

The Myth and Symbolism Involved in an *N'kisi N'kondi* Sculpture

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It has been established that *n'kisi n'kondi* (plural: *min'kisi min'kondi*¹) originated with the *BaKongo*², a culture which dominated a rather large region of central Africa from the early fourteenth century, lasting through the period of Portuguese discovery - which marks the beginning of Euro-Christian conquest and the *BaKongo* inauguration into the slave trade - culminating in the complete overthrow of the *BaKongo* in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by the Belgians. According to Thompson (D.I.A., 208), Kongo citizens once came before the rather large, communal *n'kisi n'kondi* “as might have visited a king or major healer to seal important covenants, to end disputes, to regain wholeness of mind or body, or to destroy by mystic means an anti-social enemy or witch.” In order to understand the ‘magic’ which is incorporated into these incredible, nail-encrusted sculptures it is beneficial to first discover some background on the theological/cosmological framework of the *BaKongo* (Kongo peoples’) beliefs.

Most of the information on *min'kisi* comes down to us from a series of texts produced by literate *BaKongo* who were trained in the writing of their language (*KiKongo*) by Christian missionaries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Janzen (a), 11, MacGaffey (b), 13). The Swedish missionary/ethnographer, Karl Laman, invited

¹ In Bantu languages, nouns are given different meaning by the prefix attached, which assign them to different classes, i.e., *n'kisi* = “a charm occupied by a spirit;” *min'kisi* = “more than one *n'kisi*;” *Kongo* = “territory;” *MuKongo* = “one who lives there;” *BaKongo* = “more than one of them;” *KiKongo* = “the language they speak” (MacGaffey (b), 22).

² Kongo is the name given by the *BaKongo* to the land they occupy and is divided between the modern: Congo (Brazzaville), Lower Zaire, and northern Angola.

the learned *BaKongo* to write essays in *KiKongo* in answer to an ethnographic survey conducted between 1912-19. One of those who replied, Lunungu, a teacher in one of the missionary schools, writes:

We should not be hostile to someone who writes up our history in a book, for who knows whether the generations to come will know how to preserve tradition. Already it is difficult to enquire from the elders about the rules they used to observe. It is good that our country should change, but we should examine the skills and customs of other countries to see whether they are good for the soul and body (MacGaffey (b), 13).

According to information received by MacGaffey from the *MuKongo* scholar Fu-kiau (MacGaffey (a), 43-4, see also Jacobson-Widding, 183-4), the *BaKongo* believe that their universe exists in two reciprocating dimensions³: the world as they see it or ‘the earth’ (*ntoto*) - the land of the living; and the underworld (*Mpemba* - the name also for white clay, chalk or kaolin), where the soul enters when one dies. These two dimensions, which exist in mirror opposition to one another in a static and repetitive universe, are divided by a great body of water (*nzadi* - the word which originally referred to the Zaire River (MacGaffey (b), 22)) which acts as a barrier and a passage between them. Life is a cyclical or oscillatory movement between these two worlds resembling the path of the sun, or “the spiral of the snail shell (*kodya*)” (Thompson (b), 106). The frequent use of *kodya*⁴ in *min’kisi* must be related to this.

It is believed that the living and the dead exchange dominance with the rising and setting of the sun. The setting of the sun thus signifies man’s death, and its rising his rebirth or the continuity of life. Correspondingly, the *BaKongo* believe that man’s life

³ The vertical axis (of *mpemba* and *ntoto*) and the horizontal axis of the water (*nzadi*) were represented by the *BaKongo* with a cross (Jacobson-Widding, 183). This will have implications later when I discuss the transition of the *BaKongo* to Christianity.

⁴ *BaKongo* compare a child in the womb to a snail in its shell, which is related by its name to the verb ‘*kola*’, “to be strong,” and by its spiral form (*nzinga*) to ‘*luzinga*’, “long life” (MacGaffey (b), 89).

has no end, but “death is merely a transition in the process of change” (MacGaffey (a), 44). Thompson states ((b), 109): “The especially righteous Kongo person will never be destroyed but will come back in the name or body of progeny, or in the form of an everlasting pool, waterfall, stone or mountain.” MacGaffey ((a), 63) says that when one dies “he is transformed into an ancestor (*bakulu*), ghost (*matebo*), local spirit (*simbi*), or a ‘spirit in a charm’ (*n’kisi*).”

The ancestors include dead members of the clan who have “lived honestly according to the laws and customs of their forbears.” The dead man, who has in general been benevolently disposed, sheds his mortal skin (as a snake) in the grave and proceeds to *Mpembe*, under the earth, near the water (*nzadi*)⁵. “The dead whether old or young, male or female, assume a white body” (Ibid., 81, fr. Van Wing). This belief, that the “good” dead assume white bodies, lead many *BaKongo* to believe when the ‘white man’ arrived that they were dead ancestors who returned as Europeans (Ibid., 81, fr. Cahier). To wear white is thus, to participate in the land of the dead or spirits.

The *BaKongo* “officially” represent man (*muntu*) as having two bodies: “black” outer (*nitu*) and “white” inner (*ngudi a muntu* = ‘master of man’, ‘mother of man’ = ‘true person’) (Jacobson- Widding, 192). The body (*vuvudi*) is merely the ‘outer shells, i.e., *kodya*, which includes flesh and blood. The ‘vital force’/‘elan vital’ (*moyo*) of this body is its soul which resides in its body fluids, including the blood (‘*menga*’ - which also refers to semen). Jacobson-Widding says: “Everything that is fluid has life

⁵ A Janus-headed snake is said to reside in the water which separates the land of the living from the land of the dead. This snake is thus related to the fluidity and magic contained metaphorically in the color red (which I will discuss shortly). Also, a witch or wizard (*ndoki*) is said to receive powers from this snake (water power) (Jacobson-Widding, 184).

(*moyo*), and is believed to have a certain power for good or for worse, even when it has left the body" (Ibid.).

Apparently, this 'vital force' is what connects the outer body to the inner body, i.e., 'inner person' (*nsala*). *Nsala* is invisible, and is the seat of intelligence, knowledge, understanding (*lunzi*). Not only is *nsala* said to be the indestructible dimension of man, but also is said to travel to other places (including the land of the dead) and to see other people when the human being is dreaming⁶ (Ibid., 192-3). If a messenger is sent by *nsala* it is known as '*mfumu a kutu*', which means 'master of the ear', or 'the head of sleep' (Ibid.).

The soul of the inner person is '*mwela*', which means 'air,' 'wind,' or 'life,' and it is through the mother's breathing that the 'inner' body of the fetus is said to grow. "Hence, in this matrilineal society, it is assumed that the seat of intelligence, knowledge and understanding is fostered and 'grown' by the transmission of life from the mother" (Ibid, 193).

⁶ This idea of the seat of intelligence being the eternal, indestructible aspect of man is quite similar to Aristotle's idea of the *nous poietikos*, and the separation of living forms from non-living forms in *De Anima* [See my Dedicatory Letter, fn15]. He does not seem, however, to allow one to maintain one's 'personality' after the death of the body - but many Christians may contest this, as did Kant - who one would have to admit, is a descended from a Christian tradition. Also, we can see similarities of the *BaKongo* ideas of dreaming with those of Freud. The 'other world' that the 'consciousness' (*lunzi*) "travels to," could easily be compared to Freud's idea of the 'unconscious' - 'primary processes', and the 'pre-conscious' - 'day's residues' ('*Tagesreste*') [See Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*]. Freud believes that in dreams the ideational content of pre-conscious thought is transformed "into sensory images to which belief is attached and which appear to be experienced" (ID, 683). He adds that such transformations also take place in hallucinations and visions. But he says that "throughout our sleeping state we know just as certainly that we are dreaming as we know that we are sleeping" (ID, 726).

So obviously Freud must believe that we have some kind of conscious awareness in our dreams. He even claims that some "seem to possess the faculty of consciously directing their dreams" (ID, 727).

“Between white and black appears the red of blood, birth, death, sunrise and sunset” (MacGaffey (a), 52, fr. Jacobson-Widding). Red is thus said by Jacobson-Widding (195-6), to represent a “third body” of man - his shadow (*kiini* - which is also the word for the mirror image one sees reflected in a pool). And, just as the body fluids are said to be sacred or taboo (*nlongo*)⁷, so is one’s shadow and one’s mirror image (in photographs for instance) to be respected and protected, at all costs, from being “eaten,” (i.e., controlled and manipulated) by witches ((‘*bandoki*’) which we will discuss shortly).

Red is thus said by Jacobson-Widding (20, 36) to be a subjective, emotional element that represents water or the fluid elements of the body. Likewise, whereas black and white pertain to positive and negative, rational elements of the objective, public order, Jacobson-Widding claims that ‘red’ refers to the subjective feelings of lived experience, and thus expresses an irrational element that transcends decisions of the rational, social realm, and is appealed to as a last recourse. When the *nganga* (priest), or when the chief, elders and initiates wear red (or an *n’kisi* is painted red), this symbolizes a mediation between *mpemba* and *ntoto*.

Ghosts are said to be witches (*bandoki*) who have been refused admittance to the village of the ancestors. They are “condemned to wander in the trackless and infertile grasslands that lie between the forests and the cultivated valleys [...] often at nightfall

⁷ Jacobson-Widding explains (183) that ‘*nlongo*’ is also etymologically related to ‘force’ (*ngolo*) and with ‘water’ (*nlangu* - which also refers to any kind of liquid). She also indicates that the ‘force’ connected with the water of rivers and pools is ‘life-giving, whereas the ‘force’ connected with the liquids of the body is ambiguous, i.e., it can be directed to either the good or the bad. Blood and saliva, for instance, can be used either to bless or to cure - we will see the implications of this when I discuss the *n’kisi n’conde*, and where I will also discuss the addition of ‘*bilongo*’ (which also is etymologically connected to ‘*nlongo*’, and is what provides the *n’kisi* with its power/ force). Jacobson-Widding claims that the only unambiguous fluids of the body are the life-giving semen and secretions of the female reproductive glands and these are thus ‘*nlongo*.’

ghosts leave their haunts to pass by villages, stealing food and other items. Sometimes they attack a man they meet on a lonely path and try to devour him. Human flesh is to ghosts what pork is to the ordinary *Mukongo*, the choice dish" (MacGaffey (a), 71, fr. Van Wing). The *bandoki* ghost strives to capture, i.e., "eat," man's 'vital force' (*moyo* - in the form of body fluids) and man's spirit and emotion contained in his shadow (*kiini*). If ghosts happen to return to the village and bother the people, shots are fired into the grave to properly kill them. "Now he is dead forever, and is transformed into a frog, lizard, crocodile or some other animal" (Ibid, 74, fr. Laman).

Tribal chiefs and elders are believed to be endowed with special powers which give them the ability to communicate between the ancestors and the matrilineal descent group in whose name they govern (MacGaffey (b), 60). Such powers are probably connected with "kundu" (witchcraft), and the "Red Water Snake" (see fn5) - though the powers of the "snake" appear to be more positive (see Jacobson-Widding, 184).

The ancestors are expected to provide a number of things including: long life, good health, good hunting, good crops, and many children. Also, they protect their descendants from witches. However, if they feel that they have not been buried with enough consideration or they "have been neglected of palm wine and kola nuts, necessary pleasures in the 'other-world', they could negate these 'blessings'" (MacGaffey (a), 67, fr. Van Wing). Ancestors are still appealed to today by *BaKongo* descendants who pour palm wine on a grave, present their problem respectfully to the ancestors, and then return home to await their reply in a dream (MacGaffey (b), 61).

Bisimbi (local spirits) are usually understood to be humans who lived and died on earth long ago. After spending many years in the land of the dead, they died again and

were transformed into *bisimbi* by *Nzambi* (the highest spirit), continuing to live in the underworld, but now they are able to communicate with those who live on earth. *Bisimbi*, which do not change and cannot be destroyed, are often associated with the sea and sea shells. “In the old days people consecrated *Mbamba*, a large sea shell, as their *bisimbi*. [Seeking immortality] they hid their souls in the shells saying, ‘Take me along that I may live forever with you’ ((MacGaffey (a), 77, fr. Laman), also see fn4, p3). *Bisimbi* concern themselves with the well-being of the community, aiding them versus epidemics, rainfall, and the fertility of crops and women (MacGaffey (b), 60).

Nzambi, the highest spirit (as was mentioned above), is generally credited with the creation of the universe. When all else failed in settling human affairs, *Nzambi* was called on as a last resort - which probably entails subjective judgments, corresponding to the role of mediation, to be made. “Otherwise unexplained events calling for no specific course of action were attributed to him, and prayers were addressed to him when all else failed....In the nineteenth century he was the most general spiritual entity, made less remote by being implicit in all the others, all of which (including man) might at times be referred to as ‘*Nzambi*’” (MacGaffey (a), 78).

“Man and his social milieu furnish the *BaKongo* with the constitutional elements of what we call ‘spirits’. Those spirits are nothing but men like themselves, but different in body and placed in other spheres” (Ibid, 137, fr. Van Wing). Thus the word ‘*n’kisi*’ never means spirit, but refers to an artificial object inhabited by a spirit which is dominated by a man (Ibid.). The Kongo universe consists of both invisible persons or souls and visible (“material”) objects - which include human and animal bodies. Visible objects are, therefore, considered “empty” or neutral “unless they embody or

are specifically associated with a person, in connection with the manipulation of spiritual power" (Ibid., 120).

The *BaKongo* see the ability to survive in the universe as a function of the play of power. "The terms for 'ordinary people' who lack *Kindoki* or *kundu* (witchcraft power) are derogatory. People who have power obtain it either directly or indirectly from the otherworld. They are relatively successful; they live longer and have more children and wealth. Power obtained from the otherworld can be used for personal or public benefit" (Ibid, 170). *MuKongo*, in the general community, obtain their power indirectly through *min'kisi*. It is the *nganga* (priest, magician, diviner) who determines the amount of power in an *n'kisi* and the methods of its employment.

In the nineteenth century there were two kinds of *nganga*⁸ ('*nganga n'kisi*'), each concerned with one of two kinds of *n'kisi*: one form of *n'kisi* was associated with cults of magically caused personal afflictions, while the other pertained to collective cults of political domains (MacGaffey (a), 138, fr. Peschuel-Loesche). However, at the turn of the century the distinction between the two was confused as "the Kongo political structure was destroyed, the chief ships were corrupted by the introduction of colonially designated 'chiefs', the local cults disappeared, and the meaning of *n'kisi* was denoted by the missionary indoctrinators to be an unitary, idolatrous phenomenon called 'fetishism', whose sinister promoter was the 'witch doctor', 'fetisher', or 'sorcerer', the *nganga*" (MacGaffey (a), 139).

⁸ In addition to the '*nganga n'kisi*', there is: the '*nganga mbuki*' (from 'buka', "to heal") - who specializes in the uses of herbs; and the '*nganga nganbo*' (named for the basket he uses) - a diviner, who specializes in determining the cause of an affliction or misfortune in the particular cases brought before him - whether it be natural, human, or spirit related (Janzen (b), 15).

At any rate, while the ‘*nganga n’kisi*’ still had respect, he had a considerable amount of authority and influence, having contact with water spirits in connection with healing, fertility (Jacobson-Widding, 191), and keeping the peace - both intra-tribally and inter-tribally - through the power of *min’kisi*. According to Volavkova (72: 57), the *nganga* was paid more for activating the power of the *n’kisi* than the artist himself. This is just one way in which *min’kisi* are typical of African accumulative art. After the sculptor/artist is finished with the piece, the work may undergo an innumerable amount of modifications.

Thompson (b) notes that the word “*n’kisi*” is used to refer to indigenous medicines, charms and wooden sculptures. As such, *min’kisi* can be any of a wide variety of containers including basketry, pots, leather bags, *kodya*, and in recent years glass jars, bottles, and plastic sachets.

Simple wooden figures may be commissioned or simply purchased ready-made at the market. However, a statuette, or other object, is not considered an *n’kisi* until a special medicine (*bilongo* - which etymologically relates to elements of sacredness or taboo, see fn7, p183) has been added to make it potent. Notably, for *min’kisi* statuettes:

Without *bilongo* a figure is completely powerless and is known as ‘*biteke*’. The *nganga* determines the composition of ingredients to give the desired power and adds them to the abdomen or head - often with complete disregard for the artist’s provision for such accumulations. The artist often provides for the addition of materials by eliminating the figures forearms and roughly finishing the torso. Medicines are then covered with a resin and sealed with a mirror or cowrie shell to the abdomen, or with a cap (*mpu*) to the head. Together with whatever ritual processes may be required the *n’kisi* and the *bilongo* is referred to as magic (*bunganga*) (MacGaffey (a), 139, 140).

Thereafter, the client may add whatever accessory items he desires, such as cloth, bone, beads, or shells, and he may now summon forth the power of the *n'kisi* by various means.

The medicines added to the ‘*biteke*’ by the *nganga* are divided into two groups by Thompson ((b), 117): ‘spirit-embodying’ and ‘spirit-directing’. Spirit-embodying materials include such things as:

cemetery earth - considered one with the spirit of the buried person - or equivalents such as white clay (*mpemba*), taken from riverbeds, or powdered camwood, the reddish color of which traditionally signals transition and meditation to *BaKongo*. Spirit-embodying materials are usually wrapped or concealed in a charm, but such objects as mirrors or pieces of porcelain attached to the exterior of *n'kisi* may also signify power (Thompson (b), 118).

Mirrors are thought to enable the *nganga* to see the otherworld (Jacobson-Widding (35) refers to a ‘water mirror’ where one may see their secret self,” or “the vital essence in one’s veins and body fluids.”] and thus be in contact with the entrapped spirit. “The ‘soul’ within the spirit-embodying medicine may be an ancestor come back from the dead to serve the owner of the charm, or a victim of witchcraft, captured by its owner for good or for evil depending on the owner’s whims (Thompson (b), 118).

MacGaffey ((b), 49) notes that “minor *min'kisi* were small and cheap,” and were worn on the body, placed in one’s house, and kept in one’s garden “to protect crops from theft.” He says ((a), 144) that some charms which are simply intended to bring good luck to the client - by bringing him in contact with the dead - “contain nothing more than the *mpemba* or camwood that the client licks, rubs on his forehead or the like.” Remembering the *BaKongo* cosmology, it seems that charms do not even require a

“physical body” in themselves but the *bilongo* may be applied directly to the client’s physical body “whose trembling indicates the spirit of the charm has entered him; he himself becomes its only visible container” (Ibid.). (Such ideas of “possession” will come into play when I discuss the *BaKongo* transition to Christianity).

It seems that, similar to Medieval European medicine and cosmology, different *min’kisi* correspond to various regions of the body. MacGaffey quotes from Nsemi ((b), 63):

Min’kisi differ in form and nature because the sufferings in the human body differ. Each person chooses an *n’kisi* to correspond to his illness. One would not, for example, take *n’kisi Mwe Nsundi* for a headache. For a pain in the stomach one would not take *n’kisi Mbwanga*. Whichever *n’kisi* causes the trouble, that is the one which gives the cure.

Likewise, villages were thought of as enclosed spaces, analogous to the human body, and were protected, cured or harmed depending on the proper use of *min’kisi*. The *min’kisi* served to guard the entrances and boundaries versus witches and evil spirits (MacGaffey (b), 75). Such guardians include *N’kondi za Mafula*, “*N’kondi* of the entrances,” which also contain “spirit-directing” medicines (Ibid.).

Spirit-directing medicines instruct the spirit in the *n’kisi* - by way of puns and symbols - how to hunt down evil, to seal, guarantee and avenge oaths, protection, etc. The ingredients of the *bilongo* include such things as blood, claws, small animal bones, seeds, stones, herbs and sticks (Thompson (b), 118). MacGaffey ((a), 143) claims that hair, nails and other exuviae represent a person to be affected by a charm and, a person so affected is said to be “put into” (*kotsuwa*) the charm.

As mentioned above with the *N'kondi za Mafula, min'kisi min'kondi* incorporate elements of both the spirit-embodying and spirit-directing medicines. Derived from the Kongo word ‘*konda*’ which means “to hunt at night,” the powers of a *n'kisi* may be positive or negative: it may act as an agent of healing, justice, revenge and oath-taking, among other things. The figures are usually of the male form, with its knees bent - “as in all Kongo sculptures” (Ibid., 142, fr. Laman). However, female forms are rarely found (Frum collection), and also dogs with opposite facing heads (*Mbwende*) have been used. Such “dogs,” said to have “four eyes,” are known to eat only human flesh and are used to hunt down evildoers. “It is said that on the way to the village of the dead one passes through a village of dogs, and dogs are thought to be able to see the dead” (Ibid., 132).

The smaller figures were usually personal charms for good luck or to perform the owner’s bidding, while the larger *min'kisi min'kondi*, usually over 70 cm, were shared by the entire village. “They had to do with swearing-in members of important societies, the termination of lawsuits, and the ending of skirmishes between villages” (Thompson (d), 180). To seal a contract, bind an oath, or finalize a treaty, the parties involved may drive blades, nails, screws, or some other object into the figure halfway, often wrapping them with raffia twine to bind the agreement. “Often the blades are licked before insertion by elite members of society. It is a sign of their power that they do so, and represents the activation of the medicine and the bewitching of another” (MacGaffey (a), 160, fr. Laman). It is also suggested by Thompson ((d), 180) that “the saliva on the blade acts as a formal signature, sealing the vow or admonition to the *n'kondi* spirit, and leads the spirit to the one who breaks the agreement.” (See also fn7, p183).

The *min'kondi* figures are very much associated with witches or ghosts in that the “human” figures are incorporated with a representation of the ‘kundu’ gland in the belly region, usually covered by a mirror or cowrie shell. It is believed by the *BaKongo* that death is caused by witchcraft through the *bakisi*. Their power is accumulated by the ‘eating’ of human flesh, and storing the souls of their up to twelve victims within the kundu. “Magicians and elders must be very much like witches in order to struggle with or negotiate with them. Elders must have *kundu* to protect the clan; *nganga* must have it in order to make the dead appear” (MacGaffey (a), 165).

Kundu, then, (which would most likely correspond to the emotional, indeterminate, irrational, magical power in man - which may be used in a good way (chiefs, elders, *nganga*) or evil manner (through witches/ghosts/*bakisi*) (see Jacobson-Widding, 35, 184)) is what incorporates the force of the *n'kondi* figure. “The *n'kondi* is provoked into action by using as an incantation such obscenities as, ‘eat, lick your mother’” (MacGaffey (a), 160). And many *min'kondi* figures have their mouths open with protruding tongues. Also, sacrifices are sometimes made to invoke the *n'kondi* for vengeful purposes.

The significance of blood sacrifice appears to be that the client expects a “killing” on his behalf or that he hopes to avoid a violent act directed toward himself (Ibid, 156). MacGaffey says (Ibid.): “A chicken was often sacrificed to the *n'kondi*, while at the same time ‘killing’ the statuette with a nail to make it angry⁹, so that it in turn will kill the witch in the same way - so that ultimately the ‘hunter’ (*n'kondi*) will be able to

⁹ The *KiKongo* word for “anger” (*mfunyia*) also means “wedge” (Janzen (b), 77). The wedges, blades, nails are thus hammered (*Mbau*) into the figure by the *nganga* to set the agreement, and, at the same time, the *n'kisi n'konde* into effect/performance.

kill his prey.” On the inter-communal level, Janzen ((b), 77) claims that sacrifices of animals, goats usually, were given as the *nganga* drove “blood wedges” into the *n’kondi* as the chiefs pledged:

Between your village and my village we have an accord, you may not seize hostages from us, and we will not seize hostages from you. If one of our people does something to the other group, we will meet and talk and will not fight (Ibid, fr. Munzele).

“War” is understood by the *BaKongo* as the perpetual struggle between man and the unseen forces that cause illness and misfortune, and, in conflicts between chiefdoms, was as much a contest between the magic forces of the *min’kisi* as it was between men in battle. A battle usually ends as soon as a few casualties have demonstrated which side has the better magic. MacGaffey ((b), 98) says the *BaKongo* could not understand what possessed the Europeans to kill each other by the millions in WWI.¹⁰

We can see then that the *n’kisi n’kondi* is much more of a peacekeeper than a destroyer. The charm itself is both avenger and victim - who suffers for the members of the community. This is reflected in its wild, painful, and yet, fierce, threatening expression. Its large wide-open eyes and mouth usually agape indicate, if not the deepest suffering, frustration and terror, than the madness of a warrior. One can only imagine what it is like to be trapped in a statue with nails being constantly driven into your body. The African artist portrays this quite well.

¹⁰ One would have to wonder if the recent genocide which occurred in Rwanda is related to a loss of magic belief, i.e., if it is related to the conversion of the “African” to a “European” mentality.

Its knees bent and arms akimbo (on either side of the abdomen) relate to the wrestling stance known as ‘*pakala*’ and represents, according to Thompson ((d), 180), that the figure is ready to attack evil in defense of the community. Another pose of the *n’kondi* is with the right arm raised with a spear or knife (usually missing today), and the other arm akimbo. Thompson calls this the ‘power pose’ which entails that, while the medicine is working on one’s behalf, it will neutralize one’s enemies ((d), 185).

The number of blades and points placed into the *n’kondi* are directly proportional to the success of the magical powers within it. If the desired result is not achieved by the client(s) then the figure is returned to the *nganga* to replace the *bilongo* (Roy, 160). The type of blades and their placement varies with the desired results. If a dispute is resolved, or an individual declared innocent, the nail or blade is sometimes removed (Wardwell, 98).

The *min’kisi* figures that I have seen have all been elevated from the ground by a platform under the feet. This is perhaps reflective of the sanctity the *BaKongo* placed on these extraordinary art forms, and reflects the dedication and sincerity bestowed upon them within their socio-political/religious cultus. The *min’kisi min’kondi* supplied the *BaKongo* with an organized, peaceful means - a symbolically incarnated force - with which to deal with the misfortune and oftentimes heartbreaking results of destiny and the unknown. It provided the *BaKongo* with a “civilized” way to settle disputes through promises made and bound with the unknown forces of the universe. By the hands of the “rational” Portuguese, French and Belgians, in their “development” and “civilization” of the land and peoples, thousands of *min’kisi* -

which were seen as a threat to their control - were burned or carried off to museums and households, the cults behind them being suppressed and forced underground.

When the *min'kisi min'kondi* fell the sun went down on a powerful African nation, and with it an incredible art form and system of beliefs were nullified and replaced by a more powerful culture with its own symbolic system. However, we can still see vestiges of this African cultus, not only in various parts of central Africa, but also in South America, the Caribbean Islands and in New Orleans in North America. Here the descendants of African slaves carry on the tradition in various forms (including *Voodoo*) - where they are often combined with Christian symbolism.

Afterword

Janzen ((a), 3) claims that, among those who inhabit the Lower Zaire region today, “nearly everybody is at least nominally Christian.” But this is a peculiar form of Christianity associated with *Kimbanguism* (after the religious revolutionary prophet, Simon Kimbangu, who was arrested in 1921, along with many of his disciples and followers, by the colonial authorities in accordance with the Catholic Church). In 1972 Mobutu made the Church of Jesus Christ on the Earth through the Prophet Simon Kimbangu (EJCSK) the “official” indigenous church of Zaire, among the six others permitted - all others being suppressed. However, Janzen notes (*Ibid.*) that the amount of propaganda put out by the government and the Church tends to hide the fact that “many churches, often insignificant in numbers, that also trace their origin to Kimbangu, [...] challenge the claim of EJCSK.” And he says, “It is also true that nearly everybody believes in at least the possibility of witchcraft, and also in the possibility of divination and spiritual healing. Catholics, Protestants, and agnostics seek out some particular expert in the occult as their afflictions demand although they willingly support, in public, any movement to suppress ‘superstition’ and ‘charlatanism’ in general” (*Ibid.*).

This last fact would go along quite well with what Jacobson-Widding has pointed out (186-8), i.e., that the image of rationality which the people allow for in the public domain of law and order, is actually quite different from their private, secret, magical beliefs which pertain to ‘*nlongo*.’

The ‘*nganga*’ still exists in the Kongo region today, but his name is changed to ‘*ngunza*’, “the prophet” (*Ibid.*, 4). And *min’kisi* ceremonies still go on today within a

more “modern” context. For example, palm wine (*nsamba*)¹¹ is necessary in all social transactions, including marriages, in meetings with important people, and in funerals and in communicating with ancestors (as was mentioned p164). The palm wine, as such, partly because of its name, partly because of its social significance, embodies the meaning of the action performed.

Another case, of an *n'kisi n'kondi*, pertains to an actual hunt where the *nganga*/ *ngunza* sacrifices a chicken - wiping its blood on the barrel, and invokes the ‘*n'kisi Makwende*’ (whose name itself means “leopard”) to rid the gun of its bewitchment; an iron wedge is then driven into the “breast” of a banana tree, close to water, to aid the hunter to kill his prey (Ibid., 6-7).

Despite such ritual actions, the traditional forms of religion have been greatly diminished and impoverished. Janzen claims that: “Virtually the only type of closed, quasi-secret organization, concerned with the manipulation of power, in which language is used in the old way, is that of youth clubs or gangs, whose culture is heavily marked by American and French movies and comic strips” (Ibid, 7). And MacGaffey ((b), 29) says that *min'kisi* can be found, recently in the Republic of Zaire, in such forms as “little plastic packets discreetly worn, ball-point pens medicated to help schoolboys pass examinations, and special sunglasses that taxi drivers hope will protect them from accidents.”

¹¹ ‘*Sambula*’ = “to bless;” ‘*sambila*’ = “to beseech, invoke, pray to;” ‘*sambuka*’ - “to get better, prosper;” (Janzen (a), 6). Also, the word for “palm” is ‘*kanda*’, which also means “clan” and “sole,” - which ultimately seem to refer to ‘*Nzambi*’ (God) (Ibid, 71).

But Janzen and MacGaffey seem to be overlooking the inter-influential relations of the *BaKongo* with other clans, tribes, and kinship groups which exist today in rural areas of Central/Sub-Saharan Africa where similar, yet variable, magical rituals and cosmological beliefs are still very much adhered to and practiced, i.e., with the Luunda, Akan (who have ancestral territorial deities which inhabit charms (Thornton, 252)), Maasai, Nuer, Mossi, etc.; and more closely, Bembe, Kamba, Ladi, Yombe, Buissi [see Jacobson-Widding 15-44 - where she discusses the subjective influence of individuals on the intra-tribal objective ideas of space and time. It seems that the cosmological color scheme of white, black and red was pretty standard in this region; also, the idea that the rising of the sun signified life, and the setting of the sun - death; and the analogy of the microcosm of body to the macrocosm of the village and the universe was rather general. Note especially p40, where she discusses the “infection” of other clan’s matrilineages, by the “vital force” contained within the clan-oriented *n’kisi* of the *BaKongo*, when one clan is married into another]. By such an idea of “infections,” I will support the thesis of Thornton (191) that:

[T]he degree of diversity in Africa can be easily exaggerated. The older anthropological tendency to see each ethno-linguistic group as a separate “tribe” and to ignore such factors as multilingualism or nonlinguistic cultural sharing have tended to force the real diversity beyond its true limits. At most we have three truly culturally diverse areas, and the seven subgroups are themselves often quite homogenous.

Thornton believes that cultures are not static and fixed, but constantly changing (in various degrees and time spans), adapting themselves to various circumstances in their environment, and in interactions with other cultural groups (211). He notes that linguistic barriers are “always a bit flexible and confused” (186), and that many people in western and central Africa “interacted with each other from day to day as a result of proximity or commerce. In the course of these interactions they might exchange many cultural ideas even if they did not exchange languages” (Ibid.). He

goes against a “maximum-diversity” hypothesis demonstrating that, not only was there inter-communication and inter-tribal influence in Africa before the arrival of the Europeans, but also, there followed an intra-influential relation between Africans and Europeans.

We do not have to hypothesize very far to see the European impact, by means of trade of slaves and other cargo, and their ruling ideology, upon the African continent. But Thornton demonstrates further, not only the adaptation and inter-communication amongst slaves - through the development of various “Creole” languages, aesthetics, and belief systems - but also, their (the African slave’s) influence upon the “New World” and thus upon the indigenous peoples and “Europeans” who lived there. Obviously, there is a great African influence upon aesthetics, language and religious practice in the Americas and in the Caribbean, varying in degree and region - especially in music, clothing, and art. I am not going to go into detail on this, but I will mention some instances of “Africanized” Christian religion in the “New World.”

As has been mentioned, many Africans were converted to Christianity - adapting it to their own particular interpretations. Thornton says they found Christianity as presented in the Holy Scriptures hard to accept because the events that took place in it occurred so long ago and far away (251). He adds: “Since Africans were in almost constant contact with the other world, the potential for a flowing and constantly changing cosmology and religion was obviously enhanced” (251). Therefore, they tended to base their interpretations upon the continued revelations of such prophets as Simon Kimbangu, which relatively fixed the relations between the other world and this world.

Likewise, just as the “continued revelations” of Kimbangu had been suppressed and forced underground by colonial and Church authorities in the Kongo, several African (Christian) priests who performed divination, interpreted omens, and acted as spirit mediums in America were persecuted for practicing witchcraft. For example, the Brazilian Inquisition of 1618 heard the case of Jorge Ferreira who had been summoned to aid a sick child through divination and treatments (Ibid, 265). Also, an unnamed African slave went before the Inquisition accused as a diviner “who could know future things.” The Inquisitor asked one of the witnesses “if he was aware ‘that the Devil could divine future things’ and if he knew whether the old man had made ‘an implicit or explicit pact with the Devil’” (Ibid.). Thornton says that such “sorcerers” were quite common, hundreds of such cases being heard before the Mexican and Cartegena Inquisitions (Ibid, 265-6).

It is quite interesting to note that - by the fact that the *BaKongo* already had the concept of the distinction between the world of the living and the “spiritual” world, their representation of this division by a cross, and by their recognition of one God, *Nzambi a Mpungu*, as the “original” creator - this lead early missionaries to believe that the True God had already been revealed to the *BaKongo*, in revelation, prior to the arrival of the Europeans (Ibid., 260). And, “when the Capuchins and the Spanish Inquisition decided to print a catechism for Allada in 1658 that used ‘*Vodou*’ as the term for God and ‘*Lisa*’ as the term for Jesus, they were also implicitly acknowledging that the people of that region must have somehow known of both God and Jesus before the arrival of the missionaries” (Ibid.). This denomination was accepted thusly as the three-in-one concept of the Western Trinity (Ibid, 253).

Similarly, just as Catholics believed that the Holy Spirit possessed a church during mass rituals and that Christ was physically present in the Eucharist, one does not have to go far to see the relation to the spiritual possession of shrines and sacred objects - as was practiced by the *BaKongo* and Akan.¹² Thornton notes that: “Spirit mediumship would play a role in the merger of traditions in Africa, especially when saints possessed mediums or when ancestors advised their descendants to take up Christian practice” (Ibid, 243). He also compares, along with MacGaffey, the fixing of a being from the other world into an *n'kisi* with the European ritual magic of the time. In such cases, “demons” were captured in magical instruments with the aid of God or other divine agents (Ibid, 145).

To conclude, I will just mention the “*Lemba-Petro*,” a Haitian *Voodoo* rite, encompassing a synthesis of Catholic deities and saints/symbolism; Dahomey: “*Voudou*” (related to Alladan “*Vodou*”) and *Rada* “*ba*” spirits/*voduns*; Yoruban “*orisha*”; and *BaKongo* ritual - involving *min'kisi* of both the *Lemba*¹³ and *N'kondi* type.

¹² Similar to the metaphorical-metonymical relation of God to the Sacraments and their relation to the sacramentalia, it appears that all *min'kisi* originate in God (*Nzambi*). What links the *min'kisi* (multiple, material, visible objects) to *Nzambi* (the One) is *Funza* - “the first *n'kisi*.” *Nzambi* is not “seen” in any *n'kisi*, but only his name is used by man (Janzen, (a), 34-5).

¹³ ‘*Lemba*’ - a word meaning “to calm” - arose in central Africa in the 17th century, apparently as a therapeutic response to the slave trade, which was seen as a play of witchcraft power - tearing clans, villages and families apart. However, it seems to have had mainly a political function, and thus most of its practitioners tended to be of the elite ruling classes. To summarize, it is “the sacred medicine integrating people, villages and markets” - with emphasis on the marketplace (law and order), but it also had to do with fertility - and thus, keeping marriages together (Janzen (b), 3, 4, 15-17, (a), 96-7). *Lemba* priests were in general well-to-do and were distinguished by the *Lemba* insignia (*nkobe*) - which could be a bracelet or staff. Their power, through *Lemba min'kisi* (“drums of affliction,” bracelets, rattles, statues), allowed them to subdue “extensive, outside, wild, and public forces” (Janzen (b), 255).

The *Lemba-Petro* is, according to Janzen ((b), 273-92), a ritual of regeneration of life, spirit and continuity - supplicating the gods/ancestors and keeping the binding, magical roots “alive” within the community. Jean Petro (the Spanish slave Don Pedro) was a heroic/martyr figure in Haitian history who, leading the slaves through “electrifying,” frenzied dance rituals, helped to unify the people in resistance to French colonial “rulers”/slave-owners in the late 18th century - that is, in resistance to the French colonials, who following their great revolution, refused, in general, to set their slaves free.

The ritual takes place secretly, deep in the forest, away from the village and the *Voodoo* temple, and is put on by a family who has suffered numerous illnesses and deaths. It encompasses two day/night/day phases separated by a pause of a few days. The first phase is to supplicate the *Petro loa* and the second, the *Rada loa*. I will describe two different versions as observed by Herskovits and Price-Mars in the 1930s.

Herskovits’ description (Ibid, paraphrased) begins before three altars, a table laden with food, drink and sacramentalia in front of each. The first table (*trone*), covered with a white cloth, bears various Catholic sacramentalia (figures of saints, Holy water, crucifixes, candles); the second, is in honor of *Simbi loa* (which Janzen says probably relates to the *BaKongo simbi* - mystical, benevolent local spirits/powers inhabiting *kodya*, water courses, springs, pools, rocks, forests, etc.); the *Simbi* is in contrast to the third *loa* - *Bosu* (a public spirit, related to *Lemba*, representing the human social/domestic realm) - whose table is proceeded by various sacrificial animals of the color: black, white and red.

In the early evening a Catholic-like service ('*action-de-grace*') sets off the event. Beginning with European music, the '*action-de-grace*' fades to African rhythms, drumbeats and singing which get louder and louder as night falls. The cult leader (*hungan*) then leads the family members before the altars, each with their own candle, where they tell their problems to the *loa* spirits. This is followed by the cyclic movement of an assistant who, taking six candles with him, proceeds in a counter-clockwise direction to implant one candle at each of the four corners surrounding the meadow (representing the four corners of the earth). The family members do the same, creating the semblance of a cosmogram.

The altars are then "joined" with lines of corn meal, or white powder, by the *hungan*. Such connections are paths for the anticipated arrival of the gods who will be fed, placated, and thus "put away" for another decade. Sacrificial animals are then brought before their respective altar/ *loa* where they are cleaned, fed and presented to the gods. Each family member is then "crossed" with the animals by the *hungan* - who, possessed by '*Simbi*', recites an invocation. Meanwhile, the chanting, singing and drumbeats become louder, and the family members, possessed and ecstatic, move from altar to altar with the other devotees.

Around midnight, the animals are sacrificed to each *loa*, and the troubling *loa* are symbolically buried - along with an offering of meat and an iron cross which will supposedly placate the *loa* for up to 17 years - and they are told to return to Africa. The family being thus "cleansed," and the community healed, a great feast persists until daylight. This concludes the first ('*Petro loa*') phase; the second phase of placating the '*Rada loa*' being much the same.

Price-Mars describes another '*Lemba-Petro*' ceremony taking place in Cul-de-Sac Valley, Haiti in which we see distinctively different (less elaborate - the practitioners may not have been as wealthy as those in the other ceremony), yet related, variations of the same ritual. Price-Mars does not witness the entire ritual, but his description proceeds as follows (*Ibid*, 286-92, paraphrased):

Two altars are noted at the base of a tree. One of them is a table, with various Catholic figures of Jesus, the Holy Virgin, St. Joseph and other saints within the niche of a bamboo structure, and also laden with plates of cake and candy, kola wine, a lamp, a bell. Under the table is a white cloth with four forged iron crosses, corn, bread, Kola wine and more cakes and candies.

The second altar/table is covered with red and blue cloth, and a deep hole lies before it containing two meter long pieces of mahogany wrapped in crimson silk cloth. The *hungan* removed both pieces of wood, and reciting a chant: "Ko!," he drives nails into the two pieces of wood. A strong chord was then stretched out, in the form of a cross, each length being five meters long.

Another chant ensued (on tying down the *petro loa* and Jean *Petro* breaking his chains) as the wood is bound to the chord/ cross. This cross, along with another mahogany cross and two of the forged crosses are then burned in the hole at the base of the second altar.

As darkness has fallen, the *hungan* sounds his bell and the congregation proceeds in two rows westward until they come to another large pit. The *hungan* then recites a prayer - to the holy earth, to Jean-*Petro* and the revolutionary forefathers of Haiti - imploring absolution and asking for their blessing.

After the prayer, five female animals (a goat, chicken, guinea fowl, turkey and dove) are decapitated by the *hungan* over the pit - their blood flowing copiously into it, after which he threw their bodies in also. Water is then poured by the *hungan* into the pit, each cursed family member repeating his gesture. And the same action is done with diverse grains.

As the *hungan* recites the final incantations, a man in the assembly becomes possessed by the *Petro* gods. Convulsing and raging, his hands are tied by the *hungan* - who leads him and the congregation back to the original ritual site, murmuring pronouncements of forgiveness.

The man is untied and held by assistants before the two altars, where the *hungan* makes a final sacrifice of a sow while making an incantation to "criminal *Petro*." The sow's jugular is cut with the blood flowing into a white vase. Another liquid is added to the blood which is then smeared by the *hungan* (while still reciting his incantation) on the lips of the family members who are now dressed in white wearing red bracelets. Meanwhile, several members of the congregation shiver in ecstasy and give deep sighs of emotion. When it is midnight the feast commences.

As we can see, this *voodoo* ritual is a synthesis of the magical mysterious elements of many religions. This demonstrates that all religions are fairly compatible - they are all relating to the same thing - "life." I have read somewhere that there are over 10,000 versions of Christianity in the world, and I think *voodoo* and *Kimbanguism* would have to be included in this list. In this time of rationality, where we do all we can to suppress the magic (the "red" side) of life, covering it over with analyses and controlled hypotheses for "success," perhaps we can learn something from these so-called "primitive" cultuses. As Lunungu said: "It is good that our country should change, but we should examine the skills and customs of other countries to see

whether they are good for the soul.” After all, we cannot deny that “magic” exists - we are alive. (There is no “rational” explanation for life itself which is more “valid” than any other. At the most, such “explanations” can only be mytho-logical - explained within the realm of myth which one already believes/participates). And perhaps also, the spirit in an *n'kisi n'kondi* was “alive” - if the people believed in it, and its spirit worked for the good of the community and harmony with others.

Postscript

I have discovered some superb *min'kisi min'kondi* since my stay in Belgium - in Tervuren and Leuven...While attending a welcoming party, for foreign students in the “University Center,” I was amazed to find the eyes of an incredible *n'kisi n'kondi* “blaring” at me from behind a glass case - and noted four or five other *min'kondi* displayed along with it. Everyone drank their wine and ate their cheese. No one knew what they were, nor even noticed them. When I saw a huge crucifix strategically positioned on an opposite wall, the play of metaphor and metonymy was just too much.., all I could do was smile. The *bilongo* was, indeed, very powerful.

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