

THE MINTADI AND
KONGO ANCESTOR FIGURES
A STUDY IN ART AND NINETEENTH CENTURY SOCIAL HISTORY

BY

ROBERT ARNOLD ROHDE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS
(History)

at the

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN

1969

Table of Contents

Chapter I	1
Chapter II	10
Chapter III	31
Chapter IV	44
Appendix	47
Bibliography	52

Chapter I

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to further our understanding of the ancestor figures produced in the Lower Congo, with special reference to those of the last century and a half. Unlike just appreciation, understanding requires an examination of those figures as art and as artifacts of the society which produced them. As art, the chronology, esthetics, and style of the statues will be presented, as well as the historical context in which they developed. Besides touching on the social role of the artists, the thesis also views the art as a product of beliefs and the social needs of the community at a particular period in time. This paper would hopefully bring much closer an understanding of the mintadi and of the other ancestor figures.

The generic term for the myriad of Kongo carved figures is teke (plural, biteke). Biteke have commonly been divided into commemorative, or ancestor, figures and minkisi, or fetishes. In this view, the nkisi was filled with the magic of kindokism (sorcery). The ancestor statues, though, were not considered as magical figures.¹ In fact, however, no such neat distinctions between

¹ Bittremieux, in Eugene Roosens, Images africaines de la mère et l'enfant (Louvain, 1967), 64; also see Elsy Leuzinger, African Sculpture (Zurich, n.d. [1963]), 178, and Robert Verly, Les Mintadi: La Statuaire du Bas-Congo (Bambaoma-Mussurongo) (Louvain, 1955), 45f.

"magical" and non-"magical" figures could be made. Village nkisi fell into a middle gray area. Some have been described as mere nkisi,² but others seemed very much like ancestor figures protecting the whole village.³ Richard Dennett, a trader who lived among the Vili for twenty years, perhaps came closer to a Kongo viewpoint when he divided nkisi into earth (royal), general, and family nkisi.⁴ The criteria of this division seems to be the areas of concern in which these particular figures played a role. The king invoked the earth nkisi (nkisi nsi), while each family head acted as the nganga (religious practitioner) of the family nkisi, which were the ancestor figures.⁵ For sure, ancestor figures formed a distinct class of statues throughout the Lower Congo--although their names and forms would differ in various localities--but as one type of

²Captain J.K. Tuckey, Narrative of an Expedition to Explore the RiverZaire usually called the Congo, in South Africa, in 1816, under the direction of Captain J.K. Tuckey, R.N. (London, 1967), 180; Richard F. Burton, Two Trips to Gorilla Land and the Cataracts of the Congo, II (London, 1876), 120.

³Richard Edward Dennett, Notes on the Folklore of the Fjort (London, 1898), 135, talked of a sacred stone or wooden image into which no nails were driven, called Nkissinsi. Verly names these great wooden figures, which guarded the village, ntadi à Kongo (Min-tadi, 20).

⁴Dennett, Notes, 146.

⁵Dennett's description of the making, consecration, and burial role of the family Nkici Nkondi, in At the Back of the Black Man's Mind (London, 1906), 87f., obviously indicates that he was referring to ancestor figures.

figure among a myriad of others.⁶

Among the ancestor figures themselves, many different forms existed. Mother-child figures, found in many other contexts, were also used as sepulchral monuments.⁷ In some regions a straw effigy of the deceased served as the ancestor figure.⁸ The mintadi, figures of chiefly or freeman ancestors, most often appeared as seated figures outfitted with the regalia of chieftainship, although many "mintadi" also had a mother-child motif or depicted prestigious occupations. Not carved at all like the nail nkisi or curing nkisi, mintadi displayed certain distinguishing characteristics.⁹ Their most noted feature--being made of stone--was not definitive however; the term "tadi dya valua" applied to any stone sculpture.¹⁰ Verly maintains that the mintadi formed a special set of stone sculpture.¹¹ Mintadi will refer in this paper to these stone ancestor figures, but one must remember that these are just a part of a large and distinctive set of Kongo statues, which include

⁶ Roosens, Mère, 63f., designates these commemorative statues as biniongi or kimanzi, terms which probably came from the coast or Mayombe. Laman in his Dictionnaire Kikongo-Français (Ridgewood, New Jersey, 1964) defined ki-nyóngo as "little image, statue, porcelain figure which is placed on the tomb." Kinyóngo also meant an uninitiated nkisi according to Laman. He defined mánzi (plural, bimánzi) as "all sorts of broken things, porcelain figures, etc., that they put on the grave," in the Yombe dialect.

⁷ Maesen in a personal communication to Roosens, Mère, 63; Leuzinger, Sculpture, 180.

⁸ Such figures have been reported in Kakongo and Loango, Dennett, Notes, 24; and in Bwende by E. Manker, in J. Maes, Kabila-en Graf-beelden uit Kongo, Tome II, fase. 2 of Annales du Musée de Congo belge, D. Ethnographie. Serie VI. (Tervuren, June, 1938), 134.

⁹ These characteristics are detailed in Chapter II.

¹⁰ Verly, Mintadi, 19.

¹¹ Verly, Mintadi, 20; there is some confusion as to what was the local term for these figures. J. Delange, Arts et peuples de l'Afrique noire (Paris, 1967), 139, calls steles in bas-relief mintadi and the ancestor figures matadi.

wood as well as stone carvings.¹² The former will be specified as wooden mintadi.

These different forms of ancestor figures were not evenly distributed over the whole of the Kongo culture area. Stone sculpting apparently centered on the massifs south of the Congo River, in the Noqui-San Salvado region (see map, page 5). From Woyo and Solongo, at the mouth of the River, have come some stone grave-figures and many fine wood mintadi.¹³ The Vili who inhabited the kingdoms of Kakongo and Loango produced wood ancestor figures;¹⁴ referring to Verly's discoveries, Marcel Soret found no mintadi among the north-west Kongo, but thought a more probing search "would probably allow us to rediscover traces of an analogous artistic activity."¹⁵

Several descriptions of grave sculptures originated from Mayombe. Apparently a wooden statue accompanied the deceased to the tomb, where the figure was often prominently displayed.¹⁶ Besides

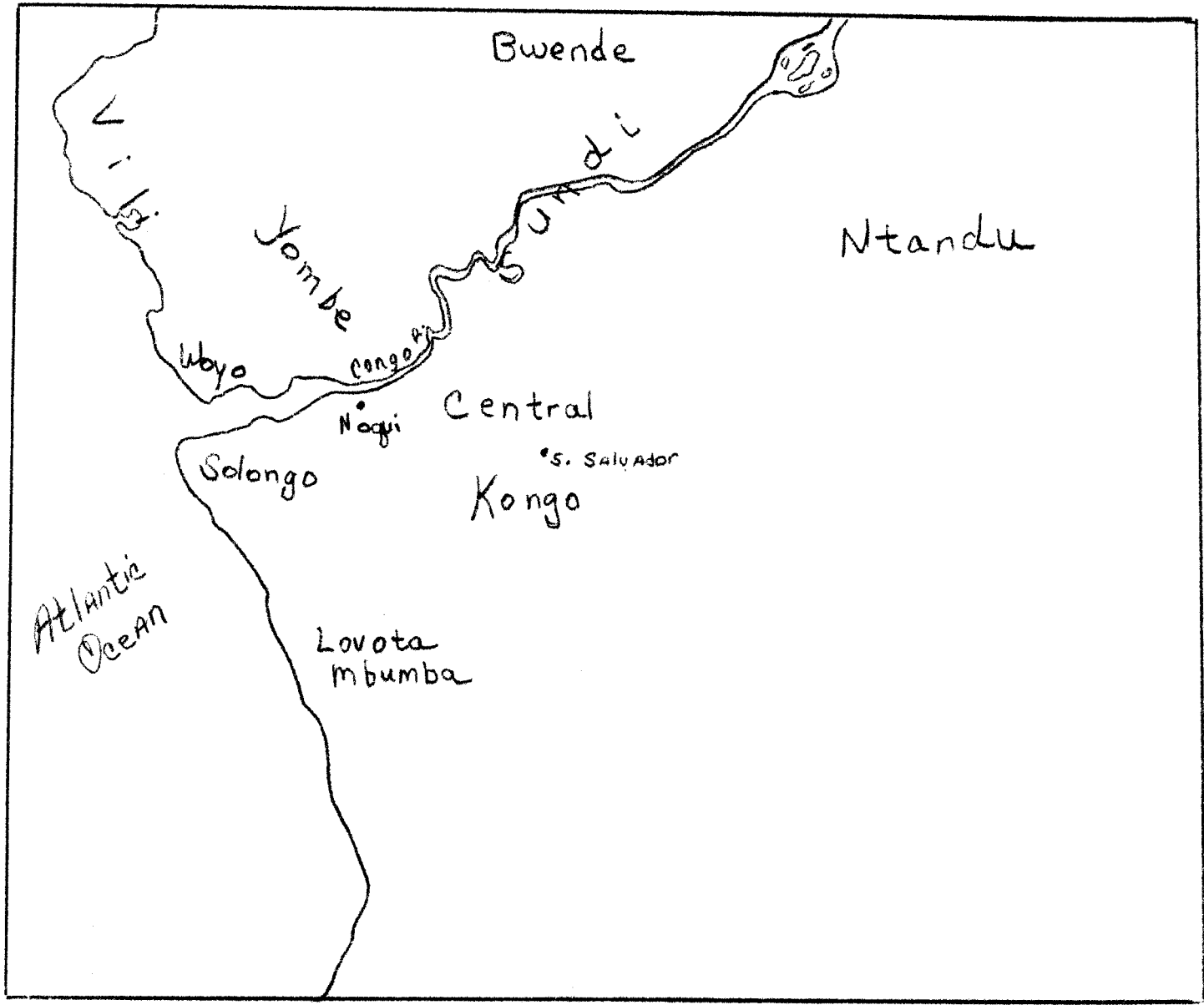
¹² Philip Allison, African Stone Sculpture (London, 1968), 42.

¹³ J.A. Weyns, "Un chef-d'oeuvre de la sculpture africaine provenant des Bakongo occidentaux," Bulletin des Musées royaux d'art et d'histoire, 3 (November, 1942), p. 71; Maes, Grafbeelden, 130, mentions Boma and Matadi areas in particular.

¹⁴ certainly in the nineteenth century, for Dennett describes such figures from Loango in Seven Years Among the Fjort (London, 1887), 50, and from Kakongo in Black Man's Mind, 19f.

¹⁵ Les Kongo Nord-occidentaux (Paris, 1959), 108; this statement reminds us that what is presented here represents the positive evidence for the existence of certain figures, but that lack of evidence for a certain figure in a particular area does not preclude their existence.

¹⁶ Albert Doutreloux, L'ombre des fetishes. Société et culture Yombe (Louvain, 1967), 175; Maes, Grafbeelden, 133.



numerous wood carvings, stone figures also came from Mayombe, where Verly found some of his mintadi. Albert Doutreloux describes a stone sculpted in human form, called Tadi dya Mbumba, which manifested some attributes of mintadi.¹⁷

The sole evidence for ancestor figures among the Sundi comes from Karl Laman. He reported that special sculptures represented dead chiefs, hunters or ndoki, who wished to help or injure the living. The protecting sculptures were called nkuyu, which protected the living by given warnings and other aid.¹⁸ Laman collected in Sundi at least two stone sculptures, which he called Nkisi Mbenza. The Mbenza nkisi may very well have been ancestor figures in the mintadi tradition.¹⁹

To the north of the Sundi, the Bwende (or Bembe) used a special kind of figure, called niombo, to portray the dead. The niombo consisted of the mummified body wrapped in cloth with cloth-covered straw head, arms, and legs attached.²⁰

¹⁷ for example, being a guardian figure; Doutreloux, Ombre, 221f.

¹⁸ Karl Laman, The Kongo, III (Upsala, 1962), 16, 51, 171f.

¹⁹ see Laman, Kongo, III, plate II and figure 22. The suggestion that these "nkisi" were actually related to a chiefly ancestor figure tradition comes from Laman's Dictionnaire, 528: not only did "Mbenza" refer to a nkisi, but also meant "a great chief; great dignity and title of chief."

²⁰ Laman, Kongo, III, 172; Maes, Grafbeelden, 133.

The eastern Kongo were not famed for their ancestor figures, but rather for their ancestor baskets. Van Wing did make a direct reference to tomb figures in both wood and baked earth.²¹ Finally, the Lovota Mbamba in the area around Ambrizette have produced interesting stone steles.

The stylistic variation among different localities raises the question of the geographic limits of this study. The Kongo ethnic group occupied most of the Lower Congo, spreading as far as the Nyari valley in the north and over much of the highlands to the south of the River. Within this large area, cultural particularisms of all kinds were quite apparent; thus, one could distinguish a group as Vili, or Sundi, or Yombe. But these differences, for the most part, did not obliterate a basic ethnic unity. All the sub-groups were interrelated by genealogical ties,²² and, most importantly, recognized themselves as being similar to the exclusion of strangers.²³ Naturally, peripheral groups like the Bwende or Sosso showed greater divergence from an abstract norm than central groups. The style area with which this paper will be most concerned is the central (San Salvador) Kongo, Vili, Solongo, Yombe, and Sundi.

The mintadi and other ancestor figures could be found in various locations. Throughout all of Kongo, special cemeteries were

²¹ J. Van Wing, Études Bakongo. Sociologie-religion et magic (Louvain, 1959), 310.

²² Albert Doutreloux, "Les Kongo," in Introduction à l'ethnographie du Congo, ed. by J. Vansina (Kinshasa, 1965), 116.

²³ Soret, Kongo, 18.

reserved for the chiefly families.²⁴ Such royal cemeteries were usually secluded in a sacred part of the forest, far from the village and in the care of a special guardian. These sacred groves were restricted and the Kongo often went to great lengths to keep away inquisitive Europeans.²⁵ The sculptures were placed on the grave itself, along with many other objects. The tombs would often be in niches formed by the roots of the trees. Many mintadi felled by the elements or animals, became buried in the deep soil, sinking completely into the ground, where many were preserved and later discovered.²⁶

Other cemeteries also contained ancestor figures. These burial places²⁷ were usually located near the village; Captain Tuckey visited one not more than two hundred yards from its village.²⁸ These cemeteries were arranged by clan and family.²⁹

The north-west Kongo constructed open huts over the graves

²⁴ In central Kongo these were called omanene (Verly, Mintadi, 30); in Vili, xibilia (Dennett, Black Man's Mind, 97); in Mayombe, bidila (Doutreloux, Ombre, 175); in Ntandu, ubansa (Van Wing, Etudes, 30f.) Mbansa also referred to that village where a chief resided; thus, giving the name of "mbansa" to the cemeteries of the deceased chiefs reaffirmed their special status among cemeteries in general and the attitude that the social order of this world and the next paralleled each other. Royal cemeteries also existed in Sundi, Laman, Kongo, III, 195.

²⁵ see Dennett's anecdote in Black Man's Mind, 97, and Burton, Two Trips, II, 111.

²⁶ Verly, Mintadi, 32f.; for the same reasons, wooden figures had so little chance of survival.

²⁷ called ziama (maziama) among the Ntandu, Van Wing, Etudes, 310; and jami by the central Kong, W. Holman Bentley, Dictionary and Grammar of the Kongo Language (London, 1887), 283; and zyami (bi-ziama) by the Sundi, Laman, Dictionnaire, 1180.

²⁸ Tuckey, Zaire, 114.

²⁹ Soret, Kongo, 60.

wherein sculptures and other objects were displayed.³⁰ The eastern Kongo also practiced this custom, but J. Mertens reported seeing an ancestor figure only once.³¹

Special huts, separate from the cemeteries, served as places of safe-keeping for mintadi, other sculptures, and relics. Laman described one such Sundi hut as scrupulously clean and containing only a mug libations and occasionally "an ancestral image made from cloth or wood."³²

These figures also were found in the innermost parts of their owner's home. The consecrated chief kept his mintadi within his enclosure, in his "conjugal chamber, a place always inviolable.... This 'sacred' chamber was called the ngudi a azo, which signified the location, the 'mother' place, the secret place of the home, the center, the place of intimacy."³³ Here the owner venerated and made gifts of palm-wine to the images.³⁴ Now, with an idea of what objects are under consideration and where they were found, let us turn to an examination of them as art.

30 These huts were particularly noticeable in Mayombe; see Delange, Arts, 139, and Maes, Grafbeelden, 133f. Dennett gives a detailed description of a Vili burial hut and the position of the ancestor figure in it, Black Man's Mind, 19.

31 R.P.J. Mertens, "Les chefs eouromnes chez les Bakongo orientaux," Tome XI, fasc. 1 of Institut Royal Colonial Belge, Section des sciences morales et politiques, Memoires, (Brussels, 1942), 352; also see, Van Wing, Etudes, 249.

32 Kongo, III, 195; also see Laman, Kongo I (Upsala, 1953), 83.

33 Verly, Mintadi, 23; ngudi a nzo meant "mother of (in) house."

34 J. Maes, "Les figurines sculptees de Bas-Congo," Africa, III, 193.

Chapter II

Ancestor Figures as Art

This study of the mintadi and ancestor figures as an art form begins with a quick survey of the historical context in which they existed and an examination from internal evidence of the mintadi's historical development. After a few words on Kongo esthetics, the styles of the mintadi and the other ancestor figures are then analyzed.

The mintadi as an art form did not develop in a timeless vacuum. Even as the history of the mintadi was a part of the history of Kongo society, so Kongo history has shaped the artistic growth of the mintadi.

The Kongo Kingdom was founded on the plateaus south of the Congo River in the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries. The king ruling Kongo at the time of the Portuguese arrival in 1482 was between the fourth to seventh king.¹ Even within these limits, by 1500, the kingdom was still fairly young and memories of conquest and founders still fresh.

Written sources give some evidence that stone sculpture existed in King Afonso's time (circa 1480's-1545). The Portuguese urged the Kongo "to renounce idols and fetishist practices;"²

¹ Doutreloux, "Kongo," 116 places the founding in the fifteenth century, while J. Vansina, Kingdoms of the Savannah (Madison, 1968), 38, prefers the fourteenth century. Even if four to seven kings did precede Nzinga Nkuvu, the reigns of the first kings would presumably been short, making a probably time span of under one hundred years.

and Afonso commanded "whoever had any idols...he should bring them forth and deliver them over to the lieutenants of the country."³ Fortunately, Eduardo Lopez also describes the idols that were surrendered; they were figures graven "in wood and stone."⁴ A 1514 letter to the Portuguese king recorded Afonso's speech to his chiefs, wherein he stated, "As for the rocks and wood which you adore, Our Lord gave them to us, the rock to build houses and the wood for fuel."⁵ These references to stone figures do not prove the existence of mintadi in the early sixteenth century, but strongly indicate their presence. Furthermore, patronage by the royal clan and other noble families could easily have stimulated this fifteenth and sixteenth century production of mintadi, representing distinguished and powerful ancestors. Remembering that the conquest of the native Ambundu peoples and establishment of the Kingdom were not long past events, one could expect some sensitivity concerning legitimacy and a strong devotion by Kongolese ruling clans to recent past heroes.

There are isolated indications of mintadi in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Four mintadi from the Lower Congo were

² Ruy da Pina, "Découverte du royaume de Manicongo et sa conversation au Christianisme," trans. from "Ineditos de Historia Portugueza" by J. Cuvelier, Brousse, 2 (1950), p. 23.

³ Eduardo Lopez, as recorded by Philippo Pigafetta, A Report of the Kingdom of Congo, trans. by Abraham Hartwell, in A Collection of Voyages and Travels...., II (London, 1745), P. 562.

⁴ Lopez, Congo, p.563.

⁵ quoted from Antonio Brasio, Monumenta Missionaria Africana, I (Lisbon), in Georges Balandier, Daily Life in the Kingdom of the Kongo (London, 1968), 234.

collected by an Italian missionary in 1695.⁶ Verly estimates many of his mintadi to date from the eighteenth century. Moreover, historical events certainly provided circumstances under which mintadi could assume great importance. After the death of Afonso (circa 1545), successional strife became increasingly bitter in the sixteenth century.⁷ Since possession of mintadi directly or indirectly gave one a claim to descent from powerful ancestors, presumably there was a great demand for them as aids in pursuit of a title. Their production would thus surely have flourished.

The death of Alvare II in 1614 ushered in a period of revolt and near anarchy which lasted until 1641. Succession crises and the rejection of existing patterns of authority on all levels characterized the times. Again, ancestors were important in the struggle for positions of power. Furthermore, when the social order is threatened and prevailing patterns of authority disintegrate, it is quite usual for the people to turn to the ancestors--guardians of the social order.

After the seventeenth century, the descendants of Afonso, the infantes, monopolized almost all titles and positions of authority, from village chief to king. The status derived from being a blood descendant of Afonso was thus very great. Since it is claimed that mintadi could only belong to nobles--or titleholders--mintadi may

⁶ Verly, Mintadi, 56; a picture of one statue appears in Allison Stone Sculpture, opposite 44.

⁷ Vansina, Kingdoms, 66.

have belonged solely to the infantes, as a sign of their descent from Afonso. By the nineteenth century each village had become autonomous; each family had "its patch of ground sacred to the spirit of the earth (Nkissi nsi), its Nganga nsi, the head of the family...."⁸

Not all factors promoted the development of ancestor figures. The very first Christian missionaries in the Kongo advocated the burning of images, and when the missionaries gained any political power wholesale destruction followed. The campaigns destroyed some of the best figures of this style, thus denying models to succeeding generations of artists. The cumulative effect was certainly depressing.

Increased European activity in the late nineteenth century proved fatal to the mintadi. The epidemics and contract labor introduced in the 1890's made their impact on artistic activities as on all other walks of life.⁹ The coming of the European administration dealt a particularly hard blow to the sculpting of mintadi. The Belgian or Portuguese administrator often named as chiefs men who were not of the royal clan, and therefore, in the eyes of the Kongo, having no legitimacy.¹⁰ These new chiefs did not commission new mintadi and the populace no longer accepted these chiefs as heads of the ancestor cult. Van Wing described this disruption of

⁸ Dennett, Notes, 2.

⁹ Laman, Kongo, II (Upsala, 1957), 17f., cites smallpox, bloody diarrhea, and especially sleeping sickness as decimating thickly populated tracts.

¹⁰ Verly, Mintadi, 31

the marriage of political and religious authority in eastern Kongo. "When, following the European domination, the division of authority had been pushed to the extreme, nkisiism, magic, almost completely effaced the ancestor cult in a great number of villages." The last two mintadi sculptors are still remembered by tradition; the last mintadi carver supposedly died in 1910.¹²

Although the mintadi tradition ended in 1910, ancestor figures continued to be made. The tombs of nobles were still decorated with statues, now cement and covered with a corrugated iron roof. These tomb figures depicted the deceased, dressed in his very best, frequently in a position recalling his trade, and surrounded by furniture and crudely painted statuettes representing friends and family.¹³ The model for these cement tombs was European, and they evidenced the Kongo's desire to identify with "modernity" and to exhibit their acculturation.¹⁴ Although these cement tombs are transitional expressions, they are the contemporary transformation of the ancestor figures.

As we have seen, the mintadi have certainly existed for 274 years and probably for five centuries. The mintadi which now are found in African, European, and American collections contain examples

¹² Verly, Mintadi, 18.

¹³ Jacques Valdy, Bakongo (Asster, Belgium, n.d. [1955]), 22.

¹⁴ Albert Doutreloux, in a personal communication, December 3, 1968.

from centuries of artistic production; in this, the mintadi are a fortunate exception, for unlike wood or metal art, the stone has not been totally destroyed by insects or oxidation. From an examination of the extant statues,¹⁵ some idea emerges of what stylistic changes occurred over those hundreds of years.

The very earliest mintadi wore a chiefly cap, the mpu, sometimes decorated with leopard claws. The hairline was quite distinct from the intersection of the mpu and the hair. A circular depression around the edge of the eyes formed them in bas-relief. The rims of the ears were curled at the top to produce a stylized spiral effect. The figures were seated cross-legged. No clothes were included, nor was paint applied; the only female figure in the sample did have tattooing, but no breast cordelette. The only two poses included in this sample were the "thinker" and the mother-child, but there is no reason to suppose that the figures

¹⁵ To arrive at this relative chronology, I examined over forty pictures of mintadi, mostly from Verly, but also from Alison's African Stone Sculpture and several other sources. The total sample numbered over forty works. Not all the pictures were sufficiently defined to provide all the information necessary.

Nine features were examined: headgear (mpu, miter, or cone), hairline (present or not), shape of ears (very spiral, slightly spiral, rounded, or open), position of legs (crossed, seated, standing, kneeling), shape of eyes (round, elongated, or with lids or pupils), clothing (type and presence), paint (present or not), breast cordelette (present or not), and attitude of the body ("thinker"; suppliant, mother-child, cross-armed, holding knife, or miscellaneous active poses). Correlations between these features were noted, as well as they could be without weeks of computations or a computer. The correlations, and thus the results, are therefore very rough.

The gross form of the statues was uniform throughout the sample. All the mintadi had enlarged heads, well-developed chests and torsos, and a casual treatment of the legs. The vertical lines dominated and the form was generally rounded into a cylindrical shape. Since the treatment of mass was the same among the figures, it was not used as a factor in this analysis.

had to be limited to these motifs. In both of "thinker" poses included in this first group of figures, the elbows rested on the knee.

The major weakness in advancing these features as characteristic of the early mintadi is the small sample from which the correlations were made. There were only three mintadi having all these features. Verly does, however, date two of them from the sixteenth century.¹⁶ Sufficient differences do begin to appear in the next set of statues--the one which these mintadi most closely resemble--so as to justify forming two groups. Furthermore, new features, which seem to be natural outgrowths of the characteristics of this first group, correlate highly with all the other features in the second group. The logical conclusion is that the second group was sculpted at a time after the first.



The second, or middle, group of mintadi continued to have the mpu, although a miter-like headgear began to appear (in two out of fourteen cases).¹⁷ A distinct hairline was retained in most instances, but in several statues, the hairline and the edge of the cap merged.¹⁸ Unlike the earlier set which had round eyes, this second group had characteristically elongated eyes, with no lids or pupils. The technique of carving the eyes in relief continued. The number of curls forming the ear increased in some cases also adding a spiral on to the lower portion of the ear, and thus creating a very stylized form. Almost all the figures were seated cross-legged, but a few were kneeling. None included

¹⁶ Mintadi, 59.

¹⁷ One of these mitered figures is definitely a woman, the other probably a man. In an early period men wore miter-like caps and this may have been represented in the mintadi. Later, the miter appeared only on female statues, except in Loango, where both sexes continued having this headgear.

¹⁸ Two thirds of the figures had a distinct hairline and one third did not.

clothes or paint, nor did any of the female figures wear a breast cordelette. A great number of different poses were represented: the familiar "thinker" and mother-childs, as well as suppliant attitudes and figurers holding or playing various objects. This wide diversity of poses was characteristic of each group and the factor of body position had the lowest correlation of all the features.

A third and most recent group was also the most eclectic. The mpu remained popular but the miter made its strongest representation in this set.¹⁹ Both separate and merged hairlines were present, but the latter predominated, indicating a continuing trend towards merging. The eyes consistently had lids or pupils carved (or painted) on the mintadi. The style of the ear changed markedly from the preceding spiral shape. Only a few were spiral, the rest being either round () or open ().²⁰ Seated and standing figures began to appear, although cross-legged and kneeling figures continued.²¹ Many figures had clothing--often of European style--included in the sculpture; some had paint applied to their surfaces.²² The only two female figures with breast cordelettes also fell into this third group. The attitudes

¹⁹ Although nine of the 22 figures in this group wore mpu and only five wore miters, the total number of figures with mpu in the sample was 23 whereas the total with miters was only eight. Therefore, from only this evidence, it would seem that mitered figures were most closely associated with the third grouping.

One wore a cone-like cap and the rest had an odd assortment of headgear.

²⁰ Of the 16 figures in this group whose ears could be classified, only three had spiral ears, eleven round, and two open ended (the only two in the whole sample).

²¹ But again, as in footnote 19, although there were only four seated and five standing figures compared to eight cross-legged and four kneeling, the former assumed a greater importance for this third group because the ratio of the number in this group to the total in

portrayed by these mintadi again ran the full gamut of possibilities. Although "thinkers" were represented, their elbows did not rest on their legs, but were suspended in midair, and their opposite arms did not rest on the hip (as usually was the case) but were tucked under the flexed arm (see figure 1). Maternities and many unconventional positions were depicted.²³

To summarize the apparent shift in features, the mpu gradually gave way to miters and cones; the hairline began to merge with the headgear itself. The eyes shifted from round to elongated, and then added pupils and lids. The ears changed from a slight spiral to a thick spiral, with a round and open style emerging later. Seated and standing positions were added to the more common cross-legged and kneeling ones. Clothing and painting were not included until the later period. These stylistic changes need not have occurred simultaneously--nor can one know when they occurred--but we can surmise the direction of change and arrive at a relative chronology within the parameters of the sixteenth-seventeenth century and 1910.

the sample was 4/5 seated, 5/7 standing, 4/8 kneeling, and 8/19 cross-legged. Thus, it is fair to assert that according to this sample, legs in a seated or standing position were characteristic of this third set of mintadi.

²² Although not all of the mintadi from this group was clothed, or painted had features which classified it in this third set.

²³ Such unconventional attitudes were playing the double gong, holding bottles under the arms, and loading a gun.

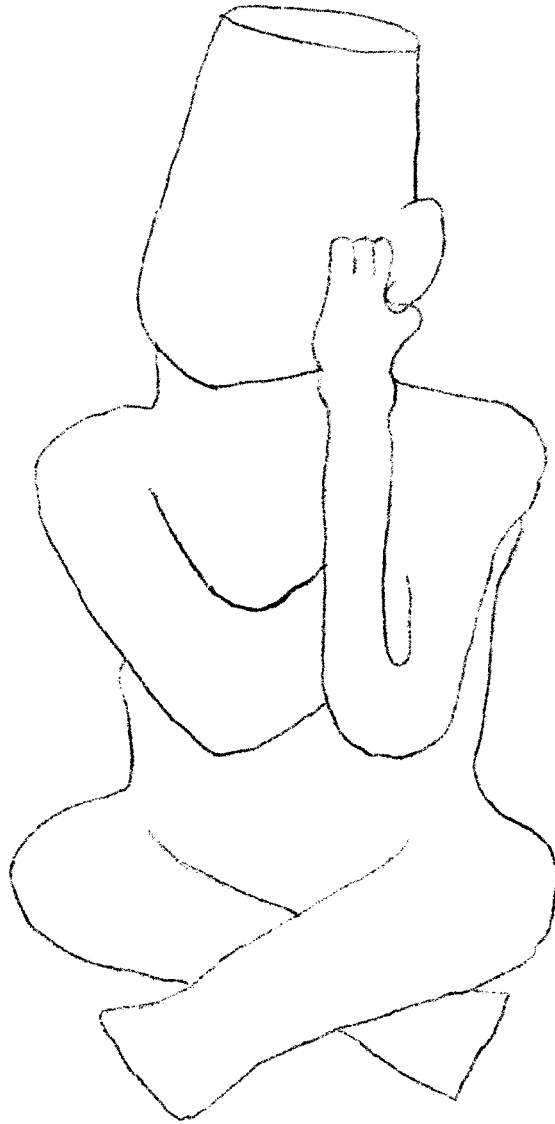


Figure 1

Although we can trace the historical development of styles or give detailed descriptions of them, one of the most important determinants of style has been grossly neglected in the literature. Ethnographers have usually overlooked the esthetics of the studied culture, and the Kongo are no exception. Much material on the function of these figures exists, but practically nothing concerning Kongoese views on what was beautiful or good art.

The difficulty of distinguishing whether a piece was admired because it was esthetically good or because it was useful in a non-esthetic context has previously been noted,²⁴ but many scholars have argued that African art was only functional and the artist was a slave to social norms. Georges Balandier forcefully asserted that Congoese art existed only to serve "the needs of the tribe;" when these social necessities vanished, so did the art²⁵--"African art being by definition religious and utilitarian."²⁶ The artist was held to an ideal dictated by old forms, rather than being allowed to introduce new ones;²⁷ "nothing has been invented by the artist, nothing arises out of fantasy...."²⁸

These views are obviously overstatements. Pechuel-Loesche emphasized the creative spirit of the Vili artists of Loango in the production of their art, and disliked attributing

²⁴ Roy Sieber, "The Arts and their Changing Social Function," Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 96 (January 20, 1962), p. 653.

²⁵ "Les conditions sociologiques de l'art noir," Présence Africaine, 10-11 (1951), p. 60.

²⁶ Verly, Mintadi, 49.

²⁷ A. Maesen, "Traditional Sculpture in the Belgian Congo," The Arts in Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi (Brussels, 1950), 14.

²⁸ Weyns, "Chef-d'oeuvre," p. 77.

all art to functionalism.²⁹ Roosens reported that the Vili had a strongly developed esthetic sense.³⁰ Indeed, the very use of art to command awe, admiration, and respect indicated a strong esthetic spirit. Without this sensibility among the bulk of the people, any old piece would have sufficed, instead of the respect and prestige accruing to a "good" work as opposed to a "shoddy" piece.

One aspect of Kongolesse esthetics is known, however. The Kongo did not want to make their ancestor figures objective representations of the person honored; they were not "real-to-life" portraits. "Negro sculpture aims above all to recreate...the human being in his essential elements. Besides it tends more toward a plastic synthesis than to the exact representation or likeness."³¹ In this sense, the Kongo esthetic valued symbolic portraits rather than exact replicas.

Beyond this very general piece of information, we in fact, do not know what was the Kongo esthetic. This lack forms the greatest gap in our knowledge about Kongo art and the greatest obstacle to our understanding the ancestor figures as a Mukongo understood them.

One set of factors affecting Kongo styles, yet which were not related to internal developments, were borrowings from non-Kongo peoples. Many hypotheses have been put forward about the

²⁹ in Roosens, *Mère*, 61.

³⁰ *Mère*, 67; but he fails to say anything about that sense, besides simply letting us know it exists.

³¹ Maesen, "Traditional Sculpture," 11.

origins of such features.³² The habitation of the Lower Congo by bushmanoid and pygmy peoples previous to the Kongo population is quite likely. Some have attributed the steatopygy of several statues to early Kongo contact with bushmanoid peoples.³³ Representatives of pygmies continued to play an important role in the consecration of the Kongo king as masters of the earth; they may also have contributed some elements to Kongo style.³⁴

Of far greater certainty are European influences on ancestor figures, although the degree of impact is open to debate.³⁵ Western clothing appeared on the figures in the nineteenth century and some even displayed printed Roman letters. Mintadi had sculpted or painted crosses and Christian pendants. A tendency to naturalistic rendering of the human body may be the child of European influences,³⁶ but could very well be indigenous. But no matter what traits were assimilated from European or any other models, the Kongo reinterpreted whatever they borrowed and integrated these features into their culture.³⁷

It is important to emphasize again the symbolic nature of these figures. Precisely because the mintadi did not represent exact likenesses, but symbolic portraits, the details of

32 One of the most fanciful is Verly's belief that immigrants from Sierra Leone brought the Kissi stone carving tradition; this idea gained support in Battell's report that the Jaga came from Sierra Leone. See Verly, Mintadi, 13, and Demmett, Notes, xvii.

33 Verly, Mintadi, 50f.

34 Doutreloux, "Kongo," 118.

35 Contrary to most opinions, Jean Laude, Les arts de l'Afrique noire (Paris, 1966), 660, dismisses European influence on Kongo artists, in particular, the assertion that Vili reliquaries were mere imitations of European models.

36 Leuzinger, Sculpture, 178; Weyns, "Chef-d'oeuvre," p.81.

37 personal communication from Albert Doutreloux. The best known example of the Kongo's borrowing a form from the European and completely transforming its significance and function are the copper crucifixes from the Lower Congo. The cross, or santu, served as a hunting fetish, which was smeared with the blood of a fresh kill to maintain its power, and as a symbol of the chief's judicial power to settle disputes, which he received at his coronation. See, Tata Nsiesie, "Notes sur les christes et statues de l'ancien Congo," Brousse, 3 (1939), pp. 32-34, and R. L. Wannyn, "Les crucifix anciens au Bas-Congo."

expression, gesture, and ornaments became extremely important because they individualized and gave significance to the statue in the eyes of a Mukongo.³⁸ Therefore, the figures showed an extraordinary precision in detail and careful rendering of ornaments. The results were extremely naturalistic carvings, but not photographic copies of real persons.

By defining style as a combination of discernible morphological elements, the observer can go far toward an understanding of these ancestor figures by means of stylistic analysis.³⁹ The general shape of the block of wood or; stone from which the statue was carved provided the limits within which the form had to take shape. Very often the completed work reflected the original block,⁴⁰ yet a great diversity of forms did exist. The "thinker" style always tilted the head to one side as it rested on a hand; the angle of the face varied from slightly downward to upward.⁴¹ The arms were almost always detached from the body, one arm supporting the head, the other usually placed on the hip.⁴¹ The trunk leaned to the side of the supporting arm. The cross-legged position was most common.

The heads of the maternity mintadi usually faced straight forward, but occasionally would be turned slightly to the side or facing upward. In none of the figures did the mother look down

³⁸ Weyns, "Chef-d'oeuvre," p.76.

³⁹ In addition, such a definition avoids the seemingly insurmountable problems introduced by a "style" which is a metaphysical structure integrating disparate morphological elements; see Albert Maesen, "Styles et expériences esthetique dans la plastique congolaise," *Problèmes d'Afrique Centrale*, 44 (1959), p.88.

⁴⁰ Maesen, "Traditional Sculpture," 12f.; Weyns, "Chef-d'Oeuvre," p.78.

⁴¹ The right arm supported the head as frequently as the left arm.

at the child, which usually had a very minor position within the total work. The arms were detached from, but kept close to the body. The trunks stood upright, but the torso enlarged from the waist up, forming broad shoulders. These figures generally sat cross-legged, with the legs given only the most superficial representation.

A third distinctive position was the "suppliant." The heads were thrown back, with uplifted faces. The upper arms remained attached to the body. The arms flexed at the elbow so that the forearms extended in front of the body, palms raised, in a supplicating gesture. The trunk leaned slightly backwards or remained vertical. The legs were in a kneeling position. The suppliants, like all the mintadi, had overly enlarged heads, with a great deal of detail discernible.

These three positions by no means were the only. Almost any scene could be depicted by a mintadi. Figures portrayed drummers beating, hunters loading their guns, a chief resting his feet on a decapitated body while holding the head, and even an adultery scene⁴² including the husband, the dead lover, and the strangled wife. ~~All~~ though technically asymmetrical, the figures did reflect the natural symmetry of the human body.

The mpu, or Kongolese chiefly hat, appeared on many of the statues. Among the western Kongo, the word mpú signified the power,⁴³ dignity, and command of the chief. The mpu was closely identified with chieftainship and for this reason was often used. The

⁴² A picture of this mintadi appears in Delange, Art, between 140-141; it supposedly came from the Massif of Novi (Noqui?), in Angola.

⁴³ Laman, Dictionnaire.

occasional use of leopard claws on the cap also served to link it with kingship. The earliest description of the mpu comes from the late sixteenth century,⁴⁴ and chiefs still wore it three hundred years later.⁴⁵ Barros described another type of chiefly cap: "a very high cap, like a miter, made of a fine fabric of palm and embroidered in relief..."⁴⁶ This miter-like hat may very well be the model for the high, peaked caps on both wood and stone mintadi, especially the maternities.

The facial features, like the entire head, were very carefully rendered. The eyes, either round or elongated, were formed by carving a depression around their rims, thus setting off the eye in bas-relief. Only later were lids or pupils added. Then, instead of being in relief, the eyes were carved out and the pupils made by a hole in the middle of the eye, creating a fixed gaze. Lids often made the figure appear drowsy. An alternative to carving the pupils or lids was to paint them. The noses were not flattened, but included broad fleshy bases. The stone mintadi consistently retained a closed mouth, with raised lips, whereas wood mintadi often had open mouths to display their filed teeth, a sign of prestige.⁴⁷

Jewelry also designated high prestige. Many figures wore necklaces,⁴⁸ and some wore bracelets. Many of the maternity figures wore a breast cordelette, probably to lift the breasts.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Lopez, Congo, p.572.

⁴⁵ J.J. Monteiro, Angola and the River Congo, I, 256; Laman, Kongo, II, 152f.

⁴⁶ W.G.L. Randles, L'ancien royaume du Congo des origines à la fin du XIXe siècle (Paris, 1968), 48.

⁴⁷ The distinction was probably a product of the medium being used. To carve the open mouth and teeth in stone would have been difficult.

⁴⁸ which Verly designated as a royal necklace called m'budji; Mintadi, 59.

Tattoos, having several connotations, indicated the courage and strength of the woman who had undergone the operation; a highly tattooed girl was considered erotic and esthetically valued by the Kongo. Basketry, raffia, and ivory carvings often provided the designs.

Although later figures often wore clothes, those mintadi without apparel never displayed any sexual members; this is particularly noteworthy since the mintadi represented ancestors. The sex of each statue could be determined only by other characteristics and sometimes not at all.

Various other articles were occasionally included in the statues. A few mintadi had the royal knife, which again associated the figure with chieftainship. Objects linked to prestigious occupations were also carved, such as drums, double gongs, and guns.

Several European observers have recorded their subjective impressions of these mintadi. A deliberative, reflective, and sagacious attitude has christened the best known group the "thinker."

49 Tuckey and Van Overbergh claimed the purpose was to flatten and reduce the breasts, but Weyns agreed with Pechuel-Loesche that the cordelette straightened and lifted the breasts; the figures seemed to indicate this; Weyns, "Chef-d'oeuvre," p.74.

50 Roosens, Mère, 48; only women, and not men, were tattooed.

51 Eliot Eliosofon and William Fagg, The Sculpture of Africa (New York, 1958), 191; Weyns, "Chef-d'oeuvre," 75; Weyns suggests that the tattoo motifs periodically changed and that because of their careful rendering by the sculptor, a study of tattoos could yield information and chronology. This idea seems very reasonable, but the pictures at my disposal were far too few and ill-defined for such a study.

52 Dennett, Black Man's Mind, 75, called this knife of office "ximpaba" and a chief's ceremonial knife was labeled "kimphaba" by the Tervuren traveling exhibition. Laman's Dictionnaire gives mpaba (meaning engraved, carved) coming from vaba, to break, to cut, to fashion (with an ax).

This quiet and reflective impression also applied to the wood min-
 53
 tadi. While described by some as calm almost to the point of be-
 54
 ing priestly, others noted the movement and dynamism of the pieces,
 which says something about the value of strictly subjective im-
 pressions. More agreement exists on their monumental character.
 Although rarely taller than 50 centimeters, the unnaturally en-
 larged head, balanced against the simple masses of the body and
 55
 arms, created a massive-looking statue.

Very little can be said about the variety and development of
 styles in wood mintadi (see Appendix, figure A) for the simple rea-
 son that only very recent examples have survived the insects and
 the climate. Because late nineteenth century wood mintadi appeared
 very much like their stone counterparts, there is some reason to
 expect that wood figures, now vanished, also followed the styles
 preserved in surviving mintadi. The late nineteenth century wood
 56
 mintadi wore mostly miters, with some mpu-like caps. The hair-
 line had generally disappeared. All the eyes had pupils and/or
 lids, some having glass inlaid eyes. Most had round ears and open
 mouths, showing filed teeth. The standing or seated positions
 appeared most frequently, but some were seated cross-legged. These
 figures were usually clothed and painted.

As for the other wooden ancestor figures, many of the same
 observations made about the mintadi above apply to them; only their

53 Allison, Stone Sculpture, 45.

54 see Franz M. Olbrechts, Les arts plastiques du Congo belge
 (Brussels, 1959), 45, and Verly, Mintadi, 47f., for these contrary
 viewpoints.

55 Leuzinger, Sculpture, 178.

56 This description of the wood mintadi comes from an exami-
 nation of 3 pictures in Maes, Grafbeelden, plates XXIX and XXX,
 three in Leuzinger, Sculpture, 179-181, and from personal photo-
 graphs of a figure in the Tervuren traveling exhibition.

special characteristics will be described below. The mother-child figures (see Appendix, figure B) usually had miter hats, no hair-line, round ears, pupils and eyelids, and open mouths. Unlike the mintadi, they invariably sat cross-legged. Although some were painted, most retained a very fine natural patina. A lack of psychological or artistic contact between the mother--the dominant figure--and the child--an almost forgotten part of the statue--characterized this genre. Another outstanding feature of these statues was the special attention given to the tattoos on the shoulders, backs, and breasts.

Other wooden ancestor figures also existed. Usually fashioned out of light wood, they were often decorated with all kinds of ornaments. Beads, crucifixes, charms, amulets, and fetishes hung from the figures, and the Kongo especially liked uniforms to dress the statues. Naturally, paint was also applied to these pieces. Red was associated with puberty and sex; yellow symbolized innocence; orange, appreciation of goodness; purple, grief; and indigo blue, mourning.

In the north, the Bwende made a special kind of ancestor figure, the niombo (see Appendix, figure C). The head of the niombo was sometimes made during the person's lifetime.

57 This description draws on the collection in Roosens, Mère; 156-195; Leuzinger, Sculpture, 181,183; Eckert von Sydow, Afrikanische Plastik (New York, 1954), 61; and Warren M. Robbins, African Art in American Collections (New York, 1966), 203.

58 Roosens, Mère, 40.

59 Roy Sieber, "African Tribal Sculpture" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, State University of Iowa, 1957), p.260.

60 Dennett saw one ancestor figure wearing a British naval uniform, Black Man's Mind, 19f.

61 among the Vili, Dennett, Notes, 20, and the Sundi, Laman, Kongo, II, 27f.

62 Dennett, Black Man's Mind, 141f.

This head consisted of straw covered with cotton material. The open mouth showed filed teeth and the eyes were painted in. The large stuffed body was made to stand or sit and was painted with various symbols and designs.

The stone steles from the Ambrizette area (see Appendix, figure D) represented women--body and face in profile--nursing or carrying a child. The bodies and legs of both mother and child were carved in bas-relief on a slab of steatite, but the heads were carved in the round and affixed atop the slab.

Before leaving this stylistic analysis of the ancestor figures, a word about the techniques of carving would be appropriate. The plateaus in the region of the Lower Congo abound in sericite-schist rock, or mica which has lost some of its elasticity and become powdery and soft. The rock was not quarried from the ground, but hauled from river beds during the dry season. Observing the natural proportions of the stone, the artist sketched his lines on the sides of the block before working the material, which was done when the rock was wet, and thus softer. The carver used small adzes and knives to cut the stone. The main technical difficulties the sculptor in both wood and stone encountered were

63 This description is from Manker, in Maes, Grafbeelden, 134.

64 see Michel Leiris and Jacqueline Delange, Afrique noire. La creation plastique (Paris, 1967), 243, and Allison, Stone Sculpture, 45.

65 Tuckey, Zaire, 135; Verly, Mintadi, 25.

66 Verly, Mintadi, 26f

67 These were the same tools that the woodcarver used. See Allison, Stone Sculpture, 43; and Maes, Grafbeelden, 130.

Linguistic evidence also indicates that woodcarving was done with a knife. A woodcarver was known as mvadi anti (Laman, Dictionnaire) or mvadi a nti (Bentley, Dictionary), from the word vala, "to cut; to sculpt in wood;...shape with a knife." (Laman, Dictionnaire). Further evidence that woodcarving preceded the mintadi is the generally cylindrical form of these figures. Although the stones may have been shaped by water, the rounded and trunk-like form suggests a wood prototype.

the disproportion resulting from the enlargement of the head and
the representing of the head in foreshortened perspective.⁶⁸ The
latter problem was never resolved and, therefore, the faces never
turned very far from the frontal position.

The above has presented exactly what morphological elements
constituted Kongo ancestor figures and mintadi. These features
have changed over the past few centuries, but these styles have
not existed and developed in a vacuum. Some of the broad histor-
ical forces at work have been touched on, yet many other factors
influenced the style of these figures. The statues were integra-
ted with an entire culture and they responded to developments in
that culture. Therefore, to better understand the mintadi and
Kongo ancestor figures, the next chapter probes the interrelations
between Kongo society and the figures, in one particular century.

⁶⁸ Roosens, Mère, 40.

Ancestor Figures as Artifacts of
Kongo Society in the Nineteenth Century

Although the student of Kongolese history is very fortunate to have relatively abundant sources, an attempt to articulate ancestor figures with the rest of Kongo culture in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries would require an immense effort of archival work.¹ Therefore, the study of the sociological implications of these ancestor figures will be limited to the nineteenth century when more adequate data is available. After a look at the belief and value systems, this chapter examines the social functions the figures fulfilled and the place of the artist in the society.

The beliefs about the ancestors naturally had a great influence on the use of the ancestor figures, thus making necessary a consideration of the ancestor cult and Kongo cosmology in general. Nzambi supposedly created everything on earth and the skies; he was the origin and master of all vital forces.² His character, however, was never clearly delineated. Nzambi remained vague, immobile, and ambivalent;³ he caused both good and evil. No ritual grew up around the Nzambi belief; several authors reiterate that the Kongo used Nzambi's name mainly as an oath or ejaculation.⁴ More-

¹ Even W. G. L. Randles, in his far more extensive work L'ancien Royaume du Congo, 47, admitted that he had found little evidence for the existence of an ancestor cult in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and nothing about the relations between the ancestors and the kings.

² Soret, Kongo, 90f; Laman, Kongo, III, 53.

³ G. Widengren maintained that Nzambi was the power of fate, both good and evil, in Efraim Andersson, Messianic Popular Movements in the Lower Congo (Upsala, 1958), 13.

⁴ Dennett, Notes, 2f.; Andersson, Movements, 13f.; Laman, Kongo, III, 57.

over, even this little importance given to Nzambi appeared to be a recent development in the late nineteenth century. In the decade of the 1880's, Swedish missionaries in the Lower Congo did not mention Nzambi once in their letters.⁵ What may have been the pre-nineteenth century concept seems impossible to say, because the effects are unknown of Christian mission teachings, which identified Nzambi with God:

Nkisi literally meant a medicine,⁶ power, or force; it designated all unknown powers which manifested themselves in an extraordinary manner.⁷ No ethical characteristic or quality was implied.⁸ The term nkisi usually referred to carved figures in which these unknown powers could be harnessed and manipulated. The statues, which have no inherent power themselves, were fused with nkisi by means of consecration and bilongo (medicines).⁹ Any individual could use nkisi to hurt his enemies and to protect himself; but the ~~nkisi~~¹⁰ were generally employed when the nature of the concern was natural or biological. Each disease or manifestation of a disease had one or more nkisi to cause or cure it; there were

5 Andersson, Movements, 12; Laman, who arrived in the Kongo in 1891, claimed that "in the old days" people seldom referred to Nzambi but concerned themselves with minkisi and bandoki, Kongo, III, 55.

6 Bentley, Dictionary; Laman, Dictionnaire.

7 Doutreloux, "Kongo," 125.

8 One missionary reported, "Concerning these spiritual powers, however, beliefs are very uncertain and wavering," in Andersson, Movements, 20; Dennett, Black Man's Mind, 167 also affirms the nkisi's unknown and ambivalent quality when he called "kici" the mysterious inherent quality in things.

9 Grasses, plants, trees, and herbs were often nkisi; Dennett, Notes, 9 stated "The Nkisi grows with the plant out of the earth." Andersson, Movements, 20, lists pig bells, red earth, and snake heads as other possible bilongo, indicating that the practically unlimited number of possibilities.

10 This is not to suggest that the nature of nkisi power was restricted to such events, but that the Kongo often looked to these belief beings when the problem at hand was natural or biological in character. It should be made explicit, however, that no rigid system of cause and effect existed in the minds of the Kongo. A Mukongo may have dealt with one problem by using nkisi at one time

rain, wind, and lightning nkisi. Several nkisi dealt with fertil-¹¹
ity; others killed their victims or protected their users in war.

Ndoki were evil-doers, either living or dead, who used their power and the power of nkisi to harm others. Sickness, death, natural calamities, and even social dissention were generally thought to result from the work of ndoki. Thus, when a grave crisis did not respond to the usual remedies, the Kongo searched for ndoki and killed them. The ndoki's death thus provided a scapegoat and¹² assured a return to the natural order.

The nature of the nkita spirits varied from group to group among the Kongo. Among the central Kongo the nkita may have repre-¹³sented "original ancestors, heroes, who died violent deaths." This concept was compatible with the Sundi "nkita za nsi," guardian spi-¹⁴rits of the country. Nkita were frequently associated with the water and sea also.

Another spirit with various and apparently shifting qualities was the simbi. They were related to both land and water spirits and to the ancestors. Among the eastern Kongo, the list of all the rivers passed on their way to the kingdom was recited at the royal coronation. The Kinda, the earth spirit, has practically assim-¹⁶ilated the simbi in Mayombe. There simbi also resided in marshes, pools, or rivers.

¹¹For the various uses of nkisi see Andersson, Movements, 20; Dennett, Notes, 4, 138; Laman, Kongo, II, 1; and W. Holman Bentley, Pioneering on the Congo, I (London, 1900), 260.

¹²Georges Balandier, Sociologie Actuelle (Paris, 1955), 376; it is significant that accusations of kindokism and the consequent poison ordeals were only reverted to when problems had first been referred to nkisi or the ancestors. Ndoki tests appeared to be the last recourse from all sorts of evils.

¹³Balandier, Daily Life, 246.

¹⁴Laman, Kongo, III, 34.

¹⁵This ceremony was called bisimbi bi nsi, Mertens, Chefs couronnés, 60.

¹⁶Among some groups the simbi and kinda have been completely

The central Kongo considered simbi water spirits. Inter-¹⁷
 estingly, the word given by Bentley for simbi (ximbi) appeared¹⁸
 related to the verb ximba, to keep, uphold, support, sustain.
 The Sundi believed that the simbi were human beings who had died
 on earth, then after a very long life in the land of the dead died
 again, becoming termite hills. Here again, the simbi were often¹⁹
 regarded as spirits of the dead. The similarities between the
 simbi and ancestors were striking. The former divided themselves
 into kin groups; they watched over the living members of their own
 clan. Their function was to safeguard the country (nsi).²⁰

Apparently the simbi concept in the nineteenth century resul-
 ted from the combining of ancestor and nature spirits into one²¹
 identity. Which beliefs were older is difficult to prove, but
 no other body of "nature" spirits existed while ancestors' beliefs
 and cult did.

When a member of the kin group²² died, he became an ancestor.
 The ancestors were called bankulu; evil ancestors had special names
 in Mayombe (tembo) and Sundi (nkuyu). This distinction between good
 ancestors (who lived in a village much like an earthly one) and evil
 ones (who had to roam through the countryside, homeless) was conso-

17 Bentley, Dictionary, 503.

18 Bentley, Dictionary,

19 Laman, Kongo, III, 33-35.

20 Laman, Kongo, III, 33f.

21 The continued existence of a separate group of "ancestors"
 tends to argue for the prior belief in ancestors. What may well
 have occurred was the assimilation of ancestor practices intro-
 duced by an immigrating group, which had to accept or at least
 to deal with the established gods of the land which the immi-
 grants hoped to settle legitimately.

22 The mvumu was the matrilineal nuclear family; the kanda (clan)
 was an extension of the mvumu including ancestors. Although the
 kanda was exogamous, the mvila, which included several kanda, was
 not necessarily exogamous, and seemed to correspond to such sub-
 groups as Sundi, Yombe, Bwende, etc. Laman, Kongo, 48, 130;
 Doutreloux, "Kongo," 121.

nant with the belief that an ancestor retained his earthly nature and personality.

The ancestor cult did not have the same importance throughout Kongo. To the south of the Congo River and in the eastern regions (Ntandu) the ancestor cult was central to the socio-political life of the community. In Mayombe, however, the ancestors played only a secondary role.²³ The Sundi closely linked the ancestors with the simbi, and the Yombe and central Kongo associated the nkita with the ancestors.²⁴ An even more curious form were the minkisi called Nakongo, Nasuni, and Nambenza, representing great heroes and founders of the tribes of Kongo, Sundi, Mbenza, etc.²⁵

The cult of the ancestors assumed such great importance because of the Kongo's emphasis on social solidarity. This social ethic dictated not only strong ties between living members of the clan, but between the living and the dead as well.²⁶ Not only did the ancestors need sacrifices and ceremonies, but they were also seen as guardians of the social order. To behave in a socially sanctioned manner was to please the ancestors.

In turn, the Kongo felt dependent on the ancestors. The ancestors could withhold the good things of life (fertility, health) and send calamitous evil as punishment for the living's misbehaviour,

²³ Albert Doutreloux, "Introduction à la culture Kongo," in Miscellanea Ethnographica, ed. by L. de Sousberghe, et al. (Tervuren, 1963), 145; Doutreloux, Ombre, 229.

²⁴ Doutreloux, Miscellanea, 149.

²⁵ Laman, Kongo, III, 67, 72.

²⁶ Leon Kochnitzky, Shrines of Wonder (New York, 1952), 9, Laman, Kongo, III, 20, illustrated the solidarity orientation of this ethic by listing the qualities of a good man among the Sundi: he was compassionate and generous, conformed to the laws, helped members of the family and orphans, did not torment slaves, and made big contributions at burials.

or the nkulu could bestow fertility and peace and protect against evil for proper social conduct. The strength of this dependence was illustrated by the importance attached to a proper burial of a relative. The survivors often sacrificed greatly to be able to
27
fulfill the burial obligations.

Other rites involving the ancestors were the weekly palm wine libations, the occasional sacrifices upon completion of some suc-
28
cessful venture, and the annual repair of the village cemetery. Upon extraordinary circumstances, such as a drought, sickness, or barrenness, the village went to the cemetery, appealed to the ancestors, made sacrifices, and smeared themselves with grave earth. Individuals often appealed to the ancestors when family disputes
29
arose or clan matters were not satisfactory to everyone.

Given these beliefs about the ancestors, the Kongo not unexpectedly carved many different forms of ancestral figures. Their
30
functions, however, as ancestor figures, were similar. These statues were carved primarily for chiefs and titleholders. Nor was
31
their purpose solely decorative, although they certainly did have great ornamental value.

27 For two individual examples see L. Philippart, Le Bas-Congo. Etat religieux et social (Louvain, 1929), 22f., and Dennett, Notes, 156.

28 This annual celebration was reported for at least the Vili, Mayombe, Kongo, Sundi, and Ntandu; Dennett, Seven Years Among the Fjort (London, 1887), 51; Doutreloux, Miscellanea, 145; Laman, Kongo, III, 46; and Van Wing, Etudes, 116.

29 Laman, Kongo, III, 45. The main types of problems brought before the ancestors--but by no means the only ones--seemed to pertain to clan or village-wide matters. This view was also expressed by Van Wing, Etudes, 118, and Balandier, Sociologie, 325f.

30 Sieber, "African Tribal Sculpture," 256f., pointed out that different style figures served the same function; and Roosens, Mère, 68f. stated that the same forms--the mother-child--performed various functions.

First, the figures provided a receptacle, a "home," for the spirit of the deceased. As such the mintadi and other figures were considered the "living" double of the ancestor.³²

A primary function was protection. Verly suggests that the making of mintadi began when a chief had to go away from home for a while and wanted to leave a consecrated figure of himself to protect his home and family. If he died away from home, his spirit would enter the statue, thus making it his "double."³³ However the mintadi originated, the Kongo of the nineteenth century certainly did look to them for protection. The living's dependence on the ancestors has previously been noted, and many Kongolese phrases and proverbs also indicated this dependence.³⁴ Fear of punishment for not sufficiently honoring the dead fostered such a feeling.³⁵ The Kongo propitiated the ancestors at special times when their protection was needed, such as war or child-birth. In Mayombe, a very interesting stone sculpture was used in a ceremony to make warriors invincible.³⁶ The ancestor figures also protected against the power of nkisi. In a Vili burial, the figures were directly re-

31 This position is held by Verly, Mintadi, 22f., and Roosens, Mère, 64; although Delange, Arts, 14, asserts that tombs of commoners also had figures. In the nineteenth century probably only freemen-nobles had ancestor figures made, and not slaves.

32 Verly, Mintadi, 22f.

33 Mintadi, 19.

34 Such sayings included: "the ancestors are listening to us;" "the ancestors have smoothed things out;" "the ancestors never sleep;" "may the ancestors judge us;" Doutreloux, Ombre, 228.

35 Manker, in Maes, Grafbeelden, 134.

36 This stone figure, the tadi dya Mbumba, had a hole through which the nganga blew smoke on the warriors to immunize them against their enemies. The stone apparently rested in the middle of the village and was associated with Mbumba, who assured peace, fecundity, and protection against infant mortality. The comparison with the mintadi and the ancestors is most interesting. Doutreloux, Ombre, 217, 221f.

37

quested to protect the family from evil; ancestral sculptures also caused uneasiness and premonitions in their owners if any danger threatened.

38

In addition, there may be some linguistic evidence for the protective function of the mintadi.

39

dence for the protective function of the mintadi.

Another fundamental function of the ancestor figures was to preserve the social order. The very memories of the deceased which the statues evoked were not individualistic, but those of the persons' social positions. The role of the ancestors, and thus of the statues, was regulatory and homeostatic. The figures tied the living to the past, and the power of the ancestors and tradition enforced the code of social behavior which promoted cohesion and stability--very necessary social functions. The derivation of the word for mintadi gives further evidence of this function. In the Sundi dialect, mutádi meant "spectator, observer, spy," and also meant a kind of "nkisi." Mutadi was related to the verb tála: "to see, look after; search for, take guard; survey; observe; contemplate; examine; notice." A regular derivation of the verb tála was the agent-noun, ntádi: "someone who watches, who surveys,

37 Dennett, Notes, 113.

38 Reported from Sundi, Laman, Kongo, III, 51.

39 The word ntadi (mintadi) may be related to the noun ntanini (central Kongo) or ntaanini (Sundi) which meant defender and protector. This noun was related to the verb tànina, to protect, to guard. Laman, Dictionnaire, and Bentley, Dictionary.

40 J. Maes, "Les figurines sculptées du Bas-Congo," Africa, III, 3 (1936), p.359.

41 Randles, Congo, 44.

42 Laman, Dictionnaire, this evidence strongly supports the belief that mutádi referred to an ancestral figure.

43

guards the body." In the central Kongo dialect also tala meant "to look" and ntadi, "onlooker, looker-on." If the word mintadi did indeed derive from the verb tála, the probability would be great that the figures were considered not as merely beneficent guardians showering blessings and warding off evil, but rather as observers, maintaining close vigilance over behavior in order to reward those who promoted the social welfare and to punish those who disregarded social norms. In this case, a more appropriate appellation for the "thinkers" would be the "observers."

The ancestor figures also served to bolster political authority. The wene (or mwene) was the spiritual force inherited through the matrilineal line that gave the chief the right and moral authority to rule his people. The ancestor statues in the possession of the chief physically embodied his links with the ancestors, the source of all power and legitimacy.

Another function of the figures was to display status. Many of the details on the statues only indicated social standing and did not necessarily symbolize anything. The stone mintadi were more prestigious than the wooden figures; the presence of the royal cap, knife, or mwala (scepter) also pointed out high status. The filed teeth conveyed the importance and beauty of the ancestor. Jewelry, such as a leopard-tooth necklace, signified chieftainship and very high prestige, as did ivory bracelets in Loango and Mayombe.

43 Laman, Dictionnaire.

44 Bentley, Dictionary.

45 Dennett, Notes, 135; Doutreloux, Ombre, 179; Leiris and Delange, Afrique, 332; also see Laman, Dictionnaire, 648, for definition of mwene.

46 Roosens, Mère, 64.

47 Weyns, "Chef-d'Oeuvre," p.73.

Copper Lemba bracelets were reserved for people of high social rank. Intricate tattoos characterized strong, beautiful, and much desired
48
women. Indeed, the status derived from one's occupation was also included in the nineteenth century statues; thus mintadi incorporated the colonial medallions of a chief or the clothes iron of a
49
domestic servant.

Fertility, associated with prestige, wealth, perfection, and even the blessings of the ancestors, was signified in the mother-child tomb figures. The maternities had human fertility as their
50
symbolic value, and many progeny was the gift of the ancestors. A large number of offspring betokened the blessing of the ancestors. It strengthened the kanda and made the group wealthier, which in itself conferred high prestige. A woman who had borne many children had the standing of a great chief.
51

Finally, the tomb figures served the simple function of commemorating a dead relative or friend. Bittremieux noticed that the Yombe statues, called biniyongi, were memorials, like a tombstone
52
in Europe. The word biningu meant an attitude of being seated quietly and silently because of grief.
53
Among all the other social needs fulfilled by these ancestor figures, this very human function should not be overlooked. (Figure 2).

The same characteristics of nineteenth century Kongo society which shaped the significance and function of the ancestor figures also affected the makers of these statues. The concept of the "big

48 Bittremieux, in Weyns, "Chef-d'Oeuvre," p.75.

49 Maes, Grafbeelden, 133.

50 Roosens, Mère, 89.

51 Laman, Kongo, II, 17.

52 In Maes, Grafbeelden, 167.

53 Laman, Dictionnaire.



Figure 2

man," full of power, which the ancestors epitomized, applied to the stereotype of the Kongolese artist. The stratification of Kongo society was expressed by both the mintadi's exclusive possession by freemen and the special status enjoyed by the sculptors. The carvers of mintadi sought after and obtained the very prestige that their figures so very much served to display and glorify.

The Kongo defined an artist as a man who had the particular power to create a materialization of a spirit such as a mintadi, because of an inherited gift from an ancestor. An artist was one who put some of his own self and power into a piece of wood or stone.

Sculpting, an exclusively masculine occupation, was done on commission by professional sculptors. Verly was able to collect the names of the last two professional makers of mintadi in the region of the Noqui Massif. Malandu Tandu, a freeman, worked in the village of Kivola and instructed a slave Kinkela N'Gombe, of Kilumbo, in his art. Kinkela was freed because of his talent and lived to an old age. He died in 1910.

Malandu Tandu must have conducted a school to train young sculptors. The development of "schools" of style is not impossible. Probably in residence at a chief's court, the master carver could pass on his skills to those eager to learn.

Many young men indeed eagerly learned the secrets of carving, for being a sculptor brought very high rewards. Good artists gained

54 Verly, Mintadi, 44f.

55 Soret, Kongo, 62.

56 Laman, Kongo, I 130; Doutreloux, Ombre, 175; Sieber, "African Tribal Sculpture," 253.

57 Verly, Mintadi, 18.

58 At least 2 sources mention such schools: Roosens, Mère, 40, and Verly, Mintadi, 27.

a reputation so that great chiefs tried to persuade them to settle at their respective courts. A parallel with the position of the smith is appropriate. Sculpting, like smithing, held special honor, but sculptors were considered with some uneasiness and suspicion because of their relations with the supernatural. But like other Kongo, the artist gained much of his prestige from his wealth; these sculptors often became wealthy, rendering their services at very high prices.

59 Laman, Kongo, I 121; Soret, Kongo, 49.

60 Roosens, Mere, 67.

Chapter IV

Conclusion

Albert Maesen has written that a work of art is entirely integrated in and conditioned by the cultural complex and that all artistic manifestations are narrowly connected with their society's activities and functions.¹ This is true insofar as art does relate to the beliefs and the normative values of its culture and plays a useful role in that culture. The stylistic peculiarities of the mintadi and other ancestor figures, presented in Chapter II, found an explanation in terms of belief, value, and function in Chapter III.

Ancestor figures, mintadi probably among them, flourished in Alfonso's time. A connection may have existed between the ancestors and the earth spirits, which reflected relatively recent establishment of the Kingdom would also have promoted the carving of mintadi in this period. Although the missionaries occasionally mounted "fetish"-burning campaigns throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the production of mintadi received considerable impetus from successional struggles and the proliferation of the infantes. The Kongo borrowed stylistic elements such as clothing and lettering from the Europeans, but the direct European intervention into Kongo life at the end of the nineteenth century finally ended the mintadi tradition. The end of consecrated chiefs in the colonial period destroyed the raison d'être of the royal mintadi. Despite fairly moderate changes in headgear and hairline;

¹ "Traditional Sculpture," 10.

facial features, clothing, and finish, the mintadi maintained a remarkable stylistic continuity throughout its long history. The negligible changes in the poses, proportions, and rounded treatment of the figures attest to an amazing artistic, if not necessarily social, stability.

The beliefs that supernatural spirits caused natural events and that the ancestors were concerned with and oversaw human beings manifested themselves in the creation of stone and wood figures. Individual stylistic elements expressed the commonly held values of fertility, wealth, courage, and power. The symbolism of the statues reinforced the values of age and clan cohesion and stability. The production and display of these figures functioned to rank persons, to encourage dependence on the ancestors, to promote normative behavior, to foster obedience to political authority, and to memorialize the dead.

Before concluding, a short consideration of the methodological problems involved in a work of this nature seems advisable. As the introduction pointed out, appreciation of art can exist in the isolated context of a museum, but understanding requires some knowledge of the culture which produced the work. Fathoming an alien culture is no easy task for anyone, but the progressive specialization within the humanities and social sciences has made the job increasingly difficult. Some expertise in archeology, art, esthetics, history, and social anthropology becomes involved when art and culture are interrelated. But with some expertise in these fields, the seemingly remote subjective experience of a Mukongo observer of an ancestor figure becomes much more accessible. It is not true that "Works of art cannot lie,"² for relating the work to the culture.

² Verly, Mintadi, 9.

is always necessary and subjective. But insofar as one never fully understands anything which is not personally experienced, the approach outlined above can bring the student of Kongolese ancestor figures close to an understanding of the reasons for their creation, the stylistic elements employed, and the role they played in the society which produced them.

Appendix

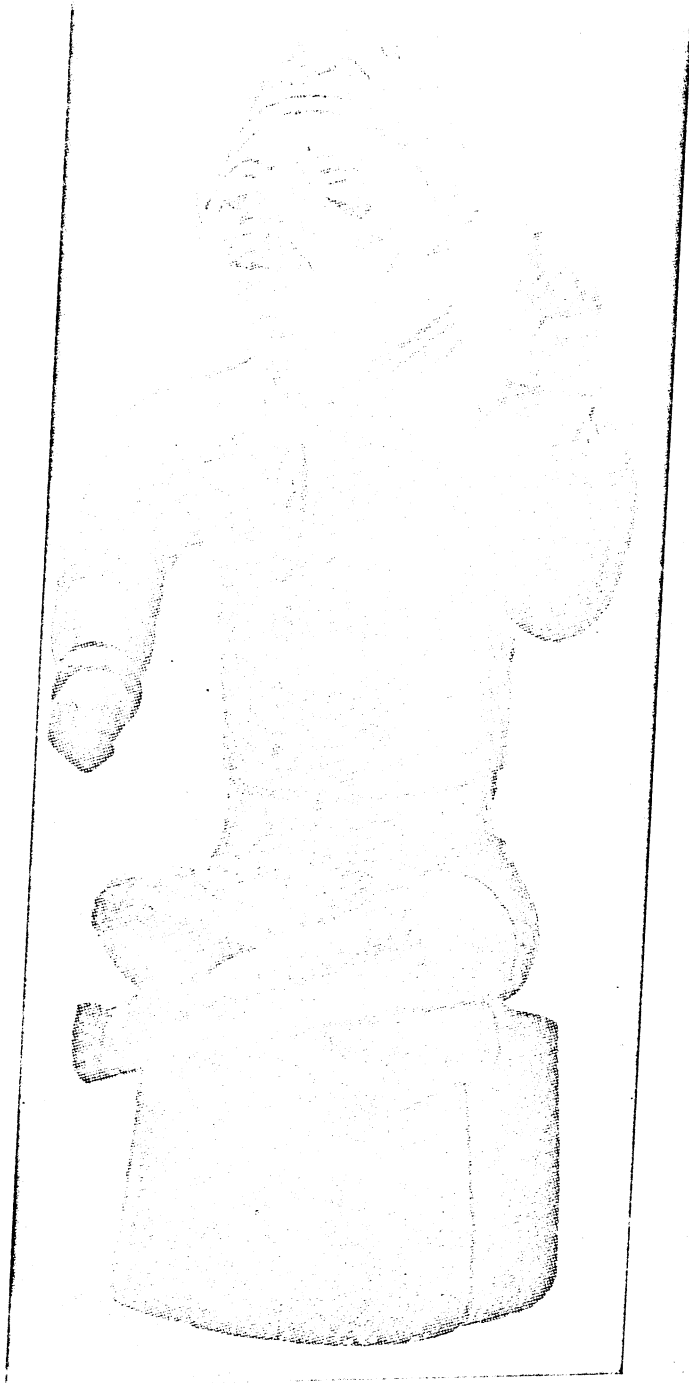


Figure A

17
17



Figure B

17



Figure B

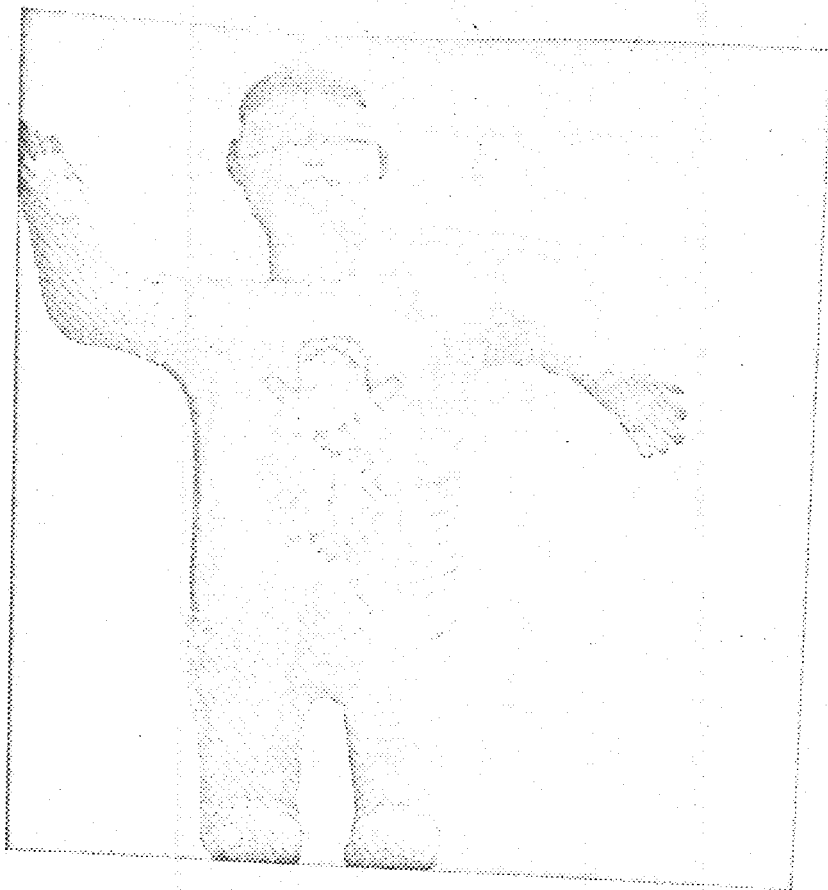


Figure C

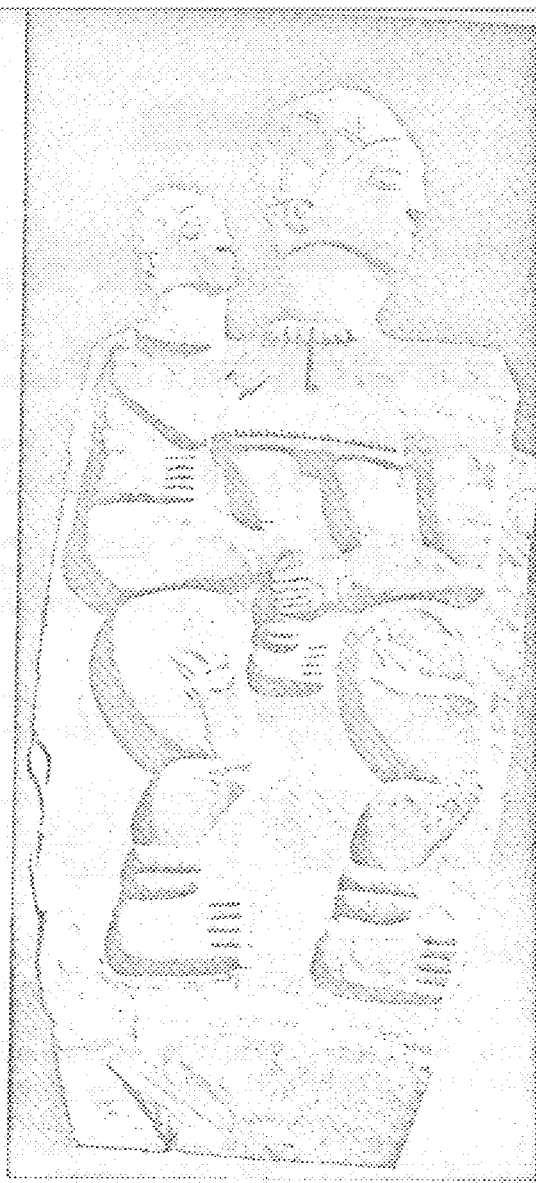


Figure D

Bibliography

- Allison, Philip. African Stone Sculpture. London: Percy Lund, Humphries & So. Ltd., 1968.
- Andersson, Efraim. Messianic Popular Movements in the Lower Congo. Upsala: Studia Ethnographica Upsaliensia, 1958.
- Balandier, Georges. "Les conditions sociologiques de l'art noir." Présence africaine, 10-11 (1951), pp. 58-71.
- Balandier, Georges. Daily Life in the Kingdom of the Kongo. From the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century. Trans. from the French by Helen Weaver. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1968.
- Balandier, Georges. Sociologie actuelle de l'Afrique noire. Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1955.
- Bentley, W. Holman. Dictionary and Grammar of the Kongo Language, as Spoken at San Salvador, the Ancient Capital of the Old Kongo Empire, West Africa. London: Baptist Missionary Society, 1887.
- Bentley, W. Holman. Pioneering on the Congo. Vols. II. London: The Religious Tract Society, 1900.
- Bourdarie, P. "Un coffre sculpté de la forêt du Mayombe," Académie des sciences coloniales, IV (1924), 259-263.
- Burton, Richard Francis. Two Trips to Gorilla Land and the Cataracts of the Congo. Vol. II. London: Sampson Low, Marston, Low, and Searle, 1876.
- Delange, Jacqueline. Arts et peuples de l'Afrique noire. Paris: Gallimard, 1967.
- Dennett, R.E. At the Back of the Black Man's Mind. Or, Notes on the Kingly Office in West Africa. London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1906.
- Dennett, Richard Edward. Notes on the Folklore of the Fjort. (French Congo). London: The Folk-Lore Society, 1898.
- Dennett, Richard E. Seven Years Among the Fjort. London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, & Rivington, 1887.
- Doutreloux, Albert. "Introduction à la culture Kongo." Miscellanea Ethnographica. Edited by L. de Sousberghe, et. al. Tervuren: Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, 1963.
- Doutreloux, Albert. "Les Kongo." Introduction à l'ethnographie du Congo. Edited by Jan Vansina. Kinshasa: Editions Universitaires du Congo, 1965.

- Doutreloux, Albert. L'Ombre des fetiches. Société et culture Yombe. Louvain: Editions Nauwelaerts, Quebec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1967.
- Elisofon, Eliot and William Fagg. The Sculpture of Africa. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1958.
- Fagg, William and Margaret Plass. African Sculpture. London: Studio Vista Limited, 1964.
- Kjersmeier, Carl. Centres de style de la sculpture negre africaine, Vol. III. Trans. by France Gleizal. New York: Hacker Art Books, 1967.
- Kochnitzky, Leon. Shrines of Wonder. New York: Clark & Fritts, 1952.
- Laman, Karl. The Kongo. Vols. III. Upsala: Studio-Ethnographica Upsalienica, 1953, 1957, 1962.
- Laman, Karl. Dictionnaire Kikongo-français. Ridgewood, New Jersey: The Gregg Press Incorporated, 1964.
- Laude, Jean. Les arts de l'Afrique noire. Librairie Generale Française, 1966.
- Leiris, Michel and Jacqueline Delange. Afrique noire. La création plastique. Paris: Gallimard, 1967.
- Leuzinger, Elsy. African Sculpture. Zurich: Museum Rietberg Zurich, Atlantis Verlag, n.d. (1963).
- Lopez, Eduardo, as recorded by Philippo Pigafetta. A Report of the Kingdom of Congo... Trans. from the Italian by Abraham Hartwell. A Collection of Voyages and Travels... Vol. II. Edited by Thomas Osborne. London, 1745.
- Maes, J. "Les figurines sculptées du Bas-Congo," Africa, III, 3 (1930), pp. 347-359.
- Maes, J. Kabila--en Grafbeelden uit Congo. Tome II, fascicule 2 of Annales du Musée du Congo belge. D. Ethnographie. Série VI. Tervaren: Musée du Congo belge, June, 1938.
- Maesen, Albert. "Styles et experience esthetique dans la plastique congolaise." Problemes d'Afrique Centrale, 44 (1959), pp. 84-95.
- Maesen, Albert. "Traditional Sculpture in Belgian Congo." The Arts in Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi. Brussels: Centre d'information et de documentation du Congo belge et du Ruanda-Urundi, 1950.
- Maquet, Jacques Jerome Pierre. Afrique: les civilisations noires. Paris: Horizons de France, 1962.
- Mertens, R. P. J. "Les chefs couronnés chez les Bakongo orientaux." Tome XI, fusc. 1 of Institut Royal Colonial Belge. Section

- des sciences morales et politiques. Memoires. (1942), 1-455.
- Monteiro, Joachim John. Angola and the River Eongo. Vols. II. London: Macmillan and Co., 1875.
- Nsiesie, Tata. "Notes sur les christs et statues de l'ancien Congo." Brousse, 3 (1939), pp. 32-34.
- Olbrechts, Frans M. Les arts plastiques du Congo belge. Brussels: Editions Erasme, S. A., 1959.
- Philippart, L. Le Bas-Congo. État religieux et social. Louvain: Imprimerie Saint-Alphonse, 1929.
- Randles, W. G. L. L'ancien royaume du Congo des origines à la fin du XIXe siècle. Paris: Mouton & Co., 1968.
- Robbins, Warren M. African Art in American Collections. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966.
- Rome, Jean-Francois de. Brève Relation de la fondation de la mission ...au royaume de Congo. Louvain: Editions Nauwelaerts, 1964.
- Roosens, Eugeen. Images Africaines de la mère et l'enfant. Louvain: Editions Nauwelaerts, 1967.
- Ruy da Pina. "Découverte du royaume de Manicongo et sa conversion au Christianism." Trans. from the Portuguese "Ineditos de Historia Portugueza" by J. Cuvelier. Brousse, 2 (1950), pp. 20-43.
- Sieber, Roy. "African Tribal Sculpture." Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, State University of Iowa, 1957.
- Sieber, Roy. "The Arts and Their Changing Social Function." Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 96, 2 (January 20, 1962), pp. 653-658.
- Sieber, Roy. "The Esthetic of Traditional African Art." Seven Metals of Africa. Philadelphia: University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, 1959.
- Soret, Marcel. Les Kongo Nord-occidentaux. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1959.
- Tuckey, Capt. J. K. Narrative of an Expedition to Explore the River Zaire, usually called the Congo, in South Africa, in 1816, under the direction of Captain J. K. Tuckey, R. N. London: Cass, 1967.
- Van Wing, J(oseph). Etudes Bakongo. Sociologie-religion et magie. Louvain: Desclée de Brouwer, 1959. 2nd edition.

- Valdy, Jaeques. Bakongo. Aalter, Belgium: A. de Rache, n.d. (1955).
- Vansina, Jan. Kingdoms of the Savanna. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968.
- Verly, Robert. Les Mintadi. La Statuaire de pierre du Bas-Congo. (Bamboma-Mussurungo). Louvain: Revue Zaire, 1955.
- Weyns, J. A. "Un chef-d'oeuvre de la sculpture africaine provenant des Bakongo occidentaux." Bulletin des Musées royaux d'art et d'histoire, 3 (November, 1943), pp. 71-82.
- von Sydow, Eckart. Afrikanische Plastik. New York: George Wittenborn, Inc. 1954.

Approved *Vansina*

Date August 6 1969

JAN VANSINA
Professor of History & Anthropology