



Chokwe Masks and Franciscan Missionaries in Sandoa, Belgian Congo, ca. 1948

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Abstract. – It is not widely known that, in the first half of the 20th century, Belgian missionaries of the Order of Saint Francis gathered important data on Chokwe peoples, in what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo. This article discusses a selection of mostly unpublished field photographs of Chokwe masks, made by Father Marchal in the village of Sandoa, Katanga Province, in 1948. After a brief history of Franciscan missionary activity in the former Belgian Congo, an attempt is made to identify the different mask characters shown in Marchal's photographs. The central section of the article examines a detailed report by Marchal's fellow missionary Father Borgonjon on a Chokwe initiation ritual for adolescent boys, which constitutes an important context for masking. The conclusion addresses some methodological questions in relation to the use of missionary photographs as anthropological and art historical documents. [*Democratic Republic of the Congo, Chokwe, masks, missionaries, photography*]

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Introduction

The art of the Chokwe, a matrilineal Bantu-speaking people who live in a vast area throughout northeastern Angola, northwestern Zambia, and

southern (Democratic Republic of the) Congo, is often published in surveys of African art and is well represented in museums and private collections.¹ Belgian missionaries belonging to the Friars Minor – or Minderbroeders, as they are called in Dutch – of the Order of Saint Francis have provided us with important textual and visual documentation on the art and culture of the Chokwe and a number of related peoples in southern Congo. Although the writings of the Fathers Ambroos Delille and Johannes-Franciscus Borgonjon have been referred to by such scholars as Hermann Baumann, Merran McCulloch, and Victor Turner, these sources remain largely unknown.²

1 As demonstrated here by the titles listed under the References Cited, the ethnonym Chokwe is spelled in many ways. The same is true for the spelling of the name of their language, which, in Katanga, is called Chichokwe. Following the African phonetic alphabet, the ethnonym should be spelled Cokwe, and the people refer to themselves as Tucokwe (sing. Kacokwe). In this article the common Anglicized spelling Chokwe is retained. However, in accordance with the African phonetic alphabet, the sound "ch" is transcribed as "c" in italicized vernacular terms.

2 Franciscan missionaries are perhaps better remembered for their anthropological and linguistic work among the southern Luba of Katanga. Among the best known of these missionary anthropologists are Placied Tempels, author of the influential "La philosophie bantoue" (1948; originally published in Dutch in 1946), Theodoor (Jacques) Theuws, who also published a number of novels under the pseudonym Antoon Bergeyck, and Servaas Peeraer, who collected a significant number of Luba objects for both the Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale in Tervuren and the Ethnographic Collections of Ghent University.