

Roberts, Mary Nooter. 2017. "Embodied Ambiguities in Luba Royal Arts." In *Visual Culture of the Ancient Americas: Contemporary Perspectives, Online Addenda*, edited by Andrew Finegold and Ellen Hoobler. Columbia University Department of Art History and Archaeology, <<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/arhistory/faculty/Pasztory/Online-Addenda/07-Roberts.pdf>>.

ONLINE ADDENDUM SEVEN

Embodied Ambiguities in Luba Royal Arts

Mary Nooter Roberts

During my doctoral studies in the 1980s under the mentorship of Esther Pasztory, I was an Africanist in a cohort of diverse students, most of whom were studying arts of the ancient Americas. Since Dr. Pasztory's Masters thesis concerned Benin arts of Nigeria, she had a special fondness for African art and was an outstanding advisor for my MA, MPhil, and PhD on arts of Luba peoples of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, with my second major in Pre-Columbian art. Among the stimulating graduate seminars that I had the good fortune to take with her was one on art and social complexity and another on erotic arts. During this time, I was researching the formation and expansion of the influential Luba kingdom of southeastern Congo, and I was also extremely interested in the prevalence of the female image in the sculptural corpus of Luba royal arts. Dr. Pasztory guided me as I conducted both archival and field research on Luba arts and political organization, and her courses and the ideas that she exposed me to at the time have had an enduring impact on my research path. Even more importantly, she trained us all in critical thinking and ways to understand images and objects as active vehicles of cultural understanding.

I dedicate this paper to Esther Pasztory, whose research, teaching, and mentorship have had far-reaching ramifications for the fields of art history and visual culture, and for my personal intellectual growth and trajectory.

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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 18th - 20th centuries.¹ Luba possessed one of central Africa's most influential precolonial polities that continues to play a pivotal role in Katanga Province. 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 the Luba scholar Mutombo Nkulu-N'Sengha.² "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.³ The visual record combined with Luba testimony demonstrates that while men rule in overt terms, women constitute the covert side of sacred authority and play critical roles in alliance-building, decision-making, succession disputes, and investiture rites. Women also figure centrally in attracting and securing the spiritual allegiance necessary for a state built on the strength of tutelary spirits called *bavidye*.

¹ This text is adapted from a longer piece, M. Roberts 2013.

² From interviews in 2013. Dr. Mutombo Nkulu-N'Sengha is a professor of Religious Studies at California State University Northridge and hails from Kabongo, a seat of Luba authority. Sincere thanks are extended for our ongoing collaboration.

³ Photographs illustrating this article have been generously provided by the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium, through our collaboration on *Shaping Power: Luba Masterworks from the Royal Museum for Central Africa* seen at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art from July 7th, 2013 to May 4th, 2014. Sincere thanks to Dr. Anne-Marie Bouttiaux, former head of the Section of Ethnography at the RMCA and my co-curator for the exhibition, and RMCA Director General Dr. Guido Gryseels.

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Fig. 1. *Caryatid Stool. Democratic Republic of the Congo, Luba Peoples, 19th Century. Wood (Ricinodendron spp.), fiber. (Ex-collection F. Michel, acquired between 1898 and 1900.) Royal Museum for Central Africa, EO.0.0.23137, collection RMCA Tervuren; photo R. Asselberghs, RMCA Tervuren ©*

As spirit mediums, certain women serve as guardians of and conduits to the most sacred dwellings of Luba spirits. Most important, the memory of each deceased king is embodied by a woman. The perpetuation of the Luba royal line is attributed to conception through the king's mother, as well as to reincarnation of the king's spirit in a woman who becomes the king herself (Nooter 1991: 271-75). Processes of exchange and communication between the new king and the spirit mediums of previous kings form an important dimension of Luba royal practice and became a quiet form of resistance in the early colonial period.⁴

⁴ The "ethnographic present" refers to my research in the late 1980s. Because of ongoing civil strife in the DRC, some institutions and relationships may have changed, but brief research conducted on my behalf in 2003 suggests continuities in women's participation in contemporary Luba politics.

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This article explores the ontological relationships among power, gender, and spirituality so as to propose that ambiguity is a deliberate and integral dimension of Luba politics and artistic representation. Through a 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 Kalala Ilunga, who would become the first legitimate Luba king. While Kalala Ilunga is considered the heir of all that is good in his father as the model of civilization and royal bearing, 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 also lead to excess and must be contained and controlled, checked and balanced (Mudimbe 1996: 246-47). 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, by some accounts the investiture process of a Luba king required 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 (Dewey and Childs 1996). The king is also closely associated with the Luba culture hero, Mbidi Kiluwe, who possessed the stealth of a melanistic serval and the stolid qualities of a buffalo. The most iconic object from the Royal Museum for Central

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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). 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.



Fig. 2. *Male Mask. Democratic Republic of the Congo, Luba Peoples, 19th Century. Wood (Schinziophyton rautanenii). Collected by O. Michaux in 1896. Royal Museum for Central Africa, EO.0.0.23470, collection RMCA Tervuren; photo R. Asselberghs, RMCA Tervuren ©*

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. 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 Hema 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

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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" (Nkulu-N'Sengha 2013).



Fig. 3. *Anthropomorphic Water Pipe. Democratic Republic of the Congo, Luba Peoples, 19th Century. Wood (Ricinodendron rautoanemii.), fiber. (Collected by Comm. Hennebert between 1891 and 1900) Royal Museum for Central Africa, EO.1973.73.1, collection RMCA Tervuren; photo R. Asselberghs, RMCA Tervuren ©*

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). Janice Boddy complicates understandings of the body as she writes that “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: 263).

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 (2001: 4),

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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." This and other works such as that of Amelia Jones and Michael Stephenson on performing the body (1999) and the many incisive contributions to *Thinking Bodies* as edited by Julia Flower MacConnell 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 the body within the "body politic," we may arrive at more culturally focused definitions and observations from macrocosmic and microcosmic levels of identification (Mirzoeff 1995:58-97). As Susan Stewart (1993: 131) writes, "forms of projection of the body – the grotesque, the miniature, 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.

A range of examples from my field research and the available literature on Luba political culture 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" (see A. Roberts 2013: 215 and passim), and so cultural continuity and the perpetuation of memory for posterity.

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 paradigms for consideration of the Luba processual body. Place aids remembering by being "well suited to contain memories – to hold and preserve them."

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(Casey 1987:186; 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” (M. Roberts 1996: 116-149).

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 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 how the female body, as simultaneously 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 is held in the hands of the women who surround him” (Nkulu-N’Sengha 2013).

The Ambiguous Gendering of Power:

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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 various institutions of royalty that appeared to be male (Nooter 1991; Roberts and Roberts 1996, 2007).

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 complex gendering 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 19th and early 20th centuries validated their claims to power through possession of treasuries consisting of thrones, staffs, spears, bowstands, axes,

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adzes, bowls, cups, and headrests, all made from wood, iron, and copper (see Roberts and Roberts 1996, 2007). 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 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.



Fig. 4. *Caryatid Stool. Democratic Republic of the Congo, Luba Peoples, 19th Century. Wood, glass beads. Royal Museum for Central Africa, EO.0.0.22725, collection RMCA Tervuren; photo R. Asselberghs, RMCA Tervuren ©*

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

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historical documents whose hierarchical composition of two and three-dimensional forms is intended as a text. 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 (pers. comm. 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. (See fig. 3 above). Women guard such secrets within their breasts. The patterns on the figure's abdomen and those on the staff's broad sections 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" (pers. comm. 1987).

Other cases 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 – 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 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"

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(pers. comm., 1989). 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.



Fig. 5. *Bowl-Bearing Figure. Democratic Republic of the Congo, Luba Peoples, 19th Century. Wood (Ricinus dendron rautoanemii). (Collected between 1891 and 1912, gift of A. H. Bure). Royal Museum for Central Africa, EO.0.0.14358, collection RMCA Tervuren; photo R. Asselberghs, RMCA Tervuren ©*

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 (pers. comm., 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.

Feminizing the Spirit Vessel:

In Luba culture, femininity is constituted through the stages of a woman's life. Through scarification, coiffures, filing of teeth, and elongation of the genital labia, the body is a vessel to be created and beautified as a work of art. Only by fulfilling this process of beautification does a woman become attractive and marriageable. During my research, Luba interlocutors asserted

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that beauty is not innate, but is rather created over the course of a lifetime. A woman is judged not by her natural-born features, but by those that have been culturally enhanced, as further demonstrated by the manner of walking, dance, and ritual performance. To crystallize this idea, Mutombo Nkulu-N'Sengha cites a Luba proverb, "God gives you beauty, but you must help him." In other words, there is personal agency involved in the creation of beauty. Sculpted royal emblems reflect this ontology, and political insignia become efficacious spirit vessels through their aesthetic and erotic embellishment.

In addition to the many ways that Luba women were and are made to be and then deemed beautiful, bodily transformations such as scarifications and elaborate hairstyles render them effective vessels to capture and hold potent spiritual energies and so establish communication with the other world. Luba were reputed 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 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" (pers. comm., 1988). And in order to protect such adornments, 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 Headdress," reflect one of the most popular styles of the latter part of the 19th century, called the "step" coiffure and worn in the Shankadi region around the towns of Kamina and Kabondo Dianda (see Maret et al 1973). Such ideal features of a beautiful woman were attractive and meaningful to spirits such as those made present through headrests that they might provide insight through dreams.

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Fig. 6. *Anthropomorphic Headrest. Democratic Republic of the Congo, Luba Peoples, 19th Century. Wood (Crossopterix febrifuga), beads. (Registered in 1954). Royal Museum for Central Africa, EO.1954.77.5, collection RMCA Tervuren; photo R. Asselberghs, RMCA Tervuren ©*

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.⁵ 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). Luba scarification was an efficacious “writing” achieved through the act of inscription (*kulemba*), as well as meanings assigned to and associated with the resulting patterns (M. N. Roberts 2007: 69; cf. Nooter 1991: 244-47, Roberts and Roberts 1996: 98-115). The body’s interior meanings and exterior communications were joined through such a tactile dimension. Indeed, inscription of significance led to what Jean-Luc Nancy has called “exscription,” insofar as

⁵ 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. See Roberts and Roberts 1996: 98-112.

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the medium extended the person to those privileged to "read" the skin's signs and symbols (1994: 24; cf. M. Roberts 2007: 59).

The full implications of female transfiguration and spirit embodiment emerge when one learns that the Kiluba verb *kunenenya* 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 *kununenya* 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 "skin-scapes" it produces are cosmological by definition (Nooter 1991: 262-263; M. Roberts 2007: 55).



Fig. 7. *Memory Board: lukasa. Democratic Republic of the Congo, Luba Peoples, 19th Century. Wood, glass beads, acacia thorns. Private collection.*

Such multireferentiality informs the enigmatic signs of the most esoteric of all Luba emblems, the *lukasa* memory device that at one level is understood as a woman's body (Roberts and Roberts 1996; M. Roberts 2005). As the key to Luba political organization and a library of Luba royal knowledge, the *lukasa* embodies principles and precepts upon which the state was founded. The "inside" of a *lukasa* is studded with tiny glass beads of different colors,

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or sometimes incised with motifs; in either case, the device is “scarified” through processes of “exscription” just considered. 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 triangles that refer to the shell of a tortoise, a secretive animal that the Luba equate with the kingdom itself. The scales 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, once told me, “scarifications have interdictions: that is why they signify the title and rank of chieftaincy”; and as a man named Papa Laza added, “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” (pers. comms. 1988-1989).

Female Epicenters of Power:

Luba entrust women to be the stewardesses of royal interdictions to ensure that male officials strictly adhere to them. This is evidenced by the crucial roles they have played as political and religious mediators in Luba royal history. Women were paid homage as one would to a king, and the first wife often acted as a surrogate in the king’s absence. Nkulu-N’Sengha asserts that the ruler’s first wife, sister, and mother all played critical roles in decision-making (2013). 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. Indeed, Reeve argues that marriages of royal Luba women to 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

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leaders and warriors in their own right, reflected in a few cases in which a woman surmounts rather than supports the royal stool.

Of similar prominence, 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. Such spirits often inhabited important fishing places and salt springs, the exploitation of which required their consent. That women were conduits for this authorization was a source of considerable power, for natural resources constituted the economic foundation of the Luba state.

Emplacing Spirit:

One form of female spirit mediumship had especially important implications for understanding the female image in Luba art. In the late 19th century, 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).⁶

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. The king maintained a ritual relationship through gifts given to the Mwadi as his father incarnate. At the onset of colonialism in the early 1900s, there were at least four Mwadis still governing their

⁶ Thanks to Dr. Thomas Q. Reeve for generously sharing and granting me permission to publish images of the Mwadi spirit medium of King Kasongwa Niembo.

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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 role 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. *Bitenta* spirit capitals, where the Mwadi spirit mediums resided, formed places of quiet resistance, not only to the overt power of living Luba kings, but also to colonial rule.⁷

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 overflow closed or limited definitions and provide an indigenous paradigm for understanding the body in composite and multiply sourced ways.

⁷ By the time of my doctoral research in the late 1980s, there were no longer any Mwadis known to be living.

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Mutombo Nkulu-N'Sengha stresses that as in all societies, women are the givers of life. Among Luba, if a child has a quarrel with 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 (Nkulu-N'Sengha 2013). The spirits will ensure that such behavior is never permitted, just as they ensure that a king abides by royal prohibitions and exhibits dignity, a good heart (*muchima muyampe*), and generosity. Only in the deliberate merging of male and female qualities can the ruler attain and maintain these ideals, for it is through the women that he rules with balanced authority and equanimity. In the realm of Luba royal culture and its epistemological underpinnings, the king remains a woman.

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