

François Neyt, *Songye: the formidable statuary of Central Africa*. Munich: Prestel (hb £90 – 978 3 79134 361 7). 2009, 400 pp., with 400 colour illustrations.*

This translation of the original French edition published in 2004 (*La redoutable statuaire songye d’Afrique centrale*) is the kind of book that any lover of African art would wish to display on their coffee table for visitors to admire its images. The photographic quality of these is comparable only to the aesthetic quality of the artefacts represented. Most of them are statuettes and masks that have been gathered for over a century north of what is today Kasai, along the upper course of the Congo River, in this region called the Lualaba.

Following the routine procedure of art galleries, auction houses and collectors, François Neyt labels these artefacts as Songye, whence the title of the book.¹ The adjective is derived from the name of an ethnic group: ‘tribal people located in the Democratic Republic of Congo’. François Neyt thus conforms to the customs of the audience to whom, first and foremost, this book is addressed.² In the promotional leaflet the book’s audience is targeted as follows: ‘This unique collection of rarely seen tribal art brings together nearly one thousand examples of powerful artefacts from the Songye tribe of Central Africa.’³ Yet, from the first page, Neyt informs his reader that the ‘tribal’ qualification is of an artefactual nature. The historical information provided in a brief chapter shows that for over a hundred years the people named Songye have undergone a chain of profound and violent changes and have integrated, by choice or by force, many migrants. The artefacts that artists/artisans have continued to produce in order to represent the world and to intervene in it were an attempt at understanding and mastering those changes. Were they seeking in this way to represent their collective ‘tribal’ identity? Were these objects received as ‘Songye’ by those for whom they were produced and who used them to intervene in their world? Possibly, on the contrary, both

* Translated from French by Madalina Florescu, School of Oriental and African Studies. The original French version of this review is published in *Africa* 81.3.

¹ In the original French publication Songye identity is ascribed to artefacts only, whereas in the English translation the book itself is introduced as Songye, thus merging people and things.

² This is a genre of publication and a category within the art book market with which academic researchers have a difficult relationship. It should therefore not be a surprise that my criticism agrees with that formulated in greater detail by Pierre Petit with regard to *Luba: to the sources of the Zaire*, (Paris: Éd. Dapper, 1994) in *African Arts* (Autumn 1996): 87–9.

³ And because in this market superlatives are interchangeable, the leaflet announces ‘impressive statuary’, while the book bears the title ‘formidable statuary’.

the artists and their audience wanted these objects to have a broader appeal and relevance, perhaps a universal one?

François Neyt does not touch upon these questions, but certain of Jan Vansina's works provide a basis for comparison with a neighbouring region. More than 40 years ago, Jan Vansina had already shown that in this region the imperative of controlling supernatural forces (illness, misfortune, infertility, climatic accidents), to which 'religious movements' also responded, took the form of a dynamic process of borrowing. An emphasis on the 'foreign' origin of a cult has sometimes been the very source of its success. In his last book,⁴ which François Neyt could not have read, Vansina discusses an early reformatting of the Kuba 'artisanate' towards an 'ethnic' standard, under way in the capital of the Kuba Kingdom from the 1930s onwards. This process corresponded to a market demand and somehow enabled the king to control this market.

The artefacts from among which the Western connoisseur/dealer selected 'artworks' – following their own criteria – were thus subject to a double logic of diversification and standardization. In a dominant position, both in terms of power of purchase and power *tout court* – the Western buyer (sometimes plunderer) contributed from the start to the selection – under the label 'Songye' or 'Kuba' – of those artefacts whose aesthetic characteristics satisfied the Western taste for 'primitive' or 'tribal' art. In the course of the twentieth century, these objects were a source of income for the locals, and of prestige first for the colonial power, and then for the nation state. They have in this way given a real existence to 'tribal' as a category of works of art. This category of the art market is the product of a history whose legitimacy and 'authenticity' I do not contest, because the 'tribal' artist/artisan is simply inscribing himself in a 'tradition' when consulting a photograph – an image 'mechanically generated' – of ancient items that are kept elsewhere, or when he follows the instructions of a buyer/collector. The tradition of 'tribal' art is not less legitimate than any other. It is attributed to the group with which it identifies its artistic approach and from where it claims to originate (a condition for the authentication of the work). Its specificity derives from the fact that it is transmitted through the market rather than through local usage and through the memory of other objects that came before.

⁴ *Being Colonized: the Kuba experience in rural Congo, 1880–1960* (Madison WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010).

We may then speak of two distinct traditions. On the one hand the internal tradition of production and usage of artefacts by the people who, under certain circumstances, but not necessarily in relation to these objects, recognize themselves as 'Songye'. On the other, the tradition of 'Songye' tribal art unfolding in the complex and still little understood relationship between the art market, the intermediaries who buy the objects, and those who have produced them for over a century. Two differences seem important to underline. On the one hand there is an act of exposure and on the other the preservation of the identity invested in the material integrity of the work.

In the West, a work of 'tribal' art encounters the human person in being exposed to whoever looks at it in a relationship of distance and admiration. In Central Africa, an object interacts with the public during a performance, then disappears from the public space to be stored while awaiting a new performance. It thus encounters humans through acting on them or with them. Its identity and authenticity are part of the continuity of ritual, magical or political actions. In the West, material integrity is essential for the recognition of the 'authenticity' (Songye in this case) of an artwork. In Central Africa, an object for ritual usage is first and foremost a representation whose presence between performances is guarded by social memory. This fact is an authorization of a constant remodelling (repair) of the material, and therefore of the object itself. We know that objects that have been used for a long time can be a true ship of Theseus – not one single piece is 'original' – without it occurring to someone to contest its identity.

One could in all fairness reproach me for talking about a book that François Neyt has not written, and perhaps did not have the intention to write. His book is addressed to his own audience and, as far as this is concerned, perfectly fulfils the 'contract'. François Neyt classifies the objects of Songye tribal art that exist in Western collections, he offers instruments for eventually adding 'new' objects, assigning them a place in the existing corpus, assessing their rarity and commercial worth. Moreover, he gives each one of us the opportunity to admire the objects, many of which are inaccessible to lesser mortals because they are part of a private collection or kept in the storerooms of a museum. Just as for the art of such and such a 'great' Western artist, this illustrated book is the only possible way to assemble the production that is scattered around the world. The collective 'Songye' actor is here presented as an individual, the narrative of the history of a human settlement is offered instead of a biographical account, the corpus is internally organized by a morphological

analysis instead of as a chronology of an individual artist's creations. Had there not been a kinship relation between this approach and the perception of Africans as 'tribal people',⁵ the author of this book could not be reproached for its methodology!

Notwithstanding its relevance for the classification and evaluation of collections, the weight of the colonial library makes me doubt the soundness of the chosen approach. The cart seems to be guiding the horse. The identification of an ethnic group in the guise of a collective actor seems to come before the encounter with the object.

BOGUMIL JEWSIEWICKI

Université de Laval/Laval University, Québec, Canada

⁵ David Newbury (*The Land Beyond the Mists. Essays on Identity and Authority in Precolonial Congo and Rwanda*, Athens, Ohio University Press, 2009, p. 9-10) makes the following observation: « [...] they identified culture with race, they assumed that broad cultural/racial groups acted as single (internally homogenous) agency, and they took it for granted that racial/cultural groups were organized in a hierarchical fashion. There is an implicit assumption in these works that the structures of African societies observed during colonial rule could simply be extrapolated into the distant past, thus effacing the effects on African societies of both colonial influences and African agency within that colonial context. What is most surprising is that these assumptions seemed to intensify over time, as researchers became further removed from local testimony [...] a rigid intellectual framework (which also increasingly reinforced colonial administrative thinking) became self-perpetuating. »