[Makonde, Hunger Figure], Phidelis Hassan Kamwona [Object 2012.0193]

Teaching Guide

# Hunger Figure

*Artist: Phidelis Hassan Kamwona*
*Culture: African*
*Date: circa 1990*
*Medium: African blackwood*
*Classification: Sculpture*
*Credit Line: Gift of the Maryknoll Sisters*
*Object: 2012.0193*


Teaching guide by Abigail Greenfied ’25

This African blackwood sculpture by Makonde artist Phildelis Hassan Kamwona is a *shetani*, or "spirit" figure. These figures aim to represent life experiences through the lens of traditional Makonde and other East African beliefs in spirits of the dead, or *mahoka*, which are thought to appear at times of trouble and to herald impending misfortunes. Makonde artist Samaki Likankoa played a key role in the development of the *shetani* style in the 1950s, though their forms and themes build on Makonde traditions of blackwood carving that began in the colonial period.

# Context

The Makonde people of Tanzania and Mozambique have a rich tradition of wood carving that began with mask and sculpture making for ritual purposes in the pre-colonial era. According to oral tradition, Makonde wood carving is tied to their creation story, in which the first Makonde man carved a female companion for himself out of wood, and she came to life. Under Portuguese and British imperial rule, Makonde sculpture began to "address foreign consumption" (Mshana), as it was largely created for and influenced by both Christian European missionaries and secular European colonial officials. Portuguese missionaries and administrators helped to foster the *binadamu*, or representational, sculptural style in the late nineteenth century; this style responded to the Portuguese desire for scenes of everyday Makonde life, often used by the colonizers as decorations and mementos. The *binadamu* style also marked Makonde artists' first use of African blackwood as a material, and nearly all early blackwood pieces were intended for either colonial officials or the tourist trade. In the post-colonial period, blackwood carving has developed into three main genres: *shetani* (spirit), *ujamaa* (togetherness or socialism), and *mawinga* (clouds) (Mshana). These genres have had different resonances in Mozambique and Tanzania at different times, and blackwood carving as a whole engages with various political, artistic, and economic goals and issues.

In the late colonial and immediate postcolonial period in Tanzania, beginning in the late 1950s and continuing through the mid-1960s, Makonde blackwood carving was characterized by "independent sculptors with strong 'artistic' identities" (Kingdon). While traditional Makonde sculpture fulfilled particular ceremonial or utilitarian needs, and colonial blackwood sculpture began as a way to respond to colonial officials' demands, the social and economic shifts that took place after Tanzania gained independence fostered the development of a new group of blackwood sculptors who were guided by their "inner creative motivation" (Kingdon). Likankoa created more abstract *shetani* figures, and other artists, including Chanuo Manudu and Dastan Nyedi, "express[ed] themes drawn from [the artists'] own experiences" and created works that, to use Nyedi's word, "'compare' with human consciousness" (Kingdon). For Chanuo, blackwood, or *mpingo*, is the best material for creating shetani carvings due to its "intrinsically carvable" nature; he sees the fact that blackwood can be made into anything as a metaphor for the "substance of being, or the lived 'self'" (Kingdon). Tanzanian postcolonial blackwood carving was also used to fulfill socialist political goals. After the 1967 Arusha Declaration in Tanzania, which is considered the country's most prominent statement of the ideals of African socialism, the *dimoongo*, or family and power, *shetani* sculptural style shifted to the present-day *ujamaa* style. *Ujamaa*, which is Swahili for brotherhood and togetherness, is the term widely used for African socialism, and the *ujamaa* style reflects ideals of togetherness, community self-reliance, and nationalism.

In Mozambique's late colonial period, the Mozambican Liberation Front, FRELIMO, encouraged blackwood carving in the *ujamaa* style as a "primary symbol of its socialist project in Mozambique" (Bortolot). After the beginning of the Mozambican independence movement in 1964, FRELIMO developed sculptural cooperatives, encouraging socialist realist sculpture as a visual representation of the movement's ideals and the sufferings of Makonde people under colonialism. Blackwood sculpture produced by these collectives depicted scenes of both imperial exploitation and "African heroism," in a form of artistic expression that FRELIMO argued "emerged naturally from artists… that were embedded in socialist praxis" (Bortolot).

Today, Makonde blackwood sculpture in the expanded *shetani* tradition pioneered by Likanloa, Chanuo, and Dastan incorporates spirit-related beliefs and practices from other cultures in the coastal regions of Tanzania and eastern Africa, in addition to Makonde *mahoka*. They frequently include motifs and representations of objects from everyday life, such as calabash gourd containers for carrying water, an example

# Context cont.

of which is being held by the figure in this sculpture. This particular figure may be a reference to the Ethiopian famine of 1983-85, which was depicted in other contemporary Makonde *shetani* figures.

The work was given to the Syracuse University Art Museum by the Maryknoll Sisters, a Catholic missionary organization that operates schools around the world, including one in Tanzania. Kamwona likely established a relationship with the sisters through their Nyumba ya Sanaa artistic and cultural center in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, which was founded in 1972 as a center promoting local modern art and craftsmanship. The center existed until 2010, when it was torn down to make way for a residential and commercial building in Dar es Salaam.

**Material Information**

As of 2020, African blackwood, which grows mainly in coastal East Africa, is on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species due to its over-exploitation for timber, combined with habitat loss due to human population growth and climate change. An especially valuable material for making woodwind musical instruments like clarinets and oboes, African blackwood was frequently harvested by, and traded to, European merchants during the nineteenth and early twentieth-century colonial era.

- IUCN Red List entry for African Blackwood: https://www.iucnredlist.org/species/32504/67798379#threats
- The Mpingo (Blackwood) Conservation and Development Initiative: https://www.mpingoconservation.org

# Discussion Questions

- What elements of this work do you see as representing a *mahoka*, or spirit fortelling misfortune? Why do you think the artist chose to include those elements, as opposed to other symbols of misfortune/hunger?
- What impact on the viewer is produced by this work's distortion of the human form?
- Historically, Western art museums and art historians have classified this type of sculpture as "folk art." What are your thoughts on that classification? Would you have chosen that classification for this work? Why or why not?
- *Shetani*, or spirit figures, are meant to represent philosophical concepts of human nature and the spirit world. What artworks from other cultures can you think of that are intended to represent similar concepts? How do they compare/contrast with this one?
- What do you think about the fact that blackwood carving in Mozambique was at one point used to advance a political agenda? What other examples of political art can you think of?
- How might it affect the significance of this work to know that blackwood carving originated as a response to colonial desires but has been reclaimed by the Makonde people as their own art form?
- Discuss the implications of carving an image of human hunger out of a threatened botanical species. How does knowing more about the ecological history of the material (African blackwood) affect your understanding of the sculpture's significance? What about knowing that much of the deforestation of African blackwood occurred historically as a result of European demand for woodwind musical instrument production?

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