

REJOINDER ON N'KISI

With reference to the discussion of *n'kisi* figures (*African Arts*, Vol. VII, No. 3, pp. 87-90), we would like to repeat our congratulations to Zdenka Volavkova, which she seems to have missed, on her critique of existing "functional" classifications, and to assure her that some of the adverse criticism she detects is simply not present in our note. For example, we do not challenge her use of the word *teki* for an "empty" statue, but add the word *mpamba* which, as our text indicates, means "empty." *Kimfwiti*, "image," is also a term in general use.

A question of broader interest arising from this exchange is whether an exotic visual language is a discrete semantic system in the province of art historians, or whether it is part of a wider system of meanings characteristic of the culture as a whole, particularly its religion, to whose interpretation anthropologists might make some contribution. In either event, as Volavkova stresses, it is important to know how far the system extends in space and time. In our view there is in Kongo culture such a general system of meaning, varying in detail from place to place, to which the characteristics of *min'kisi* should be referred. Enough evidence exists in the Capuchin records of what Bisi Kongo themselves said and did in the 16th and 17th centuries to support the hypothesis that the same system was current then. Contemporary religion therefore provides a starting point for inquiries into the art of the past.

Since we agree with Volavkova that the semantics of the Kongo visual language are quite different from the Western, we based our view that some statues are meant to be threatening not on our own response to the upraised arm (which we did not mention) but on texts such as the following, a KiKongo manuscript from the Laman Collection, written about 1910 by Nsemi Isaki, which

scarcely supports the view that the nail *n'kisi* is terrifying only to Westerners: "The statues are carved so that they shall have the appearance of a person, and like him, have a mouth to eat with. For this reason, when it is seen that a particular statue has a fearful aspect, (*Nkadulu ya nsisi*) people will respect it and think that if it attacks a person it will change him to be like itself. Some have the appearance of a woman because of the beauty of a woman; others are male because of the strength of men. Yet others are named after illnesses. If it is seen that the statue has an evil appearance, a person will quickly know that this *n'kisi* has a harmful attack. So each *n'kisi* is respected only according to its evil appearance; for example, some are incomplete or defective so that if they attack someone he will become like the *n'kisi* itself."

Conversely, it is only a European and not a Kongo logic which could conclude that because both *nganga* and sculptor say they are guided by spirits in dreams, their work differs only in quantity, not quality. Most creative people in Kongo speak in this way, including many who are fiercely opposed to all that *nganga* does and stands for. It seems to us absolutely necessary that the history of African art, as a scholarly discipline, take notice of such indigenous distinctions.

Wyatt MacGaffey
Haverford College, Pennsylvania
John M. Janzen
University of Kansas



Goldweights
Wood Carvings
Antique Brasses
African Crafts

**OPANIN YAW DENTEH'S
CULTURAL & CRAFTS SHOP**

Osei Akoto-Denteh, Director
P.O. BOX 2356
ASHANTI NEW TOWN
KUMASI, GHANA