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TO ZULU



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Photo:
Yoruba potter, Nigeria,
in Sieber, 1980, p. 248

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Baganda to Zulu: Fired brilliance of ceramic vessels in Africa

Bernard de Grunne



Group of Baganda vessels

Pottery is amongst the oldest arts known to man. It has been documented in Kenya since the Upper Paleolithic era and has been dated to the 8th millennium B.C. in Saharan sites. Clay is one of the first materials used by men and women to create objects for daily use and for rituals, transforming it into works of art using diverse and ingenious techniques.

The impulse for this small-scale project was my discovery, thanks to the keen eye of Alan Marcuson, of a small group of beautifully modeled black, highly burnished royal vessels made for the Baganda King of Uganda. I then decided to curate a small exhibition of clay vessels ranging chronologically from pre-dynastic Egypt and the medieval Soninke Ghana Empire in northern Mali, to the magnificent Zulu beer vessels from South Africa. I also included some unusual and rare vessels from the Democratic Republic of the Congo which stand out for the subtlety of their surfaces.

Baganda royal vessels from Uganda (Cat. 1-7)

From the earliest traditions, the health of the royalty of the Baganda¹ Kingdom, and thus of the entire state, has been associated with potters and pottery. The beautiful group of three black polished ware vessels in the British Museum (Fig. 1) has been a remarkable testimony to the incredible talent of Baganda potters.



Fig. 1 - Baganda vessels gifted by Sir H.H. Johnston to the British Museum in 1901 in John Mack, 2000, p. 213

Reverend John Roscoe of the Church Missionary Society has provided us an incredibly detailed description of the social and religious life of the Baganda from the old days before European influence. Roscoe worked in Uganda from 1884 to 1909 and had been in Baganda country since 1891. Furthermore, Sir Apolo Kagwa, Prime Minister and Regent of Uganda, went out of his way to bring old people to share their knowledge with Roscoe, having old informants carried from up to a hundred miles away to give him the opportunity to question them and write their accounts. His unique opportunities for gain knowledge on their mode of life and habits of thoughts allowed him to become intimately acquainted with their ancient religious ideas.²

¹ The Baganda or Ganda is the is a large Bantu ethnic group of approximately 5.5 million people native to the Kingdom of Buganda.

² Sir Apolo Kagwa, *The customs of the Baganda*, translated by Ernest B. Kalibala, edited by May Mandelbaum, New York, Columbia University Contributions to Anthropology, Volume XXII, 1934 and Rev. John Roscoe, *The Baganda. An Account of their Native Customs and Beliefs*, London, MacMillan and Co Ltd, 1911

The Kingdom of Baganda, located on the northwestern shore of Lake Victoria in south-central Uganda, emerged in the mid-second millennium A.D. and rose to become one of the most politically powerful and populous kingdoms in the region.³ Initially, Buganda was a small kingdom, but during the 17th century, it underwent territorial expansion, combined with the development of a centralized political system and a powerful military.⁴

Since the earliest times in Baganda history, there has been a king (*kabaka*) with despotic powers. The founder and first king was Kintu, from whom the entire dynasty can be traced down to the king Daudi Cwa (Fig. 2) and his descendants. According to Roscoe's account of the succession of kings at the time, there have been thirty-two generations, which in round numbers covers a period of approximately a thousand years.⁵ Trowell states that the actual number of generations is twenty-three, which equates to a period of about five hundred years.⁶



Fig. 2. - King Daudi Cwa (1897-1939),
in John Roscoe, 1911, p. 174, fig. 25



Fig. 3 - Tomb of the great King Mutesa Mukabya
(1854-1884) in John Roscoe, 1911, p. 120, fig. 24

³ John D. Giblin & Kikongo Remigius, «The social and symbolic context of the royal potters of Buganda», in *Azania: Archeological Research in Africa*, 2012, 47; 1, p. 66

⁴ Richard Reid, *Political power in pre-colonial Buganda: economy, society and warfare in the nineteenth century*, Oxford, James Currey, 2003, p. 3

⁵ Roscoe, 1911, p. 186

⁶ Margaret Trowell, *Tribal Crafts of Uganda*, London, Oxford University Press, 1953, p. 41

From the earliest times of the foundation of the Baganda kingdom, *kabaka* (king) Kintu, the first king of Baganda who reigned before A.D. 1700, promoted a talented potter named Ssekayala (chief decorator) and renamed him Sseddagala⁷ (chief medicine man) as sole maker of royal cooking pots. The legend of his fame through lasted some thirty reigns from the dim ages of the beginning of history lasted until modern times, when Margaret Trowell recorded in 1939 a praise song by Baganda potters as they stamped the clay:

"Sedagala abumba, abumba n'entamu ezikala"

"Sedagala abumba, abumba n'entamu ezikala"

"Sedagala makes his pots, and the pots grow dry."⁸

Furthermore, when Kamanya became king around A.D. 1710, he raided the neighboring Nyoro and captured a very talented Nyoro potter named Kawonawo Banda among the 3.000 captives. Kamanya then employed Kawonawo Banda as a royal potter and gave him his own estate in Nakigalala, a strip of forest land between Budo Hill and the Kampala-Entebbe Road. There has been a community of potters in this area since that day, where Josefu Basajasubi, a skilled Nyoro craftsman, made his black pots.⁹

Another example of an appropriation by the Baganda royal court of artworks made by another culture is exemplified by a fairly large wooden female statue (Fig.4) owned by the Baganda king Sana. The statue was originally carved by an itinerant Nyamwezi sculptor who accompanied trade expeditions to Bukurebe Island in Tanzania.¹⁰ Initially sent as a diplomatic gift to King Sana by the *Kerebe* (Tanzania) King Machunda, it was passed on to the missionary-anthropologist John Roscoe, who eventually gave it to the British Museum.

The king's potters were called *bajona*, but many chiefs also had their own potters. These *bajoma*, whose duty was to furnish the store in the royal enclosure where a number of pots were kept, lived in communities apart from other people.



Fig. 4 - Memorial figure given to Baganda King Sana by King Machunda of the Kerebe (Tanzania) circa 1884, London, the British Museum inv. n° AF1909-40

⁷ Or *Sedagala*

⁸ Kagwa, 1934, p. 159 and Margaret Trowell, « Some royal craftsmen in Buganda », in *Uganda Journal*, 1947, p. 57

⁹ Trowell, 1947, p. 58

¹⁰ Bernard de Grunne, *Dinka*, Brussels, 2019, p. 20 and Gerald Hartwig, « A Historical Perspective of Kerebe Sculpture- Tanzania », in *Tribus*, n° 18, 1969, pp. 85-86



Fig. 5 - Samples of Baganda pottery
in John Roscoe, 1911, p. 400, fig. 68

The potter found his clay in swamps, and carried it home, where it was stored in pits, to protect it from the sun and drying winds.¹¹ No potter's wheel was used, and the pots were made using thickish coils. It is in the clay preparation, the surface treatment, and the firing that the black finish of these pots is achieved.¹² The clay is divided into two classes: *ebumba*, any clay which is sufficiently good for the coarse earthenware, and *ebumba nakasa*, a purer, finer clay for the making of black pottery, described by one potter as "clay which women can eat because it has no stones."¹³

For the black pottery, much of the coarse material was removed from the clay by hand, grounded, sieved through a fine mesh, then soaked and slacked before grog made from ground sherds was added. This grog makes the pottery less porous. The clay was then covered and left outside to settle, age and mature until it became fine and smooth. After the pot has been built, the potter uses small pieces of calabash to smooth off and polish the pot, some of which are cut with grooves to form the rim. A piece of the split stem of elephant grass and smooth stones from the riverbed are then used for polishing. A roulette of plaited reed or a maize cob are used to make patterns on the vessel, and a little iron awl is used to make scratch patterns.

According to Trowell, there are two distinct types of black pottery showing a beautiful sense of form. The first has the solid black shine of a well-polished shoe. This is said to be produced by smoking and polishing alone. The pot is held in a forked stick over a smoking fire of elephant grass. After a few minutes, it is rubbed with an old rag or bark cloth, then alternately smoked and polished until an intense jet black is obtained.

The other type has a silvery sheen on the black, which is very attractive. This is produced by alternately rubbing the pots with a lump of graphite and polishing. The graphite is brought from a deposit in the Hoima district.¹⁴ This second technique seems to be specific to the Nyoro, who worked for the King.

To conclude, Baganda royal pottery was not only a brilliant technical innovation, but also a symbolic source of food, and thus life, which became associated with the health of the kingdom. Their achievement reminds us of the creations of Magdalena Odundo (Fig. 7 & 9) the most talented living contemporary African potter, whose elegant forms may have been inspired by the three vessels in the British Museum. (Fig. 1)

¹¹ Roscoe, 1911, p. 401

¹² John Mack, *Africa. Arts and Cultures*, London, The British Museum Press, 2000, p. 212

¹³ Trowell, 1947, p. 61

¹⁴ Trowell, 1947, p. 64



Fig. 6 - Baganda royal vessel,
Kingdom of Buganda, Uganda
H : 31 cm
(Cat. 1)



Fig. 7 - Magdalene Odundo, *Untitled*, 2013
H : 56 cm
in Pierre Marie Giraud, *Magdalene Odundo*,
Bruxelles, 2013



Fig. 8 - Baganda royal vessel,
Kingdom of Buganda, Uganda
H : 38 cm
(Cat. 2)



Fig. 9 - Magdalene Odundo, *Untitled*, 2013
H : 56 cm
in Pierre Marie Giraud, *Magdalene Odundo*,
Bruxelles, 2013

Predynastic Egypt black-topped pottery, B.C. 4500-4000 (Cat. 8)

Black-topped ware from Predynastic Period in Upper Egypt was the predominant type of pottery associated with the Badarian culture dating to B.C. 4500-4000. Examples have been excavated at Nubian archaeological sites, including Elephantine, an island on the Nile River, Nabra Playa in the Nubian Desert and Kerma in present-day Sudan. The red color is derived from the natural iron in the Nile silt which oxidizes during firing, and the black top and interior is a product of reduction firing and carbon smudging.

These simple but elegant vases of exceptional thinness are entirely handmade, with no trace of turning. Careful polishing has obliterated any marks of manufacturing. These vessels feature slips on which liquified clay is applied to alter the surface color, to smooth the surface and to reduce the porosity of the vessel, which may be an improvement in functionality rather than a purely stylistic choice.

Black-topped ware typically takes the form of the Egyptian *hes-jar*, tall, shouldered vessels used for pouring libations. This kind of pottery is found exclusively in cemeteries and deposits connected to ritual altars.

Archaeologist Karin Sowada postulates that the religious function of black-topped pottery is demonstrated by two-dimensional artworks from the Early Dynastic period. Several objects from Fourth Dynasty tombs at Giza depict these vessels being used in rituals or as offerings. In the Fourth Dynasty slab stela of Wepemnofret, the prince is "seated before a table of offerings including a black-topped jar." The surrounding imagery suggests that the jar may have been used for the offering of ritual liquids in funerary rites.¹⁵

Additionally, on the mid-Fourth Dynasty slab stela of Princess Nefertabet, a black-topped vase is seen to the right of the princess' head. Similar to the Wepemnofret slab stela, this depiction is also surrounded by imagery related to liquid offerings.

These symbolic connections between clay vessels, ritual offerings and ancestral worship can also be found among beautiful medieval Soninke pottery described below.

Royal Soninke vessels from Mali, A.D. 950- 1400 (Cat. 9-14)

The Soninke were the first pre-Mande groups to establish a Sahelian state, located in Wagadu, also known to Arab travelers as the Empire of Ghana. Situated between the Sahara and the headwaters of the Senegal and Niger rivers, ancient Ghana at its fullest extent encompassed parts of present-day Mali and southeastern Mauritania. Beginning about A.D. 500, Ghana's political economy was based on the intraregional exchange of copper and salt.¹⁶

Many prominent Mande families trace their origins to this Wagadu empire, the cradle of Soninke culture. Although certain Soninke clans played an important role in the spread of Islam from the 10th century onwards, other clans created major art styles of millennia-old statuary that remains an imperishable witness, providing invaluable data on ancient Mande civilizations and revealing the deep links with their Djenne-Jeno neighbors, all of whom were born and nurtured by *Joliba*, the great Niger River and its tributary, the Bani.¹⁷

Clans of Soninke origin can be found among various peoples of West Africa. Indeed, the supremacy of the Soninke, nicknamed *Marak*, "people of power and authority", goes back a long way, since they were the first to own horses, to exercise power and authority, and to trade all over West Africa.¹⁸

¹⁵ Karin N. Sowada, « Black-Topped Ware in Early Dynastic Contexts », in *The Journal of Egyptian Archeology*, vol. 85, 1999, pp. 85-102

¹⁶ Susan Keech McIntosh, « The Ancient Ghana and Mali project: Reconceptualizing Early Ghana », in *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, n° 2-3, 2008, p. 369

¹⁷ Bernard de Grunne, *Soninké*, Brussels, 2024

¹⁸ Charles Monteil, « La légende de Wagadou et l'origine des Soninké », in *Mélanges ethnologiques*, Mémoires de l'IFAN, 1953, pp. 360-408

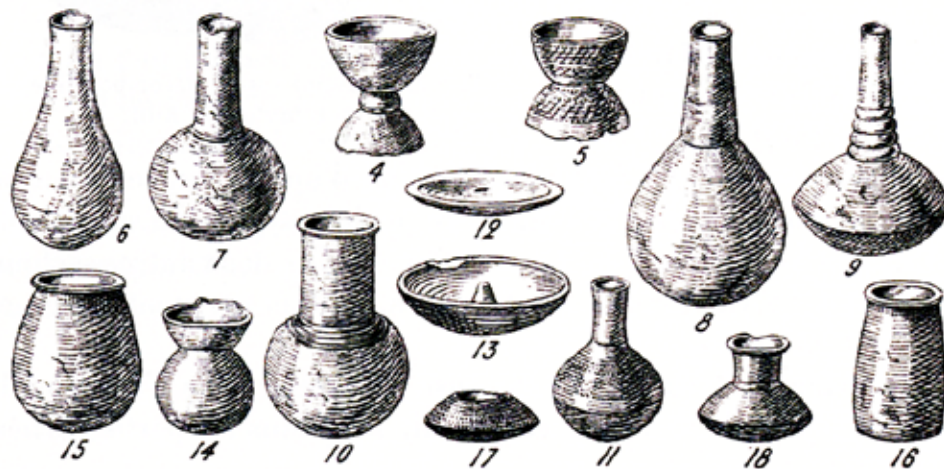


Fig. 10 - Ancient Pottery vessels from the tumuli of Killi in Louis Desplagnes, 1903, p. 162

Soninke clay vessels found in the northern part of the Inner Niger Delta, between Léré and Timbuktu around the famous tumuli of Killi and El-Oualedji, undoubtedly stand out as the finest ceramic from medieval Mali. They were first documented by two excavations conducted by Louis Desplagnes in 1904. The first dig was at the tumuli of Killi (Fig. 10) and the second one at the larger tumulus of El Oualedji (Fig. 11). These tumuli were large funerary monuments built in honor of an important king. Desplagnes relates them to the pre-Islamic empire of Ghana, between the 9th-12th century. According to local oral tradition, Killi was a funerary monument dedicated to a Soninke governor who ruled that region on behalf of the Emperor of Ghana.¹⁹

His hypothesis has been corroborated by a C14 date of A.D. 1000 ± 120 for Kouga, another site in the region where painted pottery with well-burnished deep red slip was recovered.²⁰ El Oualedji was a very large burial mound with a height of twelve meters high. In its center was a funerary chamber with a shaft leading to the surface. Inside the chamber were two bodies buried with many ornaments and bronze weapons. Funerary gifts included classic red-slipped vessels. The three tumuli of Killi, in the shape of truncated pyramids oriented on an east-west axis, were grouped together in a half circle. Desplagnes excavated a whole series of these Soninke red-slipped vessels, arranged near a large urn with ashes. In the center of the mound was a funerary chamber containing the skeletons of about thirty individuals and their grave goods, such as copper and silver rings, and statuettes of birds, crocodiles and lizards.



Fig. 11 - Ancient Soninke pottery vessels excavated at the tumulus of El Oualedji in Louis Desplagnes, 1907, pl. xxxvi, p. 62bis, fig. 70

The earliest description of Ghana's leadership comes from Abd al'Aziz al Bakri (1014-1094), a distinguished geographer from Cordoba whose 1068 chronicle, the *kitab al-masalik wa-l'mamalik* (the book of Routes and Realms), was based on accounts relayed to him in Spain by travelers to the Sahel.²¹ He identifies Ghana's leader as Tunka

¹⁹ Louis Desplagnes, *Le Plateau Central Nigérien. Une mission archéologique et ethnographique au Soudan*, Paris, Larose, 1907, p. 57

²⁰ Raymond Mauny, « Poteries à fossette basale (*dimple-based*) des fouilles de Kouga », in *Notes Africaines*, n° 103, 1964, pp. 72-73

²¹ Alisa LaGamma, « Pre-Islamic Artistic Patronage » in Alisa LaGamma, *Sahel. Art and Empires on the Shores of the Sahara*, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2020, p. 76

Manin, a powerful ruler who possessed great authority, underscoring the fact that while many of his ministers were Muslims, he and his people venerated royal ancestors. Al Bakri described the burial customs of the Soninke king of the Ghana Empire:

When the king dies, these negroes built a large wooden dome on the burial spot. Then they lay down the body on rugs and cushions inside the dome. They put besides him his weapons and his jewelry, the vessels and cups in which he drank and different kinds of food. Then they buried the king with some of his cooks. The whole construction is then covered by mats and cotton sheets and the people covered the dome with earth in order to create a large mound.²²

El Bakri's detailed description matches perfectly with two earthen structures excavated by Desplagnes at the contemporaneous Middle Niger sites of Killi and El-Oualedi, whose outer layers, respectively 18 and 12 meters high, were baked by fire on the surface. The dates obtained by thermoluminescence on 15 Soninke ceramic red-slip vessels, ranging between A.D. 950 and 1385, are consistent with those of the Ghana Empire.²³

The assemblage from El Oualedji reflects a combination of fine local craftsmanship and global trade connections linking the Soninke kingdom of Ghana to the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean and the Middle East, between A.D. 500 to 1300.²⁴

The use of ritual pottery in West African religions has yet to be fully documented. Trying to reconstruct the ancient meaning of elegant clay vessels in archaeological context by ethnographic inference is a fascinating challenge. A very complete study on Dogon ancestral vessels can be found in Germaine Dieterlen's *Les âmes des Dogon*, where she explains that the Dogon see ritual pottery when placed on an altar, forming with this shrine a larger religious and architectural unit.²⁵

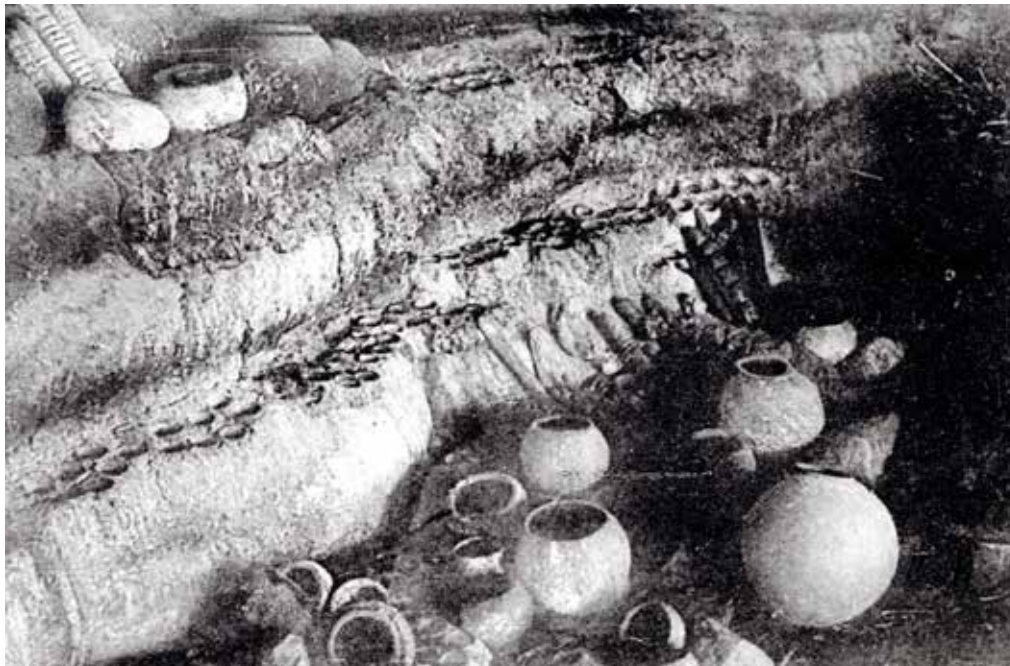


Fig. 12 - Photo of a Dogon altar for the ancestors with ceramic vessels of a family from the village of Yogo Pilou in Germaine Dieterlen, 1941, pl. Vb

²² Abou Obeïd El Bekri, *Description de l'Afrique septentrionale*, traduit par Mac Guckin de Slane, Paris, A. Maisonneuve, 1965, p. 330

²³ Bernard de Grunne, *Ancient Pottery from Mali. Some preliminary Remarks*, Munich, Galerie Biedermann, 1983, p. 25

²⁴ Yaëlle Biro and Ibrahima Thiaw, « Collection the Sahelian Past: Myth Building and Primary Sources », in Alisa LaGamma, 2020, p. 210

²⁵ Germaine Dieterlen, *Les âmes des Dogon*, Paris, Institut d'Ethnologie, 1941, planche vb

List of Thermoluminescence dates of Soninke Pottery:		
1	Oval vessel (de Grunne, 1983, Cat. 7)	A.D. 968-1238
2	Bottle from Killi (LaGamma, 2020, p. 212)	A.D. 1000-1160
3	Round bowl QED2339/BA-0304 (Cat. 9)	A.D. 1024-1324
4	Simple vase QED2339/BA-0302 (Cat. 10)	A.D. 1024-1324
5	Spherical bottle (de Grunne, 1983, Cat. 1)	A.D. 1050-1360
6	Vase from Killi (LaGamma, 2020, p. 212)	A.D. 1120-1320
7	Spherical bottle QED2339/BA-0303 (Cat. 11)	A.D. 1124-1324
8	Carinated jar (de Grunne, 1983, Cat. 13)	A.D. 1138-1418
9	Bottle from Killi (LaGamma, 2020, p. 212)	A.D. 1140-1300
10	Fluted Boston round jar R145440A (Cat. 12)	A.D. 1180-1350
11	Spherical bottle QED2030/FA-0302 (Private Collection)	A.D. 1274-1474
12	Spherical bottle QED2339/BA-0301 (Cat. 13)	A.D. 1274-1474
13	Spherical bottle QED2339/BA-0305 (Cat. 14)	A.D. 1274-1474
14	Bottle from Killi (LaGamma, 2020, p. 212)	A.D. 1320-1480
15	Spherical bottle QED2023/FA-0304 (Private Collection)	A.D. 1324-1524

Pottery from the Congo Basin (Cat. 15-21)

These amazing anthropomorphic earthenware vessels (Cat. 15 & 16) are part of a very rare corpus of vessels attributed to the Teke or Lari. The very dynamic sculptural quality of this vessel is enhanced by the sweeping curves of its handles and its firmly planted feet. The allusion to the human body is unmistakable. This vessel was created by a very talented artist around the turn of the century. Another very similar belongs to the National Museum of African Art at the Smithsonian Institution.²⁶ Pottery in innovative forms or with figurative elements predates the onset of colonial period in Africa. However, the arrival of Europeans in increasing numbers in the late 19th century stimulated the creativity of artists in Central Africa. Mangbetu and Zande anthropomorphic vessels became popular among both local and foreign buyers. For instance, the Woyo potter Voania Muba developed a highly creative form of figurative ceramics which was quite popular. Our Lari Master belongs to a short-lived tradition created by a few technically proficient potters who produced works for only one or two generations, ending with the Second World War.

The two small vessels from the Lower Congo region (Cat. 17 & 18) belong to another specific style with an unusual pale-yellow clay with a marble effect. Their surface decoration is achieved by splashing a thick infusion of resinous vegetable matter on the pots while still hot, so that it boils off unevenly.²⁷ I have illustrated a series of similar pots (Fig. 13 & 14), all collected before 1906 from the collection of the Africa Museum in Tervuren and published in the monumental study of ceramics from Congo.²⁸

²⁶ The National Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C. inv. n° 85.4.1, sold by Willy Mestach in Brussels (1984). Another vessel belongs to the Donald and Adele Hall collection of African Art, Saint Louis. Cfr. David Brinkley, *A Private Passion. The Donald and Adele Hall Collection of African Art*, Seattle, Marquand Books, 2015, p. 263

²⁷ Nigel Barley, *Smashing Pots. Works of Clay from Africa*, London, The Trustees of the British Museum, 1994, p. 30

²⁸ « Notes analytiques des collections ethnographiques du Musée du Congo », Tome II, « Les Industries indigènes, Fascicule 1, « La Céramique », in *Annales du musée du Congo, Ethnographie et Anthropologie, Série III*, Bruxelles, 1907, planche VIII



Fig. 13 Pottery vessels from the Lower and Middle Congo (from the Coast to the Stanley-Pool) in *Anales du musée du Congo*, 1907, Tome 2, Fascicule 1, planche VIII

Three supremely elegant water jars (Cat. 19-21), attributed to the Babuma and related Bateke people living in the region north of the lower Zaire River, are part of a very distinctive group modelled in a light-colored clay. They are all round and symmetrical with very fine, combed lines on the shoulders. Indeed, many African potters place their work in a shallow dish which supports the pot; the dish is turned rapidly with one hand as the patterns are applied, resulting in work that has the appearance of having been made on a wheel. The shoulders of all three pots are decorated with extremely small, closely spaced, evenly applied punch patterns made with the swift application of a small, sharp point. The spout shows a bulbous opening and all the incised patterns have been highlighted by the application of a dark red slip. Again, the tradition started in the 19th century as a group of three very similar jars were in the collections of the Africa Museum, Tervuren before 1905.²⁹

This tradition continued until the 1940s with a brisk production made for sale at the Musée de la Vie Indigène, Leopoldville in 1946. We are fortunate to have the name of one of these Babuma potters, a certain Pagnie from Eboli-Nsiele, who probably continued until 1936 this artistic tradition initiated most certainly before 1900.³⁰ (Fig. 15) Another fine example was in the collection of the Bareis family in München.³¹

²⁹ *Op.cit.*, planche X

³⁰ I want to thank Dr. Julien Volper Curator at the Africa Museum for mentioning to me the reference on this style. Cfr. R.N.B. (Radio Nationale Belge) « Une visite au Musée de la Vie Indigène à Léopoldville » in *Brousse*, 1946, n° 3-4, p. 14

³¹ Christopher Roy, *Kilengi. African Art from the Bareis family Collection*, Hannover, Kestneer Gesellschaft and University of Washington Press, 1997, p. 246, cat. 154



Fig. 14. - Pottery vessels from the Bateke, Babuma and other cultures in *Anales du musée du Congo*, 1907, Tome 2, Fascicule 1, planche x



Fig. 15 - Two Gargoulettes, the right one by potter Pagnie (from Eboli-Nsiele) in R.N.B (Radio Nationale Belge), 1949, n° 3-4, p. 14

Twa Pygmy Monumental Vessel. (Cat. 22)

The creative power of the pygmies of tropical Central Africa had already impressed Ancient Egypt with a brief reference to their art of singing and dancing as my mentor, Professor Robert Faris Thompson, remarked in his seminal essay on the aesthetics of their bark paintings.³² This monumental terracotta vessel, made by a Twa potter for Tutsi people, is a masterpiece of coiled pottery. It takes a highly skilled potter to make such a perfectly shaped, round, coiled pot of this size. Its body is incredibly thin for a pot of this size - no more than 1.5 cm thick. It is discreetly decorated on its shoulder with incised triangles, a motif used by Mbutse pygmy women in their bark paintings. (Fig. 16) A large area of the vessels has a blackened, Rorschach-like firing stain. Given the delicacy of its construction, it may have been used for grain instead of water or beer, as it would be much lighter than liquid and thus less likely to stress the refined structure of the pot.³³ As such, this vessel is a remarkable example of a true dilemma between the strange clash of artistic sophistication and the simple economic means of Pygmy lifestyle, filled with hours of leisure time. Indeed, this vessel becomes the evidence of this sophistication, as exemplified also by their polyphonic singing, and the Zen-like experiments of their bark painting reminiscent of brushworks admired in Chinese painting during the period of the Southern Sung and the linear turbulence and freedom of Jackson Pollock.

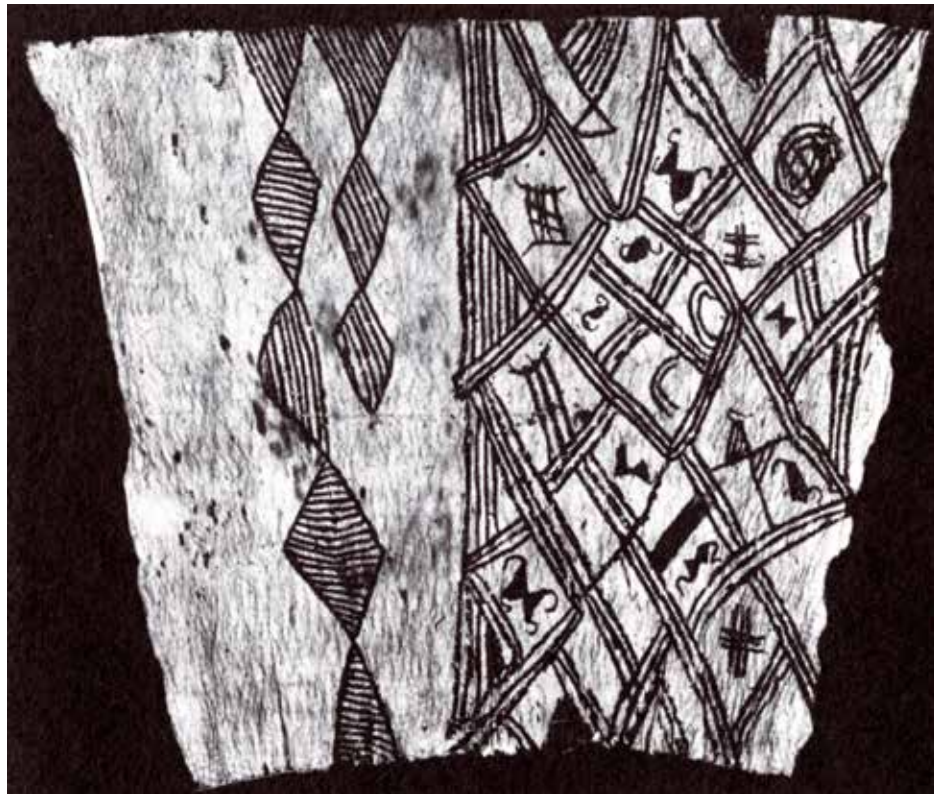


Fig. 16 - Mbutse Pygmy bark painting
50 x 42 cm
in Thompson, 1983, no 7

³² Robert Faris Thompson, *Painting from a Single Heart, preliminary remarks on bark-cloth designs of the Mbutse Women of Haut-Zaire*, Munich, Fred and Jens Jahn, 1983

³³ Alan Marcuson and Diane Hall, *The Art of Daily Life*, London, Connolly, 2019, cat. 15. The attribution to the Twa was given to Marcuson and Hall by Alain Guisson at the time (D. Hall, personal communication, 2/8/2024)

Zulu ceramic traditions, South Africa. (Cat. 23-28)

The perfection achieved in shape of Zulu pots was due to the natural ability of Zulu female potters in creating spheres. Their stark simplicity and spare embellishment, generally pure in form, are a testament to Zulu women potters' enormous skill and acumen: Their double-curved volume built coil-by-coil, their cambered surfaces embodying a taut, internalized strength, refined by external burnishing before being fired.

One is taken by the sheer beauty and control of the form of each vessel, as well as the consummate precision required to calculate the pattern sequence.

Zulu rimless pots made from fine brown or black clay are produced by women throughout the KwaZulu Natal region. They are characterized by a smooth, glossy black finish achieved by refiring the already baked pots in a dry grass fire, before rubbing their surface with animal fat, usually with the aid of a small pebble. The use of incised lines or raised *amasumpa* or "warts" is certainly one of the most frequent decorative techniques used by Zulu potters. Pots of this kind are intended principally for serving and drinking sorghum-based beer, which is brewed in larger, comparatively roughly made, clay vessel. The drinking of this beer is associated not only with the living, but also with the dead, to whom it is offered whenever rituals dictate that the ancestors must be honored.³⁴

19th-century ceramic vessels are rare compared to Zulu beadwork and wooden objects which survived from this period, as they were readily collected and transported, surviving the long journey back to Europe and Britain. Pots, on the other hand, due to their fragility and bulkiness, rarely lasted the journey intact. Two watercolors by English explorer, naturalist and painter, George French Angas, made among Zulu in 1847, show two clay vessels lying on the ground in front of Zulu women (Fig. 17 & 18). A rare example of a beer vessel in the Local History Museum in Durban was collected around 1879.³⁵ (Fig.19) However, the emergence of the main stylistic regions of Zulu pottery is a purely 20th century phenomenon. Archaeological evidence suggests that from about A.D. 1700 to 1850, black burnished vessels were much the exception rather than the rule, and the decoration was limited to lines impressions or a few elongated lozenges.³⁶

There are four distinct types of beer vessels, according to their volume and function. All but one (Cat. 28) of the Zulu pottery published here belong to the *ukhamba* type used for serving beer. Thanks to Frank Jolles deep and extensive research starting in the late 1990s, based on meticulous fieldwork, interviews with pots owners, and tracking down the living potters - some of which still remembered the flu epidemic of 1918-1924-, we are very fortunate to have a superb study of 20th century Zulu ceramic art styles.

³⁴ Sandra Klopper, « Caption Earthenware vessel », in Tom Phillips, ed., *Africa: The Art of a Continent*, London, The Royal Academy of Arts, 1995, p. 221, cat. 3.39a

³⁵ Phillips, 1995, p. 221, cat. 3..38

³⁶ Frank Jolles, *Zulu Beer Vessels in the Twentieth Century*, Stuttgart, Arnoldsche Art Publishers, 2015, p. 19

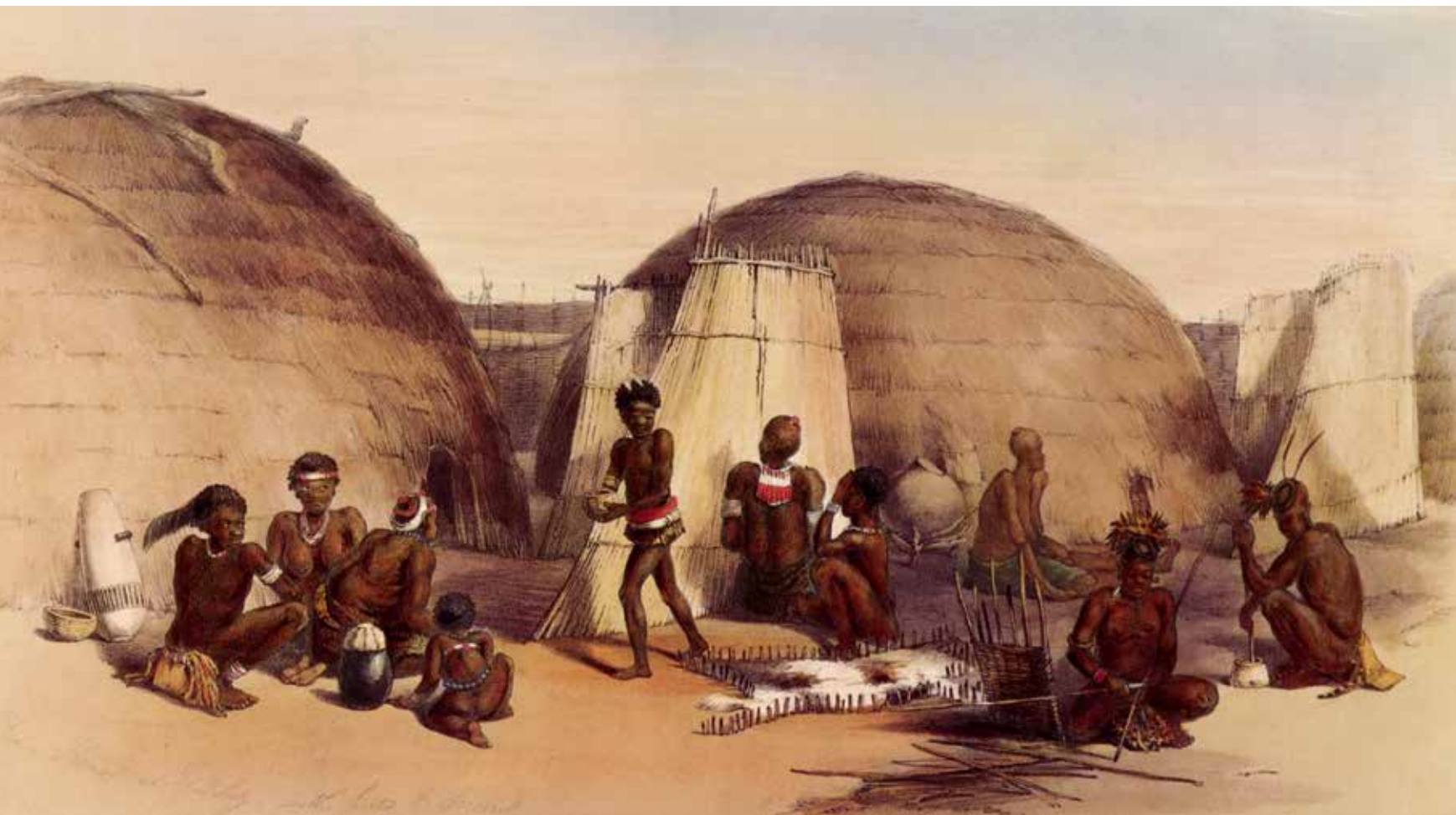


Fig. 17 - Zulu Kraal at Umlazi with an *ukhamba* vessel, by George French Angas, 1847



Fig. 18 - Portraits of Unomnyanya and Unobasoko, two Zulu girls, by George French Angas, 1847, British Museum 1876.0510.501. In John Giblin and Chris Spring, 2016, p. 77, plate 11



Fig. 19 - Beer vessel (*uphiso*), Zulu, South Africa, collected before 1879
H. 37,3 cm

Provenance : Local History Museum, Durban, NN90/39

Publication : Tom Phillips, *Africa: The Art of a Continent*, Munich/New York, Prestel, 1995, p. 220, fig. 3.38



Fig. 20. - «Dinuzulu's drinking vessels and his wives who made his beer », circa 1896-1907.

In Frank Jolles, 2015, p. 123



Fig. 21 - Earthenware vessel (*ukhamba*) Zulu, South Africa, by Aselinah Mbatha
H :34 cm

Provenance : Private Collection, Munich
Publication : Tom Phillips, *Africa: The Art of a Continent*,
Munich/New York, Prestel, 1995, p. 221, fig. 3.39a



Fig. 22 - Pot number 232 (*Ukhamba*), Zulu, South Africa, by Aselinah Mbatha
H : 35 cm / W : 39 cm

Provenance : Made by Aselinah Mbatha, Circa 1970, for her sister's wedding
Karel Nel collection

Publication : Frank Jolles, *Zulu Beer Vessels in the twentieth century*,
Stuttgart, Arnoldsche Art Publishers, 015, p. 71, no. 232

Jolles has defined six main regional styles of Zulu beer vessels. The five Zulu vessels presented here belong to the Nongoma region style, which has long been considered as the origin of the *amasumpa* motif.

Beer vessel Cat. 23 is one of the rare examples where a Zulu artist can be identified by name. This *ukhamba* was created around 1970 by Asolinah Mbatha (also variously described as Adzina Mcube or Azolina Ngema).³⁷ Two other vessels by Asolinah Mbatha are known, one in a private collection in Munich and another one in the collection of Karel Nel.³⁸

The four other *Ukhamba* vessels are all decorated with various types of this *amasumpa* motif that Jolles has classified into four types:

1. The most common is made of applied panels of clay.
2. Individual pinched protuberances applied singly
3. Singular rounded *amasumpa* (like "smarties") applied singly and flattened
4. Motif pressed from the inside of the pot while the clay was still pliable.³⁹

Finally, the *uphisi*, a narrow-necked water jar from the Msinga region (Cat. 28), was part of a pair of ceremonial wedding gifts. One vessel was given to the groom prior to the wedding, while the second one had a chip broken out of the rim, which was placed in the girl's home to indicate to her family that she was going to her husband's house.⁴⁰

To conclude, the emergence Zulu pot-making in the 20th century can be traced back to the second half of the 19th century, when clay pots began to supplant baskets as the primary drinking vessels. This shift occurred during the period following the Wolseley settlement of 1879, which effectively split the Zulu kingdom into 13 distinct tribal areas. The absence of centralized authority and the introduction of new styles imported by women who married across tribal boundaries contributed to the formation of a new identity for themselves.

My choice for this exhibition and essay was based on purely aesthetic considerations and was never intended to provide a comprehensive survey of the diverse forms and styles that can be found in African art. This study has already been carried out by Arnulf Stössel in his exhibition catalogue in 1984.⁴¹ Despite the existence of a Stone Age and subsequent revolutionary Iron Age and Bronze Age in Europe, there is no glamorous Pottery Age. From the almost infinite possibilities offered by clay, each culture has opted to develop its own style. Moreover, as the English anthropologist Nigel Barley has noted, pottery provides models for thinking about the human body. Levi-Strauss, in his own study of Amerindian potting, shows how deep the cultural roots of both men and women potters go, connecting mythical relationships between pottery and the cooking of food.⁴²

As an African proverb goes, from the time a man leaves his mother's breast, he will be eating food from a clay pot for the rest of his life.⁴³

³⁷ Kevin Conru, catalogue entry beer vessel, n° 56 in Karel Nel and Sandra Klopper, *The Art of Southeast Africa*, Milan, 5 Continents, 2002, p. 203

³⁸ Phillips, 1995, p. 221, cat. 3.39a; Hélène Joubert and Manuel Valentin, *Ubuntu. Arts et cultures d'Afrique du Sud*, Paris, Réunion des musées nationaux et musée national des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie, 2002, cat. 63, pp. 244-45 and Jolles, 2015, p. 232 cat. 232

³⁹ Jolles, 2015, p. 43

⁴⁰ Jolles, 2015, p. 176

⁴¹ Kagwa, 1934; Roscoe, 1911 and Stössel, Arnulf, *Afrikanische Keramik*, Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde München, München, Hirmer Verlag, 1984

⁴² Barley, 1994, p. 17

⁴³ Trowell, 1947, p. 58



Woman holding a ceramic vessel, Mali,
In Falgayrettes-Leveau, 1997, p. 14



Female figure, Soninke, Mali
Datation : A.D. 1320-1435
Height : 76 cm
Provenance :
Collection Jacques et Denise Schwob,
Bruxelles, avant 1960
Publication :
Bernard de Grunne, *Soninké*, Brussels, 2024, Cat. 40

Catalogue

| 1

**Baganda royal vessel,
Kingdom of Buganda,
Uganda**

Height : 31 cm

Provenance :

Michael Graham-Stewart, U.K.

Alan Marcuson,
Marcuson & Hall Gallery,
Brussels



| 2

**Baganda royal vessel,
Kingdom of Buganda,
Uganda**

Height : 38 cm

Provenance :

Fieldings Auctioneers, U.K.,
January 6, 2018, lot 681

Alan Marcuson,
Marcuson & Hall Gallery,
Brussels



| 3

Baganda royal vessel, Kingdom of Buganda, Uganda

Height : 34 cm

Provenance :

Michael Graham-Stewart, U.K.

Alan Marcuson,
Marcuson & Hall Gallery,
Brussels



| 4

**Baganda royal vessel,
Kingdom of Buganda,
Uganda**

Height : 33 cm

Provenance :

Stothert & Trice, London

Alan Marcuson,
Marcuson & Hall Gallery,
Brussels



| 5

Baganda royal vessel, Kingdom of Buganda, Uganda

Height : 18 cm

Provenance :

Rob Temple, Gent

Alan Marcuson,
Marcuson & Hall Gallery,
Brussels



|6

**Baganda royal vessel,
Kingdom of Buganda,
Uganda**

Height : 16 cm

Provenance :

Stothert & Trice, London

Alan Marcuson,
Marcuson & Hall Gallery,
Brussels



| 7

**Baganda royal vessel,
Kingdom of Buganda,
Uganda**

Height : 18 cm

Provenance :

Eastbourne Auction Room,
U.K., 12 September 2013, lot 179

Alan Marcuson,
Marcuson & Hall Gallery,
Brussels



| 8

Black-topped red ware, Predynastic Period, Naqada I-II, Egypte

Datation : B.C. 4800-3800
(Test TL, QED 2420/BG-0101)

Height : 36,5 cm

Provenance :

Hassani Abd-el-Galeel, Cairo
Nassar Brothers (licence 123),
Cairo, 1974

Mr. Kobayashi, Paris, 1974

Publication :

Paris, Hôtel Drouot,
*Tableaux Anciens, MAO -
Asie, Maison R&C,*
6 décembre 2022, lot 205



|9

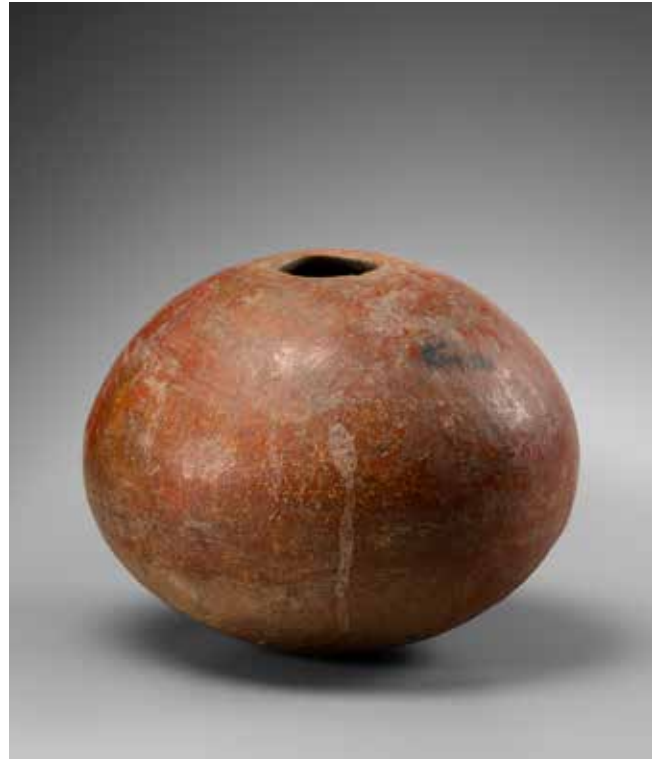
Royal ceramic vessel, Soninke Kingdom, Léré/Diré region, Mali

Datation : A.D. 1024-1324
(Test TL QED 2339/BA-0304)

Height : 17 cm

Provenance :

Collection Baudouin de Grunne,
Wezembeek-Oppem, *circa* 1971



|10

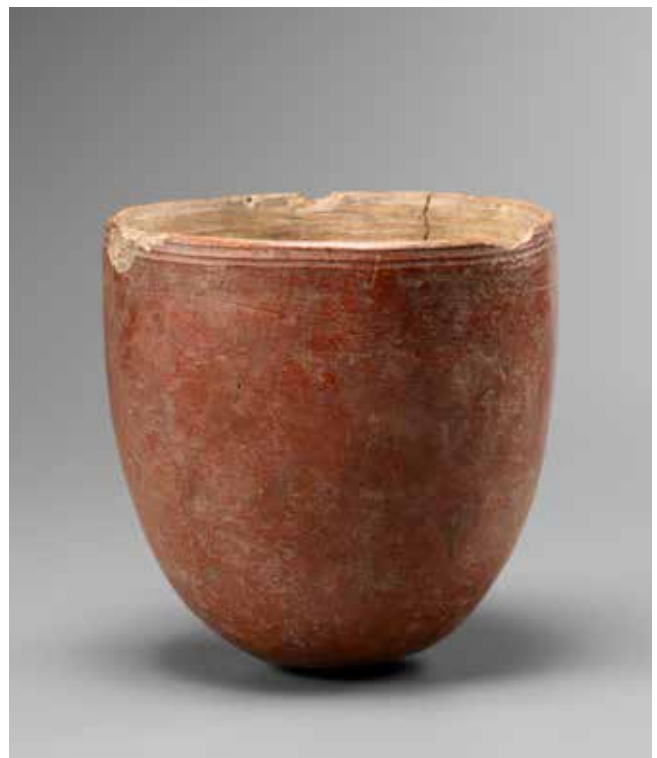
Royal ceramic vessel, Soninke Kingdom, Léré/Diré region, Mali

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(Test TL QED 2339-BA-0302)

Height : 16 cm

Provenance :

Collection Baudouin de Grunne,
Wezembeek-Oppem, *circa* 1971



| 11

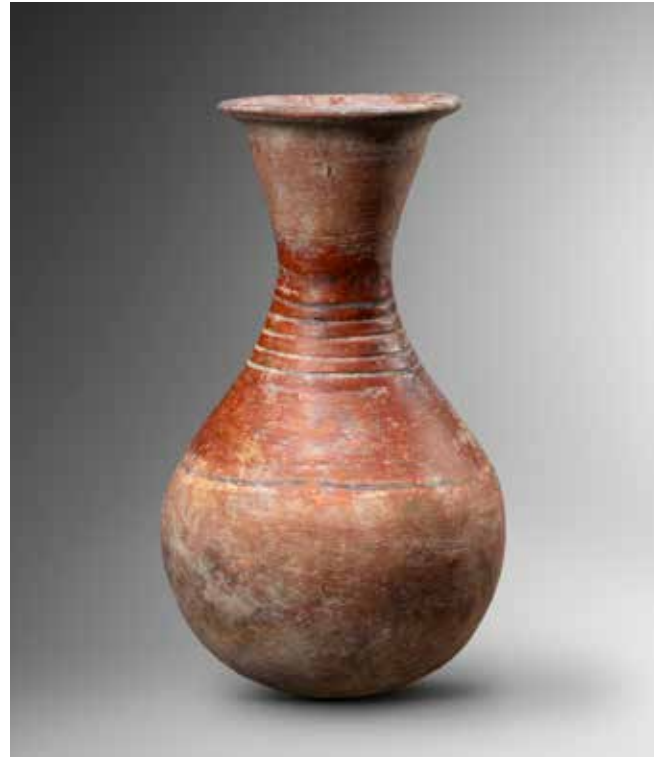
Royal ceramic vessel, Soninke Kingdom, Léré/Diré region, Mali

Datation : A.D. 1124-1324
(Test TL QED 2339-BA-0303)

Height : 25,5 cm

Provenance :

Collection Baudouin de Grunne,
Wezembeek-Oppem, *circa* 1971



| 12

Royal ceramic vessel, Soninke Kingdom, Léré/Diré region, Mali

Datation : A.D. 1180- 1350
(Test Re.S. Artes, n° R 145440A , 2024)

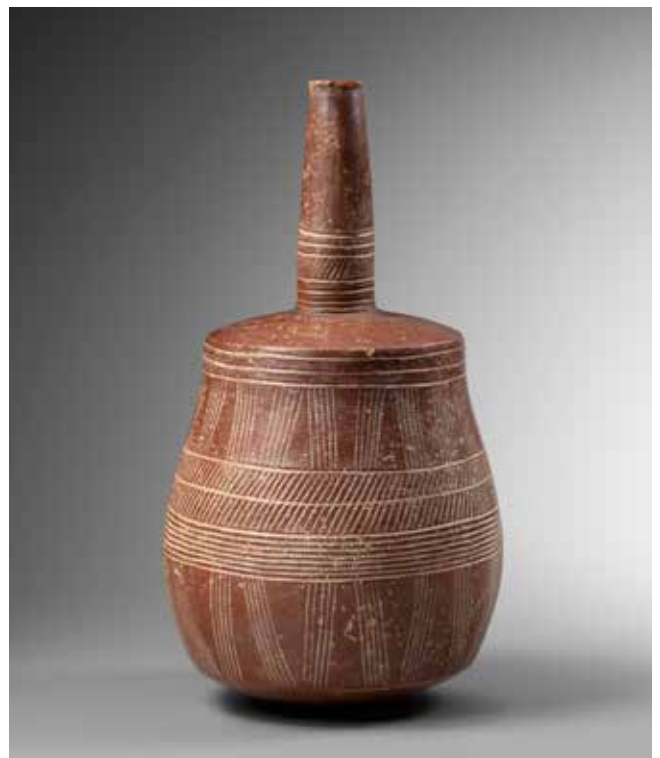
Height : 40 cm

Provenance :

Adolfo Bartolomucci, Mali, *circa* 1970

Publication :

Adolfo Bartolomucci, *Dalla terra fino all' arte. Arte figurativa e cultura materiale dell' Africa occidentale*, Milano, African Art Gallery, p. 35, pl. 12



|13

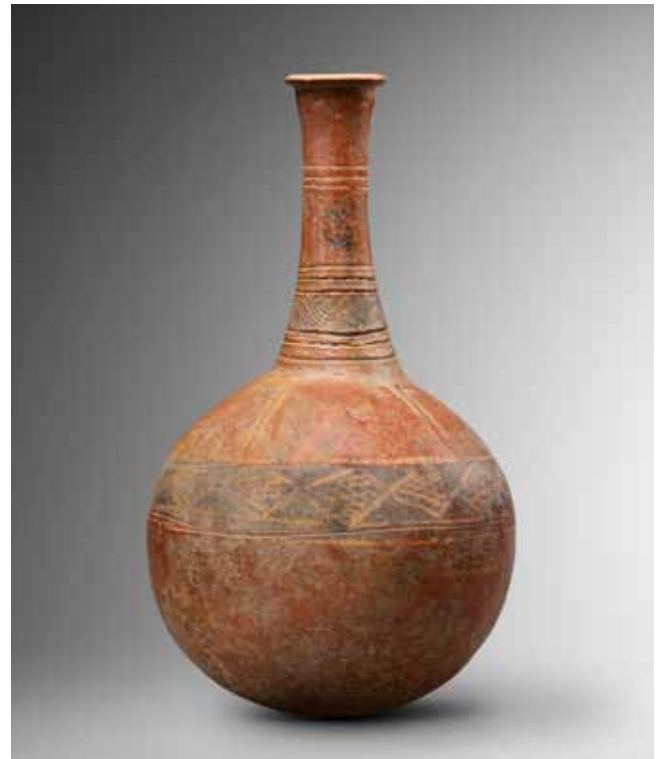
Royal ceramic vessel, Soninke Kingdom, Léré/Diré region, Mali

Datation : A.D. 1274-1474
(Test TL QED 2339-BA-0301)

Height : 36,5 cm

Provenance :

Collection Baudouin de Grunne,
Wezembeek-Oppem, *circa* 1971



|14

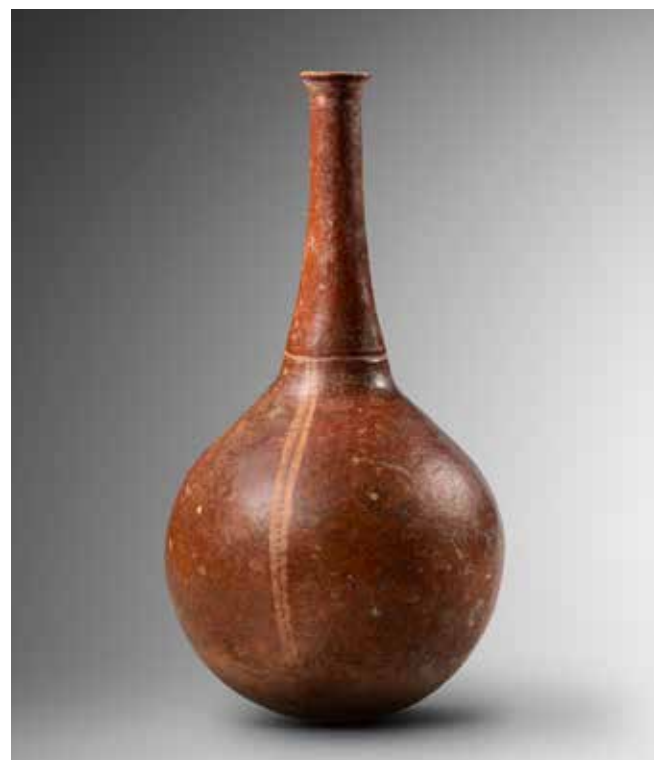
Royal ceramic vessel, Soninke Kingdom, Léré/Diré region, Mali

Datation : A.D. 1274-1474
(Test TL QED 2339-BA-0305)

Height : 36,5 cm

Provenance :

Collection Baudouin de Grunne,
Wezembeek-Oppem, *circa* 1971



|15

**Anthropomorphic ceramic vessel,
Bandundu Province or Likoula Province,
Lari/Teke, D.R.C.**

Height : 24 cm

Provenance :

Private collection, acquired *in situ*, before 1950

Michel Mouvet, Liège

Galerie Claes, Brussels



The National Museum of African Art,
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 85-4-1



|16

**Anthropomorphic ceramic vessel,
Bandundu Province or Likoula Province,
Lari/Teke, D.R.C.**

Height : 24 cm

Provenance :

Private collection, acquired *in situ*, before 1950

Michel Mouvet, Liège

Galerie Claes, Brussels



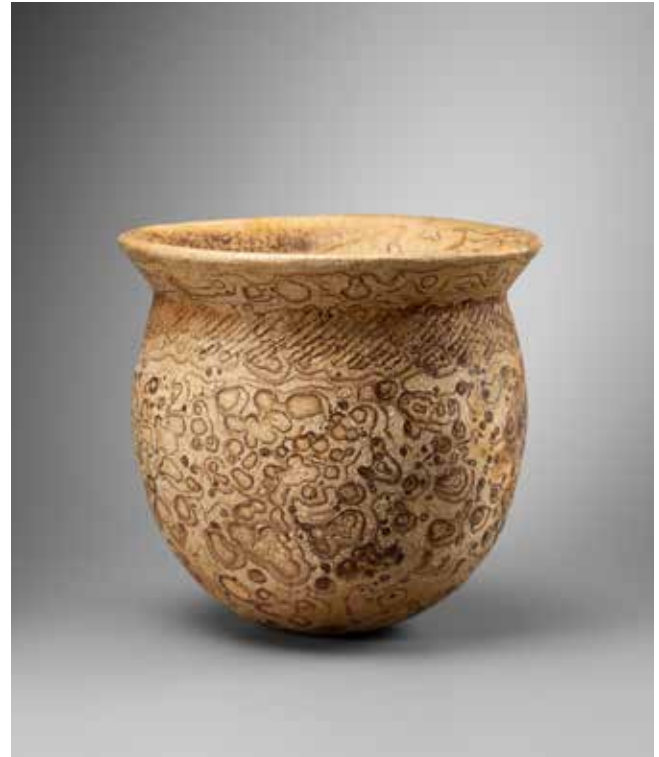
| 17

Ceramic vessel with rim, Kongo Sundi/Manyanga, D.R.C.

Height : 14 cm

Provenance :

Collection Renaud Jouslin de Noray,
Brussels



| 18

Ceramic bottle-shaped vessel, Kongo Sundi/Manyanga, D.R.C.

Height : 26 cm

Provenance :

Collection Renaud Jouslin de Noray, Brussels



|19

Ceramic vessel, Babuma, D. R. C.

Height : 42 cm

Provenance :

Alain Guisson, Brussels

Collection Renaud Jouslin de Noray, Brussels



|20

Ceramic vessel with long-neck, Babuma, D. R. C.

Height : 33,5 cm

Provenance :

Alain Guisson, Brussels

Collection Renaud Jouslin de Noray, Brussels



| 21

**Ceramic vessel
with long-neck,
Babuma, D. R. C.**

Height : 37,5 cm

Provenance :

Acquired by Belgian administrator
René Tonnoir, between 1921-1951

Collection Marc Felix, Brussels



| 22

Monumental ceramic vessel, Central Africa,

made by a Twa pygmy potter for Tutsi people

Height : 64 cm - Diameter : 54 cm

Provenance :

Alain Guisson, Brussels

Alan Marcuson,

Marcuson & Hall, Brussels



Twa women carrying traditional pottery, Burundi.
Encyclopædia Britannica



| 23

Ceramic vessel *Ukhamba*, Nongoma Region, Zulu, South Africa

Attributed to Asolinah Mbatha

Height : 27,5 cm

Provenance :

Acquired by Alain Guisson, Brussels, 1980s

Collection Kevin Conru, Brussels

Collection Anna Bennett, Brussels

Publication :

Sandra Klopper and Anitra Nettleton,
The Art of Southern Africa, Milano, 5 Continents,
2007, cat. 56



|24

Ceramic vessel *Ukhamba*, Nongoma Region, Zulu, South Africa

Height : 26.5 cm

Provenance :

Acquired by Kevin Conru in the Nongoma region, 1991 -
belonged to the grandmother of the previous owner in the 60 's

Collection Kevin Conru, Brussels

Collection Anna Bennett, Brussels



| 25

**Ceramic vessel *Ukhamba*,
Nongoma Region, Zulu, South Africa**

Height : 27 cm

Provenance :

Acquired by Alain Guisson in the Nongoma region, 1980s

Collection Kevin Conru, Brussels

Collection Anna Bennett, Brussels



| 26

Ceramic vessel *Ukhamba*, Nongoma Region, Zulu, South Africa

Height : 25.5 cm

Provenance :

Acquired by Kevin Conru and Frank Jolles in the Nongoma region, 1991

Collection Kevin Conru, Brussels

Collection Anna Bennett, Brussels



| 27

Ceramic vessel *Ukhamba*, Nongoma Region, Zulu, South Africa

Attributed to Madaka

Height : 28 cm

Provenance :

Acquired by Alain Guisson, north of the Thukela River, 1980s

Collection Kevin Conru, Brussels

Collection Anna Bennett, Brussels

Publications :

Sandra Klopper and Anitra Nettleton,
The Art of Southern Africa, Milano, 5 Continents,
2007, cat. 64



| 28

Ceramic vessel *Uphisi* or *ingcazi* (*'narrow-necked water jar'*), Msinga Region, Zulu, South Africa

Height : 36 cm

Provenance :

Collection Kevin Conru, Brussels

Collection Anna Bennett, Brussels



| 29

**Ceramic Footed bowl *Sekhona*,
Sotho, Lesotho**

Height : 21,5 cm

Provenance :

Stothert & Trice, London

Alan Marcuson, Marcuson & Hall Gallery,
Brussels



| 30

**Ceramic Footed bowl *Sekhona*,
Sotho, Lesotho**

Height : 23,5 cm

Provenance :

Stothert & Trice, London

Alan Marcuson, Marcuson & Hall Gallery,
Brussels



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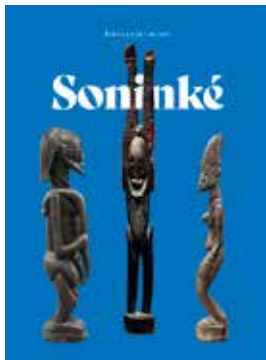
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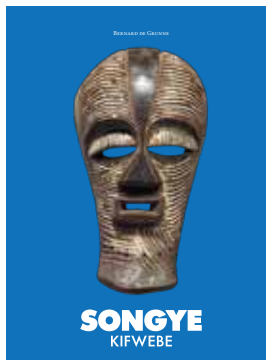
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2019



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2015



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2014



2014

Remontez le temps
LEGA



2013



ON LEGA STYLES

2013



KABEIA

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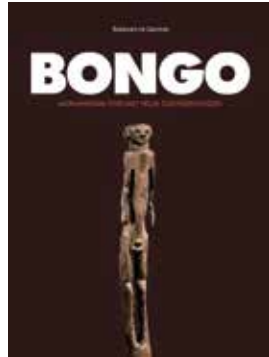


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2012

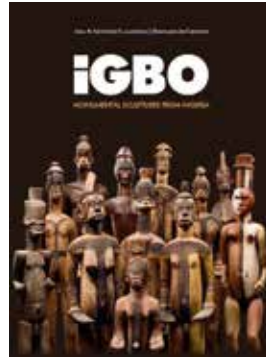


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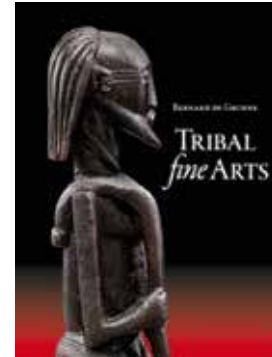
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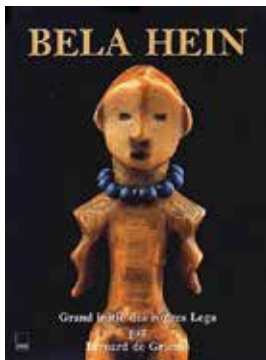
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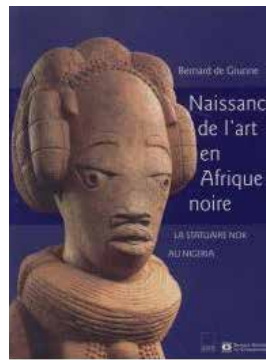
Grand maître des styles Lega
par Bernard de Grioux

2001



maîtres
de maîtres

2001



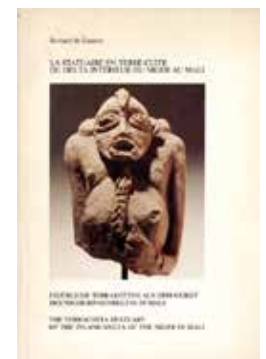
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ALGERIE

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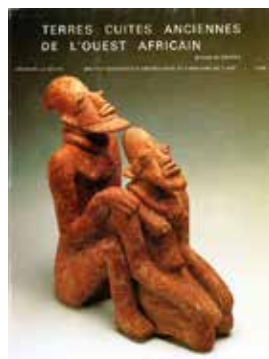
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1982



TERRES CUITES. ANCIENNES
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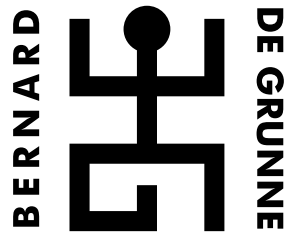
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