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Ceramics Decorated with Woven Motifs: An Archaeological Kongo Kingdom Identifier?

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Introduction

The archaeological record of the Kongo region stands out in Central Africa by an exceptional amount of pottery with elaborate decorations, obviously inspired by woven motifs (Figure 7.1). As textiles of high aesthetic quality played a prominent role in Kongo society, especially during the heyday of the kingdom (see also Fromont, Chapter 6), it is hence interesting to explore what may have been the relation between this pottery and those textiles. In this chapter we seek to explore this relation from a predominantly archaeological point of view.

In order to prepare for the post-congress excursion of the Fourth Pan-African Congress of Prehistory and Quaternary Studies that was held in Kinshasa (then Léopoldville) in 1958, Georges Mortelmans, a geology professor, visited several caves in the Mbanza Ngungu area situated in the current-day Kongo-Central province of Congo-Kinshasa. The walls of several of these caves were decorated with rock art. Some of these caves, such as Dimba, Ngovo and Mbafu, also yielded considerable finds of pottery.

In 1962, Mortelmans published the first classification of these archaeological ceramics. He subdivided them into several distinct groups, i.e. Groups I to VI, based on their shape, fabric and decoration. He noticed striking similarities between the intricate decorative patterns of Group II ceramics and those appearing on rock art, wooden sculptures and textiles from the region (Figure 7.2). He called them ‘*broderies*’ (‘embroideries’) or ‘*velours*’ (‘velvet’). He went on to suggest that their decorative patterns were closely similar to well-known Kuba and Chokwe motifs (Mortelmans 1962: 413–14).

Mortelmans’ pottery collection was subsequently deposited at the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) in Tervuren. A decade later, Pierre de Maret (1972) analyzed the collection more thoroughly.

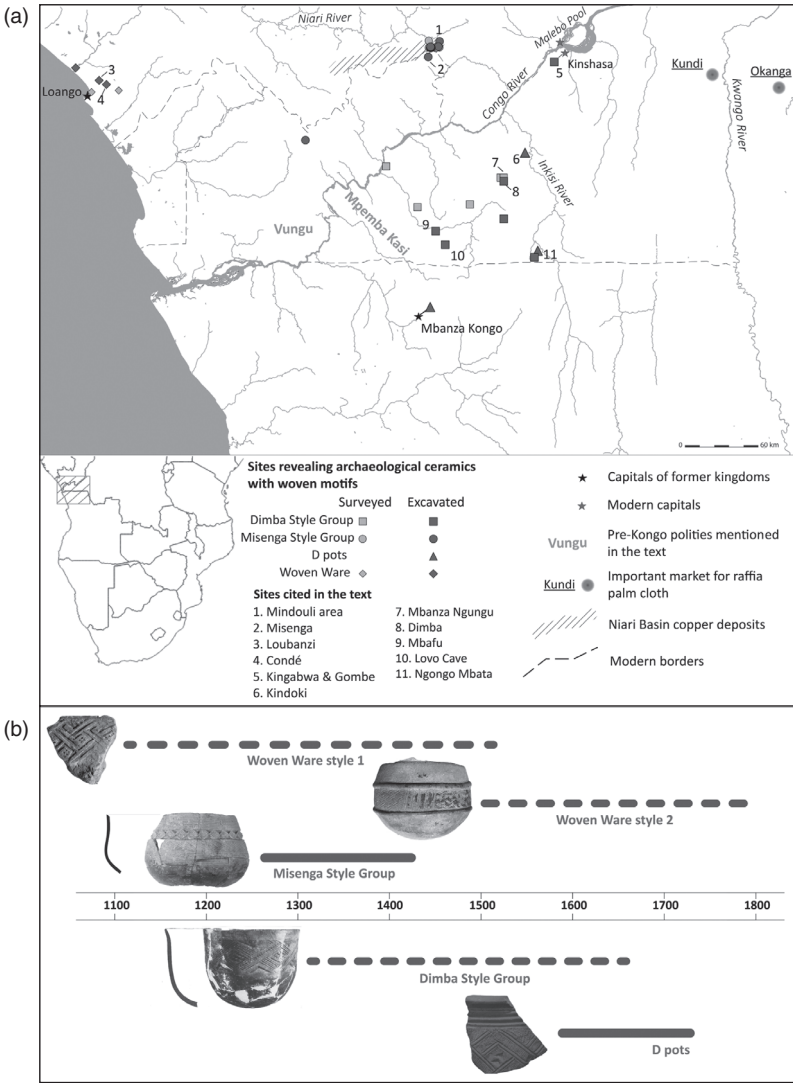


Figure 7.1 (a) Distribution map of archaeological pottery with woven motifs and main localities mentioned in the text; (b) Schematic chronology of the different ceramic groups with woven motifs ('Woven Ware', style 1 & 2: © James Denbow; D-pots: © KongoKing/Bernard Clist; Dimba style: © Pierre de Maret; Misenga style: © Nicolas Nikis).



Figure 7.2 (a) Statuette (detail), Yombe, Kongo-Central, Congo-Kinshasa, *ca.* late nineteenth century, wood and glass, 28.5 × 12.8 × 12 cm (EO.0.0.24662, collection RMCA Tervuren; photo © R. Asselberghs, RMCA Tervuren); (b) Ivory sceptre (detail), Woyo, Kongo-Central, Congo-Kinshasa, nineteenth century, ivory, 35.5 × 5 × 7.5 cm (EO.1979.1.260, collection RMCA Tervuren; photo © J. Van de Vyver, RMCA Tervuren); (c) Basket, Vili, Kongo-Central, Congo-Kinshasa, vegetal fibre, 33 × 27.5 cm (EO.0.0.7349-2, collection RMCA Tervuren; photo © J. Van de Vyver, RMCA Tervuren); (d) Basket, Vili, Kongo-Central, Congo-Kinshasa, vegetal

He specifically studied the decorative patterns of Group II ceramics in more detail and showed that these constitute a very sophisticated repertoire, expressed within a regular structure and created systematically following the same steps (de Maret 1972: 43–54). De Maret (1972: 54) also observed such decorations on stone pipes from the same area (see also Clist, Chapter 8). New surveys and test excavations combined with radiocarbon dating in the same caves soon led to revising the chronology of ceramic groups as proposed by Mortelmans (de Maret 1975; de Maret *et al.* 1977; de Maret 1982b).

Still a decade later, while working on other collections from the current-day Kongo-Central province collected by Maurits Bequaert between 1950 and 1952, Bernard Clist (1982) reviewed and redefined Group II and added to it material from Misenga, as already suggested by de Maret (1972), as well as some shards from Sumbi. After thirty years, Clist (2012) once more re-examined Group II ceramics in detail, discussed their chronology and distribution and renamed them the Mbafu Tradition, within which he distinguished two distinct facies.

Meanwhile, further north, along the Atlantic coast, in the area of the former Loango kingdom in current-day Congo-Brazzaville, James Denbow unearthed, during rescue excavations, different pottery wares with dates covering the last 3,000 years. On one of the first Later Iron Age wares, Denbow (2012) also noticed the striking similarity between its decorations and woven patterns. In his later book, he consequently

Figure 7.2 (*cont.*)

fibre, 30.5 × 31.5 cm (EO.0.0.29075, collection RMCA Tervuren; photo © J. Van de Vyver, RMCA Tervuren); (e) *Mpu*, Yombe, Kongo-Central, Congo-Kinshasa, before mid-twentieth century (date of acquisition), raffia fibre, 21 × 16 × 16 cm (EO.0.0.43042, collection RMCA Tervuren; photo © J. Van de Vyver, RMCA Tervuren); (f) *Mpu*, Kongo, Kongo-Central, Congo-Kinshasa, before late nineteenth–early twentieth centuries (date of acquisition), raffia fibre, 23 × 16 cm (EO.1971.36.24, collection RMCA Tervuren; photo © J.-M. Vandyck, RMCA Tervuren); (g) Mat, Kongo peoples, Congo-Kinshasa, Congo-Brazzaville or Angola (Cabinda), nineteenth–early twentieth centuries, vegetal fibre, pigments, 73 × 128 × 0.3 cm (EO.0.0.29115, collection RMCA Tervuren; photo © J.-M. Vandyck, RMCA Tervuren); (h) Mat, Kongo, Boma, Kongo-Central, Congo-Kinshasa, early twentieth century, vegetal fibre, 105 × 162 cm (EO.0.0.29225, collection RMCA Tervuren; photo © J.-M. Vandyck, RMCA Tervuren). (A black and white version of these figures will appear in some formats. For the colour versions, please refer to the plate section.)

calls these ceramics ‘Woven Ware’ (Denbow 2014: 68–9, 136–8, 140, 145, 150, 172, 175).

In 2012, new surveys and excavations were carried out within the framework of the KongoKing project and associated PhD projects. In total, more than 200 sites were surveyed and some 55 sites were explored by means of test pits in Congo-Kinshasa and Congo-Brazzaville (see for instance Clist *et al.* 2015b; Nikis and De Putter 2015). On two sites, Kindoki and Ngongo Mbata, over 500 m² were excavated in order to try to understand the historical occupation of both hilltops (Clist *et al.* 2015c; Clist *et al.* 2015d; Matonda *et al.* 2015; Clist *et al.* 2018a; Clist *et al.* 2018b).

During a recent exhibit of Kongo art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the quality and the significance of ancient Kongo textiles were displayed prominently (LaGamma 2015c) and their parallel with certain pottery decorations was emphasized once more (Martin 2015: 59).

In fact, in this part of Central Africa, such woven motifs not only occur on cloth, baskets and ceramics, but are also conveyed via various other media (Figure 7.2), such as architecture (Fromont 2014: 187–8), rock art (Mortelmans 1962; Mortelmans and Monteyne 1962; Heimlich 2014), wooden sculptures (LaGamma 2015a: 173), ivory (Martin 2015: 73–81) and metalwork, more specifically crucifixes (Fromont 2011c: 115) and copper ingots (Nikis *et al.* 2013; Nikis 2018a). In Mayombe, they have been reported in women’s body scarification, also known as keloids, some of which have a same basic motif called *kimbangumuna* that is used to create complex interlaced patterns as in weaving (Bittremieux 1923–1927: 778–94).

These findings support the use of a shared decorative repertoire inspired by weaving in the Kongo cultural area during at least the heyday of the kingdom. In fact, it is not uncommon to use the same motifs on different supports in Central Africa or indeed elsewhere in the world. Marie-Louise Bastin (1961) described how the Chokwe people from the south-western Congo-Kinshasa use the same motifs on different media and designate them by the same name. An example is the pattern seen on the Gabonese viper that is called *mapembe a yenge* (‘the triangles of the viper’s back’) and is recurrent in tattoos, sculptures, metalwork, weaving, etc. (Bastin 1961: 121). Among the Kuba as well, playing with various decorative motifs was very meaningful and made Kuba art easily distinguishable (Weghsteen 1963;

Cornet 1972: 138, 141; Vansina 1984: 123, 126). Further east, among the Luba of Katanga (Congo-Kinshasa), one single term, i.e. *ntâpo*, is used for pottery decoration and the keloids on a woman's belly (Nooter Roberts and Roberts 1996: 102; Lemal 1999: 67).

In Central Africa, as in many other societies around the world, it is likely that the interlaced patterns created through the weaving of baskets and textiles have been at the origin of geometric decorative motifs on other objects. Such a morphogenesis can easily be explained: when interlacing warp and weft, by skipping certain points, a geometric pattern is created, which can be further enhanced by using contrasting colours or textures.

In fact, all over the world, there are numerous examples of physical ornaments or designs on a given object that are made to resemble another material or technique. This phenomenon is also known as 'skeuomorphism' following the definition of Blitz (2015: 666): 'skeuomorphs are design attributes with meaningful content transposable across physical media. For example, many features of previously wooden buildings were repeated on stone buildings in Ancient Egypt and Greece (e.g. Angenot 2011). In Niger, Tuareg and Fulbe commodities such as textiles or leather goods or, for a more recent period, popular wax imprints are popular objects and are therefore a source of inspiration for the ceramics of so-called 'Niger River Polychrome Tradition' (Gosselain 2016).

Raffia Cloth and Basketry in the Kongo

In the Kongo area, the mastery of weaving skills reached near unprecedented heights when the kingdom was at its peak, to the extent that both Kongo textiles and baskets were among the most selected items brought back to Europe by navigators and explorers. Subsequently, they were carefully conserved in the treasuries and *Wunderkammern* belonging to lords and kings (LaGamma and Giuntini 2015: 131 and *passim*).

In the Kongo kingdom, sophisticatedly decorated textiles were elite objects marking upper class social status. Raffia cloth especially was essential in the display and exercise of power. Cloth was ubiquitous in the kingdom and its vicinity, as some pieces were also used as currency (for general or specific purposes) as well as for decorative purposes (Vansina 1998; Forbes 2013; Martin 2015: 58).

Baskets are less well known as status symbols within the Kongo area, but they were still widespread as receptacles for storing cloth or

other valuables. Ancient Kongo baskets are among the most exquisite and technically elaborate on the continent (Cooksey *et al.* 2013a: 129; Cooksey *et al.* 2013b: 217). Their manufacturing technique is closely affiliated to weaving and the resulting decorative patterns are similar (Figure 7.2).

Other woven elements, notably architectural features, such as fences and house walls made out of palms, carried the same geometrical motifs, which were executed with similar techniques as those used in both weaving and basketry (Fromont 2014: 187–8).

Raffia cloth came in many variations: from the simple plain weave cloth used for everyday dress to the highly sophisticated luxury cloth with exuberant decorations. The cloth was made from the fibres of several palm trees, such as the *Raphia textilis* and *Raphia gentiliana* (Gillet and Pâque 1910: 52; Vansina 1998: 265; Latham 2004) as well as the wine palm (*Raphia vinifera*) or the fan palm (*Hyphaene guineensis*) (Martin 1986: 1). In Kintandu, the main East Kikongo variety spoken in the vicinity of Kisantu, Daeleman and Pauwels (1983) noted four distinct vernacular terms for different raffia species: (1) *gúsu* or *mpúsu* used for fibre (*lusúnga* or *lupúsu*); (2) *koóko*, also reported by Latham (2004), for *Raphia gentiliana*; (3) *toómbe* used for palm wine (*malǎfú mámatóómbe*), also reported by Martin (1986) for raffia palm wine but by Latham (2004) as generic term for raffia palm; and (4) *yáanda* also used for palm wine.

Raffia fibres went through a process of soaking, drying and splitting or combing to prepare them for the actual weaving, which was executed using a single heddle loom. Since the length of the fibres determined the size of the woven panels, several panels or lengths of finished cloth were sewn together to obtain textiles of a larger size. After weaving, the cloth was softened by soaking and pounding it and possibly dyed (Vansina 1998: 267).

Although additional decoration techniques were often added after weaving, most ornamental patterns were structural decorative elements directly integrated in the fabric through supplementary weft-floats. These float weaves are a deviation on standard plain weave. The latter simply interlaces warp and weft in a regular over one/under one pattern. When creating float weaves, certain points are skipped for decorative purposes (Figures 7.2 c and h). Through repetition of this process in subsequent rows, geometric patterns or figures are created (Seiler-Baldinger 1994: 89). Designs that were loom-woven into the

fabric distinguish Kongo's cloths from neighbouring traditions, where decorations are often solely embroidered on top of a plain fabric (LaGamma and Giuntini 2015: 135).

Moreover, appended non-structural decoration techniques were often superimposed on an already woven raffia panel and included embossing, embroidery as well as cut-outs and hand-rubbing to create a velvet-like texture (Vansina 1998: 268; LaGamma and Giuntini 2015: 135). Most cloth was monochrome (Cornet and van Braeckel 1995), but the juxtaposition of weft-floats reflecting light and velvety cut-piles absorbing it gave the cloth panel 'a rich surface of alternating textures and tonalities' (LaGamma and Giuntini 2015: 135) and some pieces alternate fibre of two different colours (Figures 7.2 g and h).

The decorative motifs created through the float-weave techniques were endless variations of one basic motif (Figure 7.3 a), i.e. 'that of a knot in which the interlaced strands encircle and enjoin to create a contained form' (LaGamma and Giuntini 2015: 135). This widespread Kongo motif, also known in the Kuba language as *imbolo*, might be derived, in its turn, from basic over-one under-one plaiting (Torday 1969: 101), mimicking the very technique of weaving. Using different symmetries, the standard contained knot is expanded upon and undergoes a series of transformations (Crowe 2004: 4; Gerdes 2007: 32–7). These alterations result in geometric configurations of interlaced or interlocking zigzags, lozenges, triangles and chevrons (Moraga 2011: 33; Martin 2015: 59). Because of the technical constraints of right-angle intersections of warp and weft, most clearly observed in basketry (Figures 7.2 c and d) (Washburn and Crowe 2004: XV), the geometrical patterns are developed on four axes (both diagonals, horizontal and vertical) (Moraga 2011: 38).

In the Kongo region, designs were dense, symmetrical (Gerdes 2004) and organized in two distinct formats: either individual contained knot-like motifs filled the void within a framework of rows and columns (Figure 7.3 c) or a pattern of two or more interlaced strands created 'an endless network extending in every direction (Figure 7.3 b) (LaGamma and Giuntini 2015: 135).

Kongo baskets showed the same decorative technique as weaving, but called twilling instead of float weaves (Sentance 2001: 110), which produces similar geometric ornamentations highlighted by the different colours of alternating strands (Figures 7.2 c and d). However, their overall decorative organization was slightly different due to their

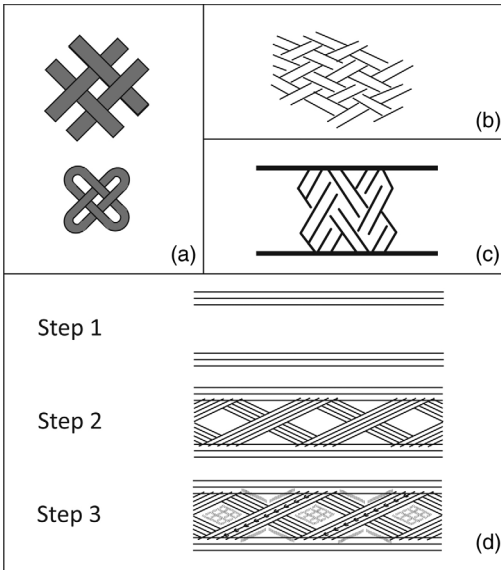


Figure 7.3 (a) Interlaced strand creating the basic ‘contained knot’ motifs; (b) Endless network motif based on a cushion cover, Kongo kingdom, seventeenth–eighteenth centuries (Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen, EDc106); (c) Individual interlaced motif based on a cushion cover, Kongo kingdom, seventeenth–eighteenth centuries (Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen, EDc108); (d) Steps of Dimba style group decoration following de Maret (1972).

three-dimensional shape. On some baskets the ‘endless network’ was maintained, while on others a horizontal register was filled with a main motif of interlaced geometric strands. These were then filled with secondary, smaller motifs in which the artisan had more liberty of execution leading to different variations of the same motif on one single basket. Kongo baskets were made of raffia or rattan fibres placed on a skeletal structure made of wood or bark and had cylindrical, oval or rectangular shapes (Moraga 2011: 33).

Lastly, the *mpu*, the very typical Kongo supple-knotted cap associated with political authority, deserves our attention, as it had characteristics of both weaving and basketry (Figures 7.2 e and f). It is considered to be textile, since it was made with the same malleable fibres of raffia or sometimes pineapple (Moraga 2011: 24). Nevertheless, like a basket, it was not woven on a loom and had a shape comparable to that of cylindrical baskets. Moreover, it also had

a similar ornamental organization. Even though the top of the cap typically had a spiralling pattern, believed to mimic and protect the crown of the head (Volavka 1998: 15), the cylindrical part of the headgear generally bore a delimited register sporting a main pattern depicting a zigzag or a series of interlocked lozenges of which the gaps were filled with smaller isolated motifs.

Raffia cloth was produced in regions where raffia palms were endemic, i.e. in rainforests and their surroundings. This means that raffia palms did not grow in the Kongo heartland or in the Portuguese colony of Angola. They were present on the Loango coast, beyond the Mayombe mountain range as well as in the Inkisi Valley, but most cloth was exported from the markets of Kundi and Okanga situated in the Kwango basin (Figure 7.1) (Vansina 1998: 274). It is less clear where basketry was produced, but since it often also involved raffia as a material, the same regions might be concerned.

Raffia cloth was produced in large quantities (Vansina 1998: 281) and palm trees were cultivated in orchards and treated with the utmost care (Jones 1983: 51–2). Weaving cloth was primarily men's work, even though women could assist in some of the more marginal tasks (Vansina 1998: 268). For basketry, the division of roles is not as clear: while women made baskets and mats in Loango (Martin 2015: 48), Vansina (1998: 281) mentions baskets and mats made by men, whereas the ethnographic studies of Gerdes (2004) and Mabilia Mantuba-Ngoma (1989) describe mats woven by women.

Several trade routes served the cloth trade and, in a later stage, the slave trade. If Mbanza Kongo first sought its raffia cloth primarily from Malebo Pool and from about 1590 onwards from Okanga, Luanda traded with Mbanza Kongo over land and Loango over sea, but also developed a trade route to Okanga completely bypassing Mbanza Kongo. Huge quantities of cloth were traded and Portuguese accounts testify that commerce in raffia was more profitable than the slave trade, at least until 1640 (Brásio 1955b: 103–15; Vansina 1998: 277). From the late sixteenth century onwards, luxury raffia cloth competed with expensive imported cloths, but its total demand probably declined only in the eighteenth century. This same evolution was later also observed with plain weave cloth, although it remained the daily wear further in the interior until late into the nineteenth century (Vansina 1998: 272).

Different types of fabric were produced on a gradient from undecorated plain weave to extremely intricate luxury cloth (Vansina 1998: 265–9). The value of a raffia textile was determined by the number of panels incorporated in the textile, the size of the individual panels (as longer fibres were rarer), the fineness of the thread indicating the number of combings the raffia fibre went through, as well as the tightness of the weave. To these parameters were added the decorative motifs used and their meaning chosen by weavers according to the taste of their consumers, the complexity of execution of those decorations, as well as the overall level of decoration of the cloth (Vansina 1998: 267, 275–6). In other words, a more valuable piece of cloth was more labour-intensive in every aspect of its production sequence. While trained weavers could make one to four panels of plain weave cloth in a day (Vansina 1998: 269), a single panel of luxury cloth required up to sixteen days of work (LaGamma and Giuntini 2015: 135). As we will see below, being quite elaborate, elite clothing simply required more lengths of cloth as well.

Raffia cloth functioned primarily as clothing, with ordinary plain weave cloth serving as the daily dress for commoners, while the nobility used the range of different luxury textiles to mark their socio-political status. An ordinary raffia outfit usually consisted of a simple wrapper going from waist to knee and sometimes down to the ankles for male wearers (Vansina 1998: 269–70). The elite wore longer and more layers of skirts, adding lengths of cloth hung over the shoulder as well as a *nkutu* net, a loose looped garment reserved for high-placed members of Kongo society (Fromont 2014: 113–14; see also Fromont, Chapter 6). People with authority would be outfitted with the typical *mpu* cap too (Moraga 2011: 24). Raffia panels were furthermore hoarded in noblemen's treasuries as well as transformed into carpets, tapestries or cushion covers displayed at their courts (LaGamma and Giuntini 2015: 136). The king of Loango was known to have a monopoly on certain types of luxury cloth, reserving him the right to keep them entirely for himself or to distribute them to those in his favour (Martin 1986: 2; Vansina 1998: 270). Economically, raffia cloth could serve to pay tributes and fines or as a gift, and acted as official currency in Loango, Kongo and Angola (Martin 1972: 37–8). Raffia cloth was also an export product in addition to copper and slaves (LaGamma 2015b: 24). Finally, raffia fabrics were associated with rites of passage

and were used during rituals of birth, initiation, marriage and burial (Martin 1986: 3–4).

Luxury baskets were used to store valuable possessions (LaGamma and Giuntini 2015: 136) and figured prominently in the ritual practices and beliefs of the Kongo people (Moraga 2011: 33), but basketry was probably also present in everyday life, perhaps through objects similar to those (ethnographic) wicker bottles from Mayombe (Mabiala Mantuba-Ngoma 1989: 137).

In essence, woven items, especially raffia cloth, were at once omnipresent in Kongo society and crucial ‘in the wielding of power’ by its leaders (Martin 2015: 58).

Archaeological Ceramics

In sharp contrast to cloth and baskets, pottery is hardly mentioned in historical accounts. Even for recent periods, our knowledge of Kongo pottery has remained patchy for a long time. From an archaeological perspective, the situation is hardly better despite decades of academic interest.

As mentioned above, the first classification of Kongo-Central ceramics was based on artefacts collected by Georges Mortelmans and Maurits Bequaert. Most of the material consisted of surface finds and it is challenging to make sense of the few excavations carried out by Bequaert. In the area, erosion is intense and caves have been occupied repeatedly, two phenomena causing major disturbances and admixtures (de Maret 1982a: 82; de Maret 1982b). In the absence of absolute dating, attempts to establish a relative chronology of the findings were tentative at best.

Besides the work of these two scholars, potsherds were collected all over the present-day Kongo-Central province, often in caves. During the first half of the twentieth century, the collectors were mainly amateurs. Their discoveries are even more poorly contextualized. The ceramics collected before the seventies and now stored at the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) therefore did not constitute a solid basis for defining most of the original ceramic groups. In addition, the interest for the ‘*belle pièce*’ that prevailed for a long time raises some questions about the integrity and representativeness of archaeological assemblages in the old collections (de Maret 1990: 133). However, surveys and excavations since the eighties, and

especially those carried out as part of the KongoKing project, provide a much sounder basis for some of the earlier proposed ceramic groups (Figure 7.1), amongst others those discussed below, i.e. the so-called 'Group II' (which we subdivide here into Dimba and Misenga styles), 'D-pots' and 'Woven Ware'.

Group II

After a systemic analysis of its ornamental style, Clist (2012) proposes to rename Group II as the 'Mbafu Tradition' on the basis that, except for Misenga, the Mbafu cave is the only site to have yielded a representative sample of this pottery. However, within this newly created pottery tradition, he still distinguishes a distinct Misenga facies found north of the Congo River. Taking into account the spatial distribution of the Mbafu Tradition and its tentative dating between AD 1400 and 1800, Clist (2012: 196) considers it to be a Kongo production, distributed more specifically in what used to be the kingdom's Nsundi province (Clist 2012: 202).

The extensive fieldwork carried out since 2012 as part of the KongoKing project and the new archaeological data it yielded have changed our understanding of this type of pottery. Independently of the questions of whether it should be called 'Mbafu' or 'Group II' and whether it should be designated with the term 'style', 'group' or 'tradition', we think that most archaeological pottery decorated with woven motifs, collected throughout the current-day Kongo-Central province, should be considered to be part of it. While Mortelmans (1962) and Mortelmans and Monteyne (1962) originally defined Group II on the basis of surface finds from the Dimba and Mbafu caves, its definition was subsequently broadened by de Maret (1972) and Clist (1982), who principally relied on decorative criteria, i.e. the mainly interlaced patterns, to incorporate shards that no longer corresponded to the prototypical ones of the original Group II, based on the shape, on the fabrics and on the ornamental organization of the interlaced patterns.

For the time being, we consider it is safer to refrain from lumping together various groups and facies until their time period will be clearer. We propose to use here the term 'style group' in accordance with the '*stilgruppen*' used by Wotzka (1995) to describe archaeological pottery from the Inner Congo Basin. A style group is a primary 'neutral' unit of ceramics well localized in space and sharing a distinct

fabric as well as specific stylistic and morpho-functional characteristics (Wotzka 1995: 52–7). Here, we may shorten ‘style group’ to ‘group’ to refer to the same basic unit. Depending on future research, these groups could be diachronically or vertically integrated into traditions if they turn out to be genealogically related through time (Wotzka 1995: 217–19). We distinguish within the former Group II/Mbafu ceramics two separate style groups. The first one, situated south of the Congo River (Figure 7.1), is the Dimba style group, which we name after the site used by Mortelmans (1962) to define the initial Group II. The second one, situated north of the Congo River (Figure 7.1), is called the Misenga style group after the specific type of ceramics initially identified in Misenga (Clist 1982; Clist 2012) and now also attested in the Mindouli area of Congo-Brazzaville (Nikis 2018b). For the time being, we thus examine Dimba and Misenga ceramics as style groups in their own right, i.e. as two distinct sets of shards. Other ceramic sets having decoration with woven motifs (‘D-pots’ and ‘Woven Ware’) will be considered subsequently.

The Dimba Style Group

The Dimba style group (Figure 7.4) is mainly known from the old collections, especially those gathered by Georges Mortelmans. It is well attested south of the Congo River (Figure 7.1) (de Maret 1972; Clist 2012). Owing to the lack of archaeological knowledge about the region immediately south of the Congolese-Angolan border, it is, however, hard to know how far south its distribution stretched. Further north, but still south of the Congo River, a few shards have been found at Kingabwa on the left bank of Malebo Pool. Most ceramics of the Dimba style group, sometimes conserved in nearly perfect shape, were found in three caves: Dimba, Mbafu and Lovo (Mortelmans 1962; de Maret 1972). All three sites yielded human remains. In one of the various caves in the Lovo Massif, human remains were clearly associated with ceramics (de Maret *et al.* 1977). Mbafu is also well known for its rock art (Mortelmans and Monteyne 1962), just like Lovo.

The ceramics of the Dimba style group are finely tempered, resulting in a mineral soap-like touch of either sericite or talc, which is often associated with a vegetal temper. The paste colour varies from pinkish over brown to grey and black; it is most commonly grey. Some vessels seem to have been polished or have at least received a surface treatment.

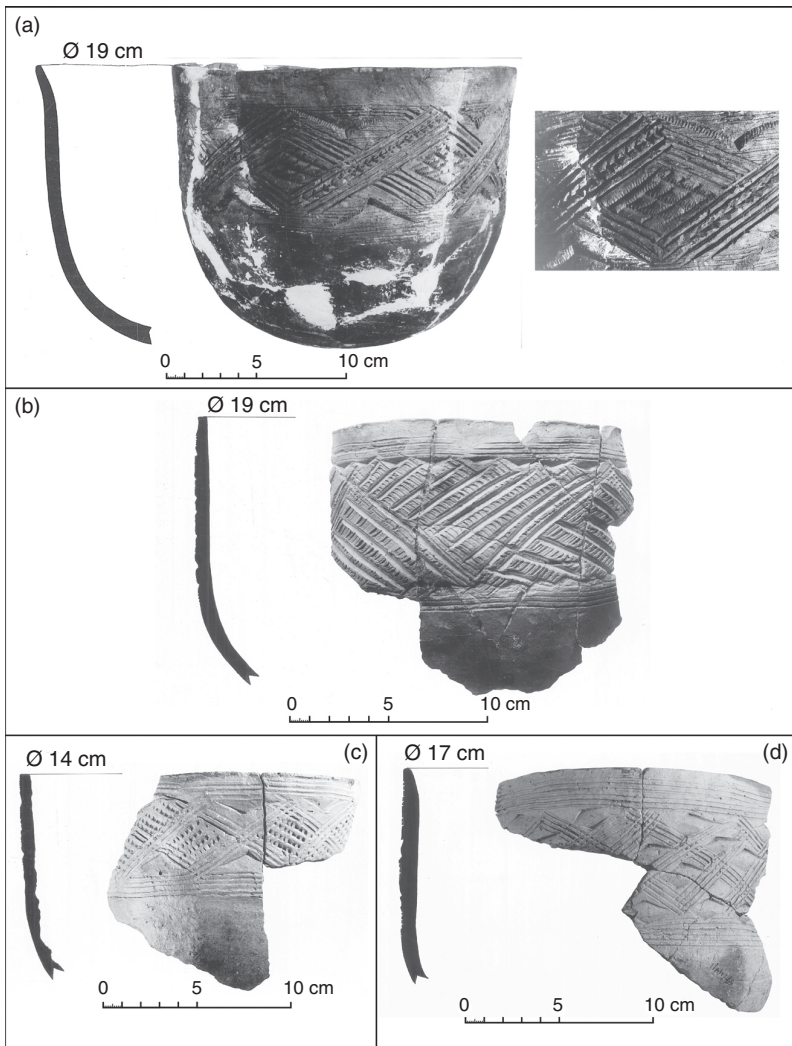


Figure 7.4 Ceramics of the Dimba style group: (a) Surface collection (1959, Georges Mortelmans), Dimba cave, Congo-Kinshasa, RMCA, Tervuren, Inv. RMCA PO.0.0.84912 (© P. de Maret 1972, fig. 52); (b) Surface collection (1957/1959, Georges Mortelmans), Mbafu cave, Congo-Kinshasa, RMCA, Tervuren, Inv. RMCA PO.0.0.85033 (© P. de Maret 1972, fig. 173); (c) Surface collection (1957/1959, Georges Mortelmans), Mbafu cave, Congo-Kinshasa, RMCA, Tervuren, Inv. RMCA PO.0.0.85027 (© P. de Maret 1972, fig. 167); (d) Surface collection (1957/1959, Georges Mortelmans), Mbafu cave, Congo-Kinshasa, RMCA, Tervuren, Inv. RMCA PO.0.0.85009 (© P. de Maret 1972, fig. 149).

The ceramics of the Dimba style display little variation in shape. Almost all are open bowl-like recipients, but a more closed pot-like vessel was identified in Kele (Clist *et al.* 2018c). Those vessels have a convex bottom, prolonged by a spherical lower body followed by a cylindrical or sometimes slightly concave neck ending with a rounded lip. On the basis of their sophisticated decoration, de Maret (1972: 38) had previously integrated nine pots with a more closed shape into the Group II. However, on closer examination, it turns out that they do not correspond to the paste, shape and decoration criteria used here to define the Dimba style group.

The Mbafo cave yielded one single specimen that manifests the characteristic formal and fabric features of the Dimba style group, but is not decorated. So far it is the only known example of an undecorated Dimba style vessel, but this could be due to the bias towards collecting only the most beautiful potsherds.

Most of the Dimba style potteries have a finely executed decoration located in a register on the cylindrical neck (Figure 7.4). The ornamental organization is relatively standardized. Indeed, it seems to respect a specific execution order and can be divided in three general and successive steps (Figure 7.3 d) (de Maret 1972). On most of the ceramics, this register is first delimited above and below by at least two parallel lines usually drawn with a comb. Then, in the space between these borders, a main pattern is drawn with at least two oblique parallel lines. It forms a motif of either chevrons or interlaced hatching. Over the first lines, some additional oblique lines are sometimes traced in an opposite direction (Figures 7.3 d and 7.4 b). The operations of this second stage create the overall effect of a large geometrical pattern consisting of interlocking lozenges, triangles or interlaced strands. This pattern may result in some triangular empty spaces along the borders of the decorative register and in some lozenge shapes that are created by the interlaced-strands pattern. In a third step, the remaining empty spaces are filled with impressions, either oblique lines of comb impressing (Figures 7.3 d, 7.4 a and c) or impressed triangles (Figures 7.3 d, 7.4 a and d), probably using the corner of a comb. Sometimes, they are also indented by comb impressing (Figures 7.3 d and 7.4 a). Finally, rod stampings are sometimes realized on the traced lines (Figure 7.4 a). Thus, ceramics of the Dimba style group always combine two decorative techniques: tracing for the first and second step of decoration and impressing for the third.

The dating of the Dimba style group remains problematic. No dates are available for the major deposits at Dimba and Mbafu. In the meanwhile, the Mbafu cave has been destroyed to produce concrete. However, in the Lovo Massif, the cave known as the Necropolis has yielded what appears to be pottery of the Dimba style group in association with at least seventeen burials (Raymaekers and Van Moorsel 1964: 10, fig. 9–10, pl. 37–9). Unfortunately, tourists looted this cave in the years that followed. However, during his 1973 survey, de Maret revisited the cave and excavated two one by one metre test pits, which yielded a few potsherds and a fragment of human skeleton. One shard was decorated with a triangle imprint, but not really characteristic of the Dimba style group. The associated charcoal was dated to 230 ± 95 BP (Hv-6259) (de Maret *et al.* 1977: 486). After calibration, it ranges between the late fifteenth century and the second half of the seventeenth century.

In Kingabwa (Cahen 1981: 135), a ceramic of the Dimba style group was recovered among the site's characteristic whitish ceramics. The context was dated to 305 ± 80 BP (Hv-6262), i.e. between the early sixteenth century and the early nineteenth century (de Maret *et al.* 1977: 497). In Gombe, also in modern-day Kinshasa, one context, which yielded some shards of Dimba style pottery in association with whitish Kingabwa ceramics, was radiocarbon dated to 220 ± 30 BP (GrN-7218), i.e. the mid-seventeenth century to the early nineteenth century AD (Cahen 1976; de Maret and Stainier 1999).

Given the high uncertainty of some of those dates and the fact that two of them come from contexts where Dimba style pottery only has a marginal presence, the Dimba style group can only be dated very roughly, i.e. somewhere between the second half of the fifteenth century and the early nineteenth century. However, given the high degree of admixture at Kingabwa and Gombe, the date coming from the Necropolis in the Lovo Massif is likely to be the most relevant date. If so, the time range of the Dimba style group could be tentatively narrowed down to the period between the fifteenth century and the seventeenth century, but this uncertain dating is in need of further corroboration.

The close stylistic proximity with the ceramics of the Misenga style group suggests that the two productions might have been contemporaneous, at least for some time (Clist *et al.* 2018c), an hypothesis

that would link the group to a period earlier than the tentative dating above.

The Misenga Style Group

In contrast to the Dimba style group, the one identified at Misenga (Figure 7.5) is particularly well dated and documented (Clist 1982; Clist 2012; Nikis *et al.* 2013; Nikis and De Putter 2015; Nikis 2018b).

This pottery distribution was first limited to the eponymous site, located north of the Congo River (Figure 7.1), close to the border separating Congo-Brazzaville and Congo-Kinshasa and excavated by Maurits Bequaert in 1951 (Clist 1982: 47) and again by the KongoKing project in 2014 (Clist *et al.* 2014: 48–50). Recent archaeological research on copper production sites a few kilometres further north, just across the border in Congo-Brazzaville, allowed the discovery of several other sites with a similar pottery, where it is always associated with remains of copper metallurgy (Nikis *et al.* 2013; Nikis and Champion 2014; Nikis and De Putter 2015; Nikis 2018b).

Like the ceramics of the Dimba style group, those of the Misenga style group are tempered with a mineral temper having a soap-like touch, such as talc or sericite. Variation in temper particle size is observed within the assemblage. Coarser temper is generally observed in the fabric of undecorated vessels, whereas highly decorated shards are often tempered with finer mineral particles. The fabric shows colour variations from dark grey to light brown, sometimes within one and the same pot, probably due to firing. Some vessels seem to have been smoked or smudged and, in some cases, their surface shows traces of polishing.

The pottery assemblage comprises a variety of shapes from closed pots to open vessels, such as bowls with variations in the shape of their neck (Clist 2012: 188). Some pots have no neck and their mouths are largely opened giving the illusion of an open shape (Figure 7.5 e). Closed bottles and large storage vessels are very rare. Some of the small pots have a handle on the upper belly (Figure 7.5 c). Only a few bottom shards have been identified. They are lightly rounded or convex; some of them are dimple-based.

The different sites have a homogeneous ceramic assemblage with only a small number of ornamented pots (Figure 7.5 a). The decoration of the latter presents different levels of complexity. It is located on the upper part of the vessels, generally on the upper belly, but

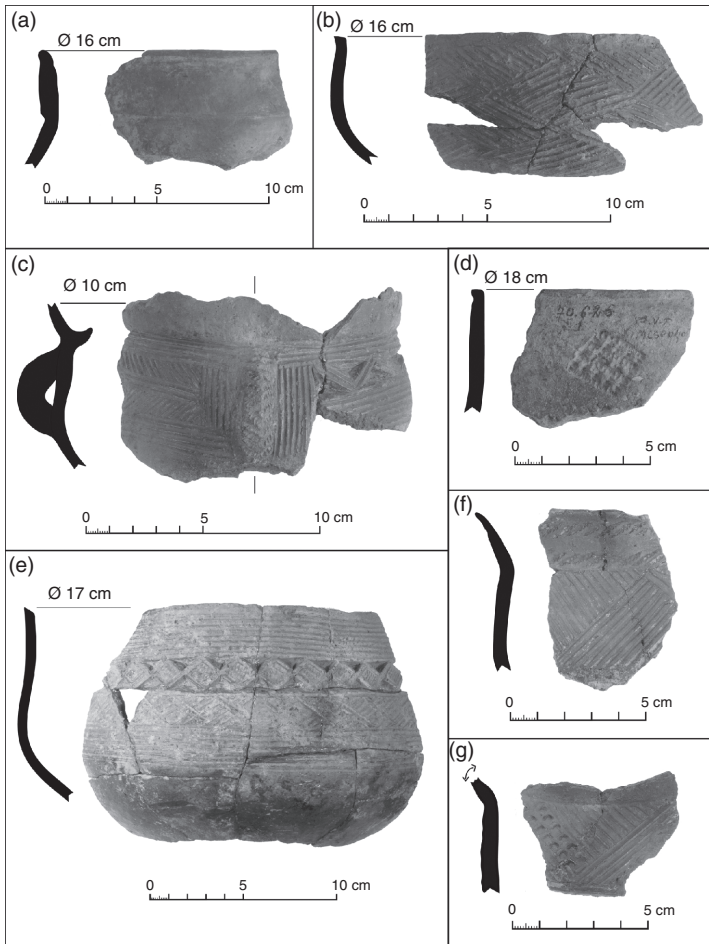


Figure 7.5 Ceramics of the Misenga style group: (a) Excavation (2014, SIV 0–5), Makuti 3, Congo-Brazzaville, Direction Générale du Patrimoine et des Archives de la République du Congo (© N. Nikis 2014); (b) Excavation (1951, Maurits Bequaert), Misenga, Congo-Kinshasa, RMCA, Tervuren, Inv. RMCA PO.0.0.70524 (© N. Nikis 2017); (c) Excavation (1951, Maurits Bequaert), Misenga, Congo-Kinshasa, RMCA, Tervuren, Inv. RMCA PO.0.0.70623 (© N. Nikis 2017); (d) Excavation (1951, Maurits Bequaert), Misenga, Congo-Kinshasa, RMCA, Tervuren, Inv. RMCA PO.0.0.70625-1 (© N. Nikis 2017); (e) Excavation (2013, SII 20–30), Makuti, Congo-Brazzaville, Direction Générale du Patrimoine et des Archives de la République du Congo (© N. Nikis 2013); (f) Excavation (2014, SIV 0–15), Makuti 3, Congo-Brazzaville, Direction Générale du Patrimoine et des Archives de la République du Congo (© N. Nikis 2014); (g) Excavation (2014, SVI 25–35), Makuti 3, Congo-Brazzaville, Direction Générale du Patrimoine et des Archives de la République du Congo (© N. Nikis 2014). (A black and white version of these figures will appear in some formats. For the colour versions, please refer to the plate section.)

sometimes also on the neck (Figure 7.5 f). Decoration is organized in clearly delimited geometric patterns and can be classified in different modes (Clist 2012: 19). Among the simplest examples are the isolated traced lozenges filled with comb-traced hatchings or comb impression (Figure 7.5 d).

These geometric patterns cover the entire circumference of the pottery. The register can be non-delimited and the oblique comb-traced hatchings form imbricated triangles and/or lozenges. They give the illusion that the traced lines pass over and under one another hinting at the interlacing of warp and weft (Figure 7.5 b). These triangles or lozenges can also be organized in a register delimited by one or several horizontal traced lines above and under the ornamental register. In this case, the pattern forms smaller triangles next to the borders that are sometimes excised, accentuating them by adding relief (Figure 7.5 e). On some vessels, crosshatched triangles alternate with triangles filled in with comb impressions (Clist 2012).

Likewise, decoration can be organized in several superimposed registers separated by horizontal lines and decorated with alternate crosshatched triangles, excised triangles bordered by oblique drawn lines or associated in friezes with lozenges filled with lines, comb-impressed herringbone, etc. (Figure 7.5 e). In some rare cases, registers are divided into a series of panels separated by vertical comb traced hatching or horizontal hatching (Figure 7.5 c). Some isolated stamped motifs can be added, like hollow reed or stick impressions, at the corner of triangle patterns or in lines following the crosshatching (Figure 7.5 g). The handles are decorated with comb impressions (Figure 7.5 c).

Several radiocarbon dates have been obtained in Misenga (680±30 BP – Poz-69049 and 535±30 BP – Poz-69050), Makuti 3 (645±30 BP – Poz-70551) (Nikis and De Putter 2015), Makuti (605±30 BP – Poz-59484) and Nkabi (610±30 BP – Poz-59435). After calibration, they range between the early fourteenth century AD and the mid-fifteenth century AD, which may also be the age of the Dimba style group.

The D-pots

A very different ceramic style group called ‘D-pots’ (Figures 6 a–e) has been identified at three major sites situated in the former Kongo kingdom, more specifically south of the Congo River (Clist *et al.* 2018c). These D-pots are well represented in excavation units of the polity’s

capital Mbanza Kongo (Clist *et al.* 2015e) as well as at Ngongo Mbata, which used to be an important commercial centre (Clist *et al.* 2015d). They are less frequent at Kindoki, which was probably part of the former provincial capital of Mbanza Nsundi and just like Ngongo Mbata situated in Kongo-Central province of Congo-Kinshasa (Figure 7.1). Interestingly, this ceramic style group has so far not been found in any of the surveys or test pits located in between those three major sites.

D-pots have relatively thick walls and are made of crushed quartz particles and fine-grained micaceous clay particles finely tempered with sand. Their fabric's colour ranges from a dark reddish to a dark brown, but the colour of a small number of vessels leans towards either orange or almost black. Undecorated parts are often polished.

Due to high fragmentation, it is hard to reconstruct a complete shape for the ceramics of the D style group. Only the upper body is well known: its orientation is either straight or slightly narrowing, meaning that the overall shape of the pot is either open or slightly closing. The pots are topped with either an exterior re-curved flat rim or an exterior thickened pinched rim, the latter giving the impression of a triangle when considered in a cross-sectional way. In both cases, the lips are rounded (Clist *et al.* 2018c).

All potteries of this style group seem decorated so far (Clist *et al.* 2018c). This decoration is finely executed and requires considerable skill and time investment from the potter. Ornamentation is predominantly organized in a series of traced horizontal registers of varying width, alternating those with decorative content and those without. When left blank, the narrower bands also serve to border those with more intricate decorative patterns. Several subtypes of this decorative mode exist. Either the decoration starts immediately under the rim (Figure 7.6 c) – usual for vessels sporting the thickened triangularly shaped rim – or the decoration is preceded by a register left completely blank (Figure 7.6 e). In the simpler of decorative subtypes, only one or two smaller registers receive additional decorative motifs consisting of traced or impressed lines or points with combs or awls forming lozenges, diagonal impressions or intermittent sets of vertical straight lines (Figure 7.6 e).

Below several rather blank registers, a register with more decoration can sometimes be found. Again, several variations exist. Either the register is filled with a relatively simple motif, such as hatchings, or

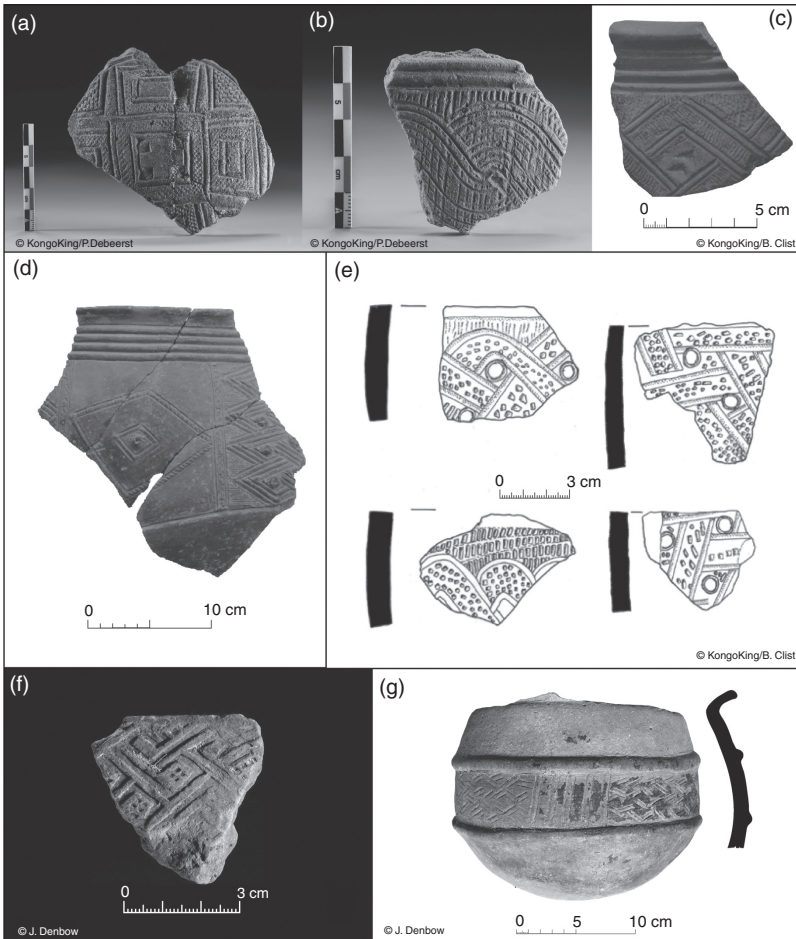


Figure 7.6 D pots: (a) Excavation (2014, Tr. 1), Ngongo Mbata, Congo-Kinshasa (© KongoKing / P. Debeerst); (b) Excavation (2013, Tr. 41), Ngongo Mbata, Congo-Kinshasa (© KongoKing / P. Debeerst); (c) Excavation (2013, Tr. 1), Ngongo Mbata, Congo-Kinshasa (© KongoKing/B. Clist); (d) Excavation (2011, Madungu Station), Mbanza Kongo, Angola (© KongoKing / P. de Maret); (e) Excavation (2014, Tr. 70, 72, 78, 83), Ngongo Mbata, Congo-Kinshasa (© KongoKing / B. Clist); ‘Woven Ware’ style 1: (f) Excavation (K.164), Loubanzi, Congo-Brazzaville (© James Denbow); ‘Woven Ware’ style 2: (g) Surface find, Loango Coast, Congo-Brazzaville (© James Denbow). (A black and white version of these figures will appear in some formats. For the colour versions, please refer to the plate section.)

a simple textured surface carried out with several combing techniques. It can also support a main motif, often with the texture as a background (Figures 7.6 b, d and e). This principal motif is always traced and can be inspired by the patterns discussed above, such as interlacing strands or an ever-extending network. However, in contrast to the style groups discussed previously, curved lines are sometimes used (Figure 7.6 b). Afterwards, spaces not covered by the main motif, often between two strands, can be filled with additional, isolated motifs such as triangular comb impressions (Figure 7.6 c), 'false relief chevron', hollow awl impressions or appliqué pastilles overwritten with comb impressions (Figures 7.6 d and e).

Other D-pot specimens have a different organization with the main register divided into panels sporting isolated main motifs (Figures 7.6 a and d), similar to the rows and columns with knot-like motifs found in raffia textiles. Still other pots have a series of adjoining squares alternating those with and without a textured surface.

This play of textures alternating between polished, blank and textured surfaces is a characteristic found in most ceramics of the D style group. Like the Dimba and Misenga style groups, the principal motif – if present – is generally realized through tracing. However, the order of execution is less straightforward as the textured background is often produced before this main pattern is realized. Another characteristic of D style decoration is that patterns are not monolithic, but often composite and assembled with multiple juxtaposed traced lines to form a single pattern resulting in the sophisticated and labour-intensive decorations typical for this style.

Of all the D style fragments found at Ngongo Mbata, the site providing us with the largest and most representative sample, about twenty-nine per cent have decorative motifs paralleling those found in weaving, while another fifteen per cent have motifs more loosely inspired by those weaving motifs.

Comparing radiocarbon dates associated with well-dated European objects from contexts associated with the D style group in Ngongo Mbata (Clist *et al.* 2015d; Clist *et al.* 2018a), Kindoki (Clist *et al.* 2015c; Clist *et al.* 2018b) and Mbanza Kongo (Clist *et al.* 2015e), it is possible to date the D style between the late sixteenth century AD and the first half of the eighteenth century, with particular emphasis on the second half of the seventeenth century.

Woven Ware

Denbow (2014) called some of the pottery from his surveys and excavations along the Loango coast 'Woven Ware', because its decorative patterns resemble woven motifs. Pottery shapes and the location of ornamentation on the vessels allow for that ware to be divided into two different styles. According to Denbow's description, the first one consists of jars with a tall and everted neck, tempered with sandy grit (Figure 7.6 f). Its decoration is located all around the neck and features diamond or lozenge motifs, most likely traced (Denbow 2014: 68, 136). The shape of the vessels seems to be a continuation of the forms of Early Iron Age ceramics in the same area.

This ceramic style was collected during surveys on twenty-four sites; two of them, i.e. Conde and Loubanzi, were also excavated. Conde gave a radiocarbon date of 810 ± 70 BP (Tx-7019), which ranges between 1040 and 1291 AD after calibration, but it was associated with chert and quartzite flakes that were found alongside pottery suggesting admixture with older levels. In Loubanzi, the context yielding these ceramics is dated to 420 ± 50 BP (Tx-7017), which corresponds to the period between 1415 and 1633 AD after calibration. Taking into account these dates and the fact these sites did not yield European ceramics, Denbow (2014: 136) situates this style group between 1100 and 1500.

The characteristic recipients of the second 'Woven Ware' style group are hemispherical pots with a sharply everted rim (Figure 7.6 g). Decoration is located in the midst of the belly in a register bordered on both sides by *appliqué* strips. This band is most commonly filled with traced hatching or cross-hatching designs, but some pots also show panels of diamond patterns formed by drawn interlaced strands (Denbow 2014: 140). The latter design is sometimes combined with applied strips on which copies of cowrie shells were moulded (Denbow 2014: 69).

This second style group consists almost exclusively of survey finds. Only one shard was retrieved from an archaeological context, namely in Loubanzi. It has its decorative register filled with stamping realized by the scalloped edge of a cockleshell. According to the illustration in Denbow (2014: 141), the pattern seems to produce a rope-like effect. It is unclear whether or not this potsherd could be linked to the 420 ± 50 BP date (Tx-7017) obtained from the same site (cf. *supra*).

The other examples of this second ‘Woven Ware’ style group, all of them obtained through surface collection, were associated with European artefacts on most sites. Denbow (2014: 69–70) therefore dates them between 1500 and 1900 AD. He postulates also that the change in shape between the two ‘Woven Ware’ style groups was influenced by the arrival of European goods and he compares the hemispherical pots of the second style to ‘chamber pots’.

There is no doubt that the first style is older than the second, but, given the uncertainty of the context of the two radiocarbon dates and the lack of excavated contexts for the second style, both styles cannot yet be placed in a solid chronological framework. Likewise, there is little evidence for the representativeness of the interlaced pattern among the ceramic assemblages from the Loango area, but its presence still confirms the use of this kind of pattern in the wider Kongo cultural area. Although the decorative pattern of this ware is indeed inspired by woven motifs, our knowledge remains rather sketchy and further analysis on a larger corpus is needed.

Discussion

The pottery style groups discussed above use, at least partly, the same decorative language of geometric patterns derived from the ‘contained knot’ (Figure 7.3 a). On some vessels (for instance, Figures 7.3 d, 7.4 a and 7.5 d), the patterns used are not merely a play of interlocking lozenges and triangles. The artisans went out of their way to mimic the visual effect of strands going over and under one another. In the case of weaving, this effect is the inevitable consequence of the technique used. When applied to ceramics, however, it is a deliberate choice, which considerably complicates the ornamental execution.

The decoration of the ceramic style groups discussed sharply contrasts with the decorative pattern found on contemporaneous ceramic style groups from the Kongo area, such as the style group A, specimens of which have also been unearthed in Ngongo Mbata, Kindoki and Mbanza Kongo (Clist *et al.* 2018c). Kongo pottery decorated with woven motifs is almost exclusively built up with right angles around the same four axes discussed above. Again, this makes sense in weaving, when using techniques such as weft-floats and twilling, but on clay material this same pattern is purposely sought after.

Similarly to the weavers' search for 'alternating textures and tonalities' (LaGamma and Giuntini 2015: 135), the potters paid a great deal of attention to fabrics and surface treatments. Surfaces free from decoration are often polished and the pots of both the Mbafu and Misenga style groups often have a silky touch due to the sericite or talc temper. The decoration itself is a juxtaposition and sometimes superimposition of different decorative actions with several different tools. All of the stamped and traced motifs, but especially the 'false relief chevron' (Phillipson 1968; Phillipson 1972), create a play of light and shadow comparable to alternating woven textures reflecting and absorbing light.

Additionally, when looking at those woven objects which most resemble the shape of ceramic pots, i.e. the cylindrical baskets and (inverted) *mpu* caps, the overall organization of decorative elements on them is very similar. A principal pattern, usually a variation on the contained knot or a zigzag, is found in the main well-delimited register situated on the cylindrical part of the volume. Wherever that chief motif leaves blank spaces within the register, it can be filled with secondary, smaller and usually finite and free-floating patterns. While the potter actually executes the decoration in this order on the vessel, the weaver has to invent the entire design before starting the loom work, because the patterns are embedded in the weave. However, in both weaving and pottery-making, most artisans have more freedom executing the smaller additional motifs. This is where we find the false relief chevrons as well as various other stamped finite patterns. As Fromont (2014: 125–30) describes for a *mpu* held in the collections of Copenhagen's National Museum, this is where a cross symbol was integrated on the headgear, integrating a new reference into the range of Kongo symbols of authority.

It makes sense that the ubiquitous geometric motifs found in woven objects were transposed to other types of materials in this 'highly textile-literate society' (Fromont 2014: 112). We know that the contrast between plain and decorated cloth corresponded to a distinction between ordinary versus prestige goods. Could the same be true for pottery? Plain vessels would then serve ordinary purposes, whereas the highly decorated ones with typical Kongo motifs would have been luxury goods. In the Misenga style group, there is a fair proportion of undecorated and decorated vessels, but in the Dimba style, there are almost only decorated vessels among those collected. This is probably

due to the fact that they were discovered in caves, which probably link them to ritual practices, but this may also reflect a collector's bias towards fine pieces. All the Ngongo Mbata Group D shards are decorated, but there is some noticeable variation, some vessels being less elaborately decorated than others. Moreover, they are contemporaneous with other less decorated groups of ceramics (Clist *et al.* 2018c).

In raffia weaving and basketry, the more labour-intensive and skilfully executed the finished product, the more valuable it was. This was true at every stage of the manufacturing process, from selecting and processing the raw material to creating the extremely complex decorative patterns. As was the case for raffia cloth, the most elaborate ceramics also result from a careful selection of raw material and temper, shaping techniques and complex decorative patterns. The latter are applied through a time-consuming process of juxtaposing several decorative techniques within one single general pattern, already complex as such, making its appearance even more intricate. As with decorations woven on a loom, this requires the final result to be conceived in the finest details before execution. In addition, particular care is observed in other stages of the ceramic production. Dimba and Misenga potteries decorated with woven motifs generally have a more meticulously polished surface, while some Ngongo Mbata vessels of style group D display the same surface treatment. In all groups, one notices that the more richly decorated pots also have the most carefully processed paste. This is especially apparent in the Misenga style group, where one observes a striking difference between decorated and undecorated pots. It is thus very likely that, as is the case for cloth and baskets, the most sophisticated pots were more valuable than their more ordinary counterparts.

If these pots decorated with woven motifs were more valuable, they were, like luxury cloth, probably also more prestigious and more apt to express and display status. However, the question remains if and to what extent these highly decorated ceramics became prestige goods in their own right and, therefore, associated with the elite. It can also be surmised that they were imitations of elite items in other media. The current state of research does not allow for definitive answers, but some elements tend to support the elite character of these ceramics.

First, the location where some of those artefacts were found can be indicative of links to power, ritual or economic activity. The Misenga

style group has thus far been found exclusively at copper production sites in the Mindouli area. Even though we still have little knowledge of the trading networks contemporary to this ceramic group, we know that at least in the sixteenth century copper was a valuable resource (Hilton 1985: 54–7).

Second, the Dimba style group was mostly found in caves and once in a funerary context. These kinds of sites are in all likelihood ritual places (Heimlich 2014: 154–65), where one could expect the use of prestigious items. In addition, the ceramics' highly unusual shape and the thinness of their walls do not make domestic use a likely purpose. It is also interesting to note that Dimba pots circulated beyond their main distribution zone. Some Dimba remains have been collected in Kingabwa, today a suburb of Kinshasa on the left bank of Malebo Pool, where they are clearly exogenous within the local assemblage (de Maret and Stainier 1999: 485).

Moreover, the extremely finely carved embellishments found on some steatite pipes from Ngongo Mbata closely follow the decorative patterns of those on Dimba pots (de Maret 1982a: 82) and we know that stone pipes used to be prestigious objects in their own right (Clist 2018 and Chapter 8).

As far as the Ngongo Mbata D Group is concerned, it is so far mainly found in places that used to host the kingdom's elite. When 'walls, clothing, and objects of status echoed one another in palatial spaces in a concert of geometric patterns of varying scales, colours, and shapes' (Fromont 2014: 188), it makes sense that elite ceramics were integrated in and contributed to this visual culture through the display of the same decorative motifs.

In addition, all over the world, prestige items are prone to be imitated. For example, Inka vessels were used by the elites, but in some of their provinces, blended imitation styles were used by a local elite (Menzel 1960). In Namazga Bronze Age ceramics from West Central Asia around *ca.* 3200–2700 BC, a given pottery assemblage displays certain geometric patterns recalling textile designs. In the next period, *i.e.* 2700–2000 BC, this ceramic is replaced by skeuomorphic assemblages imitating metal recipient. This change has been interpreted as a shift from textiles to metal as valuable goods in long-distance exchanges (Wilkinson 2014). Today counterfeit luxury goods have become a major phenomenon worldwide (Wilcox 2009). We may very well have one example of this process within the Dimba

style group. At Dimba cave, Mortelmans collected a pot, which he initially designated as Group III and thought to be a child's imitation (Mortelmans 1962: 414–15). As a matter of fact, it is an obviously clumsy replica of Dimba vessels. Its fabric, shape and decoration are similar though far more irregular (de Maret 1972: 36–7).

Even though the use of finely decorated pottery is hardly mentioned in historical sources, we believe that it was presumably associated with the elite for display or rituals. Our assumption needs further corroboration, preferably with evidence from the major political and/or ritual centres, not least Mbanza Kongo, once all material excavated there has been studied in detail and published. Furthermore, we need to fill the remaining gaps and uncertainties in the chronology and distribution of the numerous pottery groups throughout the Kongo area.

Despite the chronological gaps, it seems that the currently attested woven motifs on pottery – especially the most sophisticated among them – coincide with the rise and fall of the major polities in the area, such as the Kongo and Loango kingdoms. The Kongo kingdom is indeed estimated to have risen from the thirteenth century onwards (Thornton 2001; Chapter 1, this volume), just like the Loango kingdom (Martin 1972: 9) and some other less known and smaller polities. Historians have suggested that the exploitation of copper deposits in the Niari Basin, on the border between Congo-Kinshasa and Congo-Brazzaville, was linked to the emergence of those centralized and stratified entities (Hilton 1985: 54–7; Martin 2015: 55; Martin pers. comm.). In Hilton's view (1985: 55), this was indeed a major factor in the rise of the Kongo kingdom.

Looking at that same area from an archaeological perspective, the Misenga ceramic style group, well dated to the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, is contemporary to the above-mentioned period. This may not be a pure coincidence, as copper metallurgical activities in the region became very visible in the archaeological record from this period onwards (Nikis and De Putter 2015). Although the link between the copper region yielding Misenga pottery and the early Kongo kingdom itself is not yet soundly established, Martin (2015: 55) has hypothesized that the polities present early on in Vungu or Mpemba Kasi may well have been in contact with the mineral-rich region. In the same way, the style group D of Ngongo Mbata is chronologically situated towards the end of Kongo's apogee, but so far is not attested beyond the political collapse of the kingdom towards

the end of the eighteenth century. The Dimba style group, although still poorly documented and dated, is almost certainly also situated within the kingdom's chronological confines, if not earlier.

Similarly, it is striking that in the whole of the Kongo area, not one vessel from the last two centuries is decorated with woven-inspired motifs (Coart and de Haulleville 1907; de Maret 1974; Vincke 2002; Kaumba 2017; Kaumba 2018), once more mirroring the evolution observed in raffia cloth (LaGamma and Giuntini 2015: 135). When the Kongo state was disrupted by political unrest and collapsed, the highly elaborate weaving know-how, considered one of the Kongo kingdom's trademarks both in Africa and Europe, vanished (Giuntini and Brown 2015).

In addition, the distribution pattern of ceramic groups decorated with woven motifs seems to be limited to the Kongo cultural area. Despite the importance of raffia weaving in Central Africa, weaving motifs seem to have been transferred to ceramics to that extent only in the Kongo region (Vansina 1998; de Maret 1999). Although the Kuba decorative repertoire comes to mind here, as it already did to Mortelmans, modern Kuba pottery does not display this degree of skeuomorphic transfer, while this decorative language and organization was transferred to wooden vessels.

In the regions adjoining the Kongo cultural area, the decorative repertoire is obviously different. To the northeast, Kongo pottery decorated with woven motifs contrasts with the various productions identified in and upstream from the Malebo Pool area. This pottery with its whitish paste has a decoration style comprising undulating lines, cowrie or *nzimbu* (*Olivancillaria nana*) imitations, hollow awl impressions and *appliqué* (Van Moorsel 1968; Pinçon 1988; Rochette 1989).

Further east, the closest excavated site serving as a comparison is Mashita Mbanza in the Bandundu province of Congo-Kinshasa, where pots are primarily decorated with horizontal and vertical parallel tracing without the typical Kongo knot-like patterns or organization (Pierot 1987).

Further south in Angola, the few excavated sites have so far not yielded the same kind of patterns either (Ervedosa 1980; Gutierrez 1999; Da Silva Domingos 2009).

According to our current-day knowledge, the intricate woven motifs found in the Kongo area stand out in the pottery production

of West-Central Africa and could well be regarded as a characteristic feature of Kongo material culture during the zenith of its kingdom.

Conclusion

Elaborate interlaced patterns are clearly prominent motifs within the Kongo cultural area. They make up a decorative repertoire shared among several media, but are most prominent and visible on luxury raffia cloth and basketry. They are also found on a significant proportion of ceramics within certain pottery style groups. Ceramic decoration retains the knot-like motifs, probably derived from the very idea of interlacing warp and weft and in many cases the more global decorative organization, especially of baskets and *mpu* headgear.

As highly prized and positively connoted goods, luxury cloth and baskets would have acted as ‘boundary objects’, allowing developments of shared aesthetics and taste in the wider Kongo cultural area expressed on different media (Gosselain 2016). Decorative patterns on the more labour-intensive ceramics would subsequently have been imitated in more loosely executed versions.

This ‘recognizably Kongo’ pattern (Cornet and van Braeckel 1995) is an obvious cultural marker and it is probably closely connected to the prestige of local elites. To what extent it was directly related to Kongo’s nobility hierarchy remains to be evaluated. In any case, the feature seems to chronologically correspond to the pinnacle of the kingdom. It may well be further evidence for the fact that political centralization and economic integration within the realm of the Kongo kingdom led to the diffusion and the increasing homogenization of material culture, as Bernard Clist argues in Chapter 8 with regard to Kongo pipes. Along similar lines, Bostoën and de Schryver (2015) and Goes and Bostoën (2019) have carried out dedicated studies on specific language features showing that the growing spread and impact of the high-prestige South Kikongo variety spoken in the vicinity of Mbanza Kongo induced linguistic convergence and higher similarity between Kikongo varieties belonging to distinct subgroups. In the kingdom’s northernmost provinces, the contact between South Kikongo and these other subclades of the Kikongo Language Cluster was even so intensive that it gave rise to the central convergence zone from which the present-day

Kimanyanga and Kindibu varieties evolved (de Schryver *et al.* 2015; Dom and Bostoën 2015; see also Bostoën and de Schryver, Chapter 3).

In summary, considering their chronology and distribution closely paralleling the spatial and temporal limits of the Kongo kingdom, pottery displaying woven motifs could be used for the time being as a proxy-marker for the apogee of that famous polity. In our view, it is a highly relevant archaeological marker of the Kongo kingdom and its cultural influence, to the same extent as the smoking pipes (see Chapter 8). This hypothesis should be tested in future research with further excavations resulting in better distribution maps and a sounder chronology.

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