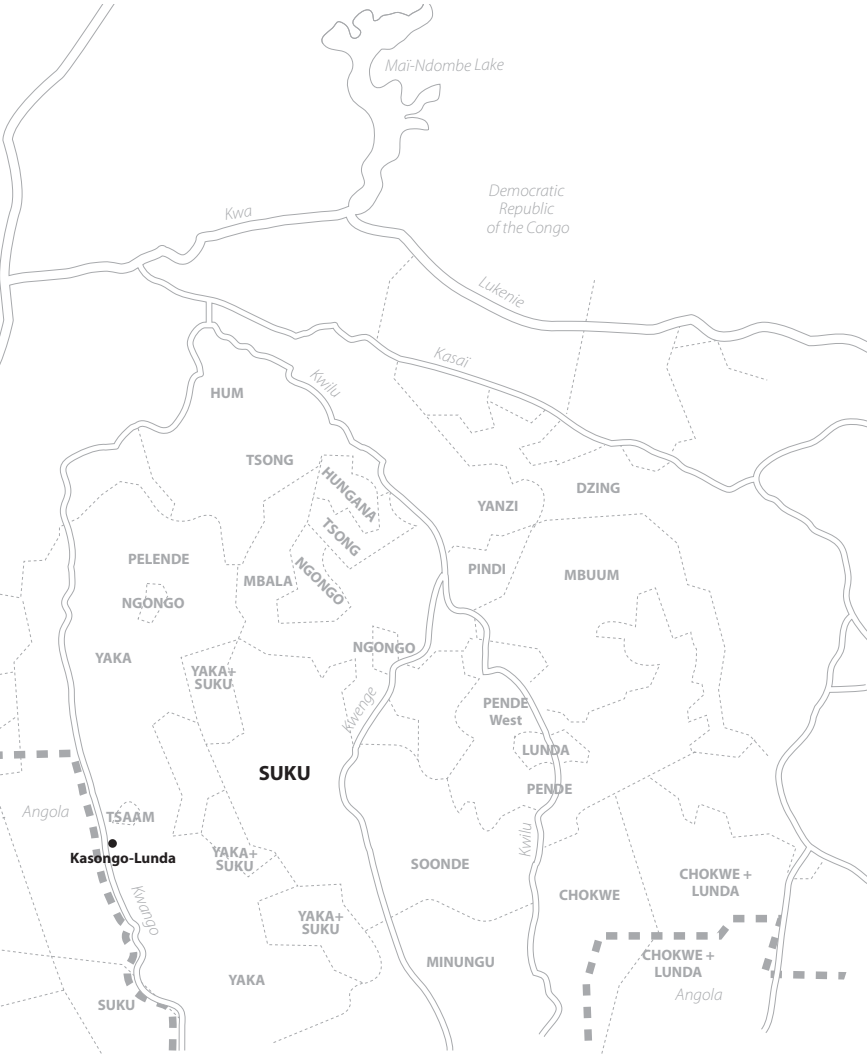
Context

YAKA-SUKU territory covers a vast area in southeastern Democratic Republic of Congo and northeastern Angola.

With a population four times smaller than that of the YAKA, the SUKU (about 80,000 people), occupy a small parcel that reaches Kwenge, to the east of the territory.

They speak Ki-suku, a dialect of the Kikongo group of Bantu languages. The SUKU claim to be descended from the KONGO, and their royal lineage claims close association with the *mwata yamvo* of the LUNDA. SUKU traditions are very specific concerning their origins on the banks of the Nganga, a tributary of the Kwango, near the contemporary village of Kasongo Lunda.

The SUKU tended to be matrilineal, and more is known about maternal history than paternal. This explains the importance of feminine sculptures such as the one presented here. A very similar figure – acquired by G. Verbist in the Mutangu chiefdom and registered in the collection at the Royal Museum for Central Africa in 1948 – is known as *khaaka* or “clan mother”. The information provided by the collector and confirmed later by A. Maesen (mission 1953–1955) suggests the sculpture accompanied the group’s ancestors on their long migration from the banks of the River Kwango.



Description

While we unfortunately know very little about the African history of the piece presented here, its first known location in Europe was Antwerp. The port there was the principal point of entry for most objects originating in the Belgian colony.

We can guess from its appearance, however, that it comes from an important Suku chiefdom, likely one close to Mutangu, based on the remarkable similarity in style. As in the oldest specimens, both have rigorously architectural forms and finely drawn faces.

The detailed hairstyle with its rich engraved motifs (longitudinal lines, squares at the temple, and chevrons in back) also attests to a shared iconography. It is reminiscent of the *bwemi*, the ceremonial woven-raffia headdress worn daily by chiefs. Different weaving techniques are used for this kind of chiefly headdress, and the shape varies depending on lineage. *Bwemi* commonly sport one to three longitudinal crests, recalling the woven *tsekete* hairstyle once worn by Suku of both sexes. Variations of this hairstyle can also be found in their statuary and their wood helmet-masks.

The architectural shapes and the finely drawn face of this statuette suggest it comes from an important Suku chiefdom.

With a slightly protruding oval mouth, highly stylised ears with a deeply carved circular concha but nevertheless some detail of the tragus, the head and the face resemble the sculpture housed in Tervuren. The body, however, is handled differently, with the long, solid neck (not found on the Tervuren statue) embedded in the voluminous shoulders, and the cylindrical torso presenting a narrower chest, highlighted by the hands held up to support it. The abdomen has much the same bulge, but the treatment of the sex organ, although not engorged, leaves no room for the hypotheses about hermaphroditism that are sometimes advanced concerning these figures. The elongated buttocks mean the legs benefit from a more sober handling than the customary “saw tooth” shape.



Suku statue
Democratic Republic of the Congo
wood – height 59 cm
EO.0.0.1948.40.51, MRAC Tervuren collection
photo R. Asselberghs, MRAC Tervuren ©
→
Suku statue
Democratic Republic of the Congo
wood – height 64 cm
private collection, Antwerp
Armand Charles collection, Paris





SUKU

statue

Style

The sculpture of the Kwango region is surely among the most expressive of Central Africa.

SUKU statues are less "stylised" than those of their YAKA neighbours; they are generally more naturalist, and less angular. Beyond this generalisation, it is not easy to define SUKU statuary, as it incorporates a wide diversity of styles. Stylistic classification (as described by Maesen) is qualified by some specialist, who suggest instead a specificity linked directly to individual sculptors or workshops (see Bourgeois).

This large female figure, the dark, shiny surface of which presents a slightly crusted patina in places, perfectly reflects the canon of SUKU iconography while remaining original, the fruit of the sculptor's creativity. It is this quality that makes it one of the most beautiful specimens known.

The detailed hairstyle with its rich engraved motifs represents the bwemi, the ceremonial woven-raffia headdress worn daily by chiefs.

The Armand Charles collection

Armand Charles moved to Paris around 1955, and opened a restaurant on avenue de Wagram in the 17th arrondissement. Art-lover and inspired autodidact, Armand Charles lived in the heart of Saint-Germain-des-Près, the gallery district. After buying impressionist and post-impressionist paintings, he became interested in primitive art, probably through the influence of his neighbour Charles Ratton (1895-1986), the acknowledged master of African art during the post-war years.

Acquired primarily through specialist galleries, the objects in Charles's African collection reveal a good deal about French tastes of that period. Although focussed on the former French colonies of West Africa – and especially masks from Côte d'Ivoire – his collection nevertheless included a group of Central African pieces. They were sold by the missionary museum of the Blanche de Mortain abbey in Normandy towards the end of the 1960s to raise funds for renovations. Acquired *in situ* at the beginning of the 20th century by missionaries, these works are as notable for their age and rarity as they are for their association with historical archives. In acquiring them, Armand Charles demonstrated a marked interest in Congolese magico-religious statuary.

The statue presented here does not belong to that group of works, but is associated with it by its typology. Probably acquired from Ratton before the Mortain purchase or just after as a compliment to them, it demonstrates that this collector's taste was as bold as it was judicious.





LULUWA

statuette

Context

Originating in western Africa, the LULUWA migrated during the 18th century and settled in the south of what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo.

They lived in small chiefdoms organised in castes distinguishing nobles, warriors, freemen, foreigners, and slaves.

The members of the upper ranks of this highly regimented society are one of the principal themes of LULUWA statuary, which often represents nobles and warriors. These are usually standing figures, although there are rare busts with a pointed lower section, such as the statuette presented here.

Only a dozen of these "busts" are known, and only three of these, held in prestigious museum collections in Belgium, Switzerland, and the United States, represent maternity, as this one does. The Royal Museum for Central Africa holds two; the other is in the Brooklyn Museum in New York. The theme of maternity is nonetheless a common one in LULUWA statuary, and is the subject of the *bwanga bwa tshibola* fertility cult, still active until recently, which sought to protect new-borns in whom ancestors might have been reborn. During a woman's initiation into the cult, standing sculptures were placed near her bed, and pointed sculptures were slid up her skirts (C. Petridis).



Style

The naturalism of LULUWA art is accentuated by the precision of the details (in this case, the point on the head, called *disungu*, is an ancient hairstyle common among the LULUWA) and intensified by a particularly recognisable decorative profusion.

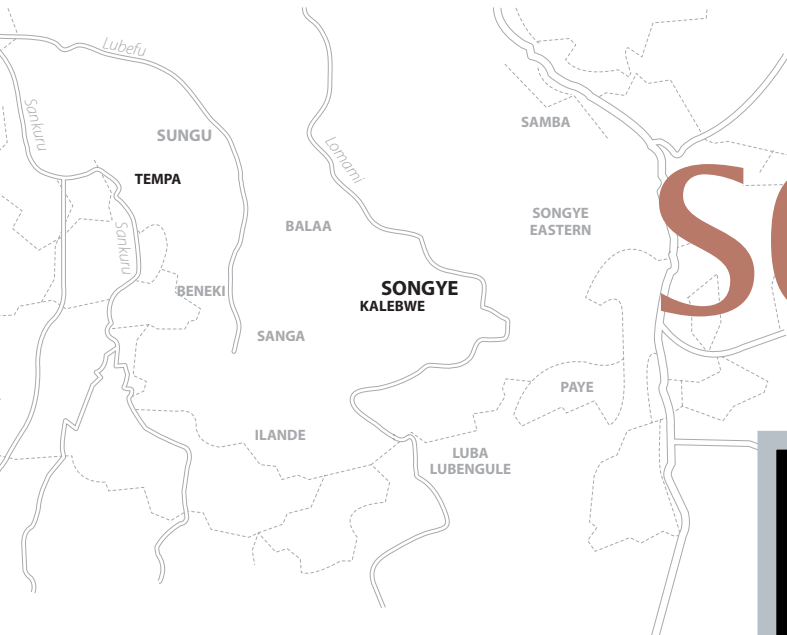
The slender figures are covered in rich abstract motifs, exaggerated representations of scarification, signs of physical and moral beauty. This ornamental aspect (which notably has an erotic function) consists of fundamental symbols: concentric circles and spirals (often at the top of the head or around the navel) for life and hope, double scrolls on the forehead symbolising life within the body: either the life pulsing in the breast, or else a child in its mother's belly.

The symbolism of this last motif is especially prominent in the statuette presented here, which is remarkable for the very natural posture of the baby held to the maternal breast.

The rich abstract motifs represent scarifications, signs of physical and moral beauty.

↑
LULUWA statuette
Democratic Republic of the Congo
wood - height 24 cm
De Kerchove collection, 1895
←

↑
LULUWA statuette
Democratic Republic of the Congo
wood - height 39 cm
EO.0.0.9446, MRAC Tervuren collection
photo R. Asselberghs, MRAC Tervuren ©



SONGYE

statuette

Numbering around 150,000, the SONGYE live in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, mostly in east Kasai, in Katanga, and in a small area of Kivu.

The Lomami River bisects their vast territory from north to south. To one side are the great western chiefdoms, such as the TEMPA, the EKI, the KALEBWE, the BALA, the TSHOFWA, and the ILANDE; to the east are smaller groups known collectively as the Eastern SONGYE.

The style of the sculpture presented here can be associated with that of the TEMPA chiefdom, situated along the banks of the Sankuru and Lubefu in northwestern SONGYE territory. This is a standing male figure, with a semi-spherical hairstyle mounted by an inverted antelope horn. The face is piriform, with a protruding figure-eight mouth. The solid neck extends into the body, with its overly prominent umbilical area. The feet, barely sketched, overflow and mix with the small circular base.

This statuette belongs to the *mankishi* (plural of *nkishi*) category of anthropomorphic statue "power objects" (*bwanga*). A mix of ingredients (*bishimba*) would be inserted by a ritualist into its cavities – in this case, the horn fixed to the top, but also originally in the navel and the orifices of the head, especially the ears.

These objects were generally tools for benevolent magic, whether individual or communal. Its small size suggests that this figure was likely used in a private context, to bring abundance and protection to the household. Personal *mankishi* were kept in the house or a small adjoining structure.



This Songye statuette exudes exceptional strength through its perfect combination of expressive form and the power of its function.

If the real power of this sculpture resides in the hidden magical cargo, it is accentuated by its visual impact, which conjures masculine power, and a certain prestige. The metallic spark of the nail driven in the navel and the wrappings around the neck reinforce the determined and aggressive expression, meant to repel sorcerers and offer protection from their spells.





LEGA

mask

Originating from the area around the Lualaba river in a region situated at the foot of the Ruwenzori Mountains where Congo borders Uganda, the LEGA came to inhabit the forests of South Kiva and Maniema, in the Mwenga, Shabunda, and Pangi regions. Here they encountered the PYGMIES, who were soon integrated into their socio-cultural system.

The LEGA trace their origins to an eponymous ancestor, LEGA, and his wife, PYGMY, giving them a strong sense of belonging to a single group. If their culture reflects a general homogeneity, this is above all due to the importance of the Bwami society, a central and dominant institution playing economic, political, religious, philosophical, and artistic roles. Indeed, every LEGA art form is linked to this association: assemblages, costumes, dances, gestures, songs, music, poetry, proverbs, and sculpture.

LEGA objects are imbued with a rich and complex symbolism, which they transmit in secrecy.

The small *lukwakongo* mask presented here belongs to the category of bitungwa sculptures commissioned by the Bwami for the final stages of their initiation. This type of wood "masquette" (as Biebuick calls them) was reserved for members just below the very highest rank. More than any other sculpture, this mask demonstrates the characteristic LEGA style – with the concave, cordiform face – as first discussed by Olbrecht. Between 11 and 18 cms tall, these pieces usually have a fibre beard, and a hole high in each temple by which the mask could be held in place using a string.

The white areas in certain places are the result of repeated use: at each new initiation rite, they would have been coated in kaolin. They were then arranged in stacks or rows, worn carried on shoulders, hung from a fence or pole, carried by hand during a dance, dragged along the ground by the beard, or even thrown. Sometimes these "masquettes" were attached to hats, their fibrous beards used to cover the face of the initiate. In very rare instances, they were worn on the knee, the back, against the ribs, or on the back of the head.



This little mask once belonged to Jean-Pierre Lepage (1921–1994), a Brussels dealer whose name is strongly associated with LEGA objects. Lepage trained as a decorator, and had links with several colonials who then worked in Kindu in eastern Congo. When they would visit, his friends would often show him the objects they had acquired. Jean-Pierre Lepage became a dealer, opening a gallery at 17 rue de la Régence, where he worked with Willy Mestach. Going on to become "the" dealer of LEGA art in Belgium, Lepage also supplied such important collectors from New York as J.J. Klejman and Merton Simpson.

Despite the variety of ways it might have been handled, this mask had only one function: to illustrate chanted aphorisms containing the moral code of the Bwami. Certain formal traits drawn by the initiate make each mask express one or more kinds of characters or values. The specimen shown here, for example, has a small baton in the upper portion of the mouth, which symbolises the verbal control one must demonstrate before the ancestors and initiates of the highest rank.

The ostensible simplicity and the economy of means employed by their sculptors notwithstanding, LEGA objects are imbued with a rich and complex symbolism, which they serve to transmit in secrecy from one generation of initiates to the next.

↑
LEGA *lukwakongo* mask
Democratic Republic of the Congo
Wood, vegetable fibres – height 21 cm
Jean-Pierre Lepage collection, Brussels, circa 1955
James M. Silberman collection, Alexandria, VA (United States)