

## **GEOGRAPHICAL, HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND**

Boundaries and country names in Central Africa have changed many times since they were first established in the colonial era. The countries from which the artefacts in RAMM's collections originate are now known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Republic of the Congo and Angola.

### **GEOGRAPHY**

Biebuyck, in Phillips (2005: 231-234), gives a useful, short outline of 'historical and cultural aspects of Central Africa'. Adjacent to his article (ibid: 230) is a map showing the location of various cultural groups, although many of the country names are now out of date. The Central African region, he informs us, 'encompasses a vast area of rainforests, forest galleries, secondary forest formations and various types of open and wooded savannahs'. The various countries in the region, originally drawn up by colonial powers, cross-cut cultural areas although 'the majority of art-producing peoples in this region are Bantu-speakers'. Biebuyck explains that 'the social and economic structures, the religious, philosophical and value systems of the peoples in the central African region vary widely in form and content, yet some important recurring patterns can be discerned. Except for certain Pygmy groups, all populations in the region engage in some form of agriculture, based on the cultivation of bananas and plantains, root crops, cereals or a mixture of them all. All tend goats and sheep and keep chickens and dogs, but very few of the central African populations own cattle. Most groups fish...Hunting game with dogs, nets, spears, bows and arrows...and trapping using everything from snares to baited traps and huge elephant crushers are still important subsistence activities in a large number of ethnic areas. The significance of hunting and trapping is deeply embedded in these peoples' ritual and world view regardless of whether there is game to hunt or not...Many durable parts of the animals are essential in the manufacture of artworks' (ibid: 231-232).

### **HISTORY**

Barraclough (1983: 166) explains that the Congo region was a principal source for the trans-Atlantic slave trade between 1526 and 1810. He describes how, 'when the Portuguese arrived off the coast south of the estuary of the Congo river in 1484, they found the brilliant Kongo kingdom just inland. South of the Congo basin forests was a string of Bantu-speaking African states, such as the Luba and Lunda kingdoms'.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo, encompassing most of the Congo River Basin, is by far the largest country in Central Africa. It is the home of the Kuba people, from whom RAMM's collection contains a number of pieces. Barraclough (1983: 240) explains that 'after the explorer Stanley's epic journey down the Congo river in 1877, the ambitious King Leopold of the Belgians took him into his personal service. In 1879 Stanley returned to the lower Congo and laid the foundations of the huge private domain the king carved out for himself in the Congo basin'. Leopold's notorious rule of his 'Congo Free State' continued until 1908 when it was transferred to Belgium as a colony and re-named Belgian Congo. A period of civil unrest followed its independence in 1960.

The notorious dictator President Mabutu, who renamed the country Zaire, ruled from 1965 until his regime was toppled by President Kabila in 1997. The country was then renamed the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). For the latest geographical names and socio-political statistics, the CIA World Fact Book online (<http://www.cia.gov/>) is an up-to-date and reliable resource.

In the 1880s, when Dennett first arrived in Central Africa, it was newly colonised. Between the 1880s and 1900s it became notorious for the appalling and lawless treatment of the local population by colonisers trading in rubber and ivory. Dennett himself was a trader, but became involved in the Congo reform movement for improving conditions in the region. For an accurate but disturbing account of the Congo's history, see Hochschild's 'King Leopold's Ghost' (2000). This book provides a readable overview, from the times of earliest contact, through the rapid and rapacious colonisation of the region by King Leopold II of the Belgians in the 1880s and the atrocities committed in the name of rubber and ivory trading under the auspices of the 'Congo Free State', to the anti-slavery and Congo Reform movements. The atrocities gradually became known to the outside world through the efforts of human rights campaigner E.D. Morel and others, eventually leading to a British government investigation under Roger Casement. In 1900, Casement was appointed British consul to the Congo Free State and in 1903 he was sent to investigate the rubber-gathering areas in its interior. His discoveries, together with Morel's campaigning, were the most powerful forces leading to the end of Leopold's rule. Hochschild goes on to describe the foundation of Belgian Congo in 1908, its independence in 1960 and the continued troubles and hardships of the country which have stemmed from its colonisation. No study of the region at this time is complete without mentioning Conrad's famous novel 'Heart of Darkness'. Conrad and Casement had met in the Congo in 1890 and saw many of the same horrors, but the former wrote about his experiences as a novelist, while the latter wrote as a diarist and government investigator. Conrad's novel convincingly portrays the feelings of hopelessness and horror prevalent at the time when RAMM's early collections were being made.

## CULTURES AND COLLECTIONS

The majority of items in Dennett's collection were made by the Bavili people, amongst whom he lived and worked in Loango and Cabinda. Other objects in his collection appear to be from other parts of Central Africa. His publications do not describe how he obtained them and as we have no record of him travelling further afield, it seems probable that he purchased artefacts which had been traded to the area. Dennett called the people he worked with the Fjort (spelt Fiote or Fiot elsewhere), but this was simply a term used to refer to the Black population in general at the time. They are more usually referred to as the Vili or Bavili, a Bantu-speaking people who are a sub-group of the Kongo. Both Loango and Cabinda were originally Bavili kingdoms in the coastal area north of the Congo River mouth. Loango was incorporated into the French colony of Middle Congo in 1885. It was administered primarily by French companies whose aim was to exploit the area's rubber and ivory resources. Scandals over the decimation of the African population through forced labour and portage broke out in 1905 and 1906. Dennett played a part in these protests. France restricted the role of the companies in 1907, and in

1910 the Middle Congo became a part of French Equatorial Africa. It finally gained independence in 1960 as the Republic of Congo. Cabinda became a Belgian colony in 1885 and has been occupied by Angola since 1975, when the latter gained its independence from Portugal.

RAMM's collections - Dennett and otherwise - represent a cross-section of famous art-styles from the Congo, in addition to items which are less familiar. The most well-known cultural groups in Congo art are the Kongo peoples of the coastal region and the Kuba peoples of Central Congo. The Dennett collection also includes a mask which appears to be from the Pende people, who live in an area between the Kongo and the Kuba, and a barkcloth which may have been made by Pygmy forest-dwellers. The far north-east of the Congo region is inhabited by peoples who are Nuba rather than Bantu, including the Azande and Mangbetu groups. MacGaffey (1986, 1991 etc.) is the foremost authority on Kongo religion, of which Dennett was an early student. Jan Vansina is the most prominent recent anthropologist of Kuba culture. He introduces their art (1998: 211-224) in the context of their history and society (ibid: 4-11). Pygmy peoples such as the Mbuti and Ituri inhabit the Central African rainforest areas - Turner (1961, 1983) is the best known anthropologist of the Mbuti people. Blier gives an excellent introduction to the royal arts of Africa, putting them in scholarly but accessible context, including the Kongo and Kuba kingdoms (1998: 201-248). She also provides a concise timeline of the region's history from earliest times until the late twentieth century, comparing it with other areas of Africa and the rest of the world. Gillon also gives an overview of 'the art of the Southern Savannah' including the Kongo (1984: 271-285), the Kwilu-Kwango area which includes the Pende (ibid: 286-290), and the Kuba region (ibid: 299-310).