

# Catholic king of the Kuba stops in Rochester

## Visit helps open gallery's art show

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Nwymi Kwete Mbeky III, the first Catholic king of the Kuba in Zaire, visited here last month to open an exhibition of Royal Kuba Art at Memorial Art Gallery, 500 University Ave.

The Kuba kingdom in central Zaire comprises 20 different ethnic groups and constitutes one of Africa's most renowned and distinguished civilizations.

Between 60 and 70 percent of the Kuba people are Catholic, while the remainder are Protestants and adherents of traditional religions, the king explained through an interpreter.

Prior to his ascension to the throne, the king noted that his predecessors were either Protestants or adherents to other religions.

Attired in elaborate royal garb, the king met such local dignitaries as Bishop Matthew H. Clark and Monroe County Executive Robert King at the gallery on Saturday afternoon, Feb. 28.

Dubbed "Kuba Family Day," the afternoon featured African music and dancers; dramatic monologues and dances performed by Black Expressions, a local troupe; and family workshops on traditional African themes.

The Hampton University Museum in Virginia organized the exhibit, which primarily featured the collection of Hampton alumnus William H. Sheppard.

An African-American Protestant missionary, Sheppard lived among the Kuba in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He collected numerous richly decorated textiles, masks, hats, gloves, footwear and ritual objects

**Where:** Memorial Art Gallery

**When:** Now through April 25 noon-9 p.m. Tuesday; 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Wednesday-Friday; 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday; noon-5 p.m. Sunday; closed Mondays.

**Admission:** free to members and University of Rochester students; \$4, adults; \$2.50, college students with ID and senior citizens; \$1, children 6-18; free, children under 5. Also, free general admission from 5-9 p.m. Tuesdays.

**Information:** Call 716/473-0350 or 473-6152 (TDD) for more details.

while living with the Kuba people.

The legacy left by Protestant and Catholic missionaries lives on among the Kuba, noted Nyimi Kwete Mbeky III on Feb. 28, and in a subsequent interview with the *Catholic Courier* on Monday, March 2.

Belgian rule of what is now Zaire meant that Catholic missionaries were favored over their Protestant counterparts, the king said, and the Catholic faith planted permanent roots among the Kuba.

"After the Belgians left, the Catholic Church continued to grow," the king noted through an interpreter. "Today, more and more Zaireans are going into church vocations."

Although he holds no official position in the Catholic Church, the king often refers to Scripture to guide his people, he stated.

"When the people understand the Bible well, then there are less problems with crime," he said. "Every now and then, I'll make pronouncements that we must follow the good words of God. It serves as an incentive to the people."

Catholic missionaries have established many schools and health facilities among the Kuba and continue to serve the area in which the Kuba re-



Nwymi Kwete Mbeky III (right), king of the Kuba people in Zaire, speaks with Candace Adelson, the Memorial Art Gallery's curator of European art. Adelson also served as the king's interpreter during his Feb. 28 visit to the gallery.

side, the king continued.

"The church in Africa has to play a great part because they are in the perfect place to help with health and with education of children," he said.

The Memorial Art Gallery exhibit is an education in itself. Several pieces of art highlight the Kuba kingdom's emphasis on the symbolic importance of each item of clothing the people wear. Among the Kuba, clothes may not make the person, but they certainly distinguish who he or she is, according to information from the January-February edition of *Gallery Notes*, the museum's newsmagazine.

"(O)nly the king may wear eagle feathers and leopard skins," according to the newsmagazine. "(T)he iconography of elaborate textile designs ... are not only decorative but also announce the wearer's status."



Natalie Rogers views one of the traditional Kuba masks on display in the gallery. The exhibit is on loan from the collection of Hampton University Museum.



The king of Kuba, wearing his traditional dress, is the only individual allowed to wear eagle feathers and leopard skins.



Maiwenn Raout (left) gets a closer look at traditional African dancer Lansana Kouyate during Kuba family day in the Sculpture Pavilion of the Memorial Art Gallery.

Photos  
by  
S. John Wilkin