

Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz

Bakongo graphic writing as a basis for rethinking the transmission of knowledge

Although the clear focus of this chapter is the study of *bidimbu* and *bisinsu* in Angola and *firmas* in Cuba, a brief look at some of the other graphic writing forms found among the Bakongo peoples of central Africa is warranted. The examples selected for cursory examination in this section serve to illustrate not only the widespread usage of visual and symbolic language in daily and religious life, but also to demonstrate the diversity in graphic forms and designs across related cultures. The differences among the forms discussed here in fact sharpen the commonalities; most importantly the role of graphic writing in facilitating communication between individuals, communities, nature, and ancestral spirits, in imparting and clarifying values, perpetuating cultural and cosmological histories, and in shaping moral philosophy.

Lembéta Sign Writing

Lembéta is the name of the graphic system among the Kuba people in the Democratic Republic of the Congo used for self-discovery before one joins the Ngo (leopard) society. Clementine Faïk-Nzuji refers to this graphic writing under the name *Lembéta* which means symbol, sign, mark, and souvenir.¹ Partially accurate, this name fails to reflect the systematic way in which individual symbolic elements are brought together to express complex ideas and beliefs.

Faïk-Nzuji categorizes the signs into the following three groups: (1) figurative graphic signs that illustrate clear animal and human forms; (2) metonymic signs that represent fragments of the proverbial literature; (3) abstract signs that generally appear as geometric forms that represent concepts and ideas. Faïk-Nzuji also

1 Faïk-Nzuji 2000, 54.

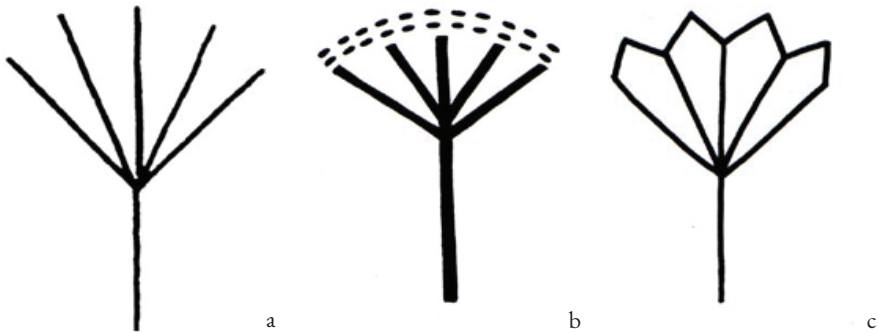


Fig. 1: *Lembéta* signs (after Faïk-Nzuji 2000).

makes reference to two basic conceptual forms or arrangements of signs; the first is the more simple, combining two or three unique symbols, whereas the second form combines more than three symbols in a single narrative. The simple graphic form is comprised of non-autonomous elements for which meaning is determined by the joining of two or three signs. Like the stamp in the *firma* system, these simple units both carry meaning and become the building blocks for more complicated narratives. In *Lembéta*, the independent signs that create a graphic symbol have no meaning in isolated form as it is their unity that implies philosophical and cosmogonical concepts.² As a result, although it is understood that these concepts are formed by different elements, they, like stamps in Cuba, are read as a unified, and thus single, whole.

Figure 1a can be found among the Kuba, Luba and Chokwe in Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo and generally represents Nzambi a Mpungu (God) or Kalunga. This symbol combines with a vertical line that ends where five lines radiate out, making a semi-circle and simulating the rays of the sun. In addition to its basic meaning of God, this symbol has a multiplicity of meanings including: the word, intelligence, work, the pillar of God, and procreation.

Another example of the more simple arrangement is **Figure 1b** which shows the same symbol with an additional element; the radiating lines are topped by an arc of parallel dotted lines. These dotted lines represent the constant spiritual journey of the ancestors to protect and transmit messages to members of the community. The symbol in **Figure 1c** is drawn on the tomb of a child and signifies that he or she may return. It can also be drawn on the door of a house of a child that is dying as a sign of

² Ibid. 124–125.



Fig. 2: Postcard *Nègre tatuoué de race Bas-Congo*, Democratic Republic of the Congo, ca. ?, Yale Sterling Memorial Library, Manuscripts and Archives (Martínez-Ruiz 2004).

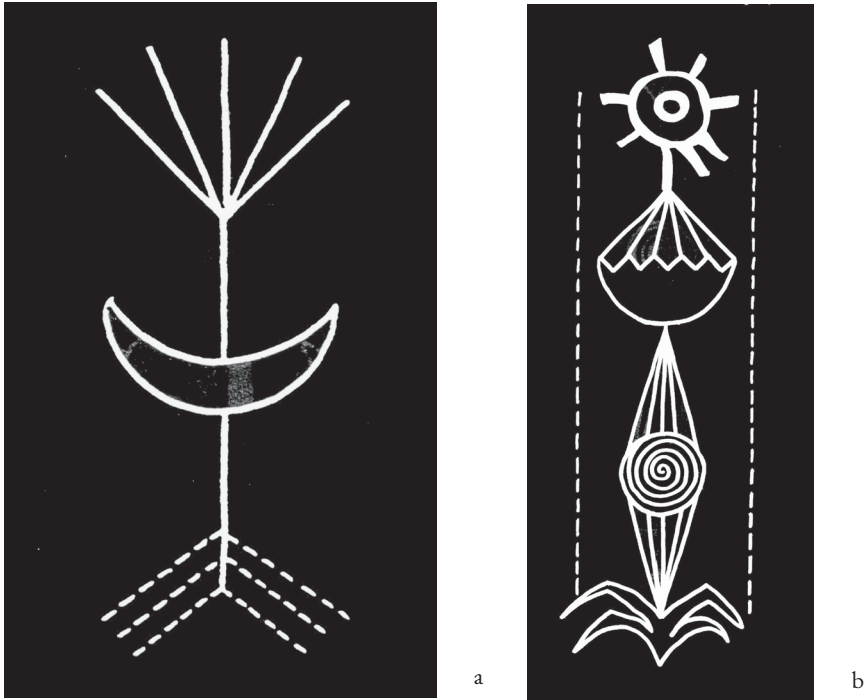


Fig. 3: Two examples of *Lembéta* writing, Democratic Republic of the Congo (after Faïk-Nzuji 2000).

hope. In this example, the lines that spread from the principal vertical line are closed by a zigzagging line that creates the illusion of a hand. The zigzag line is a symbol of communication or movement. The symbol means immortality, eternal renewal, gifts and hope.³

Figure 2 shows a postcard from the turn of the 19th century Democratic Republic of Congo in which simple *Lembéta* symbols are depicted on the body through scarification. Among the Luba and Songye cultures, arrows signify protection, confinement, bondage or a complete man.

In this example, it is possible to recognize two braids of repeating arrows that allude to the complete force that a person can accomplish when he becomes an adult or after initiation. Complete force is comprised of three forces; spiritual, physical and emotional. This example points out that this person may be accomplished just two of those forces indicated by the two braids or arrow sign.

As mentioned, *Lembéta* symbols also come in more complex form within an elaborate structure (see **Fig. 3**). Such structures form a union of more than three signs

³ Ibid. 122.

that, once organized in a particular sequence, creates a narrative or a multiplicity of meanings. The narrative form of these sign structures and their meaning closely mirror the construction and reading of firmas in Cuba. As the following descriptions demonstrate, while each piece of the structure carries meaning, it is the compound arrangement that ties these meanings together and gives rise to a message.

According to Faïk-Nzuji, **Figure 3a** is a sign of prohibition that protects the user. The symbol is composed of the following elements from top to bottom: the sign of invisible hand, symbol of divine gift and the protective hand of God; the crescent, the nocturnal face of God that can also be understand as a sign of fertility governed by the ancestors in concert with the spirit of nature; and the dotted arrow-head that signifies the ancestors and the spirits of nature that watch over humans.⁴

Figure 3b can be read in a similar fashion, but from bottom to top. Its component signs include:

- Sign of the ancestor and the same biological connection among the peoples in the community, symbol of human origin. Also means the invisible hand of God, language, intelligence
- Sign of divine origin of humans, also resembles the dot of leopard skin
- Sign of God under and above watching humans
- Sign of leopard communication, or language, inspiration
- Sign of the first or primary source of meaning, canal, sign or relation of meaning
- Sign of the underground world, being below and plenitude

Read as a whole, it is the sign of communication with the ancestors, indicating that everything coming from them, they are the beginning. This sign can also mean protection.⁵

As before, these more complex symbol structures can be replicated on the human body. The verticality of the body helps to interrelate all the signs along the torso, implying a relationship between elements and establishing contact between two or more signs in a sequence. This is seen in **Figure 4**. In this example, the bottom sign combines four rows of zigzagging lines, which generally means the formation of the family or that the person in the picture is married. The belly button forms part of the second sign which, surrounded by dotted lines forming the sun, means that the person is in virtual possession by the ancestors and the spirits, and is in the process to become an expert or Ngudia Nkisi (priestess). The third sign, to the right of the previous one means that the woman is in a single marriage or has been married only once. In this location, it also means meditation or the power of meditation. The five signs that combine to form the letter M and a diamond shape mean water,

4 Faïk-Nzuji 1996, 99.

5 Faïk-Nzuji 2000, 127–128.



Fig. 4: Postcard known Bas-Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, ca.?, Yale Sterling Memorial Library, Manuscripts and Archives (Martínez-Ruiz 2004).

or fertility and womanhood, and the inclusion of the diamond means that this individual is an accomplished woman and has already been initiated. The six signs of three vertical zigzag lines mark the motion along the vertical and mean that she is in constant communication with the spirits. The final sign of multiples dots forming a vertical line is a sign of an infant and means that she has given birth to her first child.

Panelas (Lip Pot) of Cabinda

Panelas (Mibaya Nzungu) are a form of graphic writing in sculptural form on three-dimensional objects, namely lip pots used by Bakongo peoples in Cabinda, a region in the northwest corner of Angola. *Panelas* combine figurative motifs that depict humans, animals, everyday and religious objects, and fruits and vegetables. The major function of this graphic tradition is to convey moral meanings for the basic interactions between husband and wife and other family matters. *Panelas* are an essential element in traditional society and continually engage the moral law and family institutions. Representing communication between husband and wife, the *panelas* actively serve as talking symbols. Each visual depiction is linked to a proverb that serves as its other half, neither can exist without the other.

Panelas are used when some sort of problem arises in the home. The partner that has concerns goes to a priest for assistance in identifying the issue through divination and devising a symbolic design to address it. Once the design is realized by the priest or community sculptor, the *panela* is taken to the home and left in plain sight. The other partner, upon finding the *panela*, decodes the meaning of the symbols and identifies the proverb needed to complete it and understand its moral message. The following examples illustrate some of the wide range of messages conveyed through the covers and indicate graphic techniques used to alter or add meaning.

Figure 5a is an example of a single image *panela*. The picture depicts a crab in the center of a circle. The proverb that is part of this example says:

Kala ke I muizi,
I mama ku simba, simbizi.

The crab has claws,
when it grabs, it doesn't let go.⁶

6 Martins Vaz 1966, 480.

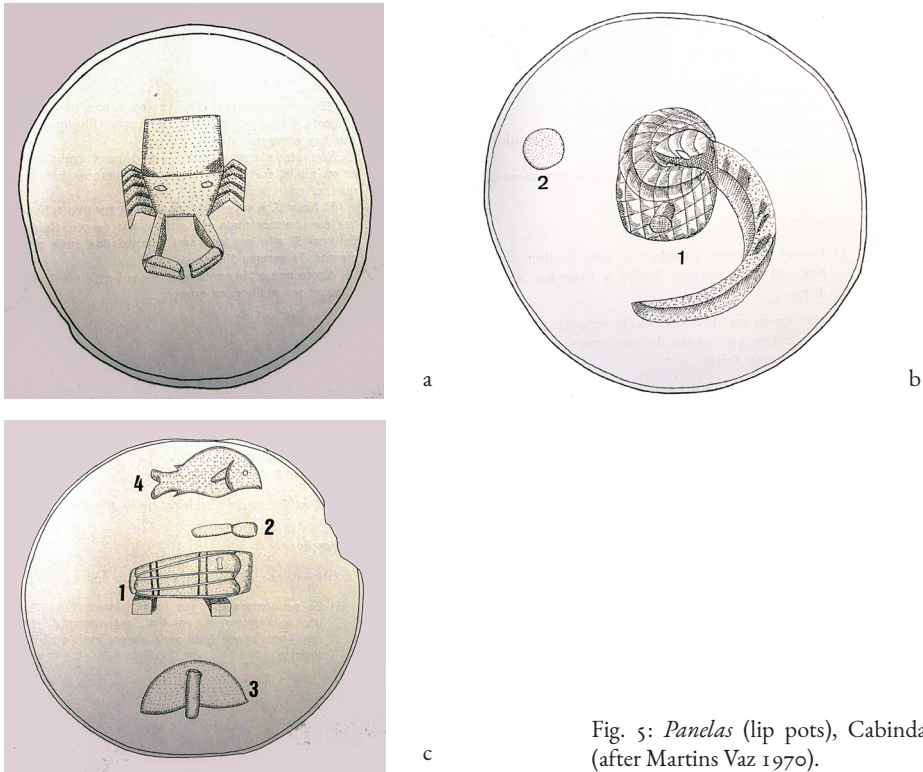


Fig. 5: *Panelas* (lip pots), Cabinda (after Martins Vaz 1970).

This proverb relates to a wife and husband at home. It means that the wife wants to say that she is suffering a lot in her own house, and that she is not willing to be there any longer. The final meaning is in conclusive form “remember that I am not your slave”⁷ and makes clear that the woman is leaving. The second level of significance depends on the status of the person. If the person is not married, but lives with her partner, it means “although I am young, I am strong enough to work and find the man that I love.”

Figure 5b is an example of two elements related to and interacting with each other. Most of the *panela* examples involve multiple elements that have to be read in relation to the main figure that is always the central image in the center of the composition. The manner in which a central image controls the reading of the *panela* and influences the meaning of the entire composition is also seen in the reading of signatures in Cuba. This figure shows a coiled snake with its head on a basket, and a type of fruit called *Ntampu-Mvemba*. Image one signifies that a married woman (or one simply in love) is always at home. Nobody can touch her, she only belongs

⁷ Ibid.

to her husband or lover. This figure is a message by the woman seeking greater freedom. The basket represents the house, the wife. The snake signifies protection and care. The second image in the panela is the Ntampu fruit which is the emblem of the Mvemba society. In general this representation functions outside of the society as an indication of a verbal action, meaning the person is saying something, and that it is sacred, it is true. The fruit is an element that conditions the principle design. In general, only one fruit indicates that it is only for the moment, a single argument, although there are other things to be discussed. It also means that, when the piece is offered by the husband or lover that he is not disposed to permit extravagances on the part of his lover or wife. In general, these are much younger than their husbands or lovers.⁸

Figure 5c is an example of linear reading within the circle but this style still uses the central element as the major subject of the reading. This central image, number one, represents a drum, number two is a stick to play the drum, number three is a sign that identifies the chief of the community and his drumstick, and number four is a fish. The meaning of these images is that the person who has a drum of this size is from a noble family and that the community must therefore treat him or her with respect and courtesy. The community is represented by the individual drumstick. The image at the bottom of the panela represents the noble family, the drumstick with the noble crest indicates that although living in the same space, the noble family has greater privileges and a royal sign to differentiate themselves. The fish at the top signifies integrity and respect, indicating that the person will not allow any type of offense or disrespect.⁹

Figure 6 presents examples of more complex interaction that range from three, four, and five elements that could be read along the line or in circle with the major image in the centre.

Figure 6a is composed of three basic elements. Figure one represents a married woman. Image two is a wall, and image three is a *Ntampu-Mvemba* fruit on either side of the central figure. The central figure means that the person is unhappy because the more she tries to help, she is not able to improve the relationship with her husband, an idea that is emphasized by the centrality of the figure alone in the middle of the composition. The wall indicates the impossibility of her position. The fruits affirm her argument, stating that it is true and she is not lying. Two fruits signify that her argument is final and that there is nothing more to be said.¹⁰

Figure 6b is comprised of the following images: number one represents a sick person in bed, number two is a representation of the *Chili-mioko* fruit and image

8 Ibid. 240–241.

9 Ibid. 558–559.

10 Ibid. 461–462.

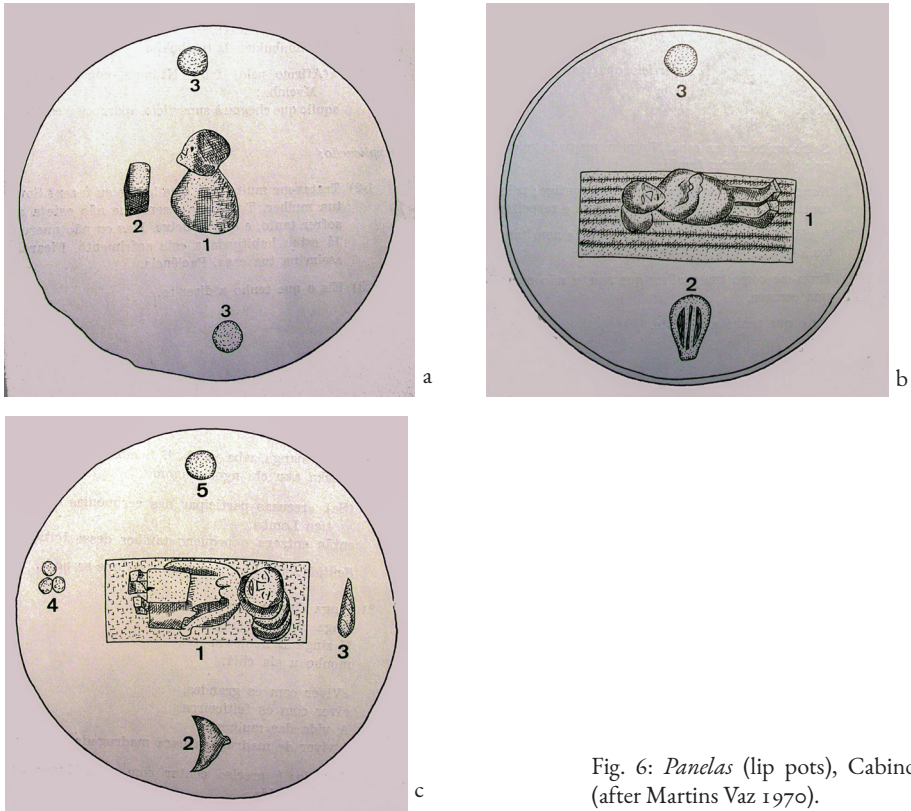


Fig. 6: *Panelas* (lip pots), Cabinda (after Martins Vaz 1970).

three is the *Ntampu-Mvemba* fruit. The meaning of the central image is the loss of love in the family that is shown metaphorically as the family being sick. It also represents a loss of family unity as a symbol of prosperity. The *Chili-mioko* fruit is a symbol of understanding and respect for the people. In the context of the composition, it means that the members of the family, particularly the wife, demand better treatment in the future. Image three, the *Ntampu* fruit merely signifies that this is a single argument.¹¹

Figure 6c is an example of multiple elements around the central image. The manner of reading this composition is with each element read in relation to the central figure. This central image represents a sick woman in bed, signifying family unhappiness. Image two is a religious object emblematic of the Lemba society, indicating that the person cannot do more than they are already doing. Image three is a *Zinga* shell, which here refers to life's dialectic, implying that there are always difficult things in life and that maturity is seen in learning to face the difficulties. Image

¹¹ Ibid. 466–467.

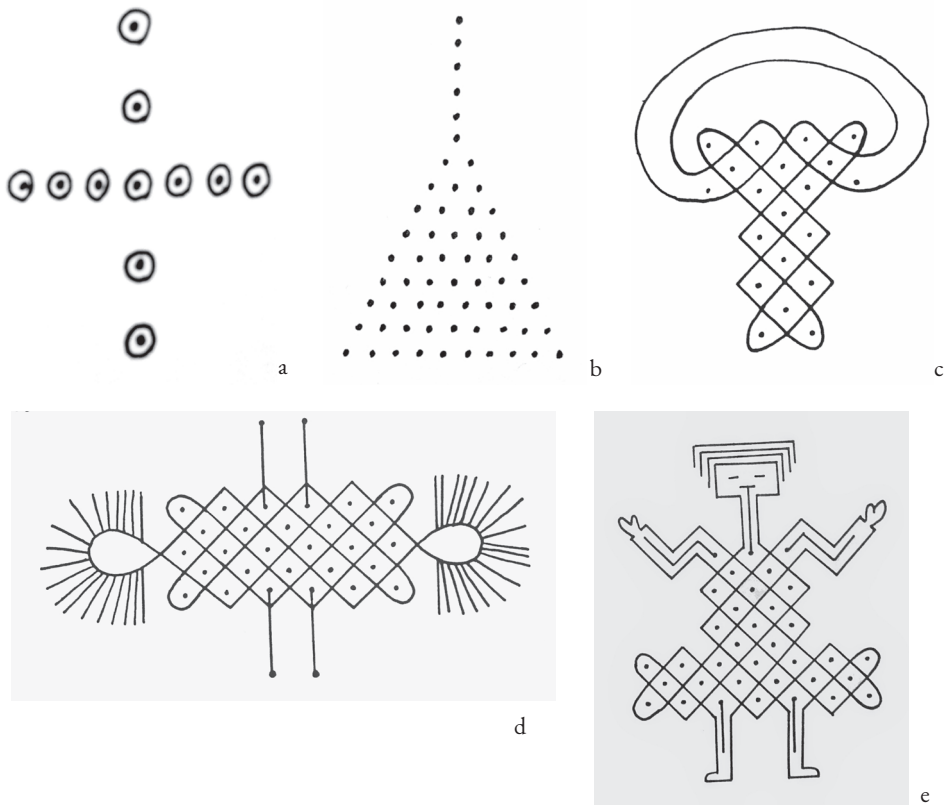


Fig. 7a–e: Sona Chokwe sand drawings (after Fontinha 1983).

four illustrates the three rocks used to hold the cooking pot, which signify respect and state that the husband must treat his wife with dignity, not as a slave. It also indicates that it is the wife that sustains the nucleus of the family. The fifth image is the *Ntampu-Mvemba* fruit that signifies that this is the only argument and that the person swears that she is not lying.¹²

Sona scripture

In the early 1960s, Gerhard Kubik began his research on Bantu peoples in an area that included the countries of Angola, Tanzania, Malawi, Gabon, Cameroon, and Zambia. In his study of musicology, Kubik encountered what he called African

¹² Ibid. 463–65.

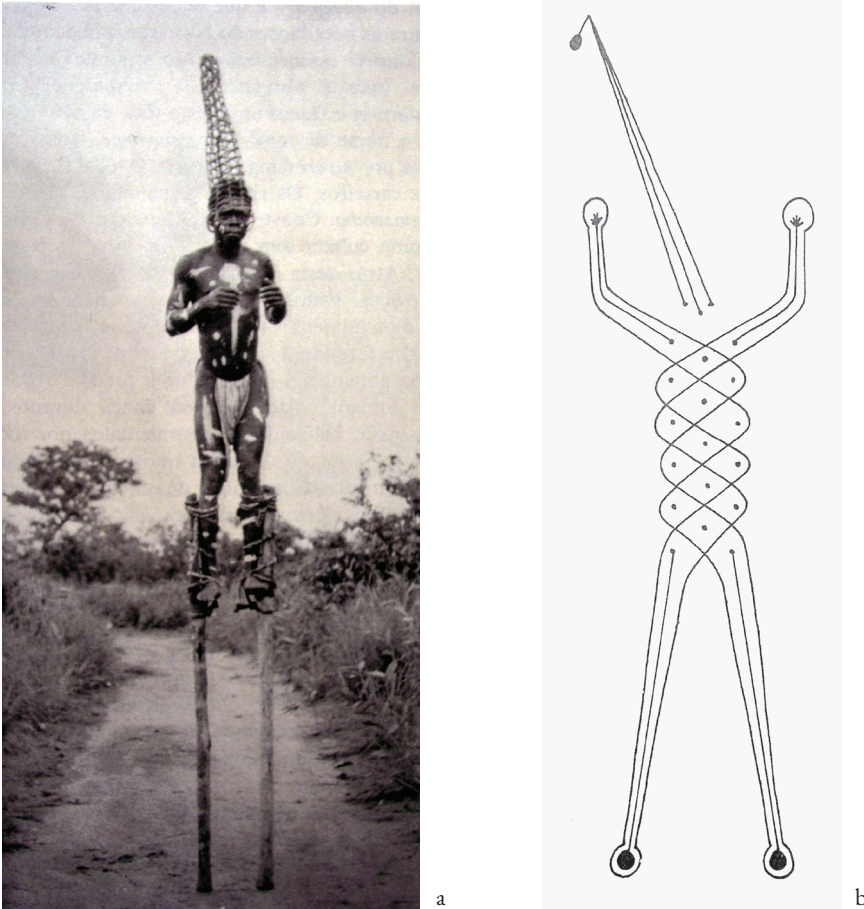


Fig. 8a: A performer of the mask Mayinda; 8b: Drawing of Mayinda mask in Sona sand drawing (after Fontinha 1983).

Graphic Systems and published an essay on the topic in *Muntu Magazine*. The piece focused on Bamum scripture, Kiswahili tattoo signs, and Sona writing among the Chokwe people in northeastern and southeastern Angola and western Zambia. Kubik summarized his early field research and drew upon previous work conducted on engravings, scarification, calabash symbols and wall painting in the region by the Swedish missionary, Emil Pearson, Mario Fontinha, José Redinha, Eduardo dos Santos, and Maria-Louise Bastin.

Sona scripture is drawn in the sand and is based on the use of dots and lines in a geometric aestheticism. See **Figure 7**, for some examples. Figure 7a and 7b are among the simplest of the sona designs, representing *Ngombe* (cow, bull) and *Bamba Mutai* respectively.

More complex in form, Figures 7c–d illustrate symbols ranging from geometric form to anthropomorphic depiction. For example, Figure 7c represents the mask *Mukishi wo Tshihongo*, Figure 7d represents the moment when the dancer has to show his ability moving and performing nicely, and Figure 7e represents the expression of the figure’s personal understanding of the manifestation of the power that the drawing represents and the masquerade embodies.¹³ The final examples related a real performance and its depicting in the Sona Scripture. **Figure 8a** shows a real performance of *Mayinda* masquerade that represents *Zemba* initiation among Chokwe, Pende, and Ndembo. The drawing (**Fig. 8b**) depicts a gigantic figure that will be hit by stars on its way to earth.¹⁴

According to Kubik, Sona writing carries social, educational, literary and metaphysical messages. He describes it as an “elaborate configuration”¹⁵ that can be reduced to a few graphemes or a few symbols in a sequence. As is the case with firmas, Kubik points out that reading the meanings of Sona signs depend on their location, and the number of times the same sign is depicted. He emphasized that learning to read and use the signs takes a considerable amount of time and involves a complicated memorizing technique.

An important use of the Sona sand drawings among the Chokwe is as a divination system. In a divination ceremony, a basket is used that contains a range of objects, each with a particular name, meaning, and associated proverb. In the course of divination, the priest removes objects from this basket and lets them fall over the ground where signs have been drawn. Meaning is taken from the combination and placement of the objects over the board of scripture.

Figure 9 illustrates selected examples of the scriptures that comprise a divination board. From numbers 1 to 10, the depicted signs are named: antelope feet, bundle of savage rats, rabbit, a kind of animal bones, nest, *Mukólu* fruit, knee, to support the elbow in the knee, two birds in the nest, and a fishing pole.¹⁶

While this is not the place to delve into the precise meanings and/or uses of these symbols in the divination context, it is important to point out the parallels between the usage of this graphic writing in divination and the role played by firmas in Palo Monte practice.

Of equal importance to the signs are the three-dimensional objects that are found within the divination basket. A selection of these is represented below in **Figure 10**. In the figure, the images mean as follows: A ‘the moon of the month’ means that although the person is very sick, will see the moon of the next month, B ‘conspiracy’

13 Fontinha 1983, 127–128.

14 Ibid. 140.

15 Kubik 1986, 103–104.

16 Redinha 1974, 56.

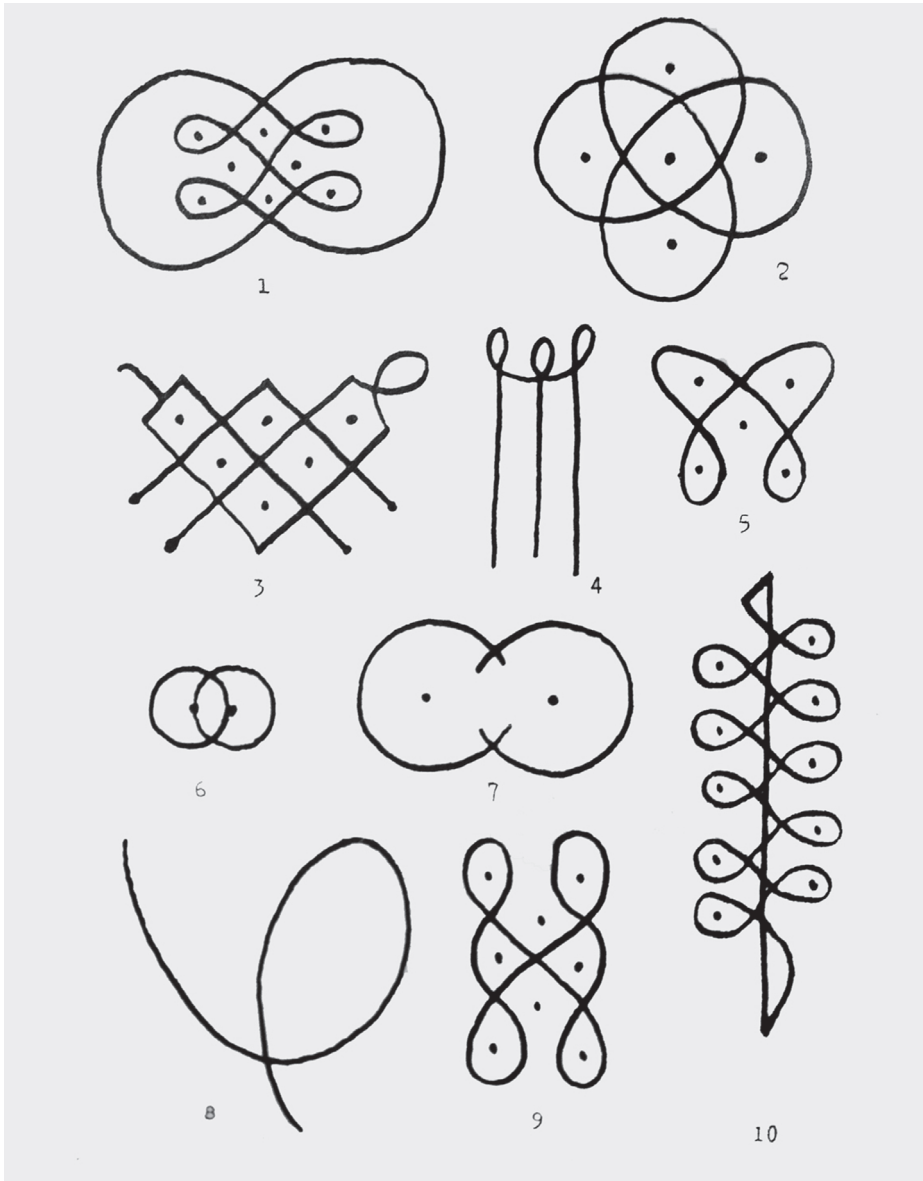


Fig. 9: Examples of Sona sand drawing (after Redinha 1974).

means that the person being consulted is correct, C ‘the name of the arrow head’ means that it is necessary to feed the minkisi with blood, D ‘your own dish’ recommends an offering to guarantee a new birth, E ‘bracelet’ represents the ancestors, F ‘Jia’ means the road, G ‘pillow’ means a signal of the bad luck that originates in

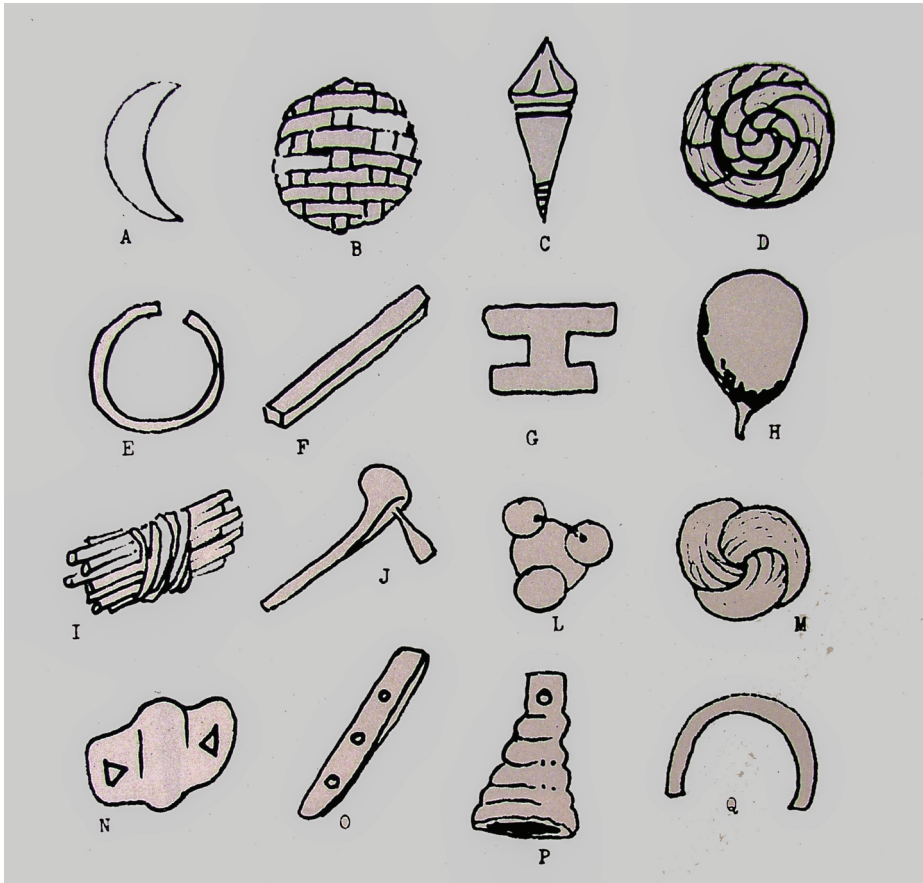


Fig. 10: Examples of Chokwe divinatory objects (after Redinha 1974).

the dreams, H 'red clay ball' means witchcraft, I 'juice of medicinal roots' means a need for great medicine, J 'hunter boy' means a fight caused by sharing the hunting, L 'Upwango' medicine for twins, M 'Origin' means a bad thing that never ends, N 'Kaluta' means bad dreams, O 'Tchite a tcha nkaia' means the need to use fire, P 'Mbinga' means the need to use a charm against conspiracy, and Q 'Katone' means retaliation.¹⁷

All of the examples and abbreviated explanations in this section are merely by way of noting that numerous other, equally complex systems of graphic writing exist in central Africa. Like *bidimbu*, *bisinsu*, and *firmas*, these systems facilitate communication, pass values and moral lessons on, and formulate unique cultural identities.

¹⁷ Ibid. 60.

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