



NOVEMBER 2020

MOTHER POWER AND PROTECTION

Nkisi (Power Figure) | Early 20th century. Democratic Republic of the Congo.



Artist unidentified. *Nkisi (Power Figure)*. Early 20th century. Kongo region (Yombe area), Democratic Republic of the Congo. Wood, mirrored glass, copper alloy, encrustation. 10 13/16 x 2 3/8 x 2 3/4 in. (27.5 x 6 x 7 cm). The Baltimore Museum of Art: Gift of Alan Wurtzbarger, BMA 1954.145.65

This polished wood sculpture depicts a young woman sitting proudly with mirrored eyes, iron earrings, and an elegant high cap. At her midsection sits a rounded, mirrored area. She is a *nkisi*, or power figure, meant to resemble a young Kongolesse noblewoman. The mirror in her stomach area is a chamber which was used to store *bilongo*, or medicinal plants, and other natural materials, placed there by a *nganga*, a priest or healer who used *bilongo* to invite the spirits of the ancestors to infuse the sculpture with protective power.

The concept of a protective object may be common across cultures, but this beautifully carved *nkisi* is an excellent example of the Kongolesse expression of this idea in the context of the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans, the Kingdom of the Kongo as a matrilineal society, and the Kongolesse cosmos.

Between approximately 1500 and the very early 20th century, it is estimated that one to four million people were kidnapped and sold from the Kingdom of the Kongo, making it the hardest hit of all the West African coastal regions. The resulting depopulation and trauma had an important effect on art-making. Prior to the 16th century, most *minkisi* (plural of *nkisi*) were simply *bilongo* wrapped in cloth, but with the advent of the transatlantic slave trade, figurative images became holders of the *bilongo* and the associated powers of healing and protection, reflecting the deep concern for the safety of one's body.

As a matrilineal society, the protruding chamber for the *bilongo* is also significant—recalling the belly of a pregnant woman. The power of women to give life was greatly honored in this matrilineal society where social identity was determined by kinship in the women's line of the family. Also, as part of a civilization devastated by the transatlantic slave trade, women's ability to produce life was literally essential in the continued existence of their communities.

In Kongolesse belief, the living and the ancestors interact, as they do when the ancestors empower the *nkisi*. The mirrored chamber in the belly area of this sculpture also evokes the shimmering body of water believed to separate the domains of the living and the ancestors. The mirrored eyes and stomach area would have reflected light in the interior of the *nganga's* home where the power figure would have been stored when not in use.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

Invite your students to examine and discuss this *nkisi* in the context of the information provided in this resource. Another kind of *nkisi* is a *nkisi n'kondi* (*mangaaka*) which emerged in the early 19th century when the trade of enslaved Africans continued to decimate the Kingdom of the Kongo. Large (up to 4 feet tall) and often embedded with nails, these were intended to play a more aggressively protective role for their communities. Have your students research these *minkisi* (plural of *nkisi*) and compare and contrast them, and their particular contexts, to the *nkisi* here. Why might such a form of the *nkisi* have emerged at this time? An example can be found here: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/320053>.

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