Case 6-Afr-Gabon-Mask-Kata-19th c



RELIQUARY FIGURE

Gabon, Kata

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

I9tb-20tb centmy

This large double-faced figure (ngulu or nguru) is typical of one

Kota substyle. Its size alone attests to its great ritual impor

tance as guardian of a basket of relics belonging to an extensive

lineage group. It has two ovoid faces, one concave (here dec

orated 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 over

hanging brow cutting straight across the face. (The latter re

calls the form of Mvudi masks of the Ndjabi and Aduma peo

ple.) 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 em

blems appear on front and back of the crest. Is this a symbol

ically male and female object? No evidence supports this hy

pothesis.

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 nailheads 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 un

known.1

Several early illustrations (de Brazza 1887) show these fig

ures arranged on large baskets (mbulu, musuku, or nsuwu) con

taining 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.

L. Perroz's

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.)

19t/J-