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Jan Vansina Remembered

# Words and Things and "The Kuba Miracle"

Colleen E. Kriger

**Abstract**: The essay revisits Vansina's work on the Kuba kingdom, drawing together art historical, historical linguistic, written documents, and oral sources. It argues that Vansina's eclectic methodology fostered continual revision to his historical conclusions as new material in one of those threads forced rethinking interpretations of the others. Vansina's captions to images of material forms from Kuba exemplify skilled compression while figuring African audiences, artisans, and owners of objects with humor and respect.

**Résumé**: Cet article revient sur le travail de Jan Vansina portant sur le royaume de Kuba, en rassemblant des sources écrites, orales et issues de l'histoire de l'art. Il montre que la méthodologie éclectique de Vansina a favorisé la révision continuelle de ses conclusions historiques grâce à l'apport de nouvelles sources qui l'ont forcé à repenser ses interprétations. Les légendes d'images écrites par Vansina pour les objets de la culture matérielle de Kuba montrent à quel point il savait être concis et habile tout en représentant le public africain, les artisans et les propriétaires d'objets avec humour et respect.

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## Introduction

In this appreciation of Jan Vansina I will focus on his lifelong fascination with the Kuba Kingdom and how much we owe him as a result. Over the course of his career he wrote and rewrote, revised, and reshaped his changing views of the kingdom's past, delving deeply into the complications of its political and social history and probing ever further back in time. Along the way he pioneered in historical methodology by demonstrating both the value and limitations of oral traditions and comparative Bantu linguistics as primary sources for the understanding and writing of precolonial African history. His restless and insatiable mind was just the right vehicle for picking apart the intricate threads and layerings built up over centuries in the making of Kuba history and the kingdom's oral, visual, and material culture.

Remarking on the first recorded European encounters with the Kuba Kingdom (which took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), Vansina chronicled how dazzled they were by the unexpected complexities and visual splendors of the kingdom and the elegant manners of its peoples. Searching for an explanation for such a distinctive and highly developed Central African civilization, one visitor suggested a link with Egypt of the Pharaohs while another compared the Kuba Kingdom to the early Roman Empire. Vansina proffered a judgement of his own, stating that there had been a "Kuba miracle" much like the well-known "Greek miracle" and that it required historical explanation. Thus begins Chapter 1 of *The Children of Woot: A History of the Kuba Peoples*, Vansina's second history of the Kuba Kingdom and a complete overhaul of the first one written in the early 1960s.[1] That overhaul – what it was, what prompted it, and what further research Vansina then embarked upon as a result – provides us with an effective illustration of Jan Vansina's intellectual energy and his persistent dedication to historical inquiry.

Vansina carried out fieldwork in Central Africa from 1953 to 1956 while pursuing a PhD in history, and from the beginning he was involved in gathering oral historical sources and developing rigorous methods for analyzing and interpreting both oral histories and oral traditions. He describes this period very vividly in his memoir and takes us through his initial culture-shocked bewilderment and then on to his breakthrough moment when an informant began to recite poems in an archaic form of the Bushong language. Recognizing that these poems were an oral genre comparable to the medieval dirges of Europe, Vansina understood that as such they constituted viable historical data – sources that could be subjected to rules of evidence in order to write history. He and his team of assistants then went on to gather over a thousand oral traditions. The many poems, tales, political traditions, kinglists, and other oral genres became

[1] Jan Vansina, *Children of Woot – A History of the Kuba Peoples* (Madison WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 3–4.

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the evidential basis for his PhD dissertation on oral tradition as historical method and also for his first history of the Kuba kingdom itself.[2] The latter was published in Dutch in 1963 and in French in 1964.

Ten years later, in the inaugural volume of *History in Africa*, Vansina summarized his analyses of that enormous corpus of Kuba oral traditions and explained how the chronicle he was able to create of the kingdom's origins dovetailed with relevant data available from ethnography and linguistics. He then ended his impressive summary with a bombshell: that his conclusions in this Kuba history were all wrong. At the heart of the matter were two newly discovered items: a statistical correction in the comparative Bantu linguistic dataset that showed the Bushong language was more closely related to the language north of the Kuba rather than the one to the west; and historical evidence that invalidated an episode in the royal narrative of Kuba history. What some researchers might have considered a major setback became to Vansina an invaluable lesson and promising opportunity. These new and unavoidable doubts that were cast on Kuba oral traditions did not disqualify them but instead opened them up to greater scrutiny and for a complete reassessment of Kuba history.[3] Vansina was coming to the realization that his first Kuba history was a history of the kingdom as seen through the special lens of its ruling elite, selectively remembered according to their consensus and conveyed in the royals' language of Bushong. As such it nevertheless was still a valuable if very limited perspective on Kuba history as a whole.

## Words and Things: *The Children of Woot*

And so we come to *The Children of Woot: A History of the Kuba Peoples*, a political, social, and cultural history of the Kuba Kingdom in precolonial times. Employing comparative Bantu language data and historical linguistics – the methodology he called "words and things" – he broadened and expanded the history of Kuba to include more widely shared aspects of their world and long-term historical trends and changes in their past that were not consciously known or deliberately remembered. As Vansina put it, the data and method exposed "internal innovations" in Kuba society and represented "testimony despite themselves."[4]

Vansina's "words and things" method enabled him to uncover invaluable historical evidence that was generated internally and collectively over time. Some of his greatest gifts to us are the appendices to his histories which are brimming with lexical terminology and his analyses of linguistic comparisons. *The Children of Woot* inaugurates the methodology

[2] Jan Vansina, *Living With Africa* (Madison WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 12–39.

[3] Jan Vansina, "The Power of Systematic Doubt in Historical Inquiry," *History in Africa* 1 (1974), 109–128, 110–115.

[4] Vansina, *Living with Africa*, 198–199.

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and its two appendices span over seventy pages. A short appendix discussing king lists and listing Kuba rulers is followed by a voluminous appendix bringing together lexical evidence from Bushong and neighboring languages and also comparative linguistic analyses that show which words are shared in common among the languages and thus reach far back in time, which words are loan words and from where, and which words appear to be internal Kuba innovations. He divided the lexical terminology into eleven general vocabulary groups: conceptual categories, environment, farming, hunting/fishing/gathering, crafts, trade and markets, kinship terminology, social organization, political organization, religion, and visual arts.[5]

Just a quick browse through this treasure trove of linguistic evidence brings home the central point that study of Bushong and neighboring languages can reveal specific aspects of the complexity of Kuba society and its history. For example, Bushong words for indigenous agricultural crops that were widely shared with many surrounding languages Vansina identified as Proto-Kuba, that is, early and foundational, while the loan words for crops introduced in later times traveled with them from the direction of introduction, i.e. American crops from the west via Kongo speakers, and Indian Ocean crops from the east via Songye speakers or from the southeast via Luba speakers. Terminology for social organization was generally Proto-Kuba while major political titles display a complex pattern of change over time: five titles were Proto-Kuba; four were internal innovations; and nine were loan words – seven of them introduced from the southeast and two from the west. Similarly, the Bushong language has two words for the Creator God – one identified as Proto-Kuba, the other identified as a loan word from the west via Kongo speakers.[6]

This appendix constitutes a published archive of linguistic data, providing the basis and tools for scholars to continue to build upon Jan Vansina's painstaking work. An example is how the Bushong language data can be used to delve into Kuba visual culture and gain access to the richness of Kuba iconography. To illustrate, I will focus on a major work of Kuba art in metal, an elaborate ceremonial anvil that had been kept in the royal treasury. Two African art catalogues published in 1982 by other scholars present images of the anvil along with brief descriptive information.[7]

The catalogue descriptions are very similar in content and appear to be based on the same oral traditions and informants, but this observation cannot be verified since there are no citations given. In describing the

[5] Vansina, *Children of Woot*, 245–318.

[6] Vansina, *Children of Woot*, 245–318.

[7] Musée des Arts Décoratifs, *Sura Dji: Visages et Racines du Zaïre* (Paris: Le Musée, 1982), 82–83; Joseph Cornet, *Art Royal Kuba* (Milan: Edizioni Sipiel, 1982), 288–291. I do not present an image of the anvil as it is believed to have been stolen from the Institut des Musées Nationaux du Zaïre in Kinshasa. Its present whereabouts is unknown.

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object itself, each description states categorically that the anvil is a symbol of the founding of the Bushong ruling dynasty. As supporting evidence for this claim, an episode of Kuba oral tradition is briefly recounted. The tale involves a competition between rival chiefs to see which one can create an anvil that will float on water. And that is as far as the descriptions go.

Missing from each text is the victor's clever trick, which was to cover a wooden object with sheet metal so it would float. In other versions of the episode, discussed at length by Vansina in *Children of Woot*, we see that the specific type of object in the competition varies: it can be a copper dish or an iron hammer, or an iron anvil or an iron axe. What matters in the oral tradition is not the specific object type itself but that it is supposed to be solid metal. The victor made it float by a visual *trompe l'œil* trick using sheet metal and wood. By taking into account all the known versions and variants – a good example of Jan Vansina's rigorous methodological practices – of this episode we come to see its central logic. It is not about the cultural value of specific Kuba art objects such as this ceremonial anvil. Instead, the variations of the episode can be analyzed more generally as Vansina does to identify its core meaning. Each one provides named references to early chiefdoms in the area and describes a competition among chiefs to recall and signify the transition to a kingdom.[8]

Oral traditions aside, what can this particular and very special anvil itself tell us about Kuba history? It is a virtuoso piece of unusual metal-working techniques, incorporating a cast copper alloy body attached to a forged iron stem with additional structural elements in copper wire and iron bands. Both of the catalogue entries refer to a motif of a beetle called *ntshyeem* or *nshyeem* engraved on the uppermost surface of the anvil, and said to be a symbol of royalty. On each of the six side surfaces of the anvil's trunk there is an engraved motif called *nnaam*.

Vansina gives us additional and informative linguistic details in the glossary and appendix of *Children of Woot*. The correct orthography for the beetle motif is *ncyeem*, and the word's definition is much more complex and intriguing. It is one of the Bushong words meaning Creator God, and also denotes a royal charm and a species of beetle. As Creator God, the full form is *ncyeem poong*, identified by Vansina as a loan from Kongo (*Nzambu mpungu*). The Bushong word for the other engraved motif, *nnaam*, means tribute, identified by Vansina as a loan word from Luba (*mulambu*).[9] In short, the full lexical evidence and comparative analyses greatly enrich our understanding of the two engraved motifs. They do refer to kingship indirectly by way of the institution of tribute and suggest perhaps some kind of divine sanction of the office if not the office-holder. And as loan words they do not go back to shared Proto-Kuba vocabulary, that is, to the

[8] Vansina, *Children of Woot*, 49–52.
[9] Vansina, *Children of Woot*, 309, 317, 379–380.

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times before kingship. We can now appreciate this splendid and treasured anvil as a highly potent object signifying royalty and aspects of royal power, as evidenced by its specific iconographic and lexical messages.

Yet there is still more to be learned from this ceremonial anvil, with the help of additional lexical evidence in Vansina's appendix. The anvil is quite carefully and deliberately made out of three different types of metal – iron, copper, and copper alloy (likely brass) – employing three distinctly different metalworking techniques – forging, wire-drawing and -bending, and casting, respectively. As such it serves as an impressive visual compendium of major specialized skills and techniques Kuba blacksmiths mastered and taught in their workshops over time. Vansina's lexical comparisons can be used to sketch out a general relative chronology for this techno-cultural history by reference to the Bushong words for each of these metals and some of the smith's main tools and equipment.

The basic metalworking vocabulary items are Proto-Kuba. Not surprisingly, Vansina finds the Bushong terms for iron ore, *butady*, and wrought iron, *labol*, to be Proto-Kuba. As for smithing tools, Bushong has at least two words for hammer, the primary tool for forging iron. One, *ncoon*, is a general term, while the other, *nshaak*, denotes a smaller and lighter hammer, used for special detailing and finishing. The Bushong word for anvil, *iloon*, is derived from *ncoon*. All these words, along with *iyal*, charcoal, and *kuuk*, bellows, Vansina classifies also as Proto-Kuba. So, too, is the verb *-tul*, to forge. The Bushong word for copper (presumably unalloyed), *mweepdy*, appears to be a Kuba innovation from a Mongo verb, but it is not possible to place this lexical event more precisely in time. *Kyeengl*, Bushong for brass, is a later loan word of Cokwe origin, applied to brass rods imported from Europe.[10] Together, the Proto-Kuba Bushong terms for iron, copper, and blacksmithing provide important linguistic evidence for the antiquity of iron- and copper-working in Central Africa, a vast region where archaeological sites are relatively few.[11]

## Words and Things: *Paths in the Rainforests*

After publishing *Children of Woot*, Vansina continued with "words and things" as he set his sights much more broadly on the history of societies

[10] Vansina, *Children of Woot*, 270–273, 275. In Kuba oral traditions, brass is associated with the time of kingship.

[11] For a map and discussion of the paucity of archaeological research in Central Africa relative to the rest of tropical Africa (published nine years after *Children of Woot*), see: Graham Connah, *African Civilizations. Precolonial Cities and States in Tropical Africa: An Archaeological Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 216–222. See also discussion in: Koen Bostoen and Inge Brinkman (eds.), *The Kongo Kingdom: Origins, Dynamics and Cosmopolitan Culture of an African Polity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

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populating equatorial Central Africa, an area that straddles the equator and stretches from the Atlantic across the continent to the great lakes in the east. *Paths in the Rainforests* (1990) is therefore based on a much larger dataset of languages spoken in this area – 147 out of an estimated total of 200, then classified as western Bantu. Here, too, Vansina published the lexical terms and his comparative analyses in an appendix, this one having 35 pages of data with just over half devoted to "society" – social units, social status, and social activities – and the rest devoted to shorter notes in the categories of food production, domestic plants and animals, industries, exchange, religious experts and activities, and spirits and forces.[12] He begins the book with an epigraph summing up a colonial stereotype of this particular place in tropical Africa: "Thus appeared to us a first province which we call central equatorial Africa and which could be called the ahistorical region of black Africa, for no important state developed there."[13] This time, Vansina marshaled his "words and things" to counter that glib and self-serving view with linguistic data showing a long history and variety of political institutions in the region. *Paths in the Rainforests* presents such a wealth of specific examples it is hard to imagine how anyone could argue convincingly against it. And it is this well-established and widespread process of social and political change that serves as foundation and context for analyzing the extraordinary corpus of Kuba art and material culture.

In an unusually rich exhibition catalogue of Central African art – 190 objects from the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin, over half collected before 1910 – Vansina wrote for a general audience about the histories of Central Africa and the Kuba Kingdom. His chapters "History of Central African Civilization," "Kings in Tropical Africa," "The Kuba Kingdom (Zaire)," and his vivid catalogue descriptions for the Kuba art objects in the exhibition sum up his most important historical findings and insights and are not to be missed.[14] The Central Africa he writes about in "History of Central African Civilization" extends well beyond the one in *Paths*. In addition to the equatorial zone it includes areas of savanna and woodlands to the south, which together constitutes a region much larger than Europe. He notes that peoples of this region speak related languages of the western branch of the Bantu language family and used to share a core set of world views, institutions, concepts, and practices that can be considered a common tradition. Then, adopting the history of the Bantu language family as a temporal framework for describing and analyzing this tradition, he states that it has a history going back five thousand years. Finally, by noting that "tradition" is often a term used interchangeably with

[12] Jan Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (Madison WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 267–301.

[13] Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests*, 3, 303.

[14] Erna Beumers and Hans-Joachim Koloss (eds.), *Kings of Africa: Art and Authority in Central Africa* (Maastricht: Foundation Kings of Africa, 1992).

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"civilization," Vansina arrives at his declarative phrase "Central African Civilization." Finally, he sketches out its history from 3,000 BCE through episodes of "Bantu expansions" into and within central and southern Africa over five millennia.[15]

This chapter also includes an important section titled "A Living Tradition." In it, Vansina takes the reader through a construction of the dynamics of social and political change in Central African societies, proffering examples of how these dynamics played out locally in specific places, spawning a variety of different outcomes. Here Vansina uses core linguistic terms for aspects of "society" in western Bantu languages to frame and follow the patterns of change in these histories. Terminology for varying sizes of social units represents scale and complexity in social organization while the terminology for types of leaders and leadership positions denotes power relations and seats of power. The key social institution, "house," Vansina defines as domestic groups of thirty to fifty people, not all of them biologically related. Terminology for it and for other larger social groups, villages, and district territories go back to ancient proto-Bantu or in the latter case, proto-western Bantu, suggesting complex social organization above and beyond family groupings from very early times. A major term for leader, or "big man," appears to go back to proto-Bantu, while other terms for leader and for leadership positions were later coined through innovation.[16]

Vansina combines his linguistic evidence for long-term endogenous social change with evidence from archaeology to show developments in regional trade, which he sees intensifying in much of the region ca. 1,300 CE. Here Vansina focuses on economic factors such as increases in trade activity, new forms of wealth, and new patterns in wealth accumulation, to portray a significant change in the political dynamics of Central African societies. Volatile periods of competition among and between local and regional leaders over access to wealth and prestige alternated with more peaceable times of alliances and cooperation. Vansina sums up his survey of social and political change in the sub-regions of Central Africa by providing examples of specific cases he was able to track and interpret. His general conclusion in this section presents the big picture and leads us to consider the role of art in politics:

> By 1500, hundreds of different polities covered Central Africa, ranging in population from hundred or less people to half a million! An estimated twenty-five major varieties of societies were found in the area, and less

[15] Jan Vansina, "History of Central African Civilization," in: Erna Beumers and Hans-Joachim Koloss (eds.), *Kings of Africa*: *Art and Authority in Central Africa* (Maastricht: Foundation Kings of Africa, 1992), 13–18.

[16] Vansina, "History of Central African Civilization," 14–15; Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests*, 268–277.

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> than a fifth of these were kingdoms. Kingdoms were merely one of the outcomes of such dynamics. Therefore it is an historical aberration to *reduce* the political history of the area to that of its kingdoms. Thus, for example, the "origins" of kingdoms cannot be understood apart from the "origins" of other varieties of polities, and the internal structure of kingdoms still preserves the cherished principle of autonomy for the House and for the local group.
>
> Nevertheless, kingdoms were important because most kingdoms were among the more large-scale and complex societies in Central Africa… Furthermore, by or after the fifteenth century, some kingdoms south of the rainforests affected both huge areas and very large numbers of people far beyond their heartlands. And, last but not least, their rulers stimulated the arts to a very high degree, as is shown in this exhibition.[17]

In the next section of this chapter, Vansina provides a brief overview of kingdoms in Central Africa and the varying ways they arose, giving specific examples across the region. He stresses, however, that alongside this variety almost all Central African kingdoms shared a set of common features. Vansina singles out one common feature as crucial – the title-holding system. This feature is also the key to appreciating the role of politics in stimulating the making, owning, and displaying of art and material culture in Central African history. In contrast to divisions by territory, Vansina calls the title-holding system a "division of labor" in ruling a kingdom. The authority of such titled positions was limited and specialized, resting in only certain domains of governance such as tribute collecting or courts of law. Vansina also emphasizes that this system was not like modern bureaucracies because each title was individual and specific, even if duties were the same. Each one had its own specific history, praise name, privileges, and visual signs and symbols of office. Hence the power and prestige of each individual title-holder was publicly visible to others while the title-holding system itself could be seen and admired in all of its social and political complexity.[18]

Vansina's chapter "The Kuba Kingdom (Zaire)" takes us at last into the special social relations and political dynamics that together generated "The Kuba Miracle." Increasing regional trade between ca. 1750 and the 1890s brought the kingdom into contact with Atlantic markets for ivory and slaves. Terms of trade negotiated by the king enriched him, his court, and many of his subjects, who benefitted from imports such as brass rods and slaves, demanded as payment for Kuba ivory. Vansina proposes that expansion of the kingdom's wealth and slave labor force brought about a rise in the standard of living that was felt everywhere, even in the countryside. Prosperity led to proliferation of titles among male heads of households such

[17] Vansina, "History of Central African Civilization," 15.
[18] Vansina, "History of Central African Civilization," 16.

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that many men throughout the kingdom sought a title and the prestige and status it conferred.[19] Competition for status and for the visual and material confirmations of it was thus a driving force behind "The Kuba Miracle." An example of one particular title and the variety of visual signs and symbols of office its holder displayed serves to illustrate how the title-holding system could stimulate the manufacture of and desire for Kuba art and material culture:

> [T]he *ipaancl* had to be a member from the aristocratic clans Ilyeeng or Nshoody; he was the second official in rank within [those governing territorial units]; his title was said to have been created by King Shyaam; he wore the feather of a white *nkidy* bird: "the great bird that is a subject of the eagle," a special hat *ikash*, a wooden staff, and a hatpin of red copper (...) a ceremonial adze over the shoulder, two small bows under his shoulders, a special belt in bark, special rings on arms and legs as well as a special back ornament, and like the others he was carried in a litter, and arrived with a charm called "the basket of the daily council."[20]

Next, Vansina homes in on the social dynamics of "The Kuba Miracle," which center on personal and professional relationships between title holders (patrons) and specialized artists and artisans. Not only were the particular emblems or symbols of office publicly displayed, they promoted a high degree of connoisseurship among patrons and viewers, who gauged the quality of the work and assessed the skills, creativity, and inventiveness of the individual artists and artisans. Vansina appreciates this public scrutiny of visual display as another vital source of the dynamic: "The reputation of the artist testified both to the wealth and to the competitive success of the patron who owned work from his hand over rivals who were not able to commission such a reputed artist."[21]

In some of Vansina's catalogue descriptions of Kuba objects in the exhibition he makes direct references to the patron-artist relationship and its dynamic interplay. We see not only the skill and wit of the artist but we also gain some access into Kuba ways of seeing and assessing both artist and patron. Vansina's descriptions sparkle with insights as he vivifies Kuba works of art through close readings of their intersecting and overlapping features. Kuba visual language combines three-dimensional forms with well-known two-dimensional signs, motifs, and patterns, brought together cleverly, sometimes wittily, by artists in ever new and inventive arrangements. Vansina's descriptions of two examples of carved wooden palm wine

[19] Jan Vansina, "The Kuba Kingdom (Zaire)," in: Erna Beumers and Hans-Joachim Koloss (eds.), *Kings of Africa*: *Art and Authority in Central Africa* (Maastricht: Foundation Kings of Africa, 1992), 71–78.

[20] Vansina, "The Kuba Kingdom (Zaire)," 73.

[21] Vansina, "The Kuba Kingdom (Zaire)," 74.

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cups, collected by Leo Frobenius and purchased by the Berlin Museum für Völkerkunde in 1904, illustrate this.[22]

These elaborately carved cups, each about seven inches high, would have been displayed and used by their owners during the very special public or ceremonial occasions calling for the sharing of palm wine. In each case the basic form of the cup is generic, that is, recognizable as a woman or as a drum. Additional features, some more accessible to viewers than others, designate the woman as not just any woman, and the drum as not just any drum. Vansina decodes some of these particular attributes which in each case serve as indicators of high rank. Social prominence of the woman is evidenced in jewelry she wears on both arms and by the elaborate scarifications over her face and on her torso. As for the drum, this particular one, known as *bukit*, was the prerogative of an entire village, or high political officials such as a chief or the king himself. It sometimes appeared in carved images (*ndop*) honoring Kuba kings, as the symbol chosen by a king to represent his reign. Thus the carvers of these cups endowed them with very specific and socially meaningful features recognizable as reflections of social hierarchy.

A major hallmark of Kuba art and material culture is the use of elaborate patterning as a structural element in weaving or plaiting and as a surface treatment in embroidery, beadwork, metalwork, carving, painting, or body ornament. Many patterns have names and a variety of meanings and associations. Vansina reads the scarifications on the woman's face as ethnic markings from a particular geographical area in eastern Kuba bordering their Lele neighbors, while those on her pubis he sees as a variant of the conventional Kuba patterns. This leads him to suggest that the woman might represent the high ranking foreign wife of the office-holder who commissioned the cup. The meticulously carved geometric patterning on the drum cup Vansina sees as having at least two possible readings. Overall, the pattern covering the surface can be recognized as a version known as "Kweet's design," presumably named after the inventor. At the same time, single elements of the design, the lozenge motifs, can be recognized as references to the Kuba peoples' original ancestor, Woot. Kuba patterning thus serves as a testament to the artist's level of skill and knowledge as well as a visual language for conveying references to aspects of the kingdom's social and cultural history.

Vansina's most insightful readings and interpretations of Kuba art draw upon his deep knowledge of Kuba history and also his years of friendships with Kuba people. In considering the cup in female form, he reads the scarifications on her abdomen as ambiguous. The patterns are produced like the scarifications on central Kuba women's bodies, but

[22] Vansina, "The Kuba Kingdom (Zaire)," 74, 319 (illustrations 143 and 144 and catalogue descriptions). The following paragraphs are based on these images and descriptions.

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the designs themselves are not typical. He sees the patterns as resembling those that are often carved over the surfaces of a variety of personal household objects such as receptacles and boxes. This, Vansina proposes, is deliberate: "The ambiguity points to a visual pun, reminiscent of Magritte: 'This object is not a woman, it is a cup.' The Kuba delighted in visual puns and *double entendre*." Another example Vansina finds on the drum cup: "The handle in the shape of a head and a hand is very common and constitutes another visual pun: the 'handle' is a 'hand.'" But there is more – Vansina noticed that the hand has six fingers. He proposes that this is a deliberate feature possibly serving as a reference to an anecdote about the individual patron who commissioned the cup. In concluding, the significance of the drum and its elaborate carved patterning and inventive forms Vansina sees as indicators of the owner's standing – perhaps a highly ranked title-holder at court.

## Conclusion

Jan Vansina's work throughout his career has illuminated for us the building blocks of Central African societies and their varying political structures. He showed us the importance of title holders as well as kings, and we have learned about the importance of visual proofs of titles and royal legitimacy in Central Africa and especially in the Kuba Kingdom. We now appreciate how vital the mutually reinforcing relationships were between political leaders, government officials, and the highly skilled artists and artisans who envisioned, designed, and fashioned regalia, emblems of office, and impressive personal objects to be used in ceremony or on other public occasions. We have even seen evidence of the high value placed on wit and acumen in Kuba visual culture. In other words, Vansina has taken us deeply into Kuba history, oral traditions, culture, and visual art to show us what makes the Kuba Kingdom so distinctive. And in doing so he managed to plumb the rich visual vocabularies employed and understood by Kuba artists and their most discerning admirers. But it is my belief that we still have a long way to go in fully fathoming the multifarious and astonishing splendors of "The Kuba Miracle."

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