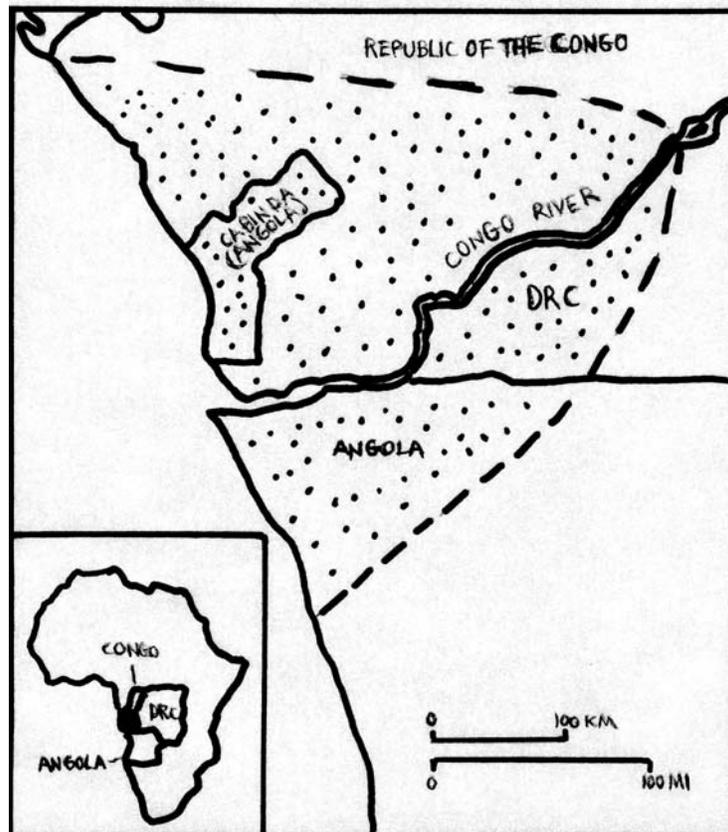


Dogs in the spiritual world of the Kongo People

by James E Johannes

The Kongo people's spiritual world includes their dogs. To understand how the dogs are incorporated into this world the Kongo people's beliefs and practices will be described.



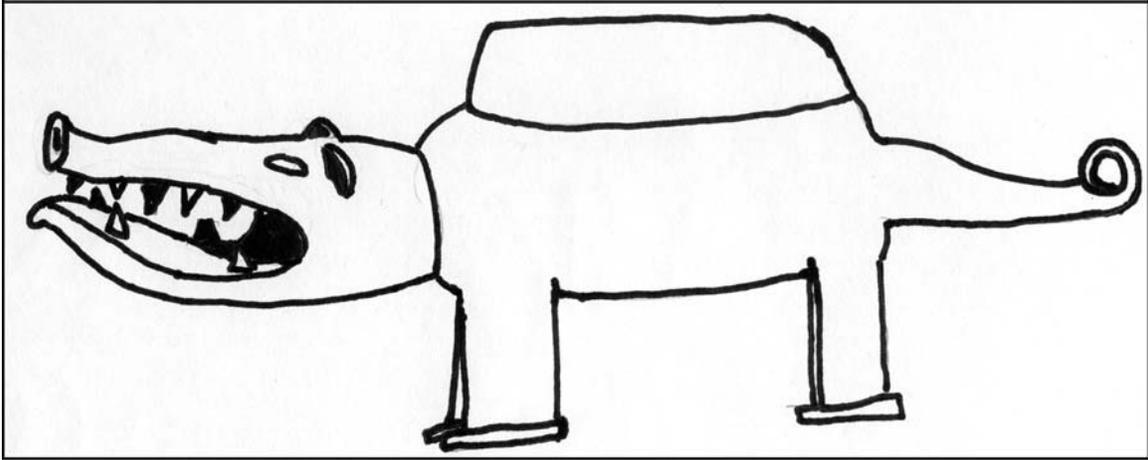
Map showing the area where the Kongo people live

The Kongo people see the cosmos divided into “this world” (*nza yahi*) and “the land of the dead” (*nsi a bafwa*). The land of the dead can be underground, in the forest, in the cemetery, or across a body of water (i.e. river, Atlantic, or underwater) which is both a passage and barrier between the land of the living and of the dead. White is the color of the dead and the name of their abode is called *Mpemba*, which is also the word used for chalk or white Kaolin clay. When it is day in the land of the living, it is night in the land of the dead. To the dead, 6 AM is nightfall and the early morning mist is their cooking fires. The forest is the village of the dead and wild animals are their livestock. Cemeteries are usually located in the forest. In the village of the dead the same activities and social forms occur as in the living village. The living say the dead are in the forest and that they live in a village, but the dead say the living live in the forest and that they live in the village.

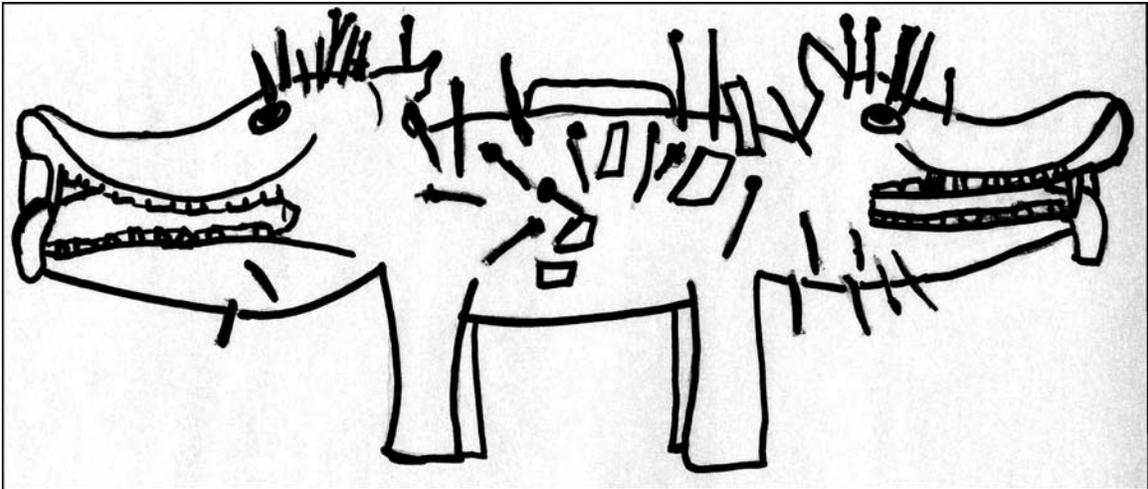
It is thought by the Kongo that power can be derived by communicating with the dead. Those who have such powers were chiefs, public diviners or prophets, witches, and magicians. These people have “four eyes” which allows them to see hidden things as well as ordinary daylight events and an ability to communicate with the dead “at night”. The magicians called *Bangana* (sing. *Nganga*) are healers, diviners, and adjudicators who help individuals by righting wrongs, procuring benefits, averting misfortune, or providing remedies against witchcraft, disease or demands of spirits. The *Nganga* used objects called *Minkisi* (sing. *Nkisi*) that hold and make accessible the spirit’s (*Bakisi*) power. The *nkisi* could be a bag, a pot, a calabash, or a wooden statue of a human or animal. It was only considered having power when activated with medicines (*bilongo*). These were stored in the bag, pot or jar and on a statue in a cavity or pack. During the ceremony to animate a *nkisi* a series of ingredients were properly arranged by the *Nganga* while singing and music occurred. It is during this ceremony that a spirit from world of the dead moved into the container. This spirit could be an ancestor who having lived in the other world wanted to renew his relations with kin and become a *nkisi* or it could be a ‘nature spirit’.

Although statues are not the most prevalent form of *nkisi*, they are the most spectacular. Many of the *Minkisi* statues in western Museums came from the lower Congo. *Minkisi* are sorted by those that operated in two cosmological domains, the below and the above. *Minkisi* associated with the above, the sky and celestial waters and with diseases of the upper part of the body were mostly wooden statues belonging to the *Khonde* or *Nkondi* family. *Nkondi* means hunter, derived from the word *konda* (which means to hunt alone and at night), and the chief function of *nkondi* is to pursue evildoers.

One well known *Nkondi* statue is *Nkisi Kozo*. This *nkisi* is in the form of a dog. It can have a single head or double head. The dog is considered a mediator between the living and the dead because it lives in the villages with the living but hunts in the forest where the dead live. Some say that on the way to the village of the dead one passes through a village of dogs. It is thought that dogs have four eyes to see this world as well as the other and it is possible to see the dead if you apply the ocular secretions (*bihota*) of a dog to your eye. To represent the dog’s four eyes some statues are made with two heads. Dogs are also hunters and it is thought they help *nkondi* to track witches. The statue is not a picture of a dog as such but a statement about hunting wrongdoers and about movements to and fro between the seen and unseen worlds. A common feature seen on a *nkondi* are *madibu* (dog-bells; sing. *dibu*) and some also have hunting nets entangling the legs. When the *nkondi* included a pot it might be medicated and placed on a fire to boil, as a divination device; such a pot was supported, not on three stones as usual, but on sticks of *luvete* wood, a physical pun on the verb *veta* (to hunt).

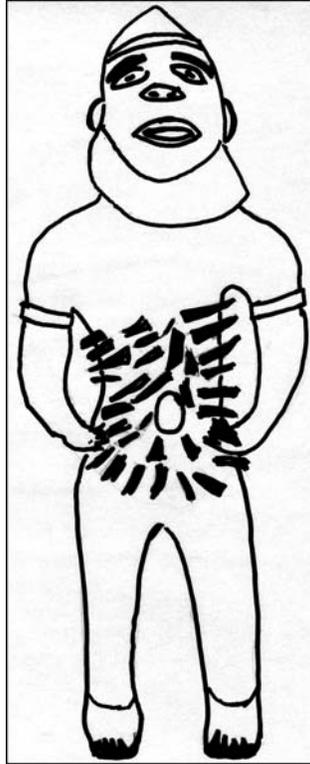


Nkisi Kozo with a single head and medicine pack on the back



Nkisi Kozo with a double head, iron nails in the body, and medicine pack on the back

A second *nkondi* statue that was paired with *Kozo* is called *Nkisi Mangaaka*. *Mangaaka* was the fetish for men and *Kozo* for the women. *Mangaaka* is a figure of a man standing in a confrontational pose called *vonganana* (to assert oneself, to be somebody, to come on strong).



Nkisi Mangaaka with iron blades
and medicine cavity in the belly

The job of the *nkondi* was to hunt down witches, thieves, adulterers, and other wrongdoers. The wronged party pays the *nganga* with the *nkondi* to hammer (*koma nloko* [literally hammer a curse]) in a nail or iron blade into the statue while urging it to find the person who wronged them and do terrible things to them. The nails or blades represented an appeal and a way to arouse (*koma*) the force in the figure. The pounding of the nail or blades also mimed the violence to be inflicted on the wrongdoer. An item or cloth (*mfunya*) associated with the crime might be attached to the nail to remind it what to do and where to go. *Mfunya* tokens were also called “dogs” (*mbwa*). Eventually someone in the village would suffer chest pains or something like pneumonia (*mungundu*). This person would have to pay the *nganga* a large sum to lift the *nkisi*'s pursuit off him.

For the Kongo people still practicing their traditional beliefs killing a dog even today can be serious offense as killing a man because the act induces the death of an actual man. A driver who runs over a dog might be accused of witchcraft. There is a tale told of a women caught in adultery who, before her execution, refused to name her lover. In the place of her lover a male dog was killed.

In the Kongo spiritual thought the dog has a special place. They provide a bridge between the living and the dead and help *nkondi* hunt down wrongdoers.

Bibliography

Kongo People. Art and Life in Africa. University of Iowa.
<http://www.uiowa.edu/~africart/toc/people/kongo.html> April 14, 2008

MacGaffey, W. (1986). *Religion and Society in Central Africa: The BaKongo of Lower Zaire*. University of Chicago Press. Chicago xi + 295 pp

MacGaffey, W. (1993). *The Eyes of Understanding*. In: *Astonishment and Power*. Smithsonian Institution Press. Washington 160 pp

MacGaffey, W. (2000). *Kongo Political Culture: The conceptual challenge of the particular*. Indiana University Press. Indiana. xi + 274 pp

Mack, J. (ed.)(2000). *Africa: Arts and Cultures*. Oxford. University Press. 224 pp.

Maurer, E. M. & Batulukisi, N. (1999). *Spirits Embodied: Art of the Congo*. The Minneapolis Institute of Art. Minneapolis. 153 pp

Thompson, B.(1999). *The sacred Vessel : Ceramic Minkisi as Agents of healing*, pp. 1-11 (conference-debate, November 1999, Ghent).

Vanhee, H. (2000). *Agents of Order and Disorder: Kongo Minkisi*. In: *Re-visions: New Perspectives on the African Collections of the Horniman Museum*, ed. Karel Arnaut. The Horniman Museum and Gardens & Museu de Antropologia da Universidade de Coimbra, London & Coimbra. pp 89-106.