



# ARTIFACTS

A Journal of Undergraduate Writing

## The Cultural Power of Iron in Early Africa

Elias Froeschle

Iron played a central role in many societies of early Africa. It held both spiritual and material power. Physically, Africans used iron to create tools for agriculture, utensils for everyday life, and weapons for protection and conquest (Shillington, 2012, p. 45). Spiritually, Africans considered iron potent. Because of the elemental forces wielded to create iron out of earth, smiths were revered, respected, and feared (Ross, 2000).

They made bellows, the air pumps used to heat the furnace's fire, in the shape of male genitals while the furnaces themselves were intentionally constructed to resemble the body a woman (Shillington, 2012, pp. 57-60). The ore would be placed in the belly of the female structure, a word that also translates to life or soul in several African languages (Power Figure/Nail Fetish, n. d.). Thus the miracle of creating iron out of dirt was comparable to the miracle of procreation.

The University of Missouri Museum of Art and Archaeology has several artifacts made of iron that were used in religious ceremonies across Africa. One of them is the *nkisi* (pl. *minkisi*), a statue that the Kikongo speaking people of Central Africa used to determine the source of chronic problems or find evildoers (Power Figure/Nail Fetish, n. d.).

*Minkisi* provide us with a unique opportunity to understand the cultural power of iron in early African societies. The museum's *nkisi* is a wooden male figure approximately two to three feet tall. The body is proportional except for the feet, which seem to be larger to serve as a base to balance on. Most details preserved are on the head, with a realistic portrayal of a human face and neck. The rest of the body, particularly the chest and thoracic area, is imbedded with nails and shards of thin metal. Only one nail is imbedded above the neck and none are below the groin. Artisans carved the basic figure of *minkisi* while ritual specialists infused spiritual power to the statue. The artist who made the museum's *nkisi* left the figure's belly hollow, so that it could be filled with objects of power. Then, with each use of the figure, a nail or other piece of metal was embedded into it, adding to its power.

The practice of using *minkisi* reveals much about the societies that used them. In order to construct a *nkisi*, a society had to support artisans who carved the figure, spiritual leaders who made these objects sacred, and smiths who smelt and forged the tools and nails used in the ceremonies. The process to create iron was also labor intensive, requiring the construction of bellows and forges, the gathering of

ore, and the cutting and burning of wood for charcoal. Moreover, in places where iron ore was scarce, traders had to import iron from other regions, suggesting that the production of *minkisi* was tied to long distance trade.

Therefore, *minkinsi* production required specialized workers indicating that societies that used such artifacts were prosperous enough to support a social hierarchy containing members who did not actively participate in food production. Without social organization or hierarchy, all members of the group would merely fend for themselves or close friends and family.

Not all *minkisi* were associated with iron. There are many examples of *minkisi* that do not use metal at all (Power). However, since the discovery and subsequent use of iron in Central Africa by the first millennium, the metal became a central part of the Kikongo spiritual world as indicated through the several nails imbedded in the bodies of *minkisi* available at this and other museums around the world. Perhaps, the use of iron nails in *minkinsi* offers just another example of the larger question of whether technological advancements lead to social change or do the social environments lead to technological advancement.

If this nail *nkisi* were to be used as a case study to find an answer to this question, it would probably have to be the former explanation. The cultural use of *minkisi* was not dependent on iron nails or pieces of metal. The use of metal in this particular religious object was incorporated after the original ceremony had been created. Nevertheless, after the development of the iron industry, the cultural impact of iron in Central Africa was so strong that it did become an integral part of a powerful religious act. Apparently, in this case, culture may have adapted to technological advancement.

#### Reference List

Power Figure/Nail Fetish (Nkisi). (n. d.) Exhibit. University of Missouri Museum of Art and Archeology African Exhibit, Columbia Missouri.

Power Figure (Nkisi) [Kongo peoples; Democratic Republic of Congo] (1979.206.127)". In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000-.  
<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1979.206.127> (October 2006)

Ross, E. G. (2000). The age of iron in West Africa. In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art. [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/iron/hd\\_iron.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/iron/hd_iron.htm) (October 2002)

Shillington, K. (2012). *History of Africa*. 3rd ed. New York City: St. Martin's.

**Part of Issue 12, published in April 2015**

**Topics: Arts, Culture, History**

## About **Artifacts**

*Artifacts* is a refereed journal of undergraduate work in writing at The University of Missouri. The journal celebrates writing in all its forms by inviting student authors to submit projects composed across different genres and media.

*Artifacts* is sponsored by [The Campus Writing Program](#).

Published by the Campus Writing Program.

Copyright © 2015 — Curators of the [University of Missouri](#). All rights reserved. [DMCA](#) and [other copyright information](#). An [equal opportunity/access/affirmative action/pro-disabled and veteran employer](#).