



Central African Art

In Global Context

University of Central Oklahoma

Global Art and Visual Culture
2016 Central African Art Class Presentation

Archives and Special Collections
Max Chambers Library
Edmond, OK, 2016

STLR

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(Right) Mwanapwo mask, Chokwe. From [Encyclopedia Britannica](#).

Special Thanks

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Foreword

The human race evolved in Central Africa 200,000 years ago, when ancient hominoids moved away from the forests, developing upright postures enabling them to stand tall to see over the tall grass. As the great migrations began, people developed different features to adapt to various climates and environments throughout the world. Despite the socially constructed differences, such as ethnicity, race, religion, nation, and culture, it is believed we are all descendants of the African population.

Presently, the African continent thrives with over 1.2 billion people, including over 1,000 distinct languages in different ethnicities. Throughout its history, African societies were organized into chiefdoms or princedoms, each with complex social, cultural, and religious systems. While some states developed hierarchical structures, many societies were egalitarian, governed by consensus among the entire adult populations rather than by an elite few. Other societies have been governed by two main institutions, a king/chief and a secret society. Art objects often represented the power and authority of the king and secret societies, creating the identity of the communities, and establishing the societal hierarchies. Thus, each political entity developed its own visual culture to support its own societal structure and beliefs.

Control of the great wealth of natural resources has attracted countless conflicts within the regions and with outsiders shaping the complex history of Africa. Material wealth of the continent included not only gold, rubber, and copper, but also clay, woods, raffia, and gemstones, including diamond, opal, and amethyst. It is not only the diversity of materials, but also the diversity of natural ecosystems. Increased trade with Muslim merchants and European nations brought new ideas, materials, and religions, mainly Christianity and Islam, to Africa, enriching its diversity and material wealth. West African Ivory, known as “white gold” was especially treasured among Renaissance nobles for their curiosity cabinets. In addition to copper, ivory, beads, and cloths, slave trade rapidly increased especially after colonization of the American continent by European powers.

The collapse of the profitable slave trade in the mid-nineteenth century and rising capitalism in European nations, backed by the Industrial Revolution, led to exploitation of African societies through colonization. The colonization was motivated mainly by economic interests, since European powers were looking for new guaranteed profitable markets and investments, including abundant African natural resources for growing industries. Urbanization of the imperial nations also created social inequity, including unemployment, poverty, and homelessness in rural areas, and therefore a need for exporting the “surplus population” to the newly found colonies in Africa. Among “surplus population,” there was a large number of formerly enslaved Africans from the Americas who immigrated to London. British colonization of Sierra Leone in West Africa was established almost entirely by freed slaves from the United States. In fact, Abraham Lincoln (president, 1861-1865) believed that “colonization was the ultimate resolution of the race problem.” He introduced his plan of gradual emancipation, as well as settling African Americans in a colony on the African continent.

As the colonial powers competed to establish colonies in Africa, the Berlin Conference (1884-85) was assembled by German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck with the aim to divide Africa among thirteen European colonial powers. It was to resolve the confusion of territorial boundaries of existing colonies. More than 80% of African nations at that time were under their own rule, but none of their representatives were invited to the Berlin Conference. Arbitrary territory lines between the colonial powers were decided to establish fifty countries in Africa, paying little consideration to existing diverse cultures. Britain controlled Western Africa, present day Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone; East Africa, Kenya, Uganda, Sudan, and part of Somalia. Germany took over Tanzania and Cameroon, and Portugal colonized the Cape Verde Islands, Angola, and South Africa’s autonomous regions. Congo was split between France and Belgium, and Italy took over Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, and the coastal area of Libya. Spain claimed the coastal area of northwest Africa and Equatorial Guinea, and remaining regions of western and northern Africa were controlled by France. The decisions at the conference were simply forced on African nations, societies, and tribes disregarding the existing political, economic, and cultural borders.

Central Africa, as it has been defined by colonizers, is situated in the Congo Basin, rich in rivers, forests, savanna woodlands, swamps, and flooded forests. The Basin is also known for 10,000 tropical botanical species (30% are unique to the area), 400 mammal species, including some endangered animals (forest elephants, chimpanzees, bonobos, and lowland and mountain gorillas), 1,000 species of birds, and 700 species of fish. The Congo Basin is primarily occupied by Bantu peoples, including Mongo, Kongo, and Luba cultures. The Bantu language was formed in the last millennium B.C.E. of the Neolithic period (Bantu means the language of the people).

In the pre-colonial period, part of Central Africa developed through the rich copper and salt industries, which led to political power establishing states in the area of modern Congo. Textiles were another important trading good in the regions. Raffia palm forest and textile productions created a tremendous wealth for the Kongo Kingdom (present-day Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo). However, political systems in most of Central Africa stayed small, in the form of chiefdoms. The people of Kuba established extensive trading networks acquiring copper from a distant region, as well as cowrie shells from the Indian Ocean. Along with Kongo and Kuba, the Luba peoples established a larger political system through the wealth of the fishing industry.

Exploitation of ivory, rubber, as well as cheap labor, was eminent during the colonial period. Ivory was actively traded with the United States in exchange for calico furs. After the Berlin Conference, Belgian King Leopold II built his colony, Congo Free State, and reigned with a horrifying system allowing the brutal punishments of local villagers whose limbs were amputated if the rubber collection quota was not met. Millions of Congolese died under the rule of Leopold II and the Belgian government. This period is sometimes referred to as the African Holocaust, but has been silenced in history still dominated by the Euro-centric historical narrative. Even after the rise of human rights and those practices having stopped, neocolonialism interests of European nations and the United States fought to protect their investments in the African regions.

The African continent is still rich in natural resources, including oil, coal, natural gas, copper, iron, gold, manganese, chromium, rubber, and many others. South Africa, Ghana, and Zimbabwe hold more than half of the world's gold reserve. The unique quality of gold is indispensable to modern technology, including computer and electronics, as well as the aerospace industry. Led by South Africa, combining Botswana, Namibia, Congo Basin, and Sierra Leone, Africa holds 56% of the diamond reserve in the world. However, the exploitation of natural resources and abuse of cheap labors have become severe issues at present day. For example, "sweatshops" in various countries became vital forces in bringing an immense wealth to the top few percent of people, mostly in the developed capitalist countries, allowing for inequity, poverty, abuse, and low wage. The exploiters have been monopolizing the world's wealth while collectively turning a blind eye to human rights issues caused simply by greed.

Despite much of its tragic history, Africa stands strong in its uniqueness and diversity of societies and cultures. African artworks are often made in abstract or stylized manners that are rich in iconography and materials. These conceptual artworks often work as a medium between the human and spiritual world touching the human's everlasting fascination with death and the supernatural realm. Thus, conceptual art is not a modern art phenomena founded by the West-centered art world, but was actually practiced in Africa, and in other indigenous cultures in every corner of the world, for centuries. Those artworks are typically associated with the sociocultural, socioeconomic, political, aesthetic, and religious systems of societies, and are often accompanied by mythology and legends.

Many Contemporary African artists produce art in various mediums, and have been trained in European and American schools. As in any other society, art in African societies reflects local and global cross-cultural traditions, playing a critical role in constructing different identities: an identity of an individual, an identity of society, and an identity of a nation. Many artworks serve to complete the cycle of life and death, preserve traditions, and express social changes.

The University of Central Oklahoma (UCO) houses one of the most significant collections of African artistic production in the U.S. The collection consists of more than 1,200 African Art objects from twenty different countries in Central, Western, and Southern African regions. More than 100 diverse societies and cultures are represented through their conceptual and abstract artistic practices. More than 400 African artworks are displayed on the second and third floors of the UCO Max Chambers Library. These artworks were bought by UCO or are on loan from the Kirkpatrick Foundation, as well as from private individuals. Much of the collection was gathered by former UCO Professor of art, William Hommel Ph.D. The oldest culture in the collection is exemplified by the Sao, dating back to 600 BCE. The Central African Art collection specifically represents diverse societies: Ati, Bamum, Bungo, Chokwe, Fang, Hema, Juba, Kom, Kuba, Kongo, Luba, Mileke, Sao, Songo, Suku, Teke, Yaka, and Wum. It is the aim of the Library to study these collections and keep them available to students at UCO as part of an effort to foster global and cultural competencies.

Shikoh Shiraiwa
Edmond, OK.
Dec. 2016

Global Art History as Comparative Studies

The Central African Art in Global Context presentations have been prepared by the students from the *Central African Art* course, one of the many courses in UCO's Global Art and Visual Culture program. Developed during the 2012-2013 academic year, the Global Art and Visual Culture program considers UCO's focus on global and cultural competence and the university's aspiration to be a global institution. The program consists of many intellectually challenging courses, which provide students with global art historical knowledge. The 2000- and 3000-level courses comparatively explore the art visual culture of a particular geographical region or religious entity, such as *Global Art and Visual Culture I*, *Contemporary Art and Visual Culture Globally*, *Art of the Americas*, and *Islamic Art*. The 4000-level courses, such as *History of Museum Practices*, *Art by Women*, and *Multicultural Art*, address cross-cultural issues in visual language, such as gender, nationalism, ethnicity, religion, location (urban or rural), globalization, colonialism or museum practices.

The global study of art is still in its formative stages, as most art history and history departments focus on the Western art historical narrative that covers Europe and the U.S., beginning with ancient Greece and ending in the contemporary period. This model marginalizes the art histories of non-Western societies, which are included as mere supporting actors of the major narrative, with no contemporary artistic production. For example, thousands of years of African art history is given as much attention as one small period of the Western narrative. It is recognized by scholars that white American or European artists dominate the contemporary art world, while non-Western artists are forced to this artistic framework in order to be recognized on a global scale. While claiming to be global, therefore, art history continues to favor Germany, Italy, France, England, and the U.S., perpetuating the superiority of the Western nations and the concept of the nation state in general.

At the same time, the U.S. leads in advocating the global approach, which means comparative studies of societies and their histories, including art

histories. The comparative approach is critical considering that modern social movement and migrations of people across the planet following the creation of the E.U. signaled a recognition of the world in this entirety. For the U.S., a nation of immigrants continually accepting new influxes of people from all over the world, it is natural to focus on the global identity of its citizens. The concept of the global citizen, in turn, requires a new approach to teaching art history, since the art historical concepts, theories, and methods of Western art simply do not apply to the art and visual culture of non-Western societies. Only by approaching art histories comparatively, by studying all cultures as equal to one another, can we shift away from the dominant Western art historical narrative. Some scholars are already examining Western artistic traditions as a result of contacts with other societies, through trade, colonization, slavery, and war.

Central to comparative studies is the understanding that history is dynamic and identity formation is rooted in social conflict, as various social groups continually negotiate their relative positions in society. Because of the inherent power asymmetry, dominant political and religious groups often denigrate other groups, leading to human rights violations. Thus, as a part of identity rhetoric, art and visual culture serve to justify these violations and validate social conflicts. This makes the ability to decode visual language crucial to the understanding of social relations and to diminishing social prejudice. At the 2015 Research-to-Practices conference, a UCO student pointed out that “it would be beneficial to instill global and cultural competencies amongst our students, which play a large role in reducing practices and creates healthy learning and working environments.”

Our students’ interest in global and cultural competency and social justice is evident in their research projects. Student taking Global Art and Visual Culture courses have discussed the use of visual culture in the Rwandan genocide, the posters announcing an American movie in Cuba and Poland, the importance of artists addressing the penitentiary system in the U.S., the fight of the Cherokee against stereotype image of Native Americans in American society, the depictions of death in various societies, and the creation of America’s first slavery museum at The Whitney Plantation as trauma site. Students have

presented their research at many professional conferences, including the Oklahoma Research Day, the National Conference of Undergraduate Research, the Oklahoma Art Historian conference, the Mountain-Plains Museums Association conference, and the Research-to-Practices conference.

UCO provides the Global Art and Visual Culture program with a great environment for comparative studies. The UCO Chambers Library houses significant art collections, including both African and Native American art. We feel privileged utilizing these collections in classes, providing students and myself with real-life research experiences. Research by the *West African Art* students will be used in writing a future catalogue on the collection. The *Central African Art* class comparatively studied what we call traditional African art and contemporary art in the U.S. Our aim was to shift away from treating African art as exotic and different toward understanding its commonalities and differences with American art and culture. The research projects presented today demonstrate that our students not only display keen interest in comparative art history and identity formation, but also recognize Central African societies as complex and equal to American societies. It is both humbling and amazing how students address social and cultural issues through art history, shaping their own future and perhaps our future as well, although they are not always completely aware of the profoundness of their research.

Teresa Pac, Ph.D.
Edmond, OK.
Dec. 2016

Program

3:00 -3:05 **Introduction: Nicole Willard, Shikoh Shiraiwa, and Dr. Teresa Pac**

3:05-3:20 **Jacob Jones: Sound and Space in Congo and American *Soundsuits* Performances**

Many scholars have addressed the concepts of sound and space within contemporary art. However, comparative studies of the use of sound and space in regard to what we know as traditional art of Congolese societies and contemporary art practices have yet to be done. This research will examine the use of space surrounding artwork in action, including the Mangbetu *Harp*, the Bembe *Helmet* and *Face Mask*, and the Lega *Bwami Mask*. By comparing and contrasting the ritual use of these artworks with art performances of the contemporary experimental Congolese band Konono N°1 and the Chicago-based textile artist Nick Cave, I argue for the similarities in the use of sound and space in the traditional Congolese performances and contemporary performative art. This unique comparative interdisciplinary analysis facilitates a more global understanding of the use of sound and space in artistic performances.

3:20 -3:35 **Olivia Musgrove: Legitimizing Cultural Dominance through Spectacle: A Comparative Study of Bushoong Performance and American Sporting Events**

This research is a comparative study of the use of spectacle in justifying the conqueror's right to dominate society, both in the Kuba Kingdom, located in the modern Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the contemporary United States. The royal institution of the Kuba Kingdom utilizes a royal masquerade spectacle, in which the ruling Bushoong clan validates its dynastic heritage and power over various clans, including that of the Cwa pygmies. This spectacle has a significant visual dimension, employing specific royal geometric designs on royal clothing and artworks, especially the *Mwaash a*

Mbooy and *Bwoom* masks. Men perform in these masks in a specifically prescribed dance, recalling the triumph of the original Kuba king over the leader of the Cwa pygmies. I will argue that this act of assimilation through public spectacle is similar to that which is commonly seen in American sporting rituals, including football and baseball games, involving the assimilation of stereotyped images of Native American culture. Both the Kuba royal masquerade and American football and baseball performances make use of carefully chosen visual language of the conquered societies, and thereby produce and control the image of the Cwa and Native Americans, respectively. This comparative interdisciplinary approach permits a cross-cultural understanding of the nuances of cultural dominance through artistic performances.

3:35-3:50 **Corrie Alvaro: Manipulating Social Hierarchy through Art Performance: A Comparative Study of the Kwifon Society and the Ku Klux Klan**

Ceremonial masks have been used in ritual performances to wield power in various societies throughout history. Two cultures where this is exhibited are Cameroon and the United States. In Cameroon, Kwifon was a secret society, which along with the king – or “fon” - ruled the kingdom, specifically during the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries. The Kwifon used animal masks in various performances. In the southern United States, the Ku Klux Klan was a secret society, which primarily advocated white supremacy during the early to mid-twentieth century. The Klan made use of white, pointed hoods and floor-length robes, often marked with the symbol of the cross. While there are obvious differences between the Kwifon and the Klan, I argue that both secret societies shared similar use of visual language and performance to advocate their societal goals. In each case, art and ritual were utilized to instill fear in people, in order to maintain power hierarchies and stabilize societal norms. Thus, traditionally associated with tribal societies, the performative use of masks is not completely foreign to or far removed from American culture. Understanding the visual language of secret societies is critical, considering that in recent years there has been a rise of white nationalist organizations. While white hoods are less popular and are currently stigmatized, these groups

have found ways to leverage anonymity with the aim of advancing their own exclusionary vision of society.

3:50-4:05 **Bridget Moore: Geometrical Illusion in the Traditional Kuba Textiles and Contemporary Artworks of Bridget Riley**

This research is a comparative study of the use of geometry by traditional Kuba artists and the contemporary British artist Bridget Riley. The Kuba people inhabit the area of what is today the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The society is known for ornately decorated wooden objects, such as palm wine cups and containers, as well as embroidered textiles, all covered with geometric motifs created in a manner to deceive the eye by giving the illusion of movement and depth in the patterns. Most scholars study this use of geometry as confined to the Kuba society, within the framework of Central African artistic traditions. In this research, I argue that such use of geometric pattern is also an important element in the works of contemporary Western artists, such as Bridget Riley. Similar to Kuba artists, she explores the use of geometry in creating illusion in her art. The aim of this comparative interdisciplinary study is to emphasize that traditional Kuba and contemporary British artists share artistic practices, in order to challenge the idea of Kuba art as primitive or tribal, as is often studied by scholars.

4:05-4:20 **Linda Rother: A Comparative Study of Circumcision Ceremonies in the Yaka Society and the United States**

This research examines art associated with male circumcision ceremonies in the Yaka tribe of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and two contemporary American artists, Glen Calder and Adrian Parsons. In Yaka society, circumcision is part of the practice of communal ceremonial initiations of youth into adult society, making use of tribal artifacts, such as masks, in powerful performances. In the U.S., circumcision of boys is also a social phenomenon but takes place within days after the child's birth in the hospital. Usually performed by a doctor, circumcision in the U.S. is shrouded in silence and controversy. However, recent circumcision performance art by Callender

and Parsons are social events, and therefore public statements about circumcision practices in the country. Clearly, the rituals and customs associated with male circumcision are historically and culturally specific. What is important, however, is that both Yaka and American society consider it necessary to perpetuate social norms surrounding boyhood, manhood, and cleanliness.

Break 4:20-4:35

4:35-4:50 Blair Summers: Language of Dance: Chokwe and German Expressionists

The medium of dance as performance, human expression, and spiritual communication has historically played an integral part in the construction of cultural traditions and existential philosophies on a global scale. This research compares the cultural interpretations and functions of dance by the Chokwe society with the revolutionary dance of the German Expressionists of the 1920s through historical, art historical, and social research, including Chokwe initiation and dance masks from the UCO Africa Art Collection. The Chokwe society in Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo utilizes dance as a means to enculturate the youth, embody ancestors, and foster a sense of community. Similarly, using one's body movement as a fulcrum between the material world and ethereal universe, Expressionist dancers conveyed the spiritual and emotional state of the German people during the interwar period. By comparing these socially and spiritually unique societies, this research will expand the study on dance as a universal language capable of expressing both specific zeitgeists and the overall human condition through the connection between body, mind, and the metaphysical realm.

4:50-5:05 Victor Hernandez: Artists as Shaman in the Traditional and Contemporary Pende Societies

This research compares the use of masks by the Pende people, located in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo, and in paintings of two contemporary Congolese artists, Pierre Bodo and Pathy Tshindele. The

examination of these artworks demonstrates the culture artists live in, molds their views of the world, and provides values and customs that are unique to their culture. At the same time, I argue, there is similarity between the two artistic traditions since in either case artist use masks with the aim of transforming the world into a better place. In the Pende society, masks were used in ceremonies to celebrate the transition from a boy to a man who could benefit his society, considering that men's social status required discipline and strict expectations from the community. Particularly, they had to adhere to the morals of the society, learn the teachings of the ancestors and history of their people in order to communicate this knowledge to future generations. Similarly, Bodo and Tshindele use images of masks to comment on important contemporary societal problems, including the never ending racial discrimination and oppression, as well as other political issues. By making use of the traditional role of masks, both artists seek to educate society about these problems, inspiring the viewers to social action towards improvement of society.

5:05-5:20 Nina Nguyen: The Reinforcement of the Image of Africa as Primitive in Picasso's Artwork

This research is concerned with the use of geometry in the Hembra and Luba societies in comparison with Pablo Picasso's abstract artwork. Picasso's supposed invention of abstract art has been widely researched by scholars. I argue, however, that this notion diminishes the significance African artistic tradition that in fact inspired Picasso's work. First, the use of geometry in figurative sculptures of the Hembra and Luba societies is examined. Second, Picasso's exposure to the cakewalk dance, performances by African Americans of ragtime music, and Parisian flea market during the Jazz Age is discussed. Third, the contextual analysis of how Picasso's painting, "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon," reinforced the colonizer's image about African people is provided. This comparative interdisciplinary research is important considering that Western art continues to dominate scholarly discussions about art, and thereby diminishes African as well as other non-Western artistic traditions on a global scale.

5:20-5:35 **Oliver Ellinton: Institutionalized Authority: Production of Royal Identity in the Bamileke Tribe and National Identity in the United States**

This research is a comparative study of art associated with the royal court of the Bamileke Tribe in the Cameroon Grasslands and the national art of the United States. I approach the royal court and the concept of the nation-state as institutions, which need places, visual languages, and rituals to justify their existence. In the Bamileke tribe, which is divided into 90 sub-tribes called chiefdoms, each chief was the sole owner of the artistic production, which was used in specific performances, including rituals and dances. While this ownership was not always proprietary, it helped to establish and signify the importance of the chief. One of the most significant rituals was the inauguration celebration of the chosen successor's transformation from 'a mere mortal to a divine being,' which occurred only after he was sent away for nine weeks to prepare for his new role as the chief. Similarly, the U.S. as a nation has specific places, such as the White House, celebrations, like the Presidential inauguration ceremony, and visual language, such as the American flag, to inaugurate the President Elect into the President of the U.S. I utilize artwork of the Bamileke tribe as well as art-historical and historical research, and research on the formation of institution and the social construction of the past. Each construction of the chief's and presidential power as seen in the Bamileke tribes and the US, respectively, makes use of the same place and visual language which serve as mnemonic devices in justifying the right to rule by connecting each ritual with past inauguration rituals.

5:35-5:50 **Mattie Barlow: *Minkisi* and *Mintadi* of the Kongo Kingdom: Symbols of Religious Identity and Cultural Exchange**

Two Central African Art exhibit cases at the University of Central Oklahoma display various examples of *minkisi* and *mintadi* figures. These objects are believed to have once belonged to the Kingdom of Congo, a vast territory that was at the center of the African continent, comprised of what is now the

Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Republic of Congo, the northwestern part of Angola, and the enclave of Cabinda. All of the wooden and stone artifacts are religious objects, including two Christian crosses. I will argue that these artworks are not simply the expression of the Congo artistic tradition. Rather, they were a result of local and cross-cultural artistic exchange. First, the various examples of *minkisi* and *mintadi* objects will be examined in relation to pre-colonial Congo religious practices. Next, the history of Christian infiltration within the Kingdom of Congo will be discussed, emphasizing that the Congo people willingly accepted some ideas of Christianity due to some similar pre-colonial Congo religious beliefs. Congo art therefore is not simply a static tribal phenomenon, as often studied by scholars, but was continually transformed due to cultural exchanges, colonization, and the Christianization of Congo.

5:50-6:00 Questions

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