Case 6-Afr-Gabon-Mask, Ngulu-Brass, Wood-Kota-19th c



RELIQUARY FIGURE

Gabon, Kata

Wood, brass, H. 24% in. (61.6 cm.)

I9th-20th centmy

This large double-faced ngulu or nguru is one Kota substyle. Its size alone attests to its great ritual importance as guardian of a container of relics belonging to an extended lineage group. It has two ovoid faces, one concave (here decorated with strips of brass on the forehead reminiscent of the ornamentation used by groups north of the Sebe River), and the other a combination of concave and convex, with an overhanging brow cutting straight across the face. (The latter recalls the form of Mvudi masks of the Ndjabi and Aduma people.) The sharp crescent-shaped crest is wide, as are the sides of the coiffure with their cylindrical eardrops. The decoration consists entirely of brass and copper plaques. Identifying emblems appear on front and back of the crest. Is this a symbolically male and female object? No evidence supports this hypothesis. Several features allow us to group this piece with a number

of others: the base with its elegantly pointed “shoulders”; the eyes (coffee-bean shape with slits or nail-heads for pupils); and the mouth on the concave-convex face (decorated with a cowrie shell and incised teeth in the manner of Mvudi masks). It is

possible that the entire group is the work of a single school—some even of a single artist, who unfortunately remains unknown.

1Several early illustrations (de Brazza 1887) show these figures arranged on large baskets (mbulu, musuku, or nsuwu) containing relics of ancestors. All the reliquaries in a village were grouped together under a small shelter away from the houses, in a sort of sanctuary for ancestors. In contrast to the Fang, whose Byeri cult became a family concern at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Kota—especially those in the south (Obamba, Mindumu, Mindassa, Bawumbu)—-practiced a more communal cult in conjunction with initiation societies (ngoye) and on the village level.

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1. Similar examples are in the British Museum, Musée de l’Homme,

Musée d’Angouléme, and collections of Pierre Verité, Schoffel, Van

Bussel, and I. Pz'iiles.

Refirences: Andersson 1953, 1974; Perrois 1979.

j 119. RELIQUARY FIGURE

Gabon, Kota

Wood, brass, copper, bone, H. 20 in. (50.8 cm.)

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