

# Upemba Depression

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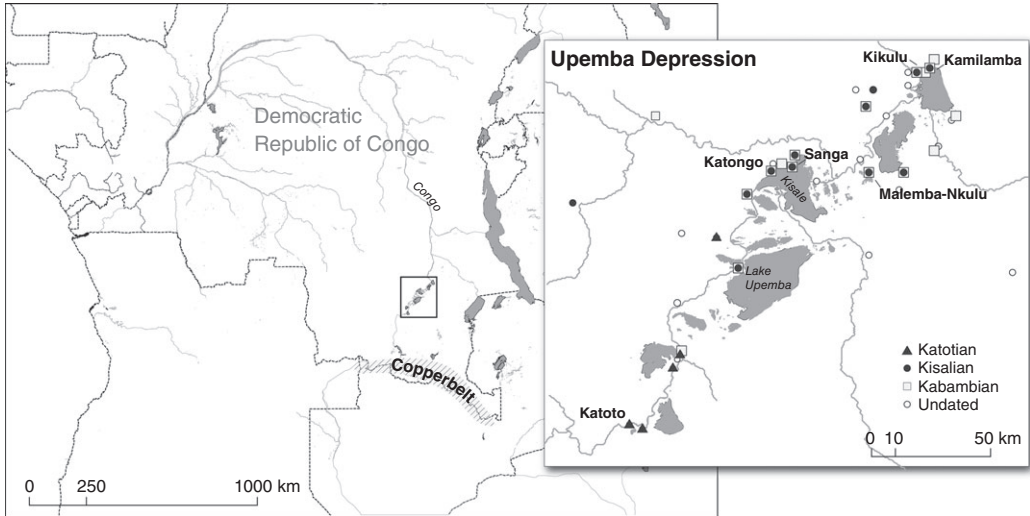
The Upemba Depression is a 200-kilometer-long floodplain crossed by the Congo River located in the southeastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (see Figure 1). Its numerous lakes, marshes, and small rivers are the home of a rich biodiversity, including large game and fishery resources that have supported the settlement of ironworking communities on the higher ground. Between the 1950s and the 1980s, several excavation and survey campaigns allowed archaeologists to identify around fifty sites and to excavate six of them: Sanga (Nenquin 1963; Hiernaux, de Longree, and De Buyst 1971; de Maret 1985; Childs and de Maret 1996), Katongo (de Maret 1985), Kamilamba, Malemba-Nkulu, and Kikulu (de Maret 1992) in the north and Katoto (Hiernaux, Maquet, and De Buyst 1972) south of the depression (see Figure 1). The excavations uncovered almost three hundred graves, one of the largest set of burials studied south of the Sahara. Associated settlements are poorly known, the long-term and continuous occupation of most of the sites having prevented preservation of the archaeological layers over a large surface (de Maret 1999: 152). The study of the graves has nevertheless allowed archaeologists to build a chrono-cultural sequence from around the sixth to the nineteenth century CE, unique in Central Africa. The successive archaeological tradition (see Figure 2) which was identified displayed the sociopolitical changes Upemba societies have experienced but also some continuity in material culture, from the earliest farming communities to integration into the Luba kingdom. The archaeological collections are curated in the Musée National de Lubumbashi, in DRC, the Royal Museum for Central Africa, and

the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences in Belgium.

## EARLY OCCUPATION: STONE AGE AND KAMILAMBIAN

The earliest human occupation in the Upemba Depression is poorly documented. Some of the levels displaying lithic industry on quartz have been recovered during the excavations and one of them dated back to ca. fifth century BCE in Kamilamba. While stratigraphy does not display any major gap, it is still unclear whether this Late Stone Age industry would have lasted until the beginning of the Kamilambian – the earliest ironworking culture of the area – around the mid-sixth century CE (de Maret 1992: 204).

The density of sites seems to have been quite low, the Kamilambian (ca. sixth–eighth century CE) being only identified in a few sites in the north part of the depression. Unlike later periods, most of the materials have been recovered from thick occupation layers in Kamilamba and Sanga, while the single Kamilambian graves only displayed a few iron tools. These tools – including hoe, axe blade, and harpoon heads – and the grindstone fragment recovered in the different sites suggest that the Kamilambian population relied mainly on an agricultural and fishing economy. The Kamilambian pottery – characterized by decorations of comb impressions or false relief chevron – shares similarities with other ironworking group pottery traditions in the Copperbelt – the rich copper-bearing area 400 kilometers south – and northern Zambia. However, the absence of any imported materials – especially copper – suggests that the depression remains outside of some of the regional exchange networks that started to develop around the Copperbelt at that time (de Maret 1992: 217–18).



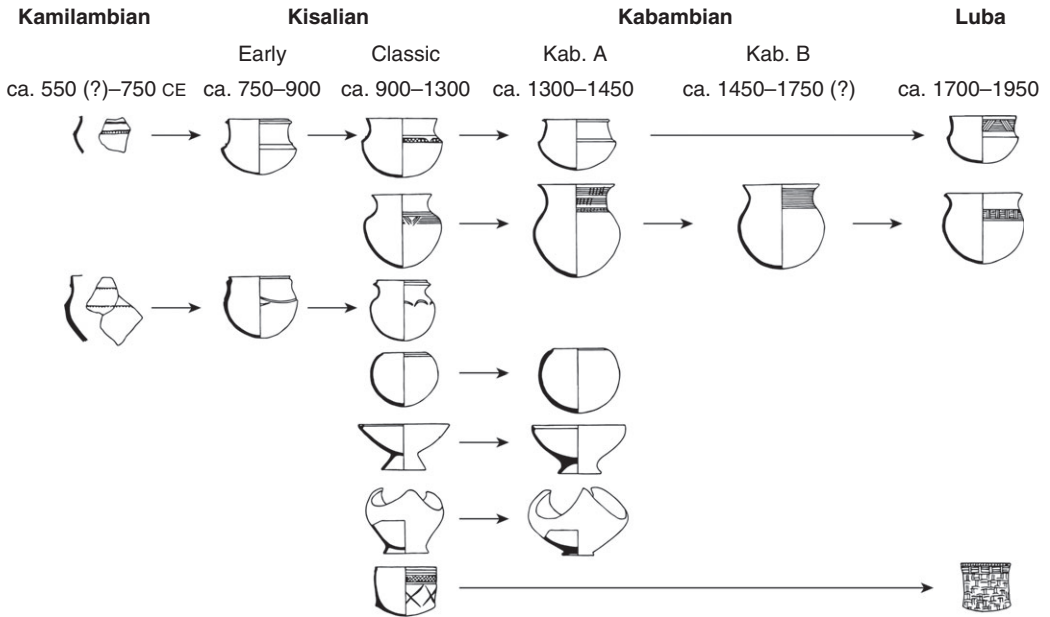
**Figure 1** Location of the Upemba Depression and archaeological sites and distribution of archaeological culture (Kisalian, Katotian, Kabambian).

#### KISALIAN AND KATOTIAN: THE RISE OF THE ELITE

The last centuries of the first millennium CE saw a progressive demographic increase and the flourish of two related, though independent, cultures: the Kisalian in the center and north of the Upemba Depression and the Katotian in the south.

Early phases of the Kisalian (ca. mid-eighth century–late ninth century CE) have been identified in all the excavated sites. The stratigraphy and some similarities in pottery characteristics – i.e., some particular profile, paste preparation, or the use of comb impressions for decoration – indicate that the early Kisalian arose from the Kamilambian (de Maret 1992: 159). Changes in material culture are, however, significant and, together with the funerary practices, reflect the transformation that Upemba societies were undergoing at the terminal first millennium. The number of graves, limited during the early Kisalian, increased during classic Kisalian (ninth–thirteenth century CE). While almost all of the deceased were buried with at least a few pottery items, some graves stand out for their wealth and the

presence of objects considered as status symbols. Some of the wealthiest graves belonged to children (see Figure 3) and women, indicating that females were playing a significant role in society and that high social position was, at least partly, inherited (de Maret 1999: 157). A telling example is the three early and classic Kisalian graves that contained finely worked ceremonial axes (see Figure 3), one of them also associated with an ironsmith's anvil (de Maret 1985: 265; 1992: 161). This is the earliest archaeological evidence of those objects that were closely associated with power in the major polities of Central Africa, such as the Luba kingdom. Two belonged to the grave of an adult and one to that of a child. Social position was also displayed by other unusual objects – leopard teeth, human jaws, ivory ornaments, shells (including a few cowries), etc. – and, more importantly, by the abundance of metal objects (see Figure 3). Iron was used for tools – spearheads, axes, hoes, harpoons, fishhooks, etc. – and for ornaments. Copper, considered as a precious metal all over Central Africa, has been found in large quantities in some graves in the form of ornaments. It was used to reproduce iron tools, such as



**Figure 2** Chronology of the archaeological culture and overview of the main pottery type in the north part of the depression, showing change and continuity through time. Source: after de Maret (1999). Reproduced courtesy of Pierre de Maret. © 1999, Pierre de Maret.

fishhooks or spearheads, though they were probably never used and only had a symbolic function. Some elaborate belts and collars were made of both iron and copper, using complex manufacturing processes (Childs 1991; Garenne-Marot 2019). The sophistication of metalwork production, and also of ceramics, bones, and ivory items, advocates for the presence of specialized and highly skilled artisans who were able to invest considerable amounts of time in producing elaborate artifacts for the elite (de Maret 1999).

Kisialian sites were part of growing regional trade, especially with the Copperbelt, from where they obtained the copper. In exchange, one of the main exports of the Upemba Depression may have been dried fish, as was also the case in the nineteenth century (de Maret 1999: 158). The few glass beads and cowrie shells found in graves suggest they also were connected to the long-distance trade with the Indian Ocean coast.

The importance of fishing – and more generally, of waterways – for the Kisialian economy is illustrated by the numerous fish remains and fishing tools – hooks, harpoons – found in the graves, as well as the trilobate vessels, usually used by fishermen as braziers for cooking in a boat (de Maret 1992: 219). In addition to fishing, a diet rich in  $C_4$ -based resources – possibly millet or sorghum – eaten as porridge has been suggested by carbon isotope analyses and the high rate of dental cavities, later possibly worsened among men by the high consumption of palm wine (Dlamini, Morris, and Sealy 2016). Some hunting and raising of small livestock supplemented the diet.

The Katotian culture (ca. ninth–thirteenth century CE) thrived around the same period as the classic Kisialian, south of Upemba Depression. Only one site, Katoto, has been excavated (Hiernaux, Maquet, and De Buyst 1972) and the Katotian culture is consequently far less known. Excavations allowed, nevertheless, the discovery of more than fifty graves reflecting,



**Figure 3** Two Kisalian graves. (a) Adult, buried with a ceremonial axe (1) and an iron anvil (2), Ancient Kisalian, Burial 5, Kamilamba, excavated in 1975. Source: courtesy of Pierre de Maret, 1975. (b) Two child graves, with a detail of the 2.5 kilograms of copper ornaments found in one of them, classic Kisalian, Burial 148 and 148 bis, Sanga, excavated in 1974. Source: courtesy of Pierre de Maret, 1974.

as with the Kisalian sites, a hierarchical social structure. Some graves were indeed remarkable, not only for their wealth and the presence of status symbols, including ceremonial axes, anvils, conus shells, etc., but also by their multiple burials, suggesting that sacrifice may have been performed after the death of an important person.

Katotian and Kisalian communities maintained trade relations, as suggested by Katotian pottery found in Kisalian sites and vice versa, and they shared cultural similarities, such as the use of similar status symbols (de Maret 1992: 189). However, Katotian and Kisalian cultures were most probably communities – and perhaps polities – independent of each other and showed contrasting aspects, not only in pottery style. The significant difference in proportion of long-distance trade goods is telling. While among more than a hundred Kisalian graves the only Indian Ocean trade items found were a few dozen cowries and four glass beads, almost 150 cowries, a dozen glass beads, and eight conus shells (*Terebra maculata* and *Conus prometheus*) were found in the richest graves of Katoto (Hiernaux, Maquet, and De Buyst 1972). Motifs imitating

conus and cowries were also visible on pottery, indicating the value attached to these shells that were considered status symbols in several places in Central and East Africa in the late nineteenth century. This difference between the Kisalian and the Katotian may have been related to differing access to long-distance trade networks. Alternatively, the Kisalian elite perhaps did not prize long-distance trade items to demonstrate their social position, preferring other mediums, such as copper, the use of which displays a wider diversity of shape and techniques than in Katoto.

Katotian people also had a different diet. While fish also would have been an important source of protein, their staple diet seems to have mainly relied on cucurbits, vegetables, and probably yams, and less on grains (Dlamini, Morris, and Sealy 2016).

#### KABAMBIAN AND LATER DEVELOPMENT

A subsequent history of Katotian communities has not yet been documented but in the northern part of the depression, the Kisalian

was followed by the Kabambian culture around the fourteenth century CE. Some graves and pottery, with mixed Kisalian and Kabambian A features, suggest a gradual transition (de Maret 1992: 167), but both material culture and funerary rituals nevertheless suggest that Upemba societies have experienced major social and political change (de Maret 1992: 223).

During Kabambian A (ca. thirteenth–mid-fifteenth century CE), the material culture is less homogeneous between sites than it was during Kisalian and the grave goods decline. Metal objects, in particular, are less abundant and less diverse (see Figure 4). Objects that can be considered as symbols of authority are much rarer, and only include a clap bell and a conus shell (de Maret 1999: 159). However, the social stratification seems to intensify, with the contrast between richest and poorest graves becoming sharper. The two richest graves, found together in Malemba-Nkulu, contained hundreds of iron ornaments and hundreds of copper cross-shaped ingots, called *croisettes* – more than half of the metal retrieved for Kabambian A – and dozens of cowries (de Maret 1992: 127–31). During Kabambian B (ca. mid-fifteenth–mid-eighteenth century CE), the grave goods continued to decrease and most of the burials contained only a few pots and very few iron objects but dozens or even hundreds of small *croisettes*.

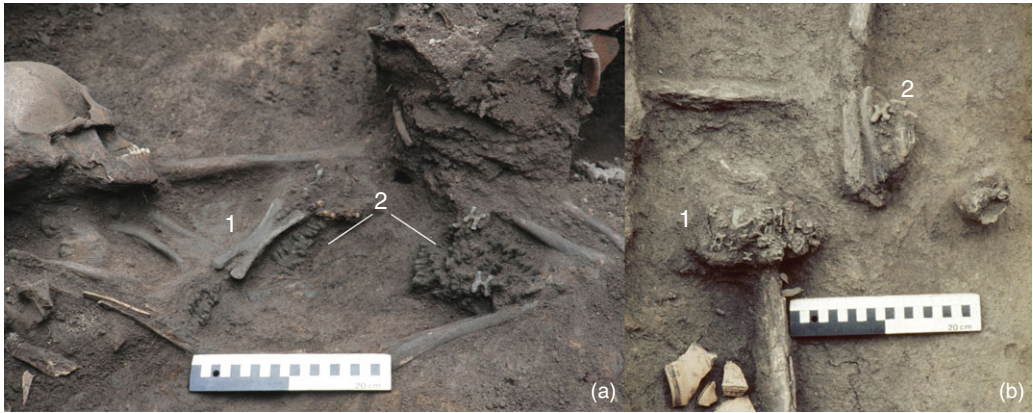
It has been suggested that the nature and location of power changed with the Kabambian and that the northern part of the depression was progressively integrated into a larger polity, probably the Luba kingdom (de Maret 1999). Pottery displayed the same manufacturing process as in late nineteenth-century and modern Luba pottery (Livingstone Smith and Vysserias 2010). The style evolved throughout the Kabambian to become very similar to Luba pottery toward the end of Kabambian B. By the end of the eighteenth century the northern part of the depression was fully integrated into the Luba kingdom (de Maret 1999).

During the Kabambian, the Upemba Depression was part of an extensive regional exchange network that was connected to the Indian Ocean coast, as shown by the cowries and glass beads found in several graves. Evidence suggests that trade with the Kasai region in the north was, by that time, well established but it is the exchanges with the Copperbelt that is the most evident in the graves (de Maret 1992: 193, 224).

The copper cross-shaped ingots found in the Kabambian graves are telling about the evolution of their use and the dynamic of regional exchange networks (Nikis and Livingstone Smith 2017). The larger *croisettes*, HIH, were only used at the beginning of Kabambian A, around the fourteenth century. They were produced between the ninth and fourteenth centuries in the Copperbelt and have also been found as far away as the region south of the Zambezi. Primarily used as raw material, their position in the graves (see Figure 4) suggests they gained a symbolic value, maybe as a status symbol (de Maret 1995). The smaller type, called HH, seems to have been more available while their size was decreasing and their number increasing throughout the Kabambian (see Figure 4). The same type of ingots have been found throughout southeast Africa, suggesting that the Upemba Depression was part of a larger economic sphere where these ingots acted as a general purpose currency, until they disappeared from the archaeological record at the end of Kabambian B, around the eighteenth century. In addition, change in copper composition between the Kabambian A and Kabambian B seems to suggest that a shift in supply occurred, indicating a change in the exchange networks around the fifteenth century (Rademakers *et al.* 2019).

Despite the major change in material culture and funerary practices, the continuity seen in some aspects of material culture, such as pottery (see Figure 2), suggests that the archaeological cultures that developed in the Upemba Depression from the sixth century CE to the nineteenth century were related to





**Figure 4** Details of two Kabambian graves showing copper cross-shaped ingots *croisettes*. (a) Details of an adult's grave, showing HIH copper cross-shaped ingots (1) and around 170 large HH copper cross-shaped ingots, tied together (2), Kabambian A, Burial 27, Malemba-Nkulu, excavated in 1975. Source: courtesy of Pierre de Maret, 1975. (b) Details of an adult's grave, showing around ninety small HH copper cross-shaped ingots, some of them being tied together, Kabambian B, Burial 4, Katongo, excavated in 1974. Source: courtesy of Pierre de Maret, 1974.

each other. More than a window on the past of this part of Central Africa, the Upemba Depression excavations are unique in providing a deep historical background to the major kingdoms of the southeast Central African savannah. They show that political tradition and some prominent symbols of authority of these polities – ceremonial axes, anvils, conus shells – arose during the first millennium CE. The increased social stratification is thus by no means linked to external factors such as coastal trade, as it has been long thought, but in regional development (de Maret 2013: 879), similarly to other contemporaneous polities in Central and southern Africa.

SEE ALSO: Agriculture, Central African forests; Cowries; Iron in Africa.

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