Bwami Mask of the Songola People



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The Songola people are the northwestern and western neighbors of the better known Lega tribe in the Democratic Republic of Congo. For the most part, they have borrowed the traditions of the Lega people living to their east, in particular, the rites and rituals associated with the Bwami Society, the group that regulates social and political life.



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The Songola traditionally live in small village groups. Within any community, a chief inherits his position on a patrilineal basis, and his close relatives have the highest rank.

Counterbalancing this hereditary structure is the Bwami society. This society has numerous levels and is open to all men and women. An initiate advances through a complex system of instruction, payment and initiation, achieving increasing status as they grow older. A member of the highest level is recognized as a Kindi, a social leader with great status.

The masks of the Songola are primarily used in initiation rites associated with the Bwami Society, and are symbols of the owner's rank within the society. These works of art are often associated with local proverbs and used in conjunction with dance, poetry and song, which are believed to give wisdom to the members of the society. Some of the masks can only be seen, handled or owned by the highest grades of the society, and because of the size, age and patina, it can be presumed that this is such a mask. The Bwami masks of the Songola tend to be large and elongated, with geometrically stylized eyes and mouth. They are usually white and black, sometimes with dark red highlights, although they may also be red and white, which is rarer.
These masks are rather rarely encountered in today's market.



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