Discover...

MAVUNGU

What is Mavungu?

Mavungu is the name of what was once a powerful religious object of the Kongo people in the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaïre). Mavungu is the name of a particular spirit personality controlling a particular activity or function held to reside within this type of figure known as a *nkisi* (plural *minkisi*). According to a contemporary source (R. E. Dennett), around 1900 there were twenty-three such objects in the region of Kakongo, with the three most powerful ones being Mavungu (Mungundu), Mabyaala Ma Ndembe, and Mangaaka. Mavungu is a type of *nkisi* known as a *nkondi* (plural *minkondi*), which in the past was inadequately glossed as a 'nail fetish'. Just why this term is inadequate to describe the complexity of objects such as Mavungu will become clear below. The term *nkondi* means 'hunter at night', since such figures were meant to hunt down during the night the witchcraft practitioners they had been charged by a diviner or *nganga* to identify and punish.

▲ Mavungu, Democratic Republic of Congo; 1900.39.70

A characteristic feature of *nkondi* is the accretion of metal objects hammered into the figures that represent invocations to action by a *nganga* on behalf of a client.

In Kongo religious belief, spirits of nature (*nkita*) exist that whilst normally inhabiting water may sometimes inhabit the human body and cause illness or misfortune. This was often understood as arising through the malevolent

intentions of someone performing witchcraft. The sick person would therefore approach a *nganga* to capture the malevolent spirits from within the body, and a *nkisi* figure would be made for the spirits to be driven into. The *minkondi* figures were seen as particularly powerful since they operated in both the seen and unseen worlds. Once approached by someone wishing to find and punish a witch causing illness or misfortune, the *nganga* would perform a ritual in which the spirits within Mavungu were invoked to help. The *nganga* would drive in a nail or other metal object to arouse the hunter spirit (*nkondi*) within, and to symbolise the suffering that will befall the person causing the illness through witchcraft. The *nganga* himself would often be of an equally striking and frightening appearance during such rituals, wearing a costume with charms attached. The making of a *nkisi* figure also included the addition of ritually efficacious medicines representing materials from the land of the dead, with which figures such as Mavungu were understood to communicate. Mostly, such materials were held in containers attached to the figure that added to the *ngitukulu* ('astonishment') experienced by the beholder who could see powerful materials on display. Wooden figures such as Mavungu had such medicines placed in a protruding cavity sealed in by a mirror, which served to allow the *nganga* visions of where danger lay.

▲ Costume of a *nganga* (Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter)

According to contemporary accounts, Mavungu was also used by those wishing to harm others, who would pay the *nganga* to invoke the *nkondi* by hammering metal into the figure. This meant that people were frequently consulting *nganga* to divine which *nkisi* was persecuting them, and then paying them to draw out the metal 'contracts' others had made with the figure against them. Another practice is also described in which someone wishing to be cured of a bad habit allowed a family member to have a metal shard driven into Mavungu, which would bind him or her to breaking the habit. Should this sort of contract be broken, serious consequences would follow. The term *nkondi* Mungundu, which was also applied to this figure, referred specifically to a type of birdcall that resembles a wheezing chest, and was understood to cause this ailment in any person it sought out for retribution (MacGaffey 1993:75). Anyone suffering

from a bad chest in this way might then pay the *nganga* a sum of money to invoke the *nkondi* to relent. Thus, not only does each metal object in Mavungu represent some sort of action on behalf of someone by a *nganga*, but it also manifests a complex history of adding and removing metal pieces, creating a rich document of people's lives and concerns that is now frustratingly unrecoverable.

A recent comment in the catalogue of an exhibition at the Musée Dapper in Paris adds the following interpretation of Mavungu's particular characteristics:

'He judges them by raising his right hand, holding a shaft of metal (lost in this example), the fingers folded and thumb pointed in the air. For the last sign, the *nkondi* indicates that a decision is being made between the sky and the earth, a decision that is serious and grave. The folded fingers represent the earth. The thumb is raised toward the sky. This gesture announces to a sorcerer: "Now the sky and the earth are allied against you. You are pierced by my weapon. You are condemned. You will die." The further the *nkondi* travels deep into the world of the dead, the more his pupils shrink, corresponding to the idea that, should the pupils disappear entirely, contact with the ancestors will be complete. Sometimes a *nkondi* will have pupils with tiny red points, painted on fragments of mirrored glass. The colour red is believed to prevent major problems from recurring. Microscopic pupils guarantee that the *nkisi* will journey, as far as he has, to detect and destroy danger. Little by little as he enters inside his spirit or his vision, his pupils will contract in proportion.' (Thompson 2002: 43; translated by Emily Stokes-Rees)

Mavungu, therefore, was involved in a complex web of social interactions, disputes and dealings between people, diviners and the spirits of the Kongo world. It was both a container for captive *nkita* or spirits but also, importantly, the site of invocations to spiritual action on behalf of Kongo society. It is the complex and dynamic way in which such figures operated in Kongo religious practices that makes the term 'fetish' a particularly poor notion for understanding them, since the term carries historical misreadings of the ways in which such objects operated.

This *nganga* costume is from the Bavili people, Democratic Republic of Congo, and is on display in the World Cultures Gallery at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter (Dennett collection, acc. no. 9/1889/43). The costume includes two wooden masks, facing backwards and forwards, demonstrating that the *nganga* can also see into the spirit world. Image courtesy of Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter.

How did Mavungu come to the Museum?

▲ Mary Henriette Kingsley, circa 1890; 1998.266.2

According to the Museum's rich documentation, Mavungu belonged to the village of Nganzi in Kakongo, and was made some time in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The fact that *minkisi* were seen by colonial powers as important symbols of indigenous religious and political opposition is attested to by the urgency with which they were captured by soldiers and missionaries. It seems that Mavungu was confiscated by Portuguese government agents in about 1892, after which it was acquired by San José Chichorro of Cantida. It was from this individual that Mavungu was acquired by the traveller and collector Mary Kingsley, probably on her first travels in West Africa in 1893. On Kingsly's death in 1900, Mavungu was bequeathed to the Museum via her brother. According to one account, Mary Kingsley believed Mavungu to be one of the only *minkisi* to come out of Kakongo retaining its 'power' – consisting of a band of congealed blood around the neck – without which its indigenous efficacy would disappear. Such medicine containers were mostly removed from *minkisi* by missionaries or colonial agents, since this was where their indigenous power was understood to reside. The figures were then often exchanged, sold, or kept as curios by traders and agents, or else collected by missionaries as examples of the nature of 'savage' religions that they could then use to gain further support for missions to the colonies.

Mary Kingsley was born in London in 1862, and spent the years from 1888 until 1892 nursing her parents. Shortly after her parents' deaths, she travelled to the Canary Islands and took up the study of early religion and law, travelling to West Africa after being inspired by an unfinished work of her late father's. This first journey, in August 1893, took her from present day Luanda in Angola, through the Democratic Republic of Congo (Zaïre), and the French Congo (present-day People's Republic of Congo, Chad, Gabon, and Central African Republic) to Calabar in Nigeria. She returned with a valuable collection of natural history specimens, a working knowledge of 'trade English' and a great respect for the traders. She had also learnt how to travel rough, and how to manage a boat and crew.

Kingsley's second West African journey was in 1894. She sailed to Calabar with Lady MacDonald, whose husband was the governor there. She stayed at Calabar for five months, collecting fish and insect specimens. She then embarked on a voyage to the upper Ogowé River in Gabon. She established a base at Lambaréné and made a daring trip up-river by canoe with an African crew. Later, she undertook an even more ambitious river journey northwards, cutting through unexplored bush.

The party survived swamps, traps, gorillas, snakes, and encounters with potentially hostile people. There is even a story that Kingsley once traded twelve of her own blouses to get out of a dangerous situation. However, she seemed to thrive on the danger, and she particularly enjoyed the party's sojourns at Fan villages where she studied local customs. Kingsley often travelled as a trader as a way of gaining the confidence of local people, carrying the usual trade goods, and was accredited to the firm of Hatton and Cookson.

As a result of her books and lectures, Mary Kingsley become one of the most famous of Victorian women travellers. When the South African (Boer) War started, she changed her plans to revisit West Africa and instead travelled to South Africa where she volunteered to nurse Boer prisoners in Simonstown. In June 1900 at the age of just 37 she died of enteric fever in South Africa, where she was buried at sea with full military honours.

Mavungu in the Twentieth Century and Beyond

In 1902, two years after Mavungu's arrival in Oxford, the Museum's then curator Henry Balfour reported that a display had been set up in the court of the Museum 'assigned to some important West African fetish figures and objects associated with them', including religious figures donated by the Revd W. Allan and Mavungu. Balfour suggests that this display was intended to be 'of historical importance in connexion with the opening up of Southern Nigeria, and the suppression of the gruesome practices connected with the superstitious beliefs of the natives of the region' (Balfour 1902). Of the three other objects displayed alongside Mavungu, one (described as the 'national idol' of the Asaba people of the Niger River) was captured in battle by the Royal Niger Company in 1888. The accession record for this object states that 'every temple, juju house and idol was destroyed with the exception of this idol which was taken by Dr Cross of the Royal Niger Co. and given by him to Mr Packer of the Church Missionary Society who gave it to Dr W. Allan'. According to Allan, the occasion for the attack on the Asaba was the decision by Sir James Marshall to abolish the sacrifice of slaves at the funeral of a chief, a move that led to conflict. The other figure (described as a wooden figure with carved human faces representing sacrifices) was removed from the Ikuba shrine at Bonny, in Nigeria also in 1888, when according to a contemporary account 'it was finally dismantled and cleared out. These [objects] were handed over to Archdeacon Crowther and given by him to Dr. W. Allan'.

▲ Mavungu on display in the Court with other West African 'fetish' figures. Photograph taken sometime after 1902; 1998.267.262.5

In the context of the time, Mavungu's display may be seen as complementing the contemporary popular interest in West African religious practice, especially given the appetite for examples of 'primitivism' and 'barbarity'. This had come to the forefront of the popular imagination only five years earlier with the Benin Punitive Expedition of 1897, a British military revenge attack for an earlier attack made upon colonial agents in the region. The propaganda justifying the attack was

centred upon the supposed use of human sacrifice in West African religions, widely reported in the newspapers of the time to demonstrate the 'savagery' of West African customs and thus to legitimise both mercantile and missionary expansion in the region.

The fame of Mavungu in Kakango seems to have been mirrored in its subsequent life as a museum artefact. Soon after its display at the Pitt Rivers Museum in 1902, a full-sized, two-dimensional copy of it was put on display in a major exhibition called '*The Orient in London*' in 1908, where the anthropologist A. C. Haddon noted that 'the original of this extraordinary figure is in the Pitt Rivers Museum, to which it was bequeathed by Mary Kingsley, of West African fame'. With such early credentials, Mavungu was thereby set on course to become one of the most widely reproduced and regarded of West African religious figures.

The case in which Mavungu was put on display in 1902 seems to have survived until 1975/6 when it was dismantled, probably to make more space in a very congested area of the Museum. Mavungu was placed in a case of its own for the next ten years, after which it was incorporated into the current display of West African Sculpture. This display history suggests a probably unintentional but none the less interesting movement over time, in which Mavungu went from being exhibited as part of a group of objects exemplifying 'savage' religious practices to an individual status as a separate, famous object, and then back to being part of a group exemplifying African sculptural forms. It could be said that Mavungu's display history within the Museum has been a general movement from function to form, a movement running contrary to more recent academic interest in *minkisi* that has sought to understand the way such figures operated within their religious and historical contexts.

Mavungu continues to fascinate and inspire a variety of responses to those who encounter it in the Museum. One writer noted how 'the weight of feeling hammered into that passive hunk of wood is enough to give a visitor pause' (Reader 1987: 109). Perhaps, given what we now know about the way a *nkondi* worked to astonish (*ngitukulu*) the Kongo beholder through its physical appearance, our experiences of Mavungu today are – at least on certain levels – not so different.

References and further reading

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Mavungu can be found at the following location:

Court (ground floor)
Case C6A - West African Sculpture

Compiled by:
Christopher Morton, Head of Photography and Manuscript Collections
February 2010.

Front Cover Image:
Mavungu
Democratic Republic of Congo; 1900.39.70

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