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Reviewing Power, Process, and Statement

The Case of Songye Figures

by Dunja Hersak

Part of this paper first saw the light of day in 1991 on the occasion of a small international workshop I organized in Brussels on the topic of “power objects.”¹ In continental Europe at that time, the use of this Anglophone designation for magico-religious supports or containers was practically unknown, or at best confused with other typological categories, in particular regalia, whereas the term “fetish” continued to thrive. It made sense in that context to begin by exposing newly introduced terms and to evaluate their cultural relevance. This was the result of a period during which terminology had been seriously sifted out by Africanist art historians in an effort to approach more closely indigenous systems of thought. Hence, masks fanned out into acts of masking and masquerades; textiles, dress (not costume), and regalia were examined as body art, tattoos were distinguished technically from scarification, and cave art was taken from obscurity to its proper outside habitat and renamed rock art.

A great deal of time has passed since then. We are far beyond mere explorations of terminology. Art history on the whole has been challenged in confrontation with visual and cultural studies, admittedly more akin to the somewhat eclectic, interdisciplinary approach of Africanists. Stylistic analyses, connoisseurship, and the view that creativity is linked to quality and craftsmanship have remained largely aligned with the commodification of African art, whereas many Africanist art historians and anthropologists have opened the gates to other dimensions, such as those that involve different sensory experiences with material culture and performance (see Howes 2006; Edwards, Gosden, and Phillips 2006; Lamp 2004; Van Damme 1996; H-AfrArts discussion, Jan./Feb. 2003). As for ethnography and field work in Africa, such activity has for some time now

encountered considerable critique for its Western authoritative stance, its lack of reflexivity and dialogue, and its varied textual constructs (Clifford 1988; Barker 2006:26, 27). With pressure to seek out multiple voices including those from the “margins,” fieldwork has somehow receded into an apologetic mode. Coupled with political problems in many countries in Africa and the potentially unpredictable emergence of conflict, research in the rural sector has been relegated to the back bench in preference to urban studies and especially the newly adopted, admittedly exciting, field of contemporary art.

In the light of such developments, it is a challenge to look back and to reflect a little more broadly on the changes in the perception and reception of this popular genre of power objects, taking what Suzanne Blier has called a “multiplex” approach (2005:95). To begin with I intend first to pick up the threads from my 1990s presentation on Songye magical objects (*nkishi/mankishi*). It makes sense to go over some of the familiar ground and back to verbal taxonomy because it is precisely this initial exercise that led me to some observations about historical shifts in the indigenous use of this genre of objects.

So, starting with the term “fetish”: As we have all learned by now, this word derived from the Portuguese word *feitico* (‘manufactured’) and it developed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries on the West African coast into the pidgin *fetisso*, meaning ‘magical practice’ or ‘witchcraft’ (Pietz 1985:5). While these initial associational meanings are not entirely erroneous, William Pietz, who published a well-known multipart study of the topic (Pietz 1985, 1987, 1988), asserts that the idea of the fetish originated in a mercantile cross-cultural space created by the ongoing encounter of value codes between Europeans and West Africans and that it is therefore not proper to either social order except to the history of the word itself (Pietz 1985:5–11). Despite its multi-



1 Children of same age-grade with community *nkishi*. Kalebwe region, 1960s.
PHOTO: KAREL PLASMANS, © DUNJA HERSAK.

ple mediaeval connotations, which relegated almost anything to the fetish category, and subsequent wide-ranging use and criticism in anthropology, sociology, psychoanalysis and other fields, the word seems to have demonstrated remarkable resilience and continued fascination. Although Pietz's own historicolinguistic approach and that of some anthropologists is by no means tolerant of ethnographers who categorically dismiss the fetish as a specific object and idea (ibid., p. 5–6), I am inclined to go along with those who argue that this word is nonetheless grounded in Eurocentric perceptions and historical experiences and has become overloaded with meaningless associations and nostalgia (see Tobias-Chaidesson 2000 for a historical overview of the terms “fetish” and “fetishism”).

In the search for alternative signifiers, “fetishes” have also been referred to by Arnold Rubin (1974) as accumulative sculpture, for the obvious reason that they are often covered with var-

ied applications (e.g. blood, kaolin, camwood powder, oil) and a range of items may be suspended, bound, or pegged into them (e.g. animal skins, cloth, shells, metal blades, or nails). This designation was not only a part of the shift away from purely visual typologies but it also suggested an important processual dimension. Malcolm McLeod (1976) picked up on this aspect and presented a framework for comparative classification by launching the distinction between “process” and “statement” art. As Allen Roberts has pointed out, this “echoes Victor Turner’s earlier opposition of ‘ritual’ and ‘ceremony’” (1985:10). McLeod’s idea



was that statement images are those which “exist in their final intended form and by themselves communicate their meaning” while process art is “part of a continuing series of acts and made, modified or discarded over time.” Statement images, like so-called ancestral figures for example, are “primarily associated with the glorification or reinforcement of existing systems of authority or with expressing generally accepted propositions about the nature of man and society.” They are formal, fixed, and timeless. Process images, on the other hand, like magical power figures, are subservient to a didactic or therapeutic system and are primarily concerned with helping their users conceptualize and clarify their situation. They deal with “alteration and readjustment.” McLeod further explained that process images operate on the basis of their “linked codes,” hence as long as these codes are understood, far greater variation in form is possible than in the case of statement art (1976:99–102).

Although it could be argued that much African art incorporates statement and certainly incorporates process, Allen Roberts has demonstrated the applicability of this distinction within the historical development of Tabwa art. He explained that *mikisi* process forms, that is figures and other nonrepresentational magical devices, are highly varied in form, material, and application and have probably always existed. Then, in the nineteenth century, as a result of the prosperity of trade, out of the same pool of beliefs and practices involving interaction with *mipasi* ancestral spirits, an elaborated form of statuary evolved that began to be used as legitimizing visual statements of the political and economic growth of particular Tabwa ruling lines (1985:14–16).

In re-examining my own data on the central Songye groups in eastern Kasai, who share many affinities with other Lubaized cultures, I find useful pointers in this material for the further analysis of their *mankishi* power figures. Among the Songye, ancestral figures, as defined by the term “statement art,” were not an inherent part of their material culture, whereas process art abounded.² According to central Songye perceptions of the invisible world, ancestral spirits of lineage founders, important chiefs, and dignitaries are associated with the divine creator Efile Mukulu and are the most distant in time and space. Although they are said not to enter into direct contact with man, their existence is recognized through natural waters—such as lakes, rivers, and waterfalls—and specific trees. The spirits that are actively engaged in the daily affairs of man are the common, wandering *mikishi*, who may be benevolent or malevolent and are ascribed to a transitory realm between the divine and the terrestrial. These are the *mikishi* that have been regularly solicited by the Songye, through various magical power objects and figures, for some form of therapeutic or circumstantial betterment. As I have already established in my research, two distinct categories of power objects existed: small personal devices and those used by an entire community, usually one village (Hersak 1976:120). Those of the personal variety took the form of horns, shells, gourds, or tin cans as well as various figural forms, while community *mankishi* were anthropomorphic and large scale, often reaching a meter in height. The essential defining characteristic of all of these objects is their *bishimba* content, the magical medicines of natural substances assembled by the *nganga* or diviner/healer, which was intended to activate spirit forces according to prescribed ritual proceedings.



(opposite)

2 Community *nkishi*, Kalebwe, 1932.
Witwatersrand Art Museum. Ill. ref. BPC.04.19
PHOTO: REV. WILLIAM F.P. BURTON © UNIVERSITY OF
THE WITWATERSRAND ART GALLERIES

3 *Mankishi* with diviner and patient. In fore-
front Kalebwe figure with carrying poles, 1932.
PHOTO: REV. WILLIAM F.P. BURTON © UNIVERSITY OF
THE WITWATERSRAND ART GALLERIES

(this page)

4 Community *nkishi* inside shelter elevated
on stool, central Songye region, 1960s.
PHOTO: KAREL PLASMANS, © DUNJA HERSAK

5 Kalebwe community *nkishi* with beads,
brass tacks, fur, horn, etc., 1932.
Witwatersrand Art Museum. Ill. ref. BPC.04.18
PHOTO: REV. WILLIAM F.P. BURTON © UNIVERSITY OF
THE WITWATERSRAND ART GALLERIES



Within this schematic view of ideology and practice, community statuary stands out as a distinct and somewhat aberrant genre. Visually the figures are imposing because of their size, voluminous stature, and often dramatic accumulation of attached paraphernalia. Moreover, unlike personal figures, they display greater stylistic homogeneity, particularly in the case of formerly powerful chiefdom regions such as those of Kalebwe, Eki, and Ilande. But what is even more revealing is that despite claims that magic processes are always linked to common spirits of the dead, my Songye informants stipulated that these images related to higher spiritual agencies, namely the ancestors with whom the community as a whole identifies. This seemingly discrepant interpretation suggests a directional shift, not entirely unlike that described by Allen Roberts for the Tabwa.

Rather than being transient, perishable supports used within temporal cyclical processes, like the host of personal magical devices, these figures represented the collective identity, the corporate body of the community, and survived for generations. They were commissioned by the chief and elders, most often for the same reason: to avert widespread illness and infertility said to be the result of the evil schemes of witches (*buchi*) and sorcerers (*basha masende*). The nature and frequent recurrence of this explanation suggests an underlying preoccupation with the fear of invasive, disruptive forces to village unity. Given the drastic population decrease and disintegration of large-scale chiefships during the last three decades of the nineteenth century due to wars, the East African slave trade, major epidemics, and colonial administrative policies, village-based political power began to acquire greater significance (see Merriam 1974:9–26). In this context *mankishi* provided the assurance of continuity and oneness. Their lifespan may not have extended beyond a couple of generations but they were remembered as an important part of local history and served as markers of time and as unifiers of age-grades for all those born during a particular *nkishi*'s use (Fig. 1). As process art, they also began to acquire the profile of statement images.





6 Community *nkishi* Nkima.
Kongolo, Kalebwe style
Wood, metal, animal hair and skin, feathers, cloth,
beads, and ritual ingredients; H. 76cm (30")
Acquired by the National Museum of Ethnology in
1939 from Father Julius Teernstra.
PHOTO: © NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ETHNOLOGY, LEIDEN

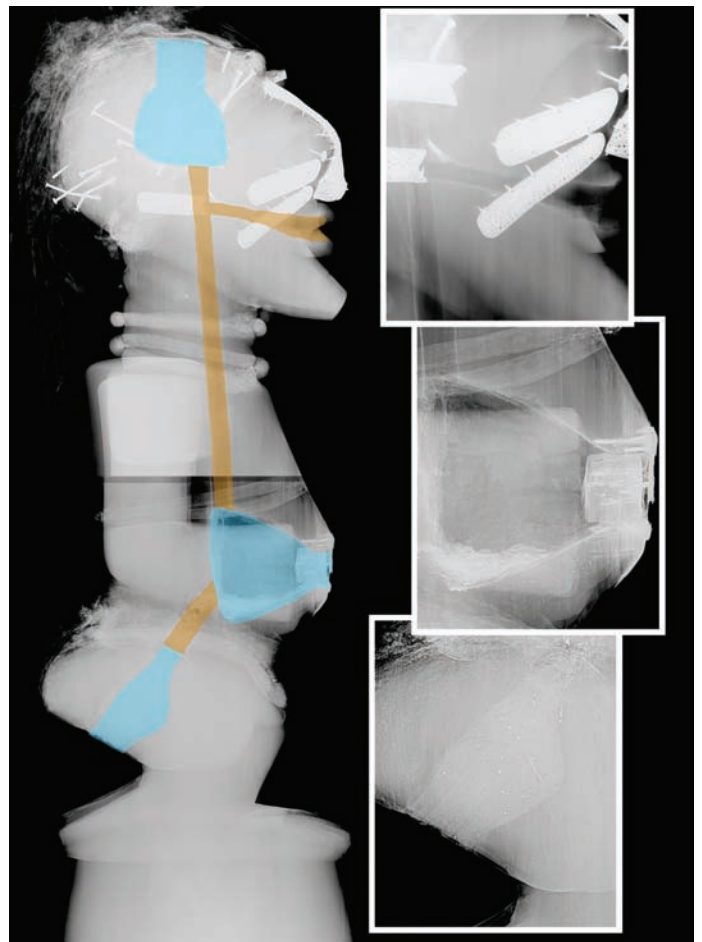
Unlike personal figures that may have been made and consecrated by anyone of the user's choice, community statuary was carved by esteemed specialists and, more importantly, empowered with *bishimba* and external paraphernalia by a *nganga* with a far-flung reputation. While personal figures occupied private, anonymous domains, community *mankishi* commanded a strategically visible position in the village, though like sacred rulers they were hidden from daily view, often behind their own enclosures. They were also geographically bound to a locality like a shrine or sanctuary, even though their notoriety may have extended regionally. These *mankishi* were not the intimate, portable, personal supports that defined individual mobility and desires. They were heroic images of power, personified through timely, ritual disclosure, distancing, and individual names given to them such as Yantambwe, Yankima, or Yanshima, many of which bear the honorific prefix "Ya." These names, meaning lion, monkey, and civet respectively, refer to animals associated with men of power and special knowledge. In like fashion, the figures often wear familiar, referential attributes of leadership: head-dresses, raffia skirts, beads, with leopard teeth, and a leopard skin as (Fig. 2). Shells and metal attachments symbolically recall the ancestral professions of the hunter and smith, culture heroes who figure prominently in Songye accounts of state formation (see Hersak 1986).

The images were conceived as full figures that portray physical strength, male potency, and perfect symmetry and balance. They were said to speak but only indirectly, through dreams experienced by their attendants, individuals such as epileptics who were considered mystically endowed by virtue of their proximity to the spirit world. Given their great potency, *mankishi* were handled and manipulated with the use of large poles (Fig. 3). As Rev. Burton noted, "they are far too sacred to be touched by hand" and when making a round of the village, even "the ground before [them] is beaten with a small bundle of charms wrapped in grass-cloth, or raffia fibre" (1961:130). During periods of seclusion or when holding public audience, the figures were elevated from the ground and placed either on a stool (Fig. 4) or, as witnessed by Robert Schmitz in 1905, on an inverted mortar (Van Overbergh 1908:311). The latter is particularly revealing of the nature of the *nkishi*, for as the Songye explained to me, the mortar, as a life-giving symbol, has been left by the ancestors, yet when inverted, the one who sits on it has killed and is a sorcerer (Hersak 1986:52). This dualistic association attributed the *nkishi* not only with the most extraordinary magical capacity, defined in terms of its ambivalent potential, but elevated it to a type of sacred ruler possessed of both powers of increase over land and people and destructive potency (see de Heusch 1990).

Other visual indicators contribute to this dichotomous characterization. For example, despite the accoutrements of chiefship, *nkishi* figures are often distinguished by horns implanted on top of their heads to contain *bishimba*, which relates at one level to wisdom acquired with age (Wauters 1949:338) while at another reinforces their bestial character (Fig. 5). Also, many *mankishi* often have open mouths with expressively shaped, pursed lips as if emphasizing their non-human otherness. There are examples in which substances have been placed in the mouth and ear openings of figures, but in such a conspicuous manner that it would appear as if the *mankishi* is flowing over with magical content (Fig. 6). What is interesting here is that despite their human resemblance, the bodies of *mankishi*, like that of animals (Merriam 1974:108), were said not to house the essential spirit or *kikudi* but were instead filled with magic. According to Alan Merriam's research among the Bala subgroup, the *kikudi* was thought by many to be located either in the stomach or in the head (1974:115), these being precisely the two regions of the figures containing the receptacles filled with *bishimba*. We further discover that while some individuals considered the head



7a-b Songye community *nkishi*
 (front and side views)
 Wood, cloth, feathers, reptile skin, metal, pigment; H: 84cm (33")
 Former Carlo Monzino collection. Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis.
 PHOTO: © INDIANAPOLIS MUSEUM OF ART, ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.



8 Radiographs of Figure 7. Areas in blue indicate the presence of magical substances in the head, anus, and abdomen. The brown highlights the channels that connect these centers.
 RADIOGRAPHS AND PHOTO: RICHARD MCCOY, 2008 © INDIANAPOLIS MUSEUM OF ART, ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

as the center of the body because of its sensory functions, there was a generally held belief, at least among the Bala, that upon death the *kikudi* leaves the body through the mouth (ibid., pp. 114, 115). Quite surprisingly, radiographic analyses conducted by the Indianapolis Museum of Art on a major Songye community figure (Fig. 7) revealed that the mouth opening was internally linked by connecting channels to all the other receptacles (Fig. 8).³ It would be tempting to interpret this feature simply in the light of the above noted symbolic functioning of the body, but I suspect that there are technical considerations of greater significance here.

In contrast to aspects of this suggestive openness of the mouth and ears, the two other vital centers containing the *bishimba* (cranium and belly) are tightly sealed with resin or with some form of covering (e.g., the top of a tin can). Snake and lizard belts also encircle the neck or torso to keep in, tie up, and protect the inner body essence. In Eki cosmology snakes are the embodiment of the rainbow and are seen as linking elements between the waters of above and below, while lizards are described as wise and silent guardians of the ancestral inheritance (Wauters 1949:337). In a similar vein, copper tacks and strips, principally arranged on the head, metaphorically seal in power while in their association to lightning—a phenomenon invariably directed by sorcerers at adversaries—they expell its negative magical effect.

There is an interplay of oppositions here between a cultural construct and a bestial entity, between openness and visibility and inwardness and secrecy, and between the body symbolism associating the lower organs with water and increase and the upper body parts with fire, sorcery, and sterility. Interestingly, the dream signals experienced by *nkunja*, the figure's guardian, provide the most revealing and remarkably consistent evidence of this dual opposition which seems to apply to both community and personal figures. Dreams of water, rain, snakes, twins and white kaolin were interpreted as positive while those of fire, lightning, ravines, suicides, and war provoked much fear and anxiety. The ingredients inserted into the figure cover a vast range and differ substantially from one *nkishi* to another; however, among the most commonly recurrent ones were the physiognomically characteristic parts of wild animals (e.g. leopard, lion, elephant, rat, crocodile) whose speed, strength, venom, odor, or alertness defines the external aggressive action. To these were added other fire elements such as the residue of a tree struck by lightning, referred to as the excreta of lightning, and correspondingly something from the corpse of a sorcerer, a suicide victim, or an albino. In contrast to this series, one also finds ingredients such as the umbilical cord of twins, which evokes the watery category of calming, desirable dreams and internal, protective action. Finally, the concoction was completed with bits of the villagers' hair and nail clippings, thus bonding their hopes and desires with the active capacities of the *nkishi*. Through this identification with the figure, the populace was thereby drawn into a powerful and dynamic drama in which the chaotic, the wild, and the invisible was contained and its essential vitality transposed into orderly, sane, productive community life.

This transversion is, however, a process. It was not only regulated cyclically according to the reappearance of the new moon but it was also known to dip and ebb at unforeseen moments

when *kunja* dreamt of danger or when an epidemic struck. All such occasions were felt to be unpredictable, worrisome transitions because of the intense confrontation between spirits, intermediaries, and humans. At such times, and especially on the day of the new moon, normal village life and individual activity came to a standstill. The *nkishi* became the focal point of collective ritual behavior: dancing, chanting, feeding, and anointing with protective white kaolin or manioc flour. In stark contrast to this controlled, rhythmic patterning, the *nkishi* and *nkunja* were released into flight. The *nkishi* was fortified with the sacrificial blood of a rooster and all polluting or weakening elements were prohibited. Hence, menstruating women were kept at bay and contact with water, prone to reducing the fiery side of the *nkishi*, was avoided at all cost. The same prohibitions applied to *nkunja* but, in addition, pepper was not to be eaten because of its immobilizing effect (Merriam 1974:153) and only wild, smoked meat could be consumed instead of cooked, cultivated products.

Thus far I have tried to point out two facets of community *mankishi*: their visible, iconic stature and the symbolic dimensions that mobilized their use within the magico-religious system. I believe that these two aspects of statement and process may be seen as compatible and viable through the creation of the object.

This creative process may be viewed as an initiation, a tripartite sequence of separation, liminality, and integration. Through these three phases the *nkishi* came into being and was socially validated. It was personalized, mystified, and ritually embraced into the life of the community. Most important and revealing in all of this was the role and integration of the different participants, namely the carver, the *nganga*, and the villagers.

Briefly, the first phase of this rite involved cutting the tree—the selection and separation of the wood from its natural setting. The chief, elders, *nganga*, and often the villagers accompanied the carver into the bush, where he chose an appropriately hard, durable species. Despite the fact that only the carver's technical considerations were emphasized, the selected species often had curative and/or toxic properties and were associated with certain ancestral contexts. This clear distinction points to the central role of the chief and villagers at this stage. It was the chief who specified his intention to the ancestors, a white chicken was offered to them whose feathers were worn by the villagers to show the "purity of their hearts," and the scene was animated by singing and dancing. Also significantly, it was a member of the community, not the carver, who undertook the felling of the tree.

The second phase involved the carving process, which some claimed was conducted in secret while others described a more public event (Fig. 9). In either case, although the carver's skills were clearly recognized and appreciated, he and the sculpture he fabricated existed in a transitional, liminal space. He did not verbalize his intentionality and made no appeal to spirit agencies, though he may well have taken precautions at this potentially dangerous time by wearing white as a protective color. The sculpture he produced had no meaning; it was simply a piece of wood, an empty receptacle and an incomplete cultural artifact. However, as his individual creation, it was an extension of his personhood; thus, like bathwater (Merriam 1974:167), footprints, or the grass one lays on, all of which are used to make magic, its ultimate use could have implicated him directly in matters

beyond his knowledge or control. Since sculptors were often sought from other villages, sometimes even further, and only for their technical expertise, they remained personally detached and ritually delimited. In carving community figures they seem to have abided by clearly recognizable morphological types, not only because this was an indispensable part of the image's statement but also to safeguard their personal creative impulses within accepted conventions. A comment by Schmitz, dating from 1905, seems to support the latter idea:

They ... never vary their production. A chance stroke of the adze sometimes leads to novel discoveries but they fear this like a curse and revert quickly to their old models (Van Overbergh 1908:365, my translation).

In comparison to this detached, liminal framing of the sculptor, set outside of the ritual sphere though functioning within it, the *nganga's* role was quite different. He was normally credited with the "making of the *nkishi*," for he transformed it from a meaningless sculpture into a functioning mechanism. This is not to say that the names of carvers were not retained, it is just that the *nganga's* intervention marked the crucial point of integration into

the magico-religious sphere. In this phase the figure was bestowed with its official chiefly regalia, named and, most importantly, imbued with magical substance. As Mary Nooter Roberts pointed out for neighbouring Luba peoples, "essential aspects of the the objects' conception and creation occur both before and after the sculptor's interventions ..."; his role and identity is not prioritized as it is only one part of a "dynamic process of artistic exchange" between different participants (1998:66–67, 69).⁴

Of vital importance to the transformation and mystification of power figures was the belief that the *nganga's* concoction of *bishimba* was a secret and individual formula. The strength of this belief was sustained by the choice of a *nganga* who often came from further afield and was therefore unfamiliar to the client group, though a sought-after novelty by reputation. Some of his ingredients were perhaps known, for after all their importance arose from a common regional symbolic system, yet it was maintained that their preparation, combination, and proportion to one another was the special artistry of the diviner. What this implies is that the *nkishi's* efficacy was not only the result of the *nganga's* empirical knowledge but also an extension of his mystical power and personhood. In fact, upon the death of this reli-

9 Carver at work; Njibu Lupanda, Chofa village, Kalebwe Chiefdom.
PHOTO: DUNJA HERSAK, 1977



10 Songye community figure

Wood, feathers, metal, skins, beads, horn, and pigments; H. 98cm (38½")

Private Belgian collection

PHOTO: HUGHES DUBOIS, © HUGHES DUBOIS & MUSÉE DAPPER ARCHIVES.

This well-known piece is intimately linked in its exuberance and style to the personality and reputation of its former collector, Jef Vanderstraete.



gious custodian, the continued effect of the figure may have been brought into question and the piece could have been destroyed. Thus, despite its sacralization and references to continuity, the *nkishi* was susceptible to physical mortality (or ritual death). It was not fixed within a linear time frame but was part of the cyclicity of life. New *mankishi* could then be initiated into being; however, each figure remained a separate entity encapsulating a specific temporal experience. The *nganga* who came from outside of the community was seen to bring into the troubled, ailing space new sources of vitality, thus allowing further visual and ritual innovations to be incorporated within an ongoing structure and for periodic renewal to take place.

This specific example of community figures brings into evidence the high degree of flexibility and pragmatism with which power objects were adapted to specific social, political, and religious needs of central Songye communities. As localized, individualized mechanisms which related to particular time periods and relationships, they enacted visual and ritual creativity on a sliding scale, allowing for greater adjustment and shifting of perimeters than many other types of religious sculpture. Thus, paradoxically, despite all the visual and symbolic image-making, the impact of these figures arose from their transience and singularity.

Venturing beyond this ethno-fieldscape which offers an overall contextual framework, there are ongoing “paths” and alterna-

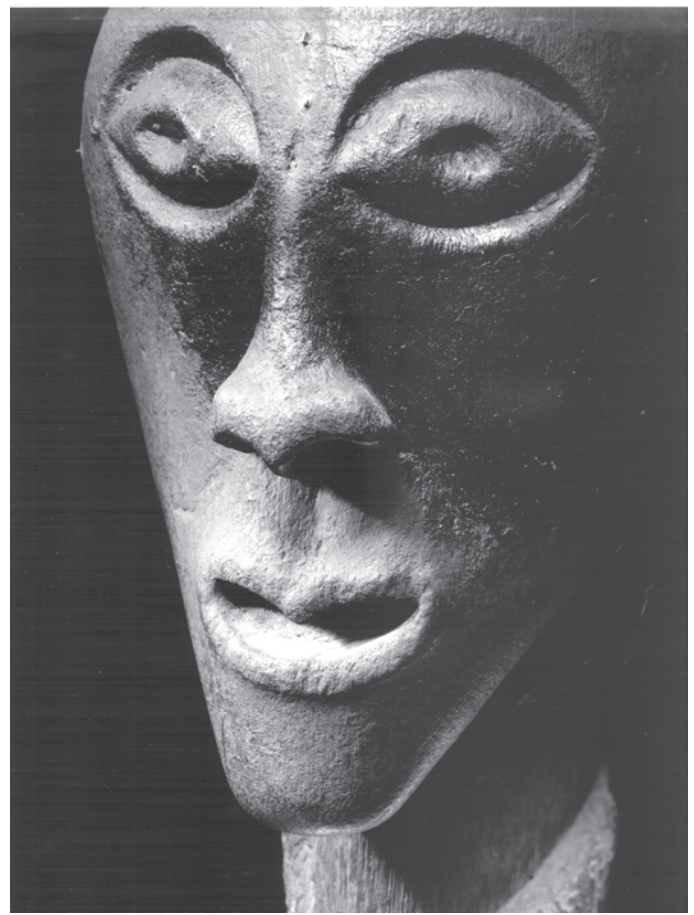


11 Songye community figure
Wood, metal, horn, feathers, leather, beads, and
ritual ingredients; H: 99.5cm (39")
Lilian and Michel Durand-Dessert collection, Paris.
PHOTO: HUGHES DUBOIS. © H. DUBOIS
Compare the aesthetic expression of this piece to
the one in Figure 10.

tive “ways of seeing,” especially with the recontextualizations of Songye carvings that have taken root among us. The very conspicuous aspect of the personification and individualization of the figures that I exposed confirms—as we know all too well by now—that objects have “social lives” and different possible trajectories which impact upon their identities and shape their “biographies” (Appadurai 1986). They embody, as Alfred Gell pointed out, the intentionality of their makers, the *banganga* in this case, and possess, by extension, “social agency” as they exercise an effect on their users, owners, or viewers (1998:17–21). I have so far pointed to the shift in definition of a class of objects in their context of origin. This diversion, says Appadurai,

is a meaningful aspect of the social history, of the long-term pattern of movement of such objects, but it is by no means the only or the most radical one (1986:18, 20, 29, 34). As such the “networks” that operate outside the indigenous “territory” (Pinney 2006:140 quoting Latour 1993) may bring about more dramatic redefinitions or ruptures that merit consideration.

Kopytoff, in his much-quoted article on the cultural biography of things, provides an economic, processual model of commoditization which helps to understand the manner in which objects can easily slide from one setting to another, with their identities continuously being culturally redefined (1986:65, 67, 68). From a “singularized” situation in its original setting, the power figure,



for example, which is efficacious only for the intended patient, is a “terminal commodity,” that is, not an object of exchange value (ibid., p. 75). But, once outside its cultural setting and among Western collectors, dealers, and museums, such an object enters the commodity exchange sphere (ibid., p. 65, 76). It may then be deactivated through purchase but it retains exchange value and is subject to increased singularization by individuals and collectivities (ibid.). Its many different, visions, readings, and receptions come into effect.

In Western museum settings the life of the Songye community figure is more or less undistinguishable from that of the personal object. Both categories of figures are stabilized physically through restoration and the ideal environmental conditions of their new abode. They often share a common space, for example in the store room or the showcase, where their degradation is arrested and their only dimension of being is the visual. Hence these seemingly favorable circumstances paradoxically freeze the “organic life” of the object (Spinney 2004 in Ouzman 2006:279) and disrupt its natural life cycle (Ouzman 2006:277). Stripped of other sensory dimensions, “it *becomes possible* to master it through sight alone,” to appropriate it visually (Classen and Howe 2006:215) and to metamorphose it into an atemporal work of “art.” In its new guise as an art object it may be confined to a time frame, but it can, nevertheless, acquire a significant life history through its travels to different museum localities

and its variable presentations and interpretations, as shown by numerous projects such as “Exhibition-ism” (1994), “ExitCongo-Museum” (2000), or the recent “Retour d’Angola” (2007) exhibition. Still, as the sociologist Violette Morin explained already (1969:134), this globalizing effect on an object by an outside authority deprives it of its intimate relationship with the user; the object cannot grow old with its proprietor, it can only fall out of fashion and be replaced or, I would say, set aside.⁵

From this point of view, all of these magical figures are vestigial references, historical specimens, or “ethnographic fragments” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991:388) of a once living, semi-autonomous mechanism. Thus it could be said that “process” gives way to “statement” with personal and community *mankishi*, statement about Western aesthetic choices, tastes, about prestige, value, exploration, exoticism, as well as the control, selectivity, and designation of the heritage of others.

This scenario may be somewhat different in the private sector among dealers and collectors, where ongoing tensions exist between individualization and commodification, between the effects of time and atemporality, between revelation/declaration and secrecy, and hence process and statement. In this competitive environment, where reputations are variable, the object remains a potential commodity and its biographical course is determined by its visual appeal, subtle marketing strategies, and proximation to prototypical models such as the superstars housed in muse-



12-14 The dramatic, enchanting, and terrifying. Close-up of Songye figures from private collections photographed by Hughes Dubois in 2004. Compare the interpretive close-up in Figure 14 to its documentary version in Figure 10.
PHOTOS: © H. DUBOIS 2003

ums and in prominent, early collections. Establishing this affiliation as well as its relationship to socially esteemed connoisseurs of art (collectors, dealers, or artists) is of utmost importance and this, as we know, is all part of the creation of a pedigree and the singularization of the object (Fig. 10). Achieving this is something of a “sport,” as one of Corby’s dealer informants revealed: “to fabricate a pedigree ... you just have to pick the name of a minor figure or family at some outpost from an early travelogue or missionary periodical” (2000:84). Through a clever process of personalization of the object, it is distanced from the charge of materialism, as Belk states, by its participation in an “economy of romance” rather than an “economy of commodities” (2006:539). The collector and/or dealer appears as Indiana Jones on the stage of conquest, full of long-lasting obstacles and trials transforming personal reverie into virtual experience. It is daring, fun, and full of emotion (Corby 2000:88).

Thus, the sculptures, like social beings, confirm their pedigree through written documentation (certificates, publications of catalogues or academic papers; see Brodie 2005) acquiring titles of noblesse through purchase, fabrication, or pretense. All this is the thorny pursuit of authenticity. They may hide their true identity like many individuals by disguising their age, use, and social notoriety. Often this pretense appears particularly pronounced in the case of the more valuable, scarcer community figures, which have been the object of more standardized paraphernalia and

whose accumulations are multiple, thus leaving greater scope for creativity. Christopher Steiner has drawn attention throughout his publications to various possible alterations of objects (or “improvements” in the words of the trade, Corby 2000:85) that nourish the exotic trail of discovery which include the addition and removal of parts, the restoration of fractures and erosions, the transformation of surface material and patination and, of course, a great deal more (Steiner 2006:461). Numerous scholars, including the Kongo specialist Wyatt MacGaffey (1998:224), have referred to such manipulations as acts of violence which are not only physical but also social and potentially psychological.

Songye figures, especially the larger-scale pieces that enjoy such international celebrity, are prime targets of cosmetic and vestimentary treatments. The frequency of added dress is noteworthy, clearly not for puritanical reasons as during early collecting practices but rather as a distinction of power associated with chiefly office (as published documentation indicates). The opposite may, however, also occur to satisfy those who prefer “cleaner” lines rather than aesthetic accumulation (Fig. 11). François Neyt’s 2004 publication on Songye figures includes many privately owned pieces and offers a fascinating glimpse of currently sought-after preferences and Western appropriation and image-making. There is the addition of animal skins—the pangolin, for example—which Africanize the image but bear no relationship to the cultural framework in question (e.g. Neyt 2004:Figs. 125,

129). There is the proliferation of patches of dark, sometimes visibly sticky patination found on some pieces that evoke the idea of bizarre, secret sacrifices but does not necessarily correspond to ritual manipulation. There is also what I would call the eye incrustation syndrome (shell and metal appliqué), which Corbey also noted (2000:85), with cowries being especially popular, as well as the strange sprouting horn phenomenon. Two recently published pieces even manage to combine both these manipulations, with the horn, usually pegged into the cranium, actually emerging from the eye socket (Neyt 2004:Figs. 64, 272).

The transformations, whether inclined towards voluminous, ever-more-heterogeneous constructs or the scaled-down, “pure” sculptural forms, seem to reflect variable notions of power and magic. As such this malleability of the object is not merely an aesthetic exercise but is intended to evoke some sort of emotional response that abstracts theory, reaching for the ever more pure and authentic. A romantic myth of otherness is thereby sustained that thrives on the authenticity of feelings, sensations, etc. (de l’Estoile 2007:319). The object is adjusted and may be made to appear even more dangerous, bestial, or other-worldly than originally intended, thus playing upon the changing desires and trends of its market context. Hughes Dubois’s photographs of Songye sculpture, prepared for an exhibition at the Museum of Central Africa in Tervuren (Baeke, Bouttiaux, and Dubois 2004), also brought into view one such personal interpretation, in which the *mise-en-scène* was empowered by juxtaposing sculptures with creative photographs of these very pieces, lighting, particular angles, and close-ups guiding the eye of the viewer. Receiving similar attention and treatment, community and personal figures were resized, reconfigured, and assimilated through the Western “Africanizing” contemporary lens. The resultant images and their sculptural models were subsequently enmeshed in a captivating scenario which dramatized, mystified, enchanted, and perhaps even terrified (Figs 12–14). By way of this stage-setting a generalized concept of alterity was generated, one Amselle would describe as an ambivalent sort of fascination-repulsion for Africa with its physical and emotional pulsation that contrasts so starkly to our aseptized, cerebral world (2005:49). Interestingly, visitors of the Songye diaspora residing in Belgium seem to have responded similarly to the general aura and emotional impact of the exhibition rather than to the specific attributes or meaning of individual works. For them, how-

ever, the setting and its installations contributed in a mnemonic fashion, as *aides-mémoires* recalling past histories and personal experiences something like the encounter between Tlingit elders and museum staff reported by James Clifford (1997:188).

The late Alfred Gell would say that all this staging and creativity is simply the masterwork of technical processes. With this he initiated a most interesting debate in which he focused on art as a “component of technology,” but what he prankishly set into play is a dynamic confrontation between the intellectual and emotional. He referred to the “technology of enchantment,” the power that creative techniques can have of casting a spell over us (1999:163). But although Gell disclaimed the relevance of aesthetic theory in his own discipline of anthropology, he clearly came to this through the workings of an artist. Indeed, Eric Hersch refers to his “distinctly artistic approach to the practice of anthropology” (1999:x). As an amateur artist, recognizing all too well the difficulty of the creative endeavor, he spoke of the “captivation” of artistic agency, even the “demoralization produced by the spectacle of unimagined virtuosity,” a virtuosity that is “indiscipherable” (1998:71). In a somewhat similar vein, and in keeping with his early twentieth century predecessors, the contemporary artist and collector Georg Baselitz referred to the “admiration and wonder” that can be sparked by “the artistic solution” (Szalay 1998:41). From these perspectives the magical power is the transformation of the ordinary into the extraordinary, the creation of a device that “works.” For artists and collectors, a recontextualized aspect of magic lives on as the sculptures continue to exert social agency affecting wide-ranging recipients.

We are very far from the point of departure and the initial intentions of the producers but somehow, despite the radical diversions and reclassifications, it is all one story that stretches from the local to the global. Within it there are perhaps not only multiple views and interpretations—some quite irreconcilable—but multiple objects as Louvel suggested. He might, in fact, have a point in saying that these exist in a way as virtual objects shaped by very different needs and fantasies, even if arising from concrete material productions (1999:168).

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Notes

1 I am very grateful to Doran Ross for having created the opportunity through the UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History for this most memorable event and to Elizabeth Cameron who helped to coordinate activities for Doran. For me this was certainly a most significant international exchange which also managed to bring together Belgian scholars from different universities and both sides of the linguistic divide. I must thank one of the participants, Allen Roberts, for encouraging me more recently to develop further and update the paper I presented at the workshop and for his valuable comments. The manuscript was submitted to *African Arts* in May 2008 and is dedicated to the late Mulinda Habi Buganza, a most admirable young scholar who really deserved more out of this life.

2 In an effort to unfreeze the temporal dimension of observation and discourse, I have decided to dispense with the convention of using the ethnographic

present in this text. My research among the Songye was conducted in the late 1970s and, although I cannot be certain of the degree of change as I have not gone back due to political upheaval in DRC and my own career circumstances, the fact is that my documentation dates back thirty years and that is unquestionably now the past. Given the number of Songye sculptures in public and private collections, I doubt that the power figures I refer to are still in use, although certain beliefs may be ongoing, as I learned during my research in the late 1990s in Congo-Brazzaville among the Vili and Yombe. The reader may therefore find some twists and turns of the tenses which allow for both continuity and change.

3 Since IMA’s purchase in 2005 of the large Songye figure and the discovery of internal channels, Ted Celenko and the museum’s conservator, Richard McCoy, have embarked upon a major project of radiographing and collecting x-ray images of Songye

power figures from public and private collections in the US. A significant data base should bring into evidence important aspects of the construction process, use and subsequent Western manipulation of these pieces.

4 Nooter Roberts clearly brings to light that the “naming game” of carvers is a Western preoccupation and not broadly relevant throughout African cultures (1998:72–73). Such an emphasis on the carver as “artist” potentially obscures a much richer context of creativity and interaction. Her example is particularly convincing as Luba carvers demonstrated extraordinary aesthetic sensitivity and achievement and, as she rightly notes, given that culture area’s development of “sophisticated mnemonic traditions,” they certainly could have found ways of remembering names of artists/carvers if they had chosen to do so (1998:66).

5 I thank Janet Hoskins (2006:78) for drawing my attention to this fairly early and little-known article.

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