Bakongo/Kongo
Nkondi or Nkonde nail fetish
(The plural form is minkondi and minkisi)

Fetishes were protective figures used by individuals, families, or whole communities to destroy or weaken evil spirits, prevent or cure illnesses, repel bad deeds, solemnize contracts or oath-taking, and decide arguments. A diviner or holy person would activate the statue, using magical substances. Fetishes gained power and were effective because people believed in them.

The nkondi are the most powerful of the nkisi. They were used to identify and hunt down unknown wrongdoers such as thieves, and people who were believed to cause sickness or death by occult means. They were also used to punish people who swore false oaths and villages which broke treaties. To inspire the nkondi to action, it was both invoked and provoked. Invocations, in bloodthirsty language, encouraged it to punish the guilty party. It would also be provoked by having gunpowder exploded in front of it, and having nails hammered into it. They were also used to literally “hammer out agreements”...with clear implications as to what would happen to people who broke the agreements.

I currently do not have a Kongo nail fetish figure in my collection.
The information and images below are for reference purposes.
Click on any picture to see larger version.

Below is one of my favorite pieces.
It is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in NY
My comparison page I am working on
The link above will take you to a couple of pages I am working on that show bad examples of these figures and then good examples of these figures.

CLICK HERE to read about Minkondi figures in pairs

CLICK HERE to go to the article
Kongo Nail Fetishes from the Chiloango River Area
By Ezio Bassani

CLICK HERE to go to the article
"Nkisi Figures of the Lower Congo"
by Zdenka Volavkova - 1972
It’s an EXCELLENT article

Both articles have a lot of additional examples and information

I HIGHLY recommend the book:
Astonishment & Power - The Eyes of Understanding: Kongo Minkisi
by Wyatt MacGaffey

It’s an excellent and comprehensive resource.

Magic is practiced throughout Black Africa, but there are distinctions to be made among those who participate in it. The witch doctor is seen as someone who undertakes on his own account a personal communication with evil powers -suspected of casting spells, he is feared and rejected as the most dangerous individual in the tribe. The accusation of sorcery is a serious one.

The diviner, or fetishist, operates in principle for the good of all. His help is sought in times of need, for he is seen as the mediator between members of the tribe and all the powers of darkness. For this reason he also acts as healer.
The various attempts to influence the fearsome powers of the supernatural through the mediation of statues or fetishes have acquired particular intensity in the regions round the mouth of the River Congo, home of the Kongo, Yombe and Vili tribes, and this is also the case in the east of Zaire, among the Songye.

Magical objects were for many years little known in Europe, as Christian missionaries working in Africa tracked them down and had them burnt. Certain statues which were brought back to Europe by religious men, allegedly for documentation, were kept in secret and could not be studied. They were much feared for they seemed, even to European eyes, to have real power, a belief almost universally accepted in 17th-century Europe. Olfert Dapper was the first to look dispassionately at these “fetish” objects and to dare to describe them.

Recent work has led to a better understanding. They are wooden carvings, either anthropomorphic or zoomorphic, which are covered with a variety of objects such as nails or metal blades. The cavities in their back or stomach contain “medicines” - grains, hairs, teeth or fingernails - which are held together with various binding materials. Pieces of fabric, feathers or lumps of clay are sometimes present. Finally, bits of mirror, shiny metal or shells are used to close the cavities or to mark the eyes (fig. 131). Very often the faces alone are carved in detail, while the rest of the body - destined to be hidden under these various additional features - is sculpted more summarily (fig 140). The figure’s genitals may even be missing, either because they have never been carved or because they have been removed by a zealous missionary.

These figures have only a remote ancestral connection and they are distinguished from reliquaries by the absence of skulls or large bones, although some may sometimes fit into either category.

Generally grouped as Nkisi, they were the result of the combined work of two men, the carver and the fetishist. The former created the shape, but without the latter (the Nganga) the figure had no meaning. It was the Nganga who filled it with magic substances and completed the rituals which gave it supernatural powers.
Figure 131 Nail fetish.
Zaire. Kongo.
Wood, nails and metal blades, with assorted materials.
Musees royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, Brussels.

Large nailed statues, the "Nkonde" or "Nkondi"

All statues possessed magical powers but their roles varied according to their size. The largest, the Nkonde standing between 0.90 and 1.20 meters high, appeared at collective ceremonies and were pierced with nails or metal blades. More of these were added after each vow of commitment, in order to give the illiterate public a way of ratifying their action. The fetishist acted first to "awaken" the Nkonde with his touch - part of the surface was left of nails for this purpose - and then a sharp blade or nail was set into the body of the statue, to remain there until the contract was completely fulfilled.

The fetishist was primarily a witness, and an important one in view of his supposed relationship with the world of the supernatural. Woe to anyone who failed to keep his promise! The Nkonde, as guardian of collective memory, would inflict sudden sickness on any defaulter, or even bring about his death, but he protected the innocent. The Nkonde's face is always aggressive and deliberately terrifying; the mouth is always open, as if shouting a warning to the person making a vow. Was that person also required to chew or lick the nails? The fact that a tongue is occasionally visible may suggest this, although there is no concrete evidence.

In the presence of a Nkonde there is greater interplay of glances. There is the Nkonde's gaze, his metallic eyes seeming to transfix the man who takes an oath, and following him through space and time. And in return this man is held fascinated and cannot detach his gaze from the fragment of mirror on the Nkonde's stomach which conceals the supposedly magical substances, hiding their striking poverty and hinting at their power. Once again African traditions manage to bring considerable natural and wholly psychological powers into play, operating through the manipulation of relatively meager material factors.

Depending on the statue's attributes or regional variations - factors which remain uncertain - the physical attitudes of the Nkonde might differ. Those holding a weapon in their raised right arm (fig. 133 below) are the most dynamic, but the figures with their hands on their hips and with their beards of clay and resin are clothed in majesty. Finally, there are many with their hands set close to their navel, a possible reference to their lineal origins.

Surprisingly, some animal forms of Nkonde also have certain features similar to human statues. The Crouching monkey (fig. 134 below), with open mouth and eyes fixed on its human brothers, is firmly classed among the animals by his bent stance, long arms and realistic fur - yet this makes it particularly disturbing. Two-headed dogs have also been found (fig. 135 below). Each muzzle has the traditional lolling tongue. Their role, as with real living dogs, appears to have been to protect families and give warning of danger.

Professor Th. Obenga, director general of Gabon's international centre of Bantu civilizations, offers interesting details on the social role of the Nkonde in his article in Dossiers d'archeologie. He sees the nails as "nails of malediction". And, extending the debate, he adds: "The principal role of the Nkonde is to engender respect for the country's laws, to aid the reign of civic peace, to seek out and denounce thieves and to wreak vengeance on wrongdoers". On the Nganga (fetishist) he offers a soundly baed opinion: "These are skillful and intelligent men. Their historic skills, their extended knowledge of both fauna and flora, of the environment, the group and psychology, gave them, and still give them, powerful ascendancy over the minds of the people and over the imagination of society as a whole."
Figure 133 Sculpture covered with nails. Nkonde.
Figures like this one are called minkisi minkondi (sing., nkisi nkondi) and are essentially containers for powerful magical/medicinal ingredients (bilongo). Such figures are used in healing or jural contexts (Bassani 1977, 36; Isaki in MacGaffey 1977, 173; Thompson 1978, 207—8).

An nkisi nkondi is made by a sculptor and an nganga (ritual expert) working together. The sculptor carefully carves a nude male figure, an animal, or another form. Next, the nganga completes the figure by placing the ingredients that have positive or negative powers around its chin, creating a "beard," and in an abdominal or other cavity made by the sculptor. The iron blades, nails, screws, and, in this example, machine parts are driven into the figure during use.

An nkisi nkondi may be used for many purposes. For example, upon concluding peace between two warring villages, representatives from both sides would first take an oath before the nkisi nkondi, and then each party would hammer iron wedges or a knife into the figure and fire a salute. Or, an oath sworn before the nkisi nkondi would make a title search on real estate unnecessary because with the driving in of a piece of iron, the title to the land would be secured through the generations (Laman 1957, 159-60). Or, a blade could be driven into the figure to activate its magical powers.

This figure was obtained in 1907 from W. D. Webster, a London dealer in ethnographica.
134 Nkisi statuette of a crouching monkey.
(Photo: Musee Dapper, Paris.)

The small size of this statuette places it in the Nkisi category, although the nails would indicate an Nkonde figure.
Figure 135 Sculpture of a two headed dog covered with nails
Nkonde
Lower Zaire, Kongo.
Hardwood, nails, and iron blades. H: 67.5 cm

CONGO: Fetish, mixed media, 18th-19th century, Musee du Louvre, Paris

Smaller statues
The small statues, the Nkisi, (fig. 136) were less ambitious than the large Nkonde and were designed for the individual or the family. Never more than 40 centimeters tall and without nails, they often had a feathered hat on their head after they had been consecrated by the fetishist. The fabrics wrapped round them were covered with a crusting of red powder. As with the Nkonde, they had a cavity in their back or stomach which held "medicines" and magic substances placed there by the fetishist. These consisted essentially of white clay from the marshes, red clay used for ancestor worship, and tukula (sawdust from red wood).

These Nkisi were supposed to protect their owner's health and transmit to him the vital strength with which they were endowed. The owner could give them offerings to escape from difficult situations.

From "Black Africa" by Laurie Meyer
Figure 136 Wood statuette. Zaire, Kongo
H: 36 cm
Private collection.

With ritual cockerel feathers on its head, this Nkisi statue carries a load of particularly important magical materials on its back.

A Sotheby's piece
with information below
A FINE AND RARE KONGO OATH TAKING AND HEALING FIGURE

LOCATION    ESTIMATE    AUCTION DATE
New York  150,000—250,000 USD  Session 1 - 17 May 02 10:15 AM
Lot Sold.   Hammer Price with Buyer's Premium:  202,000 USD

height 31in. 78.7cm.

nkisi nkondi, standing on wedge-shaped feet and straight legs, with one arm raised and the other akimbo, the body pitched forward, a fragmentary magic bundle attached at the torso, the large head with square jawline, tapering chin and full lips, beneath the naturalistic nose and almond-shaped eyes inset with glass, and wearing a fiber necklace with magic substance suspended from the neck, the whole inset with numerous pegs and iron nails of various shapes; aged and weathered patina with blackening and encrustation at the face.

Provenance:
Probably Governor Vewhilgen, gift from Chief Nembao(?) before 1900, near Banane/Osolongo area
Musée de la Porte de Hal, by 1902
Royal Museum of Central Africa, Tervuren, no. 6685, Gift of H. Janssen
Baron Freddy Rolin, New York and Brussels
Sotheby's, New York, January 20, 1982, lot 257

Published:
Bulletin des Musées Royaux, 'Musée de la Porte de Hal', No. 12, September 1902
Maes, Fetschen of Tooverbeelden wit Kongo 1935: Volume II, plate IV, nos. 1 and 2
Lehuard, 1980: 44, figure 17

Exhibited:

Based on a letter from A. Maesen, then director of the Royal Museum of Central Africa, Tervuren, dated December 23, 1977, we can infer the probable early collection date of the offered lot based on the Musée du Porte Hal's accession records. A collection date before 1900 is further supported by the 1902 article on Musée de la Porte du Hal, illustrating this figure.

Lehuard places this nkisi in the corpus of Woyo power figures from the area of Banana/Solongo at the mouth of the Kongo River (1980: 45).
The figure shows an ‘oath taking’ gesture, with one arm upraised. At one point the figure probably held a blade, or baaka, an ancient kind of knife used for extracting the milk of the palm wine tree, in the upraised arm. The blade was believed to have the power to kill by supernatural means, and analogously, the word baaka as a verb, meant not only to extract wine, but to demolish or destroy (Thompson 1978: 216-217).

As described by Lehuard (1980: 135), the unusual black face, is seen less often than red or white pigment on nkisi. While white pigment is symbolic of death, black depicts life. Black is also the color that mourners (principally women) coat themselves with to show that the deceased has not died, but rather their passing has changed the way of life. The pigment is made from the ashes of a family’s hearth mixed with palm wine oil.

A Superb Kongo Oath-taking and Healing Figure,
the powerfully sculpted figure standing with each foot supported on an individual rectangular base, the left hand held to the hip and the right hand
raised originally holding a spear, now missing, the sensitively carved up-tilted face with large oval eyes, each inset with a glass plaquette, each eye
also with white kaolin and black and reddened pupil and iris, the protruding mouth with sensitive lips and with red cloth contained in the interior, the
raised eyebrows with incised chevron decoration, the top of the head comprising a section of coconut covered with fetish material (bilongo) inset with
sections of horn, a steel chain and cloth attachments, with lumps of fetish material (bilongo), set on the shoulders and back, a large lump of fetish
material, originally covered with a mirror inset, covering the abdomen, the shoulders, arms and top of the chest entirely covered with nails, a
spearhead embedded in the front of the chest, both ears pierced with metal rings, cloth attachments around the ankles, right wrist, left elbow and
crown; aged reddish brown with significant patina. Height 23 in. (58'/2 cm.)

Provenance:
Hans Coray, Agnusso
Count Jean Jacques de Launoit, Brussels (Sotheby's
London, June 23, 1981, Cover and Lot 189)

Literature:
Meisterwerke, 1968, fig. 81, illus.

As stated by Thompson, 1988, referring to another Kongo figure in a similar posture: "This splendid image symbolizes legal discourse written in wood
and iron. To decode the meaning of the blades and nails is to expand our understanding of the world of the famed lawcourts of Kongo. Each blade or
nail is a mambu. A mambu is a legal matter or problem, nailed-in, literally and metaphorically, in the search for restitution of what is right and just,
between two or more parties.

An nkondi of this quality might have been carried to the top of a hill by its priest, accompanied by the opposing parties in a lawsuit or a treaty. The
summit of the hill was a point in cosmos of great importance. It symbolized 'the place of perfection', the level of noon, the level of the second moment
of the sun, where all is ascendency, appropriately underscoring and inspiring the proceedings. There, before nkondi, both parties would swear by
blades driven into the image to keep certain vows-never to wage war against their neighbors, never to fight again over a neighboring clan's territory,
or many other issues as well. It remained the responsibility of the priest of the image to keep track of every blade and nail and the precise legal
understanding hammered into perpetuity by the koma mambu [nail-the-issue] process.

The right hand of the nkondi is especially stylized. The circle formed by the fingers represents the world; the upraised thumb indicates the realm of
heaven. Like the thumbs-down gesture of ancient Rome, it was a sign of doom for the convicted felon or the guilty party to a trial, meaning sky and
world are now against you. The world of the convicted felon would soon be pierced, even as the fingers often circled round a lance or dagger. Equally
interesting are the pinpoint pupils. These form what might be termed an ocular gesture, meaning nkondi views the solutions, and the punishments
adhering to the trials from afar, from beyond the forest, from beneath the river. As nkondi thinks from this distant source of ancestral justice, the
pupils of his eyes are said to become small dots, as if carried to a kind of vanishing point, on the horizon between this world and the next.

Thus the metaphors of moral preoccupation embedded in this sterling image not only actualize the powerful connotations of the law/courts which
surround zinkondi in Kongo, but also establish a field of valences that are still very much a part of the classical religion of Kongo as practiced among
blacks in Cuba and in certain black hispanic barrios of New York and Miami. There, initiates into palo mayombe are conceptually "nailed," with
crossed blades and wedges of sacred wood, as they take their vows, precisely as if they were zinkondi conjured into flesh. Moreover, when the
followers of the Kongo religion in Havana, New York and Miami receive their master medicines, the grand minkisi called prendas, we frequently find
that each medicine-vessel is 'nailed' with inserted twigs and sticks and blades precisely in the manner of zinkondi. Thus the image and zinkondi like it
expand our understanding of a living religion, not something exotic and extinct. Zinkondi form a kind of visual inquiry into the power of words, both spoken and visual, to protect us from all evil, which sometimes means protecting us from ourselves."

Estimate $200,000-300,000

Below is one of my favorite Kongo power figures
nkisi, standing on a circular base, the finely rendered feet beneath ankles encircled by brass rings, the legs with articulated knees supporting the torso with a mirrored bundle affixed with resin at the center, the right arm to the side, the left arm fragmentary and inset with tiny metal blades, the neck encircled by power materials beneath the upturned head with full, parted lips, naturalistic nose and large, glass eyes leading to the backsweped crown wrapped in fiber and surmounted by feathers; fine aged and varied deep brown patina with areas of camwood powder.

PROVENANCE
J. J. Klejman, New York
Acquired from Pace Gallery, New York, December 1976

This figure exhibits a sensitive combination of expressionism and pathos. Kongo power figures, nkisi, were used in cooperation with a spiritual healer, nganga, to invoke positive and negative forces on behalf of a client seeking his services. The power invested in the figure could either relieve the family of a burden or, in turn, place a burden on one’s enemies. The stance, with hand on hip, together with the upturned head, is a typical gesture displaying confrontation and confidence. The nganga would magically charge the figure with various effective materials, creating a series of accumulations over time. The bundle at the abdomen, for instance, incorporated ‘a mirror of mystic vision, indicating the ritual expert’s power to see beyond the glassy surface of the river, or the sea [beneath which the underworld lies] to penetrate the secrets of the dead’ (Thompson in Vogel 1981: 210). This figure is unusual in that the left arm appears to have been removed or amputated, with a resinous bundle and a series of small blades inserted at the tip.

Cf. Roy (1992: 125, figure 84) for a related figure from the Stanley Collection.
The link above will take you to a couple of pages I am working on that show bad examples of these figures and then good examples of these figures.

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