

Unswerving Power in The Congo
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Within the vast landscape of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Chiloango River region is home to a unique culture- the Yombe peoples.¹ This group of inhabitants is known for its *minkisi* sculptures comprising of a myriad of stances and functions. One such work of art, known as the *nkisi nkondi*, is the hallmark of Congo art as its nuanced and symbolic features create a compelling, yet intimidating connection with the viewer.

Standing at a height of almost four feet, the *nkisi nkondi's* imposing stature makes it feel as though the viewer is directly interacting with the figure.² The figure's hands are deliberately placed at the side of its hips in an authoritative, almost confrontational, stance that is essential in indicating the sheer authority of the *nkisi nkondi*. Furthermore, the white stripes under the figure's eyes symbolize the "eyes of those the *nkisi* will smite," which reveals the power of this sculpture.³ This, along with the *nkisi nkondi's* alert white eyes, stands in stark contrast to the surrounding brown body, which is key to attracting the viewer's attention. Additionally, the "piercing pieces of metal" puncturing the figure's body are perhaps the most prominent feature of the *nkisi nkondi*.⁴ These iron nails plunge into the wooden surface of the figure, creating a rough texture around its torso and contributes to the power figure's rugged appearance. The nails extend from the *nkisi nkondi* directly towards the viewer, so as to accentuate the figure's strength. Another aspect that symbolizes the divine authority of the figure is the two wooden blocks that the *nkisi nkondi* towers over. As opposed to touching the ground like the viewer, the *nkisi nkondi* is instead elevated above the realm of the living and the dead.

In addition to the threatening demeanor of the figure, the *nkisi nkondi's* role in society also exemplifies its dominance. The Yombe peoples believe that this figure embodies a divine spirit that is invoked through various rites and songs conducted by a *nganga*, or ritual specialist.⁵ An important function of the *nkisi nkondi* is its healing power to cure illnesses. This can be seen in the *bilongo*, or sacred medicines stored in a cavity within the *nkisi nkondi's* wooden surface. Comprising of a variety of "vegetal, animal, and mineral elements," these natural remedies underscore the power of the *nkisi nkondi* to use spiritual forces to cure patients.⁶

Another fundamental aspect of this figure is that it represents a specific category of *minkisi*, which serve as "effective hunters of danger."⁷ This power is reflected through the figure's role as an arbitrator. For instance, when accusations arose amongst certain community members, such as theft, both parties would "lick the spikes and drive them into the *nkondi*."⁸ Through the binding of saliva, the empowering spirit activated by the embedded nails, would be able to "respond to any broken vows."⁹ Therefore, each of the iron spikes that the *nkisi nkondi* bears, represents a unique instance in which the spirit was stirred.

The *nkisi nkondi* is a distinct, remarkable work of art that gave the divine spirit a powerful and authoritative physical form. Through the power figure, the Yombe peoples were able to witness the presence of this divine spirit with which they could interact with and seek guidance from.

¹ Roslyn A. Walker, *The Arts of Africa at The Dallas Museum of Art* (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art, 2010), 160.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Suzanne Blier, *Royal Arts of Africa: The Majesty of Form* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2012), 226.

⁵ Alisa Lagamma, *Kongo: Power and Majesty* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2015), 55.

⁶ Walker, 160.

⁷ Blier, 225.

⁸ Wyatt MacGaffey, "Complexity, Astonishment and Power: The Visual Vocabulary of Kongo Minkisi," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 14, no. 2 (1988): 201.

⁹ Blier, 226.