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Editorial

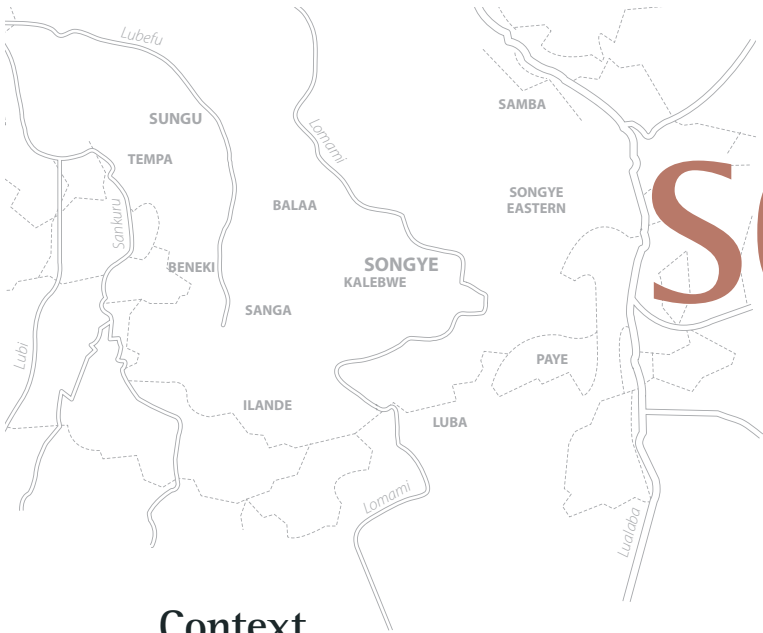
2013 is over (drum roll) for the Paris and New York auctions, which brought in several records with pieces acquired by important museums, notably the Songye statue from the Stone collection purchased by the Dallas Museum of Art.

A museum will also be bringing the spotlight to the 2014 Brafa, the year's first international fair, with the Tervuren museum chosen as guest of honour. This year, the fair will welcome eight tribal art dealers. This winter's Bruneaf is also ready to go, bringing to the Sablon no fewer than 30 specialist vendors.

For these two fairs, I plan to offer several key objects. Centered on a Songye statue first presented at the Olbrecht Kunst van Kongo exhibition in Antwerp in 1937 will be about 30 works chosen for their provenance and their remarkable artistic qualities.

Didier Claes





SONGYE

statue

Context

The SONGYE live in the east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, mostly in the eastern Kasai, in Katanga, as well as in a small part of Kivu.

Their enormous territory is cut in two from the north to the south by the Lomami, separating the great western chiefdoms – such as the Tempa, the Eki, the Kalebwe, the Bala, the Tshofwa, and the Ilande – from the smaller groups known collectively as the EASTERN SONGYE but who are in fact the only ones to describe themselves using the term SONGYE.

This sculptures exhibits the style from the center of SONGYE territory, probably KALEBWE. Anthropomorphic, this *nkisi* statue is above all a *bwanga* (power object) into the cavity of which the *nganga* (ritualist) would place *bishimba* (a mixture of ingredients). He would also fill the horn attached to the top of the head.

Despite its moderate size, the great quality of the sculpture and the careful choice of its added elements indicate that this figure was probably for collective use, either for the protection of a large family or else an entire village community.

Communal *mankisi* (the plural of *nkisi*) were stored in a sanctuary usually in the center of the village and overseen by a guardian, either an old man or old woman. Alerted by signs or dreams, these guardians would decide the time and the type of rituals in which the statues would be used. Additionally, the power of the statues might be reactivated by ritual at every new moon.

Removed from the sanctuary, they were placed on a chieftain's chair then carried in procession through the village with the help of poles placed under their arms.

The sculpture's great quality and the careful choice of its added elements indicate that this figure was probably for collective use.

Description

This statue is incomperably well-preserved, highlighting the powerful visual impact these figures would have had when they appeared during rituals.

The hard wood offers a veined texture with a light red patina linked to pigments still visible in the etched motifs (around the eyes, the lines of the beard). An antelope horn and an iron hoe blade are fixed to the top of the head covered by a fur hood (civet?). A metallic veneer of hammered copper-alloy leaves cover the forehead, nose, and temples. Upholsterer's tacks in steel underline the geometric motif of the face and body of the statue. The neck is decorated with a collar in three rows of blue glass beads from which hang two bead pendants and a small iron knife with a wood handle. The lower part of the sculpture is hidden by a woven raffia skirt to which is attached a small "apron" in fur (leopard?).

All these accessories are also erudite references evoking directly or indirectly, the properties and scope of each statue. Dunja Hersak notes the connection between certain communal *nkisi* and large ancestral figures, explaining link between the figure and the chief of the lineage through the use of blue beads, a pleated raffia skirt, the attributes of powerful animals, and the omnipresence of metal.

History

This sculpture was in the exposition held at the Antwerp Festival Hall in 1937–1938.

Archive photographs show an assortment of SONGYE statues, including the piece presented here.

In 1946, this image was chosen as the plate to illustrate SONGYE statuary in Olbrecht's reference work, *Plastiek van Kongo* (fig. 176). Above it appeared a photograph of this object (fig. 174).



← Catalogue cover and installation view of Songye *mankisi*, exhibition at the Antwerp Festival Hall, 1937–1938, from Frans M. Olbrechts (1899–1958), *In search of Art in Africa* (s. dir. C. Petridis, Antwerp Ethnographic Museum, 2001, fig. 46, cat. 38)



Old photos of the piece allow us to see that the sculpture and its attributes have survived intact and admirably preserved.

Considered particularly characteristic of Songye artistic genius by Olbrecht, one of the first and most brilliant historians of African art, this statue is an exceptional specimen of SONGYE MANKISI of the highest quality.

→
SONGYE *nkisi* Statue
Democratic Republic of the Congo
wood, brass, iron, glass paste, fur, woven raffia
Height 67 cm
John Lens collection, Antwerp (circa 1950s)
transmitted by inheritance
publication and exhibition:
Kongo-Kunst, exhibition catalog, City Festival Hall (Stadsfestzaal)
Antwerp, from 24 December 1937 to 16 January 1938
F.M. Olbrechts, *Plastiek van Kongo*, 1946, fig. 174, pl. XXXVI





MAHONGWE

reliquary

from the collection of Prince Sadruddin Khan

The MAHONGWE live in Gabon and neighbouring areas of Congo-Brazzaville in a region of dense rainforest between the Invido valleys and those of the Lébangou-Likouala and the Lékona. The territories are centered on Mékambo in Gabon and Kéllé in Congo.

Relic worship is known by the MAHONGWE and their neighbours in the KOTA region as *bwete* so that reliquary guardian figures were the "faces" of the *bwete*.

These ancient sculpted figures (*boho-na-bwete*), consisting of a slender wooden center decorated with fine blades of copper and brass, measure between 25 and 70 cm. The domed face with a rectilinear lower edge, extremely thin, shows a slightly concave surface. Decoration consists of delicate parallel metallic blades arranged perpendicularly to a vertical plaque representing the forehead. This plaque has a repoussé décor: a central dotted line and double arches over the hemispherical cabochon eyes. Specific to this kind of figure is the motif of multiple arched metallic wires above the eyes extending down either side of the nose – made from a triangular piece of forged metal – which then spread at an angle across the lower section.

Above the face, an ornate protruding metallic spiral represents the upper part of the tressed hairstyle (*ibenda*) once worn by *kani* notables. The hairstyle is further evoked at the back of the sculpture by a central groove widening at the bottom.

The neck of the figure was broken just above the diamond-shaped base, the central opening in which allowed the effigy to be attached to the basket with rope and twine made of vegetable fibre.

It appears that MAHONGWE figures were associated in twos and threes with reliquary baskets, with one "large" figure of 50 to 70 cm and one or two "small" pieces, of 25 to 30 cm. The main figure represented the reliquary's founder (the chief of a clan or important lineage) and the others represented secondary or allied notables.

On the small figures, as seen here, the decoration is made of even finer blades, with beautiful results. They are also generally less "calibrated", the sculptor being allowed more freedom to follow his inspiration. The rear of this figure for example shows a perhaps unique feature, one never mentioned in the literature: blades fixed at different heights in chevrons that cover the head.

The corpus of MAHONGWE reliquary figures is estimated by Louis Perrois at approximately 200 pieces, all dating from the first half of the 19th century (before the final migration of this people towards the north, which resulted in a loss of knowledge among blacksmiths). Sculpted in a soft, alterable wood, they carry evidence of their forced abandonment in the middle of the 20th century under pressure first from Catholic missionaries and then from a Congolese prophet promoting an iconoclastic cult.

Much sought after today by all the top collectors, These refined objects are evidence of the care which the Kota treated the relics of their ancestors, offering them exquisite figures as guardians.

The rear of this figure shows a perhaps unique feature, never mentioned in the literature: blades fixed at different heights in chevrons that cover the head.



→
MAHONGWE Reliquary
Gabon
wood, copper alloy wires and plaques
height 27 cm
Jacques Kerchache collection
Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan collection (1933–2003)
Armand and Conice Arman collection
publication and exposition :
African Faces, African Figures. The Arman Collection
Catalog for traveling exhibition, Europe/United States, 1996–1997
New York, Museum for African Art, 1997, fig. 94



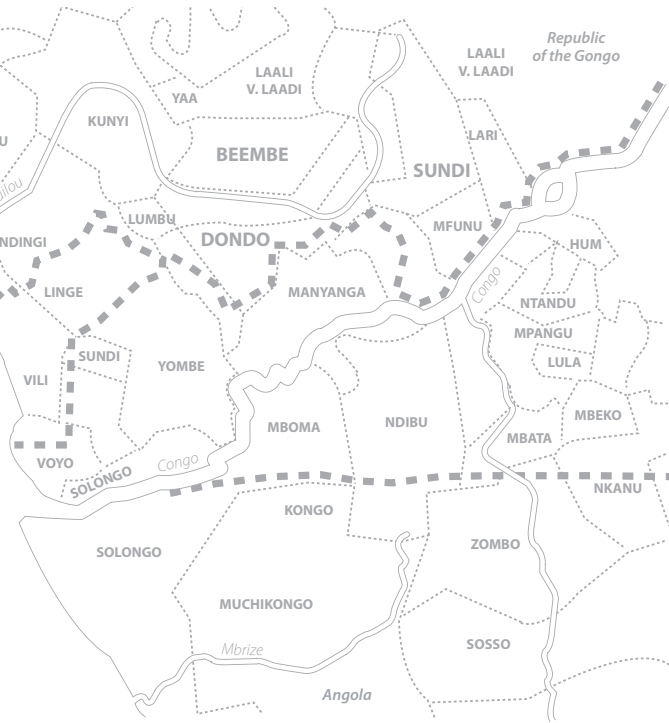
KONGO

statuette

In the 14th century, the ancient kingdom of KONGO united lower Congo (DRC), the Cabinda region, and northwestern Angola.

The Bakongo influenced the Beembe, the Vili, the Sundi, the Yombe, and the Dondo, who all, at some time in their history, were integrated into this kingdom and handled the same themes: maternity, seated kings, objects of prestige, nail fetishes, etc.

Nkisi figures are among the most powerful pieces of KONGO statuary. They are often anthropomorphic and sometimes zoomorphic, such as the dog we present here. Called Koso, the animal would have functioned as an intermediary between the living and the dead, and would have had visionary power suggested by his painted glass eyes. Like other *nkisi*, this one also carries a magic cargo, albeit a particularly discrete one, a rectangular orifice carved into the back. The crusty patina which covers the entire sculpture makes it hard to tell if the cavity is closed with a small wooden cover or completely filled with sacrificial materials. The surface, which makes the shallow depression barely visible, nullifies any hypothesis of a larger cargo (*bilongo*) having previously been fixed to the same spot.



LEGA

mask

LEGA masks are among the many objects associated with Bwami initiation. Depending on the material, Their dimensions, and their shape, this institution classed them in five categories, each belonging to the uppermost ranks of the society.

According to Daniel P. Biebuyck, large *idimu* masks such as this one are associated with the *yananio* and *kindi* ranks. Generally of koalin-covered wood, they were sometimes sculpted in ivory, as recalled by the honey colour of the specimen we present here.

Kept in a collective basket, the *idimu* mask was, in its most common use, suspended from a rack among very similar but smaller – privately owned – *lukwakongo* masks. The large mask represented the founder of the lineage or an important deceased initiate, both of whom would have been respected by the group as an ancestor. Rarely worn over the face, and indeed more of a sculptured head than a mask, this piece has the heart shape characteristic of the LEGA.

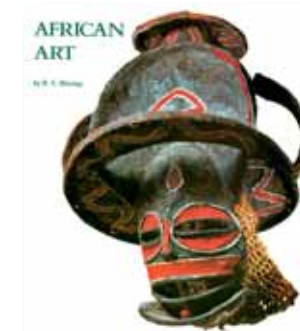
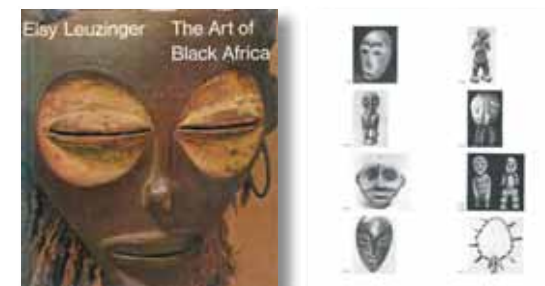
“[...] only important deceased initiates acquired, through the treatment of their skulls and through the symbols of masks, the fullness of immortality, and thus a certain holiness.”

Viviane Baeke
« À la recherche du sens du bwami », in *Anthropos*, p. 51



↑
Lega *idimu* mask
Democratic Republic of the Congo
wood, kaolin (traces)
height 23 cm
Max & Berthe Koller-Emi collection, Basel

↓
Elsy Leuzinger, *The Art of Black Africa*
London, Studio Vista Publishers, 1972, fig. x9, p. 345

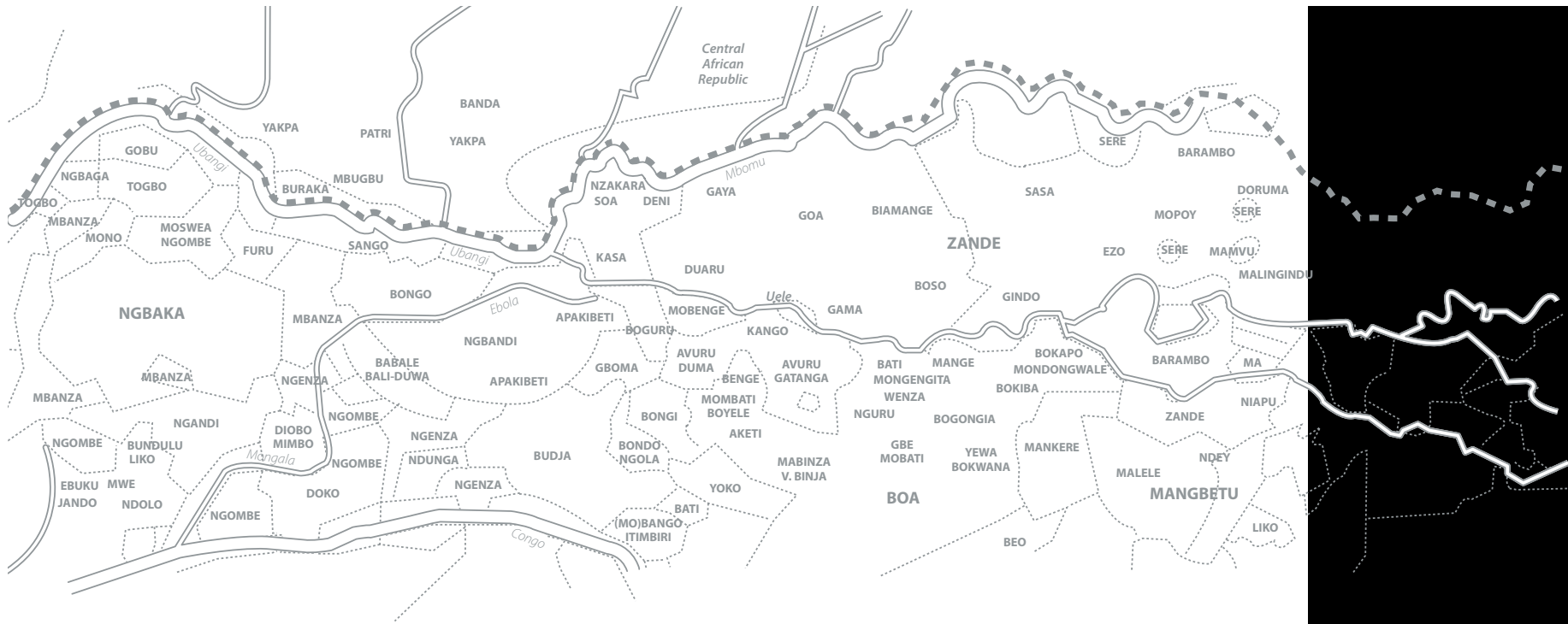


↓
R.S. Wassing, *African Art. Its Background and Traditions*
Leon Amiel Publisher, 1968, cat. 13, p. 235



←
Koso (Yombe ?) *Nkisi* Koso Statuette
Democratic Republic of the Congo
wood, glass, sacrificial crust, vegetable fibers
and textile fragments
length 23 cm
Robert Coulon collection, Bordeaux





ZANDE NZAKARA harp

This harp is a slightly unusual version of the instrument which the first Europeans to have visited what is now the northern Democratic Republic of the Congo in the late 19th and early 20th found so striking.

If this type of cordophone, called an "arched harp", has the sought-after anthropomorphic sculpted head, the hide stretched over the body also features an exceptional figurative pyrograph of two figures. Even more unusual is the bifurcated element at the base of the wooden sound box, on which the instrument can stand while it is being played. This motif doubtless evokes the sculpted legs seen on NGBAKA anthropomorphic harps. The style of the face, however – particularly the large pierced ears at the height of the temples – suggest a link with the BOA, who live to the east. The slight elongation of the head could suggest the MANGBETU, from even further east. The nose and the mouth, on the other hand, and the use of small glass beads for eyes, evoke sculpture from the Central African Republic, notably BANDA sculpture.

Indeed, utilitarian objects with an anthropomorphic head – including boxes, knives, and musical instruments – were common to a number of ethnic groups in this sub-region who for long periods influenced one another's sculptural styles. Made for use as well as for decoration, the visual aspect of these pieces was especially susceptible to stylistic variations and changing fashions.

This piece might also represent a transitional style between those of the eastern and western parts of the vast Ubangi-Uélé region, where these harps are used to accompany songs and recitations.



↑
An Azande playing a harp in Bafuka's village
EPO.0.2386, collection MRAC Tervuren ;
photo Congo Expedition Lang-Chapin, 1913
© American Museum of Natural History, 224095.

Very few five-stringed harps of this kind have been attributed to the BOA (private collections). The tradition was much more firmly established among the ZANDE, whose instruments had violin-like sound boxes, and taken up by the MANGBETU, who ran their tuning pegs along the right side of the neck. Both of these characteristics are found here. This piece might also represent a transitional style between those of the eastern and western parts of the vast Ubangi-Uélé region, where these harps are used to accompany songs and recitations.

According to some sources, among the ZANDE, they were the preferred instruments of travelling musicians (unsavoury characters often suspected of sorcery) but also sometimes of high-born youth, who took their instruments everywhere, and revelled in the glory of being accomplished harpists. Owning elegantly constructed harps brought them even greater distinction.

This secular rather than ritual context explains the infinite originality and the great liberty of expression that characterise these musical instruments, in which function and artistic creativity are masterfully balanced.

→
Zande/Nzaka Harp
The chronic republic of the Congo
wood, skin, vegetable fibre, glass paste - height 79 cm
private collection, Netherlands
sold Christie's, London, 25 July 1978, Lot 148





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