Case 6-Afr-DR Congo-*N’kisi nkondi*-Statue-Female-Wood-19th c

*Note: The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo) has been known as, in chronological order, the Congo Free State, Belgian Congo, the Republic of Congo-Léopoldville, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Republic of Zaire, before returning to its current name the DR Congo.*

*Note: The Kongo people (singular: Mukongo, pl. Bakongo) speak Kikongo, a Bantu language, who have lived along the Atlantic coast of Central Africa, in a region that, by the 15th century, was a centralized and well-organized Kongo Kingdom but is now a part of three countries: DR Congo, the Republic of the Congo and Angola.*



Figs. 1-4. Congo DR- *N’kisi nkondi*-Statue-Female-Wood-19th c, with shell, fiber, glass and pigments.

Case no.: 6

Accession Number:

Formal Label: Congo DR- *N’kisi nkondi*-Statue-Male-Wood-19th c

**Display Description:**

This figure is a *nkisi* (plural *minkisi*) of the type known as *nkondi* (plural *minkondi)* from the Congo basin in west central Africa. *Nkisi* is a general term referring to spirits and the objects that house them. *Nkondi* refers more specifically to the category of objects were carved and animated by hammering nails into its body by *nganga* (ritual specialists), who would work in conjunction with a supplicant or a separate artisan. The carved figure (usually anthropomorphic, but occasionally taking the form of an animal such as a dog or panther) would act as a container, which would be animated and empowered by the insertion of a parcel of medicine (*bilongo*).

This *nkisi* has the physical attributes of a medicine woman and her medicine paraphernalia which is powerless until it has been activated on a particular patient. This *nkisi* has a classic BaKongo face with expectant glass eyes and wrinkled brow, suggestive of the serious effort being exerted. Its forehead is adorned with a cowry shell which is shaped like the womb and therefore symbolic of successful childbirth (MacGaffey 1988:192). The cowry is "*kodya"* in BaKongo, which evokes the word "*kola",* "to be strong", the exhortation of this powerful midwife to the mother-to-be, demonstrated by her protruding lips and everted nose indicating the need for labored breathing and bent knees suggestive of an advantageous child-bearing position. Pregnancy is also emphasized by a protruding belly which is covered with divination objects -- wrappings of rope, roots and a leather pouch, which also contains other powerful but unseen, hence mysterious, objects such as efficacious insects and snake teeth. All of these unseen objects are affixed with secret types of knots securing these hidden objects with their mysterious powers to her body and by sympathetic magic their power is extended to that of the patient. Her arms are at her side, showing attentiveness to the suppliant and are consistent with her well-carved ears suggesting that she is ready to hear entreaties. A small, beaded, white, shell necklace is encrusted with libations demonstrative of years of use.



Fig. 5. Three *nkisi,* two males and a dog, Boma, Congo, 1902. After http://www.randafricanart.com/sitebuilder/images/Nail\_fetishes\_1902\_Boma\_Congo-781x515.jpg

In the case of the this *nkisi*, this *bilongo* would have been sealed into the cavity on the figure’s abdomen. Once animated by the *nganga*, supplicants would drive nails and other objects into the *nkisi* in order to enrage the spirit into action for the purposes of vengeance, protection, healing, or dispute resolution. It has been reported that two *nkisi nkonde* could be hit together to achieve the same kind of spiritual animation. In other instances, *minkondi* could be used to sanction an oath; if the oath were broken, the spirit would be released to pursue the party that breached the agreement and to effect a psycho-social restitution. Reflecting this function, *nkisi nkondi* are often depicted in the pose of hunters, and the word *nkondi* is derived from the word *konda* meaning “to hunt.” *Nkisi* were never intended for aesthetic contemplation as they had an important psycho-social function and were meant to be used to resolve a specific communal purpose.

**LC Classification: NB1099 C6**

Date or Time Horizon: 19th c

Geographical Area: Congo DR

**Map:**

INCLUDEPICTURE "../../../../DOCUME~1/ADMINI~1/LOCALS~1/Temp/scl3.jpg" \\* MERGEFORMAT 



Fig. 1. Map of Kongo Cultures, West Central Africa. After Walker Art Center 1967.

**GPS coordinates:**

Cultural Affiliation: Kongo

Media: wood, iron nails

Dimensions: H

Weight:

Condition: original

Provenance: Kinshasa

**Discussion:**

This *n’kisi nkondi* has embedded iron nails (*nkonso*) which were hammered into its surface marking the incidences of personal encounters with other humans or spirits and concluding with resolution (Laman 1953, vol. 3, p. 86). The totality of these nails presents a remarkable testimony to the efficacy of Kongo psycho-social therapy, since each nail represents such a transaction.

Kongo figural protocol is predicated on animating the object in order that it will be effectively animate. One of the basic demands is that the knees be bent to signify it is a sentient being, which has been engaged by the *bilongo* or activating energy. This *bilongo* may also be seen in its gestural language to engage the client. In this case the figure has its right hand raised above its ear as though requesting the client to speak louder, its mouth is open (*bamuna)* as if it has spoken or is speaking and its left arm is by its side. Its eyes challenge (*mambo*) the client beseeching him with the power of *Kalunga*, the spiritual agent, demanding one to divulge the truth. Nails embedded in the figure represent strongly felt desires, requests for protection, requests for defense and empowerment each is sealed with a solemn vow or “tied *mambo*” (Thompson 1978).

The Songye regarded the *n’kisi nkondi* sculpture as spiritually devoid until it was energized by *bishimba*, a sacred “medicine” uniquely prepared by the village Shaman-Sculptor in consultation with his patient or client. *Bishimba* could be composed of animal, plant, or mineral components, such as a bird of prey’s feathers, a venomous snake’s skin, a dangerous animal’s horn, a predator’s teeth or claws, wood from a tree struck by lightning, earth from the footprint of a dangerous animal. All these things and more could be tied on to the sculpture in containers or pouches or crammed into cavities or channels.  In addition, the application of metal to the wooden surface invoked the awesome powers of the village blacksmith, who was associated with the powers of fire whether on the land or lightning in the sky.

The powerful Kuba kingdom ruled by King Kot áPe had the famous Songye sculptor-diviner Kongolo brought *n’kisi nkondi* to his court in order to ensure the king’s protection and well-being. Kongolo created a set of four personal *n’kisi nkondi* and a 1908 photograph, taken during the Hungarian ethnographer Emil Torday’s visit, shows King Kot áPe standing next to them.

The so-called “art criticism” of *n’kisi nkondi* reflects a lack of anthropological context. Kongo communal societies have not engaged in aesthetically designed works and this is true for societies whether they be Western, African, Native American or Eastern. It is pointless to refute those who engage in solely artistic critiques of these objects, since the two planes of reality, art criticism and anthropology, rarely intersect. A good treatment of this debate from one who is familiar with both sides and articulates the issues succinctly, especially with regard to *n’kisi nkondi,* is Henry Skeritt at *https://henryfskerritt.com/2013/01/04/objects-of-power-and-the-power-of-objects/*, *https://virginia.academia.edu/HenrySkerritt.*

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