

# Kongo Nail Fetishes from the Chiloango River Area

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In the nineteenth century, ethnologists who collected and catalogued objects of art from Africa were not concerned with discovering the names of the artists or even their ethnic identities; usually, broad indications of geographic origins, such as "the Lower Congo," "the region of the White Nile," or the "River Uelle" were deemed sufficient identification. In addition, because these objects were regarded merely as documents of a mode of life inferior to that of Western societies, no effort was made to categorize them stylistically. Although during the first ten years of this century, French and German artists revealed the artistic independence and importance of African sculpture, scholars persisted in considering the works of African carvers as popular, undifferentiated art that obediently followed the laws of a static tradition. Later, the dissemination of information through exhibitions and publications led to the isolation, within tribal divisions, of certain regional peculiarities, local stylistic schools and, finally, individual artists.

In 1937 in Antwerp, Frans Olbrechts organized a memorable exhibition of art from the Belgian Congo (now Zaire) that included 1,525 pieces, mainly from private collections. From these, Olbrechts was able to distinguish a style shared by ten Luba sculptures, which he named "Style à face allongée de Buli," after the village on the Lualaba River where two of the ten objects had been discovered (Olbrechts 1959:71-75). For the first time, the work of a black African artist—thereafter referred to as the Master of Buli—had been clearly defined through a procedure normally applied in attributions of art from Western cultures. Other specialists proceeded along the lines traced by the Belgian scholar, and now it is apparent that African art appeared to be anonymous because of our ignorance, if not our cultural presumption, for these artists were well known in their native villages and often beyond, their fame lasting after their deaths.

Today, many specialists in African art are concerned with identifying individual styles. Richard A. Long, for instance, in a contribution for the Conference on Traditional African Art held at the Hampton Institute in May 1968, expressed his point of view: "Whenever possible we must construct catalogues of the works of individual African artists. The study is now at the stage where the study of Flemish and Italian Primitives was a hundred years ago ... At all costs, the denigrating myth of anonymous tradition-bound artists—essentially an inheritance of the teutonic Wölkertheorie—must be laid to rest. Beyond individual artists we must recognize ateliers, such as the Luba Master of Buli; and beyond these, circles, schools and regional styles must be delimited, each in scientifically established catalogues" (1968:9-10).

In this regard, I have examined the morphological characteristics of a series of fetish figures from the Kongo people of Zaire; my starting point was a superb exhibit in the Museo Nazionale Preistorico e Etnografico (Museo Luigi Pigorini) in Rome. These fetishes seemed to be, if not indubitably by the same hand, at least from the same atelier. They are of the nkonde type, bristling with nails and blades. The most common theory is that these spikes were meant to inflict disease, ill-luck or death on the enemy. Certain scholars, however, among them A. Maesen, believe the function to be more ambiguous, and they do not even exclude the possibility that the nails and blades may have been offerings of thanks for favors bestowed. This practice was apparently introduced indirectly by the Portuguese as early as the end of the fifteenth century, through the diffusion of crucifixes in the Congolese cultural area. One cannot, however, exclude a far more direct influence: the European practice of piercing portraits of enemies to cause their illness or death.<2>

The theme of lower Congo fetishes has been studied by all Congolese art specialists, and most exhaustively by Zdenka Volavkova in "Nkisi Figures of the Lower Congo" (1972:52-59). The figure was ordered from the sculptor, who left its completion to the fetish priest, or nganga; the latter made the carving active by placing magical materials in one or more receptacles made by the sculptor; sometimes, however, the nganga ignored the carver's provisions for these materials and thus altered the morphology of the object. In the case of a nkonde fetish, a further alteration is effected by the introduction of nails and blades. The sculpture is thus an assemblage of different materials, put together by two different people.

The group of carvings I have isolated as nkonde consists of seven examples belonging to the following museums and private collections:

(photos of the figures at the bottom of the article)

1. Museo Nazionale Preistorico e Etnografico (Museo Luigi Pigorini), Rome (**Fig. 3**). Inventory number 75909, 112 centimeters. Collected by G. Scardino, area of origin unknown. Acquired in 1906.
2. Musée Royal de L'Afrique Centrale, Tervuren (**Fig. 1**). Inventory number 7777, 114 centimeters. Bought before 1912, collector and area of origin unknown.
3. Institut für Ethnologie und Afrika-Studien der Universität, Mainz (**Fig. 5**).<3> Inventory number 2594, 109 centimeters. Collected by R. Visser in the region of Chiloango. Acquired in 1903. The name "Mangaka" also appears in the institute's data. According to H. Van Geluwe of the Musée Royal de F Afrique Centrale, the word indicates in the language of the western Kongo a nail fetish that provokes breast ailments and the vomiting of blood.
4. Linden-Museum, Stuttgart (**Fig. 2**). Inventory number 38019, 102 centimeters. Mangaka. Collected by R. Visser in the region of Chiloango. Acquired in 1904.
5. Spry collection (formerly from the Jan Ollers collection, Stockholm) (**Fig. 4**).<4> 110 centimeters. No information as to origin or acquisition.
6. Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago (**Fig. 6**). Inventory number 91300, 113 centimeters. Collected by W. D. Webster, area of origin unknown. Acquired in 1907.
7. University of Manchester, Ethnology Department (**Fig. 7**).<5> Inventory number 0.9321/1, 118 centimeters. Collected by A. Clave in the region of the Chiloango River, Cabinda. Acquired in 1898.

The fetishes are of hardwood and depict standing human figures, whose bodies are pierced by nails and blades. They have two large containers of magical material, one around the chin in the shape of a beard and one a cylinder in the middle of the abdomen. These characteristics are generally common to fetishes from the lower Congo area, but the constant recurrence of other morphological peculiarities suggests that this group is the work of one artist and one nganga.

The seven figures range in height from 102 cm (39.8 inches) to 118 cm (46 inches); this similarity is itself rather remarkable, since there are no more than a few dozen Kongo fetishes over one meter high. They have elongated, muscular bodies and broad, rounded shoulders; seen frontally, the silhouette forms a nearly perfect arc, accented by the slight crest at the shoulders, which marks the convergence of the front and back surfaces. Their stances are identical: the upper body is bent slightly forward with hands on hips, the head—face upraised—is thrust forward, and the vertical axis of the figures is slightly deflected to the right. No sex is indicated. As seen clearly in the skinless Manchester piece, the legs of the sculptures are short, slightly bent and spread apart. Large feet rest on individual rectangular bases, and the back portion is exaggerated. The anklebone is carefully carved (most visible in **Fig. 3**) as are the toes, which are slightly spread apart. Around the ankles of the fetishes in the Stuttgart, Mainz, Chicago, Manchester and Spry collections are thick rings carved in relief, those of the last two examples bearing the same engraved geometrical motifs.

The arms of these seven figures are bent at the elbow so that the hands rest on the hips, thumbs placed horizontally and turned backward. Just below the armpits are carved armpits that probably represent a double circle of fibers that have been tightly plaited and knotted to make the shoulder muscles stand out. The knot is in the shape of a figure eight. The figures' heads are large, thrusting forward from a strong neck, which almost forms a right angle with the line of the chin. The back of the neck arises from between the shoulder blades in a rounded swelling. The sculptor carved the upper back in slight relief, the bottom of which is marked by a curved line, and below it is a vertical indentation delineating the spine (**Fig. 3**). In the Mainz fetish, shoulder blades are decorated with an engraved geometrical pattern. The Stuttgart figure varies somewhat from the others in that the neck does not arise from between the shoulder blades, and the curved line separating the upper and lower back is divided into two half curves that are separated by the spinal indentation.

The heads, most visible in the Mainz figure, as it has lost its large resin beard (**Fig. 5**), are elongated with oval faces and low foreheads. The mouths, with their large, protruding lips, show filed teeth, and the noses are short, broad, and have well-modeled nostrils. In all of the figures except the Manchester and Spry examples, which have almond-shaped eyes, the artist hollowed out eyes in the shape of half moons in which pieces of shell were then inserted; nailheads covered with a kind of resin represent the pupils. This detail is missing in the figures from Manchester and Chicago, leaving round holes. The eyes of the figure in the Museo Pigorini are slightly different in that heavy lids create the half-moon shape (**Fig. 3**). The eyebrows of the carvings are slightly curved bars in low relief; in four examples, they bear an incised pattern. Protruding ears are shaped like a double snail and are perforated and ornamented with iron or fiber rings (missing in some of the figures). Each carving wears a cap that rises in a conical or pyramidal form, with dentate borders and engraved geometrical patterns suggesting the woven palm-leaf fabrics made by the Kongo people.

In addition to the sculptural characteristics I have just noted, the additions made by the nganga are surprisingly identical for the seven examples. The two containers of magical substance are not only placed in the same position but are of the same shape. In the two best-preserved fetishes—those in Chicago and Tervuren (**Figs. 1,6**)—the resin beard, which is attached from ear to ear, is completed by short strips of woven material and by long fibers that descend over the upper chest. In the figure from Mainz (**Fig. 5**), which has lost its beard, one can see how the resin was attached by a number of nails previously fixed into the chin. This piece was apparently no longer used after it lost its magical addition, as the area that was covered by the beard is not studded with nails. The same is true for the Manchester fetish; the Pigorini and Stuttgart figures, however, were pierced by additional nails after they had lost the fiber that covered their chests. The other container of magical material is a cylinder projecting from the abdomen, closed at the front by a large cowrie.

Another external addition that is shared by the carvings is a short skirt worn by all but two figures; it consists of bunches of straw that have been carefully tied and attached to a fiber belt. The Pigorini example also wears a band of woven material; the Spry figure has a double skirt of indigenous fabric; and the Manchester piece has lost its skirt completely—the color of the patina is different in the area that was once covered by the skirt. In only one carving, that in the Museo Pigorini, two long, wrought-iron bells hang from the wrists; their use, in this context, is obscure. <6>

The sculptures show traces of paint (in some cases, very bright colors), and once again, the colors and their arrangement are practically identical. The area above the eyebrows, the inside of the eye sockets, the teeth, and the bracelets are painted white with kaolin, while the cheeks and temples, as well as the armbands, are striped in white and red. Finally, there is a similarity in the type of nails and blades used.

In addition to these seven carvings, there are three others that share most of the characteristics I have described. The first is in the University Museum in Philadelphia (Inv. no. 30-46-2) (**Fig. 8**). It is 106 centimeters high and was acquired in 1930 after its collection in Cabinda. The head is seriously deteriorated, the lenticular eyes are missing their pieces of shell, the resin beard has almost disappeared, and the container on the abdomen has lost its cowrie. Compared to the other figures, its shoulders are flatter and the length of the upper arms is so exaggerated that the forearm is bent at a right angle to allow the hands to rest on the abdomen. It has no armpits, and the back is not carved in relief.

The second fetish, formerly in a Swiss collection and now in London, is 118 centimeters high. <7> Its stance is similar to the others, except that the legs are longer and nearly straight. The area below the knees seems not to have been carved from the same block of wood as the rest of the body. It may have been added later, when it was still in Africa, perhaps because that portion was damaged; in the course of the substitution, the proportions may have been altered. There are other small differences: the two anklets are placed higher up than those on the other examples, the head is more regular in shape, the distance between the nose and mouth is greater, and the lips are thicker and more prominent. Also, there is no thickening between the shoulder blades descending from the neck, nor are the back muscles represented in relief.

The third fetish was recently purchased by the Detroit Institute of Arts. It has no beard, but nails around the chin reveal where the resinous compound had been applied. The fiber skirt is missing, revealing three details that do not appear on the other sculptures: the knee joints are faintly outlined, the inside as well as the outside ankle bone is represented (indicated also in the carving in the University Museum), and the shin bones are articulated. Its facial features and headgear are similar to the rest of the group. The figure is 117 centimeters high, and—most importantly—it was collected in 1903 by E. Visser, as was the fetish figure from Mainz. Moreover, it has been identified as "Mangake Chiboke," <8> recalling "Mangaka," a term that appears in the data for the examples in Mainz and Stuttgart.

Finally, as an additional point, there is a fetish very similar to the ones I have described that was published in the *Annales of the Musee du Congo Beige* (now *Musee Royal de L'Afrique Centrale*, Tervuren) (1906:154). Unfortunately, the old photograph taken in the field reveals few details (**Fig. 9**). One can, however, see that the head is covered by a straw headgear and the resin beard is severely damaged, missing the hanging fibers. More nails were driven into this piece than in all those we have so far observed; they cover the shoulders and arms as well as the chest, practically hiding the figure. According to information given me by H. Van Geluwe, the photograph was taken by M. Michel in 1896. She believes that the carving was carried out of the house of the nganga and placed atop a case, probably of European manufacture, for the picture-taking. Unfortunately, the journal gives no information about the figure, and I have not succeeded in finding its present whereabouts.

By comparing the few reliable data, we find that five of the seven carvings were acquired between 1898 and 1907 and that the figure from Tervuren entered that museum's collection sometime before 1912. The Mainz, Stuttgart and Manchester pieces agree in their designation of the region of the Chiloango River as the place of origin. This river runs for a short distance in the southwest part of Zaire, but most of its course lies in Cabinda, which was expressly named in the Manchester documents; the notes of the Stuttgart and Mainz museums also mention the name Mangaka.

We can therefore conclude that the seven figures, which, judging from their appearance, were probably collected some years after they were produced, were created by a sculptor and completed by a nganga working approximately between 1880 and 1910 along the bed of the Chiloango River in the Cabinda tract. If one also considers the figure in the University Museum in Philadelphia, also from Cabinda and similar in many respects to the other seven, the fetish in the London private collection, and the example in the Detroit Institute of Arts, one may feel safe in speaking of a style of nail fetishes from the "Chiloango River workshop," consisting of sculptor and nganga.

Figures mentioned in the article



(Fig. 1)

Musee Royal de L'Afrique Centrale, Tervuren. Inventory number 7777, 114 centimeters. Bought before 1912, collector and area of origin unknown.





(Fig. 2)  
Linden-Museum, Stuttgart. Inventory number 38019, 102 centimeters. Mangaka. Collected by R. Visser in the region of Chiloango. Acquired in 1904.



3. MUSEO NAZIONALE PREISTORICO E ETNOGRAFICO, ROMA. 112cm.

(Fig. 3)  
Museo Nazionale Preistorico e Etnografico (Museo Luigi Pigorini), Rome.  
Inventory number 75909, 112 centimeters.  
Collected by G. Scardino, area of origin unknown. Acquired in 1906.





4. SPRY COLLECTION. 110cm

(Fig. 4)

Spry collection (formerly from the Jan Ollers collection, Stockholm) 110 centimeters.  
No information as to origin or acquisition.



(Fig. 5)

Institut für Ethnologie und Afrika-Studien der Universität, Mainz. Inventory number 2594, 109 centimeters.  
Collected by R. Visser in the region of Chiloango. Acquired in 1903.

The name "Mangaka" also appears in the institute's data. According to H. Van Geluwe of the Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, the word indicates in the language of the western Kongo a nail fetish that provokes breast ailments and the vomiting of blood.





(Fig. 6)

Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago. Inventory number 91300, 113 centimeters.  
Collected by W. D. Webster, area of origin unknown. Acquired in 1907.



7. ETHNOLOGY DEPARTMENT MUSEUM,  
UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER. 118cm.

(Fig. 7)

University of Manchester, Ethnology Department. Inventory number 0.9321/1, 118 centimeters.  
Collected by A. Clave in the region of the Chiloango River, Cabinda. Acquired in 1898.





8. UNIVERSITY MUSEUM, PHILADELPHIA. 106cm.



9. PHOTO ARCHIVES, MUSEE ROYAL DE L'AFRIQUE CENTRALE, TERVUREN. PHOTO BY M. MICHEL. 1896.



As I did not have access to all the objects, I wish to thank the various museum directors, who provided me with photos and data.

- <1>. In this regard, C. Kjersmeier's book (1935) is especially valuable. This is the first scientific publication dealing with African art.
- <2>. This practice, common in certain underdeveloped regions of Europe, has persisted into the present; the portraits, however, have been superseded by photographs, which are cheaper.
- <3>. In December 1971 this carving was handed over to the Institut für Ethnologic und Afrika-Studien der Universität Mainz by the Linden-Museum in Stuttgart, where its inventory number was 29633.
- <4>. This piece was auctioned at Sotheby's on March 26, 1973. The name of the buyer was found in Sotheby's price list.
- <5>. This carving was first presented by the collector to the Salford Museum; it was transferred a few years ago to its present location.
- <6>. A similar instrument was noted by Filippo Pigafetta in his book on the ancient Kongo kingdom of San Salvador, the first published on the subject. He wrote: "There are three main sounds used in war; the first ones are produced by drums ... the others are obtained by a number of instruments shaped like top-sided pyramids pointing downward and increasing their section upward toward the base of the triangle so that on the low side they finish with a sharp angle, upward with a wide one; they are made of thin iron sheets, concave in shape, empty inside like an overturned bell; they are to be beaten with a wooden stick; sometimes they are fissured in order to produce a deeper, hoarse sound, more horrible and hostile" (1591:20, tav. 4: translated from the original Italian).
- <7>. A photograph of this piece was published in *Afrique Noir: sculptures des collections privées Suisse, Musée des Beaux-Arts, La-Chaux-de-Fonds (Switzerland)*. Catalogue of the exhibition held March 27-June 6, 1971.
- <8>. This information was obtained from the caption to an advertisement depicting the figure in *Burlington Magazine* (October 1976). NAIL FETISHES, Bibliography Kjersmeier, C. K. 1935. *Centres de Style de la Sculpture nègre africaine*.
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