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## KOTA

Louis Perrois

An in-depth exploration of the significance of art in the culture of the Kota people of Gabon in equatorial Africa, focusing on form, function and meaning, as well as the interplay of verbal and visual imagery.

This new title in the Visions of Africa series offers a deep insight into the art of the Kota people of Gabon in the coastal area of western equatorial Africa. The Kota have developed an astonishing creativity in their representations of their ancestors. Their dreamlike figures combine a sharp sense of stylized reality tending towards abstraction with an extraordinary and imaginative use of copper, tin, and iron for purposes of decoration. But what seems to have been just a matter of aesthetic "taste" has in fact a symbolic function, as most of the decorative motifs and the choice of the technique are linked to the Kota's kinship system or religious beliefs. The same applies to the use of copper, which was a rare material and consequently a mark of wealth and power in their society. The *mbulu-ngulu* reliquary figure was an icon, the visual sign of a world in which the ancestors continued to watch over their descendants. In Kota lands it was an essential "tool" in group survival, one that enabled a continuous communication to be established between the living and the dead. The reliquary figures and initiation masks of the Kota and Mbete served as *aides-mémoire* and instruments useful in arousing the forces of the netherworld among the Gabonese and Congolese in times past. Together with the Fang *byeri* and other *nkisi punu*, in their various forms they have gradually become the time-honoured emblems of the culture and ancestral values of the peoples of the great African equatorial forest.

**Louis Perrois** is an ethnologist specializing in the ancient arts and cultures of equatorial Africa. Former director of the Museum of Gabonese Arts and Traditions in Libreville, he carried out fieldwork in Gabon and Cameroon for twenty years and taught at the University of Paris I. Perrois has published several works on these regions, notably *Arts du Gabon*, and in the Visions of Africa series, *Fang* and, in collaboration with Charlotte Grand-Dufay, *Punu*.