in memorium

Léon de Sousberghe, S.J.
1903–2006
by Z.S. Strother

“Nous parlons de l’art Pende actuel...”

Léon de Clerque-Wissocq de Sousberghe, the author of *L’art pende* (1959) and many other important treatises, died on March 30, 2006, at the age of 102. He was born on October 25, 1903, at Conjoux Hall, Conneux, in the Province of Namur. Scion to one of the aristocratic families of Belgium, de Sousberghe wryly remembered a happy childhood hunting rabbits on the picturesque family domain. Following the chaos of the German invasion in 1914, his family sent him to secondary schools first in Paris and then on the Isle of Jersey. In 1918, he transferred to the Collège jésuite de Marmoutier in Tours, where he obtained a French Baccalauréat in Letters and Philosophy. Returning to Belgium, de Sousberghe began graduate studies at the University of Louvain and received doctorates in both philosophy and law, 1929–30.

The son of a vicomte and grandson of a count, de Sousberghe forfeited his title to join the Jesuits in 1930. He achieved his lifelong desire of being ordained as a Catholic priest in August 1936. His younger sister, Anne, showed a similar dedication and joined a congregation of cloistered nuns in London. De Sousberghe spent two years teaching constitutional law and social legislation at the Institut supérieur de commerce St. Ignace in Antwerp before war once again intervened. In 1939, he was mobilized as a military chaplain. Assigned to serve the Allied troops because of his superb English language skills, he was captured and interned as prisoner of war by the Germans.

Although de Sousberghe had long been interested in the formal study of prehistory and ethnography, he initially pursued philosophy and law, believing that he would be more likely to gain entry to the Jesuit order.

However, in 1950, his superiors authorized his professional retooling and sent him for a year of independent study in London with Darryl Forde, head of the department of anthropology at University College London and director of the International African Institute. Forde directed the studies of many leading Belgian Africanists after 1948, including Jacques Maquet, Daniel Biebuyck, and Jan Vansina (Biebuyck 2001:105–106). For such a mature student, the switch from law to ethnography was more credible, since prehistory was classed as one of the natural sciences. Following the year of coursework in London, de Sousberghe conducted his first field research among the Pende of the Belgian Congo, 1951–53, supported by the Institut pour la Recherche scientifique en Afrique centrale (IRSAC). After a furlough, he returned for additional fieldwork, 1955–57, funded this time by both IRSAC and the Académie royale des Sciences coloniales.

From 1951, de Sousberghe requested a posting in the Great Lakes region. However, his Jesuit superiors insisted that he be of social anthropology at the Université Ibéro-Américaine in Mexico. In 1963, he taught at the Université Lovanium in Kinshasha and at the University of Bujumbura in Burundi. In 1965–67, he conducted another two years of fieldwork in Bukavu among the Havu and Nyanga.

Many have speculated that the great anthropologists experience alienation from their home culture which renders them sympathetic to and curious about the mechanics of culture elsewhere. Although de Sousberghe renounced his family fortune in joining the Jesuits, his social position sometimes isolated him. It is probably no accident that he spent most of his adult life abroad before retirement. As a Belgian imprisoned among Allied troops in a German prisoner-of-war camp; as an anthropologist working among missionaries; and as a scholar usually berthed outside of a university, he never fit easily into any one community.

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De Sousberghe discovered that he needed to exercise a certain caution. When he presented his papers at Kilremebe, the colonial administrator asked if he wished to interview the Lunda chief, Mwaat Kombaan. De Sousberghe assented. Only later did he learn that in order to obey the official summons, the old man had been obliged to walk more than 100 kilometers in a few days’ time, in acute distress, suffering as he was from a scrotal hernia. De Sousberghe’s conscience never failed to bother him about this incident. In response, he decided to concentrate on kinship and marriage, issues that seemed inoffensive but which were engaging so many anthropologists of this period.

The mature statement of this work is Les Pende (1963). The culmination of his comparative work on definitions of incest appears in Don et contredon de la vie (1986) for which he won the Georges Bruel Prize of the Académie des Sciences d’Outre-Mer at the age of eighty-two.

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It can be inspirational to realize that de Sousberghe discovered his life’s work at the age of forty-seven. When he arrived in the Belgian Congo, he hoped to build on his years of training in theology and law. However, the realities of working during the colonial period dictated otherwise. “I had asked to live in a village or in a Pende family as a way of learning the language. But Jesuit superiors ordered that I had to live in a Mission-house and wear a [white] cassock … The most painful restriction was the refusal to let me live among the Pende.” As it was, he was only allowed to travel away from the mission after nine months in residence and then had to spend the night in one of the rest houses established by the colonial government. De Sousberghe never failed to regret that he was unable to take advantage of church policy, liberalized fifteen years later, which would have allowed him to dress as a layman and to spend the night in local villages.

De Sousberghe spoke often of feeling psychologically inhibited by wearing a cassock. He only broke the rule once, removing the cumbersome garment when he needed to “waddle for kilometers in the water knee-deep” to reach the remote seat of Mwaat Kombaan, an act for which he was rebuked. The Jesuits never forbade him from pursuing religious inquiries, and indeed his predecessor at Totshi, Jacques Delaere, published a Superlative overview of Pende religious beliefs (Delaere 1942–45). Nevertheless, de Sousberghe steered away from most religious questions, believing that his interest would be met with suspicion. Marked so clearly as an ambassador for the Catholic Church, he also felt unable to attend divination sessions.

De Sousberghe’s hopes to study the indigenous justice system met other obstacles. Immediately on his arrival, the Belgian Chef de Territoire visited his superiors and insisted that he “avoid political inquiries” that could revive old disputes about land tenure or the appointment of chiefs, warning, “We have settled the political situation for good.” Even when administrators were sympathetic, de Sousberghe’s faith led him to a respectful engagement with Pende culture, but he often felt himself to be the odd man out in

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Two sides of an engraved calabash used in the women’s Giwila Society of the South-Central Pende.

PHOTOGRAPH: DON COLE 2006

The rattle is decorated with several cruciform ideographs (khata) derived ultimately from Lunda funerary ceremonies, seen in the view on the left. Collected by de Sousberghe near Mukedi, 1951–53. Donated in memory of Léon de Sousberghe and Marie-Louise Bastin by Z.S. Strother.

Lodged in one of their own mission stations and selected Totshi, just west of the Kwilu River, arguing that the Kongo had already received much scholarly attention, whereas there was nothing comparable for the Pende. As a result, the Kwilu Pende became the center for de Sousberghe’s research. He spent the first nine months attached to the mission of Totshi, near the Shimuna chiefdom, studying the language (Kipende). He then conducted six months further research at Ngashi among the South-Central Pende, who are culturally allied to those west of the Kwilu. He spent three weeks visiting small chiefdoms on the left bank of the Loange River, several weeks at Kilembe, a few days in the territory of Idiofa (with the help of the Abbé B. Sheta), three weeks among the Eastern Pende, and returned for another six-month stay west of the Kwilu, this time concentrating on the chiefdom of Mushinya. The Pende language is characterized by great dialectical diversity. De Sousberghe found that each zone required significant linguistic adaption, since even the
the field. Although the Jesuits have a long history of supporting distinguished ethnographic research in the Congo (e.g. J. Van Wing, M. Plancquaert, Wautier de Mathieu), some of de Sousberghe’s colleagues resented his work. In 1953, when he took furlough, de Sousberghe left behind most of his photographs. He was horrified to discover on his return that someone had systematically destroyed his photographs and slides, believing that this work somehow undermined the Mission. De Sousberghe found this act of iconoclasm doubly painful because he was unable to reproduce much of his documentation of religious and architectural sculpture among the Central Pende due to the fast pace of cultural change, 1953–55. De Sousberghe’s experience was far from unique. Daniel Biebuyck has described the need to negotiate the “antagonism and even latent hostility from most of the European locals” during his fieldwork, 1949–51, in eastern Congo (2001:113).

Nevertheless, a community of art enthusiasts arose among the expatriates in the Belgian Congo during the 1950s, who became particularly interested in the Pende, located within an easy day’s drive of the capital at this time. Among the promoters of Pende art figured Governor and Mrs. Maquet-Tombu; Adrien Vanden Bossche, curator for the Musée de la Vie indigène in Léopoldville; Robert Verly, director of the Ateliers Sociaux d’Art indigène du Sud-Kasaï; and Charles Souris, an Agent Territorial who opened a small museum dedicated to the Eastern Pende in Kitangua. Moreover, a flurry of short articles illustrated by professional photographers made clear the vitality of the arts (Vanden Bossche 1950; Scohy 1952; Maquet-Tombu 1953; Mathy 1953; Kochnitzky 1953a, 1953b). In 1954, there was even a long series of broadcasts on the Belgian National Radio program “Anthologie folklorique” devoted to Pende music (Maquet 1954).

No doubt sensitized by this publicity, Henric Lavachery recognized that de Sousberghe was ideally placed to produce an important study on a living Congolese art tradition. Lavachery “pursued” de Sousberghe during his furlough, proposing that he should dedicate an entire book to Pende art and promising that he would help to find the means to publish it. De Sousberghe accepted the challenge and turned to style and formulated a descriptive project of documenting Pende art from 1907 (the time of Emil Torday’s collection) to 1957 (1959:2). Although he was unable to study law and theology in the field, one wonders if his training in these disciplines pushed him to greater rigor in weighing historical evidence. Although de Sousberghe made every effort to recuperate the past and was energetic in archival research, he seems curiously inoculated from his contemporaries’ desires to evoke a mythic precolonial Africa. He found it difficult enough to understand the present.

Although there were many important exhibitions devoted to African art between 1946 and 1960, L’art pende comprises the “only major work on the arts of a single ethnic group” (Biebuyck 1985:32). It is hard to comprehend today the novelty and scope of de Sousberghe’s research agenda. By 1955, only a few objects were attributed to the Pende in print (and not always correctly). It was no mean feat to untangle the distribution and history for the various arts when the corpus of masks alone numbered in the hundreds. Returning to the Congo in 1955, de Sousberghe kept his bases at Totshi and at Kondo, but took advantage of the excellent late-colonial road system to drive to every corner of Pende country north to south, east to west, to a degree unimaginable for someone working in Mobutu’s Zaïre thirty years later. On his return to Belgium, he carefully consulted as many private collections as possible, as well as those at Tervuren. As a result of his work with these collections, many questions arose which he was able to communicate in correspondence to Donatien Tukweso and Samuel Mulebo, who conducted interviews for him after his departure.

De Sousberghe strove for a precision that is simply unprecedented in the literature of the period. There is absolutely no evocation of timeless Africa here. L’art pende is a book brimming with dates. As much as possible, he tried to pinpoint when and where an object was made, who made it, and when and where it was collected. Refusing to over-synthesize, he
created an invaluable census of visual culture in the 1950s, including masks, pendants, divination devices, whistles, staffs, lances, stools and chairs, architectural sculpture, mortars, snuffboxes, adzes, axes, cups, wigged hats, and architectural and other sculpture. There is a fierce honesty about this text. De Sousberge will not bend the facts to submit to established models for reasons of ambition or political agenda. Although he works within the rubric of "tribal style," he acknowledges the artifice where neither the distribution of objects nor the distribution of styles conforms to linguistic boundaries. He reminds readers periodically of points at which Pende objects overlap with works produced by the Mpiin, Mbuun, Kwese, Mbala, Suku, Holo, or Chokwe. Moreover, he concludes that one must discard the idea of a single, homogenous Pende style and recognize a multitude of local centers (1955:10, 21–7). He writes that the style described so eloquently by Frans Olbrechts may be the "most original," i.e. "the most easily identified ... however, it is only a local style ... one of the Pende styles" (p. 22, my trans.). Finally, although he struggles to identify local centers he is forced to admit fluidity. He documents the acquisition by Pende of objects from different regions (e.g. pp. 23–5, 26). He must also confess that the development of local styles cannot be explained through kinship models (p. 10).

Daniel Biebuyck has written that "it is frustrating to observe how little of the substantial information (e.g., on substrates and differential artistic productivity with the Pende area) provided by de Sousberge has been incorporated into recent publications on African art" (1985:32). Indeed, Lart pende should have blasted the whole concept of "tribal style" out of the water. Instead, the exceptional nature of his work seemed only to render the Pende exceptional. Long dear to collectors because of its encyclopedic coverage, Lart pende should now be recognized as making a significant theoretical contribution to African art history. In Tristes tropiques, Claude Lévi-Strauss asks himself if future travelers will reproach art historians for having ignored the Kwilu, composed of groups of Pende, Lunda, Kwese, Sonde, Holo, and Hungaan, about which little otherwise is known.

References cited


