

**Chokwe Traditional Architecture of North East Angola**  
**Encyclopedia of vernacular architecture of the world /edited by Paul Oliver**  
ISBN 0521564220

Volume 3: Cultures and Habitats  
Section VII: SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA  
Main Entry 2: Equatorial and Central  
Secondary entry g: Chokwe (Angola, NE)  
Entry beginning on page: 2002  
<http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4415468>

Allan Cain (2018) 3.VII.2.g **Chokwe** (Angola, NE)

The Chokwe (or the Quiocos), one of Angola's most developed cultures in pre-colonial times, are best known for their sculpture and plastic arts tradition. This tradition is also reflected in their vernacular architecture and architectural decoration.

Belonging to the Lunda-Quioco ethnic group along with Lundas, Cacongós and Balubas, the Chokwe span three countries: they are the principal peoples of northeast Angola and the Lunda provinces and are also found throughout southern Zaire and northwestern Zambia. They are concentrated through central Angola as far south as the margins of the Cuban river south of Menongue. Years after independence and during the civil war (1975 – 2002) traditional forms of settlement were disrupted and the Chokwe and other Angolan peoples were forced to become refugees in Zambia and the Democratic of Congo.

The Lunda-Quiocos inhabit a region dissected by numerous rivers, tributaries of the River Cassai which forms the northeastern border with Zaire and empties into the Congo basin. The rivers and their seasonal floods affect the region's economy and settlement patterns. Chokwe agriculturalists who also engage in hunting and gathering activities such as apiculture are settled in the southern forested region. The people of the northern savanna region are predominantly hunters and their agriculture tends towards nomadism. Fishing is an important activity for the Chokwe living on the river margins and seasonally flooded basin lands.



Fig. 1 Habitat and granaries on poles (Redinha 1948)

The temporary forms of habitat reflect the seasonal semi-nomadism of certain subgroups of the northern Chokwe. The temporary habitat (Figure 1) is usually composed of demountable poles and components which can be transported and reassembled as required. In the northeastern region where the traditional river economy still prevails, the typical dwelling

is mounted on pillars on the rivers or on islands on the rivers.<sup>1</sup> Some units are elevated 1.5 m (5 ft) above the ground. The form is a half ellipse cut horizontally along its major axis with a small door of 0.5 m (1.5 ft) and about 0.7 m (2.3 ft) high. The floor is made of thick hard-packed clay on a framework of sticks. A ramp provides access to the dwelling.

Most of the Chokwe have broken with the traditional river economy and have adopted the standard rectangular shelter form of two or more divisions. The common wall material (*pau-à-pique*), is a framework of termite-resistant poles or building members made of cane twisted into small diameter bundles. The verticals are anchored in the earth and interwoven with split cane sticks or reeds to form a dense web which is then covered in clay. The roof is either pitched or hipped and thatched. The ridge is often decorated with ornate pinnacles.

Adobe and clay-mud wall rendering are well-known materials today for the Chokwe, despite the old Lunda-Chokwe's superstition that 'man only after death should be found between the earth'.

The round and domed shelter, usually no more than 2.5 m (8 ft) in height, is the original, prehistoric house form. It remains traditional in much of semi-arid southern Angola. Towards the north, however, rectangular or four-cornered houses with overhanging eaves or verandas as protection from the more abundant rainfall are increasingly used. While climate is an important influence on this change, European acculturation is also a factor. Some ethnologists have attributed the continued use of circular form today to a religious motif. The round plan, domed form *cubata* is still used as a menstrual hut and as a prayer house for certain of the animist groups. In some regions of the northeast only chiefs use a round house.

The largest structures built by the Chokwe are the village centre meeting places, reception halls, or *jingo* (Figure 2). They consist of high conical roofs often 6 m (20 ft) or more in diameter, supported by posts and walled by an open network of vertical stakes allowing free movement of air but affording basic visual privacy. Similar large shelters are used by village women as collective workplaces.

The house of the chief (*soba*) is usually noteworthy for its size and facade decorated with geometric motifs or ideograms the *lusona*, they are drawn around a geometric set of points as continuous single-linear pattern of sinuous lines. The *lusona* are



Fig. 2 Jango meeting hall (Quintal do Vieira 2015)

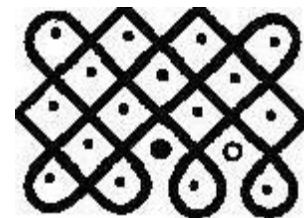


Fig. 3 Lusona ideograms

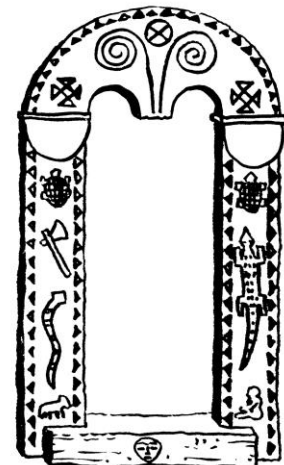


Fig. 4 Chief's carved door frame (Redinha 1974)

<sup>1</sup> Redinha (photo 1948)

a symbolic representation of the narrative of tales, proverbs, games, myths, songs, parables and sometime laws.<sup>2</sup>

The single access to the interior of the chief's house is covered by a large curved thatch brim and framed by an elaborately carved wooden jamb and lintel (Figure 4). The thatched roof is usually fabricated on the ground and lifted into place. The ridge is often decorated with woven grasses or reeds. The traditional settlement form is a compact protective enclosure with thorn hedges or cane fencing encircling two concentric series of shelters (Figure 5). The outer ring accommodates the heads of various interrelated families and the inner ring was for children and unmarried dependants. The house of the chief is located on the highest land in a favoured site nearest a water source. Next to the main gate are the small storage places, moving around the ring, thus forming progressively larger houses, until you reach the largest that is "the chief's house". The chief's house faces a division normally allocated to a nephew designated as a successor although the Chokwe follow a matrilineal succession. Likewise, the old regional chiefs live in the centre of similar but much larger stockade compounds surrounded by their people. An often complex system of passageways provides the chief with private entrance-ways and escape routes in case of banditry attack or war.

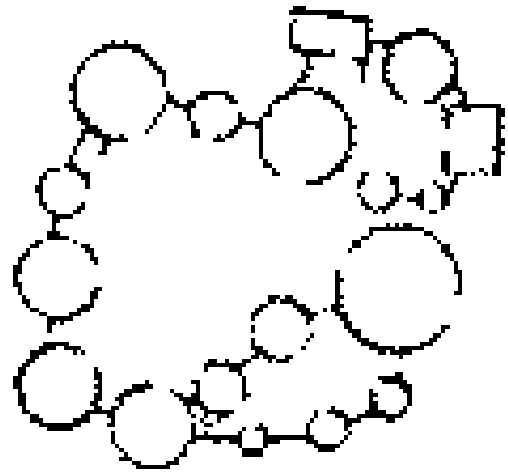


Fig. 5 Chokwe extended family compound (Cain 1997)

### See also

1.II.2. Economy

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<sup>2</sup> Kukalesa (2016)