Kuba Kingdom

The Kuba Kingdom (also Kuba, Bakuba or Bushongo) (1625–1900) was a pre-colonial Central African state bordered by the Sankuru, Lulua, and Kasai rivers in the southeast of what is today the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire). The Kuba kingdom was a conglomerate of several smaller Bushongo-speaking principalities as well as the Kete, Coofa, Mbeengi, and the Cwa Pygmies. The original Kuba migrated during the 16th century from the north.

History

Shyaam a-Mbul
The kingdom began as a conglomeration of several chiefdoms of various ethnic groups with no real central authority. In approximately 1625, an individual from outside the area known as Shyaam a-Mbul a Ngoong usurped the position of one of the area rulers and united all the chiefdoms under his leadership. Tradition states that Shyaam a-Mbul was the adopted son of a Kuba queen. He left the Kuba region to find enlightenment in the Pende and Kongo kingdoms to the west. After learning all he could from these states, he returned to Kuba to form the empire's political, social and economic foundations.

A new government
The Kuba government was reorganized toward a merit-based title system, but power still remained firmly in the hands of the aristocracy. The Kuba government was controlled by a king called the *nyim* who belonged to the Bushoong clan. The king was responsible to a court council of all the Kuba subgroups, who were represented equally before the king by their elites.

Growth
As the kingdom matured, it benefited from advanced techniques adopted from neighboring peoples as well as New World crops introduced from the Americas, such as maize, tobacco, cassava and beans. Kuba became very wealthy, which resulted in great artistic works commissioned by the Kuba nobility. The Kuba kings retained the most fanciful works for court ceremony and were also buried with these artifacts.

Apex and decline
The Kuba Kingdom reached its apex during the mid 19th century. Europeans first reached the area in 1884. Because of the kingdom's relative isolation, it was not as affected by the slave trade as were the Kongo and Ndongo kingdoms on the coast. Toward the end of the 19th century, the kingdom was invaded by the Nsapo people. The weakened Kingdom never recovered, and it was fragmented into chiefdoms once again by the time of the area became a Belgian colony.

The current reigning monarch, Kot-a-Mbweeky III, has been on the throne since 1969.
Kuba Kingdom

Kuba culture

Kuba art

The Kuba are known for their raffia embroidered textiles, fiber and beaded hats, carved palm wine cups and cosmetic boxes, but they are most famous for their monumental helmet masks, featuring exquisite geometric patterns, stunning fabrics, seeds, beads and shells. They have been described as a people who cannot bear to leave a surface without ornament.

The boxes, known as Kuba Boxes and called ngedi mu ntey by the Kuba, are generally used to hold tukula powder and paste. The boxes are usually in the shape of a square with a faceted lid, a semicircle (sometimes referred to as "half moon"), a rectangle or the shape of a mask. Sometimes they were used for holding razors for cutting raffia, hairpins or ritual objects.

Tukula (called twool by the Kuba) is a red powder made of ground camwood. The color red is essential to the Kuba concept of beauty and was therefore used to ornament the face, hair and chest during dances and important ceremonies, as well as to anoint bodies for burial. Tukula was also mixed with other pigments to dye raffia cloth.

After 1700, King Misha mi-Shyaang a-Mbul introduced wooden sculptures called ndop figures that were carved to resemble the king and represent his individual reign. These figures always included the king's ibol or personal symbol, akin to a personal standard.

The carved palm-wine drinking cups and ornately carved boxes are identified with competition between titled court members among the Kuba. With half of all Bushoong men holding titles in the 1880s, competition for influence was sometimes fierce, and it found expression in the elaboration of these essentially commonplace household objects into works of extraordinary beauty.

Kuba religion and mythos

The Kuba believed in Bumba the Sky Father who spewed out the sun, moon, stars, and planets. He also created life with the Earth Mother. However these were somewhat distant deities, and the Kuba placed more immediate concern in a supernatural being named Woot, who named the animals and other things. Woot was the first human and bringer of civilization. The Kuba are sometimes known as the "Children of Woot."

References

[1] Swarthmore article (http://www.swarthmore.edu/Humanities/pschmid1/kuba.html)

• Kingdoms of the Savanna: The Kuba Kingdom (http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/ld/kuba/ld_kuba.htm)
• The Bwoom Mask of the Kuba People (http://www.anthro.ku.edu/Central African Art/website_bwoom/web_pages/general.htm)
• Art & Life in Africa (http://www.uiowa.edu/~africart/toc/people/Kuba.html)
External links

- An exhibit of Kuba art held at Clemson University in 2002 (http://www.clemson.edu/caah/history/faculty/Miller Kuba/Kuba Site/kuba_home.html)
- Map of tribes in the area (http://www.randafricanart.com/sitebuilder/images/Kuba-541x466.jpg)
- Photos of Kuba Raffia Cloths (http://flickr.com/photos/71909327@N00/sets/72157602085585719/)
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