

Papa Shama Kwete Nicolas

Master sculptor and weaver, holder of Kuba textile knowledge

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Interviewer	Nsaka Sandrine NGANGA
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NOTE ON THE TRANSCRIPT

This is an edited transcript. Repetitions, hesitations and the self-corrections natural to speech have been lightened for readability, without altering the meaning or the substance of what was said. Vernacular terms (Lingala, Kikongo, Kuba vocabulary) are kept in italics. Where the participant refers to his workshop and to his demonstration, this refers to the exchanges and the demonstration conducted remotely, not to an in-person visit.

TRANSCRIPT

Sandrine NGANGA: I am going to speak in the language of our country, the language of our ancestors, *Lingala*. Good morning Papa Shama Kwete Nicolas, how are you?

Papa Shama Kwete Nicolas: I am well, thank you, Maman Sandrine.

Sandrine NGANGA: Papa Shama Kwete Nicolas, could you introduce yourself?

Papa Shama Kwete Nicolas: Well, Maman Sandrine, you came to me because you know who I am. So I will let you describe me.

Sandrine NGANGA: As you know, I came to you because I am carrying out research on the culture of the Kuba Kingdom, and it is said that you are the living library of the culture of the Kuba people. So I am going to put my questions to you one by one, to trace the history of Kuba textile art, and more specifically raffia textile. Could you introduce yourself in a few words?

Papa Shama Kwete Nicolas: I am an artist. I am a sculptor, I work in wood, and I also practise raffia weaving. What is called “raffia” is a name given by the colonisers; we call it *mbala*. *Mbala* is made from the leaf, from the stem we call *Ibole*. It is with this stem that we create the textile used to make the garments we call *bushongo*. We produce a very fine textile, and that is what we are known for. So I hold the art and the technique of the ancestors of the king and of the Kuba people. I also want to make one thing clear: I cannot bear to hear people speak of “raffia rugs”, because it diminishes our art. One should say Kuba textile made from raffia.

Sandrine NGANGA: Papa Shama Kwete, you told me that there are three types of *Ibole*. I would like you to describe them to me, please.

Papa Shama Kwete Nicolas: Indeed, there are three types of raffia. The first is *ibole*; the second is called *icadi*; and the third is called *ndiane*. This third one is not used for textile at all, because it is not of great

necessity: it is mainly its fruit that is eaten. Even though its fibres are beautiful, they are not strong enough to make textile, because they break quickly. *Ibole*, on the other hand: after testing it, we understood that its fibre was very resistant, and it is from this one that we draw the textile I spoke to you about, *mbala*.

Sandrine NGANGA: Thank you very much for that description. So we understand that these textiles come from the *Ibole* plant.

Sandrine NGANGA: Papa Shama Kwete, I would like to know whether the weaving of Kuba raffia textile is reserved for women or for men.

Papa Shama Kwete Nicolas: There is no real hierarchy between the feminine and the masculine. In general, it is the men who do the hardest part: they prepare the stem and make the fibre ready for weaving. Then the work passes to the women, who soften the textile, who make it supple. That is where the women create the motifs and stitch them onto the textile. So this work is carried out by men and women alike.

Sandrine NGANGA: Very good, thank you very much. My next question is about the motifs and the colours, which are many. When you take an *mbala* with no motif, it keeps its original colour. Could you explain to us how you add the colours onto the cloths?

Papa Shama Kwete Nicolas: Of course. That orange colour comes from red clay and from padouk, which we call in *Kikongo demutul*. A piece of this wood is grated to extract the colour; this pigment is also used for make-up. The black colour comes from a black wood, *black ebony*: in the same way, it is grated to extract the colouring matter and dye the fibre a deep black. To obtain this black, we also use minerals that come from the sea. Finally, for a lighter colour, more of a beige, we take the colouring matter from a wood we call *bilinga*. So most of the dyes come from wood, from different kinds of wood.

Sandrine NGANGA: Very good, thank you very much for your answers. I would now like us to talk about the motifs. Does each of them have a meaning? Do they also serve to communicate, like a language?

Papa Shama Kwete Nicolas: Yes, indeed. We have a motif we call *ibole*: it is the logo, the emblem of the Kuba Kingdom. It is found on the belts of chiefs, but also in tattoos. It is the symbol that every Kuba should carry. As for most of the other motifs you see on Kuba textiles, they are created by the people themselves, according to their thoughts, their state of mind and the meaning they want to give them. Each person creates their own motif, and only its creator can name it. You should also know that certain families have their own motifs: it is a genuine form of communication. Each family has its motif, and this allowed us to communicate among ourselves. So the designs are made freely, according to each person's inspiration, but some belong to the royalty, in particular the *ibole* logo I showed you. Other motifs were created by great respected figures of the Kuba people, and those fall under a form of copyright. That is in fact where we have had difficulties: Western brands have used some of our motifs and profited from them without even informing us. Today they pay royalties to the king.

Sandrine NGANGA: I would like to ask you another question. What do you think of the Congolese diaspora in Europe who use Kuba textiles without knowing their meaning, their history or their value, and who sell them without that knowledge? What do you think of that?

Papa Shama Kwete Nicolas: I will tell you frankly: unfortunately it is a bad thing. Yes, they come to the country to take our art and resell it, fine, but it is sad, because they do not pass on the history, the knowledge and the understanding that go with it. They see only the money, and that concerns me. For now, we still have masters capable of producing this textile, but for how long? It is now that the way of making this art must be learned. Because if we all go, who will still come to Congo to buy this art and resell it? No one. It is all very well to draw on our art, but you must also know how to reproduce it. The real wealth is there: in the knowledge, not only in the resale. I myself, for instance, have no worries, because I know how to do everything: I will always be able to produce and live from this art. But for the simple resellers, that is not the case. They must understand that drawing on it without knowing how to reproduce it leads them to ruin, and finally to being left with nothing.

Sandrine NGANGA: What do you think of digitisation? You know that my research is about the digitisation of Kuba heritage and art, so that it stays in the memory of our descendants and so that they can discover Kuba art through the digital, through the virtual world. What do you think of that?

Papa Shama Kwete Nicolas: You should know that the current king has always told us that we must promote our art, so that people know who we are. I think that digitisation is a very fine opportunity, because it answers exactly the king's wish: that his word be fulfilled. Through it, our children, our descendants, will be able to know Kuba history. What is more, digitisation will make it possible to spread Kuba art throughout the world much faster, since everything moves very quickly with the digital. So the promotion will happen as the king wished it. You should know that the previous kings totally refused the diffusion of Kuba art: they wanted to keep it for themselves and not to disclose it. The current king changed everything, and it is thanks to him that this art is today shown to the whole world, that foreigners come to see us, buy our works and make them known everywhere.

Sandrine NGANGA: Mister Shama Kwete Nicolas, could you tell us a little about the history of the Kuba Kingdom? We are here in Kinshasa, and not on its territory of origin; that will give us some context.

Papa Shama Kwete Nicolas: Yes, of course. The Kuba Kingdom does not come from Kinshasa, but from a region that is often difficult for most people to place. The Kuba Kingdom comes from the centre, from Western Kasai. You should know that it brings together several tribes. The king's native town, Mushenge, is its capital. We also have Mweka, another important town, then Kananga and Ilebo. Our Kuba people have never lacked for anything; we have always been comfortable. We have never had a reputation as liars: we do not like lying, we like to work at our art, and that is what we are known for. We are proud of it. Our pride also comes from the fact that, being very learned and knowing how to do everything, we cannot bear others dictating to us how we should work; that is perhaps one of our faults. We are also great cultivators, endowed with immense patience: patience characterises us. Finally, you should remember that the Kuba man is someone very sociable.

Sandrine NGANGA: You also told me that the Kuba people are distinguished from other peoples by the way they dress.

Papa Shama Kwete Nicolas: Yes. That reputation comes from the fact that, when the colonisers arrived in Congo and discovered us, we were the only people who were clothed. It had greatly impressed the white men to see us dressed, and that is what earned us this reputation.

Papa Shama Kwete Nicolas: I would like to add, in closing: today, if you come to resell our Kuba art without knowing its history, do not sell it. It is the worst thing you can do to us, because you break our history and our savoir-faire, and you make us lose our value. If you know nothing of the art or of the Kuba people, do not resell our art: this is very important. Sell what you have truly learned to make.

Papa Shama Kwete Nicolas: Today, I can tell you, Sandrine: you can recreate Kuba art, because you came here, to my workshop, and I showed you. You have the knowledge, so you are entitled to reproduce our art without fear. If one day you meet with difficulties concerning the right to practise Kuba art, know that I can testify that you have that right: your presence here and the teaching I have passed on to you about Kuba art and its making render you eligible. Know this.

Sandrine NGANGA: Well, know that I am truly very happy and honoured. We are coming to the end of our interview. For our last question: do you have a final word for the people who will watch this video?

Papa Shama Kwete Nicolas: My final word is to thank you for coming to do this interview. I would also like to say that this Kuba art must be kept alive, because it is what gives visibility to our people. So I invite everyone to learn our art and our culture, because it is essential for our visibility and for the respect of our work. You should also know that only people from the Kuba people can teach it, as I do: I am a qualified teacher in my field, the one I grew up with. Finally, I would like to say who I am. My name is Shama Kwete. "Shama" is the palm tree: it means that I possess everything, because thanks to the palm I can make everything, a house, textile and many other things. "Kwete" means to carve, to sculpt in wood. Thank you very much for everything, Maman Sandrine.