

THERE ARE MANY KONGO WORLDS  
PARTICULARITIES OF MAGICO-RELIGIOUS  
BELIEFS AMONG THE VILI AND YOMBE OF  
CONGO-BRAZZAVILLE

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PREAMBLE

An abridged version of this article was presented in 1998 at the eleventh Triennial on African art in New Orleans. The circumstances leading up to and involving my participation in this event merit a comment, as they are revealing of the state of scholarship on Kongo cultures. What I had proposed to do was to re-examine the concept of *nkisi* as it relates to the magico-religious beliefs of north-western Kongo peoples today, namely those of the Vili and Yombe of the Kwilu region of the Republic of the Congo, where I had been conducting periodic research since 1994. Not surprisingly, this proto-Bantu term *nkisi*, seemingly familiar to many Africanists, was immediately taken by the organisers of the conference to mean power object or charm (e.g. figure, bundle, bottle, pot, etc.) as used widely today in the art historical and anthropological literature and, in keeping with the panel designation, I was asked to consider 'active processes of manufacture and use' of these *nkisi* objects. My goal, however, was to expose another dimension of this concept and to bring into view the current regional specificity of the term. My intention was to deal with cultural particularities that differentiate this north-western sector from Lower Congo groups studied by specialists such as Wyatt MacGaffey, John M. Janzen, Robert Farris Thompson and many others. As it happened, scheduled at the very same time as our panel, R. F. Thompson, a leading figure in African art studies in the United States, was conducting a session next door on the Kongo roots of Afro-American cultures. I managed to slip out of our room briefly just to hear a little of the paper presented by Fu-Kiau, the often quoted Lower Congo scholar. What I witnessed upon entering was a steaming room packed with participants from both hemispheres and both sides of the Atlantic listening to a sermon about Kongo ancestors. In this cult-like ambience, energised by the personal style of R. F. Thompson and his disciples, I realised that the gathering was not merely about scholarly concerns but even more about identity and heritage, understandably important to African-Americans. The fact that most of what was being said about Kongo peoples was based mainly on Lower Congo traditions studied by those present was of little consequence in this context.

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For the Vili and Yombe<sup>1</sup> of the Kwilu this may have come as something of a surprise. They generally do not refer to themselves as Kongo globally and they do not venerate the ancestors. Rather, they rely on powers such as those of Mbumba, an ancient nature spirit, a *nkisi si*, apparently unimportant now south of the Kongo river. This Mbumba is the 'Bomba' referred to by Dapper in his seventeenth-century descriptions of the Vili kingdom of Loango on the Atlantic coast (1668: 262) and it is the very source of the 'Bomba' we discover in the popular literature and invocations of vodun devotees right there in New Orleans where our conference took place (Tallant, 1998: 7, 8, 31).

#### THE PROBLEM

In an effort to deal with terminology and classification relating to particular African phenomena, which may be difficult to define or contentious in Western languages (e.g. 'fetish'), the reliance on vernacular terminology may provide solutions and 'authentications' (e.g. *nkisi*). But, in the case of a vast region such as that of the Kongo, it may also embroil us in further complexities if not sufficiently culture- and time-specific. This I was to learn first-hand during the course of my fieldwork as I set out with what I thought were some valid working definitions of key Kikongo terms relating to the contextual framework of magical objects. *Nkisi* was the major and most baffling notion to reckon with, which I continued to test and retest throughout my prolonged stay in the Congo. But there were other terms whose definitions and variables, sometimes too subtly dispersed throughout the literature, came into focus only during the field experience. Hence *Nkondi*, an equally recurrent generic label in the literature, especially associated with nail figures (e.g. see Beumers and Koloss, 1992: 311), was not recognised as such by my informants in the manner reported by Mulinda (1985: 209) for the coastal Woyo in ex-Zaire and noted by MacGaffey and Harris (1993: 72). *Nkulu*, the word for ancestor, assumed connotations entirely different from those among the Mpangu documented by Father Van Wing, for example (1938: 16), or other studied groups in Lower Congo-Kinshasa (MacGaffey, Janzen, Thompson and others). *Simbi* and *nkita* nature spirits, important among many other Kongo groups (MacGaffey, 1986: 75), were also not known, as already pointed out by Frank Hagenbucher-Sacripanti (1992: 44). In testing out these and other terms people generally looked at me somewhat puzzled and asked which 'patois' I was speaking.

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<sup>1</sup> Although the current tendency is to abandon ethnic labels because such identity is subject to change and tainted with European notions of territorial homogeneity, as Vansina and others have said (1990: 19), it is difficult to avoid this nomenclature if we are to build on the published ethnographic material of the past. To speak simply of the North-western Kongo or of a coastal Western Equatorial region of Africa would be to obscure much important data and also to deny identities many people today still choose to uphold.

As anyone knows who has attempted to digest the list of sources on the Kongo complex, this literature is abundant but also patchy, that is, unevenly focused both in time and in space. Moreover, some of the early writing, precious as it may be, is at times ethnographically fuzzy. Olifert Dapper's compilation of voyagers' data relating to the Loango coast stands out as a remarkable seventeenth-century achievement, as does the eighteenth-century account of the adventurous sailor, Andrew Battell [Ravenstein] (1901). From the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the findings and collections of the German ethnographic expeditions (Bastian, 1874; Pechuel-Loesche, 1907) are particularly noteworthy, while the writing of the English merchant Dennett, though somewhat confusing, nonetheless provides a view of one actively engaged in life at Loango. Still, with much of this material, one is never quite clear of the contextual significance of words such as 'fetish', 'idol' or the varied inscriptions of *nkisi*.

Although these authors reflect their very different preoccupations as well as the social and intellectual attitudes of their time, we must also bear in mind that the Kongo-speaking region is extensive and, despite continuities, there were and still are many variants in terminology and transformations in beliefs and traditions, as shown by de Heusch in his recent analysis of Kongo myths (2000). Among the most often quoted twentieth-century sources, what Father Van Wing (1938) reported for the Mpangu or Wyatt MacGaffey (1986, 1993) for the Boma region is unquestionably of great consequence but it is not directly transposable to the cultures of the Vili, for example. Bittremieux's (1936) and Doutreloux's (1967) equally important data were collected decades ago among the Yombe of ex-Zaire and not among those of Congo-Brazzaville. Karl Laman's extensive and much relied on four volumes on the Kongo are a patchwork of mostly unidentified findings from Kongo informants of different origins, with Sundi predominating (1953, 1957, 1962, 1968). These authorities, and especially John Janzen in his historical examination of *nkisi* Lemba and others (1982, 1992a), point to specificities in the north-west. Mulinda Habi Buganza acknowledges some of these local divergences in prefacing one of his articles on the Woyo (1985, 201–2) and Frank Hagenbucher-Sacripanti brings much of this into view in his field data on the Kwilu of Congo-Brazzaville (1960s and 1990s). Yet, for the most part, this has escaped notice or perhaps, in all fairness, has simply been too difficult to unravel. The pervasive tendency has been to amalgamate sources from various sectors into a single Kongo universe, devoid of seeming contradictions. Sture Lagercrantz's editorial intervention with the above-noted posthumous publication of Laman's invaluable data is a prime example of how the rich fabric of specificity and diversity was flattened into 'uniform, but fictive, custom', as Janzen has shown, without regard to the origin of the sources (1972). Recent publications on language and culture by Congolese writers such as Simon Bockie (1993) or Jean de Dieu Nsondé (1995) have similarly opted for homogenisation.

In all the above writing, the ancient and widespread use of the term *nkisi* has obviously been subject to frequent discussion. Surprisingly, though, a thorough linguistic analysis of this word has not even been attempted as yet. All we can resort to is Guthrie's Bantu studies in which he points to the 'divergence of meaning', with *\*-kítì* or *\*-kícì*, distinguishing between 'fetish' or 'charm' (C. S. 1072), on the one hand, and 'spirit' (C. S. 1073), namely that of a deceased, on the other (1971: II, 130). Though treading on soft ground, he attempts to resolve this problem by 'postulating a primary meaning "fetish" which [he says] extended to include "spirit" late in Proto-Bantu A' (Guthrie, 1970: III, 281). This hypothesis, based on varied and insufficient data, simply blurs significant regional variations.

Among the ethnographic reports, Bittremieux and Doutreloux in their studies of the Yombe of the Democratic Republic of Congo do refer to the material manifestation of *nkisi* but they both also emphasise that it is, above all, a force of nature emanating from the highest spiritual entities called *kinda* (1936: 135–6; 1967: 215). Van Wing, on the other hand, insists that among the south-eastern Kongo it is purely a man-made construct and never means spirit, *génie* or any phenomenon of nature (1938: 120, 121). Acknowledging, however, that this artificial object may be activated by the spirit of a deceased, he reveals that there is not only an object/spirit distinction in the definition of the word but also one between different sources of empowerment (*ibid.*: 120). Despite their differences, Laman's data echo this view as well. While placing emphasis on the magical object and associated illness in his Kikongo dictionary (1936: 72) he also refers to the activating power as either an ancestral spirit or a *nkuyu*, an evil spirit of a deceased (1962: 67). Of the leading current anthropologists, MacGaffey considered these predecessors' differing regional perspectives on the *nkisi* debate as 'forced', given what he saw as the 'ambiguities of Kongo thought' and the linguistic unclarity of the term (1986: 137, 138). He tried to explain that the contrast between person (or spirit) and object is 'less clear in Kongo than European thought' and that his 'informants were puzzled by [his] effort to distinguish sharply between *n-kisi* (object, class *mu-/mi*) and *n'kisi* (spirit, class *mu-/ba*)' (*ibid.*, 137–9). In line with this view, and drawing on Laman's data (1936: 72) and Guthrie's analysis, his colleague Janzen notes that the Western Bantu cognate *kii* or *kici* 'refers both to the possessing spirit of an affliction, as well as to the medicine used to deal with that affliction' (1992b, 67). Ekholm Friedman, in her examination of the same older sources, arrives at the conclusion that '[*n*]kisi was something between deity [as she thinks was understood by Laman] and magical object, and at the turn of the century there was a tendency for it to become more of the latter' (1991: 135). Given the complexity of the issue, *nkisi* was somehow selectively defined, especially in much art historical writing, as an object-fetish, a charm or power figure, and no one found it necessary to examine critically or to compare the nature of *nkisi* power from different regional perspectives (see de Heusch, 2000).



As I was to discover during my fieldwork among Chivili and Kiyombe-speakers of Congo-Brazzaville, magical power objects, whether figurative or non-figurative, are never referred to today as *nkisi*, or as *minkisi* in the plural form (using the prefix *mi*, appropriate for objects), as in southern and south-eastern Kongo sectors.<sup>2</sup> Hagenbucher-Sacripanti, who is unquestionably the most informed scholar on this very Kwilu region, had, in fact, taken this stand in his first publication on the Loango kingdom (1973: 106). But then, in his most recent writing on the Mvulusi prophetic cult (e.g. 1992), he adopts a somewhat wavering *nkisi*-object definition as if consolidating both the ideas of these neo-traditionalist adepts as well as the extensive and differing currents of published data on various Kongo groups. He therefore arrives at the view that *nkisi* is an 'immanent force of nature', a seemingly diffuse universal force, captured by man using natural and fabricated objects also called *nkisi* or *minkisi* in the plural (Hagenbucher-Sacripanti, 1992: 42). This *nkisi* force/object is categorically distinguished from another widely recognised entity, namely *nkisi si*, which he and other sources describe as localised and territorially bound clan spirits of 'earth' or the 'domain', as indicated by the qualifier *si* (*ibid.*: 21–3; MacGaffey, 1986: 137; Janzen, 1982: 43–4; Vansina, 1990: 95, 274). According to my findings among the Vili and Yombe, *nkisi* as well as *nkisi si* are always pluralised as *bakisi* (with the noun prefix *ba* for people and spirits) and both are designations of nature spirits. Apart from the territorial *nkisi si*, those referred to simply as *nkisi* are in my view independent and wandering entities that belong to the same continuum of nature spirits, at least in my region of investigation. They are indeed less personalised, as Hagenbucher-Sacripanti states (1992: 25), and their existence is more transient than that of the *nkisi si*. Still, many of my informants used the term *nkisi* synonymously and interchangeably with *nkisi si*, which is another indication that they share a common dimension.

Interestingly, Annie Merlet, in her reading of the sources relevant to Loango and its northern extension into Gabon, arrives at a similar interpretation. She defines both *nkisi si* and *nkisi* as spirits, with the latter being a simpler, inferior category, still associated with specific natural features but 'not clan-bound' (1991: 45–48). The *bakisi*, she says, are like the *ombwiri* among the Nkomi and the *bagisi* of the Punu and Sangu, for example (*ibid.*: 47). In her compilation of sources she also draws attention to what I see as an astute contribution for its time published by Mary Kingsley in one of Dennett's works on the Vili (1898). Here Kingsley emphasises this affinity between the beliefs of the Vili and those of Mpongwe peoples to the north (*ibid.*: xii, xiii), not surprisingly a result of the Loango kingdom's expansion from 1600

<sup>2</sup> Exceptions arise with the younger generation, with those who speak Munukutuba, the 'lingua franca' of the region, with the more mobile, those educated elsewhere and within syncretic religious cults.

onward and its 'pervasive general influence' up to the Ogooué delta (Vansina, 1990: 159). Taking one step further, Kingsley also says, 'that particular school of fetish [Mr. Dennett calls] Nkissism you do not meet with until you strike the northern limits of the old Kingdom of Kongo' (in Dennett, 1898: xii, xiii). In the appendix to this work she supports her argument by exposing additional notes received by Dennett in which he states himself that the 'zinganga' developed 'Nkissism'—'as time went on'—and 'instituted the Nkissi or wooden image of a man or a beast charged with medicines' when they became 'a class apart' from the 'effective authority' of rulers (*ibid.*: 135–6). According to popular oral tradition these 'zinganga' (*banganga*) are believed to have followed the sons of the king of Kongo, one of whom is credited with the founding of Loango (*ibid.*).

These ethnographic findings and historical hypotheses, though never quite set into perspective by Dennett himself, are indeed interesting. They reveal an important base line. There was something particular about the beliefs of Loango and its vicinity which differed from practices farther to the south. Onto the spirit powers of nature another concept (and definition) of *nkisi* may well have been 'superimposed', as Kingsley states (in Dennett, 1898: 134). Though this is difficult to sift out from the existing ethnographic material, the differences in interpretation on the part of the observers provide revealing perspectives. For example, Dennett's documentation on *nkisi* arises from a particular milieu and experience, as he was a merchant with responsibilities for factory activities not only in Loango but also farther south in the Woyo and Solongo region (Lehuard, in Dennett, 1991 [1887], 12). He was therefore exposed to the ideas of different Kongo peoples as well as to those of other varied origins who gravitated to the coastal trading zone. In comparison, Father Marichelle, a contemporary of Dennett, never used the term *nkisi* in connection with magical objects and statues (1909). Such objects were certainly used at the time for protective and especially judiciary or retaliatory purposes but, as Dennett states in a later publication, among the important latter category which he calls *nkici mbowu* numerous ones were imported from Kakongo, making it difficult 'to distinguish those which were originally consecrated for use solely of this [Loango] district' (1906: 85, 94). He further lists their names 'under all reserve', cautioning that he 'may not have got at the true and original Bavili ones' (*ibid.*: 85–6). Though we know that many power objects constitute a mobile category, all this also points to a layered context in which the term *nkisi* may not have been a singularly used generic designation at the time for charms and statues.

Today, at least, no one well versed in local beliefs of the past refers to these objects and ingredients as *nkisi*. Figural carvings with magical charges are always referred to in the Kwilu as *nkosi*, whereas bundles, bottles, shells or pots with substances are attributed specific names which often define their action. As a rule, *nkisi* spirits do not empower what are known as *nkosi* figures. The latter are potentially more

dangerous objects that derive their power from a human source, namely from the spirit of a deceased.

Analysis of the term *nkosi*, already singled out by the linguist Yvonne Bastin as being of regional interest (1994: 55–7), provides further insight into the problem. While it is simply a generic designation for a power figure (or magical statue) among the Vili and Yombe, devoid of other meanings, and even noted in passing by Dennett as *nkawci* or ‘common figures’ (1906: 87), among the southern and eastern Kongo it means ‘lion’. Van Wing sheds light on this by stating that, among the Mpangu, *nkosi*, or ‘lion’, is also the specific name of an ancient and powerful figure (1938: 133). Of the numerous definitions given by Laman he states that *Nkosi* is a large *nkisi* (statuette) in his western (Yombe) sector (1936: 728). Bittremieux mentions ‘*khose* [or *khonde*]’ for the Yombe region of Congo-Kinshasa in relation to a category of fetishes for vengeance, manipulated by witches (1935: 163). Indeed, lions and witches do share points in common. Both are principally nocturnal hunters, renowned as the most powerful flesh eaters (Dorst and Dandelot, 1978: 143–4). *Khonde*, the second term noted by Bittremieux in reference to these fetishes, is very possibly *nkondi*, a word that means ‘hunter’ according to MacGaffey (MacGaffey and Harris, 1993: 76). The latter further tells us that the job of these power figures, referred to on the coast as *nkosi*, was to hunt down ‘at night’, by occult means, unidentified witches, thieves, adulterers and other wrongdoers (*ibid.*, 1993: 72, 76; Laman, 1962: 88). This theme of aggression, or violence, as MacGaffey observes (MacGaffey and Harris, 1993: 37), is further highlighted by Laman, who adds to the ‘lion’ definition other references to animals that ‘suck blood’, interestingly also to a worm that does so during one’s sleep (*lion, pou[e], mouche à viande, vers qui vous sucent le sang pendant votre sommeil*, 1936: 728; Bastin, 1994: 56). Though the provenance of these data in Laman’s dictionary entry is not entirely clear, taken broadly the suggestion of such nocturnal activity points to the invisible sphere of witches and the use of magical objects. It should also be added that among non-Kongo peoples in Gabon, influenced by the northern expansion of the Loango kingdom, one finds a logical extension of *nkosi* definitions. Thus, for example, in the Tsogo area, where lions are unknown, *kosi* refers to a fabulous or legendary animal (*l’animal fabuleux*), perhaps better seen as a mystical beast, while among the Punu it is a fetish or effigy (Bastin, 1994: 56, 57), as among the Vili and Yombe. Even on the basis of these fragments of data we can see not only how varied interpretations may be within a regional expanse but also how a progression could have occurred, from lion to magical lion figure, to power figure in general (*ibid.*).

John Janzen’s historical analysis of developments in the region north of the Congo river from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth helps to orient some of the divergent data on *nkisi* that I have been grappling with (1982, 1992a). Though focusing on Lemba, a royal medicine described by Dapper, that evolved into an important cult of healing, trade and marriage alliance and, as such, into an alternative peace-keeping order, he exposes a broader picture (1982: 3, 4). In his

examination of the sources, he brings into view the progressive weakening of the Loango kingdom from the eighteenth century onwards resulting from its position as a major centre of long-distance trade, especially the slave trade. He traces the shift from public cults of the mid-seventeenth century, in which the king plays a central role in relation to the wealth and health of the populace, to the collapse of centralised authority and formal appeal courts in the mid-nineteenth century. This, he shows, led to a preoccupation with widespread trade interests and entrepreneurial pursuits as exemplified by Lemba, and more personal concerns with adjudication, thief and witch hunting and female fertility (1982: 47–58). Drawing on the documentation by Pechuel-Loesche and Bastian of the 1870s German Loango expedition, he points to the rise in the use of what he calls ‘consecrated medicines (*minkisi*)’ for ‘openly aggressive techniques of private self-defence’ (1982: 55). In this growing climate of insecurity and fragmentation that peaked at the turn of the nineteenth century, the term *nkosi* for power figure in general, as discussed above, takes on significance.

It is clear that after five centuries of trade and late nineteenth-century epidemics—namely smallpox and sleeping sickness—major population movements, fluctuations and convergences occurred in the Kwilu region (see Martin, 1972; Vennetier, 1968; Marichelle, 1909: 15–22). In the 1920s and 1930s the labour-intensive construction of the Brazzaville–Pointe-Noire rail link—especially treacherous in the mountainous Mayombe forest region—reshaped the demographic map further (Vennetier, 1968: 107–10). Adding to the impact of commercial interests on political and social restructuring, Western religious activity and the pressure of indigenous prophetic cults in the twentieth century, especially the anti-witchcraft movement established by Lassy Simon Zéphirin in 1953, set out to cleanse the region of its diabolic practices (Soret, 1959: 98; Hagenbucher-Sacripanti, 1973: 193–9). In the course of all this, traditions, languages and dialects mingled and influenced one another, and words, like objects, may well have been withdrawn from use, reinterpreted or replaced by those considered more powerful or spiritually more acceptable.

Nonetheless traditions can be fairly resilient to heavy onslaught. Even in the face of such a turbulent past there is still evidence of continuities within change that need closer scrutiny, but we need first to confront the local distinctiveness of culture areas. This may be easier said than done, as I found trying to come to terms with the parameters within which *nkisi* and other powers operate in my area of investigation. What follows, therefore, is an effort to make sense of the salient aspects of magico-religious beliefs that characterise this particular Kongo region today, as revealed to me by many elders and other wide-ranging informants as well as the work of Frank Hagenbucher-Sacripanti.

#### CONTEXT

Let us begin quite simply. Apart from the noted nature spirits (*bakisi basi* and *bakisi*), what concerns the Vili and Yombe equally are

wandering spirits of the dead (*bakulu/nkulu*) and their manifestation as animal familiars (*binkoko/chinkoko*).<sup>3</sup> All these spirit agencies seem to exist in the present dimension, going in and out of focus, roaming and intersecting the frontiers between the visible and invisible. Most people attribute little importance to reflections about the distant past, involving ancient ancestors (also referred to as *bakulu/nkulu*) or to the journey of spirits of the dead outside the earthbound realm. 'The dead are right here with us,' many elders claimed; as for the long gone ancestors, they are said to be of little service to the living and are therefore largely forgotten. This was noted by Captain R. Lethur, an ethnographically orientated French officer stationed in the Pointe-Noire area in the early 1950s. He tells us quite emphatically that the *nkulu* continues to reside invisibly in the place of the living or its vicinity. It is feared, he says, because of its malevolent influence (or so the *nganga* says), which is why people appease it with appropriate funerary rites and then move their home from the site where the death occurred (1960: 30).

According to Hagenbucher-Sacripanti's findings some of the long-gone dead are eventually transformed into nature spirits (*bakisi basi*) that return to the terrestrial sphere but, from my investigation, this is far from being a unanimously upheld view (1973: 104). Even if this notion did exist in former times and has been forgotten, it simply confirms that this north-western Kongo region is and was preoccupied with spirits and forces of nature rather than with ancestor 'worship' as among the south-eastern Kongo groups such as the Mpangu, dealt with by Van Wing. This important shift in emphasis was noted by Van Wing himself (1938: 168–9) and is evident in Bittremieux's (1936: 136, 139) and Doutreloux's (1967: 229) studies of the Yombe region of ex-Zaire and in Hagenbucher-Sacripanti's work (1960s and 1990s). As Bittremieux stated, 'our *bakisi ba tsi* have largely or entirely taken on the role of protective ancestors [manes]' (1936: 139, my translation). Similarly Doutreloux noted 'the cult of the ancestors, even when there is a cult, plays a small role in the traditional religion of the Yombe, in contrast to other Kongo groups' (1967: 229, my translation).

People in the Kwilu therefore live in close proximity to both spirits of nature and those troublesome wandering dead but they relegate them—at least in theory—to different spheres of operation. The former, the *bakisi*, though invisible to most, are associated with the visible, material world (*munyi*), with the day and with diurnal activity and ritual. The latter (both *bakulu* and *binkoko* animal familiars) are synonymous with the invisible (*nyimbi*) and the night (*bwilu*) and are associated with potentially awesome experiences and with witchcraft (Hagenbucher-Sacripanti, 1992: 29). As I see it, the visible/invisible or diurnal/nocturnal—these two equally real domains—may be spatially schema-

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise specified, the vernacular terms are given in Chivili. Among the Yombe the *chi* prefix becomes *ki* (hence sing. *-kinkoko*/ pl. *-binkoko*).

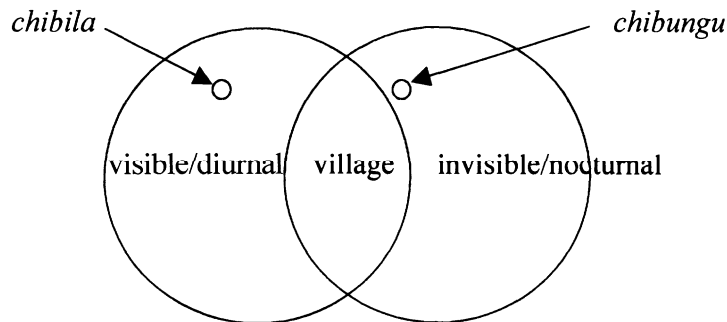


FIGURE 1

tised as two largely overlapping spheres (Fig. 1). The central portion of overlap is the village, the inhabited world in which the living confront and interact with the various spirit forces. It is the place of family conflict, harming, healing, divining and transformation. To one side of this core area is the visible periphery; it is the bush where nature spirits (*nkisi si*) reside and where their sacred groves (*chibila*) are normally located. On the opposite side of the overlap, in the invisible periphery, everything exists as in the visible, tangible world, everything ever created by man, including aeroplanes, cars and washing machines (Hagenbucher-Sacripanti, 1983: 205). In this sphere are villages of the dead (*chibungu*) where spirits of the deceased (*bakulu*) and animal familiars (*binkoko*) are kept, nourished and manipulated by the living for protective or aggressive purposes. This is no longer the 'deserted place' described so long ago by Dapper but a technologically competitive and more urbanised world of today (1686: 260). Only witches are privy to the powers of this domain; they are said to draw these spirit demons into the village through varied material supports and traps. To the innocent, curious or opportunist seeker there is usually no return from the *chibungu* except through the rescue efforts of a shrewd anti-witchcraft specialist.

In this arena the interaction of the three spirit entities and their corresponding participants may become clearer if we consider first their individual roles. Spirits of nature, the *bakisi basi*, share a privileged cosmological dimension with the supreme creator, Nzambi Mpungu, and are considered indispensable to survival, increase and social harmony. Although referred to by name as earth spirits (*si*, earth, land), they are associated with the entirety of the domain or territory of its occupants and therefore with all types of habitat, terrestrial and aquatic, and with diverse natural phenomena (Hagenbucher-Sacripanti, 1992: 22, 23). They are, in my view, the very *moquisies*, the *démons champêtres*, or country demons, Dapper described in the seventeenth century, responsible for the weather, resources of the earth, trade and health (1686: 258). Today much emphasis is placed on their role as custodians

of the precious resources of each domain such as fish, game, oil, gold, clay, kaolin, fresh water and various medicinal ingredients, which they can bestow or withhold at their pleasure. If not appeased with gifts such as kola nuts, ginger, a bitter-sweet root called *milondo* (*Mondia whitei*; Hagenbucher-Sacripanti, 1994: 32), alcoholic beverages and money, and if not regularly honoured at their sanctuary (*chibila*), or if interdictions (*china*) are broken, these spirits can inflict illness requiring extensive therapy through rituals of affliction. For while associated with sacrality, the *bakisi basi* are clearly also political entities, and as keen on material wealth as the foreign investors they observe on their territory. They may simply appear to mirror human desire and folly and, of course, demand unconditional devotion, but their voice is that of ever more desperate struggles for social and territorial control.

Given their terrestrial/aquatic nature, it is not surprising that the conceptualisation of a mermaid, referred to as Mami Wata (from the pidgin English 'Mother Water'), has been adopted as a popular image of these land/water spirits, as elsewhere along the west coast of Africa, in the interior and across the Atlantic. Since 'land' and 'water' are apparent as the two significant symbolic categories defining these spirits, a third 'air' dimension, as in the case of some of those force/object *nkisi* referred to by Nsemi, one of Laman's informants (Janzen and MacGaffey, 1974: 37), and discussed by Marie-Claude Dupré (1975), seems incongruous or simply compressed. The fact that certain people nowadays fan out this duality, claiming that some *nkisi* and *nkisi si* are specifically those of 'earth' (*si/nthandu*) and others are 'water' (*masi*) types (see also Hagenbucher-Sacripanti, 1973: 105) simply confirms this bipartite notion. However, the latter is admittedly bound up with other unclear issues that transpire during discussions with informants and appear in the literature. For example, Hagenbucher-Sacripanti, in his earliest publication (*ibid.*), noted that *nkisi masi* and *nkisi nthandu* belong to the unlocalised *nkisi* group. In so doing he suggested that both were type categories related to the physical environment rather than to a localised socio-political entity such as the *nkisi si*. But even though he distinguishes the term *si* from *nthandu*, meaning 'expanse of land' or 'a plain', he nonetheless includes 'Mbumba si' in the latter category (*ibid.*). It is obvious from this that *si*, which can be translated by terms as diverse as 'earth', 'land', 'country', 'domain' and 'territory', does not appear to have a single definition in practice. In my view, a distinction to be drawn here is between 'domain' and 'territory', between the local socio-politically bound lineage spirits and those that operate within a broadly defined cultural territory.

Mbumba, one of the most frequently solicited *nkisi si*, is a case in point. While there are people who distinguish between 'Mbumba si' and 'Mbumba masi', there are other cosmological interpretations that reveal a holistic duality of this spirit entity and its long-standing territorial spread. Noted by Dapper ('bomba', 1686: 262) and dealt with by Bittremieux (1936: 170–8) and Doutreloux (1967: 217), Mbumba is associated with the rainbow and snakes. Doutreloux

emphasises its ubiquity (1967: 217) and de Heusch, in his analysis of Bittremieux's material, brings to light not only the importance and role of Mbumba in a Yombe cosmogonic myth but also, comparatively, within a wider world of Bantu mythic constructs (1982: 42–5; 2000: 259–85). In what de Heusch sees as an 'aquatic drama', related to seasonal change, Mbumba, the rainbow serpent of terrestrial waters, is locked in confrontation with lightning (Nzazi), the ruler of the sky, and his ally Phulu Bunzi, master of rain. Mediating between earth and sky, Mbumba is unsuccessful and is decapitated by his adversaries, his body being buried and his head hung high on the fence of the chief's enclosure (*ibid.*). This final episode imprints the duality of Mbumba as master of earth and protagonist of the forces of sky.

According to my field investigation in the Kwilu, Mbumba is still believed by some, especially the Yombe, to be one of the oldest original *bakisi basi*. From where it resides in its watery habitat, it is said to survey and calm the rainbow (*nkyama*), which emits a characteristic mh-mh-mh sound or 'the shrieking of a mermaid' when it is angered and wants to rise. In this interpretation there is a hint of two separate though related entities which are referred to as Mbumba and *nkyama*, the non-visible and the visible. More common is the conceptualisation of Mbumba as two serpents, a black one that is female and good, or less venomous, known as *nduma*, and a yellow, male, evil one called *nlimba*.<sup>4</sup> These snakes transform into the rainbow (*nchyama*), which prevents the rain and burns. Some informants claim that *nduma* and *nlimba* give rise to two rainbows, the first being faint and benign because it prevents rain and floods whereas the latter is bright and hot and causes thunder and lightning.

A source on the Yombe of ex-Zaire from 1897 by a Lieutenant Gilmont referred to 'Bumba, the lightning of war' (*Bumba, le foudre de la guerre . . . une espèce de dieu Mars*; Van Overbergh and de Jonghe, 1907: 291–2). Lieutenant Gilmont also evoked the duality of Mbumba in reporting a double-headed representation (*Bumbambindu*) set at the foot of a palm tree which he said, rather disappointingly, was used only to prevent those who climb trees from falling off (*ibid.*). Little did he know that when Mbumba emerged from the waters it would climb a tree before ascending into the sky and plunging back again into another terrain (Bittremieux, 1936: 170). What is more, his so-called 'fetish' is not an isolated example. It recalls the well known double-headed figure Thafu Maluangu, used in the same Yombe area in Nkimba male initiation rites to represent the bipartite upper and lower rainbows constituting the entity Mbumba (*ibid.*: 170, 171, 177). All this also correlates with the zoological data obtained from the scientific identification of the above-noted snakes. *Nduma* (*Naja melanoleuca*,

<sup>4</sup> Hagenbucher-Sacripanti provides a variant, referring to *nduma* and the python *mboma* as the manifestations of Mbumba (1992: 52).



Hallowell)<sup>5</sup> is a black-brown species distinguished as a terrestrial, semi-aquatic forest dweller which, though ominous in appearance and behaviour, is in fact not aggressive (Nkouka, 1989: 142–3; Pitman, 1974: 182–5).<sup>6</sup> *Nlimba* (*Dendroaspis jamesoni jamesoni*, Traill), on the other hand, belongs to the tree-climbing species and may be found in forested habitat, clearings and plantations (*ibid.*; *ibid.*, 142–3). It is a handsome, though highly poisonous, snake with glittering eyes, large scales, a body conspicuously margined black, and a yellow tail (Pitman, 1974: 192–4).

Today one of the easily visible references to the dual characteristics of *mbumba* can be found in the market place where the ingredients of medicines are sold. Among the most highly prized and expensive elements are the slivers of white mica (muscovite), referred to as the ‘scales of the rainbow’ (*likwa linchyama*), or occasionally those of the mermaid. Equally valued is the golden powder referred to as ‘thunder’ (*nkachi*) which is, interestingly enough, a closely comparable and simply more decomposed form of mica.<sup>7</sup> Both these seem to be associated with the power of Mbumba and are used in a wide range of medicines and magical devices to deflect nocturnal forces. Although opinion is divided and often unclear, there is evidence that Mbumba is bipartite, omnipresent and still pre-eminent compared with other lineage-bound *bakisi basi*.

Belonging to everyone and no one, the Mbumba of today is therefore widely evoked by healers and diviners, in rural and urban sectors, for the treatment of physical dysfunctions and social aspirations. But in villages where traditional authority still reigns, lineage chiefs continue to emphasise the importance of the *nkisi si* of their domain and to ensure the maintenance of the sacred grove (*chibila*). Direct interaction with these spirits is, however, entrusted to the *ntomi*, or ‘priest’, who divines and performs periodic public religious rituals (Hagenbucher-Sacripanti, 1992: 23). The *bitomi* are regarded as visible envoys of the *bakisi basi* and are individuals recognisable by unusual births (e.g. twins, their mothers, those born with teeth or in the breech position) or physical anomalies (e.g. albinos, dwarfs, hunchbacks or epileptics). These attributes which signal their ‘otherness’ are signs of innate special vision. Centuries ago Dapper noted that, among the Vili, the king of Loango used the ‘minister of the albinos’ in honouring the *mosquisies*, which is why, he says, the people also referred to him as *moquisie* (1686: 259). Nowadays both in the rural setting as well as in Pointe-Noire,

<sup>5</sup> Scientific identification of the vernacular names of the snakes (*nduma* and *nlimba*) is noted in Hagenbucher-Sacripanti (1973: 206).

<sup>6</sup> The Pitman reference may appear geographically misplaced in this article but the source was suggested to me by Mr W. Tavernier of the Vertebrate Section at the Royal Museum of Central Africa, Tervuren, as one of the few that also includes the behavioural characteristics of the snake species.

<sup>7</sup> Ingredients identified in 1997 in Pointe-Noire by Elf-Congo geologist Alain Dorbath.

many self-appointed diviners/healers (*banganga bakisi basi*) profess to be *bitomi*, thus attributing their power to the natural, diurnal and divinely inspired sphere. Others rely on *bitomi* such as the handicapped or epileptics as human divination instruments who receive visions and instructions through dreams, seizures or possession. All these *banganga* who engage in divination and therapeutic treatment of repressive spirit action have in many communities replaced the religious role of the *bitomi*. They profess to have personal relations with communal lineage spirits and with territorial ones. Moreover, they incorporate into their repertoire of power a host of new *nkisi* which have no claim to a former 'land' pedigree, specified by the qualifier *si*. They solicit the powers of the *bakasi basi* in private enclosures on their compound that represent a kind of extended space of the *chibila* and they channel what they see as excessive, intrusive and unlocalised *nkisi* forces that man has learned to manipulate for self-gratification. They clearly also use material paraphernalia, both natural and fabricated, but these are presented as socially beneficial objects of divining and healing.

What they all possess are powerful bundles or baskets of ingredients called *chikalu* which are not finite, sealed constructs but are simply presented as the pharmacopoeia of the specialist, which is used and refilled according to need. Among the varied vegetal, animal and mineral substances there is usually a special item such as a shell or a stone that may recall or be associated with a figurative form. This is said to be an object of revelation and empowerment made visible by the *bakisi* in a dream (see also Hilton, 1985: 15). In one unusual case a Vili diviner/healer I met even possessed a carved wooden figure of a mermaid, which is that imported iconic image of a *nkisi si* noted earlier but one which is rarely represented visually. This, he said, allowed him 'to see' and was commissioned upon instruction by the *bakisi*. In general, however, figurative representations are avoided, as they are too readily labelled *nkosi* and associated with the nocturnal sphere of activity. All the other vegetal, animal, mineral and manufactured ingredients in the *chikalu* are considered to be the gifts of 'sacred knowledge', as Janzen would say (1978: 45). As such these *nganga bakisi basi* radically maintain the stand that their activities relate only to nature spirits and not to nocturnal forces. This response, born especially out of prophetic anti-witchcraft cult activities in the region, conceals the fact that the *nkisi* issue has become more complicated, as we shall see (Hagenbucher-Sacripanti, 1992: 26). I have had occasion to see a *chikalu* confiscated by Zephirin anti-witchcraft practitioners which when opened contained identity photographs of three individuals. Like the hair or nail clippings used in power objects to trap or contain one's doubles, these photographs clearly indicated another sphere of operation, not normally revealed in interviews. To most people this comes as no surprise; they know that *nkisi* spirits can bestow favours but they are also aware that they may eventually also seek compensation and sacrifice.

This brings us to the darker side of life. In opposition to nature spirits that may inflict illness and misery, wandering human spirits of the night

are manipulated by the living to enslave, dominate and even kill. Being themselves victims of this course of action, they are therefore potentially aggressive, vengeful entities. Among the living only those considered to be witches (*bandoki*, sing. *ndoki*) have the vision and power to exploit the resources of this ominous periphery. Unlike the *ntomi*, that phenomenon of nature whose physical anomalies are in general external and easily recognisable, a witch's identity, as in other Central African societies, is suspected or proven only upon death and autopsy, since the source of its innate force is believed to derive from a supplementary internal organ called *likundu*. In general, all men of power, influence or wealth such as chiefs are assumed and required to possess this special 'vision'. In the strict sense they all kill to obtain such power but their actions are not always assessed as antisocial. The head of the family who chooses victims among his own maternal kin to protect its members is considered in a different light from the witch who devours those of another family and who trades its spoils with other witches simply for personal gain. *Likundu*, I was told, is like white man's magic; it is like knowledge which can be put to useful or destructive ends.

The *likundu* is inherited from the mother, if she is a witch, or rather nurtured by her into existence. During pregnancy she is said to feed the foetus with human flesh (*mbisi mutu*) which develops into an autonomous, round organ in the abdomen characterised by veins, a mouth and even teeth, though of no classifiable form. It is comparable to the *evu(s)*, of the Fang, Tsogo and other Gabonese groups who believe that this supplementary body substance can transform itself into some nocturnal animal being (Raponda-Walker and Sillens 1962: 82). Some people claim that the *likundu* can be transmitted only if the mother feasts on human flesh just prior to the intercourse that leads to conception. Once implanted, this animalistic, voracious organ craves constant nourishment. It compels the woman to venture into the nocturnal sphere ('se dédoubler', *kusomuka*) in search of sustenance, thus drawing the foetus progressively into experiences in the invisible world.

The human meat that is sought by witches is a metaphorical expression for the spoils of nocturnal, invisible anthrophagy. It is the 'unsalted' and, by extension, raw meat referred to by Dapper (1668: 260). As such, the witch is likened both to a daring hunter and to a voracious beast, as described in other African cultures, that devours and lusts uncontrollably after human flesh, the most succulent being that of a foetus or newborn. Women therefore conceal their pregnancies as long as possible and they protect themselves and their newborn with potent baths containing gorilla substances and with magical bundles strung around the waist.

What the witch or *ndoki* does, in fact, is to capture the double or spirit (*chilunzi*) of a living person, thereby draining the body (*nitu*) of its vital essence. This ephemeral spirit entity is the locus of intelligence and memory and is said to be located in the brain (*tonsu*), specifically in what is believed to be the smaller of the two sections (*kibala*) which works in harmony with the heart (*ntima*). During sleep, when one's

double wanders, witches can easily trap the *kilunzi* leaving the body temporarily paralysed or robbed of normal reasoning faculties.<sup>8</sup> But they can also begin by gnawing at the living, thus inflicting incurable wounds and even illnesses like AIDS (Hagenbucher-Sacripanti, 1994) which progressively weaken and destabilise the individual until the *kibala* falls out of rhythm and the *kilunzi* is attained for good.

If one's double is not rescued by an anti-witchcraft diviner/healer in the initial stages of attack, the *kilunzi* is enslaved by the witch in its village of the dead (*kibungu*). This trapped spirit, now referred to as *nkulu* (*nkuyu* among other Kongo neighbours: MacGaffey, 1986: 45–6, 64) or sometimes as *linthengo*, remains at the service of the witch. Only other witches can see and recognise the *nkulu* but, should a 'simple' person encounter someone he knows or subsequently learns to be dead, his own life is in peril, for it is a sure sign that he is already being lured into a witch's trap. The *nkulu* is therefore always suspect and feared, as already noted in the passage by Captain Lethur (1960: 30). It is this spirit entity that is the main and indispensable source of empowerment of magical objects. *Nkosi* figural carvings, like bundles, bottles, pots and the like, even if used for protective or regulatory purposes, are therefore unquestionably viewed as instruments of witchcraft, of the nocturnal sphere, which are distinguished ideologically from the diurnal activities relating to *nkisi* spirits.

Now the *nkulu* may also be transformed by the witch—and only by a witch—into a *chinkoko*, which is conceived of as a so-called 'composed' animal of the nocturnal periphery. Referred to by Laman (*kinkonko*; 1962 III: 211), Fu-kiau (1969: 169) and most of my French-speaking Vili, Yombe and Lumbu informants as a 'totem', the *chinkoko* is categorically distinguished from the visible, sacred animals such as the *mvila* creatures that define clan identity and to which this misplaced translated term may apply more aptly (Hagenbucher-Sacripanti, 1992: 36). The *chinkoko* relates to more clearly defined, smaller social units than the clan and is a magically construed creature, a dynamic metamorphosis of human and animal force sustained by blood sacrifice. This animal familiar is the auxiliary of the witch, used for personal or

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<sup>8</sup> This interpretation is vague and flawed anatomically and neurologically. It is interesting, though, because the 'vital essence' or 'double' of a person is related to the very organ that controls sensory impulses and motor activities defining a conscious, alert and emotional being, capable of reasoning and memory recall. Even patterns of sleep, seen as a potentially vulnerable wandering of the 'double', are a result of brain functions. What informants called 'the smaller of the two sections of the brain' could be the cerebellum or 'small brain' but this is the part that co-ordinates voluntary body movements, posture and balance. Centres of vision, hearing, speech, emotions, language and other aspects of perceiving, thinking and remembering are located in the much larger cerebrum. The latter is indeed bipartite but its two hemispheres are the same size and neither is directly concerned with the heart rate. Cardiovascular and respiratory activity is regulated by nuclei within a sector of a third structural component, namely the brain stem. Clearly the field data do not correspond accurately to any of the different parts of the brain but they reveal a notion of its structural and functional complexity and its integral working with other body parts (Draper, 1965: 3–5, 16, 17, 48–53; Toga, 1993–97).

collective purposes, for protective or aggressive ends, though ideally for the preservation of the extended family. It is said to be their wealth and stronghold which needs to be nourished like the *likundu* from within the family by the vital force of its kin and transmitted from one generation to another along the maternal line.

Despite the pervasive importance of the *chinkoko*, Hagenbucher-Sacripanti is the first to have written extensively on this phenomenon in the Kwilu Region. Surprisingly it has been largely disregarded in the recent literature, or perhaps set aside as a limited peripheral element. MacGaffey does make reference to an 'animal familiar' (1986: 163) and Laman's notes include much more than just a passing word on this 'special magic animal' which he says is adopted with the aid of a *nkuyu* (Kwilu *nkulu*) spirit (1962: 211). For the region in question, Father Marichelle, in his early twentieth-century Loango notes, tells us explicitly of a *démon familier* and the magically conceived identification with an animal (1909: 34, 35).

Hagenbucher-Sacripanti describes the creation of a *chinkoko* as a complicated ritual and metaphorical grafting of a human head, the seat of the *chilunzi* or double, on to an animal body (1983: 207) which may be that of a panther, a crocodile, a gorilla or even an insect. Father Marichelle speaks rather of a process of transposition or ritual substitution in which a dried lizard, for example, is temporarily activated by the *nganga* and, after invocations of the *démon familier* (that is, the activating *nkulu* spirit), thrown into the river, only to be replaced by a crocodile, the *chinkoko* form requested by the client (1909: 35). Even from farther afield, Laman notes various procedures which include body and often blood contact through incisions on the desired animal of identification and the recipient (1962: 211–12). Although I believe that there are multiple interpretations of this process of affiliation which reflect the particularity and notoriety of empowering *nganga*(s), the essential point that is invariably repeated is that any chosen animal is always 'composed' because it is created and activated into being by the enslaved double of a human spirit (*nkulu*). This metamorphosis or transformation leads to a host of power plays associated with forces of the wild and with human ingenuity which fulfil desire and imagination, sustaining the belief that anything is possible and attainable. As one elder explained and others confirmed, 'In the invisible, nocturnal world we have created everything you Europeans have been able to do. You have made planes; we have created [a magical bird called] the *mwiya*; it is our nocturnal plane; it is a *chinkoko*.'

According to this statement, the *chinkoko* creature may be perceived as a metaphorical image of fantasy, yet, to almost everyone, it is seen to exist not only in the nocturnal but also in the diurnal sphere (see also Hagenbucher-Sacripanti, 1983: 208). It exists because it is created into being and controlled by a spoken word and an object from the visible world, which can be a charm, a figure, a pot or any commonplace item. Yombe recollections about the *mwiya* confirm this dual reality, although they also bring into view the merging and overlapping of the

two planes of reference. They remember it as a terrifying bird of prey which was activated by the *kula* medicine bundle. Its mission was to hunt down criminals, something like the dream revelations about the 'flying *Nkondi*' (meaning 'hunter', reported by MacGaffey, 1993: 76, 79). *Mwiya*, I was told, killed mercilessly and could eliminate an entire village, even the animals, until someone confessed to the crime. It picked up bits of cloth, nails and strands of hair of the villagers as well as left-overs from the cooking pot. All this debris was said to stick together, forming the body of the bird, which became bigger and rounder, padded by the remains of those whose doubles were thereby captured. Even after a confession, only the *nganga kula* could restore normality, by cutting out all these different bits and burning them. It is interesting to note the reversal of order in this final act; it is the destruction of the mystical bird that neutralises the charm. The visible and invisible are inextricably intertwined.

As we can see from this example the *chinkoko* is drawn and integrated into the human sphere by a visible, material object. People say that it needs a resting place, literally a 'bed' (*chika*: Hagenbucher-Sacripanti, 1992: 230), but these visible supports are rarely now *nkosi* figures or even magical bundles. The object in question is most often totally dissociated visually and symbolically from the mystical entity or any other formerly conspicuous magico-religious instrument and may take any shape or form (e.g. a ring, lighter, pen, coin, etc.). There are, however, some cases even today that play upon overt signalling and display. For example, among the Yombe and Lumbu the *kinkoko/ikowo* is buried under the central pillar (*bumbuli*) of the family hangar (*mwanza*) which is the men's place of arbitration, reception and instruction and is the first structure erected on a new site of occupation. This central pillar represents the stronghold of the group. 'The *bumbuli* is like the chief,' they say, imbued with power that he must uphold and control to protect his entourage. In some cases diverse power images are carved in relief or attached to the pillar, signalling that the *bumbuli* is charged, that there are *binkoko* and witches about. Male and female representations are said to refer to the empowering spirit slaves; masks, crocodiles and snakes are common icons of their transformation. Interestingly, some of these images also appear on cement graves and tombstones, apparently as indicators of the deceased's witchcraft powers.

But nothing is ever what it appears to be or should be. In the sphere of convergence between different spirit forces and creatures of the night there are witches (*bandoki*) who are said to have perverted the margins. Individual concerns override collective ones, hence family members fight among each other for control of the *chinkoko*. Some try to steal its *chika* (receptacle) or even to swallow it. Others simply use it for their own egocentric purposes to acquire wealth and power. To make matters even worse, witches are believed to hide behind the moon, the *bakisi* or the rainbow, a manifestation of the *nkisi si Mbumba*. There are those who are also said to be able to harness the rainbow and to use it as their *chinkoko*. Hagenbucher-Sacripanti explains that they can even

duplicate the harming effects of the *bakisi basi* or alternatively they can activate them using their *nkulu* and *chinkoko* (1994: 29). There are those who in their thirst for power uncontrollably consume and trade in human flesh, thus amassing spirit slaves beyond all reason in their village of the dead (*chibungu*).

In this battleground between greedy antisocial witches and a host of different diviners/healers (*banganga*) there are dangerous traps everywhere which are either not easily recognisable from the gamut of possible external supports or are just not visible to the 'simple' person. The inhabited sphere is therefore not surprisingly a potentially unsettling place pervaded by invisible, outside forces and full of concealment and intrigue. True spirits of nature infringe upon this cultural space as social regulators; they possess the body, inflicting upon it physical ailments that require extraction and exorcism. This spirit intrusion in the body causes swellings and hernias of various kinds as well as reproductive disorders. The possessed individual manifests epileptoid seizures, lethargy, loss of memory and often other mental disorders and may even begin to speak in some alien language. In contrast, the greedy antisocial witches, even if replicating these symptoms, ultimately aim to dispossess the body of its double. They set their tricky nocturnal traps (*mitambu/ntambu*) unleashing their invisible creatures into action; they progressively drain the body, paralyse it or inflict physical and psychological symptoms (scabies, leprosy, mental disturbances) analogous symbolically to those provoked by the animal species represented by the *chinkoko* creature (Hagenbucher-Sacripanti, 1996: 45). The individual's behaviour is altered; he is likened to the creatures of the wild who are devoid of spirit doubles.

These two well known interpretations of illness in which the body is either possessed or dispossessed define the activities of a host of diviners and healers (*banganga*). In principle the *banganga bakisi basi*, those divinely inspired therapists, specialise in treating ailments inflicted by nature spirits; the *nganga liboka* detect the source of aggression and arbitrate with evil witches to rescue and calm the departed spirit; others, such as the *nganga kula*, for example, implement magical healing procedures activating anti-witchcraft devices. The first category of healers (*banganga bakisi*) logically often disclaim the use of witchcraft techniques, whereas the latter two overtly profess to be witches who use their *likundu* in socially approved practices. In fact the roles played out by these practitioners often overlap or are combined, since the source of harming and affliction may be disguised and contorted.

What I can see operating among these diviners/healers are practices relating to possession and shamanism which may, in certain circumstances, coexist. While possession cults are certainly widespread in this part of the world, shamanism, first mentioned by Hagenbucher-Sacripanti in his initial study of the Vili (1973: 181; also 1992: 53), is by no means common in Central Africa, as his cautious words reveal. Janzen argues against such 'charged descriptive distinctions' for therapeutic cults in the light of his study of the spread of *ngoma* ('rituals of affliction' or 'drums of affliction') throughout a vast part of

Bantu-speaking Africa (1992b: 134). He does not, however, dismiss entirely the possibility of rare cases of 'shamanistic divination' (*ibid.*). Moreover, in plotting the distribution of the *ngoma*-style drum and the use of this term for the therapeutic 'institution' on Guthrie's language map, he reveals its absence along the Atlantic coast in zones B, H and R (1992: 73, 197).

In my view, de Heusch's discussion of possession and shamanism (1981) provides useful guidelines which should be reviewed for the interpretation of the Kwilu context. Following his scheme, the *banganga bakisi basi* who claim to be *bitomi* are themselves the vehicles of authentic possession (possession A), as the spirit that possessed them, usually in early childhood, was accepted as a blessing and a desirable sign rather than as an illness (1981: 158). But there are many others who have reached the same end through what he calls possession B, that is, evil possession, which is defined clearly as a sickness inflicted by a nature spirit as a result of an infraction. As among the Tsonga of Southern Africa or the *nkita* cults of other Kongo neighbours, it is through the cultural expressions of dance, trance and subsequent initiatory procedures that the spirit is exorcised and kept at bay. The patient is thereby cured and becomes him or herself a master seer and healer of similar afflictions (1981: 155).

The same type of *nganga* may, however, also be endowed with the *likundu*, which allows him to explore the nocturnal sphere through the shamanic dance of *liboka*. As Hagenbucher-Sacripanti has pointed out, and as I have also observed, the *nganga bakisi basi* who deal with the nature spirit Mbumba often also exercise the divinatory technique of *liboka* (1973: 108, 190). In this case the diviner/healer embarks upon a shamanic 'ascension', as de Heusch would say (1981: 173). He leaves his body and sets out into mystical space to win the 'dispossessed' soul/double of the sick person (1981: 153). The *liboka* shaman seeks out the witch who has stolen the double; he ventures into the *chibungu*, the nocturnal village of the dead, and attempts to negotiate with the evildoer for the return of the double. Through dance, music and the use of stimulants, though not necessarily hallucinogens, he becomes 'the subject of a ritualized fit of depersonalization' (de Heusch, 1981: 173); he 'de-doubles' and, like the victim, demonstrates the animalistic/savage behaviour of his *chinkoko*. Some say he shows off the strength of his *chinkoko* to the opponent witch; according to others he is bonded with his animal familiar, not unlike the San shaman of South Africa whose divinatory and healing powers derive from an identification with the magical potency of the eland (Lewis-Williams, 1981). This form of cure which de Heusch calls 'adorcism' or shamanism A consists of a 'reintegration' of the patient's body and soul. He distinguishes it from shamanism B, that is, exorcism of an evil from the body, usually by some form of suction (1981: 153).

Even in the latter case we may find aspects significant to the Vili and Yombe contexts. The *nganga liboka* is frequently faced with the problem of exorcising an intrusive element that has invaded and transformed the body. While this may not be a contagion inside the



body, it is most often a magical device, a nocturnal trap containing a *chinkoko* usually planted by the witch within the personal homestead periphery which must be detected and detonated. This power object is metonymically associated with the victim, as it contains some personal item or substance and is therefore the extension of his or her being. Among the most dreaded of these is the magical pot, *nzungu madungu*, which, according to Hagenbucher-Sacripanti, causes hernias, haemorrhoids, epilepsy and sleeping-sickness (1983: 211). In talking about such an object people point out that its support, usually a hand-made clay pot, as well as its contents are displayed and readily available in the market. Yet once 'worked' and empowered it is alternatively, though repeatedly, noted as being invisible, hidden by an elderly female member of the family in her vagina or buried somewhere in the house or its surroundings.

One senses here that ambiguity is better seen as flexibility of interpretation, which takes into account the overlapping, converging and ever more constricting spheres of existence that I spoke of at the outset. On this point Hagenbucher-Sacripanti refers to the malleability of the cosmological system, in which there is an ontological duality of beings and things that can exist simultaneously or successively in the nocturnal and diurnal (1983: 208). The role of diviners/healers is therefore to distinguish and detect not the real from the imagined but the invisible and diurnal from the nocturnal. Their role is to unveil the true nature of spirit forces; to face the rainbow, whether *nkisi si* or *chinkoko*. Ritual dramas such as the *liboka* are essential ways of identifying, displaying and transforming from one sphere to another and from one order to another what is hidden, separated, combined, twisted or 'worked', as they say. This applies to magical pots such as the *nzungu madungu*, the *mwiya* bird or a human being; in our terms, to the animate, inanimate and imaginary. There is creativity in this process but also reliance on certain recognisable cultural constants needed as anchorage and legitimisation.

#### CONCLUSION AND AFTERTHOUGHT

What I have outlined about the beliefs in the Kwilu cannot take into account all the nuances of expression and interpretation in the region. Both among the Vili savanna dwellers and among the Yombe in the seemingly impenetrable rain forest I encountered distinct groupings, as defined by Vennetier, with their own histories of migrations, contacts and exchanges. In this century major displacements occurred in the Mayombe forest from 1926 to 1934 (Vennetier, 1968: 107) during the construction of the railway (Chemin de fer Congo-océan). The vast village of Les Saras is an example of such a Yombe 'station community' with the most pronounced admixture of peoples but there are also more homogeneous insular pockets not far from this main-line centre. Such is the case of the Yombe villages extending from Les Saras to Kimpese which have simply moved their south-eastern roots a little closer to the railway. To the north-west of the line of rail there are the Yombe of the

District of Kakamweka, similarly coerced at that time to move southward but who remain a distinct northern sector sharing relations with the Lumbu. Also among the Vili, the people north of Pointe-Noire around Diosso maintain their vigil over Buali, the ancient capital of the Loango kingdom, and remain the most impenetrable guardians of tradition. In contrast, the Vili of the Djenno sector to the south of Pointe-Noire, who have affinities with the Linji and Woyo of Cabinda, display an uncanny openness, perhaps because they are a frontier group, betwixt and between Loango and its historical counterparts Ngoyo and Kakongo.

In the on-going dynamics of these communities language has certainly played a major role in defining, modifying and blurring—from the outsider's point of view—cultural signifiers; Northern non-Kongo influences on the Kwilu are evident in words such as *liboka*, which obviously derives from *iboga*, the shrub (*Tabernaemontana iboga*, Baillon) whose hallucinogenic bark and roots are indispensable in Bwiti initiations of the Tsogo (Raponda-Walker and Sillens, 1962: 46). While the Bwiti cult has reached the Congo through Lumbu migration, it is a different ritual context from the Vili and Yombe *liboka* dance, in which this very stimulant was not recognised let alone considered indispensable by my informants.<sup>9</sup> It is as if certain terms were introduced or appended by incoming peoples to existing or comparable phenomena. As Hagenbucher-Sacripanti points out, Dapper's description three centuries ago of the 'Bomba' (Mbumba) ceremony corresponds precisely with what is known today as the *liboka* dance (1973: 190).

Another particular source of language influence and difficulty with contextual interpretation that I have experienced arises with the use of Munukutuba (Monokutuba or, according to some, western Kituba) as a 'lingua franca'. According to the linguist Jacquot, this language, a derivative of the Kikongo H.10 group (Guthrie, 1971 II: 51, 52), is 'multiform and fluctuating', as it combines local variants (e.g. Chivili or Kiyombe) with non-Kongo languages (in Hagenbucher-Sacripanti, 1992: 15). He notes this complex linguistic heterogeneity in Hagenbucher-Sacripanti's material on the Mvulusi neo-traditionalist healing cult, whose adepts speak Chivili, Kiyombe and a Munukutuba of Chivili extraction influenced by languages of the Teke, Laadi, Nzabi, Sira-Punu, Mbete, Kota and others (1992: 15–17). The problem is that, in addition to the scarcity of published documentation on Kikongo of the Kwilu, little research has been conducted on Munukutuba. While its origins are apparently still being debated as between the early sixteenth and the late nineteenth century, or even before European arrival, it seems clear that it emerged in response to the need for a mutually intelligible form of communication in trade and commerce

<sup>9</sup> Hagenbucher-Sacripanti upheld this view in his study of the Loango kingdom though in a more recent publication (1992: 286) and in personal communication (3 March 2000) he indicates that he may have underestimated the potential importance of the use of *iboga*.

(Heine, 1970: 68). As such the important market at Manianga, on the caravan routes between the Atlantic coast and the interior, played an important role in its development (*ibid.*). Its pervasiveness today in the ever growing multi-ethnic urban spread and its rural extensions is unquestionable but, apart from its beginnings in the commercial sector, it is also important in new religious movements.

It is perhaps this medium of communication that has contributed to obscuring or redefining local conceptions of certain terms such as *nkisi* and has been the vehicle for the diffusion and introduction of others. A glance at the single Munukutuba lexicon circulating in Pointe-Noire at the time of my research confirms this amalgamation of different socio-linguistic sources (INRDP, 1981). Even Swartenbroeckx's dictionary (1973), though still one of the more useful references for researchers, which claims to include the Kwilu region of the Republic of the Congo, combines Kikongo and Kituba and reflects not only the unequal coverage of the literature but also the different language traditions. We find both *nkisi* and *nkosi* defined as an 'object/fetish', without specification, whereas the concept of *nkisi* or *nkisi si* as nature spirit is entirely absent (Swartenbroeckx, 1973: 446, 450). This publication may be broadly, though selectively, representative of the multilingual realities *in situ*—and only up to the early 1970s—yet it brings into view the very problems set out at the beginning of this article.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My research was conducted during numerous periods and under quite different circumstances. The initial questions arose during a month-long, totally unexpected trip to the Congo in 1990. Logistical constraints allowed me to experience life as something of a vagabond in the cité of Pointe-Noire and to venture beyond the coastal savanna with a Congolese forestry company. This was followed by a more classical four-wheel-drive research mission during the summer of 1994 throughout the rural region of the Kwilu. Then, in 1995, I had the opportunity to take up residence with my family in Pointe-Noire and to explore further the rural and urban environment, for at least six months of the year, when not involved in teaching responsibilities in Brussels. The tragic outbreak of war in the Congo cut our stay short in 1997 and again in 1998. I returned briefly in 1999 but, given the political climate and insecurity, I was confined to the coastal strip and concentrated on the area between Dioso and the Cabinda enclave. I am indebted to the healers/diviners, chiefs, elders and many others, the list of whose names is extensive, for allowing me to learn something of their world. I apologise for all misrepresentations and for having relied on French translations rather than direct dialogue in Chivili or Kiyombe. I wish to thank the Agence de coopération culturelle et technique (Paris) for financial support with my field trip during the summer of 1994. I am also grateful to the Institut de recherche pour le développement (ORSTOM) in Pointe-Noire for providing me with a research base during my periods of residence in the Congo. I have appreciated the on-going encouragement of Jean Dello, Frank Hagenbucher-Sacripanti and Luc de Heusch, and I owe thanks to Yvonne Bastin, Claire Grégoire and *Africa's* anonymous referees. I assume full responsibility, however, for the content of the article.

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## ABSTRACT

The article analyses the distinctiveness of magico-religious practices in the north-western sector of the vast Kongo cultural complex, namely among the peoples who refer to themselves as Vili and Yombe. On the basis of fieldwork and a critical examination of the sources, the article points out that such widely distributed terms of proto-Bantu origin as *nkisi* cannot be covered by a single or even a multi-stranded definition; the variants, ranging from spirit to object, express local and time-specific beliefs. An approach that seeks a single Kongo universe is an ethnographic, historical and linguistic misreading that obscures existing regional concepts while possibly overlooking the importance of other notions. The article focuses on sorting out the basic ethnographic data relating to the beliefs current in the region and reveals not only long-standing aspects, some of them common to the wider Kongo world, but also those that have developed more recently in this particular coastal zone where different peoples trade and interact.

## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article analyse le caractère particulier des pratiques magico-religieuses dans le secteur nord-ouest du vaste complexe culturel Kongo, à savoir chez les peuples qui se désignent eux-mêmes sous le nom de Vili et Yombe. Se basant sur des travaux menés sur le terrain et sur un examen critique des sources, l'article souligne qu'il est impossible de couvrir des termes d'origine proto-bantoue aussi répandus que *nkisi* par une définition unique, voire même multinuancée ; les variantes, qui vont de l'esprit à l'objet, expriment des

croyances locales et ponctuelles. Une démarche tendant vers un univers Kongo unique est une interprétation ethnographique, historique et linguistique erronée qui occulte des concepts régionaux existants en négligeant parfois l'importance d'autres notions. L'article se borne à trier les données ethnographiques de base se rapportant aux croyances en vigueur dans la région et révèle non seulement des aspects anciens, dont une partie est commune à l'ensemble du monde Kongo, mais aussi des aspects qui sont apparus plus récemment dans cette région côtière particulière où des peuples divers commercent et dialoguent.