

Community Power

Figure: Male (Nkisi)

Songye peoples

19th–20th century

[source: www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/310453]

This imposing standing male figure, about half life size, is the joint creation of a skilled carver and a trained ritual practitioner, or nganga (pl. banganga). Across Central Africa, such ritual specialists are major patrons of such power objects. The sculptor has divided the body evenly in sections that define the head, torso, and legs. Each of these remains clearly visible despite the materials added by the nganga to the wooden sculpture, whether attached to its surface, or embedded within.

The face has sensitively rendered features, with semi-circular eyes closed under arched eyebrows that extend on either side towards the jaw lines. These give the face its distinctive V-shape, interrupted by the short horizontal line of the chin. A brass plate covers the length of the nose, and organic matter fills the mouth, obscuring details of



the carving. An ensemble of feathers, hide, fur, and rope, forming an elaborate hairdo that cascades down to the shoulder at the back of the neck, conceals the top and back of the head. A heavy iron pendant in the shape of an agricultural tool, or hoe, adorns the long ringed neck. The body is a succession of articulated angular shapes, from the squared off shoulders and tubular arms to the side

of the torso, to the protruding abdomen on either side of which the hands rest, and the telescoping cones forming the thighs and calves. The prominent navel is topped with fur and brass studs. The figure's feet and circular base, carved from the same piece of wood as the rest of the figure, are wrapped in hide. Completing the figure's visible paraphernalia are snakeskins that encircle the torso and pieces of rope attached at both wrists. The head, arms and torso show a dark and shiny patina while the legs' tone is closer to the wood's natural surface. This discrepancy in the sculpture's overall surface treatment signals the loss of a skirt that would have originally covered the lower half of the body. When compared with the extant corpus of community-owned Songye power figures, or *mankishi* (sing. *nkishi*), to which this example belongs, it is unusually slender. Its fully-defined legs stand out in a corpus where stocky lower limbs predominate. In absence of collecting data for this example, and based on specialist François Neyt's 2009 survey of regional styles based on visual analysis, this example relates stylistically to the Songye central region, located around and south of Kalebwe.

Large-scale power figures such as this example

were central to the life of Songye communities spread over a vast territory in east-central Democratic Republic of the Congo, between the Sankuru and Lubilash rivers in the west and the Lualaba in the east. Acting as intercessors between ancestral spirits and the living, *minkishi* were intended to benefit the entire community and were not the property of a single individual. The creation of a *nkishi* was a public event (Petridis 2009: 85) that brought together the community, a skilled carver and experienced *nganga*. Chiefs and elders commissioned the *nkishi* and the community was responsible for cutting the tree selected for the carving. Both the carver and the *nganga* had to be well established in their respective professions. The latter decided on the *nkishi*'s features and type of wood to be used, often selected for its curative or toxic properties or for being associated with certain ancestral contexts (Hersak 2010:44). Once the wooden form was carved following standardized protocols, the *nganga* assembled the *bishimba*, powerful matter made of animal, plant, and mineral substances. The addition of this sacred matter allowed the *nkishi* to become a conduit for spiritual forces. According to anthropologist and Songye art specialist Dunja Hersak, and based on her 1970s fieldwork in the region, the *nganga* was responsible

for “bring[ing] the spirit forces into play with the physical world” (Hersak 1986: 118) and was considered the true creator of the nkishi.

Once completed, the nkishi was kept in a special enclosure positioned in a highly visible location, such as the center of the village or near the chief’s house. It was cared for by a guardian who also served as an interpreter for the nkishi whose messages were received through dreams or spirit possession. Collective consultations occurred following specific dreams or nightmares, and recurrently during celebrations related to the appearance of the new moon – an essential symbol of new life, fertility, and wealth associated with the human life-cycle. On those occasions, the nkishi was taken out of its enclosure to be recharged by the moon’s life-force. It was sprinkled with the blood of a sacrificed chicken and anointed with palm oil, giving it its distinctive shiny patina. It was carried in procession through the village but could not be touched due to its great potency: instead, wooden poles attached under its arms with raffia strings had to be used. In the Met’s example, the raffia strings attached around the figure’s wrists are all that remains of this means of manipulation.

Spirits of the dead, whether benevolent or malevolent, were thought to interfere in individuals' daily affairs. Mankishi were used for a community's well-being, assuring fertility, protecting against illnesses, and generally keeping malevolent forces at bay. Their commissioning reflected a fear that disruptive forces would damage the village's unity. Hersak states that mankishi "provided the assurance of continuity and oneness in the context of drastic population decrease and disintegration of large-scale chiefships during the last three decades of the 19th century" (Hersak 2010: 41). They represented a collective identity and could survive generations. Communal mankishi were given honorific names and their existence was remembered well after they ceased to be used. They eventually served as markers of time, as civic events came to be associated with the period of a specific nkishi's activity.

While significant political differences exist among the Songye groups, they are related to the neighboring Luba and like them, share the belief in a founding culture hero. Songye chiefs are considered to be his sacred heirs and two activities hold special status in connection with this mythical figure: hunting and blacksmithing (Hersak 2010:

42). Both are often referred to in the dress and accessories of *mankishi*, as can be seen in the Met example, through the inclusion of animal paraphernalia such as feathers, fur, and snakeskins on one hand, and of the large forged iron pendant and brass ornaments on the other. In addition, in reference to the type of *bishimba*-filled protective objects (especially horns, calabashes or diminutive carved figures) often worn by hunters, blacksmiths, chiefs and *banganga* themselves, such powerful devices often enhance *mankishi* as well (Hersak 1986: 120). Furthermore, attributes such as the elaborate headdress and raffia skirt, which the Met *nkishi* would have originally worn, are distinctive traits of leadership. It appears that these heroic images could be characterized as both power figures and ancestor figures, underlining their combined political and religious significance (Petridis 2009: 88).

Duality and opposition are at the core of a *nkishi*'s physical representation and function. Their human appearance and visible attributes of chieftaincy are juxtaposed with animal characteristics that emphasize their non-human otherness (Hersak 2010: 42). The *bishimba* ostentatiously packed in the mouth and navel of the Met figure give the

impression that it is overflowing with mystical power. The snake belts that encircle the figure's torso are meant to tie up and protect the inner body essence (Hersak 2010: 44). X-rays reveal that hidden under the fur and feather hairdo is a large animal horn filled with what is likely medicinal matter; two-third of it is buried into the head, point down. Its concealed presence reinforces the figure's wild potency. Analysis further reveals hidden channels running inwards from the ears all the way to the tip of the embedded horn, as well as the presence of a filled inner cavity in the figure's abdomen. Hidden by the fur that covers the navel, a long iron nail is embedded within and extends through the entire cavity (personal communication with conservators Ellen Howe and Caitlin Mahony, March 2018). These heroic images are highly visible but call upon secret knowledge, are both cultural construct and non-human entity, and are simultaneously characterized by openness and inwardness. Their materiality, function, and symbolic significance all attest to their complex and dual nature.

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Further reading

Hersak, Dunja. 1986. Songye. Masks and Figure Sculpture. London: Ethnographica.

Hersak, Dunja. 2010. "Reviewing power, process, and statement: the case of Songye figures". African Arts. 43: 38-51.

Neyt, François. 2009. Songye: The Formidable Statuary of Central Africa. Munich: Prestel.

Petridis, Constantine. 2009. Art and power in the central African Savanna: Luba, Songye, Chokwe, Luluwa. Cleveland, Ohio: Cleveland Museum of Art.