

Hadisi Njo

Storytelling Through Objects of the Kingdom of Kongo



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Storytelling Through Objects of the Kingdom of Kongo

Formed in the late 14th century, the Kingdom of Kongo was a powerful kingdom in Central Africa. It extended from parts of what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola and Gabon. In the 17th century, the Angolan-speaking part of this kingdom – present-day Luanda – was invaded by Portuguese forces, who would ultimately establish colonial rule of the kingdom lasting into the 20th century.

However, Dutch forces would occupy Luanda from 1641 to 1648, seizing the territory in Angola through agreements with the Kingdom of Kongo that offered protection from the Portuguese. This period was an important stage of the Dutch-Portuguese War: a series of naval, land and colonial conflicts that pitted the interests of the Dutch West and East India Companies (WIC and VOC) against those of the Portuguese trading empire for almost a century. These seven years of cohabitation between the Dutch and the people of Kongo resulted in various forms of exchange and commercial mobility, including enslaved labour and Kongolese objects which can be found in the Netherlands today.

Objects tell a story: a past, a culture, an encounter.

The collections of the National Museum of World Cultures and the Rijksmuseum, which may have had a direct connection to the Kingdom of Kongo, tell of a past not represented in histories of painting. In this project, I connect objects found in these collections through real and imagined facts, to create a path through the missing visual documentation of the Dutch presence in the Kongo Kingdom between 1641 and 1648.

The provenance, or origin, of the selected objects identified by the museums played a major role in creating a narrative around them. In the process, I was challenged to travel through time as an artist to better understand history. But building the story through my own imagination was not enough to materialise a narrative. I felt drawn toward questioning my creative process through other tools. A highly questionable tool was becoming more popular around the same time that I began the research: artificial intelligence (AI).

I began my questions about the Dutch past in the Kongo Kingdom by reformulating the captions of select objects to have a conversation with AI. This conversation created a borderline situation, mixing modern times and the past. I also quickly understood the limitations of AI with regard to representing human subjects of the 17th century slave trade.

This process provided me with models, which I considered blueprints that could be modified to guide the artistic approach of my work, drawing on my background as a photographer. I began transforming and embedding the objects into the models to create visualisations of their existence in their original place and time.

The representations of 17th century European life that exist today in paintings by great artists such as Rembrandt have always left me questioning why they did not use VOC travel journals, which eventually sparked my curiosity about an imaginary documentation of the Dutch presence in the Kingdom of Kongo. My central question revolved around how I could reincarnate myself in the spirit of this period to realise my journey through time and obtain the missing visual documentation.

After embedding the objects into my AI-generated models, a big step in the materialisation process came in comparing them to existing paintings of 17th century artists. To create this parallel, I approached a studio in Dafen, a village in Shenzhen, China, where artists specialise in creating replicas of paintings by famous artists, which are then sold at low prices. I worked with five artists, challenging them to create new paintings based on my models. The result is a new identity that navigates between Dutch 'Golden Age' painting, the errors of technology and the appropriation of the works by human expertise.

OBJECTS & PAINTINGS



Headdress with shells

Object reference: RV-1509-14
 Origin: Democratic Republic of Congo / Central Africa
 Material: Shells
 Function and category: dressing and decorating the head and face / dressing and decorating the body / clothing and appearance / dressing and decorating by body part
 Acquisition: Purchase, 1906-01-01
 Collection National Museum of World Cultures



'The Amsterdam'

1985
 Replica of a VOC ship that got lost on its first voyage in 1749
 Collection Het Scheepvaartmuseum (National Maritime Museum)



Knife and sheath

38 x 7 x 5.6 cm (knife) & 27 x 10 x 8 cm (sheath)
 Object reference: WM-14685
 Culture: Kundu / Ekonda
 Origin: Ubangi (river) / Central Africa
 Material: Iron, wood, brass (strip wrapping), brass (head nail), tinplate, lead, leather
 Acquisition: Purchase, 1919-03
 Collection Wereldmuseum Rotterdam



Bottle with the coat of arms of Prince Maurits

1618-1625
 32 x 9.5 cm
 Object reference: BK-NM-434
 Origin: Westerwald, Rijnland-Palts
 Material: Metal, ceramic, stoneware, glaze, cobalt, tin
 Collection Rijksmuseum



Axe

38.5 x 19 cm
 Object reference: WM-33835
 Culture: Chokwe
 Origin: Angola / Central Africa
 Material: Iron (blade & head nail), wood, brass (head nail & strip wrapping), brass wire
 Function and category: weapons
 Acquisition: Gift, 1953
 Collection Wereldmuseum Rotterdam



Cup with a boar hunt

1610
 16.7 x 10.3 cm (diameter)
 Object reference: BK-KOG-105
 Origin: Bohemen
 Material: Glass, enamel
 Collection Rijksmuseum, on loan from the Koninklijk Oudheidkundig Genootschap (Royal Antiquarian Society)



The Dutch military invades Angola, capturing Luanda after battling the Portuguese by sea and the warriors of the Kongo Kingdom by land

1641, oil painting on canvas, 100 x 100 cm



Dutch soldiers drink palm wine beside the Kwanza River to celebrate their capture of Portuguese territory 1643, oil painting on canvas, 100 x 100 cm



Winged glass with six-lobed calyx

1550-1650
13.5 x 8.4 (diameter base) x 11.2 cm (diameter top)
Object reference: BK-NM-8016
Origin: Venice
Material: Glass
Acquisition: Purchase, 1885
Collection Rijksmuseum



Piet Heyn ewer

Francisco Enriquez
1550-1600
35 x 24.5 x 10 (diameter base) x 15 cm (diameter top)
Object reference: NG-NM-583
Origin: Spain / South America
Material: Silver
Collection Rijksmuseum



Short sword

pre-1881
Object reference: RV-265-303
Culture: Bafang
Origin: Guinea Coast / Cameroon / West Africa
Material: Iron, wood
Function and category: weapons / weapons by means of propulsion / weapons wielded by physical force
Acquisition: Purchase, 1881-04-01
Collection National Museum of World Cultures



Jug with inscription of the Afrikaansche Handelsvennootschap (African Trading Company)

1859-1879
40.4 x 25 cm
Object reference: RV-5891-1
Origin: Democratic Republic of Congo / Central Africa
Material: Ceramic, glaze
Function and category: collecting and recycling waste materials / gathering food and raw materials / hunting and gathering / production and gathering of goods and food
Acquisition: Purchase, 1997-12-11
Collection National Museum of World Cultures



Basket

pre-1885
35 x 17 cm
Object reference: RV-514-3
Culture: Nzombo
Origin: Central Africa
Material: Reed
Function and category: household goods / settlement, infrastructure and transportation / storage of objects
Acquisition: Gift, 1885-11-01
Collection National Museum of World Cultures



Kongolese King Garcia II pays the Dutch for their protection from the Portuguese with enslaved Dembos rebels; the enslaved people would be sent to Pernambuco, Brazil where the Dutch had taken control of a portion of the Portuguese sugar-producing region 1643, oil painting on canvas, 100 x 100 cm



A Dutch soldier prepares food provisions for the enslaved people being taken from Kongo to Pernambuco, Brazil

1643, oil painting on canvas, 100 x 100 cm



Glove of white waxed leather with silk and gold metal thread embroidery

1622
24-26 x 13 cm
Object reference: BK-1978-48-A
Origin: The Netherlands
Material: Waxed leather, silk, gold thread
Acquisition: Purchase, 1978-07-28
Collection Rijksmuseum



Birdcage

1685-1700
29 x 24 x 15 cm (depth)
Object reference: BK-NM-12400-109
Origin: Delft, The Netherlands
Material: Ceramic, glaze, faience
Acquisition: Gift of the heirs of J.F. Loudon, The Hague
Collection Rijksmuseum



VOC lantern

1700-1800
22 x 9 x 9 cm
Object reference: NG-1985-1
Origin: Japan
Material: Iron, bronze, glass
Acquisition: Purchase, 1985-01-07
Collection Rijksmuseum



Hat for high-ranking leader – Mpu

pre-1884
11 x 16 cm
Object reference: RV-497-140
Culture: Yombe
Origin: Democratic Republic of Congo / Central Africa
Material: Pineapple fibre or raffia fibre
Acquisition: Exchange, 1884-12-01
Collection National Museum of World Cultures



Matchlock musket

1600-1650
158.3 cm x 6.4 kg (weight) x 19.2 mm (calibre)
Object reference: NG-2002-23-3
Origin: The Netherlands
Material: Iron, brass, wood, shell (animal material), horn (animal material), mother of pearl
Acquisition: Purchase, 2002, from the H.L. Visser Collection, with the support of the Cultuurfonds, the Ministry of OCW, the Ministry of Defense, the VSBfonds, the BankGiro Lottery and the Rijksmuseum Fonds
Collection Rijksmuseum



Jug

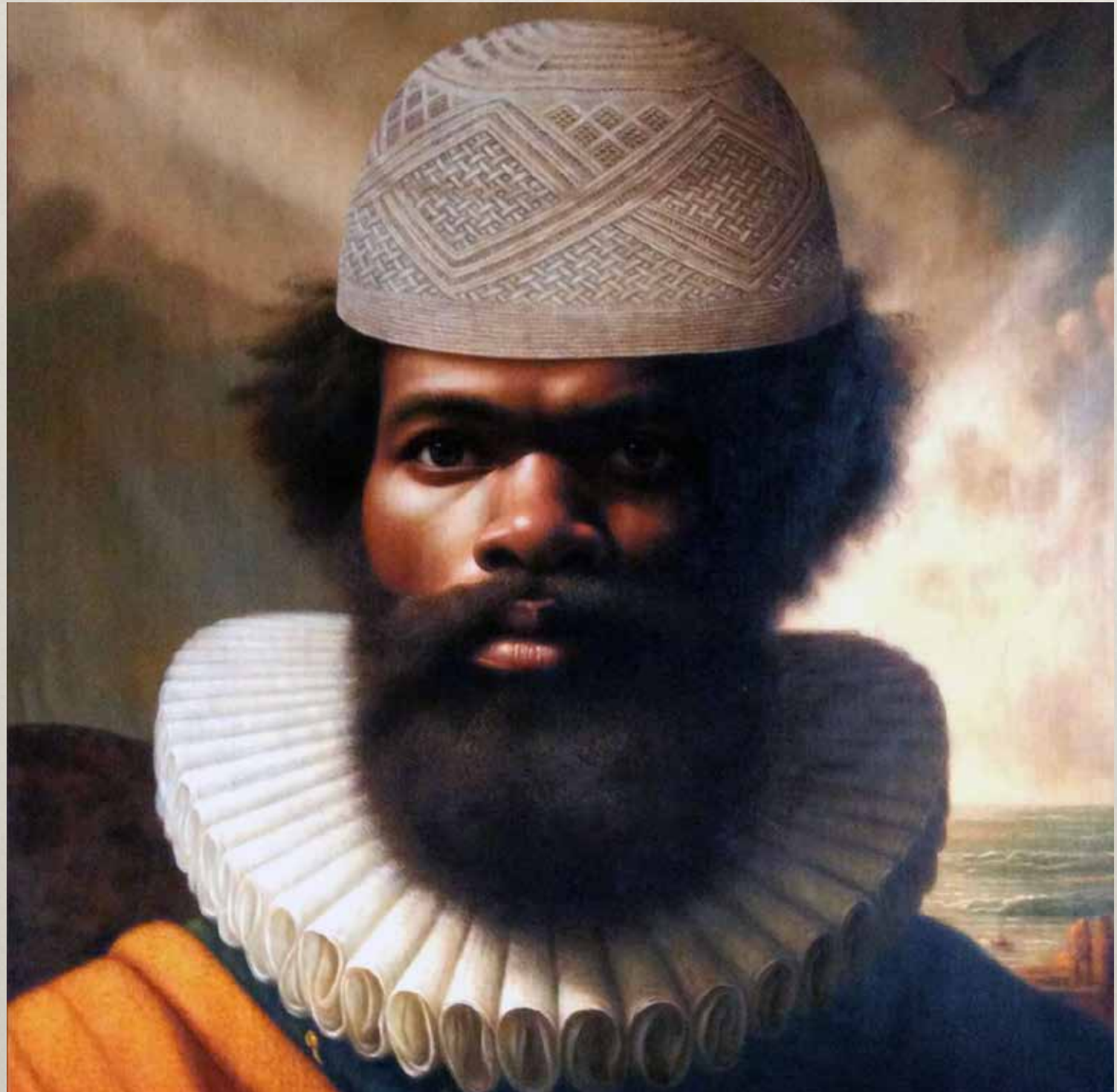
14 x 19 cm (diameter)
Object reference: WM-18972
Culture: Kongo / Sundi / Yombe
Origin: Democratic Republic of Congo / Central Africa
Material: Ceramic
Acquisition: Purchase, 1911-11-24
Collection Wereldmuseum Rotterdam



Portrait of a Dutch-Kongo couple and their child
1644, oil painting on canvas, 100 x 100 cm



Dutch soldiers occupy a military base beside the
Bengo River in the Kingdom of Kongo
1644, oil painting on canvas, 100 x 100 cm



Portrait of Afonso, son of Kongolese King Garcia II,
before he was captured by Daniel da Silva, ruler of
Soyo from the House of Kwilu
1645, oil painting on canvas, 100 x 100 cm



Kongolese troops after defeating the Portuguese in the battle of Kombi

1647, oil painting on canvas, 100 x 100 cm



Shoulder cloak

1850-1885
 57 x 60 x 14 cm
 Object reference: RV-2668-1858
 Culture: Lower Zaire river region
 Origin: Bas-Zaire / Democratic Republic of Congo / Central Africa
 Material: Raffia fibre
 Function and category: clothing and decoration of the upper body / clothing and appearance / clothing and decoration of the body / clothing and decoration by body part
 Acquisition: Purchase, 1947-11-01
 Collection Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, courtesy of Royal Zoological Society Natura Artis Magistra



Table carpet with the four elements and a strewn floral pattern

1650
 156 x 206 cm
 Object reference: BK-1975-75
 Origin: Northern Netherlands
 Material: Linen, wool, silk
 Acquisition: Purchase, 1975, with the support of the Stichting tot Bevordering van de Belangen van het Rijksmuseum (Foundation for the Promotion of the Interests of the Rijksmuseum)
 Collection Rijksmuseum



Mitra of a grenadier of the VOC

1740-1760
 30 x 20 cm
 Object reference: NG-200
 Origin: The Netherlands
 Material: Paper, pasteboard, gold, cloth, felt, copper, gold thread, wool
 Acquisition: Purchase from the dealer J. Stodel, Amsterdam, 1952-08-28
 Collection Rijksmuseum



Power figure – Nkisi phemba

1850-1885
 Object reference: RV-2668-2101
 Culture: Vili
 Origin: Angola / Central Africa / Cabinda (province) / Loango
 Material: Wood, cotton, glass, resin, brass
 Function and category: magic / worldview and knowledge / magical protection and defense / religion and spiritual worldview
 Acquisition: Purchase, 1947-11-01
 Collection National Museum of World Cultures, courtesy of Koninklijk Zoölogisch Genootschap Natura Artis Magistra (Royal Zoological Society Natura Artis Magistra); first collection F.G. Hanken



A Dutch soldier fraternises with a warrior of Queen Nzinga beside Muxima, a former Portuguese military fort, after their victory in the battle of Kombi
1647, oil painting on canvas, 100 x 100 cm



Dutch Soldier (X) returns to his family from Luanda, Kingdom of Kongo, after six months of absence
1645, oil painting on canvas, 100 x 100 cm



Chief's staff

pre-1948
134.8 cm
Object reference: RV-2737-1
Culture: Yombe
Origin: Bas-Zaïre / Democratic Republic of Congo / Central Africa
Material: Wood, iron, lead
Function and category: communities and societies / clothing and appearance / expression of group affiliation or personal status / status symbols and signs of dignity / social recognition / social inequality
Acquisition: Purchase, 1948-08-13
Collection National Museum of World Cultures



Mat

1835-1885
98 x 60 cm
Object reference: RV-480-15
Culture: Western and Central Zaïrean
Origin: Democratic Republic of Congo / Central Africa
Material: Grass, rush
Function and category: settlement, infrastructure and transportation / flooring and floor coverings / parts of structures
Acquisition: Gift, 1885-05-01
Collection National Museum of World Cultures



Basket

pre-1884
Object reference: RV-497-204
Culture: Angolan
Origin: Angola / Central Africa
Material: Straw
Function and category: household goods / settlement, infrastructure and transportation / storage of objects
Acquisition: Exchange, 1884-12-01
Collection National Museum of World Cultures



Napkin ring with inscription 'Mano Elan Pre'

1875-1883
4.2 x 5.9 x 5.1 cm (inside diameter)
Object reference: RV-339-1
Culture: Vili
Origin: Angola / Central Africa / Cabinda (province) / Loango; Angola / Zaïre; Bas-Zaïre / Democratic Republic of Congo
Material: Ivory
Acquisition: Gift, 1883-02-07
Collection National Museum of World Cultures



Cloth

1836-1886
127 x 39 cm
Object reference: RV-565-2
Culture: Kuba
Origin: Central Africa / Democratic Republic of Congo / Kasai
Material: Fibre
Function and category: clothing and appearance / dressing and decorating the body
Acquisition: Gift, 1886-07-01
Collection National Museum of World Cultures



Pendant necklace

1500-1700
27.9 x 37.5 cm
Object reference: 1996.456
Culture: Chokwe
Origin: Angola
Material: Wood, ceramic, raffia
Acquisition: Gift of Herbert Weiss, 1996
Collection The Met (New York, US)



Dutch Soldier (X) with his family during his second return from Luanda, Kingdom of Kongo
1646, oil painting on canvas, 100 x 100 cm



Sister of Dutch Soldier (X) admires fabric sent by her brother from Luanda, Kingdom of Kongo
1647, oil painting on canvas, 100 x 100 cm



Father of Dutch Soldier (X) with a Kongolese spear and pipe gifted to him by his son
1647, oil painting on canvas, 100 x 100 cm

COLOPHON

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