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Wrapped in Tradition: Ceremonial Skirts of Kuba Women in the Western Congo Basin

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In the central Kasai area of the Democratic Republic of Congo, between forest and savanna, lies the Kuba Kingdom. Labeled as “Kuba” by outsiders, they refer to themselves as “the people of the king”. The monarchy is made up of several clans who all pay tribute to one supreme king or nyim, selected through matrilineal descent from the Bushoong clan. The Bushoong are also called Bambala or “people of the cloth,” a name which gives homage to the importance of textiles in their culture. Each of these clans or villages that belong to the Kuba group has its own chief and their own system or hierarchy of nobility, and they all have and report to a village council or malaang. It is the royalty, however, to whom the Kuba attribute the development of all their arts, particularly the unique and fascinating patterns which have such a central role in Kuba life. The wrap-skirts of Kuba women in the Western Congo Basin are a social construct, standing for the communal artistry of the Kuba clans as the result of a combined effort between men and women. The raffia cloth is chosen as the material for these embroidered cloths because of its abundance and its historical use as currency, directly associating the material with value and importance. The cloth is woven by men and decorated through the joint effort of several women, each completing a unique and compositionally different raffia square from the woman before her. Worn by the living during ritual celebrations and festivities, and by the deceased for funerals and burial, the traditional skirts act to preserve the cultural values and heritage of the Kuba and display the strong social relationships within their community.

3 Oral traditions trace the chosen ruler’s lineage back to the first king, Shyaam aMbul aNgoong, who was ruling during a solar eclipse, an event astronomers have recorded as happening in 1680, allowing historians to date the reign of the first Kuba king (Mack 8).
The practice of weaving and decorating textiles, and ceremonial skirts in particular, is a primary part of life for all Kuba men and women. The practice of raffia weaving and decoration is not restricted, nor is it the responsibility of certain specialists, but a skill set required for all members. Patricia Darish explains, “Traditional decorated raffia skirts and cut-pile cloths are considered tangible wealth that everyone wants to accumulate, so the participation of every adult is expected” (1989, 123). For most people, work on the skirts is typically designated to small amounts of time throughout the day, primarily in the afternoons after returning from working in the fields. It is regarded as an informal pastime taken up between their normal duties. With the exception of those who choose to specialize in textile production, the members of the community who spend the most time working on textiles are the old and sick, who are generally limited in daily activities, and women restricted to their houses during mourning, a period of months which allows them to replenish the supply of textiles that the funeral would have required (Adams 1978, 124). This is a practice that the varying ethnic groups which make up the Kuba share. While there are differences in style between sub-groups, the exchange of ideas and decorative techniques between clans through the act of trade has made it more challenging to identify the origin of all cloths and their respective decoration styles (Finch 1999, 52), though also making it clear that raffia has significant value and a primary role within the entire Kuba kingdom.

The use of raffia in the making of ceremonial skirts signals the value and importance attached to the palm. The raffia palm, officially named *raphia vinifera*, is found in moist locations such as swamps and along creeks. The plant grows in abundance so its supply cannot be depleted, and the fibers are durable and easily dyed, ideal for the artistic needs of the Kuba.

The raffia palm fibers used for ceremonial skirts are not to be confused with those used during initiation for Kuba men, the *makadi* raffia palm, found growing wild near water sources in the forest. The uncultivated *makadi* palm is associated with nature spirits and is worn by novices during their initiation. It is considered particularly dangerous to women, causing infertility or even death to those who come too close.\(^8\) In contrast, raffia is considered a form of wealth, having been the principal form of currency before it was replaced by cowrie shells (Darish 1989, 127). Its history as currency leaves a lasting impression as the cloth is now permanently associated with a form of value, marking its importance through tradition and history. Raffia cloth has been used as a form of tribute to the *nyim*; Darish states that one village was recorded paying one raffia cloth for each adult man (ibid, 128). There is also record of some Kuba groups using raffia cloth and skirts as a bride price in marital contracts in the nineteenth century, as well as in legal settlements such as loan repayment or to pay a fine to the village tribunal.\(^9\) The raffia cloth has come to represent wealth and prosperity for the Kuba and its importance is still evident in their society with its many uses both in their everyday life and their art. Patricia Darish reports from her visit with the Kuba in the 1980s,

“A Shoowa man once told me that after all is said and done: ‘The raffia palm is *mbaangt*.’ *Mbaangt* is the name designating the aristocratic clans of most Kuba affiliated ethnic groups…My informant meant that the highest title of all must be given to the raffia palm from which emerges so much of Kuba art and material culture” (1990, 186).

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\(^9\) Ex. An adulterer would be required to give a ceremonial skirt and other gifts to the village tribunal as a fine for his actions (ibid 128).
The importance of the raffia cloth can most clearly be seen in the community obligation of maintaining the clan’s supply of decorated skirts. As mentioned above, there is an expectation for all adults within the clan to contribute to the supply of textiles. While the creation of skirts may be attributed to one person or to an entire group of people, the finished product belongs to the clan as a whole (Darish 1989, 125). A significant difference between the Kuba and western civilizations can be found in the idea of group ownership, as observed concerning ceremonial skirts. This ideal can be seen in several Bushoong proverbs. One proverb states, “One person can weave cloth, many can wear them” (ibid, 126). Other proverbs refer to the dangers of evading one’s social responsibility of contributing to the group effort of textile fabrication. An example of this would be, “The weaver is weaving, the blacksmith’s helper is working the bellows, but they are all wearing leaves!” (ibid, 126). This refers to the obligation not only for all members of the community to help in creating textiles, but for them to contribute those cloths to the village supply. These skirts are not owned by a single individual, because it is extremely rare for them to be made by a single individual. Rather, they are the result of the combined efforts of both men and women within the clan.

Kuba ceremonial skirts are truly a community creation, the finished art form resulting from the combined efforts of a myriad of men and women. Monni Adams gives a detailed description of the entire process as she witnessed it during her research among the Kuba. Naturally, the process begins with the raffia palm as boys are tasked with stripping the raffia leaves of their fibers and splitting them, either by hand or with a raffia-rib comb. The fibers are then transferred to the women who prepare them for embroidery even at this early stage by smoothing the fibers with snail shells. They then bind the fibers into skeins or bundles and pass them into the possession of the weavers—the men. The weaving process is exclusively for men,
even the observers are solely men and boys (Darish 1989, 121). The raffia cloth is produced on a single-heddle loom,¹⁰ the strands being stretched between two horizontal bars supported by two poles set into the ground at a 45-degree angle so that the “warp strands” are leaning toward the weaver as he sits underneath the apparatus, as shown in figure 1 (Adams 1978, 34). They produce one square of cloth or mbala at a time, averaging twenty-six by twenty-eight inches, depending on the original size of the palm leaf. The weaving process typically requires about two to three hours to complete, though “an excellent weaver can produce from ten to fifteen squares a day.”¹¹ In most cases, however, the men will dedicate an afternoon to the process before returning to the fields or their other engagements. In regards to the women’s skirts, once the cloth is produced the men’s role is complete.

The task of decorating the women’s skirts belongs solely to the women; they are in charge of the dyeing and embroidering, and applying to the individual skirt panels the innumerable patterns of decoration which constitute their uniqueness. Typically, the design of the skirt is delegated by the female head of the clan section. She is responsible for acquiring the cloth panels and choosing the style of the finished skirt, then assigns the individual panels to women in her clan according to their skill level (Cameron, L 1997, 33). If she is sending the cloth to a novice or someone who lives farther away, she may apply the lines for the design onto the cloth herself before sending it (Darish 1998, 126-127). Before she sends the pieces, they have to be softened. Once the cloth square is cut from the loom, it is stiff and course. In order to soften the cloth for decoration, the fibers are treated by bleaching, wetting, and pounding (Finch 1999, 50). In one account of this process, the women dampened the panel with water, then kneaded and rubbed it between their hands before wrapping the square in old pieces of cloth and laying it in a trough, where the women continued to pound it with wood piles (Adams 1978, 34). In another account, the women wadded the cloth into a small ball, added hot water, and instead pounded it in a mortar (Cameron, L 1997, 30-31). This process results in the cloth being soft and pliable, close in texture to linen. Any holes created in the cloth due to the pounding are later covered up with applique.

The women are also in charge of the dye process, which is normally done in advance of the embroidery and decorative stitching. Traditionally the four main colors applied to the skirts were beige, red, black, and brown (Adams 1978, 34), however a full range of shades can be seen on the actual cloths, varying according to their individual treatment and age. They achieve their color tones by dipping cloth into cooked dye materials, which are historically obtained from local plants (ibid), though more recently these have been achieved through a combination of both...
natural and synthetic sources, including pen ink and pounded carbon paper (Cameron, L 1997, 31). Red is a particularly powerful color for the Kuba, the color of danger and mourning. During festivals and dancing, the Kuba mix redwood powder with oil and rub the resulting red paint on their bodies (Adams 1978, 35). In accordance with this tradition, women often dye beige weavings red on the reverse side so that it rubs against the body while worn, thereby bestowing a form of enhancement on the wearer (ibid). Once the dyeing process is complete, the cloth is ready to be embroidered.

The woman’s ceremonial skirt is the result of an incredible compilation of individually designed squares all fitted together into a harmonious whole. Even when the pattern is decided beforehand, the effect of having the skirt decorated by multiple women is that each skirt has its own unique design as varying skill levels and styles are joined together in one finished product. What does stay constant is their method. Most Kuba embroidery combines the use of overstitching and cut-pile, or plush. The origin of plush cloth is reported in a legend called musese by the Ngongo; the beautiful and clever Kashashi wanted to be chosen as the king’s wife, and so remained inside her hut for several weeks to cover her skirt with embroidery. The king, who was the founder of the Kuba kingdom, was so amazed by her skirt that he immediately chose her as his bride (Adams 1978, 33). The legend gives insight for why the women are the only ones who embroider using cut-pile decoration. Adams remarks that “The embroideress needs an enormous amount of steadiness and patience… Fine plush pieces are worked on for months and even years” (1978, 35), mainly due to the scarce amount of time per day most women can dedicate to the cloth, the exception being when they are in mourning. As detailed by Adams, the “embroideress” sits on a stool or mat outside her house and sews with the cloth on her lap. When forming designs, rather than turning the cloth she simply changes the direction of
the stitching, viewing the design from only one end for the entire process. To create a plush stitch, she draws strands through the weave and cuts the top with a small knife to form tufts on the surface. Throughout the weaving process, she brushes the edge of the knife across the cut ends, splitting them, and causing the plush effect in the fabric (ibid). While stitching, she applies the designs and patterns to the cloth (figure 2). As finished skirts are rarely seen in public, the women primarily learn these processes by working alongside the more experienced embroiderers (Mack 2012, 14). Over time, they come to know the patterns well enough to complete them entirely from memory.

The foremost skill of the Kuba, which they are recognized for all over the world, is their work with patterns. Displayed not only on their textiles, Kuba designs can be seen on their drums, sculptures, masks, common household items, and even on their homes themselves. Their designs are known and understood by every member of the community, becoming a form of visual language throughout the region. The patterns belong to a standardized design system called buina, in which every pattern has its own name (Cameron, L 1997, 31-32). These names are both specific and descriptive, but they do not classify patterns by their visual design. Rather, the names represent the functional quality of the designs as the cloth is worn and danced with, referring to the rhythm and movement of the patterns upon

Figure 2

the skirt (Rewerts 1998, 31). According to legend, weaving was created by King Shuaam, circa 1600 (ibid), linking both the cloth and its patterns to royalty. Possibly tracing back to said king, it has become tradition for each Kuba king to create and name his own unique pattern (Finch 1999, 55). A group of missionaries bore witness to such an event in their visit with the Kuba in the 1920s. Intending to impress the Kuba with European technology, the missionaries brought with them a motorcycle and presented it to King Kwete. Uninterested in the motorcycle itself, he was fascinated by the pattern its tires made in the soil and consequently had the imprinted patterns recorded. The pattern is still known as Kwete’s design (ibid). With such an extended history of creating and recording patterns, their collection is understandably dense. Their techniques are not only numerous, however, but mathematically precise. Suzanne Blier remarks, “one study of Kuba patterns suggests that two-thirds of all the formulaic variations possible in design are represented in the Kuba textile corpus…” (1998, 245). The Kuba have developed almost every possible method of repetition, however their patterns are anything but uniform.

The Kuba design system and their corpus of patterns act as guidelines rather than rules, and are in fact rather loose in order to allow freedom of design, style, and the beauty of something unexpected. Even when the skirt design is planned beforehand, variation is expected. Shoowa designs, for example, display subtle variation throughout the piece as different possibilities of executing the same pattern are explored within a single cloth. As sections of the cloth are finished, the Shoowa roll them up to protect the textile (Mack 2012, 13). Consequently, the completed work is hidden from view as the rest of the panel is completed over the course of weeks or months. Undesired and unneeded, perfect symmetry is not attempted and designs are often improvised as work progresses. The style of their designs has been likened with the rhythm and flow of music. A common element that weaves through Kuba music, textiles, and other art
forms is their use of off-beat phrasing. The Kuba consistently reveal preference for purposeful interruption in their designs (figure 3), breaking the expected line and disrupting the surface pattern (Adams 1978, 24-26). In their cloths with repetitive imaging, embroiderers find ways of creating variation in the details: changes in thickness, width and length of line, angle degrees, color (ibid). In figures 4 and 5, the repetitive lines and shapes vary in thickness and length to make the pieces more compositionally interesting. When an image is repeated, it is altered through balance or color, causing the interrupted flow to become the focal point of the piece.

The rarity of seeing the finished skirts coupled with the functional naming of the patterns upon them emphasizes that the Kuba designs are not meant to be seen lying flat and still but on a moving and dancing form. A woman’s ceremonial skirt or nacak is made by sewing the completed one-meter-square pieces of raffia cloth together end to end until it has reached the desired length,
typically twenty-five feet long. The skirt is wrapped around the woman’s body several times, creating a voluminous layered effect, then is securely tied with a belt or cord as seen in figure 6. She might then add a smaller overskirt, which goes around the body only once and whose borders will create a sharp contrast from the center of the skirt either in technique or color. The voluminous and entrapping skirt complements the more sedate dance style of the women; shoulders straight with feet and arms carrying the rhythm (ibid). In contrast, the men’s ceremonial skirts or mapel may be up to thirteen yards long; the skirt is wound once around the body then is folded over his belt to create a two-tiered effect that is meant to move with him while dancing (ibid). Figure 7 shows a contrast between the men’s and women’s ceremonial

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skirts as worn by an official and his wives. No longer worn daily, the last century has seen the Kuba wearing these elaborate skirts with dwindling frequency, now only during occasional ritual dance ceremonies (Finch 1999, 50). Historically, dance festivals would occur at the instillation or death of an official, at the end of mourning, or anytime the king ordered one. One of the most elaborate ceremonies is the itul festival, meant to display and enhance the prestige of royals and officials (Adams 1978, 27-31). The festival is sponsored by children of the king in a large plaza at the Bushoong capital. Itul means “striking viper,” a theme embodied in the final two days of the festival as the dance tells the story of a noble, dangerous animal terrorizing the region. The sponsor (figure 8), takes the role of the animal and is symbolically killed by the other dancers (figure 9), its skin in the form of a decorated textile taken back to the king as a trophy (ibid). Ceremonial skirts can also be seen
worn during the funeral dance at funerals of high-ranked titleholders, at which the elders have traditionally worn their embroidered cloth (Darish 1989, 129). Most commonly, however, ceremonial skirts are seen on the dead themselves.

Proper burial for the Kuba means traditional dress and a significant amount of raffia skirts wrapped around the body which will accompany the deceased to the grave. When a person in the Kuba kingdom dies, it becomes the responsibility of that person’s family and clan section to properly dress the body for burial. There is a formal meeting of clan section members who decide which textiles in their possession and other gifts will be placed upon and buried with the corpse (Darish 1989, 131-132). The amount of textiles and gifts placed on the body is in proportion to how important or wealthy the deceased person was, determining how much the clan will give as well as what is expected from the family. The spouse is expected to give at least one skirt for the deceased; this skirt is in the gender of that spouse, meaning a husband would dress his deceased wife in a male raffia skirt (ibid). There are a certain amount of textiles expected to be placed on the body, as well as a particular order. The first cloth to wrap the
body is an undecorated red-dyed raffia skirt in the gender of the deceased. For a woman, the minimum requirement is for two long, embroidered and appliqued skirts to be added next; though, the number of skirts increases with the importance of the figure. The shorter overskirts are added last, though some groups add additional plush cloths as a final covering (ibid, 133-134). When the body is properly dressed and adorned, it is typically displayed for three days under an open shed in the village. According the Darish, the great importance of being properly dressed at burial is attributed to the general belief in ilueemy, the land of the dead. She explains, “During my research, several informants stated that they would not be recognized by deceased relatives in ilueemy if they were not properly dressed.” She also noted a general concern for visitors to be able to recognize their ethnicity (Bushoong, Kete, Shoowa) based on how their body was adorned and the quantity of grave goods accompanying them (1990, 184-185). The number of textiles and grave goods would also be a statement of status, an important thing to showcase both for the clan and to honor the deceased.

The display of the body is an important and telling aspect of Kuba culture. The goods accompanying the deceased are a testament to their traditions, beliefs, and the significance of social relationships within each community. The raffia skirts are a symbolic embodiment of wealth, security, and continuity as the tradition is upheld daily throughout the kingdom. By burying the deceased in these textiles, there is a bond formed between the living community and the deceased. The creation of these elaborate skirts is a community effort, done through the combined work of men and women; this relationship is publicly displayed in the deceased as the body is clothed in both male and female skirts. The body itself then becomes a tribute to those social relationships and the interdependency of clan members; the textiles an embodiment of tradition and the cultural values which are still being upheld today.


