



*Bryn Mawr College Special
Collections*

SUPPLEMENTAL BOOKLET

BY SOFIA MONDRAGON

Background

My Museum Studies Fieldwork Seminar PRAXIS placement was in Bryn Mawr Special Collections working on 12 Congolese ceramics. This collection was donated in January of 2022 by Wyatt MacGaffey, a former professor of anthropology at Haverford College.

From 1965 to 1970, Wyatt MacGaffey and his wife, Janet MacGffey (Ph.D. 1981, Bryn Mawr College) lived in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, doing anthropological research. The MacGaffeys became friends with two potters, Mayivangwa Therese and Wadimbudla Esther, and Janet MacGaffey acquired various ceramics from these potters. These ceramics are the collection I have been studying. Janet MacGaffey wrote an article about the 12 ceramics, which has been a great source for my research. The article and a few ethnographic photographs were also donated to Bryn Mawr.

TWO KONGO POTTERS

JANET MacGAFFEY

Among the Bakongo of western Zaïre, the potter's art is flourishing. Although the use of traditional pots in this area has declined with the increase of European imports, the art continues to grow as the potters here, all of them women, adapt their craft to conform with social changes, retaining some of the traditional forms, abandoning others, and experimenting with appropriate new forms.

This article is a study of two of these potters, Mayivangwa Thérèse and Wadimbudula Esther. Both come from the village of Vunda—where there is good potting clay—in the province of Lower Zaïre, about fifty miles northeast of the port of Matadi. Mayivangwa now lives in the nearby village of Mbanza Manteke, where we were her neighbors during a year spent in the village in 1965. Wadimbudula Esther lives with her brother in Matadi where we knew her during the summer of 1970.

Both Mayivangwa and Wadimbudula make a matte black ware, carrying on a traditional art passed down through their families. In characteristic African fashion¹ these pots are made without a wheel or ceramic glaze; they are preheated before firing; they are fired on an open fire; and the firing is short so that the finishing temperature is low. The even black finish is obtained by treating the pots with a bark infusion while they are still red-hot.

Pottery vessels were formerly used by the Bakongo as cooking pots, large water storage jars, pitchers for drinking water, and small bowls for eating and drinking. Recently iron and aluminum, enamel and earthenware have supplanted pottery for cooking and tableware, but the potters still make large water-storage jars—which, I was assured, could be found in most houses in the village—and an abundance of water pitchers of various shapes, whose function, once solely utilitarian, is becoming increasingly ornamental.

Suitable potting clay is found only in certain places. In Matadi there is a shal-

low vein of the dark reddish-brown clay running through Wadimbudula's brother's compound; it surfaces again higher up the hill, and the carpenter who owns that land sells the clay to other potters. From Manteke, Mayivangwa must go to Vunda to get her clay. It is dug out in lumps and stored in a box until needed, at which time it is mixed with water and left to slake. No grit or sand is added. The resulting crumbly clay is mixed with more water, any grit is carefully removed to avoid breakage in the final firing, and the clay is kneaded until ready for use. It is then wrapped in a leaf or plastic sheet and kept in a box until needed, together with the sticks, sherds and rags that are the potter's tools.

The potter works sitting on the ground before a board. She spoons water from a basin onto the board's clay-smear surface so that she can spin the pot around easily on the slippery wood as she works, turning the pot with one hand and building up the walls or incising decorations with the other. Mayivangwa sometimes uses a large potsherd as a base upon which to turn the pot she is building.

The pot is started with a disk of clay an inch thick. The potter forms short, fat rolls of clay between her palms, then coils them to build up the pot, starting at the center disk, flattening and joining the rolls of clay with one hand and turning the pot with the other (Figs. 1, 2). As the pot rises, she continues to shape it with her fingers, then scrapes it thinner with a potsherd dipped in the basin of water placed beside

her. The clay wall will eventually be only 1/8-1/4 inch thick. Usually several pots are in progress simultaneously, which allows the lower parts to dry out somewhat before being built up higher. When making pitchers, Mayivangwa first makes a series of bottom halves and places them under damp cloths. She then works all their tops, building them up further with rolls of clay, flattening and joining them, smoothing the outside with her fingers and the inside with a stick or potsherd. The bottom is flattened by tapping it with a flat stick or a slat of wood dipped in water. She uses a spoon to scrape off



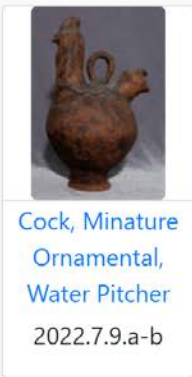
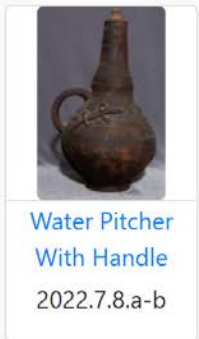
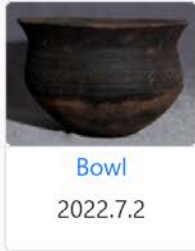
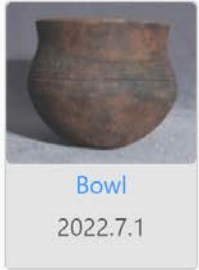
10. ELEPHANT, BY MAYIVANGWA, 4 1/2".



9. COCK, MINIATURE ORNAMENTAL WATER PITCHER, BY MAYIVANGWA, 9". A LIZARD DECORATES THE OTHER SIDE.

◀ LEFT, TOP TO BOTTOM: 1. WADIMBUDULA COILING THE LOWER HALF OF A POT LIKE THE ONE DRYING IN THE FOREGROUND. 2. HER APPRENTICE BUILDING UP THE SIDES OF A SIMILAR POT. 3. THINNING THE WALLS OF A CHANNEL HANDLE WITH A STICK. 4. SMOOTHING THE OUTSIDE OF A LARGE WATER STORAGE JAR. RIGHT, TOP TO BOTTOM: 5. PRE-HEATING. 6. FIRING. 7. BLACKENING HOT POTS WITH A BARK INFUSION SPLASHED ON WITH A WHISK. 8. FINISHED POTS.

Janet MacGaffey's article, *Two Kongo Potters*, which details how the ceramics were made, who made them, and includes photographs of the ceramics now in Bryn Mawr's care



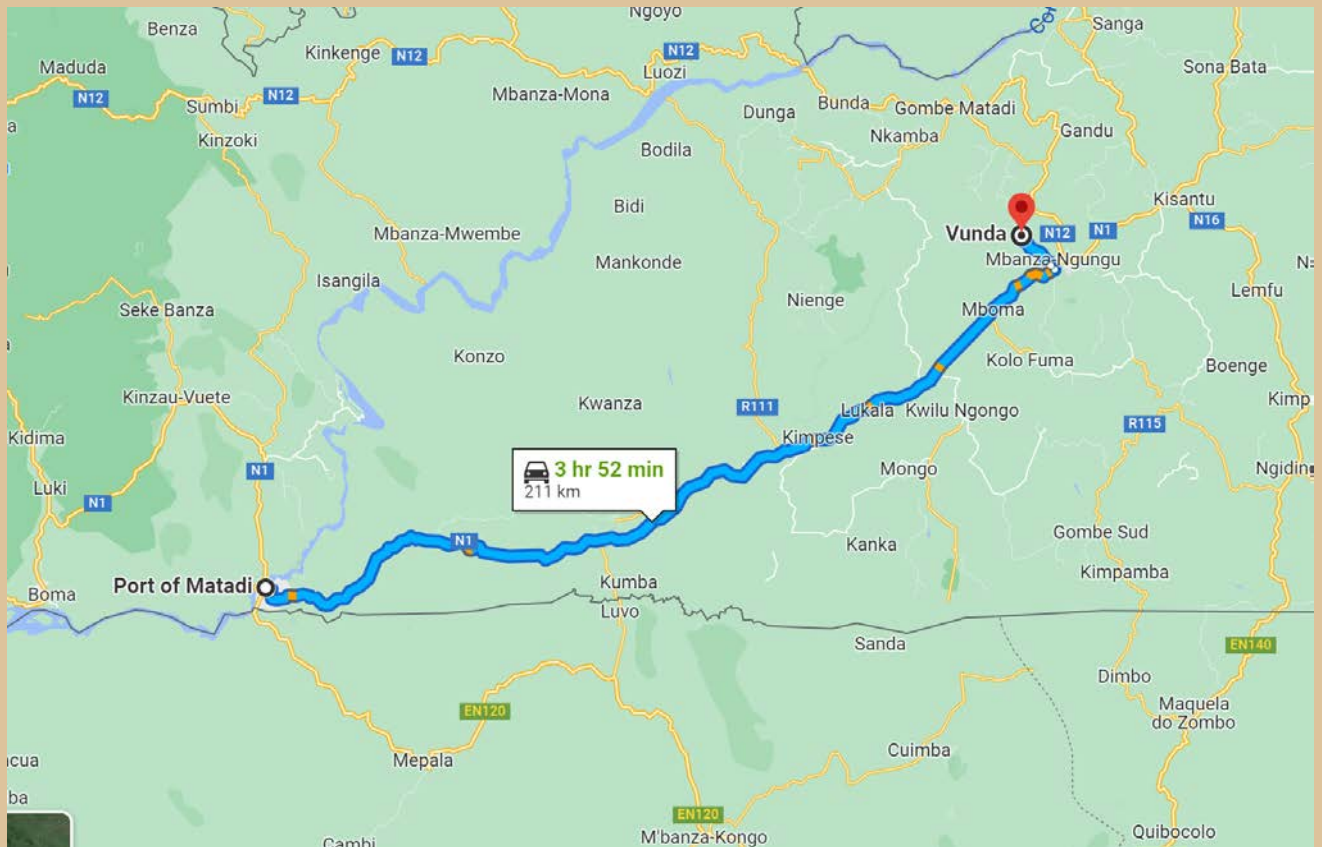
An image of the entire Congolese ceramics collection that I was working on. Most of the collection is water pitchers

Geography

In Janet MacGaffey's article *Teo Kongo Potters*, she states that the Congolese ceramics are from Vunda, a providence known for good clay that is 50 miles away from the Port of Matadi. This information is very helpful because it tells me exactly where the objects are from.



A labeled map of Africa with the Democratic Republic of the Congo highlighted



A labeled map of where Vunda is in relation to the Port of Matadi

What I Did

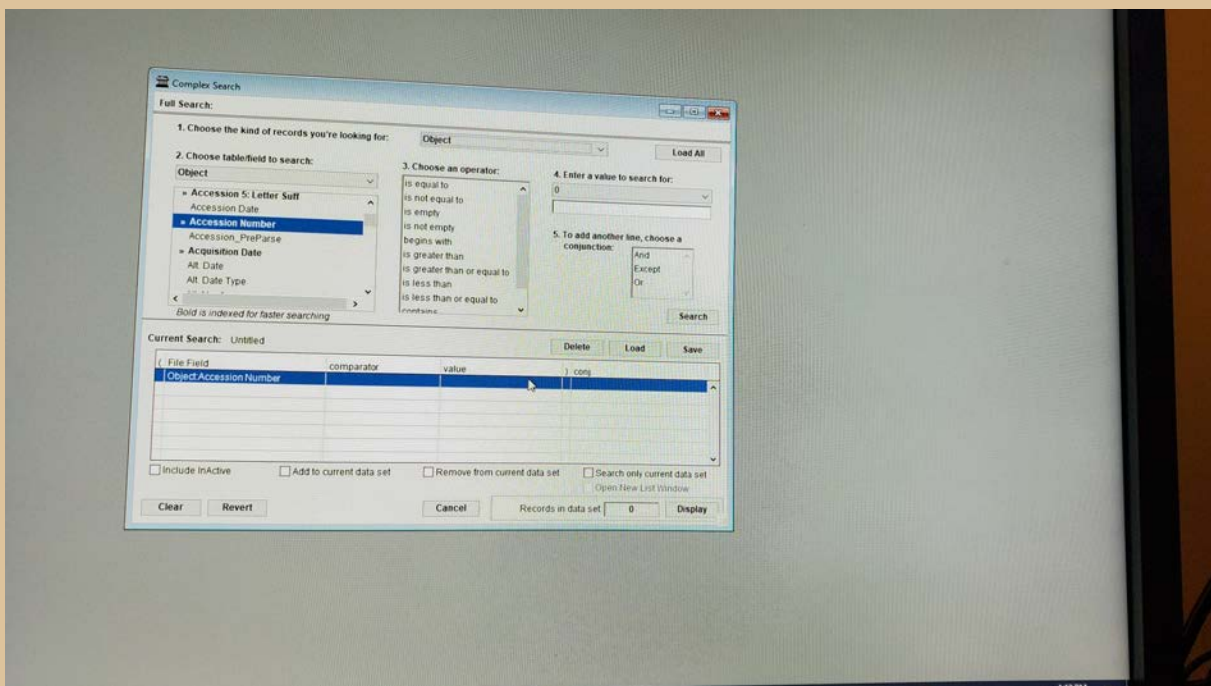
I firstly gave the 12 ceramics their accession numbers, a unique number assigned by Bryn Mawr so it is easy to locate it in the database. The ceramics all have accession numbers beginning with the number: 2022.7. Then I photographed the objects so people can see what these objects look like online.



One of the photographs I took for this collection.

Object: Four-Handled Water Pitcher (2022.7.6)

After giving the Congolese ceramics their accession numbers and photographing them, I inputted all the information that was detailed in the article about the ceramics into Bryn Mawr College's collection management database, EmBark Collections Manager.



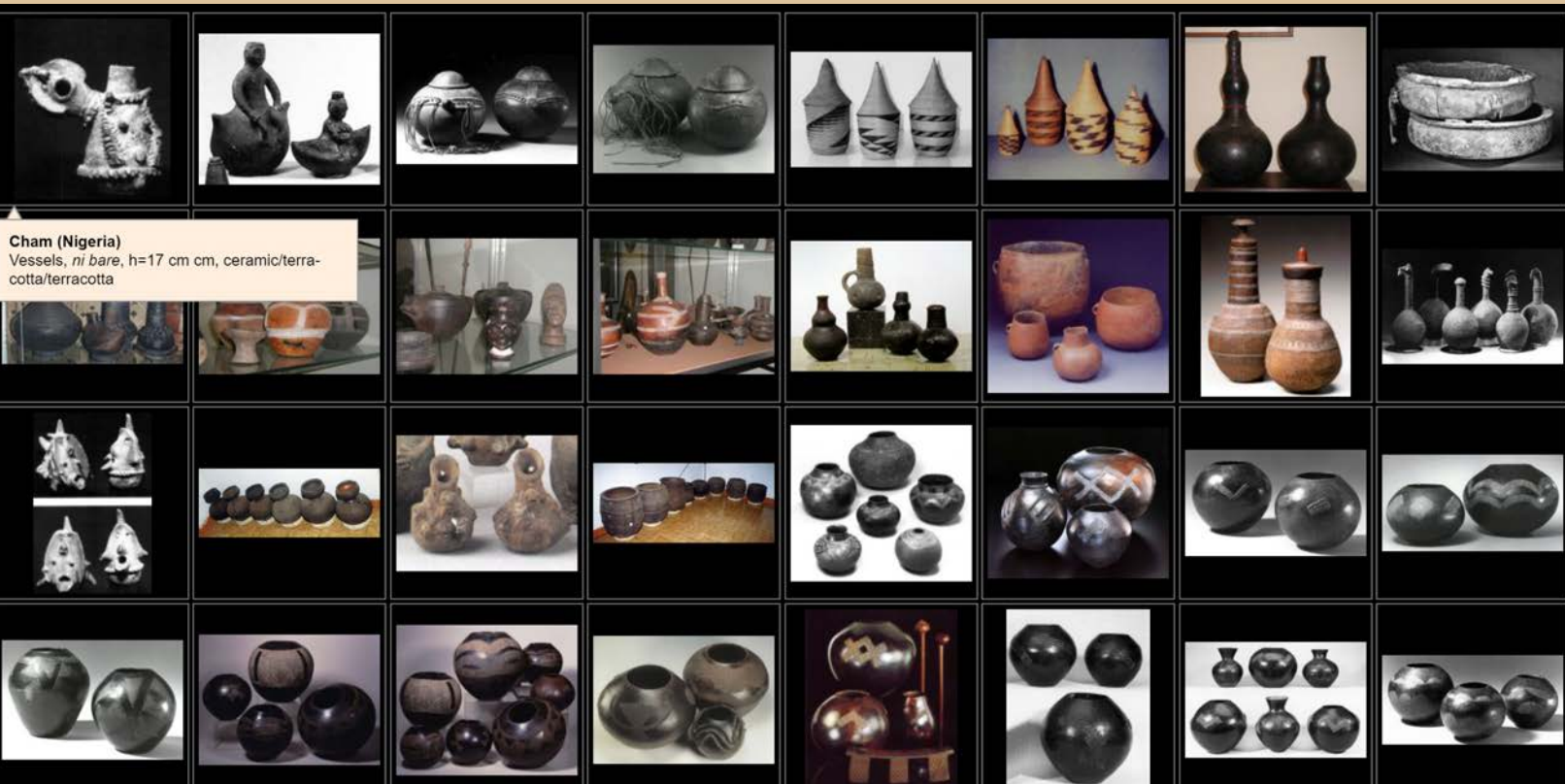
An image of me inputting information onto EmBark

Researching the Collection

Aside from cataloging, rehousing, and photographing the collection I also conducted research on the Congolese ceramic collections to learn more about these objects. My initial questions for my research were these:

1. Why do the water pitchers have the shapes that they do?
2. What do the engraved motifs communicate?
3. Are there any secondary uses for these water pitchers?

I mostly did comparanda research, which is finding related objects (known as the comparanda object) to the object I am researching. For me, I tried to find comparanda objects that looked like any of the objects in Bryn Mawr's Congolese ceramics collection. This involves me going on massive databases and trying to find good comparanda objects. Based on the information I can glean from the comparanda object, I can go into more in-depth research to find out more about the collection.



An image of the African Heritage Document & Research Centre Database. I used this database to find out lots of comparanda objects and information on the collection

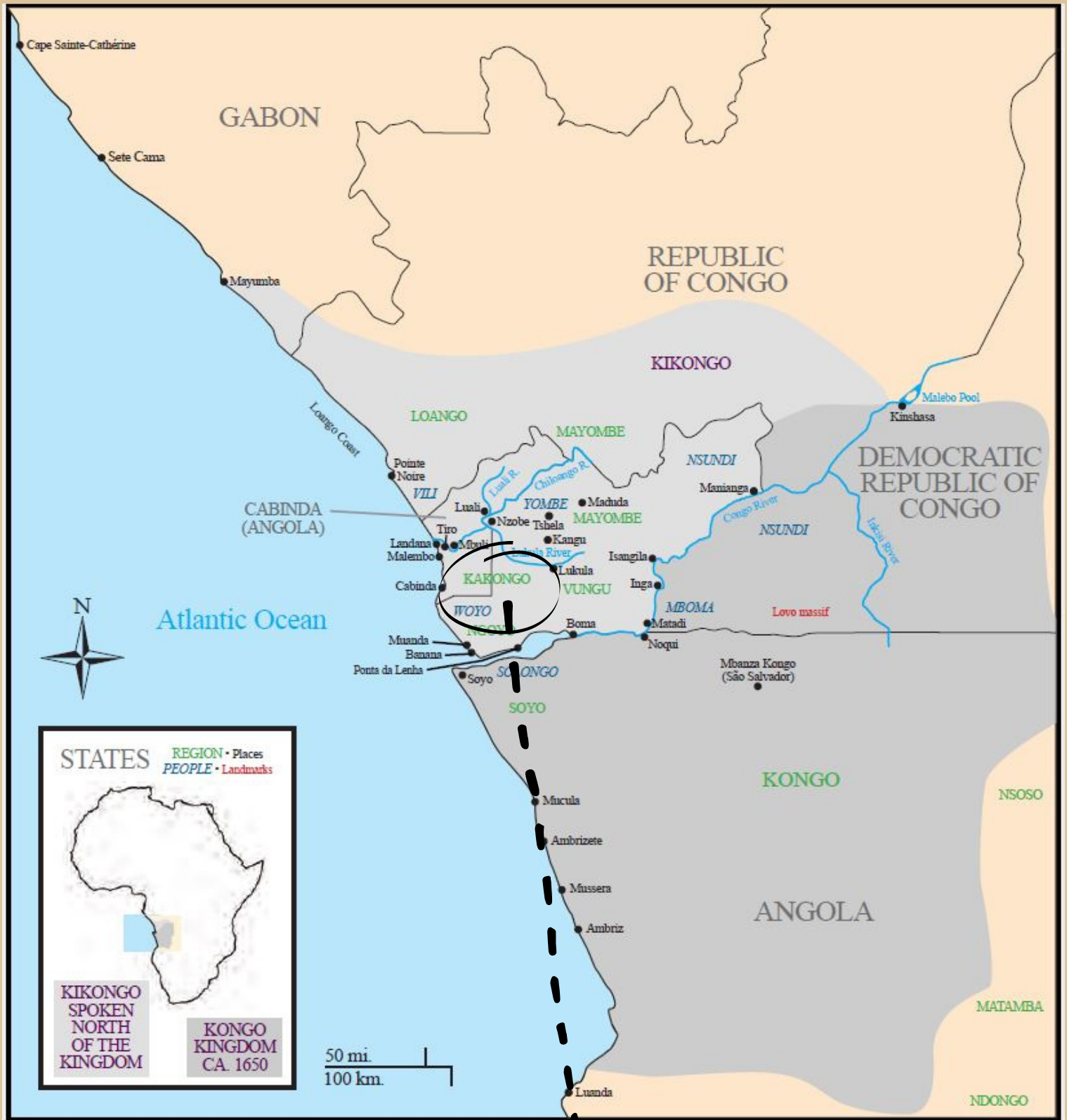
In addition to the comparanda research, I also read up on African pottery or ceramics, to better understand African artistic practices. One of the most important books that helped me understand the water pitchers was *Nzungu: La Ceramique Bakongo* which was created by the Galerie Congo in Belgium.



An image of *Nzungu: La Ceramique Bakongo*

The book, *Nzungu: La Ceramique Bakongo* gave lots of information that answered almost all of my initial research questions. From the information detailed in the book, I was able to determine that the water pitcher shapes came from the former **Kakongo Kingdom region**. All of the engraved decorative motifs (cross-hatching, protruding circular motifs, squiggly lines, slanted verticle lines) are evocative of traditional Kakongo ceramic motifs.

Kakongo Kingdom region: The Kakongo Kingdom is an ancient African empire established in the 1600s that is located on the Atlantic coast and was part of the Kongo Kingdom which ranged from present-day Angola through western present-day DRC



A historical map of the Kongo and Kakongo Kingdoms. The circle details where the water pitcher motifs and shapes came from

Example of the traditional
Kakongo engraved motifs

The slanted verticle
lines are a staple of
traditional Kakongo
ceramic motifs

The squiggly zig-
zagging line is a
staple of traditional
Kakongo ceramic
motifs



Object: M'vungu (Stirrup-Handled
Water Pitcher) 2022.7. 4. a-b

The cross-hatching is a staple of
traditional Kakongo ceramic motifs

Further Questions

Further research on Congolese ceramics will answer some questions that have arisen since I have begun this project. Various books on Congolese pottery said that water pitchers were placed on graves and were part of funerary practices. It is unclear if these particular objects would have this secondary function since the pitchers I was studying were made for the market. The zig-zagging line in Kakongo ceramics is evocative of a serpent, which is believed to be the source of men in certain Congolese spiritual belief systems. Water and serpents are used commonly as motifs in Kakongo ceramics and Kakongo funerary practices. Whether these ceramics are used in funerary practices is yet to be determined.