CHOKWE!

Art and Initiation Among Chokwe and Related Peoples

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The King's Crowns:
Hierarchy in the Making Among the Aruwund (Lunda)¹

Manuela Palmeirim

This paper examines how the official regalia of Ruwund² dignitaries reflect an ideology of kingship that incorporates both hierarchical and egalitarian principles, which are rooted in the traditions of the Aruwund state. These insignia not only convey status but are also employed in creating and negotiating hierarchical relationships³.

Autochthones vs. Innovators

The foundation myth of the Ruwund (Lunda) state records that kingship originated when a foreign hunter of Luba origin, named Cibind Yirung (Chibinda Ilunga) (Pl. 1), arrived in Aruwund and married its chief, the Princess Ruwej (Luwej/Lweji) (Pl. 9). Before Cibind Yirung's arrival, Ruwej had ruled with the help of a group of chiefs called atubung (sing. kubung). Ruwej fell in love with the stranger, and gave him the nikan, the bracelet of human sinew that is the ultimate symbol of Ruwund chiefship. Cibind Yirung introduced among the Aruwund a set of rules and teachings that established a more sophisticated state based on sacred kingship. The son of Cibind Yirung, Yaav⁴, became the first king — the first to hold the title of Mwant Yaav, meaning paramount chief, which has subsequently been bestowed on all supreme leaders of the Ruwund state.

Luc de Heusch, in his Le roi ivoire (1972), shows how Ruwej and Cibind Yirung personify the two antagonistic principles in the dualistic ideology of sovereignty maintained by the Ruwund and other central African peoples: one principle emphasizes autochthony and ancestry in Ruwund origins, while an opposing principle emphasizes the innovating order, associated with Cibind Yirung, that was alien to preexisting Ruwund culture.

By means of the institution that A. I. Richards (1940, 1950) termed "positional succession," the heroes of the foundation epic are sustained through time into the present by living dignitaries, or nobles, who trace their titles back to the mythical heroes in the oral traditions, with whom the nobles identify. Today Ruwej is represented at Musumb, which is the king's court and capital of the kingdom, by a woman dignitary with the title of Nwaan Murund (whom the Aruwund often address by the very name of Ruwej). The king, the Mwant Yaav, is considered to be the heir of Cibind Yirung and the representative of the innovating order of the Luba hunter and his son, Yaav, the first king.

The atubung are now represented by eighteen nobles who live on the sacred land surrounding the Nkalaany River, which is believed to be the cradle of the Ruwund state and the site where the mythical events that established the kingship took place. These eighteen dignitaries are the trustees of the land (anshir-a-ngand), and they represent the ancestral order and the local power that preexisted the arrival of the Luba hunter. They serve as the ritual specialists who perform the investiture of
the Mwant-Yaav⁵, but they live quietly in the Nkalaany heartland, where each is the headman of a village, much like a cǐlɔ⁶, and they do not interfere in the ruling of the state by engaging in politics or state administration.

The Mwant-Yaav rules with the administrative assistance of a group of nobles called the ayilɔl (sing. cǐlɔ). Most ayilɔl⁷ are village headmen who live in the territories they control. They settle disputes among their subjects, announce the annual setting of fire to the bush in the dry season, plan village activities, and organize such collective enterprises as construction and the cleaning of common spaces. A cǐlɔ also collects funds on the king’s request, announces news from the capital to the villagers, and takes those village problems that exceed his or her⁸ own jurisdiction to the royal court. During the Lunda Empire (17th–19th centuries), a cǐlɔ’s duties included collecting tribute, a share of which he retained for himself before sending the remainder to the capital.

As I have argued in detail elsewhere (1994), the opposing ideological principles of the Ruvund state underlie the organization of the kingdom: the atubung and the Nswaan Murund (the heir of Ruwej) represent the indigenous and ancestral power in the royal court, while the Mwant-Yaav and the ayilɔl are associated with the new political order introduced by CibindYirung and his son.

Hierarchy vs. Egalitarianism

Principles of hierarchy and egalitarianism parallel the broader duality of Ruvund state ideology, opposing the atubung, who express autochthonous egalitarianism, and the ayilɔl, who reflect the innovation of hierarchical social organization. The Ruvund view the historical process of their state’s formation as a passage from an egalitarian society without cleavages to a hierarchically organized state ruled by a sovereign of supreme rank.

The atubung, the trustees of the land, are the ritual specialists who represent the ancestral order of Ruwej. The atubung travel to Musumb, the royal court, once or twice a year to participate with great pomp and ceremony in the Mwant-Yaav’s public audiences (citentam). They are invited by the sovereign through the Nswaan Murund, the heir of Ruwej. Their official visits are great expenses for the king, who is expected to receive them in state and make generous offerings. This distinguishes the atubung from the ayilɔl, who must pay the sovereign regular tributes. The arrival of the atubung at court causes great commotion. As their approach is heralded, the population hastens to conceal all farm and game products and livestock, which the atubung are entitled to seize as they pass. Similarly, their visits to the market during their stay cause general pandemonium, because they may expropriate any produce that they regard as necessary for their subsistence—a right that proclaims them as the original and legitimate owners of the land.

The atubung clearly exist outside the elaborate hierarchy within which the ayilɔl operate. All atubung are considered of equal status, except for the differentiation among them that is evident from their respective roles during the king’s investiture. The atubung whom I interviewed were adamant that no status inequality existed among them, although they acknowledged that the kabung with the title of Mukarusong had some sort of seniority because of the history of his title and his ritual prominence during the king’s installation. Nonetheless, the Mukarusong does not benefit from any special prerogatives in comparison to other atubung.

1 The Aruwund, known also as the “Lunda of the Mwant-Yaav,” are the group who founded the great Lunda Empire, a state that reached its apogee by the early nineteenth century. Today the Aruwund occupy mainly the Kapungu and Sanda areas of the Democratic Republic of Congo, formerly Zaire, (where I carried out my fieldwork). They are also found in a narrow band that extends across northeastern Angola into the Bandundu region (Kalimbu area) of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

2 The radical “-ruwund” is used here as the adjective relating to “Aruwund.”

3 I would like to thank Dr. Allen Roberts and Dr. Christopher Roy for having invited me to the University of Iowa in 1994 under the auspices of the Program for the Advanced Study of Art and Life in Africa (PASALA). During my stay there as a Visiting Fellow, I presented an earlier version of this paper, and discussed various issues relevant to it with them and with Dr. W. Dewey and Dr. M. Jordin.

4 In some versions Yaav is said to be the son of CibindYirung and of Ruwej herself (see Carvalho (1890: 88–76) and Struyf (1948: 370–375). In other versions, Ruwej is said to be sterile, and Yaav is the son of the Luba hunter and a second wife, named Kamong (see Duysters (1958: 81–86) and Biebuyck (1957: 797–804)). For the meaning of these versions, see Palmeirim (1993).
The organization of the atubung minimizes status differences, and, indeed, individuality. Oral traditions about the founding of the state do emphasize differences, which are tantamount to establishing hierarchy and rank, among the founding heroes, who are represented today by the ayilol at court. Distinctions between atubung, in contrast, remain unspoken, because the atubung stand united. This lack of individualism among the atubung, who consider themselves chiefs of equal status, is stressed by the fact that they are viewed as twins.

Twins are regarded by the Aruwund as one single body. If one twin becomes ill, the other is believed to contract the same sickness. If one dies, no ritual crying (idil) takes place, because such mourning would acknowledge the death of both twins, causing the surviving twin to become overcome by grief and die. Happiness rather than sorrow should be exhibited on such an occasion, and licentious songs of twinship (the so-called songs of uhwang) are chanted to prevent the remaining twin from dying. Twins are immediately separated if one dies, because it is believed that if the surviving twin lays eyes on the deceased sibling, the dead twin will take the survivor away with him or her. Also emphasizing that the tie between twins, when palm wine is drunk on ritual occasions the twins must be given drink at the same time to avoid jealousy. The chants of twinship state that “the twins walk side by side/walk together” (ampamb endang aad), emphasizing that they act with one body, as if they were one person.

This lack of differentiation between twins is also a feature of the ideology surrounding the atubung. Because the atubung represent the ancient order in which all chiefs were equal and in which kinship seniority, rather than political power, was the ultimate value, they can only be thought of within an egalitarian framework and, like twins, in terms of simultaneity. The atubung are considered linked by perpetual ties of consanguinity – they are said to be siblings or cousins – and, like twins, they act together at all times and are utterly inseparable. On their official visits to court the atubung walk in single file to the palace, singing a song commonly chanted for twins. Their song and march is termed wend-a-munan (from the verb kwend, to walk, and munan, meaning group of people), by which the Aruwund mean that they walk in a group as unified as twins are. The Mwant Yaav can never summon one kabung alone to his court, which also reveals the unity among the atubung. In fact, the atubung’s egaliatarianism seems to inhibit them from affirming their individual identities, for what greater threat could there be to the unitary identity of twins than to be considered “one among twins”?

The logic uniting the atubung appears to be one of identity or sameness, which is opposed to the fine hierarchical gradations that exist among ayilol. Some ayilol chiefs have several lesser ayilol subordinated to them. This is a prerogative of those nobles whose ancestors conquered other chiefs during the Lunda Empire, or who were granted power over other chiefs by the king himself. The Aruwund acknowledge these hierarchical differences by saying that those of higher rank are “big/senior ayilol” (ayilol afim/amakunump) while their subordinate chiefs are “small/junior ayilol” (ayilol akemp/san-kanc).

Minor ayilol oversee the estates of their senior cilol, who often lives at the king’s court or has his own court in a settlement elsewhere in the country. All these minor ayilol are also village headmen of their home areas, but their lands belong ultimately to the cilol on whom they depend and to whom they pay tribute in cash, livestock, or produce. In their villages, these minor ayilol chiefs have their own court of sub-nobles, known as annubu, who assist the cilol in carrying out his tasks as village leader.
In contrast, the attubung have no subordinate dignitaries. While the village of a cilol has a heterogeneous population, the inhabitants of a kabung’s village are not so much his subjects as his relatives, who follow his advice because he is the senior and most respected member of their kinship group, rather than a political chief.

Insignia

The homogeneity of the attubung and all the nuances of the hierarchical relationships among ayiol are conveyed and codified in the insignia of office worn by these Ruwund dignitaries. Insignia are, of course, a means of asserting hierarchical positions and ranks, which are status relationships that exist only insofar as they are codified, reinscribed, and constantly re-created at certain moments and by certain codes of social life.

All male ayiol are entitled to wear a basic ceremonial garment, which consists of a mid-calf-length skirt, made from industrially manufactured cloth, with a wide lower border of contrasting cloth (mukambu). The textile is gathered around the waist or tucked in pleats at the front under a belt. Female ayiol wear a wrap-around cloth of the type worn by ordinary women. Ayiol also wear bracelets and, sometimes, anklets called jinsambu, which consist of fine wire wound around a fiber core. When a cilol’s right to office is inherited through the paternal line, the jinsambu are worn on the right arm; when inherited from the maternal side, the bracelets are displayed on the left arm; and when the title is derived from both sides, the bracelets are worn on both arms. All ayiol generally also hold a flywhisk (mvimpong), which they wave while performing their rhythmic march (verb kunanik) at the major public audiences at the capital.

Added to this basic attire are other symbols of office that express differences in rank and relate to incidents in the history of the title (Fig. 10). Several major ayiol, for instance, wear the skin of a serval (nzuwij) hanging from the waist, over the chiefly skirt. Titleholders inherit these skins from their predecessors, and must display them when

2 A cilol’s mpak ya mukwaal.

7 With the exception of the ayiol who live at the king’s court (where the Mwanz Yaaw himself is the great chief), and a few who reside in the regional courts of major dignitaries.

8 Although both ayiol and attubung may have female or male incumbents, I have employed the masculine form in this essay for simplification.
in official dress. Furthermore, some ayilol whose predecessors were war leaders or executioners during the Lunda Empire are distinguished by the emblem of a type of sword, or dagger, called mpak ya mukuual (Fig 2). A few major ayilol from the Nkalaany area are entitled to a nukan, a sinew bracelet. Oral history recalls that when Ruwej gave her ancestors’ nukan to Cibind Yirung, identical bracelets were given to chiefs from the Ruwind heartland in order to emphasize their native origin (Carvalho 1896:664).

Finally, numerous ayilol at Musumbi or in important outlying villages have the right to wear a beaded crown (Pls. 53–54). These crowns differ in type according to the status they are intended to convey. The simplest of these crowns consist of a beaded band (kabond) worn around the forehead. This band forms part of other more elaborate crowns, such as the yibangul ya yaapu ya makondi (Fig. 3), which has five beaded bands that stand up on the head, resembling a hand of bananas (yaapu ca makondi), after which the crown is named. Most major male and female ayilol at Musumbi now wear this type of crown, although it is said that it was formerly exclusively an emblem of female nobles. The crown known as twimpaap, named after its three beaded protuberances that resemble little baskets (simpaap means basket), was formerly worn only by male ayilol, who were considered aan-a-Mwali Yaav, children of the Mwanti Yaav.

The sovereign may wear the yibangul ya yaapu ya makondi for informal meetings, but on important official occasions he must wear the ubawo, the crown of highest status, which only the ruling king may wear. Until the king is invested by the atubung of the Nkalaany area, he is entitled to wear only the yibangul of his predecessor, who will have been buried with his ubawo. A new ubawo must therefore be created to present to the new king after his investiture.

On the ubawo, the bands constituting the yibangul are linked with beaded loops. On the sides of the crown, these loops terminate in buffalo horns, which give the ubawo its name (mbawo means buffalo). The ubawo is surmounted by a tuft of red feathers from the African gray parrot (Hoover 1976), or kalongi.11

The significance of the most important items of the king’s regalia – the ubawo and the nukan bracelet – is best understood as relational, insofar as whenever the king wears the sacred nukan bracelet he must also wear the ubawo.

The hierarchical differentiation among these various crowns, marked by their distinctive features, signals the differences in rank among the dignitaries who are entitled to wear them. It is not the nature of the regalia and their distinctive features, however, that codify and define rank and status; the objects do not possess absolute value, and their meaning varies according to circumstance, which is to say that it is relational.12 The hierarchical function of regalia is understood best, therefore, by focusing on when, where, and particularly in whose presence regalia is displayed, since hierarchy is by definition a mechanism of affirming relative positions. The ayilol, for example, do not have an absolute and unreserved right to wear their regalia. In some cases, although these are rare, a ciol who has the right to wear a crown during the king’s public meetings in the presence of certain dignitaries is nevertheless expected to refrain from doing so in other circumstances or in the presence of certain other dignitaries. To wear a crown is to proclaim and assert superior status; to refrain from wearing it is to recognize the higher rank of those present. Chiefly regalia are thus used or omitted depending on the context and the hierarchical status to be asserted, acknowledged, or claimed. The use of insignia therefore has a degree of flexibility that allows them to continually negotiate status and hierarchical rank. In this sense, hierarchy is continually in the making.

9 This opposition does not seem to apply to anklets.
10 The photographs published in this paper were taken by John R. Anthony during my fieldwork and are used with his permission.
11 One other headdress, named umu mukwe, is also said to have been worn by the king in the past (Hoover 1978b:557).
12 The same could probably be asserted of other objects of so-called African art.
The *ayilol* sit on skins during the king’s public audiences or when they are gathered together, but they may sit at different heights when visiting one another. As with the use of crowns, these seating height are not absolute. The relative heights of their seats thus constitutes another method of codifying or negotiating rank. When a major meeting takes place in the courtyard facing the king’s palace, all *ayilol* sit on antelope skins, except for the five major female nobles living at Musumb, who have the right to a leopard skin\(^{13}\). In contrast, commoners stand on the sidelines, and the king’s wives, who hold only minor status within the Ruwund hierarchy, sit on woven mats (*yikang*). In the presence of the king at a public meeting, the status differences among the *ayilol* are minimized to emphasize the hierarchical supremacy of the sovereign, but the subtle gradations in hierarchy among the *ayilol* are revealed and emphasized when the *ayilol* meet in other contexts. The case of a *cilol*’s sub-nobles (*amwubu*) further illustrates this point. Despite the fact that they have prerogatives when sitting at a public meeting in their *cilol*’s village, they are not recognized as dignitaries in the royal court, and therefore are not allowed to sit on a skin during the king’s audiences.

I was told more than once, while interviewing court officials at Musumb, about the case of a *cilol* who held the position of Nakambaaj. By tradition the Nakambaaj is a servant (*mwiilomb*) of another major *cilol*, named the Rukonkish, to whom she was therefore far inferior in rank. A recent Mwant Yaav conferred upon the Nakambaaj the right to wear a *yiibangul ya yaapu ya makond*. Her status was clearly raised by acquiring the right to wear this crown at the king’s public audiences. The Rukonkish took this as a reduction of her own status, although the Nakambaaj’s inferiority was still codified by the fact that she had to sit on an antelope skin during the king’s audiences, whereas the Rukonkish and other major female dignitaries were entitled to sit on leopard skins. In addition, although the Nakambaaj had the right to wear her crown in public with the other major female officials at court, she was not entitled to wear it in the individual presence of the Rukonkish, before whom she was also compelled to sit on the ground as an acknowledgment of the latter’s superior rank.

Finally, insignia are also embroiled in the dualistic symbolic framework that defines the Ruwund ideology of kingship. The regalia used by the *atuwung* include elements that recall the old order of Ruwej, while those of the *ayilol* are clearly associated with the new political rule of Cibind Yirung. J.J. Hoover (1978b: 557) explains, for example, that the beaded crowns of both the king and *ayilol* imitate the Luba hunter’s hairstyle that, according to oral tradition, Cibind Yirung wore. Also, some of these dignitaries are entitled to a type of sword (*mpak ya mukwazit*) that Cibind Yirung is said to have introduced. In these respects the *ayilol*’s regalia closely resemble those of the sovereign himself, who is, after all, the heir of the Luba mythical hero. The king, when in full ceremonial attire during audiences, wears the chiefly skirt covered with a serval skin, wire bracelets on his wrists and ankles, a crown, the sword, and the *rukan*\(^{14}\) – the ultimate emblem of royalty. He sits on a throne placed on the skins of a leopard and a lion, and is shielded by a parasol. The regalia of both the sovereign and the *ayilol* can therefore be viewed as belonging to the same system of insignia. The king dresses like a great *cilol*, while the *ayilol*’s regalia can be viewed as unquestionably lesser replicas of the king’s.

By contrast with the *ayilol*, the *atuwung* wear ceremonial garments that express their association with the autochthonous order of Ruwej (Fig. 4). Today their official dress consists of a white tee-shirt (*tariko* or *tadiko*)\(^{15}\) and a wrap-around skirt of white muslin (*malakanga*)\(^{16}\) held in place by a belt and sometimes covered with a serval skin. A white feather from a bird known locally as *kanandji* is tucked into their

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13 There is one additional exception: the chief Mukakatou, a *cilol* from Musumb who is originally from the Nkalaxy area, and who sits on the skin of a hyena (*izung*).
14 Less commonly referred to as *kasekili*.
15 Probably from the French *trièce*.
16 From the French *amérindien* (Hoover 1976).
hair. This recalls the name of the first village that Ruwej and her people founded when they emerged from the cave of origin into the daylight. According to oral tradition, the village was named Kasal Katok, which means both “to be light” and “little white feather.” The *atubung* carry a wooden walking stick (*mukombu*), because, as the representatives of the ancestors, they are regarded as the aged chiefs of the Ruwund heartland. Because the *atubung* embody the values of autochthonous and ancestry in Ruwund kingship ideology, they have their own bracelets of human sinew, each kept inside a small, lidded basket (*impiding*), which they wear over the shoulder as a sign that they were original owners of the king’s *rukan*. The *atubung’s* paraphernalia is completed by the skin of a serval or civet, which is carried over the shoulder and used for sitting on.

The insignia of the *atubung* clearly emphasize their role as ritual specialists, rather than referring to a political order. The use of the color white, the color of ritual purity, emphasizes their role at the king’s investiture.

In conclusion, it is clear that the differences between the regalia of the *ayiolo* and the *atubung* reflect the opposed principles of egalitarianism and hierarchy that are fundamental to the ideology of Ruwund kingship. The regalia of the *ayiolo* are relational, put on or taken off according to the ceremonial context and the relative rank of others who are present. This is precisely because they are concerned with conveying hierarchical relationships. In contrast, the regalia of the *atubung* are the same for all the *atubung*. Their regalia approach what may be seen as an absolute value, one that codifies an ideology of egalitarianism and expresses the *atubung’s* apparent aversion to hierarchy.