

KIFWEBE

A CENTURY OF SONGYE AND LUBA MASKS

The *kifwebe* mask has an "otherworldly beingness," created by its unique mix of human, animal, and supernatural spirit that expresses the spiritual essence of the Songye and Luba people of the southeastern area of what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Combining the pulsating effect of a linear system of groove patterns with a powerful expression of varied emotions, their penetrating stare commands an unyielding presence. But they are so much more than what they look like—they are what they did.

As in other central African cultures, the same mask can be used for both religious and secular purposes. Among the Songye, benevolent female masks reveal what is hidden and activate beneficial forces, while malevolent male masks were originally involved in social control and had a kind of policing role, carried out in accordance with the instructions of village elders. These two male and female forces acted in a balanced way to create harmony within the village. Among the Luba, both the male and female masked figures are benevolent forces that appear at new moon rites, promoting the continuation and fertility of the village.

The morphological features exhibit a strong gender distinction among the Songye, males having a triad of colors with a raised frontal crest, while females are mostly white with a flat crest or band. Male and female Eastern Luba masks, primarily white, are similar in form, showing more subtle differences.

Art historians and anthropologists have taken increasing interest in Kifwebe masks in recent years. This book offers a fresh perspective on the masking tradition of the Songye and Luba peoples through the study of the Woods Davy Collection.

François Neyt is professor emeritus at the Catholic University of Louvain and has also taught at the Official University of the Congo. Neyt has published several works on African art, including: *La Grande Statuaire hema du Zaïre*; *Arts traditionnels et histoire au Zaïre*; *Luba. Aux sources du Zaïre*; *La Redoutable Statuaire songye d'Afrique centrale*; *Fleuve Congo*; *Fétiches et objets ancestraux*; and *Trésors de Côte d'Ivoire*

Allen F. Roberts is Distinguished Professor of World Arts and Cultures at the University of California, Los Angeles. His studies of sub-Saharan African humanities include: *A Dance of Assassins: Performing Early Colonial Hegemony in the Congo* (2013) and, with his late wife Mary Nooter Roberts, *Visions of Africa: Luba* (5 Continents, 2007).

Kevin Dumouchelle earned a PhD in Art History and Archaeology from Columbia University. His doctoral research in Ghana examined architectural modernity in Asante. In 2016, he joined the National Museum of African Art. He has written books and articles on a range of topics and curated exhibitions on both contemporary and historical African art.

Woods Davy lives in Venice, California. For the past thirty years Davy has worked with stone in unaltered states, either from the sea or the earth, incorporating them into assemblages of



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precarious balance that appear to be in flux. He might be thought of as among the first “green” Postmodern artists. His work is included in many museums and institutions, as well as numerous public and private collections throughout the world.

Kellim Brown holds an MA in African Art History. In 2008 he held a research post at Portugal's National Museum of Ethnology focused on Angolan traditional art production. His work among the Lega in 2011 led him to further investigate ethnicities of the northern Democratic Republic of Congo from 2012 to 2015, resulting in a recently published essay in *Congo Masks: Masterpieces From Central Africa* (2018).