

# AFRICADAY

*"A human presence among all these, a feature on the face of our native land thus defined, I know that none dare challenge me when I say – I am an African!" – President Thabo Mbeki.*

The Campbell collections would like to celebrate this day by inviting academics, students and the African community at large in appreciation of its new collection of African Masks and other artworks. These African works were collected and donated to the CC by the Scholtz family with the aim of keeping them at home: Africa. Many books, and even exhibitions have been published about African art, but all of these theories have always been from a European perspective. Even the collection and display of these artworks can be found in European museum and galleries. The CC has been honored to house such a collection, hence today we invite you to appreciate this 'Suku Helmet'.



**SUKU HELMET**

The Basuku have lived in the Kwango area in the Democratic Republic of Congo for centuries. Their sociopolitical organization firmly believes in marriage and lineage links within the villages. There is a King 'Nkisi', elders and ritual specialists 'Nganga' who oversees the functioning of the village. The Basuku believe that there is a higher power whom they call the 'Creator: Nzambi Mpungu'. The task of keeping peace between the Basuku and Nzambi is given to the elders because they are believed to have the power to communicate with spirits. They maintain this relationship by performing rituals. This Suku Helmet is worn by adolescent boys during their initiation period 'Mukhanda'. This mask had been worn by their fathers and those before them, it is said that it represents and carries all his departed ancestors. During this time, boys are considered to be in a dangerous and vulnerable state, as evil forces could attack and even kill them. The mask then provides each initiate with powerful and safe protection as he transitions from a boy to a man. Sacred songs are sung during this process.

The helmet is carved from a tree trunk and painted in white chalk which is associated with purity and ancestors. The animal at the top symbolizes a spirit animal or a clan totem.

The Basuku initiation custom is very similar to that of Amakhosa from the Eastern Cape in South Africa. Before colonisation the initiates 'abakhwetha' dressed up in a reed costume that consisted of a helmet and skirt while the whole body was smeared in white chalk. Barbara Tyrell shows this in her painting of an 'Idutywa 'Mkhwetha' in 1948'. The belief about the costumes, songs and white chalk is the same.



**UMKHWETHA**

**Curator's View :** This worksheet is an introduction of the African Mask collection exhibition display that will follow up soon. The aim of the exhibition will be to invite African art scholars, Anthropologist, students, custodians and African elders to explore and share their knowledge about the artworks. As the Isinguni says 'Umtu ngumtu ngabantu'. Happy Africa Day!

*Curator: Miss Luleka Jakeni; Senior Museologist; Campbell Collection; UKZN*