4. Dressing for the Next Life

Raffia Textile Production and Use among the Kuba of Zaire

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Kuba raffia textiles are recognized as one of the great decorative art traditions of Subsaharan Africa. Their combinations of two-dimensional designs and decorative techniques are renowned. Yet discussion of Kuba textiles has centered on their rich surface design, whereas questions concerning the uses and meanings of these textiles for the Kuba have largely been ignored. Beyond aesthetic appreciation, most accounts have stressed the importance of these textiles as emblems of rank or as indicators of social prestige. But the social significance of Kuba textiles is more complex than these analyses conclude. My research among the Kuba suggests that the meaning of these textiles for the Kuba emerges from the dynamics of their production and their use.

Kuba textiles exist not solely as aesthetic objects, but also as products of a sociocultural framework that places a high value on the making of textiles. Kuba textile production is in sharp contrast to other areas of the world, such as the Pacific, where the use of special textiles is relegated to certain social strata and where exchange and recirculation of textiles dominates the social history of cloth. Instead, textile production among the Kuba requires the interdependent contributions of men and women. This complementarity of the sexes is revealed in textile production and ownership and is vis-
ually expressed in the most important context of use: the display of textiles at funerals and their subsequent use as burial goods. Traditional Kuba textiles persist to the present because textile production and use patterns are linked to Kuba ideas regarding social responsibility, ethnic identity, and religious belief.1

THE KUBA: ETHNIC DIVERSITY

"Kuba" is a name given by neighboring peoples, and later adopted by Europeans and Americans, to a consolidation of seventeen or more ethnic groups that organized into a kingdom as early as the seventeenth century.1 Collectively, the Kuba are sedentary agriculturists who live in the Western Kasai region of south-central Zaire, approximately seven hundred miles east of the Atlantic Ocean. Fishing competes with agriculture as the primary occupation along the major tributaries of the region’s rivers.

The historical Kuba kingdom corresponds roughly to the present-day administrative zone of Mwika. Mwika zone is bounded on the north by the Sankuru River and on the west and southwest by the Kasai and the Lulua Rivers respectively. To the north live various Mongo groups, among them the Ndengese and Nkucu directly north of the Sankuru River. To the east are the Songo Meno and the Binji, to the south live other Kete and Lulua groups, and west of the Kasai River live the Lelo.

The Kuba have been subdivided into ethnic groupings according to shared cultural, linguistic, and historical traits (see Vansina 1964:6-7; 1976:5). The "central Kuba" grouping includes the Bushoong, the Ngeende, the Pyaang and the Bulaang; they constitute more than 75 percent of the total population of the Kuba kingdom. All share a single tradition of migration into their present area and speak a variant of the Busoong language. The Busoong, who dominate the kingdom politically, are the most numerous.1

The "peripheral Kuba" grouping includes the Kel, the Shirowa, and the Ngongo. Although today they share social and cultural institutions with the central Kuba, their languages and traditions of migration are different. The Northern Kete constitute still another Kuba grouping. Some of these Northern Kete, along with the Cwa (pygmys), are the autochthonous inhabitants of the region.1

According to the latest evidence, all of the Kuba groups except for some Northern Kete and Cwa migrated to this region from the north (Vansina 1978). Following protracted struggles between these migrating groups, the Bushoong eventually achieved dominance in the area. Beginning in the seventeenth century, the kingdom was ruled from a capital village called Naheng by a paramount ruler or ngim, who is traditionally chosen from one Busoong clan.1 While most Kuba-related ethnic groups are organized into independent chiefdoms, to this day they recognize the traditional authority invested in the Kuba paramount ruler.

From the seventeenth century through the nineteenth century the capital village of Naheng developed into a bureaucratic center as the kingdom was divided into provinces and chiefdoms, each represented at the capital by a titleholder appointed by the ngim (Vansina 1964:167). Paralleling elaborate developments at the capital, titleholding evolved in most Kuba villages. A system of titleholding, which continues to the present day, is common throughout the region.

Kuba ethnic groups are organized into chiefdoms consisting of several villages, except for the Northern Kete, for whom each village is an independent chiefdom. Except for the Cwa, Coofa, and Mbeengi, the Kuba are matrilineal (Vansina 1978:6). Most Kuba villages are composed of "clan sections" made up of matrilineages. A clan section is defined as "... the localized expression of the lineage. It comprised only a handful of lineage members but many spouses and children, married or not, and its composition fluctuated over time" (Vansina 1978:6). Marriage follows a virilocally pattern of residence. Vansina writes elsewhere that nearly 50 percent of married people did not live in the village where they should live according to the "rules" (Vansina 1964:58-59; 1978:6). An average village contains two to four hundred people in three to six clan sections, although there are some larger villages with upwards of a thousand people.

Although village structure varies somewhat according to ethnic group, the village council (maliung) is the local governing body. Vansina describes this council as an outgrowth of clan section organization (Vansina 1978:11). Originally comprised of clan section chiefs, today it is composed of titled individuals. Most titleholders are male. There are two female titleholders who act as representatives for the women of the village, but do not attend council meetings on a regular basis.
Most titles are hereditary, although the means by which one achieves a title varies from ethnic group to ethnic group. In most Bushoong villages, the most important title is that of Kufo or village headman. This title is usually given to the eldest man in the village. Among the Shoowa the village headman is called itaka (Shoowa); as in all chieftoms in the kingdom, he is selected from an aristocratic clan (mhanga, Bushoong). Many other important village titleholders are also selected from these aristocratic clans. Historically it appears that certain titles have been conferred for life (Vansina 1978:135), while others may be vacated by dismissal or elevation to a higher title. The title will then be filled from the ranks below.

A titleholder’s rank is given visible form by the right to wear certain insignia of office. For many titleholders, this includes the right to wear specific bird feathers, as certain feathers correspond directly to certain titled positions. For example, the highest ranked titles in the chieftoms are the “eagle feather chiefs” (kum apong). These chiefs are found among all of the Kuba groupings. Other emblems of regalia, such as special hat forms, belts, or staffs, may correspond directly to specific titles, or may simply indicate that those wearing or carrying such items are prominent titleholders. For example, the hat neqak is worn by the titleholder Mthum at his funeral and appears to be worn only by this titleholder, while the belt mwandaan may be worn by a number of titleholders who hold high office.

Research indicates that in the past, certain styles of men’s and women’s raffia skirts may have been worn only by high-ranking titleholders. Precise information on this is lacking, and although informants from aristocratic clans insist that this was true in the past, it is not current practice. Moreover, I found that patterns and styles of skirts identified by informants as only made or owned by important families were evenly distributed among people of all classes. The only time that textiles per se designate rank or title is when “eagle feather chiefs” (kum apong) add decorative embellishments, such as cowrie shells or brass repoussé, to their costumes.

RAFFIA TEXTILES: COMPLEMENTARITY IN PRODUCTION

Throughout the Kuba area (and indeed throughout Zaire), the cultivation of the raffia palm and the weaving of raffia cloth is exclusively men’s activity. Even the onlookers who congregate under the shed while weaving is in process are always boys and men.

Raffia cloth is woven on a single-heddle loom that utilizes untwisted single lengths of raffia fiber for both warp and weft. The size of one woven unit of raffia cloth (mhala) varies according to the length of the original raffia leaflet, but a typical piece of woven raffia cloth as it is cut from the loom averages 26 by 28 inches.

Once the warp has been set on the loom, weaving a piece of cloth requires about two and one-half to three hours for an experienced weaver to complete. A man usually completes a piece of cloth in an afternoon (Figure 9).

There are three kinds of woven raffia cloth. A plain woven cloth (mhala) is used for most kinds of skirts and is by far the most common variety produced in the region. Mhala buisinga, woven with an extra design stick, introduces a pattern in the cloth and is used for certain men’s and women’s skirts. The third kind of cloth is a very coarse weave, employed for utilitarian purposes such as storage sacks or clothing worn exclusively for hunting and other work in the forest.

Woven raffia cloth is part of a labor-intensive continuum that transforms raffia fiber into a medium for the creation of ceremonial skirts. When a piece of raffia cloth is cut from the loom, it is selvageless, stiff, and coarsely textured. If the cloth is used for women’s skirts, it undergoes pounding in a mortar and other softening processes before it is hemmed, dyed, and decorated. These treatments change the stiff raffia cloth into a flexible and supple cloth approaching the quality of fine linen. During research in 1981 and 1982, only women were observed treating cloth this way, although in some villages there were matriarchs similar in style to the one Todd (found employed by men. (1910:p.XXI))

The fabrication of skirts is for the most part gender-specific; only men assemble and decorate men’s skirts, and only women assemble and decorate women’s skirts. Several kinds of decorative techniques are utilized by both men and women. These include various embroidery stitches, appliqué and reverse appliqué, patchwork, dyeing, stitch-dyeing, and tie-dyeing. Only women, however, practice certain embroidery techniques such as openwork and cutpile.

It is the length, configuration of skirt panels, and style of the borders that differentiates men’s from women’s skirts. A woman’s
long ceremonial skirt may be six to nine yards in length and is essentially unbordered. It is worn wrapped around the body three to four times and secured with a belt. Much shorter "overskirts," approximately one and a half yards in length, are worn over the longer skirts. Men's raffia skirts are usually half again to twice as long as women's skirts. Generally, men's skirts are assembled with square central sections, framed by narrower, composite borders completed with a raffia bobble fringe. Men's skirts are worn so that the length is fully gathered around the waist and hips and the top border folds downwards over a belt.

Many younger women presently wear imported cloth for daily wear, in much the same manner as do women in larger African cities. Younger men prefer to wear western-style trousers and shirts. Wearing plain, undecorated raffia cloth skirts is now a habit of the older generation. However, some older Kuba men and women mimic the traditional style of skirts by purchasing imported cotton cloth and machine-hemming it in the same style as raffia skirts. Even though changes in the style and fabric used for everyday attire are apparent in the region, the weaving of raffia cloth and the production of raffia textiles are still important daily activities.

THE DYNAMICS OF TEXTILE FABRICATION

Raffia weaving and skirt fabrication and decoration are not relegated to specialists or restricted to certain clans or lineages. Traditional decorated raffia skirts and cut-pile cloths are considered tangible wealth that everyone wants to accumulate, so the participation of every adult is expected. One Bushoong informant told me that textile fabrication is just as important as hunting.

Many proverbs underline the importance of raffia textile production in everyday life. For example, an older Northern Kete man or woman may say to an unmarried woman, "If you want to marry [well], consult the diviner so that you will find a man who will make you a skirt" (that is, weave raffia cloth). This proverb illustrates that knowledge about textile fabrication is both appropriate and valued in Kuba culture. Other Bushoong proverbs affirm the integrity and importance of traditional work, such as, "A calabash without a purpose is hanging over the hearth," and, "A man without work? We'll give him black mushrooms to eat." Black mushrooms belong to a category of wild foods consumed by women and children; they are not considered "proper" food to serve to men. Both proverbs imply that a person without work to do is considered useless.

For most adults, work on textiles is both a part-time activity and a part of daily routine. Thus, the processes of weaving cloth and
decorating textiles typically are relegated to short work periods. Some men prepare the fiber, set the warp, or complete one of the preliminary stages of weaving or dyeing early in the day, before they go to the fields or visit their traps. Many women are able to sit down and relax for a short period after returning from their fields. During this interval, they may embroider or complete another stage of skirt decoration or construction before they prepare the evening meal. Other women only have time during the two days a week (Fridays and Sundays) when they do not usually work in their fields.

Some individuals, by the nature of their talents and preferences, regularly weave raffia cloth or specialize in certain details of fabrication. Other individuals, due to infirmity or old age, are confined to the village and therefore restricted in their activities. These individuals also spend a proportionately larger part of their time in textile production. In one Bushoong village, a woman with an arthritic hip spent most of the day embroidering cloth and caring for small children. The number of hours she spent sewing was many times that of the average woman, as she was not able to work in the fields, draw water, or pound flour.

There are certain occasions when people regularly spend more time working on textiles. During the first half of the dry season, both men and women are able to devote more attention to textile production, because they are not busy clearing fields, planting or harvesting. During periods of mourning, the immediate family of the deceased is confined to the village and the women remain in their houses from dawn to dusk. During this period, which may last anywhere from three to nine months, much time is devoted to sewing and embroidering. This labor is required to replenish the family's supply of textiles, which is depleted at the funeral (Figure 10).

**OWNERSHIP OF TEXTILES**

During my research, especially among the Bushoong, I found that most decorated raffia skirts are neither fabricated nor owned by a single individual, but result from the cooperative efforts of the men and women of the clan section of a matrilineage. For example, the construction of a long woman's skirt may be the work of half a dozen women of various ages. This fact alone challenges the Western notion of "artisanship" and "ownership:" a single raffia skirt may be interpreted as a chart of social relations and of communal artistry. While individuals may be singled out for the quality of their work, it is exceptional to find a long, elaborately decorated textile made by only one individual. Even textiles that are obviously the work of only one person are never considered the property of that person.

Several Bushoong proverbs collected by the author illustrate this assumption of group ownership:
One person can weave cloth, many can wear them.

There is no one else who can weave cloth as well as this man, but when someone in his family died, they buried him nude. His cloth is only for sale (to someone outside of the clan section).

The weaver is weaving, the blacksmith’s helper is working the bellows, but they are all wearing leaves!

These last two proverbs refer to the individual who does not fulfill his (and by implication her) social responsibility—that of contributing to the group effort of textile fabrication. Thus, while the role of individuals in the production of raffia textiles may be important, it is often disguised and must be discussed in relationship to production within the clan section. This is especially true for women’s skirts, due to the time-consuming fine embroidery and appliqué technique. For example, a particular Bushoong long woman’s skirt (nsuru) may be composed of more than thirty individually embroidered units, each consisting of black embroidered designs finely stitched on doubled sections of raffia cloth. It would take one person several years to complete a long skirt such as this.

The female head of the clan section typically directs the cloth production of several women in her clan section. First, she chooses the format and style of the skirt. Then she acquires cloth from her husband or another male relative, or purchases it outright. After the cloth has been softened, she determines the dimensions for a section of the skirt desired, doubles over the cloth, and hems it. Any holes in the cloth resulting from the pounding process are covered with appliqué. At this point, she may furnish one or more prepared sections of cloth to other members of her clan to embroider.

If she supplies cloth to a novice or less skilled embroiderer, she may baste the lines of the design onto the cloth beforehand. She may also do this for married women living at some distance from their matriloc. For example, the author observed a Bushoong woman, living in another Bushoong village two days distance from her natal home, embroider a section of a skirt her mother had given to her to complete. In this way, completion of the textile is hastened as large and small sections of a skirt are simultaneously worked by several women at the same time.

As each unit of embroidered cloth is completed, it is returned to the clan section head and sewn to other sections of the skirt already completed. Thus, the assembly of the skirt proceeds in an organic fashion over a period that may extend for several years. Aesthetically, the finished textile documents the varying skills and the repertoire of traditional designs at the disposal of the women who contributed to its fabrication.

The combination of style and decorative techniques utilized in the assembly and decoration of men’s skirts dictates a working sequence different from that for women’s skirts. Unlike the latter, in which each section is compositionally different, most men’s skirts repeat the same design or designs throughout the entire length of the central panels and the skirt borders. Because of this linear repetition, individuals usually create men’s skirts in an assembly-line fashion.

This does not mean that men’s skirts require significantly less time to fabricate. Because so many separate units of decorated raffia cloth are needed to complete a man’s skirt, it may take several years to acquire sufficient cloth to construct an entire skirt. This procurement is more difficult if the man fabricating the skirt does not weave raffia cloth himself.²

RAFFIA TEXTILES AND THEIR USES

For centuries, raffia cloth has been woven across a wide region of Central Africa (see distribution map 1, Loiri 1933). In addition to its use as clothing, from the sixteenth century onward the use of raffia cloth as currency has been documented among various societies in Central Africa (Birmingham 1985; Douglas 1963; Martin 1984; Vansina 1962). It appears that in the Kuba area, raffia cloth squares were the principal currency initially and were replaced later by the cowrie imported by the Imbangala and Chokwe groups living to the south and west of the Kuba.² During this period, ten raffia squares or the approximate length of a skirt formed a larger unit of value (Vansina 1962:197). That cloth has retained its association with wealth or value in the Kuba area can readily be seen in the several other uses for which it has been employed.

Vansina notes that raffia cloth, among other items (including dried foodstuffs, salt, iron, utilitarian and decorative objects), formed a part of the annual tribute of many villages at the end of the dry season. Exact amounts of cloth given to the nyim are un-
known but one village is mentioned as paying one raffia cloth for each adult man. In addition, special tribute could also be imposed whenever there was a need for certain items at the capital. Quantities of raffia cloth were also given to the nyim by subject chieftdoms at the death and installation of eagle feather chiefs (Vansina 1978:140-42).

Among some Kuba groups in the nineteenth century, raffia cloth and decorated skirts figured in marital contracts. For the Bushongo the bride-price was composed of both material goods and services. These services might include clearing a field, or building a house for the future mother-in-law. The future bridegroom might also weave a skirt, which his mother or sister would embroider, so that he could offer it to his mother-in-law. The actual items of the bride-price, payable at the time of marriage or even later, included cowries in bulk or in the form of mbium (320 cowries sewn to a raffia cloth backing), camwood, raw raffia cloth (mbula), or decorated mats. In the case of divorce, the spouse who initiates the divorce is responsible for the repayment of the bride-price to the other family (Vansina 1964:31–34).

Another type of marriage formerly practiced among the Bushongo calls for a bride-price much higher than that of an ordinary marriage. In this marriage the woman (mpay abam) was considered a “pawn” of the lineage and any children that resulted from the marriage were negotiated between lineages, according to the contract (Vansina 1978:6). Recorded bride-prices for this form of marriage listed several men’s skirts as well as women’s skirts, mbium, beaded bracelets, necklaces, and hats. Even though among some Kuba groups, such as the Northern Kete, the payment was less, raffia cloth was always mentioned as a component of the bride-price (Vansina 1964:40–41).

Raffia cloth and skirts have also formed a required part of many legal settlements. One account mentions the loan of raffia cloth by one man to another to repay a debt (Hilton-Simpson 1912:110). In a case of adultery, a man was required to give the village tribunal 300 cowries, a man’s skirt (nopel), and a ceremonial knife to the injured husband. After a fight that resulted in bodily harm, the guilty party was heavily fined. This fine included iron gongs, spears, swords, and raffia cloth (Vansina 1964:147).

One of the most frequently cited uses for decorated raffia textiles concerns their appearance during public events. A number of festive occasions are mentioned by early visitors to the region, although more often than not, the reason for the event is not given. Hilton-Simpson describes large dances, held frequently at Missumba (an important Ngongo chieftdom), in which women dressed similarly in either red or white skirts (1912:110–11). Hilton-Simpson also describes a dance held at the end of mourning for the nyjam’s sister. He was so fascinated by the visual impact of Kuba dress that he published a color illustration of this event on the cover of his book.

As the sun was beginning to sink a little and the great heat of the afternoon became rather less oppressive, the elders assembled in the dancing-ground attired in all their ceremonial finery. This consisted of voluminous loin-cloths of raffia fibre bordered by strips of the same material elaborately embroidered in patterns, and in some cases ornamented by fringes of innumerable small tassels; around their waists they wore belts covered with beads or cowrie shells, and upon their heads nodded plumes of gaily coloured feathers (Hilton-Simpson 1912:203).

Torday describes the funeral of a high-ranked titleholder at the capital as follows: “A funeral dance took place the same evening, and all the elders turned up to it in their best finery. Their skirts were of rich embroidered cloth, and in their bennets they wore bunches of gaily colored feathers” (1925:157).

Other important occasions requiring the display of elaborate dress are the ital rituals (described by Vansina 1964, Cornet 1980) and the funeral of a paramount ruler and subsequent installation of his successor (Vansina 1964:111–16). But these events occur infrequently and only at the capital.

Today, the most common occasion for the display of Kuba textiles is at funerals. This was true historically throughout the Kuba region, although only royal funerals are mentioned in early accounts. Torday (1925:197) described the funeral of the mother of a titleholder at the capital: “When we arrived it (the coffin) had not yet been closed and we could see the corpse, thickly painted with camwood paste and enveloped in fine cloth.” Wharton (1927:128–29) states that the casket of the nyim Mbop eMbawekey was lined with embroidered raffia cloth, and that:
... great quantities of cowrie-shell money were placed near the body so that the king might not want for funds on his long journey. Lest he hunger or thirst, meats of every description and many kinds of bread, together with gourd on gourd of palmwine were disposed within the casket. At the king's feet space was reserved for a trunk, in which were laid piece on piece of the rarest examples of the Bakuba art of cloth-weaving and embroidery.

THE CONTEXT OF USE: RAFFIA TEXTILE DISPLAY AT FUNERALS

Today, the display of elaborately decorated raffia textiles most typically occurs at funerals, when the body of the deceased is dressed with a prerequisite number of textiles and related costume accessories, including hats, bracelets, belts, and anklets. In this state the deceased is presented to mourners for several days and then buried with the textiles and other gifts (Figure 111).

The majority of textiles and costume accessories displayed on the corpse belong to the clan section of the deceased. As discussed earlier, most raffia skirts are neither owned nor fabricated by a single individual, but are the result of a cooperative effort by several people. As property of the clan section, textiles are placed on the body following a formal meeting of the section members. During this meeting, decisions are made as to precisely which textiles and other gifts will be placed on the corpse and buried with it. The textiles possessed by the clan section are unwrapped and each piece is closely examined for the quality of its workmanship. Any damage since the last examination is noted and taken into account when making the final selection. At all other times, these textiles are securely wrapped and stored with one or more leaders of the clan section.

While meetings are restricted to members, aspects of the decision-making process were gathered from interviews with numerous clan section heads and from examinations of their textile holdings. These informants often related aspects of the history of specific raffia textiles and of the individuals who created them. For example, in one Bushoong store of textiles, I was shown a short overskirt (noka ishynwon) which had a border much older than its central panel. The informant explained that the original central panel had been detached from the border and buried with a family member a number of years previously. The older border (which had been made approximately fifty years earlier by her great-grandmother) had been kept because of its age and the quality of its workmanship. She also kept the border because she wanted to show her children and her grandchildren how finely embroidered textiles used to be.

Other informants told the author that they were putting aside very old textiles for their own funerals. For example, one Bushoong woman had an extremely fine and old example of a decorated overskirt made by a relative who lived during the reign of the Kuba paramount ruler Kot aPé (ruled 1902–16). This woman was in her late seventies and could still recall the relative who had sewn the textile.

Textiles placed on the body of the deceased may also come from other sources. The spouse of the deceased (whether male or female) must also contribute one or more textiles of appropriate value to the clan section of the deceased. The type of textile given by the spouse follows the gender of the spouse, not that of the deceased; thus a widow contributes one or more women's skirts while a widower provides one or more men's skirts. These skirts are usually displayed with the corpse and subsequently buried with it.
The value and aesthetic merit of the textile given by the spouse is determined by the clan section of the deceased. Decisions may be reached after much heated discussion. At one meeting held in a Southern Bushoong village in 1982, the widow of the deceased brought a textile which was immediately rejected. The clan argued that the textile was not suitable because it was not long enough and the quality and quantity of embroidery was insufficient. The widow angrily left the meeting but later returned with a longer and more completely embroidered textile, which was accepted, subsequently displayed, and buried with the body of the deceased.

At another funeral in a Northern Kete village, I observed a man offering an incomplete man’s skirt (in this case the borders of the skirt were missing) to the head of the deceased’s clan section. The man was criticized and rebuffed; he was reminded that one would never wear an unfinished skirt, so why would he offer one as a gift to the deceased?

Friends are also free to contribute textiles or other gifts to the clan section of the deceased. These gifts (lebam) from individuals outside of the clan section of the deceased insure the giver a reciprocal and equivalent exchange between clan sections upon his or her own death. Lebam may consist of textiles as well as contemporary currency (Zaires), cowrie and beaded bracelets or anklets (mahsim), and necklaces or decorated belts. The bracelets, anklets, and necklaces usually adorn the deceased while he or she lies in state. These gifts may be buried with the deceased or stored in the coffers of the clan section until needed at a future occasion. Gifts of money also may be used by the clan section to defray funeral expenditures, such as those incurred for the food and palm wine consumed by relatives and friends while they attend the funeral.

While many of the gifts displayed with the deceased are traditional and customary in nature, other items relate directly to the individual’s rank. Certain hat forms and other elements of regalia may also correspond directly to titleholding and therefore will be prominently displayed. As discussed earlier, this includes the types of feathers that indicate the title the deceased held in life. For example, one deceased Bushoong man held the important title of Mbeem in his village. A conical shaped hat (nok) and guinea fowl feathers are the prerogative of this titleholder, so this special hat and feathers were included in his funeral attire. But a modern symbol of success was also included. This man had been an agricultural purchasing agent, in charge of the collection of corn, manioc, and coffee from local farmers. To represent this aspect of his rank and achieved status, the deceased was displayed and later buried with his attaché case.

PRESENTATION OF THE BODY AT FUNERALS

After the death of an adult, the women of the clan section wash the body of the deceased, then anoint it with red camwood powder. The body is then dressed for display and subsequent burial.

Among all the ethnic groups in the area, a series of textiles varying in size, style, and gender are wrapped around the body in a prescribed order. Generally, the first textile encircling the body is a red-dyed raffia skirt, napping ndiup (for men) or ndiup nkana (for women), which is devoid of surface decoration. These skirts are the simplest in design of all long Kuba skirts. Informants likened this textile to an undergarment.

Included with this first skirt is a small packet of cowries tied to a corner, just as Kuba men and women secure money or other small valuables into a knot in the corner of a skirt. Cowries are included because it is believed the deceased will use them to pay for river transport to the next world (ilueemny), discussed below.

Several different styles of textile may be placed on the deceased over this first skirt. With a woman, two styles of long, embroidered, and appliquéd skirts (assuah or mhulde) are added next. Both are about six yards long. Nsuaha and mhulde are similar in form and design except for two distinctive characteristics. The former is embroidered with black thread on undyed raffia cloth; the latter is first embroidered with undyed raffia thread and when completely assembled, the entire skirt is dyed red.

In Bushoong practice, these two skirts are the minimum requirement. However, the number of skirts on the body increases in proportion to the importance or wealth of the deceased. For this reason, multiples of long, embroidered textiles may also be added. Shorter women’s overskirts are also employed as the top layer of the ensemble.

For a deceased man, several different skirt styles may be added
over the underskirt. A very popular choice is a red-dyed skirt with a patchwork black-and-white rectangular border and bobble fringe (kot‘a laum’a mbokkhey). It is made and used all over the region. There are other styles of long men’s skirts which may also be added (ndoro kwey, maskeshela, and kmisikihga).

Some Kuba-related ethnic groups elect to add additional textiles as the final covering. For example, the Shoowa add sections of cut-pile and embroidered cloth (uina) as a final covering over the displayed body. Research indicates that this is the primary, traditional purpose of these cut-pile cloths.

As noted above, in addition to textiles there are many other costume accessories made by the Kuba, consisting of strands of beads or beaded raffia bracelets, belts, and anklets. These are rarely worn except as costume elements at the time of burial. Other items, such as hats, feathers, and belts, differentiate titled men and women from non-titled individuals. The total ensemble, the multiplicity of textiles and costume accessories, is of overriding importance to the Kuba aesthetic at funerals.

When the body is completely dressed it is displayed, usually sitting upright on a wooden support bier, for several days under an open shed. Three days seems to be the usual number in contemporary practice. Women of both clan section and village maintain a vigil under the shed with the body during the entire time it is displayed. Men gather under a shed some distance away. If the deceased was an initiated man, prescribed rituals, including songs, dances, and possibly masquerade performances, may take place during this time (Binkley 1987a).

Shortly before burial, the men of the clan section oversee construction of a coffin made from large decorated mats secured to a bamboo framework. The coffin may be fabricated in imitation of a pitched-roof hut, and is often meticulous in its attention to architectural detail. Other coffins are fashioned in the same manner but with a flat roof. At the time of burial, the corpse is placed in the coffin and taken to the cemetery. Just before it is lowered into the ground, additional items such as currency, drinking cups, or costume elements, may be placed in the coffin. At one Bushoong funeral, a relative lifted the edge of the coffin and placed the tattered everyday hat worn by the deceased inside.

DRESSING FOR THE NEXT LIFE

The dressing of the corpse reflects both individual and group beliefs about proper burial. Although ideas concerning life after death are not systematically codified, there is a general belief in luene, the land of the dead. The deceased is thought to travel to this land by crossing a river and to reside there until his or her spirit returns to the land of the living, usually after one or two generations. For this reason coffins are fabricated in imitation of house construction while currency—both modern, in the form of Zaires, and traditional, in the form of cowries—is included with the body. Although Vansina (1978a:199) states that belief in luene is archaic, I found it prevalent in the Kuba area in 1981 and 1982. I met individuals in many villages who were believed to be reborn (nhanga). One informant commented upon the depth of knowledge and other unusual talents of a young man as proof of his nhanga status.

Because of the pervasive belief in luene, there is overwhelming concern that the deceased be dressed properly at burial. The Kuba believe that only raffia textiles are an appropriate mode of dress for burial. Several informants noted that they would not be recognized by deceased relatives in luene if they were not dressed in traditional textiles. In addition they were concerned with ethnicity: they wished to be recognized by relatives and visitors to the funeral and in the afterlife as being a Bushoong, a Kete, or a Shoowa person, replete with all emblems of attained title or status.

In the Kuba area, to be buried in anything but traditional attire is tantamount to being buried nude. Even individuals who have not worn raffia skirts for twenty years or more have stated that when they die, they will be buried in traditional dress. Another Bushoong proverb expressed this attitude succinctly: "As bamboo does not lack roots, a man cannot dismiss his origins." To Bushoong (or Kete or Shoowa) men and women, it is imperative to express this belief in cultural heritage, especially at funerals and in visual form through the display of traditional attire. This is not an archaism or a revival but rather a conscious preservation of cultural values.

If individuals are concerned with the appropriate self-presentation at their own funerals, the clan section also is concerned about the proper burial of its members for several reasons. It is widely believed that deceased people have a malevolent spirit
(mween), and that this spirit may become angered if all due respect is not paid to the deceased at the funeral. It is believed that the mween is particularly concerned that respect due his or her rank and achieved status be recognized by the clan section at the funeral (Binkley 1987a).

Fear of reprisals from the slighted mween acts as a strong motivating force on the clan section. A slighted mween may cause problems ranging from unsuccessful hunting or fishing to illness, infertility, or death for members of the clan section. The malevolent spirit of a deceased titleholder is considered far more powerful than that of an untitled individual; if an important titleholder’s mween is angered, the entire village may be harmed. In order not to offend a powerful mween, there may be protracted discussions among clan section members to make certain that burial arrangements have been properly made.

Concern for prestige provides another motive for displaying the appropriate number and quality of textiles on the deceased. If the clan section of the deceased presents the proper textiles in sufficient number and quality, it shows the village that the clan section acknowledges its responsibilities and honors and respects its members at the time of death, and thus allows the clan section to enhance its prestige. Understandably, a public funeral provides an open forum for gossip and unsolicited criticism. At one Bushoong funeral, a woman outside the clan section criticized the textiles displayed on the corpse. She said that the quality of a certain textile was insufficient as it did not have enough embroidery, and that the clan section should have placed a greater quantity of textiles on the body. Another Bushoong informant stated that gossip such as this is the primary activity at funerals.

Following most adult deaths, a crucial ritual is conducted at the grave site before the coffin is fully lowered into the ground and covered with earth. This ritual is performed by the surviving spouse and a member of the opposite sex from the clan section of the deceased. Kneeling on opposite sides of the coffin, each marks the little finger of the other’s right hand with white clay or kaolin. This gesture severs the social bonds of marriage and kinship ties between the deceased and the living. If this ritual is not performed, the deceased will appear in dreams (especially to the spouse) and may also be a source of harm to other members of the clan section. For surviving clan-section members, this ritual shows the deceased that the clan section has fulfilled its responsibilities to the deceased and should be left in peace.

**WHY THE DEAD WEAR DECORATED RAFFIA TEXTILES**

In Kuba villages today, the use of undecorated raffia cloth for everyday clothing has been largely supplanted by western dress such as shirts and trousers for men, and blouses and printed cotton wrappers for women. But despite this adoption of modern dress, the display of decorated raffia textiles continues to be a central element in the ritual surrounding death. Undoubtedly, the aesthetic appeal of these textiles in ceremonial and funeral contexts is strong. But the Kuba have many reasons in addition to aesthetics for giving decorated raffia textiles such a major role at funerals. The persistence of this tradition is fundamentally linked to the burial of textiles at funerals, because the Kuba believe that the process of making textiles is as important as the textiles themselves.

As we have seen, both male and female members of the clan section are essential participants in all of the stages of textile production. Thus, the display of textiles at funerals powerfully reaffirms the enduring social relationships that encompass the complementary and interdependent efforts of the men and women of the clan section. These relationships are acknowledged and reproduced in the social arena of the funeral. Both men’s and women’s skirts are placed on the body of the deceased when it is displayed in the village. These textiles are made and given by clan section members and others who expect the same tributes in return at their funerals. In this respect, exchange of textiles is a one-way process, moving from the living to the dead as the textiles are buried with the deceased. Yet this very process supports Kuba assertions of ethnic identity and adherence to traditional beliefs in the afterlife.

Even though Kuba textiles do not recirculate, burying them is not seen as a depletion of the system. Members of the clan section are constantly renewing this aesthetic and unifying resource as part of their everyday work. A Bushoong proverb states: “You can take from a raffia palm, but you can never deplete its supply.” For the Kuba, both the decorated textiles and the material from which they are made are powerful symbols of abundance and wealth. The raffia palm has been an inexhaustible resource for centuries, exploited not
only for decorated and plain clothing, but also for shelter, palm wine, and food. Moreover, raffia cloth squares have been a principal currency and have formed a major portion of the wealth of the Kuba paramount ruler. The burial of these labor-intensive raffia skirts at funerals recalls these ancient ideas of abundance and wealth. Thus the Kuba still choose raffia cloth for funerals because it is a potent symbol of security and continuity, actively linking the living to one another as well as to the community of the recently deceased.

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NOTES

1. Except for the Lelo (Douglas 1965), we do not have precise ethnographic details of past or current use patterns for raffia textiles among neighboring peoples.


3. The last census taken of all the Kuba people was in 1950, when the population was estimated to be over 70,000 (Vansina 1964:8).

4. These groupings have been outlined by Vansina (1964:7-719785).

5. All terms are cited in the Bushoong language, unless otherwise noted.

6. Some decorated textiles, such as the cut-pile and embroidered Shoowa awiru, the Bushoong matsu luim, and the raffia cloth employed for the borders of men’s skirts, do not utilize softened cloth.

7. These proverbs were collected in Kete and Bushoong villages by the author during 1981-82.

8. I returned to one Bushoong village a year later to find the production of the center sections of a man’s skirt at the same stage I had observed a year earlier.


10. In the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth, bride-price in cowries and francs rose tremendously, because young men did not want to work for their mothers-in-law and the reduction in services caused the amount to rise (Vansina 1964:31-34). Though I do not have data for contemporary practices, I suspect that even the custom of bride-price has been dropped by many of the Kuba groups.

11. Camwood powder is used as a cosmetic in Central Africa; it is still favored by many older Kuba women today.

12. Vansina (1978:98-99) states that the “proto-Kuba” practiced ancestor worship, but adopted some of the religious beliefs of the Kete, in this case the concepts of nkung and buqen, when they moved south of the Sankuru River. These concepts are more thoroughly discussed in Vansina 1958.


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5. Why Do Ladies Sing the Blues?

Indigo Dyeing, Cloth Production, and Gender Symbolism in Kodi

JANET HOSKINS

The unusually large, bold patterns and rich blues and rusts of Sumbanese warp ikat cloth have attracted foreign buyers for over a century, making the textile traditions of this isolated Eastern Indonesian island the focus of an important export trade. To European visitors, the cloths appear as objects of ostentatious display and public presentation. Worn as ceremonial costume by both men and women, they form part of marriage payments from the bride’s family, are used as “sails” on the “ships” that drag stones for megalithic graves, and as banners in feasts, processions, and welcoming ceremonies for important officials. Suspended from the walls or ceiling on ceremonial occasions, warp ikats also make sumptuous funeral shrouds, wrapping the corpse in as many as a hundred different layers (Adams 1969, Hoskins 1986).

The exuberant unfolding of several meters of color-saturated textiles, patterned with plant, animal, and human designs, is the public face that Sumbanese cloth producers present to the outside world. In isolated huts secluded in the bush, another face of cloth production is hidden: Here, indigo dyeing is conducted as a cult of female secrets. Hedged by a system of taboos that forbid access to all men, and to women at certain stages in their reproductive cycles, older women practice an occult art that is associated with herbalism,