CHAPTER 4

Luba Memory Theater

Mary Nooter Roberts

When Guilio Camillo Delminio proposed his "memory theater" to the philosophical circles of Renaissance Italy, his idea was received with widespread enthusiasm. Yet, ironically, we have largely forgotten "the divine Camillo," as his admirers called him. Nonetheless, Camillo's memory theater and the "memory palace" of Matteo Ricci, his contemporary, provide instructive parallels with Luba models of memory. In particular, they demonstrate how a vast body of knowledge can be firmly fixed in "eternal places" by assigning images to loci easily grasped by memory.[1]

Camillo's memory theater, according to a contemporary, was conceived as

> a work of wood . . . marked with many images, and full of little boxes; there are various orders and grades in it. . . . All things that the human mind can conceive and which we cannot see with the corporeal eye . . . may be expressed by certain corporeal signs in such a way that the beholder may at once perceive with his eyes everything that is otherwise hidden in the depths of the human mind. And it is because of this corporeal looking that he calls it a theater (quoted in Yates 1966:131–32).

Similarly, Matteo Ricci created a memory palace through which hundreds of Chinese characters could be memorized. As he had it, "'To everything we wish to remember . . . we should give an image; and to every one of those images we should assign a position where it can repose peacefully until we are ready to reclaim it by an act of memory'" (quoted in Spence 1976:2).

The Renaissance memory theater shares a great deal with Luba mnemonic systems. Both represent "the order of eternal truth" through an architectural model capable of encompassing abundant knowledge in its spacious and varied layout. Both retain and engender knowledge that may be worldly or occult, elementary or sacred. Furthermore, both create memory places whose images have affective or emotional appeal, and are regarded as "inner talismans" with their own mystical efficacy (Yates 1966:154).[2] Increasingly widespread use of the printing press displaced humanist arts of memory in Renaissance Europe, and it was only in occult activities that they persisted or were taken up again. Similarly, the introduction of writing during the African colonial period lessened Luba dependence on oral narratives, except in contexts of arcane knowledge. But no writing system could or can reproduce the knowledge embedded and encoded—even imbued—within Luba memory arts and devices. The imageric and multireferential nature of that

CAT. 46: MEMORY BOARD OR LUKASA. LUBA, ZAIRE. Lukasa memory devices provide a framework for history while permitting multiple interpretations of it. Mbudye court historians associate memories with particular loci on a lukasa. Through a rectangular or hourglass shape that represents the Luba landscape, the royal court, human anatomy, and the emblematic royal tortoise all at once, the memory board embodies multiple levels of information simultaneously. Beads, coded by size and color, and incised or raised ideograms provide a means to evoke events, places, and names in the past. *Wood, beads, metal. H. 13.4 in. Susanne K. Bennet.*

Fig. 101: Early-twentieth-century members of the Mbudye Society. *Photo: Burton 1961: fig. 20.*

Fig. 102: The dress and adornments of late-twentieth-century Mbudye Society members show striking similarities to those in the early archival photographs. *Photo: Mary Nooter Roberts, 1989.*

knowledge requires such a mnemonic system, for its possibilities of combination and juxtaposition as well as for its hermetic potential.

Mbudye and Politics

What the Renaissance and Luba mnemonic systems do not share is political purpose: Camillo's memory theater was not explicitly political at all, while Luba mnemonics always have this dimension. Luba memory devices serve as a check and balance to political authority, and are actively used for political legitimation. The association called Mbudye was created to fulfill these needs, becoming "the memory of society" (figs. 101 and 102). Mbudye's primary role was to guard Luba political and historical precepts, and to disseminate this knowledge selectively and discreetly through ritual. Mbudye members were "men of memory" (Reefe 1981), serving as genealogists, court historians, and the "traditionalists" of Luba society (see Le Goff 1992:56).

If Mbudye institutionalized memory itself, and the processes through which history was made, maintained, and transmitted, it did so through visual memory devices (fig. 103) that encode the semantic principles underlying most other Luba mnemonic arts, such as staffs, stools, bow stands, and axes. The site-specific wall murals and earthen thrones of Mbudye lodges, and the complex memory boards called "lukasa," were compelling mnemonic devices for proverbial instruction, narrative recitation of history and ideology, and panegyrical performances to honor a king and his retinue. Association members also staged dances for public entertainment, some of which reenacted the origins of kingship (fig. 104). Certain dances further incorporated beaded headdresses and costumes that were decorated with some of the same mnemonic patterns of Mbudye wall murals, clay thrones, and memory boards.

In each of these expressive forms, memory was structured around spatial principles. Whether through the narration of two- and three-dimensional art forms, the recitation and performance of praise songs, or the kinetic arts of dance, Mbudye memory phenomena were devised and oriented around architectural models, place names, and other topoi that facilitated memorization. Data presented here will show how and why Luba historians selected lieux de mémoire for the facilitation of memory, and how the maps of memory as conveyed through initiations might be seen as a Luba model of the mind itself.

Mbudye as Performance

Mbudye memory rituals and visual mnemonic devices are devised to teach and encode an "official" history of the Luba state, while at the same time subverting historical absolutism by allowing for transmutation and refabulation with every narrative telling, from one political arena to the next. As discussed in the introduction to this book, Pierre Nora has taught us that history and memory are in eternal contention: history always seeks to suppress memory, memory forever undercuts the presumptuousness of history. In short, they are dialectically interdependent and in creative tension.

Mbudye memory devices assist memory, not through word-for-word mnemonic reproduction, but rather through a "generative reconstruction" of the past. And the generation is always the "now" of the narration. As Jack Goody further emphasizes, "the support of rememoration is not situated on the superficial level of word-for-word, nor on the level of 'deep' structures that many mythologists discern. . . . On the contrary, it seems that the important role is played by the narrative dimension and by other structures at the level of particular events" (1977:34). Particular events are performed; performance is theater; Mbudye members are actors on a stage of memory.

Don Camillo excluded the performative dimension from his "theater." But not only is the Luba mnemonic system oriented around the architectural features of a theater (in this case the court), it is also a field of intense performative activity. In this essay, the word "theater" is employed in full awareness of all the drama, artifice, and actor/audience dimensions that it commonly implies. As discussed in the introduction to this book, Luba notions of memory are built upon the dialogic qualities of orality and the dialectics of litigation and argument, and also suggest verbs of active chance—verbs of game-playing, hunting, and bricolage. Memory demands full-fledged perfor-

mance, and the narrative readings, songs, and dances of Mbudye demonstrate the extent to which its members act out the dramas of memory.

The Mbudye Association in Luba History

In his landmark work on central African history, *Kingdoms of the Savanna* (1966), Jan Vansina postulates that there was an institutional check-and-balance system in Luba politics. Mbudye fulfilled this role. It was so highly secretive, though, that its full significance eluded even the most observant amateur ethnographers among early missionaries and colonial administrators. Through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was an Mbudye chapter in every region where there was a prominent Luba chieftaincy or kingship, for the two institutions were interdependent. In Pierre Colle's words, Mbudye was "the national society par excellence" among Luba (1913 2:568), and colonial statistics confirm that large numbers of people were Mbudye members in the early part of this century (Henroteaux 1945:98). Luba today state that Mbudye is as old as kingship itself, and that the association was imported from somewhere else, but both of these positions reflect current ideology. In the past and still, the origins of Mbudye have been intensely debated, for accounts of origin and patronage created during the last century are themselves vested with political interest. To whom the association is credited and when it was founded involve issues of legitimacy, authenticity, and proprietorship; and the variety of accounts demonstrates that different explanations were and still are invented to reinforce local claims to power. As one might expect, memory of the memory society is subject to constant negotiation. Memory is timeless and frameless, and when pinned down in particular histories, other particular histories will challenge.

Some early missionaries and colonial officers referred to Mbudye in their monographs or territorial reports, and several devoted entire articles or chapters to this and other Luba secret institutions. Most of these observers failed to grasp the real purpose and nature of Mbudye, however, and the extent to which it shaped Luba politics.[3] The historian Thomas Reefe (1978, 1981) was the first author to emphasize this aspect of the organization.

Through their initiation rites, Mbudye members acquire supernatural qualities and powers that allow them to arbitrate disputes and settle litigations (Reefe 1978:111). Although precolonial Luba rulers wielded far more overt political power than Mbudye, they nevertheless were subject to the society's reprisals. The association could expel a chief from office if he abused his authority, or acted against the will of its members. The counterpoint of these two institutions was critical to the internal balance of power, and may well have been influential in the formation and expansion of the Luba state (Reefe 1978:111, 1981:46–48).[4]

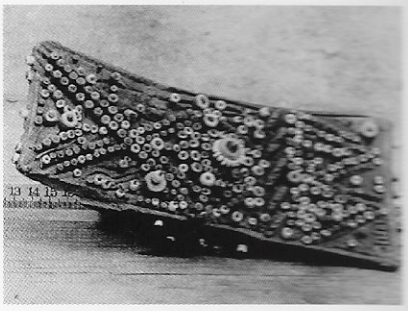


Fig. 103: Lukasa memory board from the early twentieth century. *Photo: W. F. P. Burton, 1927–35. Courtesy of the University of the Witwatersrand Art Galleries, BPC 04.48.*

Fig. 104: Mbudye dancers from the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. A line of men dressed in wide skirts, probably made from spotted genet or serval skins and fiber, dance to the accompaniment of two drums. In dress, composition of performers, orchestra, and even choreography, the scene is similar to Mbudye performances of the late twentieth century. *Drawing: Léon Dardenne, 1865–1912. Courtesy of the archives of the Royal Museum of Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium, A.221 R.G. 264. Gift of the Ministry of the Colonies, 1911.*

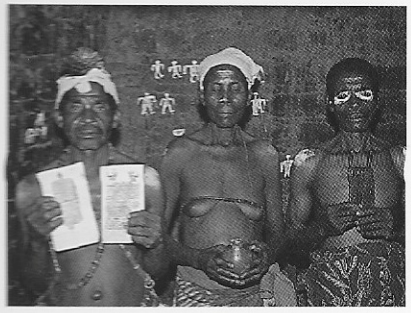


Fig. 105: High-ranking Mbudye titleholders during an initiation proceeding. Standing against the painted walls of the initiation house, they hold mnemonic gourds and a lukasa board, as well as an image, brought by the photographer, of a lukasa now in the West but originally from their region. *Photo: Mary Nooter Roberts, 1988.*

Fig. 106: Mural in an Mbudye initiation house. The blackened figures refer to the *ngulungu*, or uninitiated people, who are considered ignorant; the whiteness of the other figures refers to the clairvoyance that comes with initiation into the esoteric secrets of Luba royalty. *Photo: Mary Nooter Roberts, 1988.*

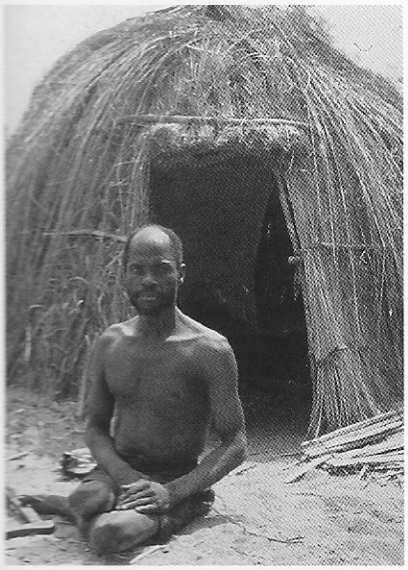


Fig. 107: Man in the state of mourning called "*kusubila*," during which, to express the sadness, loss, and darkness of this state, he is discouraged from washing and attending to normal hygienic practices. The first stage of initiation into the Mbudye Society is a metaphor for the symbolic death associated with kusubila. *Photo: Mary Nooter Roberts, 1987.*

To ensure the allegiance of Mbudye members, Luba rulers were themselves required to undergo Mbudye initiation during their investiture rites. A king or chief who did not submit to Mbudye was considered "illegitimate," and his authority was not recognized. In addition, initiation was a prerequisite for all men and women who might be seeking high office in the ranks of Luba royalty, including officeholders, subchiefs, spirit mediums, diviners, and healers. Every branch of royalty, no matter how specialized, participated in and was subject to rules and regulations that assured institutional efficacy and access to the spirit world. Mbudye was responsible for ensuring respect of these rules. As one person explained, "Yes, they came, those who know how to initiate people, because initiation is to show or teach the prohibitions of all sorts, some of which apply to diviners and others to chiefs. Should they disregard these restrictions, they will not sustain their authority for long."

Vestiges of Mbudye still exist, and the author was initiated into its ranks. The luster, scope, and power of Mbudye have been greatly diminished, though, as the chiefs Mbudye once served are now servants to the central government, and the practices of Mbudye have become largely irrelevant to the stress of coping with everyday life in Zaire. Still, Mbudye memory persists, as do some of its practices. Here is its role in the making of Luba histories, then and now. Unless otherwise indicated, the ethnographic present refers to the late 1980s, when I conducted research among Luba.

Initiation and the Transmission of Memory

Mbudye initiation usually involves four stages, the first three of which prepare the novice for the elaborate rites and rigors of the fourth stage, when use of the lukasa memory board is learned (fig. 105). The progression through each entails symbolic death and rebirth. Not coincidentally, the "death" of the initiate is cast in the "blackness" of forgetting. Through such "deaths," one abandons and forgets one's earlier identity as an *ngulungu* or "uninitiated person," to embark on the path to enlightened (and so "whitened") knowledge (fig. 106). "Ngulungu" literally refers to the bushbuck (*Tragelaphus scriptus*). This small antelope is "truculent" and "arrogant," for it will bark at and even charge a farmer while eating his own crops. Presumably, those not yet initiated to Mbudye are deemed as brutish as bushbucks (Roberts 1995a:54–56).

As the stages of initiation unfold, the lieux de mémoire of Luba royal history are taught and committed to memory through various symbols of initiation, and an initiate's body becomes a locus for memory through spirit possession. Spatial metaphors are constructed, becoming progressively more complex, spiritually charged, and arcane with each stage. At the same time, the visual didactics that are used during the course of the initiation become less representational and increasingly abstract.

The first requirement of the novice is "to drink into the association" (*kutoma mbudye*). The initiate is presented with a beverage that contains a precious stone bearing the same name as the Mbudye word for nonmember, "ngulungu." The consumption of all contents except the stone signifies the initiate's absorption of the society's secrets while leaving the uninitiated behind.[5] The novice may faint—a "death" in its own right—after which she or he is transported to a secret meeting house. Upon regaining consciousess, the initiate is covered with black ash or soot to indicate mourning. Among Luba, mourning (*kusubila*) is an extended period during which people do not bathe or attend to other ordinary hygienic and cosmetic practices. Such forgetful abstention is a way to frame and thereby emphasize their grief and affliction at a time of loss. Once blackened, the novice is called "*kafita*" or "*mudye wa mufitu*," a reference simultaneously to sadness, grief, obscurity, lack of status, and, most important to our discussion, to oblivion, obliviscence (forgetting), and the sense of loss associated with leaving the past behind (fig. 107).

During this first stage, a candidate assumes the identity of Nkongolo Mwamba, the "drunken king" of the Luba epic. In Makwidi village, Mbudye members describe the process of rendering the novice unconscious as *kuhehela Nkongolo*, "to breathe or blow the rainbow" onto the novice, because "Nkongolo" refers to both the king and an immense serpent that breathes forth the rainbow to "burn" the rains and desiccate one's crops (see chapter 7). This identification refers to

the cruel, incestuous king who represents death, loss, and infertility (Heusch 1982), in the same way that the novice has been reduced to a state of death, darkness, and mourning. Yet even as the novice is identified with Nkongolo, she or he is painted black, the color of secrecy, potency, and promise (Roberts 1993). "Black" is insight and invisibility, and if this first stage of Mbudye initiation is an effacement or erasure, it also sets the initiate on the path to new identity, intellect, and spiritual grounding, through models of behavior that—paradoxical as it may seem—include elements of philosophy and praxis embodied by both the "black" culture hero Mbidi Kiluwe and the "red" antihero Nkongolo.

A Path of Sculpted Spirits

The word "*kusubula*," the name of the second stage of Mbudye initiation, literally means "to put an end to mourning by lifting taboos," with a further sense of ritual purification (fig. 108). In Mbudye initiation, "kusubula" also refers to instruction of the novice into a new way of life, with its own set of rules and regulations and its own system of procedures relating to rank and title. It is in this second stage that space begins to shape memory and articulate precepts of power. The novice is led down a path by a man holding the title "Kamanji," who wields an ax to define the path with authority and whose role is to show the way while assuring the initiate's security and protection. The path may be a tracing in the sand or an actual route, and is called "*musebo*"—a road or passageway demarcated for the first time with a hoe or an ax. The path is a recurring motif in Luba royal symbolism, as well as a common feature shared by memory and place, where pathways cut "in and through their midst" (Casey 1987:204).

In the vicinity of Kabongo, the titleholder who performs the task of Kamanji is known as the Mukanda wa dishinda, "the letter [or panel, billboard, or indicator] of the road."[6] Whenever Mbudye members travel, he precedes them with his ax and makes blazes, tracks, and traces in the path to create and show the way. "*Kafùndanshi*" is the name for this ax, which is used to mark the path that leads to civilization.[7] A chief employs an instrument of the same name to define the boundaries of his lands, and the verb from which this noun is derived, *kufùnda*, "to inscribe," has been extended to mean "to translate, or to write" by contemporary Luba (Van Avermaet and Mbuya 1954:169). The Mukanda wa dishinda, then, is the "letter," his ax the tool of inscription, his message memory.

The path is enhanced on both sides with signs, some of them in the form of sculpted wooden figures representing the Mbudye hierarchy and its tutelary spirits (fig. 109). Combined with proverbs, these stations along the way express principles of Mbudye ethics and philosophy, such as cooperation among members, respect for authorities, and the solemn oath of secrecy. Sculptures are no longer used these days, but they are remembered by elderly Mbudye members and described by early missionaries to the area. Writing in 1930, W. F. P. Burton reported "a row of *bankishi* human figures round the base of a tree, and pieces of cloth tied in a circle, said to be 'the capital of the chief,'" or a *kitenta*, as discussed below. "Sometimes these *masubu* objects are beautifully carved, and there are a few sets of really rare ones, shiny with age and valuable works of art. . . . Other sets are rudely carved in light wood, for altogether there are about eighty of them. . . . Nowadays some are merely crudely fashioned in green banana stalk and grass" (1930:231–32).

The large number of sculptures used in Mbudye initiation testifies to the many leadership titles and roles within the association. Each Mbudye chapter is an autonomous unit, with its own hierarchy and administrative infrastructure. Mbudye's titles are critically important to an understanding of the society's political significance, for many of them are also found in the king's coterie of dignitaries and counselors.[8] Every Mbudye initiate is expected to learn and memorize this hierarchy, which is crucial to the regulation of power. As we shall see, these constellations of sculpture are represented and remembered through the beads and other ideograms of the lukasa memory board.

Each title is represented by a sculpture because it is never possible to assemble every member for each initiation, so the sculptures serve as surrogates, familiarizing the initiate with Mbudye's

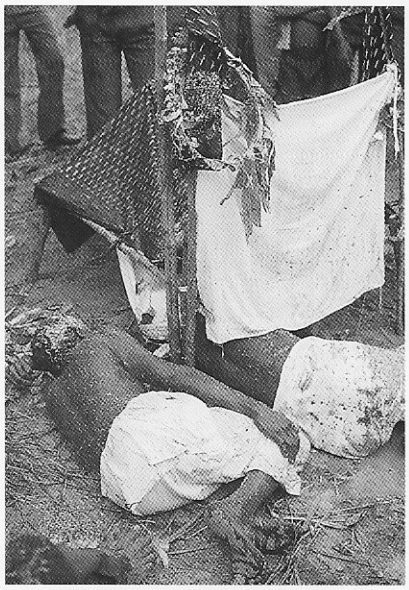


Fig. 108: Following the period of kusubila or mourning, Luba practice *kusubula*, the lifting of the mourning period. Here, a man's widows enact the ritual that takes them from kusubila to kusubula, which includes the breaking of pots and the spreading of beer all around the shrine where the clothing and relics of the deceased are worshiped. The second stage of Mbudye initiation metaphorically signifies the emergence from the darkness associated with kusubila, as the initiate leaves his previous identity behind and enters a new stage of enlightened understanding. *Photo: Mary Nooter Roberts, 1988.*

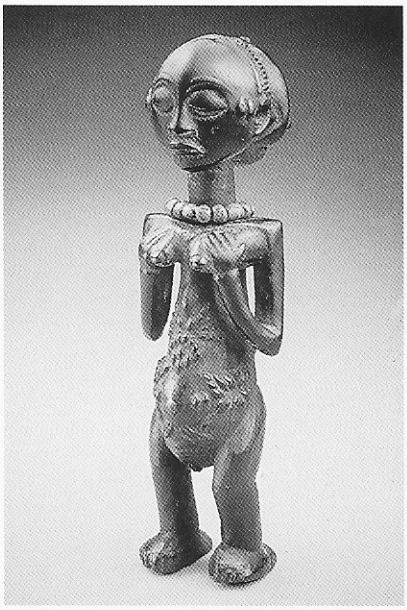


Fig. 109: Standing female figure of the type once used in Mbudye initiation rites to represent the myriad titles and officeholders in the Luba royal hierarchy. H.: 28.5 cm. Private collection. *Photo: courtesy of Louis de Strycker.*

Cat. 47 (opposite): Hermaphrodite figure in Buli style. Luba-ized Kunda, Zaire. Concepts of gender and power are inextricably linked in Luba thought. Male and female elements merge in the exercise of leadership, where men enact the visible, overt side of power and women its covert, secret side. Gender ambiguity pervades Luba royal prerogative, where kings are incarnated after death by women, are depicted on insignia as female figures, and wear women's coiffures on their enthronement day. Women's ability effectively to contain spirit and to guard royal secrets accounts for their crucial roles in dynastic history as political and religious mediators, and in visual representation as embodiments of spirit and cosmological order. *Wood. H. 11.8 in. Private collection.*

Cat. 48: Hermaphrodite figure. Luba, Zaire. Though most Luba sculpture is female, some figures are ambiguously gendered. This one is both male and female, with a penis, a beard, breasts, and gestures usually associated in Luba art with women, such as hands to breasts. In Luba sculpture, hermaphrodism expresses the dualistic nature of power. As one Luba person put it, "Luba men are chiefs in the daytime, but women are chiefs at night." This sculpture may have been used in Mbudye initiations to represent the members of royal hierarchy, with their titles, roles, and emblems. *Wood. H. 8.5 in. National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, Gift of Mrs. Sarita S. Ward, Inv. no. 323.300.*

structure. As an elder explained, for every title there is both a spirit and a person—the spirit embodied by the sculpture, and the actual person who holds that title. Though the sculptures depict both male and female spirits, the gender of the figures is almost always female, for reasons explored in the previous chapter (cat. nos. 47 and 48).

The figures often have holes in the the base or between the legs to hold an iron rod, so that they can be planted upright in the ground next to the path of initiation. Having passed through a corridor of these figures, novices come to the lukuka—a cord or cloth that bars the path to the court where the highest-ranking titleholders are assembled in the secret meeting house. "Lukuka," as we saw in chapter 3, is also the name of the beaded emblem worn across the chests of female Mbudye members and spirit mediums. Kamanji crosses the barrier to inform another titleholder, the Twite, that the novices have arrived. The Twite instructs Kamanji to proceed with the explanation of all that lies along the path. When finished, he should bring the initiates back to the court.

Kamanji begins the exegesis of each of the signs, including the proverbs associated with them. In addition to figurative sculptures, the signs include natural objects like twigs, stones, leaves, and roots that are bent, strung, or positioned in significant ways. Some of the proverbs elicited by the signs reinforce the order of hierarchy and respect for superior rank. Others refer to the acquisition of the esoteric knowledge that distinguishes Mbudye members from uninitiated people. Finally, a number of proverbs concern Mbudye solidarity (Nooter 1991:103–5). The purpose of this second stage, then, is to establish the principles of social order, political hierarchy, and stratification that characterize Luba royalty. The placement of mnemonic signs along a conceptual or actual path helps the initiate to memorize the order and hierarchy that underlie the Luba royal court. As Frances Yates has suggested, such a method "ensures that the points are remembered in the right order, since the order is fixed by the sequence of places in the building" or, in this case, along the path (1966:3).

Breaking through the Sky

Only those possessing the financial means and aspiring to Mbudye leadership may "climb the platform" to the next stage of initiation, called "*lukala*," from the word for a "threshold, earthen mound, ladder, [or] degree" (Van Avermaet and Mbuya 1954:220). "To climb the ladder" is to become an Mbudye dignitary. Lukala ritual is performed in a specially designated house with a raised step in the entrance. To cross this threshold signifies the novice's progress toward higher learning and leadership status (see Roberts forthcoming 1997).

The content of lukala's teachings is more sophisticated than previous stages of initiation: while the principles of secrecy, solidarity, and respect for rank continue to be reinforced, here the spiritual precepts of Luba political organization are also learned. In particular, initiates become familiarized with the guardian spirits of Luba sacred kingship. This precious information is encoded in wall murals of abstract and figurative signs depicted on all the interior walls of the house where lukala is performed (fig. 110). Burton wrote that "rough maps are chalked on the wall. The whole country from the Lualaba to the Sankuru is marked, with the chief lakes and rivers, the noted abodes of spirits, and the capitals of the various chiefs. The initiate is stood before the wall, and questioned as to where each river flows and the names of the tutelary spirits of each locality" (Burton 1930:236).

At this stage, Mbudye didactic symbols shift from the three-dimensional figurative sculpture and natural objects of the second initiation phase to two-dimensional pictorial representations that are more reductive in form, and far more enigmatic in their rendering. A turn-of-the-century Mbudye mural photographed by Burton consists entirely of geometric motifs, with an emphasis on cross shapes, spirals, radiating circles, and step forms (fig. 111). Nowadays there seems to be a shift to more obvious forms of representation: murals from two houses photographed by the author in the late 1980s include stick-figure depictions of humans and the recognizable forms of animals, musical instruments, geographical features (lakes, mountains, and caves), and elements of the cosmos (sun, moon, rainbow, and stars) (figs. 112–114).

The paintings in both cases are in white on black, except when the figures are meant to depict

Cat. 49: Headdress. Luba, Zaire. An nkaka headdress is worn by all ritual specialists who undergo possession, and the purpose of this colorful rectangular headband, with its juxtaposed isosceles triangles and lozenges, is to take hold of the spirit as it mounts the diviner's head and to contain, control, and protect it. Luba sources say that an nkaka headdress encrypts esoteric signs within its beadwork, and all royal officeholders initiated into the highest levels of the Mbudye Association should be able to recite the proverbs linked with each of the coded patterns of color, which usually relate to principles of royalty also represented on the lukasa memory board. Some Mbudye members state that the beaded lozenges refer to "lakes" or spirit capitals, and that the ranks of Mbudye members can be determined by the number of lozenges on the headdresses. *Beads, leather, cloth. H. 21 in. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.*

the novices in the first initiation stage, when they are kafita, or blackened, to signify ritual death and oblivion (see fig. 106). The paintings cover every supporting wall, including those of the outer entrance, where Kibelo and Mashinda, guardians of the meeting house, are portrayed (figs. 112–114). Narrative exegesis of the murals during the initiation by senior officials traces the migration of Mbudye adepts from their place of origin, and documents their passage through initiation stages. Just as the sculpted figures in the kusubula stage were associated with proverbs, so the wall murals disclose their significance through spoken maxims. Some of these refer to the regulations and precepts of Mbudye membership, others to episodes in the Luba Epic. Still others familiarize the novice with the spirit pantheon, and, lastly, some reflect the thirst for power associated with the acquisition of knowledge.

During or just after the interpretation of the wall maps, each initiate adopts the name and supernatural qualities of a particular spirit. Twinned tutelary spirits (*vidye*) of Mbudye inhabit sacred lakes, and include Lubaba and Shimbi, Banze and Mpange, Kiala and Yumba, and Dolo and Kisula. Once the person's spirit pair is chosen, the initiate will be possessed by those spirits at every Mbudye assembly, including funerals, initiations, dance performances, the investitures of chiefs, and the monthly celebration of the rising of a new moon. It is only after achieving such ecstasy that an initiate acquires an Mbudye title. Then he or she dons a sacred beaded headdress called "nkaka" (cat. nos. 49 and 50). Chalk is applied halfway down the face and on the chest and arms, to reinforce the visual metaphor of enlightenment (*kutoka*) and to indicate that this Mbudye member has achieved a title and a spirit identity (fig. 115).

One can speculate about the relationship between the geometric form of older mural paintings and their use as both a memory device and a function of spirit possession. Recent neurological research on trance suggests that in the early stage of dissociation, one sees "entoptics"—luminous pinpoints, zigzags, and grids that increase in frequency and intensity until the mind loses direct control (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1989). The mind seeks to construe what it is experiencing, and finally memory takes over and gives elaborated narrative form to this sensory experience (Roberts 1995a:76–77). The geometric patterns on the painted murals and clay thrones of Mbudye are strikingly similar to such entoptic visions, and may provide an explanation for the origins of the signs that have become Luba mnemonic forms.[9]

Memory Thrones

In addition to the progression from three-dimensional to graphic signs and the use of spatial relationships to suggest hierarchies, certain kinds of "furniture" become important at this third stage of Mbudye initiation, particularly associated with seating privileges. While initiates who have completed the first two stages have the right to sit on one kind of mat, those of lukala may sit on a different sort, made from a specific marsh plant. Kikungulu, the association leader, is entitled to sit on four mats at a time, while high-ranking titleholders may sit on two or more mats (Henroteaux 1945:99). Mats and their named woven patterns are key symbols in the language of Luba power, and recur in Luba art and ritual as indicators of rank and regulation (cat. no. 51).

Certain Mbudye meeting houses include one or more large earthen thrones called "kikalanyundo," constructed in the center of the main court where the most senior officers and wives take their places. These thrones conform to the definition of "lukala" itself: a mound of earth or a platform. Burton (1930:232) saw such a throne in the vicinity of Mwanza, reserved for Kikungulu. Burton's photograph shows schematic pictographs representing the Mbudye hierarchy divided into triangular and lozenge-shaped regions around the perimeter of the kikalanyundo (fig. 116). A colonial administrator saw a different throne consisting of two superimposed cones surrounded by four smaller thrones. "The most elevated throne is that of Musenge . . . to the left, there are the thrones of Bulunga and Kalemba, and to the right, those of Kaloba and Basokele. In seance, . . . these male titleholders sit on the same throne back to back with female counterparts of the same title and rank: men face towards the front, and women face to the back of the room" (Joset 1934:3).

These Mbudye thrones closely resemble the shape and design of a kitê magical mound pho-

Cat. 50 (opposite): Beaded mask. Tabwa, Zaire. This mask, collected on the northern end of Lake Mweru, may have been associated with the Mbudye Association, for its iconography is an elaboration of the mnemonic beaded headdresses worn by Mbudye members and related Bilumbu royal diviners during states of spirit possession. The headdresses are called "nkaka" because their beaded triangles are related metaphorically to the similarly shaped scales of the nkaka, or pangolin, and to a scarification pattern of the same name. The spiral at the center of this mask's forehead represents the eye of Kibawa, an earth spirit whom eastern Luba associate with the culture hero and bearer of sacred royalty, Mbidi Kiluwe. *Glass beads, leather, rooster feathers, monkey pelts. H. 35 in. The University of Iowa Museum of Art, The Stanley Collection, Inv. no. CMS 656.*

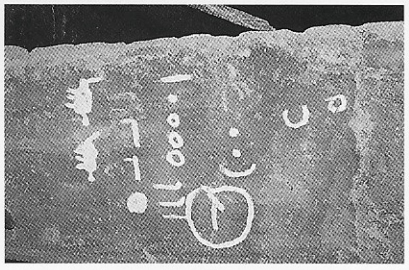


Fig. 110: Mural in an abandoned Mbudye initiation house, showing only geometric lines, dots, and other patterns similar to the entoptic signs seen during spirit possession states. *Photo: Mary Nooter Roberts, 1988.*

tographed by Burton in the 1930s (see Introduction: figs. 17a,b). Kitê mounds contain potent medicines, and are painted with ideographs; when it rains and these are absorbed by the earth of the mound, and when they are repainted the next year, the potency of the magic inside the kitê is enhanced. It is important to recall here that the word "kitê" is derived from the same radical as "lutê," "memory" (see Introduction). In the case of the pictographic mounds, the knowledge encoded on the surface is absorbed again and again until the throne itself becomes a potent shrine of memory, embodied and contained. The ideographs painted around the surface of the kitê mound are strikingly similar to the motifs chalked on the kikalanyundo thrones and Mbudye wall murals, and probably function similarly, not just to encode memory, but to activate memory to purposeful efficacy.[10]

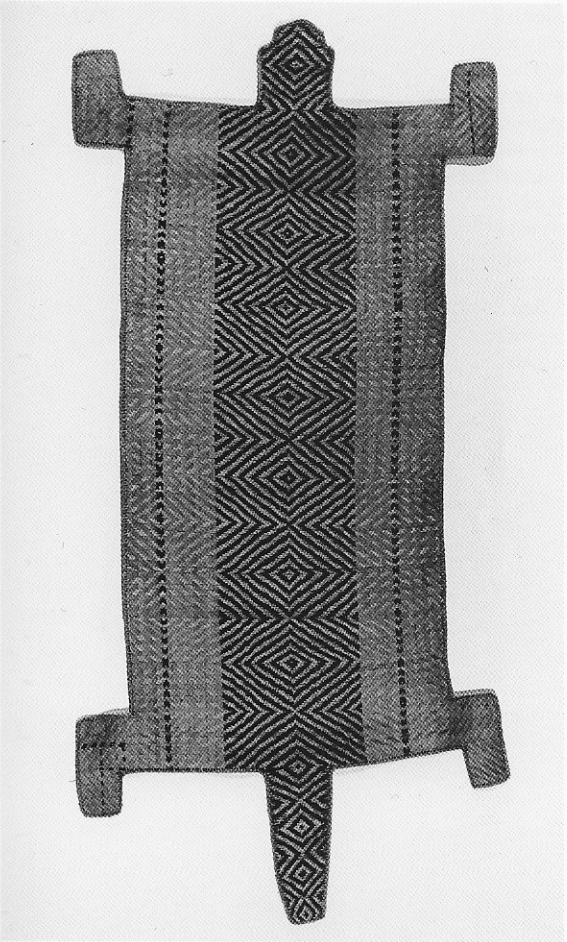
As William Dewey and Terry Childs have explained in chapter 2, the word "kikalanyundo" refers to an anvil. Memory itself is forged on this throne. "To climb the platform" or "to break the veil" in the lukala stage, then, has multiple levels of meaning. On one, "lukala" refers to the newly titled member's privileged access to the elevated status of the earthen thrones, indicating superiority over lower-ranking members who sit on leaves, mats, or animal skins. On a more profound level, lukala ritual provides a metaphor for the initiate's ascent into spirit possession and its state of grace, following rigorous memorization of the royal principles taught through the ideograms of the murals and thrones.

As a reference to this spirit possession, the initiate is presented with a last painted symbol, a red circle. The accompanying proverb refers to someone who has "broken through the sky" to see beyond the place where thunder and lightning strike. In other words, when an Mbudye initiate attains the level of lukala, she or he is no longer constrained by humanity's profane limitations, and can aspire to knowing all that can be known. Only in this transfigured state can the initiate begin to absorb and memorize the codified secrets of the lukasa memory board.

The Lukasa Memory Board

"Lukasa" refers to "rank, social position, or title of negotiability" (Van Avermaet and Mbuya 1954:235). Lukasa is the highest stage of royal initiation proceedings, and is attained only by a few members of the three principal branches of Luba royal culture: kings, diviners, and Mbudye members. Lukasa is the apex of esotericism, and involves full revelation of the precepts and principles believed to have been handed down by Mbidi Kiluwe.[11] Relationships between visual and verbal

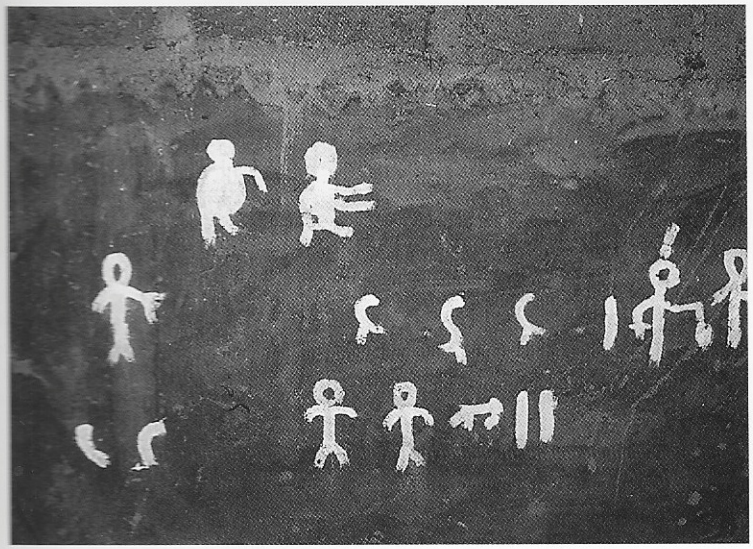
Fig. 111: Mural inside an Mbudye initiation lodge in the late nineteenth century. The profusion of geometric motifs and the lack of figurative elements suggests that murals from the period may have been entirely nonfigurative. *Photo: taken on the Charles Lemaire expedition to the Lofoi in 1898. Courtesy of the Section of Ethnography, Royal Museum of Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium, E.PH. 5843, cl.933.*

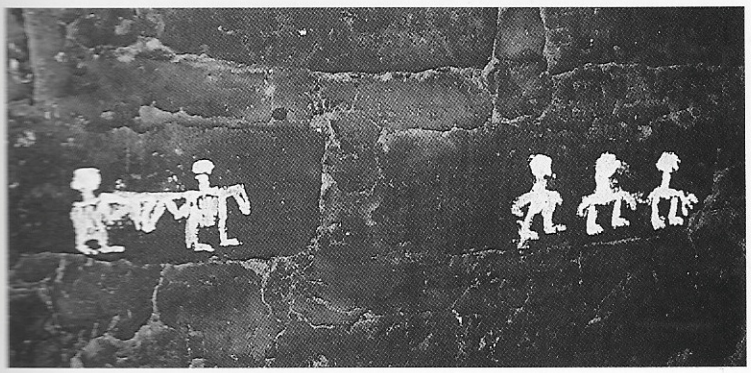


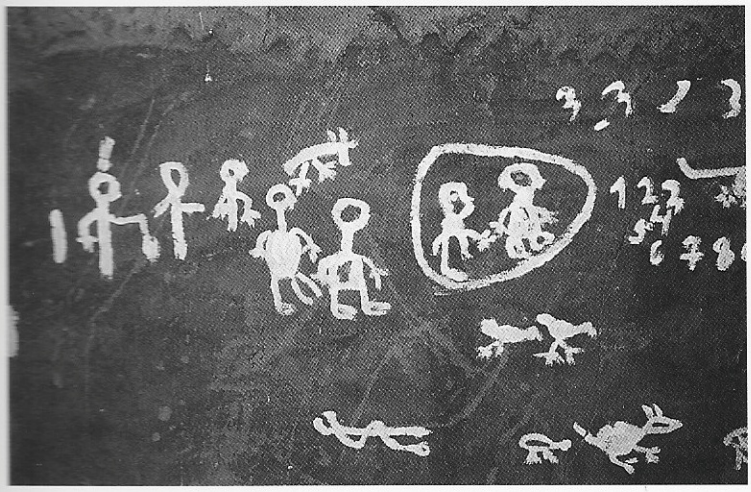
Cat. 51 (left): Mat. Luba, Zaire. Despite the central role of woven mats in everyday Luba life, and also in ritual and ceremonial contexts of the royal court, these nonfigurative Luba objects have rarely been exhibited or published. The simple, elegant designs seen on mats share the same semantic world with lukasa memory boards, and are also mnemonic. Indeed the design of this mat is nearly identical to that on the back of many lukasa memory boards and to the coded geometric regions of the nkaka beaded headdresses worn by royal officials when possessed by a spirit. This mat is exceptional for its zoomorphic form, and may have been used in the context of Mbudye initiation rites. *Woven fiber. L. 89.6 in. Burton Collection, Social Anthropology Department, University of the Witwatersrand Art Galleries, Johannesburg, Inv. no. WME/086.01.*

Cat. 52: Memory board or lukasa. Luba, Zaire. This unusual lukasa shows a full figure seated on the surface of a board inscribed with ideograms, in addition to a finely sculpted head emerging from the top. It is the most sculptural lukasa known. Why the figure is positioned in this way is not clear. The ideograms are also more explicit than those usually seen on lukasas; they resemble the sticklike figures, both human and animal, depicted on the walls of contemporary initiation houses, as well as the figures painted around the sides of the *kikalanyundo* earthen throne used during initiation rites and the kitê shrine used to contain medicinal substances. *Wood. H. 11 in. Linden-Museum, Stuttgart, Inv. no. F 52561 L.*

Cat 53: Memory board or lukasa. Luba, Zaire. Memory boards with both a head and a tail were described by some Mbudye members as representations of the crocodile, and signify the interdependence of Kikungulu (leader of the association, represented by the head) and Kaloba (owner of the land, represented by the tail). The dynamic between land chiefs and tenants (royal officials) was a crucial aspect of Luba political diplomacy. This board, which shows signs of extensive use, also possesses an iron pin to signify the kingdom for which the board was made, and a cowrie shell to designate another important spirit capital to which the kingdom was connected. *Wood, beads, metal. H. 12 in. Private collection, Brussels.*







Figs. 112–114 (left): Series of murals covering every interior wall of a contemporary initiation house. The images combine human stick figures, figures of animals, elements of the cosmos (sun, moon, stars), and even numbers. Initiates stand before these walls and are made to memorize the multilayered messages inscribed in the pictorial scenes. The images refer to the origins of Luba sacred kingship, to the dwelling places of spirits throughout the landscape, and to the migrations taken by different groups to arrive at their present locales. *Photo: Mary Nooter Roberts, 1988.*

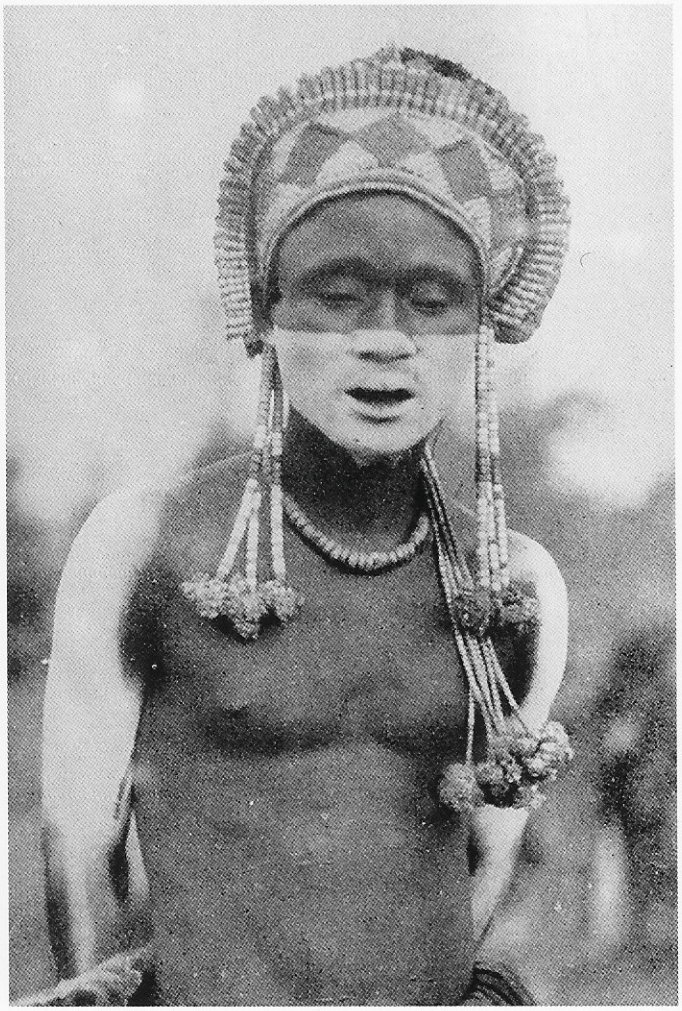
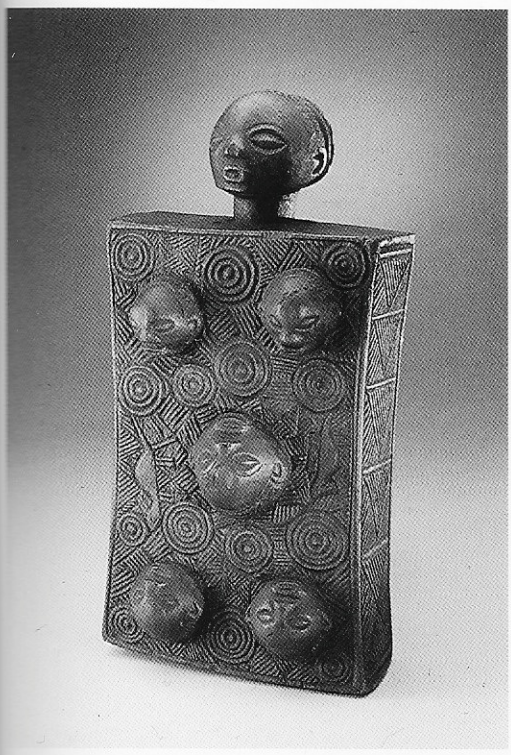


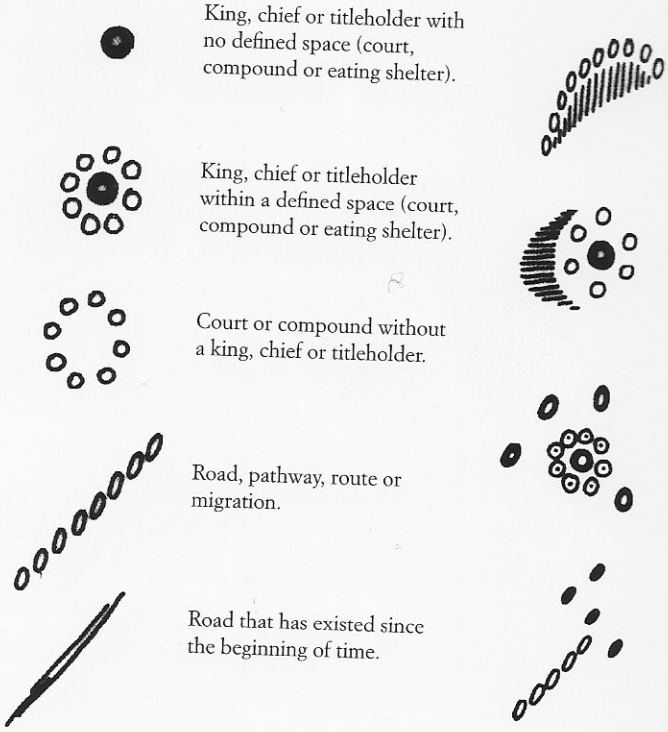
Fig. 115 (right): Mbudye initiate with chalk smeared on lower half of face and arms. The progressive chalking of the head and torso indicates how many levels an Mbudye initiate has passed through, the highest grade being marked by total covering of the face and chest. *Photo: W. F. P. Burton, 1927. Courtesy of the Section of Ethnography, Royal Museum of Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium.*



Cat. 54 (left): Memory board or lukasa. Luba, Zaire. The dominant features on any lukasa memory board are the kitenta spirit capitals commemorating the reigns of particular kings. Sometimes shown by metal pins, cowrie shells, or dominant beads, here they are rendered as sculpted human heads, creating focal points of memory on the landscape of the board. A kitenta can refer specifically to the burial place of a king, but more generally it designates the elevated seat or resting place of a spirit. Certain heights, like the summits of mountains, are thought to be the spirits' heads. *Wood. H. 16 in. National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, Gift of Mrs. Sarita S. Ward, Inv. no. 323.440.*

Cat. 55 (left): Lukasa or memory board. Luba, Zaire. It is rare to see a lukasa with three figures protruding from the top, as here. Mbudye members explain that the figures allude to the head of the Mbudye Association, Kikungulu, flanked by his two senior officers, Tusulo and Kipanga. This lukasa is also larger than most, and has a smaller number of beads. The two circles carved into the wood may represent kitenta spirit capitals, and the incised human figures may refer to specific culture heroes of the Luba Epic. *Wood, beads, tacks. H. 16 in. The University of Iowa Museum of Art, The Stanley Collection, Inv. no. x1986.570.*

Fig. 120 (right): Lukasa memory boards consist of a vocabulary of mnemonic signs. This key, provided by Jeanette Kawende Fina Nkindi and Guy De Plaen, shows the principal bead patterns found on most lukasas and their significance. The meaning varies with each reading, but the overall structure characterizes every board. *Diagram by Chris Di Maggio.*



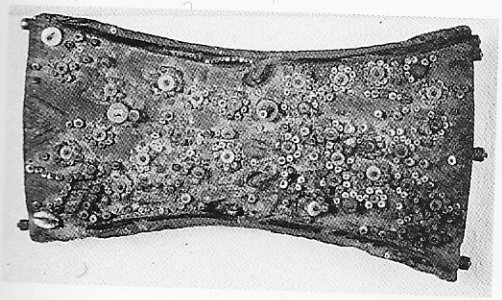


Fig. 118 : The male gender of this lukasa is evident from the center of the board's bottom half, where the largest protruding object represents a phallus and was made to fit into the depression of the female board in fig. 119. *Collection: John Studstill. Photo: courtesy of Thomas. Q. Reefe.*

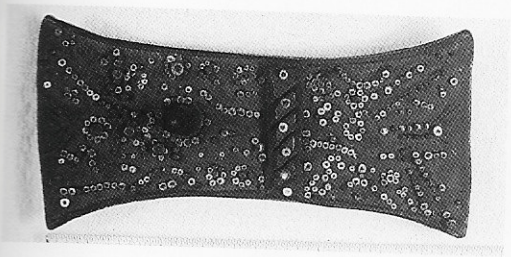
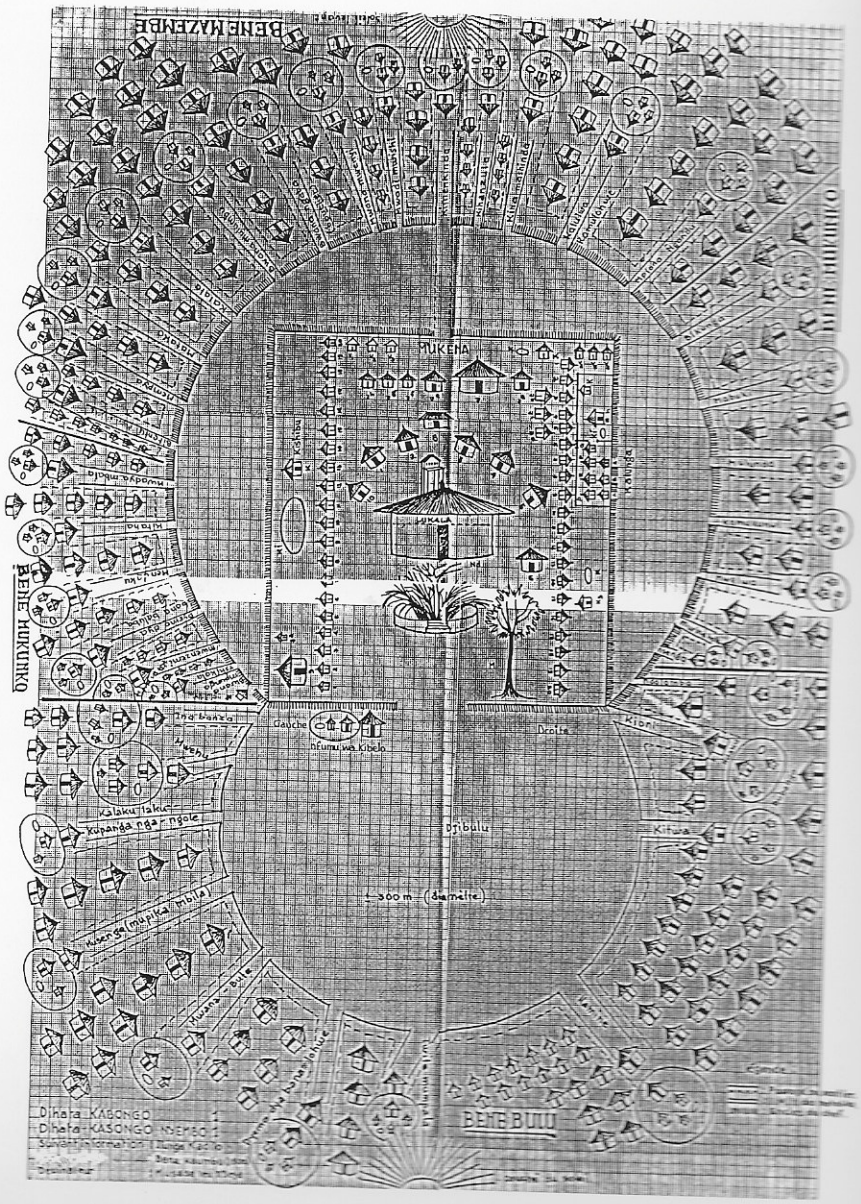


Fig. 119 : Lukasa memory boards have male and female qualities. Not only is each board divided longitudinally into female (left) and male (right) sides, but every board is one or the other gender. This board is said to be female, as evidenced by the small (vaginal) depression in the center of the bottom half of the board, and was intended to be mated with the male board in fig. 118. *Collection: Thomas Q. Reefe. Photo: courtesy of Thomas Q. Reefe.*

Fig. 121 (right): A lukasa is constructed on the model of a king's court or capital, with all the officials and their functions, the rites, and the sacred places of royalty indicated in a residential blueprint. The model shown in this diagram was the type of court constructed during the reign of Kasongo Kalombo (died 1886), son of Ilunga Kabale, and later during the reigns of Kasongo Niembo (died 1931) and Kabongo Kumwimba Tshimbu (died 1948). *Diagram provided by Jeanette Kawende Fina Nkindi and Guy De Plaen.*



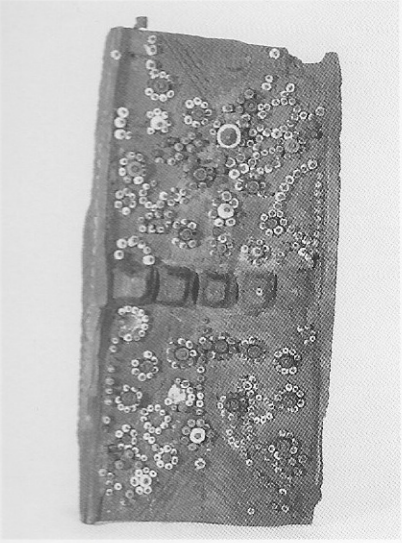


Fig. 122: Inside (or front) of a lukasa showing a division across the center created from five raised bumps. These refer to the "veil" or threshold that Mbudye initiates must cross to attain the level of *lukala*, a word that literally refers to a raised earthen threshold in a house. The five protrusions also represent the thrones found in the royal residence, signifying the highest principles of power and leadership. *Photo: courtesy of Marc L. Félix.*

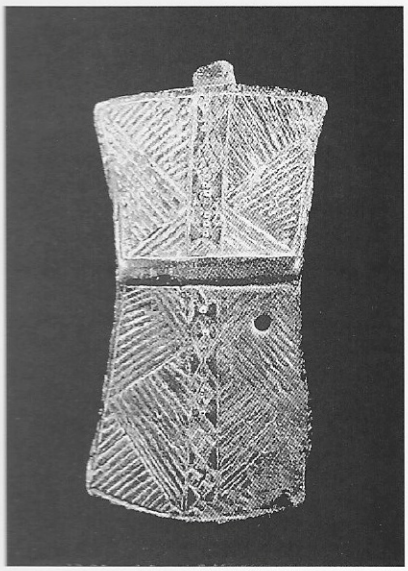


Fig. 123: Outside (or back) of lukasa showing a hole that represents an Mbudye "lake," and into which initiates must place their hands to receive the blessing of the founding ancestor of the association, Lolo Inangombe. *Photo: anonymous.*

Cat. 56 (opposite): Game board. Luba, Zaire. The design of the Luba game board is related to the architectural principles of the lukasa: the game board is structured according to the layout and planning of villages and houses, in much the same way that the lukasa's rectangular configuration mirrors that of the palace compound and its architectural features. *Wood. H. 26.4 in. Private collection.*

arts may be evident at every stage of Mbudye initiation in songs, proverbs, and praise phrases voiced to explain natural objects, figural sculpture, wall paintings, and ideographic earthen thrones; but this visual-verbal nexus reaches its climax in lukasa.

"Lukasa" is the name for both the topmost grade of Mbudye and the mnemonic device used to convey the teachings of this stage. This instrument is a hand-sized (or somewhat longer) rectangular wooden board embellished with clusters of beads and shells, and/or with figures incised or carved in relief (cat. no. 52). These enigmatic signs convey the principles upon which Luba politics are founded, and demonstrate the visual vocabulary from which all other Luba royal emblems are constructed.

Lukasas are collectively possessed by each regional chapter of Mbudye. Chiefs and kings are initiated with the lukasa of the chapter in their lands, and some may commission personal lukasas for their treasuries. Lukasas are sculpted by members of the association. Most chapters have at least one member who is a craftsman and sculptor sufficiently knowledged and skilled to effect this important work. Often the details of the lukasa's design and form are dictated by a spirit medium, and according to some accounts, specifically a Mwadi, the female incarnation of a king. The Mwadi perpetuates royal memory through her body and being. Through divine inspiration, she receives instructions for the lukasa's form, and conveys this precious information to the artist carving a lukasa.

The lukasa board often conforms to the shape of the human hand; indeed, Reefe calls it a "long hand" or "claw" (1977:49), following a literal definition of the word "lukasa" (Van Avermaet and Mbuya 1954:234–35). All lukasas are considered to have an "inside" and "outside," corresponding to what a Western observer would interpret as the board's front and back, respectively. The outside of the lukasa is covered with geometric designs, as are the narrow sides. The articulation of the usually concave "inside" of the lukasa varies by region. There are two principal styles: examples from around Kabongo are covered with beads of diverse colors and sizes, sometimes display a prominent metal hairpin and cowrie shells, and may or may not include a sculpted head emerging from the top (cat. no. 53). Lukasas from Luba fishing groups (called Bene Laba) living along the banks of the Lualaba River are usually made without beads and shells, are incised with pictorial and geometric ideograms, and may incorporate two or more heads or full figures, and sometimes a tail (cat. no. 54).

While there are other interpretations, most people around Kabongo interviewed for this research agreed that the head on the "top" of the board represents Lolo Inang'ombe, the founding ancestress of Mbudye, who is or is associated with a tortoise.[12] Along the Lualaba, the same single head is identified as Kikungulu, the most senior of Mbudye titleholders. These two interpretations may be levels of the same identity, of course. Two heads on the top of a board (fig. 117) represent paired Bene Nyembo (Mbudye women) and Bene Kapongo (Mbudye men), and three heads may be the senior officials Kikungulu, Tusulo, and Kipanga (cat. no 55).

Tusulo Yusi of Mulongo village explained that lukasas with both a head and a tail represent a crocodile, and also depict the interdependence of the Kikungulu and the Kaloba, the latter a title for someone identified with the land. Should Kikungulu wish to undertake an action that involves land use and Kaloba refuse to let him, Kikungulu must obey, for Kaloba is the earth itself, whereas Kikungulu is only an occupant of the land. The dynamic between keepers of the land and their "tenant" royal officials is a crucial aspect of Luba political diplomacy, as it reflects both conquest and peaceful establishment of dependency vis-à-vis the Luba court.[13]

In the zone of Kabongo, Mbudye members claim that lukasa boards may be male or female, although the gender does not dictate that of the initiate who uses it. The principles a lukasa embodies, however, will vary according to whether it is male or female. Reefe adds that at least in some cases, paired boards may fit together to form a unified sculpture, for the female board has a vaginal hole into which a phallic symbol on the male lukasa can be inserted (1977:49) (figs. 118 and 119). Furthermore, each board is divided into male and female halves, both vertically and laterally, with one half devoted to the Bene Kapongo (male members), the other to the Bene Nyembo (female members). On a vertical axis, the board is also divided according to lineage descent: title-

Fig. 124: High-ranking Mbudye member wearing an nkaka beaded headdress and an arm band beaded in the form of a turtle. *Photo: C. Lamote, 1945–50, Kabondo Dianda, Bukama Zone. Courtesy of the Section of Ethnography, Royal Museum of Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium.*

holders are set to the left or the right according to whether they descend from the maternal or paternal sides of the royal family (reflecting similar organization of the chief's bead necklace discussed in chapter 3).

Reading a Lukasa

Paradoxically, lukasa memory devices provide a framework for history, while permitting multiple interpretations of the past. Once again, history and memory are in contest. The lukasa memory board illustrates how Luba organize memory according to a spatial grid. Space is used to remember multilayered bodies of knowledge pertaining to royalty, genealogy, medicine, and other complex and arcane subjects. Mbudye members associate memories with particular loci or lieux de mémoire on a lukasa. Through a rectangular or hourglass shape that represents the Luba landscape, the royal court, human anatomy, and the emblematic royal tortoise all at once, the memory board embodies multiple levels of information simultaneously. A lukasa is a visual rendering of Luba spatiotemporal thought, then, and a kind of memory theater of the Luba mind.

The gridlike form of a lukasa provides a mapping system to which bits of information can be attached in a certain order to facilitate remembrance. Beads, coded by size and color, and incised or raised ideograms provide further means of associating events, places, and names in the past. Reading a lukasa presupposes an extensive body of knowledge that includes royal history,

genealogies, and initiation procedures. All participants in Luba royal culture share a conception of social space and its political significance, although the center of that arena shifts according to where one happens to be standing at the time, and whose history is being created or recounted. Specific readings are contingent upon the region, chieftaincy, village, title, and clan of the reader and on his or her knowledge and oratory skill. The sign relationships of the beads, shells, and metal pins are a loose semantic system that allows for and, indeed, promotes and provokes modification and flexibility in deciphering.[14]

Colors are coded to elicit memory, as are the configurations of beads (fig. 120). Lines of beads often signify voyages, for example. A large bead surrounded by smaller ones is a king encircled by his dignitaries. A single medium-sized bead is the memory of a sacred lake. Red beads refer to Nkongolo, the cruelly hot-blooded ("red") despot of the Luba Epic. Small, white beads often stand for titleholders who wear chalk to honor the king and, more specifically, his ancestral spirits. Large, blue (glossed as "black") beads are Mbidi Kiluwe and Kalala Ilunga, the great culture heroes who introduced the arcane secrets of sacred kingship. Yet even these relationships between signifier and signified are in no way fixed or finite.

The lukasa is designed to be both flexible and authoritative in its interpretation. As the highest emblem of royal induction, it represents the apex of memory and erudition; yet memory is always situational, as are history and identity. As such, the lukasa's coded signs provide a semantic structure that provokes interpretation. A certain "selection of events" is thus remembered (Vansina 1978), reflecting transformations in memory and the needs for history that inexorably occur over time. Some of the major categories of specialized information to be found in the lukasa will be introduced before presenting a reading of such a memory board.

An Architecture of Memory

Mbudye members agree that the "inside" or front of the lukasa is an architectonic model of both the royal court and, simultaneously, the Mbudye meeting house. The lukasa's rectangular configuration mirrors the boundaries of the palace compound and its architectural features, from the high enclosure (*lupango*) around the king's residence to the houses of his principal wives, the shrine house where his sacred relics and regalia are guarded, and the sacred house where he dines (*mbala*)(fig. 121). The king's compound is surrounded by those of his dignitaries, and the community is further divided longitudinally, according to the "sides" of the royal line from which its residents are descended (cat. no 56).

The rendering of the court is also a representation of the *kinyengele* or Mbudye lodge, for the two constructions mirror one another. Almost all lukasas are horizontally divided on both front and back, bisected by a row of mounds in relief, or by a simple line. Many are also penetrated by a hole. These features refer to episodes in Mbudye initiation that are conducted in the kinyengele: the line of mounds is the veil that separates the first initiation stages from the last. Raised circles refer to the earthen mounds of lukala, which the initiate must mount in order to "break through the veil" (fig. 122). The hole may represent the lake from which the Mbudye members emerge in their origin story, or the tunnel into which initiates must crawl in the course of ritual "to meet Lolo Inang'ombe," the association's founding ancestress (fig. 123).

Descriptions of kinyengele meeting houses from the 1930s and 1940s echo the design of a lukasa (D'Orjo de Marchovelette 1940:279, Joset 1934:3). The lodge, a huge rectangular building measuring some twenty-five by ninety feet, was located on a path leading away from the village. It was divided in the middle, with a meeting area for the association in the back and a vestibule in the front. This latter room was fitted with bamboo and wooden partitions to form low and narrow passages, so that visitors were obliged to duck their heads and advance slowly. As we shall see in later chapters, this symbolic configuration suggests a "labyrinth of memory" (Teski and Climo 1995), and a thicket of overdetermined choice through which one must carefully wend one's way to arrive at and achieve the enlightened promise of the inner sanctums.

Separating the vestibule from the back meeting room was a large arcade, pierced with as many portals as there were passageways leading to it. Entrance to the meeting room was strictly forbid-

den to all but the highest-ranking members. Arriving there, one must have been impressed by the huge earthen kikalanyundo "memory throne" in the center of the room, composed of two truncated cones superimposed to create a seat at least a meter high. Surrounding it were four smaller but similar thrones, and behind these were large seats very low to the ground, arranged in a semicircle. Finally, a sculpted figure stood sentinel at the far end of the room. The building, enclosures, chambers, exits and entrances, vestibules, seats, and sculptures of an Mbudye meeting house, echoing those of a Luba king's court, supported a memory theater, as did the gangways, gates, and figures created by Don Camillo (Yates 1966:136–37).

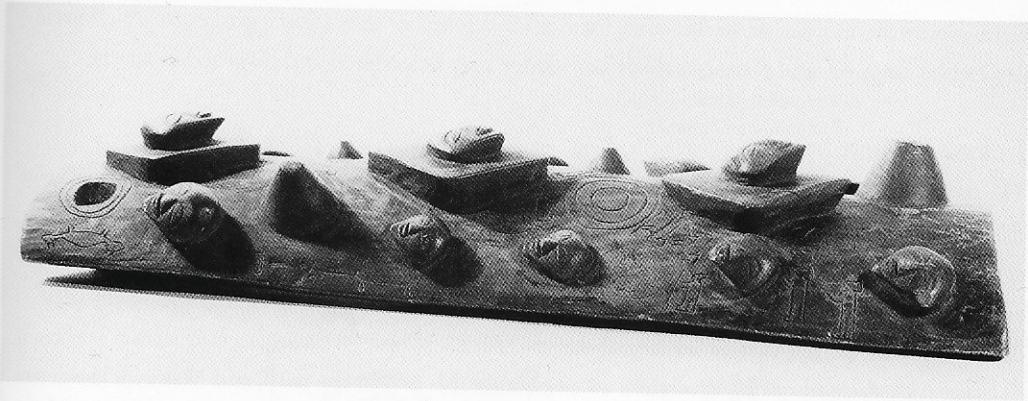
Also indicated on the lukasa are trees and other flora planted in the royal compound. Some are probably herbal or magical medicines, but others serve as "dominant symbols" (Turner 1970) of Luba kingship. A tree called "*mumbu*" is used to construct the tall, dense lupango enclosure around the palace compound. Mumbu is said to live longer than other trees, and building the king's enclosure with it signifies and promotes both the longevity of a particular king and the eternal kingship perpetuated from generation to generation. A photograph from the late 1980s of the royal court of the Kalundwe king, Mutombo Mukulu, shows the king seated underneath a mumbu tree as a symbol of his power, according to the photographer, Veronique Goblet-Vanormelingen. For the smaller enclosure of the king's dining quarters (mbala), a *kaswa musenge* tree is used, for it is thought never to rot or dry out, and even when it is cut, it continues to grow. Near the entrance of the mbala, a single *mumo* tree is planted, for it mystically protects people from lightning. As these examples suggest, a lukasa maps the meaningful gardens of the court, reflecting yet another "geometry of ideas," in this case the ideal order and purpose of nature (Francis and Hester 1991).[15]

Capitals of Memory

The dominant feature on any lukasa is the kitenta, the most potent of the concepts relating to Luba royal authority. "Kitenta" is a synonym for "lukasa," but is an even more symbolically charged term, for while it refers to dignity, social status, and place in the court hierarchy, it also evokes the idea of a chair or elevated stool. The word "kitenta" is a synonym for "*kipona*," a seat of power (Van Avermaet and Mbuya 1954:696), and directly refers to the earthen mound or elevation upon which Kikungulu sits on the day of his investiture. A man in Kabongo explained that kitentas are the places of different kings, diviners, and Mbudye members associated with their highest accomplishments. As he said, "He who has been on 'four seats' is the one who has achieved the highest instruction." Burton elaborates on the definition, and notes that a kitenta represents the burial place of a king, or the *chef-lieu* of a guardian spirit, with specific reference to the former royal villages of deceased kings (1961:261). "*Kitenta kya vidye*" designates the elevated seat or resting place of a spirit. Certain heights, such as the summits of sacred mountains, are thought to be invested with spirit in this manner (Van Avermaet and Mbuya 1954:696).[16]

Each Mbudye chapter is linked to the kitenta or "spirit capital" of a particular king of the past. Those in the chieftaincies of Kabongo and Kasongo Niembo, for example, are associated with the kitenta of Ilunga Sungu (ca. 1780–1810); while those of Ankoro, Kiluba, Manono, and Kiambi honor that of Kumwimba Ngombe (ca. 1810–40); and Mbudye societies in the regions of Kinkondja, Mwanza, Malemba Nkulu, Bunda, and Mulongo worship the kitenta of Ilunga Kabale (ca. 1840–70). This loyalty suggests that the named kings may have been great patrons of each of those chapters.[17] Acknowledgment of a particular king may also refer to expansion of the Luba state, or to networks of kinship or trade established from the Heartland to the places where Mbudye chapters were then founded.

A single lukasa may represent several kitentas at once. The spirit capitals of lesser chiefs, Mbudye associations, and diviners are depicted on the board by prominent beads or cowrie shells. Members say that when there are a few isolated beads on the back or "outside" of the board, they correspond to beaded spirit capitals on the front. The most significant kitentas are represented on the lukasa by anvil-shaped iron kinyundo pins (see chapter 2), which indicate the burial places of the king or culture hero in whose honor the boards are made. The pin's pointed shaft is inserted



Cat. 58: Lukasa-related divination board. Luba, Zaire. The documentation accompanying this object states that it was used for divination, yet it bears a closer resemblance to lukasa memory boards than to any known Luba divination instruments. Its planklike form, with heads and motifs carved in relief, might be a variation on the beads and ideograms found on most lukasas. On the other hand, it is also considerably larger than most lukasas, raising interesting questions about the development of the lukasa as an idea and a form. *Wood. H. 28 in. National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, Gift of Mrs. Sarita S. Ward, Inv. no. 323.441.*

into a hole in the lukasa containing magical ingredients, which further charge this lieu de mémoire with instrumental efficacy (cat. no. 57). Narrating the story encoded on the board, in other words-scan and does effect change.

Memory Landscapes

On the back of virtually every lukasa is the stylized depiction of a tortoise carapace, in reference to the founding ancestress of the Mbudye association, Lolo Inang'ombe. Incised triangles and other geometric regions represent the "scarifications" of the tortoise, or the scutes of its carapace (cat. no. 46a). An elder explained that the scutes are considered "beautiful to look at" because of the way they are disposed across the back of the shell. Another man added that the scutes give a lukasa "realism," and render the form of their mother, the tortoise: "On the back is marked all that relates to Mother Tortoise, to indicate that she accomplished so many deeds in so many days."

The same "scarifications" on the back of a lukasa are also called "lakes" (*dijiba*), and each is the kitenta spirit capital of an important king—because kings were buried under the water, people say. Luba note that the patterns on a tortoise shell testify to the animal's longevity (fig. 124); similarly, the striations within a lukasa's "lakes" are the deeds and accomplishments of each king. Lolo Inang'ombe, then, is the ultimate metaphor for kingship itself. She is the land that nurtured and sustained a kingship, upon whose plains and fields are etched the duration and deeds of each king, and from whose lakes emerged the various incarnations of power.[18]

The same incised patterns on the back and sides of a lukasa have yet a third interpretation, for they are bizila, the strict regulations and prohibitions concerning kingship and royalty. Bizila are numerous and vary by region, but they are critical to the balance of power between the court and Mbudye. Mbudye guards these prohibitions, ensures their respect, and punishes any who disobey them. Neglect of bizila brings disaster in droughts, epidemics, and the burgeoning of evil sorcery. Bizila refer to routine etiquette and protocol in both the royal court and the outside world, and to proper salutations, seating privileges and arrangements, entrance and exit procedures, and eating and drinking regulations. Some bizila are intended for Mbudye members themselves, others for nonmembers.

Many bizila are reinforced through proverbs and aphorisms. For example, the phrase "A person holding flies with clenched fists" (*wakupile luzi bipa*) signifies that the initiate who arrives at the lukasa level of Mbudye must hold onto the rules of Mbudye as tightly as if they were flies, never letting them escape. On one level, this proverb is a warning against divulging the secrets of the association, but on another, the image of holding flies must refer to seizing onto elusive memories and the ambiguities of doctrine.

A useful cross-cultural analogy can be drawn to the *dharani* of Buddhism, which are lists of words or statements summarizing complex doctrines. Dharani are formulas with magical powers, and form a mnemonic syllabary. More important than the content of the dharani, though, is the concept of "the holding, the complete holding, the not forgetting, the remembering and perfect holding, of the 84,000 Dharma teachings" (Gyatso 1992:175). When the striations on a lukasa are considered bizila (as opposed to something less abstract, like "lakes"), they may be likened to the "letter sameness" of the dharani. The striations and letters themselves have nothing to do with their ultimate meaning, and neither possess nor provoke emotion. Both are empty signifiers, repre-

Fig. 127: A *kasanji* musical instrument bears a formal and a functional relationship to a lukasa. Used as a mnemonic for history, it is played by titleholders and court historians at special ceremonies connected with the royal court. *Photo: Mary Nooter Roberts, 1989.*

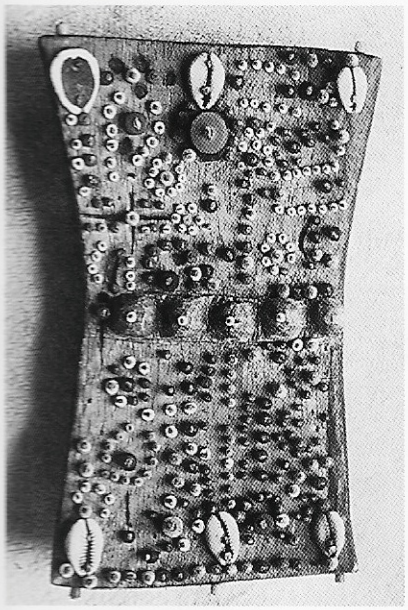


Fig. 125: Lukasa for which a "reading" was provided by Luba court officials in the sacred village of Makwidi, former royal capital of Kalala Ilunga. The entire interpretation is dedicated to Kalala Ilunga, who is represented by a large blue bead in the center of the board's upper half. *Photo: courtesy of Thomas Q. Reefe.*

Fig. 126 (opposite): Diagram of lukasa shown in fig. 125 illustrating the correspondence between the beads and shells and the accompanying oral narrative. *Diagram by Chris DiMaggio.*

senting only themselves, or, in this case, memory. Yet together they form a grid onto which memory can be mapped, and through which knowledge may be ordered and disposed in space.

Lukasa as Text

The narrated exegesis of a particular lukasa shows how initiates combine the elements previously discussed into a spatio-structural form that conveys both broad concepts of Luba royalty and the specific interests of local chieftaincies. The following "reading" of a lukasa was provided for the author in 1989 by Mbudye members and court historians at Makwidi, deemed the ancient residence of Kalala Ilunga, first Luba king and son of Mbidi Kiluwe. The lukasa in question is shown in figure 125; the author had brought a color photograph of it to the field, and Makwidi residents claimed that it was originally from their chieftainship. Reefe explains, however, that this lukasa was created for the missionary David Womersley, or for his father Harold, in the 1930s or 1940s.[19] Most likely, it was modeled on an earlier one that had been the property of this chiefdom. The notion of models upon models, based upon the memory of previous boards, is itself part of the memory process, as objects are relinquished, sold, or traded, and new ones take their place. The fact that this lukasa is a copy of an earlier one, or that the exegesis was formulated from a photograph rather than from the board directly, only underscores the perpetual refabulation of memory.

The narrative demonstrates how this board honors Kalala Ilunga, patron of Makwidi. The entire discourse is shaped around his leadership, his capital, and his relationships to other figures from the distant past. Houses, paths, roads, trees, lakes, clearings, shrines, and spirit capitals make up the lieux de mémoire of this lukasa, radiating from the central point of Kalala Ilunga's sacred Makwidi. The account explicitly reveals the way a mnemonic can manipulate the center/periphery dynamic that determines historical power relationships and realities (fig. 126).

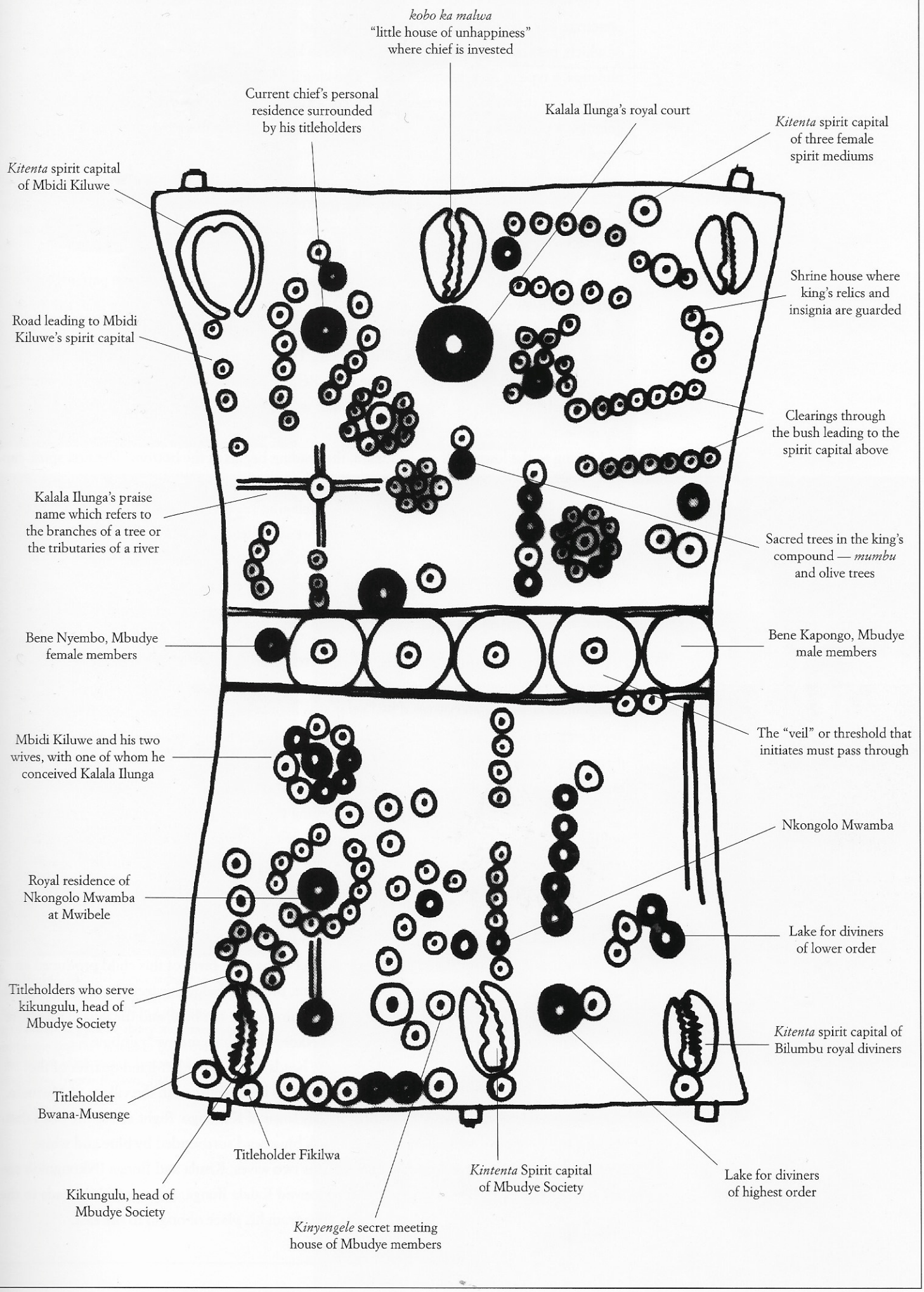
The reading of this lukasa begins with the top-central cowrie shell, which represents the koba ka malwa, or "little house of unhappiness," where a chief is invested. This means we are at the royal capital. Below and to the left, the chief's personal residence is marked by a medium-sized blue bead encircled by twelve small white beads. These represent twelve of the chief's titleholders. The large light-blue bead just below the cowrie in the center represents the royal court of the first king, Kalala Ilunga Mwine Munza. Near this bead one can identify his children: Kazadi'a Milele (the first son), Kabamba, Ngombe, Malamba, and Makwidi.

The cowrie in the upper-left-hand corner is Mbidi Kiluwe, while that in the upper right is the kitenta spirit capital of three female spirit mediums, Mwadi Ilunga, Mwadi Bulunga, and Mwadi Mfyama. These mediums—indicated by three medium-sized white beads clustered to the left of the upper-right-hand cowrie—guard the sacred house that contains the dikumbo basket, which holds the relics of all the deceased chiefs of the dynasty's different branches. Also guarded there are the regalia of sacred kingship: the staff (kibango), the stool (kipona), the ax (kafùndanshi), the spear (mulumbu), and the lukasa. This shrine house is represented by a small yellowish bead.

On the left-hand side, the white bead piercing the center of an incised cross symbolizes Kalala Ilunga, whose praise name here is Kilunda-dya-lwala-mitabi—a reference not to the branches of a tree or to the tributaries of a river, but rather to the different ramifications of Kalala Ilunga's dynasty.

Lines of white beads throughout signify the road one takes to arrive at the various seats of power. On the upper-left-hand side, the path leads to Mbidi Kiluwe's spirit capital, whereas two semihorizontal lines on the upper-right side of the lukasa are the clearings through the bush that lead to the spirit capital of the three female spirit mediums.

Two beads, one white and one blue, directly below the large blue bead are the sacred trees in the king's compound; one is the mumbu and other an olive tree. An olive tree played a role in the founding myth.


kobo ka malwa
"little house of unhappiness"
where chief is invested
Current chief's personal residence surrounded by his titleholders
Kalala Ilunga's royal court
Kitenta spirit capital of three female spirit mediums
Kitenta spirit capital of Mbidi Kiluwe
Shrine house where king's relics and insignia are guarded
Road leading to Mbidi Kiluwe's spirit capital
Clearings through the bush leading to the spirit capital above
Kalala Ilunga's praise name which refers to the branches of a tree or the tributaries of a river
Sacred trees in the king's compound — *mumbu* and olive trees
Bene Nyembo, Mbudye female members
Bene Kapongo, Mbudye male members
The "veil" or threshold that initiates must pass through
Mbidi Kiluwe and his two wives, with one of whom he conceived Kalala Ilunga
Nkongolo Mwamba
Royal residence of Nkongolo Mwamba at Mwibele
Lake for diviners of lower order
Titleholders who serve kikungulu, head of Mbudye Society
Kitenta spirit capital of Bilumbu royal diviners
Titleholder Bwana-Musenge
Titleholder Fikilwa
Kintenta Spirit capital of Mbudye Society
Lake for diviners of highest order
Kikungulu, head of Mbudye Society
Kinyengele secret meeting house of Mbudye members

The row of raised bumps across the board's center constitutes the veil that initiates must penetrate in order to achieve the highest grade of Mbudye. Each represents a tree or plant, each of which, in turn, has its own proverb related to kingship. The first bump on the left is mulenga, a type of fern, which means, "The king is flexible like the fern, which bends in all directions in the wind." There is no problem a king refuses to solve. The second bump is kilongolongo, a plant with tuberous roots, for "the rubbery tuber is not hard, but it can break the metal hoe"; the king is not "hard," but if you create problems for him, you will be broken. The third bump refers to a proverb stating that the king likes and is good to those who like him, but hates those who foster hatred for him. The fourth bump is musangala, a shrub that brings prosperity and benevolence; its corresponding proverb states that the king rejoices with all those who rejoice for him, and, likewise, rejects those who reject him.

The bead to the far left of this symbolic veil represents the place where the partridge dusts itself; the last mound at the extreme right, with no bead, stands for the place where the guinea fowl dusts itself. The partridge symbolizes the Bene Nyembo, or Mbudye women, and the guinea fowl the Bene Kapong, or Mbudye men. The reference is to male and female Mbudye members who wallow in the glory of the king. Related to this image is a proverb: "They ate the guinea fowl and forgot the partridge." In other words, men are taken into consideration, but to the neglect of women.

Moving to the lower half of the lukasa, the reading begins at the bottom. The first spirit capital is indicated by a cowrie at the bottom left, and represents the Kikungulu, head of the Mbudye Association. Located just below this shell are the officers Bwana-Musenge and Fikilwa. The circle of small white beads above the shell are the titleholders who serve the spirit capital of the Kikungulu, the largest of which represents the Kamanji, leader of the route.

The spirit capital of the Mbudye society is shown by the cowrie shell in the bottom center. This spiritual focal point is not coincidental with the secret meeting house, which is shown also, by a medium-sized white bead to the left of the central cowrie.

The last cowrie on the lower-right-hand side represents the spirit capital of the royal diviners. Some diviners and spirit mediums undergo a rite in which they plunge into a lake; these are the diviners of the highest order. They are shown on the board by a medium-sized blue bead between the central and the lower-right-hand cowries, which depicts the lake into which they throw themselves. Those who do not plunge have their own lake, which is indicated by a small blue bead placed directly above the lower-right-hand cowrie.

Situated around the central cowrie representing the Mbudye spirit capital are beads representing two types of members: those who have "broken the veil" and studied the lukasa, and who, therefore, have been granted passage to the royal court; and those lower-ranking members who have not yet graduated to the level of lukasa, and so are not permitted into the royal palace.

The small red bead above the lower central cowrie depicts Nkongolo Mwamba Seya, who was born in a village originally called Myamba ya Nkeba. The birth of this child produced an astonishing phenomenon: wherever the child went, the earth below his feet turned red. The villagers decided he must be the incarnation of the spirit of the rainbow, and the village therefore changed its name and the name of the child to Nkongolo, which means "rainbow."

The brown bead surrounded by small yellow beads in the lower left-hand quarter of the board depicts the royal residence of Nkongolo, which he established in the village of Mwibele, near the shores of Lake Boya and the present-day town of Kabongo. Right above the bead that stands for Nkongolo's court at Mwibele is a dark blue bead surrounded by blue and white beads; this circle alludes to Mbidi Kiluwe and his two wives, Kisula and Ilunga (Nkongolo's sisters at Mwibele), with one of whom Mbidi conceived Kalala Ilunga. Scattered blue beads to the right signify Mbidi Kiluwe's voyage to Lake Boya from his place of origin to the east.

Fig. 128: Titleholders Twite and Kioni of Kabongo playing a slit drum in preparation for Chief Kabongo's arrival. Through the depth and variety of their tones, imitating the tones of spoken language, slit drums can convey messages over long distances. *Photo: Mary Nooter Roberts, 1989.*

Fig. 129: Titleholder Kioni playing a balaphone, which serves as a mnemonic device through its transmission of historical songs and praises. *Photo: Mary Nooter Roberts, 1989.*

Had this lukasa hailed from a different village or chieftaincy, the reading would not have been the same. Rather than emphasizing Kalala Ilunga, the board would have honored another king or chief, and all of the dependent relationships of titleholders, Mbudye members, diviners, and spirit mediums would have been repositioned accordingly. Likewise, references to landmarks, roads, and voyages would have accommodated the histories, migrations, and deeds of that particular ruler. In this way, a lukasa is similar to the wax tablets of classical memory arts, "which remain when what has been written on them has been effaced and are ready to be written on again" (Yates 1966:7), and to Koranic healing boards, which are regularly inscribed and then washed of their sacred verses and numerological formulae, to serve the needs of particular clients and individual circumstances.

A lukasa stimulates several kinds of information, and the content of its reading depends upon who the reader is and what points she or he wishes to stress. When a number of Luba from around Kabongo, each an official of a different title or profession, provided readings of another lukasa (cat. no. 46), again from photographs, they rendered astonishingly different accounts of the same board. A chief used the lukasa to recount the origins of royalty (a version of the genesis myth), and his chieftaincy's descent from the dynastic line. A prominent titleholder stressed the configuration of the court, with its hierarchy of titles and codes of etiquette. Two Mbudye members articulated principles of the association, such as origins and the stages of initiation. And a famous diviner pointed out the prominent place of his profession within the structure of royalty, and the qualities of healing and power suggested by the placement of trees and herbs in the garden of the royal court.

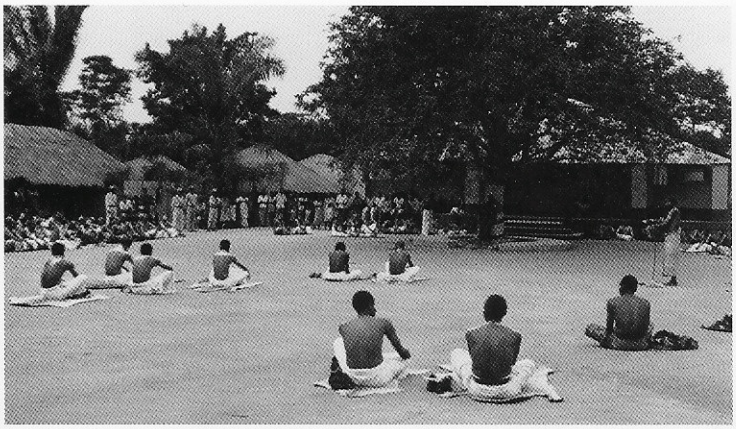
The diversity of the interpretations stimulated by a single board does not indicate error, deceit, or misperception. Rather, it proves that lukasa readings are rhetorical moments for the persuasive argument and defense of a particular point of view (cat. no. 58). As Johannes Fabian writes of a different context, "Stressing visualization in terms of arbitrarily chosen 'reminders' makes memory an 'art' and removes the foundations of rhetoric from the philosophical problematic of an accurate account of reality. The main concern is with rhetorical effectiveness and success in convincing an audience, not with abstract demonstration of 'truth'" (1983:112).

Songs of Nostalgia

The lukasa not only stimulates recitation, it elicits music. There is a formal and functional relationship between a lukasa and a Luba musical instrument called "*kasanji*" (fig. 127). Although peoples throughout many parts of Africa possess plucked ideophones or "thumb pianos" of this type, Luba liken the kasanji to a lukasa memory board. Sometimes these instruments are embellished with heads and geometric design elements much like those of the lukasas, and their structure must bear symbolic as well as practical significance, as when the bridge supporting the keys is called a "*mwamba*" (Gansemans 1980:24), recalling the rainbow king Nkongolo Mwamba. Indeed, according to the titleholder Kioni of Kabongo, the kasanji, as a particular type of plucked ideophone among the several that Luba possess, was handed down from Nkongolo Mwamba for use at the courts of subsequent chiefs.

There may be (or may have once been) even more depth to playing a kasanji than this, for it is quite possible that the keys are named, and that the notes they produce can form tone poems, as Paul Berliner (1981:2–7, 56–58) has found among Shona people of Zimbabwe. In such a case, a kasanji's crisp notes might stand as musical lieux de mémoire, complementing the visual configurations of a lukasa. In other words, the named notes may serve as musical "pegs," evoking memory as do the pins and ideograms of a lukasa.

The Kioni of Kabongo stressed the explicit formal and functional connection between a kasanji and a lukasa. "Kasanji is made in the guise of a lukasa, for by playing it, one is reminded of the history of royalty. Songs provide a memorandum for recalling the past. A whole history can be recounted." The kasanji is played by trained specialists who are usually dignitaries at the royal court. Its songs exalt the king, just as a lukasa may be read or sung by a narrator to honor the founders of Luba kingship. Though kasanji songs are intended for public consumption, as



Figs. 130 (above left) and 131 (above right): Titleholders at the western Luba court of Mukombo Mukulu occupying their positions vis-à-vis the king within the royal compound, just as they are represented by the beads on a lukasa. The king is seated on a high-backed chair in the dark shade of the tree, and is therefore difficult to see. *Photos: Veronique Gobelet-Vanormelingen. Courtesy the National Museum of African Art, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.*

opposed to the highly esoteric information encoded on a lukasa, it may be that only the most erudite Mbudye recognize and understand the kasanji's tone poems.

Clan songs, panegyrics, and eulogies that laud the deeds and accomplishments of kings, chiefs, and lineage heads, often through reference to place names, are generically called "*numbi.*" There are three principal kinds of numbi: regional, village, and family songs (Van Avermaet and Mbuya 1954:380)(figs. 128 and 129). Among Luba to the west of the Heartland, such songs are called "*kasala*," and are sung to encourage bravery, as on the battlefield; express joy, as when dignitaries are received by the king; and for mourning ceremonies honoring the dead. The singing of kasala provokes "nostalgia," and it is therefore not surprising that these songs' origins are always situated in the most ancient times, even at the beginnings of humanity itself (Mufuta 1968:48–49). The person performing these songs, the Mwena Kasala, "possesses" and is identified with them. While the songs are composed of well-known verses, there is also a good deal of improvising, and as Clémentine Faïk-Nzuji notes, such a person "feels . . . the sentiments of an entire social group" and is "the mirror of society" (1974:48–50).

Place names are critical elements of both numbi and kasala. The songs list different families and the lands belonging to them, sites of spirit habitation, watercourses, and other significant features of the landscape that enrich and particularize a region. It is as Yi-Fu Tuan states, "All people undertake to change amorphous space into articulated geography," for "when space feels thoroughly familiar to us, it has become place" (1990:73, 83).

Dignitaries visiting the royal court sing praises as they occupy their specified seating positions in the open yard, sitting on skins and mats that signify their rank in the royal hierarchy (figs. 130 and 131). Their songs are a performative accompaniment to the spatial ordering of their persons. The music serves to place them in the contexts of their clan histories and regional origins, and to place the whole landscape under the jurisdiction of the king. Music complements a lukasa, then, as an aural register to a visual model for the ceremonies of state during which the king holds office under a sacred tree, while his dignitaries and clients pay their respects to him and pronounce their places in the social universe.

The Dance of Memory

The culmination of Luba ceremonies of state are dances by Mbudye members. Like all other Mbudye expressive culture, dance, too, is mnemonic. Mbudye members are renowned for their spectacular dance displays on public occasions; indeed, many a colonial officer honored by a Mbudye performance assumed that the only purpose of Mbudye was entertainment. Mbudye members perform upon the king's or a chief's request for occasions of state, such as investitures and the welcoming of visitors. They also organize their own performances to celebrate the rising of a new moon, to initiate new members, or to honor funerals. Today, they may perform at Catholic services or political rallys (figs. 132–137).

Mbudye dancers perform in a state of spirit possession, which reveals itself in dazzling acrobatics enacted to the rhythms of a drum orchestra. Spectators are expected to lavish the dancers with gifts and applause. In addition to feathered and beaded headdresses (nkaka) and beaded

chest emblems, dancers don voluminous skirts layered with the skins and furs of symbolically significant animals, such as certain monkeys, squirrels, and spotted wildcats. When dancers hurl themselves forward in the quintessential Mbudye movement called "to throw the *mpongo*" (a small squirrel whose fur is so light that it flies up at the slightest movement), their costumes lift up in the back (figs. 138–141), revealing large magical bundles strapped to their waists. Although the constitution of these bundles is known only to those who make and use them, the sheer size of the packets sends a powerful message about their potency (figs. 142–144).

Mbudye dancers say that much of their choreography is inspired by episodes from the Luba genesis myth. In particular, the various "skits" that make up an Mbudye performance are generated from the memory of Kalala Ilunga's kutomboka dance, a dance he is said to have executed when Nkongolo Mwamba tried to kill him. As Adrienne Kaeppler writes, the motifs of choreography are not simply committed to memory. "Although a particular performance is transient, the structure is not, and even if a specific choreography is forgotten, knowledge of the structure of the system and the inventory of motifs will be remembered" (1991:109–20). Indeed, Luba say that the uniformity they perceive in Mbudye dances across space and time is due to the fact that the dances were originally taught by the first Mbudye members, who carried Kalala Ilunga's sacred memory basket, and, through initiation, they have been transmitted from generation to generation to all subsequent titleholders in the association.

Like other expressive forms, dance is certainly more adaptable than this Luba perception might suggest. Performances will vary according to their circumstances, just as the singing of numbi and kasala or the narrations of lukasa memory boards do. What Luba understand as the invariable nature of dance we might see as "the canons of taste, arising out of cultural conditioning"; yet these canons "have a recurrent . . . way of deliberately manipulating, composing, performing, and sometimes feeling the various elements" of dance (Hanna 1980:38). The "perpetually actual" uchronia of memory, then, brings to dance and other Luba mnemonic devices its "permanent evolution, [which is] open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, [and] susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived" (Nora 1989:7–8). If Luba consider dance a feature of their history, memory struggles to unfetter each step and bound of an Mbudye performer's extraordinary acrobatics. Indeed, if memory (lutê) itself implies random movement (kutà) and a "wandering" (kunànga) of the mind, then narrative, music, song, and dance lend sense, poetry, and shape to the journey.

Figs. 142–144 (opposite and above): Dancer wearing a large medicinal bundle strapped to the back of his waist, visible only when he "throws his fur." The medicine empowers the dancer, who is thought to perform his dazzling acrobatic feats as a result of being in a state of spirit possession. *Photos: Mary Nooter Roberts, 1987.*

Conclusion

The mnemonics presented in this chapter, ranging from pictorial to sculptural, contemplative to kinetic, constitute the theater of Luba royal experience. Luba mnemonics are microcosmic and macrocosmic at the same time. These expressive forms are "keys to a code designed to present to the understanding a whole kind of doctrine in a single flash." Indeed "artworks . . . become vehicles for reaching some kind of fundamental truth" (Napier 1992:134), or at least for giving the *impression* of having reached such truth. "Truth," of course, is always in the eye of the beholder, in the words of the lukasa narrator, in the poetry of the numbi singer, in the fingers of the kasanzi plucker, and in the feet of the dancer. His or her ability to persuade others through a rendition of the past will determine how history is made. For as Richard Schechner rightly states, "to 'make history' is not to do something but to do something with what has been done. History is not what happened but what is encoded and transmitted. Performance is not merely a selection from data arranged and interpreted; it is behavior itself and carries in itself kernels of originality, making it the subject for further interpretation, the source of further study" (1985:51). The initiations, recitations, and spectacles of Mbudye lie somewhere between history and performance on the border between convention and creation, where past, present, and future conflate "to re-present a past for the future performance-to-be" (ibid.).