

The Magic Trumpeter
**A Bakongo *Nkisi Nkondi* with links to World War I,
the Harlem Hellfighters & Jazz.**

Nkisi nkondi, ca. 1918–21, Loango Coast. 127 cm. x 57 cm.
Exhibited at the Mariposa Museum in Oak Bluffs during August & Sept. 2020



“The Magic Trumpeter” – as I nicknamed this Bakongo statue wearing a facsimile of a doughboy’s helmet - is one of the most complex and thoroughly analyzed sculptures from sub-Saharan Africa. It is also one of the most significant, since its attachments link it to the 27 African American brass bands that accompanied the US Army to Europe during World War One.

The publication* outlining the importance of this bridge between continents starts by examining the history and practices surrounding the most impressive Bakongo statues pierced with metal, which are known

as *minkondi* (singular *nkondi* or *n'kondi*). It then delves into some features on this one, which use mutually reinforcing metaphors, metonymy, and synecdoche to hold both our attention and supernatural powers. Although the welter of hardware covering the statue might make it look like the epitome of disorder, the attachments actually form patterns that include a *bisinsu* or cosmogram (on the chest), which means “The hunter for justice.”

In addition to a wooden antelope head on the back of a leg and a monkey skull between the shoulder blades, the attachments include the regulatory knob from a German trench lantern, six different types of apparent gas or training grenades, and a trumpet sold by a company in Manhattan called Buegeleisen and Jacobson, which supplied military musicians. The knob, grenades, and trumpet, which can be dated by a serial number, were probably all obtained in France, where Congolese soldiers fraternized with African-American troops in a sector of the Western Front with so many black soldiers that it was dubbed ‘*L’Afrique*’.

The article seizes the opportunity presented by this extraordinary assemblage (which forms a portal between worlds) to tell more about the hundreds of thousands of Africans who were thrown into battle and used in logistical capacities from France to Tanganyika, as well as the story of how those troops mixed with ones from the United States, including musicians like Will Vodery, Tim Brynn, and James Reese Europe, who introduced jazz to the French, and, by ricochet, made it more acceptable to white Americans. The consequences of those contacts in the midst of fighting in which black men were told to kill whites and exposed to unparalleled violence led to the 1919 Pan-African Congress in Paris and the article’s climax. The final section discusses the way this statue memorializes the meeting of Africans and African Americans in the real heart of darkness, which was 100 kilometers north of Paris, and tells how that meeting spawned civil rights and independence movements around the globe.

* Caldwell, Duncan. 2018. The Magic Trumpeter: A Bakongo *Nkisi Nkondi* and its links with World War I, the Harlem Hellfighters, and Jazz. *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, RES 69-70, 2018 edition. The University of Chicago Press & Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology & Art Museum, Harvard. Inside & outside covers, explanatory cover page, and pp. 269-293.

Although the article can be downloaded for a price from the university websites, I recommend downloading it from duncancaldwell.com, where it's free.

Attachments & the explanatory drawings:

The drawings of the front and back of “The Magic Trumpeter” *nkisi nkondi* show attachments discussed in the article. These include:

- The brass facsimile of a military **helmet**, which is the most obvious clue that the *nkondi* alludes to World War I. It looks more like the Brodie helmets worn by American and English troops than the French Adrian helmet. This headgear was placed over the same kind of **skullcap** as seen on other *minkondi*—the “lordly *mpú*” worn by priests, aristocrats, and trade officials. The presence of the cap under the helmet suggests that the metal hat was an afterthought, in which case it’s possible that the statue was made before the war and given a new attribute in light of the struggle.

- Moving to the back of the head, one finds **straight brown “hair”** stretching from ear to ear. This “hair” (which is probably animal fur) is so different from the local human hair applied to other African works of art that it probably alludes to a European’s. If it is a reference to white scalps, it might be to the power of white officers (including perhaps one whose ghost was incorporated into the *nkondi*’s shell), especially since some Bakongo believed that whites were a class of the dead.

- The mirrors of the **eyes** represent the watery divide between the living and dead, so you are meant to feel as if you were looking into another dimension when you meet this being’s gaze.

- The facial **expression**. The combination of the glazed crescent eyes, raised eyebrows, and subtle wrinkles on the forehead sets this *nkondi* apart from all others and make it look uncannily like soldiers suffering from shell shock or PTSD, whose “thousand-yard stares,” raised brows, and characteristic wrinkles form an involuntary expression symptomatic of prolonged exposure to cataclysmic shocks.

Tens of thousands of Bakongo fought for France and Belgium in Cameroon, Tanganyika, and Europe in World War I, thousands of whom were killed. Although most of these troops survived, many of them were wounded and returned home with inoperable bullets and shrapnel still lodged in their bodies, much like the blades in *minkondi*. Some of these veterans, who had truly been to the land of the dead if they had fought on the Western Front, suffered from PTSD. These men were effectively *nkita*, the word used to describe initiates in Kimpassi secret societies, which literally means a person who has come back from the Other World. So it is

possible that this *nkondi's* face, which appears more dazed by the fury being launched at it than wrathful, alluded to soldiers who had survived, but acquired similarly glazed eyes.

- Probable **grenades** similar to practice grenades, French M61 grenades, the 1914 French OF1c ball grenade, and the American Mk II gas grenade used in World War I.

- The **mooyo**, which is the box full of activating ingredients under a glass cover. The glass is meant to imitate the surface of water, which symbolizes the interface between life and non-life, which for the Bakongo meant between death and reincarnation. The *mooyo* and its interface, which is known as the *kalunga*, are framed by a triangle of apparent grenades, a hippo tusk (which looks like a parade belt), and a wire-and-twine perimeter.

The wire is a reminder that World War I was the first war in which it was ubiquitous, not only in protecting trenches and bunkers, but in setting traps, including ones meant to kill soldiers collecting cadavers, which were often booby-trapped with trip wires and grenades. It might be important in this regard that black troops were often used for such dangerous duties as retrieving the dead (and probably, while they were in no-man's land, rigging enemy bodies so they could wreak further vengeance).

- The **regulatory knob from a German Aida model 214 or 233 lantern**. These lamps (and the Petromax lanterns they inspired) were sought after on the Western Front because of their brightness and reliability. The knob is in the thicket of nails above the *mooyo* and tusk, where it forms the bottom of a hidden cosmogram (*bisinsu*) that symbolizes "The hunter for justice." The cross-shaped and centered *bisinsu* is a variation on the *dikenga* (or "four moments of the sun"), whose nadir is associated with the south, eventual rebirth, midnight, femaleness, the "yellow sun of perfection," and the highest point of a person's otherworldly strength - making the positioning of the regulatory knob metaphorically suggestive.

- A **palisade of four vertical horns** with (dead) white horn cores on the outside and black sheathed horns (like the ones on living animals) on each side of the knob, which forms the center.

- A **lead phallus-and-scrotum pendant**, which is on the right branch of the cosmogram (from the statue's perspective).

- Four **padlocks** (including one with a lion's head), which form a circle around the base of the neck.
- Hidden **fang-like teeth** gripping the front and back of the neck at the base of the head.
- A bronze **horse bit** across the solar plexus, which probably reinforced the activating priest's (the *nganga's*) control over the supernatural forces housed in the *nkisi nkondi* like the fangs and padlocks circling the neck.
- A 51-centimeter **antelope horn** across the back that attests to this spirit's prowess as a supernatural hunter.
- A **wooden antelope head** on the back of the right leg, which probably reinforced the sense that the *nkondi* could hunt anyone who was doing its petitioners supernatural harm.
- **Shells**. The cowries represent wealth, the large tree snails relate to successful childbirth and longevity, and the small marine shells link this supernatural chief to specific petitioners who have asked it to take them under its protection.
- Musical instruments, including an **iron bell** (which might allude to the Bakongo's legendary "Blacksmith" kings), a **military-style whistle** with suspension rings at the ends, little **bells to summon servants** (including supernatural ones), and a **bent trumpet**.

The latter was made by the Romeo Orsi Company of Milan, which began supplying American military musicians shortly after winning a competition to supply the Italian Army in 1881. Orsi's US distributor, Buegeleisen and Jacobson, whose logo appears on the trumpet's bell, opened an office on 17th Street in New York in 1897, but was apparently already selling such "**B and J Serenader**" trumpets earlier, since one example has the year 1892 near the mouthpiece and the serial number 2212 on the second valve. The number in the same place on this trumpet is 4328, placing it between the 1890s and late 1920s, when the numbers reached 6000.

Musicians from African American regimental bands like the Harlem Hellfighters called instruments that got bent while their owners were fighting at the front "**casualties**." The fact that the instruments were damaged in battle is a reminder that these men had to fight even though

they played for President Poincaré of France and the high command. The 369th Infantry, or Hellfighters, for example, spent more time in combat (191 days) than any other American unit in the war, won a *Croix de Guerre* as a regiment, and about 170 more for its individual officers and men, and was the first US formation to reach the Rhine.

My mind boggles at the courage and fortitude of these heroic men.

Duncan Caldwell

COLOR KEY TO THE DRAWINGS:

Objects:

- **Green:** metal attachments other than the nails, blades, and canisters (trumpet, helmet, hoops, bracelets, horse bit, padlocks, lids, bells, bronze jugs, and a golden object under the skull).
- **Dark blue:** biological/organic attachments other than leather (fur/hair, gourds, a bone, a coconut, a monkey skull, a wooden antelope head, tusks, horns, teeth, and shells).
- **Red:** canisters (probable grenades and a trench mortar).
- **Solid dark brown bands:** leather straps around shoulders.

Networks:

- **Black lines:** thin wire looping around nails (which are not shown).
- **Dark grey series of ovals:** chains, including that around the neck.
- **Dark brown lines:** industrial twine under shoulder lid and through trumpet.
- **Brown rope-like lines:** coiled and braided artisanal ropes, which lies below the wire (e.g. beside the bell of the trumpet) and below the twine.
- **Light blue lines:** thick copper wire below the chain around the neck of the statue and around the base of the antelope horn.



