

worth remarking on the critical aspect, not to be merely recriminatory but to show that the peculiar unwillingness of many travelers to criticize Africa (a patronizing attitude if one thinks about it) is absent in this book. It is honest. What more can one ask of a travel guide?

After such praise, a pair of cavils (there has to be some balance). The pictures are tiny and fairly unhelpful. Most importantly, the book's virtue is its fault. Its compendious size may be comprehensive; it is also a fair weight. It would be a major part of one's forty pound luggage, even if one did carry it by hand as "a reasonable amount of reading material for the journey." Also, its size represents the kind of expensive production that is going to be prohibitive to revise very often. Thus this is likely to get out of date very quickly. Perhaps one solution would be to divide this book into booklets covering proximate regions or even pamphlets for a single country, so that it would be more portable and would permit regular and relatively inexpensive sequential revision.

The volume remains a remarkable achievement. This type of thing one did not quite believe could be pulled off. It contains information that one imagined would be acquired by the helpful comments of a returning traveler experienced in each country. All credit to the eager and industrious authors and their corps of local assistants. Even if you do not plan an immediate journey, this will make fascinating bedside reading, conducive to that dreadful African disease-travel fever.

John Povey

*AFRICAN DRESS: A Select and Annotated Bibliography of Subsaharan Countries* by Joanne Bubolz Eicher has been reprinted. A copy of this volume, which was originally published in 1970, is now once again available from: African Studies Center, Center for International Programs, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan 48824. Price: \$4.00 postpaid.

## à propos

### NKISI FIGURES OF THE BAKONGO

Zdenka Volavkova's article, "Nkisi Figures of the Lower Congo" (*African Arts*, Vol. V, No. 2, pp. 52-59) accurately reflects the unsatisfactory nature of most published comment on these figures and the difficulty of solving the non-problems that arise when irrelevant European categories are imposed upon the data. Some of the difficulties can be cleared up by referring to the indigenous theory of magic. Our comments are based upon recent fieldwork and upon

archival materials not yet widely known.<sup>1</sup> Page references are to Volavkova's article.

The author has trouble classifying the figures according to their functions, largely because she takes for granted certain contrasts that do not exist in Kongo thought. The healing function is supposed to be distinct from that of attacking witches, but as the BaKongo understand it to heal is to succeed in chasing off or destroying the witch who has caused the illness. The Maramba fetish (presumably *malamba*, from *lamba*, "to cook; to medicate magically") is said to have had the three functions of supporting the chief, protecting the initiated, and killing malefactors (p. 54); but malefactors are witches, the business of a chief was to destroy them, and the purpose of initiation was to strengthen the community against them. The two "contradictory functions" for which the priest activated the charm *n'kosi* (from *kosa*, "to crush," as in pneumonia) were merely *loka n'kisi*, "activating it," and *lembola n'kisi*, "calling it off."

It is correct that a *n'kisi* was regarded as the master of particular diseases, able to cure them in its clients or inflict them on persons against whom it was activated. The priest of a given charm was often someone who had been initiated into its mystery in order to cure him of the illness in whose treatment he subsequently specialised. From the indigenous point of view, the important functional contrast lies between the uses to which a charm may be put. With respect to the victim of an angry *n'kondi* ("nail fetish"), the difference between witchcraft and the legitimate activity of a healer is that the victim deserves his misfortune. Desert, however, is a matter of judgment, political in essence; the visible, material evidence of magical activity would be the same in either case.

All powerful charms (a term we prefer to "fetishes") were composite, in at least three senses. A plain wooden statue, "empty" (*mpamba*), had no power until "ingredients" were sealed into a receptacle in its head, belly, or elsewhere, as Volavkova observes. The ingredients themselves were drawn from diverse categories recognised in nature; the items were often chosen according to a sort of linguistic game, like punning, in which the name of the item resembled the desired action. Laman gives a concise example: "[The *nganga*] takes *nkandikila* [a red fruit] so that the deceased may *kandika* (set a watch for) witches, *lunungu lwa nsamba* [a red pepper] so that in the realm of the dead he may *samba* (invoke) the witch who has eaten him, *luyalu* [another fruit] to give him *yaala* (power) over the witches

so that they may die, and *luvemba* (chalk) to make his eyes clear so that he may see the witches who have eaten him."<sup>2</sup> The resulting combinations of heterogeneous elements seem absurd to the European eye (p. 57) only because the selection principle is obscure. A padlock probably implied the verb *kanga*, "to lock up" (see below), a hunting net would invoke "trapping," and pebbles suggest *simbi* spirits; but to make anything of the remaining ingredients mentioned one would have to know *what kind* of "bird," "snake," and "nuts" were used.

In addition to, or perhaps because of, the aggregation of its material ingredients, every powerful charm was supposed to contain a "spirit," whether of an ancestor who after long sojourn in the land of the dead chose to renew his usefulness to his descendants in this fashion, or of a *simbi* water spirit who had chosen the priest by possessing him, or of a victim of witchcraft, enslaved and trapped in the charm and forced to do the will of its owner. In the last instance, the witchcraft might have been the legitimate power of a chief or priest, or the illegitimate power of a selfish and anti-social "witch" (*ndoki*); in either event, power is costly, far more



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so than an empty woodcarving, and its value is measured in human souls.

The purpose of driving nails into a charm was to make it angry so that it would readily seek vengeance on a designated victim. To distinguish between the object and the spirit "in" it would probably distort Kongo thinking on the subject; the composite *n'kisi* is a single entity to which the European conventional distinction between material and immaterial does not apply. The figure was often given a threatening pose and dressed to look as terrifying as possible in order to frighten witches, meaning not only real evildoers in the village but their spiritual selves whom the *n'kisi* might intercept in his nocturnal patrols.

The action of driving in nails is called *koma n'loko*, "to hammer in a curse." The same phrase is used to describe the action of a refugee who declares his desire of becoming the client of a chief; he activates the chief against his persecutors by ritually insulting him. In the activation of a *n'kisi*, wedges of vegetable material could be used instead of iron nails. Other forms of constraint included binding or shackling the figure, and this technique, too, was applied to living people to evoke their powers.

Dapper's story of the *n'kisi* "Kikokoo" (*kinkokoso?*), which took revenge by wrecking a Portuguese boat after someone had driven nails into it, shows that driving in nails was a current ritual in the 16th century and destroys, instead of supporting, Volavkova's argument that the practice may have begun in the mid-17th century (p. 56). It was expected that if nails were driven into a charm it would go out and wreck something. We can go further and say

with some confidence that Kikokoo incorporated a *simbi*, since it controlled the sea, and that procuring European goods from Mputu ("Portugal"), as its *nganga* said Kikokoo had done, was regarded as a normal function of such a spirit.

Missionary use of stabbed and bleeding madonnas for teaching purposes may have contributed to the development of nail fetishes, but if so the figures were understood and incorporated into Kongo culture on entirely African terms. Merolla's demonstrations (p. 56) were intended to activate feelings of guilt in his congregation, guilt being an emotion highly developed in Europeans and essential to their religious orientation, but it is likely that when he used the statues in a sermon against sorcery the audience thought that he, as a diviner, was exposing to them concrete evidence of witchcraft activity in their community. He had presumably laid hands on the actual charm which some evildoer had been arousing to attack an unsuspecting neighbor. Prophets make similar demonstrations today. We cannot deduce from the "syncretic" juxtaposition of African and European traits that a corresponding mixture of ideas is present in the actor's mind. There is abundant evidence that the early Christian missionary effort was entirely misunderstood by the BaKongo and that elements of Christianity were not juxtaposed with indigenous religion as "a second arrow" (p. 55) but were assimilated into it.<sup>3</sup>

In the activation (*mpandulu*, from *vanda*) of a charm, especially for evil purposes short of killing, the governing idea is expressed by *kanga*, "to stop,

enclose, bind." The victim of a charm such as *mpungu* is said to be "shut up in *mpungu*," meaning for example that because of this she is unable to conceive, and is thus doubly "closed up." The image of the container and the contained applies both to the charm and to its victim, which may be a whole village whose entrances have been "blocked" with the result that the inhabitants are unwell or unfortunate. Today charms are often made up in screw-capped jars, perfume bottles, or, for discreet personal use, in plastic sachets.

In the absence of very specific information on provenance, classification of charms is rendered almost impossible by the fact that, in Kongo thought, a *n'kisi* was identified not by its form or even its responsibility for a particular type of affliction but by its tradition, meaning its name, the name of its supposed originator, the sequence of priests in charge of it, and the formulae of initiation and activation. Like the clan traditions they closely resemble, magical traditions belong more to myth than to history; they must always have been difficult to verify, even in previous centuries when magic flourished more openly than now.

Maes's classification is clearly unsatisfactory, initially on linguistic grounds (p. 52). Of the terms he uses, 1) "Na Moganga" makes no sense. *Na* is an honorific prefix. *Moganga* should perhaps be *muganga*, but still makes no sense. 2) "Npezo" should be *mpezo*, "chalk," the color of spirits in general. 3) "Mbula" means "a blow." 4) "Konde" should be *n'kondi*, "hunter," from *konda*, "to hunt" (alone, not "in secret," p. 54). *N'kondi* is regarded by the BaKongo as a type of charm, the "nail fetish," but not all charms so labeled had nails in them nor were all those with nails necessarily referred to as *n'kondi*. There was probably a similar, vaguely defined type, Maes's "Mbula," equipped with "guns" and used primarily to guard houses and other places against witches and ghosts in general.

At the time when figures of the kind now found in museum collections were in widespread use there was probably no generally recognised indigenous taxonomy of the objects, considered simply as objects, which could be useful to art historians. Charms successively created within the same tradition and thus possessing the same identity sometimes took totally different forms, including bags as well as statues. Their identity in whatever form was probably recognised only within a relatively restricted community, although the theory of such objects is universal. "There were no fixed iconographical rules" (p. 58).

Users of charms seem to have been



DURING HIS RECENT VISIT TO MONROVIA IN DECEMBER 1973, FOUNDING EDITOR PAUL O. PROEHL WAS RECEIVED BY LIBERIAN PRESIDENT WILLIAM R. TOLBERT, JR. AND PRESENTED HIM WITH A VOLUME OF AFRICAN ARTS MAGAZINE.

more interested in their mystical attributes, as specified in the traditions, than in their appearance. The general nature of indigenous thinking is illustrated by a taxonomic essay written in KiKongo, about 1910:

"The class of 'land' *min'kisi* is very large. They are called 'of the land' because when they are used their ingredients are not derived from the water but from the land only, whether for healing or for interdiction. Among the land *min'kisi* are Luhemba, Mwe Kongo, Kula, Biyala, Mwe Nsundi, Madungu or Nkokobondo, Kilonda, Musansi, Mbwanga, Nsakulu, Mungani, and Kubangu. Kinkita belongs to both the land and water. Muzinga, Niambi, Muteke, and Mutadi are also land *min'kisi*, but they are classed as divination *min'kisi* too. In the 'water' class we find Bunzi, Matinu, Mbumba, Mpodi, Bisimbi, Mwe Mbuku, Mbola. Among the Nkondi, some are water, some land. In the water class, but also included in divination, are Mutadi (sic), Suku, and some Nkondi. Makwanga is in the 'sky' class, but also belongs to 'land.' Mwe Kongo, Madungu and Mungani are 'land' *min'kisi*, but they are also used to bless dogs and traps."

Evidently this classification is partly functional and partly cosmographic. For art historical purposes, a strictly formal classification of the objects is likely to be more practical.

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1. J. M. Janzen, "Laman's Kongo ethnography," *Africa* 42, 4 (1972), pp. 316-28.
2. K. Laman, *The Kongo, II*. Uppsala, 1957, p. 92.
3. W. G. L. Randles, *L'Anclen Royaume du Congo*, Paris, 1968; W. MacGaffey, "The West in Congolese experience," in P. Curtin, ed., *Africa and the West*, Madison, 1972.

### ONCE AGAIN ON THE KONGO NKISI FIGURES

The fact that my study stimulated such a lengthy response might have been a welcome occasion for a useful dialogue between two distinct disciplines, art history and anthropology. Yet Wyatt MacGaffey and John M. Janzen did not think about partnership, nor did they wish any dialogue between theirs and someone else's discipline. With authority and certainty they came to enlighten, teach and evaluate art history which they presume to be ignorant, and the author whom they presume to be helpless. One has to wonder, therefore, what expertise in both history and art substantiates their authoritative paternalism.

Rejecting their tone, my response concentrates on the major points of their comments. The authors' introductory statement directed against ethnocentric

attitudes to African art meets with my sympathy. W. Hausenstein, a European art historian, tainted in 1929 the imposition of Western concepts upon non-Western art, labelling such concepts as "colonizing," and even earlier, A. Riegl (1901), one of the founders of art historical methodology, explained such undertakings as not only ahistorical, but lacking any scientific substance. Yet, however clear and old the principles may be, they always can be neglected or ignored, especially if African art is treated by non-professionals.

The second paragraph of MacGaffey's and Janzen's comments might be understood as if the author of the article on *nkisi* figures shared this negligence of the basic foundations of historical work. I would prefer to believe that that was not the intention because it would be against the rules of fair play. Without the knowledge of my previous publications and long educational activities linked together with the African independent states, mere literacy helps to comprehend that the article on the *nkisi* figures was written to criticize ethnocentric approaches.

One of the points of my study was to demonstrate that the classification of the *nkisi* figures according to their functions was useless if not impossible. The authors of the comments understood this well as is shown in their eleventh paragraph and in their last sentence. Even though they seemed to understand, they criticized the author for having what are, in fact, non-existent troubles.

Besides some redundant explanations of the treatment of *nkisi* figures commonly known to those doing research in the area, suggestions on the decoding of the meaning of the components of the magic figures, as well as some terminological explanations, are interesting anthropological observations which may contribute to the study of certain art historical problems. However, for the purpose of further work, MacGaffey and Janzen ought to provide their statements with the necessary research data on when, where and by whom the information was recorded. Although the Kongo non-verbal communication system seems to be of rather general validity, the particular symbols were changeable in space and time. Sometimes the meaning of the entire object undergoes a change, sometimes the meaning of its components, sometimes its name. For example: in Manianga, peanuts are very meaningful as ingredients of the symbolic wedding present in that they testify to the virginity of the girl in question. In Ngoyo, on the other hand, the same peanuts in the same context may be free of all symbolic sense (forgotten? unknown? rejected?), although the Woyo are otherwise major experts in

symbolism. Thus, what is presented in MacGaffey's and Janzen's comments as statements relevant to the Beshi Kongo in general, may, in fact, relate merely to a certain region in a certain period of time. A further example: the authors corrected the term of *teki* which I used for non-initiated sculpture, replacing it by the term of *mpamba* as being its general Kongo denomination. Yet from the 1880s until the 1970s the term of *teki* used for such sculpture has been recorded in several regions south of the River by travellers, missionaries, as well as by myself, while L. Kiéner, by the beginning of the century in the region of Pangala among the Sundi, recorded *kifuiti* (sic), and in numerous localities in Mayumbe, according to the results of my repeated enquiries, the "empty" sculpture is called *tumba*. The disparity is here not a mere terminological matter, but may be of historical significance. In the Kongo country which is quite large, and among the Beshi Kongo who are a multi-ethnic agglomeration of people with various historical backgrounds, any fast generalization in terms of space and time delays instead of clarifying the knowledge about the past and present.

MacGaffey's and Janzen's interpretation of the difference between the price of the "empty" sculpture and that of the *nkisi*, might partly explain the problem. However, the authors probably do not realize that the *nkisi* is not opposed to the "plain" carved piece of wood, and that in terms of the involvement with magic, a *nganga* does not differ from a sculptor in quality but rather in quantity. The Kongo carvers in various regions repeatedly explain their work as the result of inspiration caused by spirits during a dream. (There are several other examples of sculptors' involvement with magic.)

Making statements with much certainty on the history of a ritual in the 16th century on the basis of a contemporary story recorded in a source from the second half of the 17th cen-

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