

## Anthropomorphic *inungu* statue

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This enigmatic figure is one of the few known statues from Sankuru province, home to the majority of the Nkutshu a Membele (better known as the Tetela-Hamba); they are bordered to the north and west by the Nkutshu and to the north-east by the small Djonga group to whom we owe this polychrome sculpture. All speak variants of the same language group, the C70 Tetela Group.

Figurines of this type were used in the initiatory rituals of a brotherhood. The Hamba called the brotherhoods' members *Nkum'okunda* (Masters of the Forest), the Djonga called them *Nkumi*, and the southern Nkutshu called them *Nkfumi*. This society created a network of solidarity beyond lineage-type kinship ties that helped to keep the peace. It was the Nkutshu who introduced the society to the Hamba and Djonga. Initiation took place in secret in an enclosure built in the forest. Among the Hamba, the candidate underwent a series of tests and was then confronted with one or two polychrome statuettes set in motion by an unseen mechanism.

Among the Djonga, the trials and ordeals suffered by the aspiring *nkumi* allowed him to enter one of the lower ranks, but he would enter a statuette's presence only during a second initiation to join the rank of *ikuku a nkeci*. A final rite, accompanied by a great profusion of potlatch-style goods, would open the doors to the higher rank of *lwembe*. In Bayaya, the effigy shown to the *nkumi* was called *Inungu*; coated in red and white, it bore an eagle feather on its head. Believed to feed on red *ngólá* powder, this statuette played a role as a dispenser of justice, which it did not do among the Hamba. The figurine would be placed in the home of a man who had refused to pay a fine for which he had been sentenced by the *Nkumi* court; frightened by this supernatural apparition, the offender would do as he was commanded.

These statuettes were styled very differently depending on the region, but all of them were painted, many being decorated with feathers and some with hides, and they all symbolized the peace-making power of the *Nkumi* brotherhood.