A comparison of the anthropomorphic Vodun power-figure (West African *bocio/bo/vodu/tro*) with its Kongo counterpart (Central African *nkisi*)

Lloyd D. Graham

**Graphic abstract:**

**Text abstract:** This paper compares anthropomorphic power-figures from the Vodun and Kongo cultural areas. Vodun is practised along the Guinea Coast of West Africa (especially in Benin and Togo) whereas the Kongo religion is native to the west coast of Central Africa (especially the two Republics of the Congo and northwest Angola). First, overlaps in belief and praxis between the Vodun and Kongo religions are highlighted. Second, similarities are identified in the design and significance of anthropomorphic Vodun power-figures, especially Fon *bocio* and Ewe *bo/vodu/tro(n)*, and their Kongo counterparts – *minkisi*, and especially *minkondi*, which are better known in the West as “nail fetishes.” The disturbing appearance of the figurines, the ritual operation of features such as pegs/padlocks, nails/blades, bonds/sutures and magical/medicinal material (*Kongo bilongo*) are treated in detail. Activation and appeasement by sacrificial blood, alcoholic drink and coloured dyes are also considered. The analysis ends with a broad intercultural comparison which ranges from ancient Egyptian belief to the art of Polish surrealist Zdzisław Beksiński, encompassing *en route* the zār cult and the Polynesian *tiki*. Overall, the study finds that the Vodun *bocio/bo/vodu/tro(n)* has much in common with the Kongo *nkisi nkondi*, the two sharing notable similarities in purpose, construction and operation. One difference, however, is that large Kongo *minkondi* used to serve as archival repositories of a community’s oaths, treaties and petitions, a commemorative role seemingly not shared by Vodun power-figures.
Introduction

Anthropomorphic power-figures from the western half of the African continent have long fascinated European collectors, curators, ethnographers and anthropologists. Two epicentres are recognised for the production and use of such figures, namely the Guinea Coast of West Africa (especially Bénin and Togo) for Vodun “fetishes,” and the Congo region of Central Africa (especially the Republic of the Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo [DRC] and northwest Angola) for BaKongo/Kongo, Yombe and Vili ones (Fig. 1). These represent two different religious and cultural complexes – Vodun and Kongo, respectively – which are embedded in populations of different ethnic and linguistic heritage – Guinean and Bantu, respectively. Accordingly, their artefacts have traditionally been considered separately in Western scholarship. For example, the catalogue of Jacques Kerchache’s collection, *Vodun – African Voodoo*, considers only Fon and Fon-like power-figures (bocio) from Bénin, while Suzanne Preston Blier’s *African Vodun* covers Fon bocio from Bénin, Ewe power-figures (bo/vodu/tro/tron) from Togo, and related items from neighbouring peoples. Conversely, *African Fetishes and Ancestral Objects* (edited by Didier Claes) confines itself to the output of the Congolese Bantu groups of Central Africa, including the BaKongo/Kongo, Luba and Songye, while the ethnographic half of the National Museum of African Art’s *Astonishment and Power* catalogue is an essay by Wyatt MacGaffey that is tightly focused on the history and significance of Kongo power-figures (minkisi; plural of nkisi). The edited book *Mayombe – Ritual Sculptures from the Congo* concentrates on wooden artifacts from the Yombe people and includes many anthropomorphic minkisi.

Vodun is distinct from the adjacent religion of the Yoruba people, a populous Guinean ethnic group whose heartland lies in Nigeria. Nevertheless, mutual influences are evident, and the impact of Yoruba religion on Vodun has been substantial. Some of the Vodun deities – vodun or vodu – are readily identified with Yoruba orishas, for example, Legba with Exu (messenger) and Hevioso with Shango (thunder). The names themselves are often cognate, e.g. the war-deity is called Gu (Fon), Egu (Ewe) or Ogun (Yoruba), while Legba (Fon) undoubtedly comes from the second part of Exu’s full name, Exu-Elegba (Yoruba). Both cultures use a similar geomantic system for divination, which is called Fa (Fon), Afa (Ewe) or Ifa (Yoruba). Indeed, Jacques Kerchache has gone so far as to assert that “The Fon of Dahomey and the Yoruba of Nigeria share more or less the same culture: their deities, under different names, have attributes and rituals that are very similar.” (Dahomey is an older name for Bénin; in its strict sense, it refers to the kingdom centred on Bénin during the 17th-19th centuries.) The Nago, who constitute a Yoruba subgroup in Bénin, perform egungun (Yoruba ancestor festivals) in Ouidah and Porto-Novo to the present day, and Nago carvers/fetishists have produced many bocio that are otherwise indistinguishable from those of the Fon.

Within Vodun, “Fon and Ewe forms of Vodu worship are virtually the same.” Fetishes of non-anthropomorphic type – which constitute the majority – are known to both groups as bo, “empowerment objects,” a category to which the Ewe also apply the multivalent term...
An anthropomorphic bo (i.e., a power-figure) is termed a bocio by the Fon (Figs. 2 & 3), but such statuettes do not seem to merit a specific Ewe term even though they clearly are made and used. In particular, Albert de Surgy’s fieldwork in Togo confirmed that wooden
Fig. 2. Fon bocio, Bénin, 19th century, 38 cm. Wooden “twin figure” embellished with duck skull and human (?) jawbone, necklaced with cowrie shells and string, encrusted with sacrificial patina and feathers. Brooklyn Museum 49.45; image by Brooklyn Museum, CC BY 3.0. While the museum catalogue entry claims that this is a twin figure, it seems more likely to represent a single figure with two heads; multiheadedness is a common trope among deformity bocio.
Fig. 3. Fon *bocio*, Bénin, 20th century. Human figure with iron (?) headpiece, gourd, and other bound attachments, encrusted with sacrificial patina. Museu Afro Brasil, Sao Paulo; image by Sailko, CC BY 3.0.
figurines of human aspect can form part of bo,32 bo-vodu,33 simple vodu,34 and complex vodu,35 and an Ewe practitioner may have a collection of such figurines in his ensemble.36 There are visual differences between power-statues from the two ethnic groups. According to one source, “Stylistically, the Ewe bochios37 are quite different [from the Fon]: they are simple, straightforward and very powerful despite their rudimentary carving. The eyes of practically all Ewe bochios are made of shells (cowries). The mouth is a simple square or elongated hole and also the nose is carved with minimal means.”38 Despite these generalisations, many Ewe power-figures do not have cowrie eyes or open mouths; however, the eyes are typically carved in a cowrie shape using raised relief (e.g., Fig. 4). Conversely, some figurines that are reportedly of Fon origin have genuine cowrie eyes, simple strong noses and an elongated hole for their mouth (Fig. 5). In the world of Vodun, all boundaries are fluid.39

Kongo minkisi take many forms; as with Vodun power-objects, only a minority are anthropomorphic.40 Small human figures made of light wood are intended to accompany and protect its owner on journeys (Fig. 6), while large ones may exceed 1 m in height (Fig. 7).41 For minkisi, “the classifications suggested by different Kongo authors vary, and none is exhaustive. Furthermore, important minkisi were often credited with several functions.”42 However, they fall into two moieties: those of “the below” (earth, sea, pools, streams; women’s affairs and healing) and those of “the above” (sky, rain, thunderstorms; men’s business, treaties and punishments).43 In the first category we find the mbumba, whose protective activities include safeguarding pregnancy.44 In the second category are the nduda for warrior’s issues, divination and protection against witchcraft (the nduda carries “night guns,” i.e. tubes loaded with gunpowder, which it can fire at witches),45 and the nkondi, a hunter that tracks down and punishes witches, thieves, adulterers and other malefactors.46 A nkondi often has a raised right arm that carries a spear or knife.47 The figure can be adjured by driving a nail or blade into it, and in the past nkondi were often used repeatedly in this way to record and enforce oaths and contracts.48 In Western institutional and private collections, such nkondi are often referred to as “nail fetishes” (Figs. 7-9). As we shall see, it is the nkisi nkondi that has the greatest overlap with the Vodun bocio or anthropomorphic bo/vodu/tron (hereafter shortened to bo/vodu).49

Like the BaKongo/Kongo,50 Yombe and Vili, whose territories lie near the mouth of the Congo,51 the Songye – whose land lies upriver, in the east of the DRC52 – are also well-known for their nkisi figures.53 However, these are somewhat different in appearance to the western groups; e.g., many are clad with metal sheets or arrays of studs and have a large animal horn filled with bilongo (magical charge) protruding from the top of the head.54 Since Songye power-figures are less likely than the coastal minkondi (plural of nkondi) to have multiple features in common with Vodun power-figures, they will not be considered further.

The slave trade saw Yoruba, Vodun and Kongo religious practices transmitted to the Caribbean, where they influenced one another while separately metamorphosing into new forms appropriate to the changed circumstances of their adherents.55 Yoruba religion gave rise to Santeria in Cuba, a Spanish colony; Vodun gave rise to Voodoo in Haiti, a French
Fig. 4. Ewe bo/vodu, Togo, 20th century, 32 cm. **Left:** front view; **Right:** rear view. Wooden figure with attachments (packets, padlocks & keys, cowrie shells, etc.), encrusted with dark sacrificial patina, feathers and laundry blue (or similar pigment). Author’s collection. Four cloth bags are attached to the shoulder-girdle; of the front two, one is red and the other white with a faint coloured pattern, perhaps floral; of the back two, one is very dark – perhaps black – and the other less so, both being heavily stained with dark patina. One of Albert de Surgy’s informants describes the manufacture of two Ewe fetishes thus: “We begin by making a pouch by sewing together four pieces of different fabric (indigo, white, red, multicolored), taken from the four fabrics provided by the recipient,”56 and “We pack this bag and the body of the statuette in four kinds of fabrics: white, indigo, red and floral.”57 This second combination of fabrics occurs in many Ewe fetishes.58 There appear to be 13 padlocks in total on the figurine; these are of many different brands, sizes and colours and exhibit different degrees of rusting or coating, suggesting sequential addition over a long period. Uses of the figurine are unknown, but each padlock has a tightly-folded paper (presumably bearing a name or request) tied securely to its hoop/shackle.
Fig. 5. [Previous two pages] Fon bocio, Bénin/Togo, 20th century, 29 cm. Page 8: Views 1-4, 90° clockwise rotations; Page 9: zoom of view 2. Wooden figure with attachments (fabric strips, bone, stone or nut, snakeskin, carapace, spark-plug, metal hoop girdle, etc.) encrusted with dark sacrificial patina, feathers and laundry blue or indigo. A tightly folded paper is tucked into the metal hoop. Author’s collection. Suzanne Preston Blier observes that “Certain bocios, particularly call bo and those empowered by vodun, are defined in turn by their cowrie-shell eyes.” That this figure wears strings of beads, cords, multicoloured fabric strips (rainbow), cowries (wealth) and a snakeskin potentially associates it with the vodun Dan, “the serpent-resembling god of wind and motion [... responsible for] providing humans with the power of mobility.” Mobility is suggested by the inclusion of a spark-plug from a motor vehicle engine near the figure’s left shoulder. On his back is a turtle or tortoise shell, a protective shield used “to distance bad things from oneself;” the turtle is also seen as a sage and diviner. Suzanne Preston Blier mentions a class of Dan-embodying vodun-bocio to which this figure may belong. “Scultures of this type frequently are used to determine the cause of specific malevolent actions against an individual (theft, for example) and then to punish the associated culprit. [...] ‘It is the priests (of Dan) who have this in their room. Not all the priests have this, only those who do geomancy with the vodun.’”

...the repatriation of manumitted slaves to Africa – for example, the early- to mid-19th century return of Brazilians to Bénin – closed the transatlantic migration loop and invited feedback from the New World that may have further blurred religious boundaries within Africa, although in the example cited it seemingly did not. But 19th-century Ouidah in Bénin included among its population people from Angola and Africans repatriated from Cuba, which – given Vodun’s acquisitive and incorporative nature – may well have resulted in Kongo influences on modern West African Vodun.

Overlaps in cultural and religious background

The Vodun and Kongo religions are indigenous African animistic/polytheistic belief systems that focus on natural spirits and on ancestors. In Vodun, spiritual power is called ashé, the agencies are termed vodun(n); these are deities, but may also be ancestors, natural features/forces, human anomalies, etc. The supreme gods are Mawu (female, lunar) and Lisa (male, solar); the sky pantheon under Hevioso (god of thunder) exists in opposition to the earth pantheon under Sagbata (god of smallpox). Legba is an important phallic deity. A priest is termed a vodunsi (“spouse of vodun”) or bokono, and Vodun priesthood has many overlaps with shamanism. Asen are parasol-like iron altars representing ancestors or deities. In Kongo religion, the main creator god is named Nzambi a Mpungu or Nzambi Kalunga, and the spirits are termed bisimbi or kimpungulu. The Kongo universe is split (by a body of water, kalunga) into two worlds, the upper one of the living, nza yayi, and the lower one of
the dead, *nsi a bafwa*. The boundary, *kalunga*, is porous, and Kongo rituals are designed to manipulate the relation between this world and the other one. A priest or ritualist is termed a *nganga*.

Despite the evident differences in concept and nomenclature, we have already noted that both belief systems recognise and value power-objects (“fetishes”), which are believed to contain a spiritual agency. For both Vodun and Kongo practitioners, these power-objects may – as
Fig. 7. **Nkisi nkondi** “Mangaaka,” DRC or Angola, 19th century, 118 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art 2008.30, image by Trish Mayo, CC BY 2.5.
mentioned above – be non-anthropomorphic in appearance (a non-figural bo/vodu or nkisi) or they may take human form (a bocio-like bo/vodu or figurine-type nkisi). The application of the Kongo term nkisi to both the spirit and the power-object that contains it is very similar to the Ewe use of the term vodu. Different bo/vodu have different specialties, such as diseases that they can inflict and treat, and different minkisi do as well. For example, the Ewe bo named Tsuakö can cure joint pain or avenge its client on an abuser by causing the latter to experience joint pain, whereas the Kongo nkisi named Mabyaala ma Ndembé is appropriate in the case of inflicting/curing a swollen stomach or swollen feet.

In Vodun, “the colour white recalls the heavens and the ancestors.” It is a symbol of peace that can be used to pacify humans and calm bocio. The linkage of white material with death
Fig. 9. Yombe nkisi nkondi, DRC, 28.5 cm. Left: front view; Right: 90° rotation clockwise. The projecting hairstyle “bun” is a compressible fabric bilongo container (weave of cloth is exposed at right of right-hand panel where paint/patina has flaked off), while the bilongo mound above the feet is rigid. The eyes are glass, and a circular glass abdominal window terminates the abdominal barrel – the latter contains bilongo consisting of small dark objects (shells?) embedded in a white matrix. Most of the embedded ironware seems to be hand-forged and is complemented by an extensive and tight cord winding. A patina of spat particulate material (and/or flicked paint of different colours simulating such a finish) completes the surface, further obscuring the contents of the abdominal barrel. Author’s collection. The absence of arms and encumbrance of the legs with a mound of bilongo may perhaps be understood by reference to the literature on Vodun bocio, where “the absence of arms and legs proves the impotence of the victim.” 98 Equally, the omission of forearms on minkisi may simply be a way of increasing the area available to the nganga for attachments and piercings. 99

and the ancestors is shared by Kongo religion, in which “white clay signifies ancestral force from beyond the grave.” 100 Wyatt MacGaffey tells us that “The land of the dead is itself called Mpemba, which means white kaolin clay and which in turn is used as a sign of clairvoyance and innocence.” 101
One can also identify strong procedural similarities in certain religious practices, such as initiation. According to Jacques Kerchache, the training of a Vodun adept or priest begins as follows:102

[An initiate] will be brought to the convent, or ‘thicket’, where he will undergo a long initiation that may last several months or several years. During this period, the initiate will lose his mother tongue in order to acquire the ‘holy’ language that will be used in ceremonies. When he returns to civilian life, he will remain dedicated to the god and [...] will relearn his mother tongue without forgetting the language acquired during the initiation process.

Compare this with the Kongo procedure required to become the nganga of an important nkisi,103 i.e. the ritualist who can make and operate a particular power-figure.104

Initiation was understood as a stay in the land of the dead, which was reached by plunging under the surface of a deep pool. [...] In reality, the candidate and his wife spent the time at a hidden camp in the bush, learning all the songs and the rules of the nkisi in question and how to compose the object itself. At the end of this seclusion the candidate or candidates would emerge fantastically painted and dressed and behaving in strange ways to show that they were not yet used to being back in the normal world of the living.

The Vodun and Kongo religions both consider the fontanel – the summit of the head – to be important and have similar concerns about protecting it. In Vodun, the fontanel is a privileged place where the soul resides. Some bocio have holes in the tops of their heads through which they can be fed or into which medicines can be put.105 But also, “One says that sorcerers take possession of the soul of an individual by passing the hand over the summit of the head. That is why the gesture of posing the hand on the head of someone is very suspect, especially when it is a stranger who touches the head of a child.”106 In Kongo belief, “The head was thought of as the site of communication with the spirits, who were considered able to enter through the fontanelle; minkisi therefore had medicine packs on their heads ‘so that their fontanelles might be open’ [... N]owadays, a mother protects an infant’s head from unwanted spiritual invasions by sticking a live (unused) matchstick in the hair over the fontanelle.”107

Another potential area of overlap is that both cultural blocs seem to have encoded beliefs via written symbol systems that have visual similarities. Kongo graphic writing (Fig. 10, left) is the subject of a recent paper and academic monograph by Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz,108 but – apart from Fa geomancy signs, which are combinations of simple strokes109 – the Vodun symbolic repertoire has not yet been documented.110 However, Africans who were transported to the Americas during the period of the transatlantic slave trade (late 15th to mid-19th centuries) brought their writing and graphic systems with them,111 so the vèvè notation of Haitian Voodoo (Fig. 10, right) is believed to derive primarily from indigenous inscriptive practices of the Slave Coast (now southern Bénin and Togo). In Haiti, the Vodun graphic writing system has assimilated key elements from its Kongo counterpart (such as the dikenga sign, a cosmogram formed by placing a cross centrally within a circle).112 Indeed, Haitian ideographic signs, called Veve, derive from a mixture of Fon, Yoruba, Ejagham, and Kongo traditions. People from all these cultures were taken to Haiti in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and gradually their religions and their graphic forms merged with Catholicism into the Vodun religion. In Haitian art we see the
Fig. 10. Examples of Vodun- and Kongo-derived graphic writing. **Left**: Palo Monte *firma* from Cuba, meaning unspecified. The *firma* of Insancio (Siete Rayos) or “Seven Rays of Lightning” (not shown) may be thought of as a *nkisi nkondi* in written form. **Right**: Voodoo *vèvè* from Haiti, symbol of the *loa* Maman Brigitte.

Reappearance of the Kongo cosmogram, in textiles, groundpainting, cut steel sculptures, and in paintings depicting marriages, ceremonies, life, death, the watery ancestral world, and the rebirth of souls.

Conversely, a historical influx of Haitians into Cuba explains why many of the *firmas* of Palo Monte in that country – a Kongo-derived religion – resemble Voodoo *vèvès*.

Disentangling the African sources behind the Caribbean hybrids is a challenge for the future. As Martínez-Ruiz comments at the end of his book, *Kongo Graphic Writing and Other Narratives of the Sign*, “Far more work can be done on Kongo graphic writing systems in the diaspora. In particular, Haiti, with its active practice of Voudou and use of Vévé graphic writing [...] all present rich potential for further study.” The key point for the present discussion is that the symbolic repertoires of the African Vodun and Kongo religions seem to have been highly compatible – so much so that they readily combined to form hybrid sign-systems in the Caribbean. (We might note in passing that the similarity of the resulting diagrams to the demonic “sigils” of Western ceremonial magic has not gone unremarked.) Moreover, we may deduce from Martínez-Ruiz’s book that the semiotics of the African
systems were fairly fluid, because the interpretations of Kongo graphic elements by BaKongo informants in Central Africa differ in almost every respect from the interpretations of the same elements by Palo initiates in Cuba – a disconnect that the author never actually acknowledges.120

Power-figures

Overlaps in design and significance

In Vodun, power-figures from the Fon (bocio) and Ewe are a type of god-object (vodu/bo), i.e. a sacred sculpture empowered by spirit of a vodu(n) or another supernatural agency such as the “tiny spritelike forest beings called aziza,” whether acting singly or in combination.121 Only men can carve a bocio sculpture.122 The vodu(n) that it embodies after ritual activation (which may be done by a Vodun priest, diviner, medicine/additive trader or family member)123 may be a deity, a divinized ancestor, a natural feature or force, or even a human anomaly. For example, in a relatively recent branch of Ewe Vodun, the agency – termed gorovodu – is the divinized spirit of a specific foreigner who (when alive) was typically a slave from the north.124 The etymology of the Fon term bocio is ambiguous but the word identifies the figurine as a corpse.125 In one understanding, the statue is an “empowered (bo) cadaver (ci);”126 in another, it is the “corpse of an evil spell,” insofar as the figurine presents itself as a substitute target or decoy for malicious magic directed against those under its protection.127 Indeed, a kudio bocio is a “death-exchanging” bocio which substitutes itself in this protective manner for a living individual, the equivalence being established by the attachment of a piece of the human’s clothing to their wooden “body double.”128 Among the Fon, a malicious practitioner or sorcerer is called an azṇqọtọ, azet or kennesi.129

In Kongo belief, a specific spirit (nkisi) inhabits each sacred receptacle, altar, or figurine (nkisi). However, a freshly-carved statuette remains inert until it has been empowered by a fetishist who attaches the appropriate additives and performs the necessary rituals.130 Each nkisi derives its power from a dead person with relevant personal qualities; it is in fact a “portable grave.”131 The term nkisi comes from the verb kinsa, “to take care,” because the nkisi helps the owner through its presence and power; it is a living being “with breath (mwela), eyes and ears, a life to exchange for another, and the power to both cure and punish.”132 As mentioned above, the ritualist responsible for owning and operating a significant nkisi is called a nganga.133 A malicious practitioner or witch is called a ndoki – the ghost in his nkisi can attack victims and harm or kill them.134

From the foregoing, one can identify several common elements. First, a Vodun power-object (bo/vodu) and a Kongo power-object (nkisi) can both take anthropomorphic form, being made as a human figurine carved from wood. Second, such figurines are linked with death, being identified either as a corpse (Vodun) or as a grave (Kongo).135 Third, there is potential overlap because the Vodun object is home to a vodu(n) or related agency, and a vodu(n) can be an ancestral spirit – the same class of entity that inhabits a nkisi. Moreover, the existence of a named nkisi (e.g. Mabyaala)136 specific for a certain set of problems/remedies – a nkisi that is manifested simultaneously in many copies operated by different nganga137 – makes the resident spirit of such a nkisi appear more as a deity than as the soul of a single deceased
person; this in turn broadens the overlap to include Vodun power-figures that embody deities. Finally, there is an indisputable overlap in function, insofar as both types of statue act as protectors and sentries, guarding their owners against attack. The idea that the nkisi represents “a life to exchange for another” suggests that it, like the bocio, may substitute itself for its owner if the latter becomes the target of witchcraft. In psychotherapeutic terms, both bocio and minkisi serve as targets of projection and transference by their clients/owners. 

Further similarities are evident in how the resident spirits of the power-figures are manipulated – the ways in which they are activated, nourished, provoked and mollified. Bocio are fed palm oil and animal blood. Indeed, bocio are fed with chicken sacrificial, just as “The chicken sacrifice which was often part of the ritual of invocation was said to feed and energise the nkisi [... and] also represented the violence that the nkisi itself would inflict on its victim.” Gin and chewed herbs or seeds such as Guinea pepper are spit at/on the bocio to adjure it; similarly, magical materials are transferred to minkisi by spitting, a transaction that could either activate them (in the manner of an insult) or calm their rage. Violating a bocio by intentionally polluting it with a forbidden substance engenders the rage of the vodun that it embodies – rage that can then be redirected from the bocio to the target person, namely the malefactor who is to be punished. Highly emotive qualities such as fire/heat, knotting/tying, and speech/saliva are key elements in the theatre of bocio activation, in which the client is also a participant; these “props” span all five human senses. Kongo practice is similar; beyond animal sacrifice and impaling a nkisi with metal, exploding gunpowder or dousing the figure with strong drink is another way of activating the statue. There are even occasional reports of human sacrifice in connection with minkisi. The Yombe nkisi called Pfula Nkombe is described by the missionary Father Leo Bittremieux (ca. 1910) as “a powerful nduda or ndoki hunter who, at least at his inauguration, requires several human lives. [...] Apparently the little mirror that decorates his belly contains nine human hearts.” Human sacrifice does not seem to be attested for bocio, perhaps because the anthropological field-work on the Guinea Coast was conducted much more recently than that in the Congo.

One notional difference between Vodun bocio and Kongo minkondi is that the former, conceived as corpses, are often carved with closed mouths and are thought to lack the power of speech, whereas the latter typically have an open mouth with bared teeth, a jutting jaw, and sometimes a protruding tongue. The open mouth is interpreted to mean that the nkondi can speak and is about to do so, while the extended tongue is taken to refer to the practice (discussed below) whereby a client licks a nail or blade before it is hammered into the statue’s body. However, a quick survey of Vodun power-figures will identify many that have been carved with open mouths, especially (as noted in the Introduction) those made by Ewe sculptors. Moreover, Sagbadju – one of Suzanne Preston Blier’s Fon informants – expressly records of some bocio used in Vodun-powered divination that “this thing talks. It sees. If you stole something, it will tell on you, saying ‘It is a tall person.'” Fon bocio with pointed bases that one inserts into the earth are associated with Legba and can only be used for a single purpose. In contrast, those on flat plinths (such as Fig. 5) are
associated with other vodun (or, in some cases, with sorcery) and “can be reactivated and reused a number of times.” Vodun power-figures that fail to perform to expectations are “abandoned, left to die” and no longer receive offerings. Like free-standing bocio, “Most minkisi [...] have been employed many times. Sometimes the nganga simply followed a different mode of procedure to use the same fetish for a purpose other than its previous one,” while at other times the repurposing was more radical. Like bocio, privately-owned minkisi must prove themselves effective if they are to be kept in service. Zdenka Volavkova records that “an Nkisi figure which is found weak or ineffective may be returned to the nganga [who ... ] after a little adaptation, sometimes sold them to another client.” Minkisi that do not work command no respect and may be subject to ridicule. Even a once-powerful nkisi can lose its authority, for example if his nganga dies.

A male Vodun power-figure may have several small figures – “followers” – bound to him; the main figure is usually taken to represent the chief healer or agent, the minor ones his assistants. A female power-figure may also include small figures – “children” – among her accoutrements. Ensembles of the latter type are considered members of the widespread African genre of maternity sculptures; these Vodun embodiments are thought to invoke the powers of Minona, the female counterpart of the phallic trickster-god Legba. For example, one Adja bocio of this type “has the attributes of Sakpata, the vodun of the earth and of smallpox, which are indicated by the pierced pottery on the head and the red fabric. It also has the attributes of Minona, the vodun of maternity and of sorcery, which are indicated by the child hanging from its hip.” Similarly, in Kongo statuary, children may be carried by a female nkisi, often in the classic “maternity” pose; this indicates that the female is a married woman. Minkisi (including, surprisingly, minkondi) “often had important functions relating to maternity.”

The similarities between the two types of power-figure have attracted little commentary in the literature. Nevertheless, the overlap has not gone entirely unnoticed. Wyatt MacGaffey observes in a footnote that “Kongo [nkisi] nkondi are similar to Fon bocio from Dahomey,” i.e., from Bénin. Similarly, Suzanne Preston Blier writes that “Bociɔ’s closest visual heteronyms [...], however, are Kongolese power sculptures [...] and similar power figures from Zaïrian groups such as the Yaka [...]. Parallels between bociɔ and these latter traditions include a diverse range of body-piercing forms, binding elements, and materials applied to (or in) the stomach as a means of empowerment.” In terms of function, she elaborates, “The latter objects, like bociɔ, function according to Wyatt MacGaffey [...] as ‘both avenger and victim; (their) ... appearance reflect(ing) this ambivalence.’” Dark Matter (the Nyehaus catalogue of William Harper’s Vodun collection) reports of an Adja bocio that “Figures such as this are protectors, and are likely a corollary, both visually and functionally, to Bakongo nail fetishes.”

Suzanne Preston Blier believes of bocio that “Works of this sort no doubt were made and used prior to the slave trade,” which places their origin in the 17th century or earlier. Noting similarities in the methods by which power-figures are adjured in Senegal and Burkina Faso (West Africa) as well as in the Congo, Duncan Caldwell has suggested “that many of the
practices surrounding power figures (and, to some extent, *minkondi*) might go back nearly a millennium, when the Sahel spawned numerous migrations, or even back to the Bantu expansion from 1000 to 500 BCE. The initial Bantu core was located in the highlands between eastern Nigeria and western Cameroon, and the southward expansion down the west coast reached Cabinda (Angola/DRC) in the 13th century CE. There the Bantu displaced the indigenous Khoisan and established several powerful kingdoms—a history that potentially allows for cultural continuity between West Africa and the Congo. Consistent with this trajectory, Blier muses in a footnote: “While it may be tempting to suggest that *bocio* forms are derivative of the better known (in the West) Kongolesque sculptures, that the latter is the source of the former is highly unlikely. Indeed historians generally trace African migration from West to East, thus making any early influence more likely to have flowed in the opposite direction.”

**Revealing, concealing, confusing and deceiving**

For Vodun *bocio*, “the sculpted part is concealed beneath an accumulation of materials that endow it with its power.” Similarly, an anthropomorphic Kongo *nkisi* begins as a carved human figurine that the *nganga* buys from a sculptor. It is not effective until the *nganga* has added *bilongo* and performed the necessary rituals. For *bocio*, Fa geomancy is used to determine the nature of the necessary additions to the sculpture; “The diviner [...] furnishes the list of materials and magic formulas that accompany the making of the fetish in order to turn it into a sacred object.”

Active or retired Vodun power-figures typically manifest tensions and contradictions so extreme that they have a high shock value, especially for Western viewers. Suzanne Preston Blier writes that their surfaces are covered with [...] a ‘garbage heap’ of matter – iron beads, straw, bones, leather, rags, pottery, fur, feathers, blood. [...] Adding to this sensate quality, packets of potent substances hang heavily from the figure’s surface, producing competing visual tensions of bursting and constriction. A range of suturing forms – cords, beads, iron chains, and cloth and leather wrappers – secure these and other elements to the figure [...] Slicked over the head and torso, a thick patina of blood, oil, and feathers, serves as a visceral signifier of the work’s ritual history.

*Bocio* [...] are defined in essential ways by features of genre violation, deformation, mixing and overlapping. *Bocio* for this reason frequently belie easy genre classification with regard to formal attributes and functional concerns.

Some *bocio* [...] are predicated on such tension-defined formal attributes as binding (bondage), piercing (pegging), deformity (multiheadedness especially), and swelling (or pregnancy).

Features of force, fear, shock, fury, disorder, and deception, in sum, play a critical role in *bocio* reception [...] These criteria in turn have a role in effectuating particular types of viewer response – be it of mystification, danger or awe.

A similar assessment has been provided by Jacques Kerchache. From Dana Rush, we may additionally infer that *bocio* present a reified microcosm of Vodun in general:
to lack cohesion it is these very characteristics that conspire to create Vodun’s opacity. Its open-ended, unfinished sensibilities block attempts at any sort of definitive interpretation.186

In the same vein, minkisi present a reified microcosm of the Kongo world: “Figuratively, the nkisi represent[s] all of the power of the earth in miniature.”187 Some attributes of minkisi are sealed away out of sight in compartments, e.g. behind a mirror or opaque piece of glass, which increases mystification and prevents rational enquiry.188 Other are displayed on the surface where packets, knots and nets suggested the constraining of strong forces. “The sheer intricacy of texture and detail in many minkisi contributed to ngitukulu, ‘astonishment,’ in the mind of the beholder, suggesting the presence of something extraordinary.”189 A heavily embellished nkisi was distinguished by “the extravagance of its self-presentation.”190

“Minkisi [...] were intended to create a visual effect in the context of ritual use, heightened by songs, drumming, dances, the distress of the occasion, and various devices contributing to ‘astonishment’ (nsisi, ngitukulu). The bits of rag, chicken feathers, pieces of raffia, and other ‘mixed media,’ which some collectors in search of pure form used to clean off before varnishing the piece, were part of the visual effect originally intended.”191 Recently, a large nkisi nkondi was subjected to a non-destructive “virtual excavation;” conducted as carefully as any modern archaeological dig, the investigation revealed a wealth of detail about this particular statue and its myriad meaningful attachments, which included much World War I militaria.192 CT scanning was not undertaken in this case, but has proven effective in the “digital dissection” of other Central African power-figures.193

Some old minkisi are “encrusted with a thin patina of what may be blood,”194 consistent with the earlier assertion that they received sacrificial offerings like Vodun bocio/bo/vodu. A recent proteomic analysis of the patina on a 19-20th century Adja bocio195 found that it was primarily “a plant resin with minerals and plant fibers mixed into it,” but also identified goat blood as a significant component.196 That the main constituent was identified as plant resin is consistent with the known use of palm oil and sodabi libations on Vodun figurines. Palm oil is initially bright orange, but ages (presumably via air oxidation) to a black tar.197 Sodabi, an orange liquor distilled from palm wine,198 is likely to behave similarly.

In modern times, authenticity has become an issue, with many bocio being constructed for sale to the Western market rather than for domestic use.199 On the website of The Hamill Gallery of Tribal Art, Boston, we find that Vodun power-figures often carry the warning that “Despite their appearance and patina, the objects below show no evidence of age or use and were probably made to be sold.”200 Some of the considerations for collecting Vodun figures have been addressed in interviews with dealers and collectors by the art magazine ÌMÓ DÁRA.201 In one such article, dealer Ann de Pauw observes that “We see a lot of young and fake figures appearing at all levels of the market. Often they are ‘too beautiful to be true’—friendly faces, exaggerated features, big in size, perfectly balanced loads, a little bit of everything but lacking power.”202 She also points out that
If the whole piece is ‘sacrificed’ from top to bottom (and even underneath), then you can be almost certain that it is a fake. A natural sacrificial patina is built up, little by little, over time. During rituals, buckets of blood and other organic material are not poured onto the figure—sacrificial material is added gradually, sometimes only a few drops at a time, resulting in a construction of layers. The thickness of those layers varies depending on the location at which sacrifices were applied to the bocio. Therefore, you’ll never find a homogeneous sacrificial patina on bocio figures.203

The sole exception might be the situation where a statue is immersed or washed in special plant solutions during its preparation or use.204 Within the wider scope of de Pauw’s warning we might include the dowsing of an entire Vodun figure in laundry blue205 or bright blue polymer pigment, which seems to be a very recent trend.206 Although seemingly not just a ruse to catch the eye of potential Western buyers,207 the presence of rows of such statues at well-touristed “fetish markets” in Bénin is a little suspicious.208 Normatively, blue is added to Vodun bocio to activate them, and white (kaolin) is used to calm them down.209 For Ewe bo/vodu, we are told that “The blue colour in the face is a sign of Gambada,”210 where Gambada is the mother of the Ewe Vodun pantheon from whom all the deities derive their power.211 Note that laundry blue or indigo has been applied in small amounts to the head and/or chest areas of Figs. 4 & 5 (as well as selectively to the back of Fig. 4).

The situation of authenticity with minkondi is even more fraught, since Congolese “nail fetishes” became art objects and collectibles long before Vodun figures did. Accordingly, the “Bakongo-Style Fetishes Archive” at the Hamill Gallery website carries the sobering reminder that “Authentic Bakongo fetishes are very rare. Despite their appearance, these fetish figures show no evidence of age or use and were probably made to be sold.”212 It is rare – but not unheard of – for a nkisi to show traces of laundry blue or other blue pigment.213

**Pegs and padlocks**

Pegs are normally found in Vodun power-figures rather than in minkisi,214 but it is worth noting that in 1670 Olfert Dapper found in the Congo a “seated sculpture of a man with wooden pegs called nsonso (which later meant nails) stuck in it.”215 The BaKongo explained a subsequent Portuguese shipwreck as being this entity’s revenge for certain “nailings” that had been done to it during its temporary removal by the Portuguese.216 It certainly sounds as if this power-figure was an early form of nkisi nkondi. On the Slave Coast, an early European report of a bocio-like Vodun figure dates from 1725,217 which incidentally confirms that both sculptural traditions are at least three centuries old,218 but this power-figure does not seem to have involved pegs.

Consistent with the ambiguities, tensions and contradictions outlined by Blier and Rush in the previous section, the essays in the edited volume Vodun – African Voodoo present no less than three mutually incompatible interpretations of peg insertions into a bocio:

1. To injure, impair or prevent use of that region/organ of the victim (Jacques Kerchache);219
2. To drive and secure remedial medicine within a region/organ that is afflicted by pain or disease, thereby reaching the root of the problem (Suzanne Preston Blier);220 and
3. To “lock” the bocio to a particular mission – positive or negative – just as closing the padlock does in bocios that have such a lock attached (Gabin Djimassé).221
In her own book, *African Vodun*, Blier cites instances that conform not to option (2) above but to option (1).\textsuperscript{222} For example, she says “Sometimes pegs are inserted in the ear [...] of a sculpture to prevent another from hearing of one’s acts,”\textsuperscript{223} likewise “in the thighs or buttocks, such pegs are said to lead to immobility or incapacity of movement.”\textsuperscript{224} Similarly, she quotes her informant Sagbadju as saying “when one puts the peg in its chest or foot, the person will not be able to move or do anything.”\textsuperscript{225} Elsewhere in the same book, Blier provides examples for Vodun *kpododonme* ("pierced") *bocio* that seem to conform most closely with option (3).\textsuperscript{226} Accordingly, she quotes Sagbadju as saying “When you tell (the sculpture) everything, you press the needle in it. You give it oil, alcohol, chickens. If it accepts, everything will come to pass.”\textsuperscript{227} More specifically, she reports her informants Yemadje and Dewui as stating that “The peg is used to hold the words inside” and “the peg represents something that one says. One speaks to this peg and closes the [metaphorical] door with it – thus the pegs represent promises.”\textsuperscript{228}

The detail of Djimassé’s method – option (3) – is that the peg is first removed and its tethering cord partially unwound from the figurine; “then, as the mission is intoned, the cord must be wound back around the object and the peg put back into the groove. To finish, one spits finely chewed *atakun* (Guinea pepper) seeds onto it and then sprays the whole thing with an alcoholic drink or water, depending on the mission to be accomplished.”\textsuperscript{229} However, if the peg penetrates a key body part (ear, head, neck, stomach, genitals or legs), the “mission” accords with option (1).\textsuperscript{230} Consistent especially with option (3), Blier asserts that “As with Kongo power figures, each peg signifies a particular idea or wish.”\textsuperscript{231} This reference to *nkisi* operation, which is of course highly pertinent to our Vodun/Kongo inter-cultural comparison, will be reprised in the next section. Some *minkisi* (e.g. Fig. 9) have mottled or spotted surfaces consistent with chewed material having been spat over them, or at least with having different coloured paints flecked at them to simulate exactly that kind of freckled patina.

Jacques Kerchache favours option (1) and says of Fon *bocio* that “The little sticks [i.e., pegs] were later replaced by locks.”\textsuperscript{232} Among the Ewe of Togo, Albert de Surgy reports that “knots or padlocks indicate a will to subdue or prevent malefactors from acting.”\textsuperscript{233} While conveying a sense of mission consistent with option (3), the main aim is to constrain the intended victim in line with option (1), although de Surgy makes no mention of targeting a specific body part with the placement of the knot or lock. Multiple locks are a common feature; a malicious bo named Agbagli involves seventeen padlocks.\textsuperscript{234} Among the Fon, Suzanne Preston Blier observes that “Bocio with multiple pegs or padlocks are thought to be more potent than those with but a single closure.”\textsuperscript{235}

Djimassé’s assertion about the *modus operandi* of padlocks in option (3) is that “The locks are opened, sacred words (incantations) are uttered and requests are made before they are closed again. Then they are sprayed with alcohol from the mouth and with chewed nuts.”\textsuperscript{236} In other instances, Guinea pepper seeds are chewed and then spat at the keyhole immediately before the lock is closed.\textsuperscript{237} The idea that clicking the lock shut is what launches the mission is supported by one of Blier’s informants, Dewui, who declares that “one says the thing and
closes the lock ... it is what one asks when closing the lock that the bochio will do. If the work is powerful it will be done.238 However, this view does not go unchallenged. A contrary explanation of the operation of the locks is presented in *Dark Matter*, the catalogue of William Harper’s Vodun collection; this source maintains that the client’s lock is opened during the ritual and remains open until the client’s problem is resolved, whereupon it is closed. The lock may either be closed on the *bochio* and left in place for posterity, or it may be reclaimed by the client before it is closed and taken away.239 Albert de Surgy reports a process for the multiple padlocks on a named Ewe bo which shares some features with Djimassè’s procedure (e.g., the locks are closed during the ritual) and some with the one in *Dark Matter* (e.g., the locks are left open after the ritual). Specifically, “Seven padlocks and seven elongated metal whistles, with a very high pitch” feature in a malicious bo named Abrayiböe.240 One ritual use of Abrayiböe involves seven whistle-blasts in succession, which cause intense agitation in whichever individual has been nominated as the target, at which time “one then takes the precaution of locking all the padlocks and removing the keys. [...] When one has finished with the evocation, one opens the locks again.”241 An Ewe bo/vodu bearing multiple padlocks and two metal police whistles is shown in Fig. 11. Whistles might be used simply to call to the cognate bocio to attention at the beginning of a ritual.242

Consistent with the idea that a padlock “signifies a particular idea or wish” is the fact that a (seemingly small) subset of Ewe power-figures bear multiple closed padlocks to which tightly-folded papers have been attached (Figs. 4 & 11). The locks’ keys may be present too, but are not inserted into the barrels. Each folded paper is firmly attached by many windings of thin string or thread to the shackle (i.e., the hoop-shaped part) of a closed padlock; presumably each paper bears a message, instruction or wish, or perhaps the name of the client, or even the name of an individual whom the power-figure is to target.243 In keeping with this interpretation, Albert de Surgy’s fieldwork in Togo has revealed that some Ewe bo/vodu do require written depositions.244 For example, to obtain the restitution of a client into a business or official capacity, the operator of a malicious bo called Agbagli must prepare a written submission. “Around midnight, accompanied or not by the client, he goes out naked, his bo in hand. He attaches [to it] with the cotton thread a piece of paper on which he has written the name of the person to influence, then he evokes it again by restating what he wants. He then deposits the bo in savannah or in a secret place of his house, on a shelf of xeti wood.”245

Padlocks feature not only in Fon bocio and Ewe bo/vodu but also in some minkisi and related Congolese fetishes. For example, a Vili magical figure from the DRC that dates from the first half of the 20th century is embellished with padlocks, bedsprings, and a bead as well as the usual nails, magic belly enclosure and string-bound accessories; it also bears an oily dark brown sacrificial patina.246 Likewise, a large BaKongo nkisi nkondi from the same period wears a chain necklace which contains “four padlocks that form a circle around the base of the neck, three in front and one behind.”247 A protective mpungu power-figure collected from the frontier region between the Lower Congo and Bandundu, near Angola – now in the Tervuren Museum’s collection – is laden with padlocks.248
Fig. 11. Ewe bo/vodu, Togo, 20th century, 31 cm. *Left:* front view; *Right:* 90° rotation clockwise. Wooden figure with attachments (packets, padlocks & keys, cowrie shells, etc.), encrusted with dark sacrificial patina and feathers (without laundry blue or indigo); almost certainly from the same fetishist as Fig. 4.249 Author’s collection. It is not clear whether the large and incongruous circular mouth-hole was original to the statue or added later, perhaps to accept a peg to assure silence/discretion or to accept cigarettes for the statue to smoke.250 From the two large police whistles at its front, one might suspect that this is a power-figure designed to catch thieves or punish criminals – yet there is no certainty in such an attribution.251 Thus, among the Ewe of Togo, “a magical *sosi* called Dudulölö [...] whose making required two little padlocks and seventeen police whistles” is not a crime-busting device but rather an accessory of the complex *vodu* Karabi, one that “is able to restore life to a dying person.”252 Perhaps the whistles link Dudulölö with breath – the breath to power so many whistles may have been equated with the breath of life. On the figurine pictured here there are approx. 14 padlocks; these are of many different brands, sizes and colours and exhibit different degrees of rusting or coating, suggesting sequential addition over a long period. Uses of the figurine are unknown, but each padlock has a tightly-folded paper (presumably bearing a name or request) tied securely to its hoop/shackle.
Another example is provided by Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz, who presents a Congolese anthropomorphic *Mpungu a Nkama* (“Mpungu of One Hundred Powers”) from Angola with a raffia ring (*lukuba*) at its base that is secured by several – seemingly three – padlocks, of which two are visible in his photograph.²⁵³ (Some Vodun *bocio*, too, are encircled by three padlocks.²⁵⁴) *Mpungu* is the Kongo term for the elemental force that surrounds us,²⁵⁵ but – like the Ewe use of the word *vodu* – it here refers to a fetish possessed of such power.²⁵⁶ For this item,

The metal locks attached to this foundation lukuba are used to seal problems and to open up the channel that allows the Mpungu a Nkama to interact with both worlds and direct the life forces enclosed inside it. [...] The locks create a second hidden triangle and [...] thereby] form a complete diamond that represents the world of the ancestors at the bottom of the mpungu and symbolizes protection and all the positive things on earth. [...] The locks are also used to open and close the mpungu’s dialogue with the spirits. The locks are physically opened from top to bottom to initiate the communication and closed from bottom to top to close the performance, a process that culminates with three final claps as a sign of respect and completion.”²⁵⁷

Moreover, the process for operating this Kongo power-object conforms to some extent with the interpretation in *Dark Matter* of padlock operation on *bocio*; with the *mpungu*, however, the locks remain open only for the duration of the ritual, rather than for the time it takes for the problem to be resolved. The closure of the locks could therefore be considered as locking the *mpungu* to its mission. To the extent that this is true, the use of padlocks on the *mpungu* would be consistent with Djimassé’s option (3) above for *bocio*. However, for Sagbadju – one of Blier’s Vodun informants – closure of the lock on a *bocio* and resolution of the client’s problem are simultaneous: “If something bothers you, when you close the padlock, nothing more will bother you.”²⁵⁸ If the problem is solved immediately, much of the distinction between Djimassé’s interpretation and the one in *Dark Matter* disappears.

The *Mpungu a Nkama* in Martínez-Ruiz’s book is partly figural, and the entire ensemble is considered female – in fact, a female swollen through pregnancy. In this respect it parallels Vodun *wutuji-bocio*, the “swollen or pregnancy works [...] that comprise another important genre of *bocio* sculptures.”²⁵⁹ The relevance of this *mpungu* to *minkisi* in general is made explicit by Martínez-Ruiz:

> Mpungu a Nkama belongs to the same tradition of Kongo art as the nkisi featured by scholars and displayed in museum collections, and many of the techniques utilized in its production are directly linked to precedents documented in early descriptions of Kongo art and related traditions in both the Republic of the Congo and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.²⁶⁰

In other words: as for the padlocks on this *mpungu*, so too for those on *minkisi* and *minkondi*.

**Nails and blades**

Human figurines pierced with sharp metal objects for magical purposes have ancient precedents; for example, the effigy shown in Fig. 12 dates from Roman Egypt (4th century CE). It is an example of aggressive love magic that has been made in accordance with instructions in the collection of magical documents known as the *Papyri Graecae Magicae*.
As with Kongo minkisi, “the immediate agent is the spirit of a dead man,” as we can see from the following exhortation of the figure:

Do not fail, spirit of the dead man, Antinoos, but arouse yourself for me and go to every place, into every quarter, into every house, and draw to me Ptolemais [i.e., the woman desired by the client and represented by the effigy.] [...] If you accomplish this for me, I will set you free.
The effigy represents the target of the spell rather than the agent that is adjured to effect it, just as the impaled nkondi represents what will befall the target of its retribution. This type of ritual practice is an example of “sympathetic magic” or, in more modern terms, “persuasive analogy.” In addition, Duncan Caldwell has suggested that the presence of such injuries in a nkisi may signal the “supernatural warrior’s transcendental ability to survive even the most violent provocations and excruciating combat in his zeal to fight for his petitioners.”

Some scholars believe that the tradition of piercing of a nkondi was influenced by Christian representations of immolation and martyrdom. The Portuguese were distributing crucifixes in the Congo as early as the end of the 15th century, and images of St. Sebastian pierced by arrows were also common. “It is not known how much influence these Christian wares had on Kongo sculpture at that time,” writes a representative of the Seattle Art Museum, but clearly such Western depictions of nailing and piercing would have resonated with local practices of violating minkondi with pieces of iron. Crucifixes were incorporated into Vodun paraphernalia, too, where they underwent a radical shift in meaning.

The blades and nails hammered into minkondi are called mbau. “Each represents an appeal to the force represented in the figure, arousing it to action;” the metal insertions often carry mfunya, a token (such as a strip of clothing or remnant of a stolen item) intended to draw retribution upon a wrongdoer, even if their identity is unknown. Koma nloko means “nailing a curse,” although verbal insults could achieve the same end. The insertion is performed by the client, who often licks the nail or blade to personalise it before hammering it in. As mentioned above, the result represents what will happen to the target of the nkondi; nails in the chest “are statements of intention that the wrongdoer in the case shall suffer terrible pains in the chest.”

For Kongo minkondi, writes Shawnya Harris, “A peg may refer to a matter being ‘settled’ whereas a nail, deeply inserted may represent a more serious offense such as murder.” If she is correct, the act of inserting a peg into a nkondi would mirror the act of closing the...
padlock on a bocio as interpreted in *Dark Matter*, i.e., resolution of the problem and closure. For Vodun power-figures, however, piercing with wooden pegs and metal pins seem to be regarded as equivalent. An exception would be where medicines are to be driven into a specific part of the figure (previous section, option 2), for which pegs would be more effective.

**Bonds and sutures**

Tying may be static, intended to show how the power of the medicines associated with a power-figure are constrained, as seen in the next section. In Vodun, where cords are associated with disempowerment, danger and death, tying may also reference the history of slavery on the Guinea Coast. “Kannumon, ‘thing in cords,’” is the Fon term for slaves and prisoners of war, a term that complements many bocio arts which similarly show prominent forms of binding with cords, cloth, and/or chains, these items encircling specific figural body parts (the belly and back, neck arms). However, such tying can also represent a symbolic interdiction of specific bodily functions: “Neck bindings are supposed to cause aphasia in the adversary; chest bindings attack the breath of life, those around the lower abdomen attack sexual potency and leg bindings lead to paralysis.” This is consistent with option 1 for peg function, which was discussed above.

Tying can also conform to option 3 for peg function. In an earlier section, we noted Suzanne Preston Blier’s assertion that Kongo *minkondi* may be equated with Vodun *kpododonme* (pierced) *bocio* insofar as each nail or peg signifies a particular idea or wish. Tying something onto a bocio can be used in the same way; Blier’s informant Sagbadju explains that “When one ties it, one says what one would like to convey. Ones names the person as one is attaching it.” Similarly, the Congolese *nkisi nkondi* – which is often used to record oaths – requires the attachment of the human’s words to it, although again an actual written record seems unnecessary: “When you go to speak to an nkisi n’kondi, you have to tie everything you say to the nkisi. To do this, you can make a knot (kolo) on one peg (kinko) of iron or wood.” Indeed, one can omit the peg/nail and use suturing alone. “In addition to the variety of piercing techniques [...] there is an alternative and parallel process of using different types of knot to record and address issues through a nkisi.” Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz notes that knotting (*mazito*) was more common than piercing in the religious objects that he encountered in northwestern Angola during 1999-2013. As with iron piercings, there are many different forms of knots. For example, *nkeka kanga* is “a single knot used to seal and close one issue,” while *mazita a tatu* refers to “more than one knot tied in a row along a single cord, used to deal with difficult issues.”

**Medicines**

The medicines in/on a *nkisi* are termed *bilongo*. Their ingredients, which are often chosen for linguistic and symbolic reasons rather than their true pharmacological properties, fall into three classes. These are:

1. earth and minerals such as kaolin (white clay) from graves and other places inhabited by the dead;
2. leaves, seeds, fruits, etc., whose names resemble desired activities, e.g., *luzibu* (a grain) gives the power of opening things (*zibula*); and
(3) items that symbolise the nkisi’s power, such as carnivore teeth, raptor claws, snake-heads, nets and cords.  

Fulfillment of category (1) meant that some minkisi were composed in the cemetery; indeed, many included dirt from the grave of a person (not an ancestor) who had exhibited personal qualities aligned with the character of the nkisi under construction. Similarly, some Ewe bo/vodu require items from the corpse or grave of a “bad death,” although Albert de Surgy claims that such relics are not intended to make the spirit of the dead person act, but rather to bring down a similarly unpleasant fate upon the targeted person. On a lighter note, category (2) has a long history on the African continent; the ancient Egyptians relished puns and word-play and used a similar “phonetic logic” in their mythology and medicine. Similarly, Suzanne Preston Blier records that word-play is important in Vodun in the choice of bocio accessories. In category (3) there is overlap with the accoutrements of bocio, which include animal parts, these “drawing on both physical and metaphoric qualities to enhance the power of a given work.” Accordingly, “animal fur, feathers, teeth, jaws, the skins of snakes or other reptiles” are often included in bocio for reasons of power, e.g. “an eagle’s claw gives strength.” Some ethnologists extend the list of classes by adding a category (4) that consists of non-natural “spirit-admonishing material ideographs ... signs, which told the contained spirit what to do.”

The bilongo ingredients are usually put in a container whose exterior suggests constraint; sometimes they are packed into cloth bags, resulting in bulging packets not unlike those adorning the Ewe power-figures in Figs. 4 & 11. These can serve as non-figural minkisi in their own right. They may also adorn anthropomorphic minkisi; one nkondi is festooned with a dozen or so medicine packs, considered an unusually large number. For such figures, however, “the medicines were usually contained in cavities or protuberances on the head, on the belly, between the legs, on the back [...] The belly [...] is obviously an appropriate place for medicines. They are usually sealed in with resin; the medicine pack often has a mirror on the outside as a divination device [...] and as ] ‘eyes for seeing.’” (Similarly, mirrors on Vodun bocio are associated with divination, “both in ‘seeing’ danger and in ‘turning it back.’”) The small nkisi in Fig. 6 contains white bilongo in a cylindrical projection on its abdomen; the medicine is visible though a circular glass window, a popular alternative to a mirror. Some 20th-century Yombe minkondi, about 70 cm high, have a projecting abdominal barrel or box of this kind but also carry 25-50 small cloth “balloons” – which presumably contain additional bilongo – secured to the statues’ trunks by a single nail through the centre of each ball. The smaller Yombe nkisi nkondi shown in Fig. 9 has large bilongo pouches at the back of the head and forward between its two legs, as well as a cylindrical stomach projection which – once again – ends in circular glass window, although this one is quite difficult to see through as its external surface is mottled/spotted as if chewed material has been spat at it. An almost identically-shaped projection is found on the abdomen of a Fon monkey bocio, which is described as “a type of reliquary. In a small round box on the front of its body, the presence of mica can be glimpsed.” (Mica is a transparent
mineral that occurs in thin sheets and can be used in the same manner as glass.) Similar attachments can sometimes be found in Vodun power-figures; for example, an anthropomorphic Adja altar-figurine from Bénin has a large square-framed mirror covering its abdomen.\textsuperscript{315} As with \textit{minkisi}, many \textit{bocio} have additive materials positioned on the stomach, which for the Fon is the seat of emotion and a common target of witchcraft.\textsuperscript{316}

A \textit{nkisi} is considered to inflict a specific disease and then, when suitably appeased by its \textit{nganga}, is able to permit or effect its cure.\textsuperscript{317} Of course, the patient must pay the \textit{nganga} a fee for performing the appeasement. As mentioned earlier, the same ambivalence is found with Vodun power-objects; for example, among the Ewe, “As a rule ... all (works) ... which can cure a sickness can bring on the same sickness and inversely.”\textsuperscript{318}

\textbf{Broader inter-cultural comparisons}

There are similarities between West African Vodun and the East African/Middle Eastern \textit{zār} cult. Consider first this description of Vodun-derived ceremonies in the New World:

> The Vodou gods or spirits, called \textit{lwa}, are grouped into several “nations,” linked to areas and peoples in Africa. Vodou temples in Haiti, and some in North America, are marked by a sacred center pole. Intricate corn meal drawings called veve are traced on the ground around the pole to summon individual spirits. On an altar, gifts of food and drink are presented. Singing, drumming, and dance invoke particular spirits to become manifest in one of the devotees. The spirit is said to “mount” and “ride” a devotee as one might ride a horse. The movements, the voice, and the words of one so possessed are understood to be those of the spirit. In this way, the \textit{lwa} communicate with human beings.\textsuperscript{319}

Spirit possession by \textit{vodun} in West Africa is described in the precisely same terms by Jacques Kerchache, who writes: “Communication is established with a deity who becomes incarnate in the possessed dancer whom it ‘rides.’”\textsuperscript{320} Others amplify the analogy thus: “During a Voodoo ceremony, a spirit (Loa) will enter (ride) the individual. The person being possessed considers being chosen by the spirit, to ride her/him as a horse into the physical world, to be one of the highest honors that can be bestowed on him/her. Possession is seen as a way the person is integrated into the community or group.”\textsuperscript{321} It is therefore most interesting to see exactly the same equine metaphor being employed to describe spirit possession in the Ethiopian \textit{zār} cult: “In Gondar, the possessed body of the Zar spirit medium is referred to as Yāzar Fārās (literally meaning ‘the horse of Zar.’) In this rhetoric, spirit possession can be understood as the spirit riding the body of the medium.”\textsuperscript{322}

The nails/blades of Kongo \textit{minkisi} are probably reflected in the insertions that adorn some “voodoo dolls” in the African diaspora – a further confounding of the Central and West African traditions. “Kongo traditions such as those of the nkisi nkondi have survived over the centuries and migrated to the Americas and the Caribbean via Afro-Atlantic religious practices such as vodun, Palo Monte, and macumba. In Hollywood these figures have morphed into objects of superstition such as New Orleans voodoo dolls covered with stick pins.”\textsuperscript{323} Suzanne Preston Blier suggests that the effigies of European witchcraft (derived perhaps from the ancient Mediterranean type exemplified by Fig. 12) are also likely to have
contributed to the genre that took root as a source of fear and horror in the popular imagination of white North Americans.\textsuperscript{324}

A number of modern African concepts have suggestive overlaps with ancient Egyptian belief. For example, in Vodun there are “two compositions of the soul, one associated with life, the other with death.”\textsuperscript{325} These are termed se and ye, respectively; dripping the blood of a sacrificed animal onto a bocio transfers the animal’s ye to the statue, thereby empowering it.\textsuperscript{326} The division of labour in the se/ye dual-soul concept is quite reminiscent of the categories in the Egyptian k3/b3 paradigm, where the k3 is a generic “life force” while the b3 is a vehicle for survival of the personality after death.\textsuperscript{327} Moreover, among the Ewe of south Togo, se is characterised as “a celestial genius [...] which is] a modalization of the divine intelligence that has a mission to help individuals to best realize their destiny,”\textsuperscript{328} which makes an interesting convergence with the similarly-named Egyptian entity šy (Shay), the “god personifying destiny [...] who exists both as a concept and as a divinity.”\textsuperscript{329} The Vodun Sakpata (Sagbata), the deity of smallpox who is associated with the leopard and whose colour is red,\textsuperscript{330} is not unlike Sakhmet (Sekhmet), the Egyptian goddess of plague and pestilence, the “mistress of red linen” who is portrayed as a lioness.\textsuperscript{331} In true African fashion, both deities can heal disease as well as cause it.\textsuperscript{332} Despite these and other curious parallels with pharaonic Egypt, some of which were adduced earlier, there is no credible evidence to support the notion that ancient Egyptians migrated south to Nigeria or were the ancestors of the Yoruba.\textsuperscript{333} At best, it is possible that a few ancient Egyptian concepts that reflected durable and widespread African beliefs may have survived into modern times in West or Central Africa. For example, “Ethnographic parallels for the [Egyptian] worship of the royal placenta have been cited amongst the Baganda people of Uganda; the élite of this tribe are Hamitic in origin, and therefore supposedly share elements of a common Hamitic belief-system with the ancient Egyptians.”\textsuperscript{334} Overall, to quote Egyptologist John Baines, “Features comparable with [ancient] Egypt can be seen in the polities of chieftoms known typically from Africa and Polynesia.”\textsuperscript{335} As luck would have it, Baines’ inclusion of Polynesia affords a convenient segue to our next topic.

In Central Africa, a freshly-carved statuette that has not been empowered by a nganga “is not yet an Nkisi, but only the basis for one; the person has bought a piece of sculpture, not an Nkisi. This image or sculpture is called in the Eastern Kongo teke or teki.”\textsuperscript{336} Among the Māori of New Zealand and other Polynesian people, a tiki is a carving in humanoid form. In the past, “Large wooden tiki used to guard the entrance to a Maori pa (fortified place).”\textsuperscript{337} The figure is often that of a stocky man who stands with his legs bent at the knees, his hands cradling a projecting stomach (Fig. 13)\textsuperscript{338} – very much like a nkisi cradling his abdominal bilongo container. Of miniature pendant Māori tiki, which are usually carved from jade or bone, we are told that “sometimes they act as talismen [i.e., talismans] to avert makutu (witchcraft) and accident.”\textsuperscript{339} Presumably the similarity between the Kongo and Polynesian term is just a coincidence, given the geographic remoteness of the Polynesian islands from Africa\textsuperscript{340} – although the numerous similarities in masks and statuary shared by African and Oceanic traditional societies must give one pause for thought.\textsuperscript{341} Another linguistic coincidence attaches to the Fon word Yehwe, a synonym for the Vodun religion and for spirit;
Fig. 13. Stone tikis from the Marquesas Islands, the location where the tiki is thought to have appeared first in Polynesia. Left: Tiki, 15 cm high, 18th century; Louvre 71.1887.50.1. Right: Tiki, ca. 1800-1820; Musée du Quai Branly; photo by Sailko, CC BY 3.0.

“Yehe is ‘everything.’” This term was preferred by European missionaries and was co-opted to refer to the Christian church. While Dana Rush draws attention to the usage, she does not seem to recognise that the affinity for the term probably lies (consciously or otherwise) in its similarity to the Hebrew word for God, YHWH, which is most often vocalised as Yahweh (and thence “Europeanised” to Jehovah).

Moving from word to image, Central and West African power-figures have clearly served as an inspiration to some modern European painters – a phenomenon that can be seen as a continuation and extension of the rapport established by Pablo Picasso with African masks in Les Demoiselles d’Avignon. The most striking examples that I am aware of are to be found within the oeuvre of the Polish surrealist, Zdzisław Beksiński. Beksiński did not title his paintings, but some of the living “fetish figures” in his dystopian – indeed, nightmarish – scenes (e.g., Fig. 14) clearly draw upon the anthropomorphic statues that form the subject of this paper: Vodun bocio and Kongo minkisi. As far as I am aware, this connection has not previously been articulated, at least not in a formal manner. The accessories of Beksiński’s “fetish figures” are overtly Christian, but the interpenetration of African and Christian religious accessories is not without historical precedent. For a start, “The Portuguese
Fig. 14. Surrealist paintings by the Polish artist Zdzisław Beksiński.347 Previous page: Untitled, oil on hardboard, 1975; 87 x 73 cm.348 Above: Untitled, oil on hardboard, 1975; 122 x 98 cm.349 The small figure tethered frontally to the adult female recapitulates “child” accessories in maternity bocio (see main text). Both images © Historical Museum in Sanok, reproduced here by kind permission.
explorers called the rituals, including the [...] objects [...] which they encountered in Africa, *feitiço*. In Portugal, this word was used to refer to amulets and relics of the saints. The English word fetish comes directly from *feitiço*. Moreover, as was remarked earlier in this paper, Christian symbols such as crucifixes have been appropriated effortlessly by Vodun and assimilated into its own ever-expanding visual vocabulary. Indeed, in the New World – as mentioned earlier – the Vodun and Kongo religions have both become syncretised to some extent with Roman Catholicism.

**Conclusion**

The comparison undertaken in this paper has found much in common between the Vodun *bocio/bo/vodu* and the Kongo *nkisi nkondi*. It is clear that – while far from identical – these two types of anthropomorphic African power-figure share notable similarities in purpose, construction and operation. For example, both are inhabited by a spiritual agency and both types of figurine are linked with death, one being identified as a corpse and the other as a grave. Both act as protectors, guarding their owners’ and/or clients’ safety and wellbeing. The indwelling spiritual agency functions ambivalently, inflicting a particular disease as well as relieving it, and the figurine too is regarded with ambivalence, insofar as it represents both avenger and victim. Both types of statue are usually festooned with piercings, bindings and/or accessories, including medicine bags/boxes and animal parts, to the extent that their accretion-laden surfaces are both disturbing and confronting. Both types of figurine are fed animal – often chicken – sacrifices, whose blood and feathers form an unnerving sacrificial patina, and both types are activated or calmed by having heating or cooling materials transferred to them by spitting or libation. Padlocks feature in both Vodun and Kongo power-figures, but are more common in the former. Closing a lock can have the same meaning as inserting a peg into a *bocio* or hammering a nail into a *nkondi*, namely locking or rousing the indwelling spirit to a specific mission; tying or knotting can achieve the same end.

At a more detailed level, however, conflicting information abounds, and much remains ambiguous and uncertain. As Dana Rush declares, “Vodun and its spirits defy conventional categorization.” Indeed, everything is questionable in Vodun. That which appears to be something may be something else. [...] There are always many answers [...] The infinite variability in the world of appearances empowers Vodun space. Correspondingly, one is never quite sure of what anything is due precisely to the inherent potential in all things. [...] The only thing that is certain within Vodun epistemologies is that nothing is certain.”

Indeed, interpretive problems are especially acute with Vodun power-objects, since part of their essence is deception.

Suzanne Preston Blier says of *bocio* constituents that “each of these additive elements is part of a unique visual vocabulary that is only known to the maker and user [...] such that] each work is unique, and ultimately ‘unknowable’ to those outside.” Blier came to believe that “the works themselves are not meant ever to be ‘understood’ in a standard sense, but instead remain enigmatic and obscure to local residents and foreign observers alike.” This echoes Albert de Surgy’s warning about Ewe power-objects that “No one can therefore, by a scientific method, become aware of the occult virtues of bodies, especially those of *ama* used
to make spiritual medicines and fetishes. He must normally acquire this knowledge from someone who already possesses it."\textsuperscript{357} The situation is the same in Kongo religion. \textquote{Minkisi reveal an endless variety of interpretations within a certain framework of ideas [...] such that no definitive reading of an undocumented \textit{nkisi} can be made. As the BaKongo say, you would have to be initiated to the \textit{nkisi} in question.}\textsuperscript{358}

But Duncan Caldwell, speaking of a BaKongo \textit{nkisi nkondi} from the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, finds that even outsiders can achieve some level of appreciation of the symbolism employed in the construction and adornment of such power-figures. His analysis of this power-figure uncovered its hidden features, which turn the statue\textquotesingle s assemblage into a web of entrapping and empowering metaphors. [...] Instead of flaunting these intriguing aspects, the \textit{nganga} deliberately embedded them deeply and intimately at the core of the metaphor-laden trap, so that they would effectively draw someone\textquotesingle s spirit into the \textit{nkondi}. [...] Furthermore, the discovery of these hidden features – such as the horn palisade, wooden antelope head, canine behind the neck, \textit{mpu} under the helmet, necklace of padlocks, canister under the buttocks, and cross composed of circles and semicircles – is likely to lead to similarly concealed features on other \textit{minkondi}, in which case the analysis will have proven itself like a theory with predictive powers.\textsuperscript{359}

For both Vodun and Kongo power-figures, even greater uncertainty attends the procedural details of their manipulation. The variety of conflicting interpretations provided for the ritual operation of pegs and padlocks on Vodun power-figures is a good example of this. It is possible that some interpretations are erroneous, the result of misunderstandings between African informants and Western interlocutors. But it seems more probable that the wide spectrum of interpretations reflects a genuine diversity in praxis; for example, the inconsistencies may well reflect regional variations in protocol and/or the existence of different operating procedures for different \textit{bocio} within the same cultural group.

Finally, it is worth noting that there is a commemorative dimension to large Kongo \textit{minkondi} that does not seem to be matched by Vodun \textit{bocio/bo/vodu}. A major \textit{nkisi nkondi} carries in its body the physical records of its community\textquotesingle s oaths, treaties and pleas for retributive justice. As early as 1886, Van de Velde recognized that such a power-figure was not an idol but \textquote{a history book or communal archive.}\textsuperscript{360} Accordingly, \textquote{\textit{Minkondi} of such complexity are not only aesthetic triumphs because of their tension between order and disorder and the richness of their conceptions, but unintended metaphors for the work of historians, who deepen our understanding of the past.}\textsuperscript{361} It seems that at least some Vodun power-figures – such as the Ewe \textit{bo/vodu} of Figs. 4 & 11 – do commemorate the history of their clientele by retaining the padlocks and attached messages of requests that they have serviced. However, Vodun power-figures of this kind do not seem to have existed on a community scale, nor would they have been used to record oaths or treaties. This realisation offers a further dimension to claims (mentioned earlier) that the typical \textit{nkondi} is considered to speak whereas the typical \textit{bocio} remains silent; an important \textit{nkondi} was, in a real sense, the voice of history for the population that it served. Accordingly, despite the many similarities between West and Central African power-figures, playing the role of \textquote{collective memory} to a community seems to have been a unique prerogative of the Congo\textquotesingle s large-scale \textit{minkondi}. 
1 In this paper, “Guinea Coast” alludes to the historic Guinea Coast, i.e. the region that provides the northern boundary to the Gulf of Guinea, especially the coast and hinterland of the Bight of Bénin.

2 The modern Republic of Benin (République du Bénin), not the city of Benin in Nigeria.

3 I use the term “fetish” reluctantly; MacGaffey (1993), 32; Hackett (1996), 141-142.

4 Formerly named Zaïre.

5 MacGaffey (1993), 23 (Fig).


8 Douaoui (2011).


10 Neyt & Dubois (2013).


12 Tollebeek (2010).


14 Augé (2011), 211.


16 Rush (2013), 77.


18 Kerchache (2011a), 19.


21 Ono (2011), 59-61, 67-68, 128, 136, 142-145, 147, 150-151, 156-157, 159-160, 167, 171, 177, 183, 185-187; Djimassé (2011), 203 (Fig. 2); Blier (2011), 199.


27 QCC Art Gallery, 77.


31 Wikimedia Commons – Benin, Fon, Statuette Bocio, online at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bénin, fon, statuette bocio, xx sec. 01.JPG.

Dan is linked with rainbows; Augé (2011), 215. Polychrome fabric – “described locally as any multicoloured material characterised by stripes, spots or patterns in a combination of red, white black or other colours” [Blier (1995), 269] is much in evidence on this bocio. It “symbolizes the plenitude of the vital dynamism and its manifestation because it recalls the rainbow.” As such it is closely associated with the deity Ayidowedo, the rainbow serpent […] ‘the abundance of colours (of the rainbow) is the symbol of abundance of riches which this serpent can bring.’ Because of this wealth association, polychrome is a frequently requested color in bocio cloth coverings.” [Blier (1995), 269]. Ayidowedo is a deity identified or syncretised with Dan [Rush (2013) 62-64], often envisaged as his consort [Brown (2009)].

Dan is the dispenser of the wealth of the world, which may relate to the attachment of cowries (currency) by knotted cords on the chest of the bocio; Blier (1995), 200. On cowries as currency, see Blier (1995), 254-255; on cowries to beautify Vodun bocio, see Blier (1995), 258.


The spark-plug may also relate to the belief that Dan “serves Hevioso by guiding his lightning down to earth;” Augé (2011), 215.


Blier (1995), 221.


Indeed, it seems that Christian missionary activity in Africa had already precipitated syncretism even there; Volavkova (1972), 55.


Dana Rush expected that the repatriated Brazilians would have introduced Santeria-derived practices into local Vodun or Yoruba traditions in Africa. She writes: “Within West African Brazilian culture, I anticipated finding a mélange of African-Brazilian religious art and expression returned to Bénin and reintegrated into local traditions. I found nothing of the sort. Brazilians I spoke with were either Catholic or Muslim.” Rush (2013), 1.

Rush (2013), 11.

Rush (2013), 4-11.

Augé (2011).

Harper (2012), 6; Forte (2009), 430 fn.3.

Augé (2011), 213.

Augé (2011), 214-215. Compare the above-mentioned division of Kongo minkisi into those of “the above” (sky) and those of “the below” (earth/sea).

For vodunsi, see Kerchache (2011a), 22; for bokono, see Vilaire (2011), 219.

Montgomery (2016).


MacGaffey (1993), 27; Martínez-Ruiz (2013), 30-33.

PHILTAR – Overview Of World Religions – Kongo Religion, online at http://www.philtar.ac.uk/encyclopedia/sub/kongo.html; Martínez-Ruiz (2013), 30-33. That the world of the dead is below, see MacGaffey (1993), 50.


Martínez-Ruiz (2013), 159.

For Mangaaka, see MacGaffey (1993), 33.

Wikimedia Commons – WLA Metmuseum Kongo Power Figure Nkisi Nkondi, online at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:WLA_metmuseum_Kongo_Power_Figure_Nkisi_NKondi_2.jpg.


Wikimedia Commons – British Museum Room 25 Nkisi Kongo people 19th century, online at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:British_Museum_Room_25_Nkisi_Kongo_people_19th_century_17022019_4979.jpg (left panel) and


MacGaffey (1993), 63; Volavkova (1972), 54.

De Surgy (1994), 221.


Volavkova (1972), 58-59.

Perkinson (2007), 368. No doubt the white colour of bones underpins, or at least reinforces, the association.

MacGaffey (2001), 145. White also symbolises purity and moral correctness; Walker (2009), 206 (#72).

Kerchache (2011a), 22.

MacGaffey (1993), 49. He observes that such initiation was often undertaken in response to an illness associated with that *nkisi*.

MacGaffey (1993), 50.

Blier (1995), 158.


Grabill (2019).

Accordingly, one cannot exclude the possibility that the entirety of Afro-Caribbean graphic writing originated primarily or solely in the Kongo system.


LinkedIn – Slideshare – Mario Hurtado – 108 Firmas de Palo Monte, online at https://es.slideshare.net/mariohurtado31/89-108-firmas-de-palo-monte.

Martínez-Ruiz (2000), 102-103 & Fig. 55.

Wikimedia Commons – Veve Brigitte, online at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:VeveBrigitte.png.

Wahlman (2004), 925.


Martínez-Ruiz (2013), 192.


Compare Tables 5 & 10 in Martínez-Ruiz (2013).


Rosenthal (1998), 264-265. *Goro* means “kola nut” and the basic shrine consists of seven of these nuts; Rush (2013), 80. Gorovodu is in fact the focus of Judy Rosenthal’s book *Possession, Extasy, and Law in Ewe Voodoo* [Rosenthal (1998)]. Gorovodu has many overlaps with Tchamba Vodun, which also venerates the spirits of slaves from the north, and for which kola nuts are also significant; Rush (2013), 111-124. Rosenthal describes the Mama Tchamba cult as “a cousin to Gorovodu worship;” Rosenthal (1998), 251 (note 3).


130 Volavkova (1972). For a major nkisi the ritualist would be a nganga, but for small and cheap ones a bilongo merchant might have sufficient knowledge; MacGaffey (1993), 49.
131 MacGaffey (1993), 61.
132 Martinez-Ruiz (2013), 150.
133 MacGaffey (1993), 49.
134 MacGaffey (1993), 27; Tollebeek (2010), 71.
135 In Haitian Voodoo, cloth dolls – the Caribbean successors to bocio – are often brought to the cemetery to activate their power; Blier (1995), 50 & Fig. 29.
136 MacGaffey (1993), 32 (Fig. 11) & p.35-39.
137 “J. H. Weeks mentioned that there may have been simultaneously in use 1000 charms and fetishes of a particular name;” Volavkova (1972), 58.
139 Blier (1995), 14, 20, 95-132, 276 & 348; Henderson (2014), 63. There much slippage and overlap between the categories of “owner” and “client.” A person who buys a power-figure from a ritualist (or has him activate a sculpture bought for the purpose) is a client of the ritualist, but the client goes on to becomes the owner of the fetish. Alternatively, a client may visit a ritualist who consults or manipulates one of his (i.e., the ritualist’s) power-figures on the client’s behalf. In addition, a ritualist will routinely operate some of his own fetishes on his own behalf, e.g. for self-protection against witchcraft, in which case the owner, client and ritualist are one and the same person. My policy in respect of this vexed issue has been to preserve the term used (or implied) in the source being cited.
141 Blier (2011), 196.
142 MacGaffey (2000), 105-106.
144 MacGaffey (2000), 106.
146 Blier (1995), 74-82.
147 Tollebeek (2010), 22 & 112 (no. 41).
148 Tollebeek (2010), 82 (no. 9); Leyten (2015), 52.
150 Martinez-Ruiz (2013), 165-166; Martinez-Ruiz (2000), 105; Rand African Art – Nkondi or Nkonde Nail Fetish – Large Nailed Statues, the “Nkonde” or “Nkondi,” online at http://www.randafricanart.com/Bakongo_Nkondi_figure.html.
151 MacGaffey (1993), 90.
152 On the circular open mouth of Fig. 11, see comment in the figure legend (and footnote thereto).
155 One cannot be certain that the bottom parts of spiked bocio have not been sawn off for ease of display by Western collectors, but the good condition of this bocio suggests that it has always enjoyed an indoor location.
157 Kerchache (2011b), 34.
158 Volavkova (1972), 58.
159 Volavkova (1972), 58.
160 MacGaffey (1993), 87.
161 Leyten (2015), 58.
162 E.g., Nyehaus (2012), 72-73.
163 E.g., Nyehaus (2012), 74-79.
165 Schoffel (2014), 24-25.
166 MacGaffey (1993), 36-37.
167 MacGaffey (1993), 37.
43
For a photo of such statues in the home of a Vodun priest in Ouidah, Bénin, see Flickr – Linda De Volder – The Home of a Fetish Priest, online at https://www.flickr.com/photos/lindadevolder/32689351270/in/photostream/.


Nyehaus (2012), 86.

Shikra – Bocio (Ewe?, Togo), online at https://www.shikra.de/product_info.php?products_id=462&cPath=2_159_204&imgID=4&language=en&XTCsid=k7cm1b9va075ev1vs9v53c2. For other uses of laundry blue by Ewe ritualists, see (for example) de Surgy p.157, 200, 250-255, 256-257 & 372-376.


Hamill Gallery – Bakongo Style Fetishes Archives, Congo, online at https://www.hamillgallery.com/BAKONGO/BakongoFetishes/BakongoFetishes.html.

For example, a mid-20th century Yombe nkondi from the Albert H. Chambon collection offered for sale by Galerie ArtsPremiers (Braine-le-Comte, Belgium) bears traces of blue on its front, in a manner consistent with ritual addition; Ebay – Galerie ArtsPremiers BE – Statue Nkisi Nkonde YOMBE Fetish Fétiche CONGO (RDC/DRC), Ebay item number 163907557060, online at https://www.ebay.com/itm/Statue-Nkisi-Nkonde-YOMBE-fetish-fetiche-CONGO-RDC-DRC/163907557060?hash=item2629a6d6c4:g:B0EAAOSwSgFdptdv; accessed 26 Oct 2019.


Cited by Caldwell (2018), 271.

Caldwell (2018), 271; Volavkova (1972), 56.


The issue of time-depth was considered more broadly in the previous section.

Kerchache (2011c), 43.


Blier (2011), 195


Blier (1995), 289. The complexity of the situation is evident from other instances cited by Blier, such as Sagbadju’s assertion that a figure with a peg in its chest helps to calm one and brings well-being; Blier (1995), 292.


De Surgy (1994), 55.

De Surgy (1994), 258.


Djimassé (2011), 203-204.

Djimassé (2011), 205.


Nyehaus (2012), 136.

De Surgy (1994), 256.

De Surgy (1994), 257.

De Surgy (1994), 128.

The sacrificial patina has infused the tightly folded papers and caused them to set hard, precluding their opening for inspection.


Originally sold by Le Fevre Gallery in Brussels. Recently resold by OldPaleos, Ebay – OldPaleos – An Old Vili Magical Figure, online at https://www.ebay.com/itm/AN-OLD-VILI-MAGICAL-FIGURE-R-D-CONGO/323657011387?_trkparms=aid%3D222007%26algo%3DSIM.MBE%26ao%3D2%26asc%3D2013100313420%26meid%3D9ee7214675f6408428eebfee2d98%26pid%3D100005%26rk%3D3%26rkt%3D10%26sd%3D32366449598%26itm%3D323657011387&_trksid=p2047675.c100005.m1851, accessed Jan 2019.

Caldwell (2018), 275 & Fig. 7 legend.


The two items were acquired in quick succession from the same dealer, and both display a tightly-folded paper (presumably bearing a name or request) tied securely to the shackles/hoop of each padlock.

For a nearly identical situation in a Fon bocio couple where the circular holes accept tethered pegs, see Aguttes (2014), 39 (lot 84). For two examples of bocio smoking cigarettes (in the home of a Vodun priest in Ouidah, Benin), see Flickr – Linda De Volder – The Home of a Fetish Priest, online at https://www.flickr.com/photos/lindadevolder/32256659383/in/photostream/ and https://www.flickr.com/photos/lindadevolder/32945070261/in/photostream/. Another photo in the same sequence seems to show a third bocio (at left of image) with a similar “cigarette hole” to that in Fig. 11, but without any cigarette present; Flickr – Linda De Volder – The Home of a Fetish Priest, https://www.flickr.com/photos/lindadevolder/32689351270/in/photostream/.

Of the components making up a fetish, we are told “Although they must find some echo in the minds of their users, it would be an exaggeration to believe that they were chosen by applying spontaneously or deliberately a symbolic code according to which they would be explicable;” de Surgy (1994), 54.


Martínez-Ruiz (2013), 173 (Fig. 122).

Ono (2011), 136 & 185; Djimassé (2011), 203 (Fig. 2); Vilaire (2011), 225 (Fig. 15).

Colon (2018).

The term kimpungula, given earlier in the main text as meaning “spirits,” is the plural of mpungu; Association of Independent Readers & Rootworkers (2014).

Martínez-Ruiz (2013), 175.


Martínez-Ruiz (2013), 176.


Wikimedia Commons – Voodoo Doll Louvre E27145b, online at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Voodoo_doll_Louvre_E27145b.jpg.

PGM IV, lines 296-329; translated by Betz (1992), 44.

Gager (1992), 97-100 (no. 28).

Frazer (1925), 11-47.

Tambiah (1985), 60-86.

Caldwell (2018), 275.


Seattle Art Museum – Collections – Standing Figure (Nkondi) & The Crucifixion: European and Kongo Versions, online at http://art.seattleartmuseum.org/objects/9265/standing-figure-nkondi;iessessionid=5CF4D53B470E26AB03C21EC919D8150D.

Seattle Art Museum – Collections – Standing Figure (Nkondi) & The Crucifixion: European and Kongo Versions, online at http://art.seattleartmuseum.org/objects/9265/standing-figure-nkondi;iessessionid=5CF4D53B470E26AB03C21EC919D8150D.

Volavkova (1972), 55-56.


MacGaffey (1993), 44.

MacGaffey (1993), 76-79, 84 & 101 incl. Fig. 64a.b.

MacGaffey (1993), 27 & 95.

MacGaffey (1993), 27 & 80.

MacGaffey (1993), 79-80.
This identification of the *nkisi* as representing the intended target/victim contrasts with the common identification of Vodun *bocio* as representing the owner/client, i.e. the person who is protected; Blier (1995), 97. However, *bocio* sometimes depict the owner’s/client’s enemy or the *vodun* that empowers the statue; Blier (1995), 97.


MacGaffey (1993), 35.

Harris (2015).


Blier (1995), 244 & 293.


Blier (1995), 82.

Martínez-Ruiz (2013), 168.

Martínez-Ruiz (2013), 168 & 171.

MacGaffey (1993), 61-62.

MacGaffey (1993), 62 & 98.

MacGaffey (1993), 39 & 68.

MacGaffey (1993), 61.

“Someone who perhaps drowned, was burned, or was killed in an accident;” Nyehaus (2012), 136.

De Surgy (1994), 55 (incl. fn.1).

“Every Egyptian wordplay [...] reveals a deep affinity between the entities that are associated, showing the ‘harmony’ of the world which is reflected in language.” Hornung (1982), 67 & 149-150. Similarly, Hellum (2015).


Kerchache (2011a), 23.

Martínez-Ruiz (2013), 162.

MacGaffey (1993), 63.

MacGaffey (1993), 63 (Fig. 43).

MacGaffey (1993), 99-101 incl. Fig. 64a,b.


As in, e.g., MacGaffey (1993), 66 (Fig. 45).

One example is a *nkondi* from the Albert H. Chambon collection offered for sale by Galerie Artspremiers (Braine-le-Comte, Belgium): Ebay – Galerie ArtsPremiers BE – Statue Nkisi Nkonde Yombe Fetish Fétiche Congo (RDC/DRC), eBay item number 163907557060, online at https://www.ebay.com/itm/Statue-Nkisi-Nkonde-YOMBE-fetish-fetiche-CONGO-RDC-DRC/163907557060?hash=item2629a6d6c4:g:B0EAAOSwSgFdptdv. For another example, this time on the US market: Ebay – rya_stomm – Yombe Power Figure Nkisi Nkonde Fetish Kongo Africa 28 inches, eBay item number 264509322229, online at https://www.ebay.com/itm/264509322229?ul_noapp=true.

This surface treatment was discussed earlier in the section titled *Pegs and padlocks*.

Kerchache (2011c), 42; Ono (2011), 131-133 & 185.

Schoffel (2014), 16, central figure; close-up on p.22-23. “This *bochio* is placed near a sick individual to repel external influences. The mirror serves to identify the evil-doer who is the cause of his illness.”


MacGaffey (1993), 68.

323 Harris (2015).
328 Volavkova (1972).
329 Riley (1994), 58. For a photograph, see Wikimedia Commons – Tiki 1905, online at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tiki1905.jpg
331 Riley (1994), 57.
332 Michael Gunn (Senior Curator, Pacific Art, National Gallery of Australia) writes: “There is good evidence to indicate that the tiki concept came to Polynesia from South America, either directly to the Marquesas Islands by Polynesian navigators, who also made the return journey, or by Incas who sailed to Rapa Nui Easter Island by raft;” Gunn (2014).
333 Traditional and tribal artefacts from the two regions are of course commonly offered for sale alongside one another, e.g. Sotheby’s auction house has a single Department of African and Oceanic Art (Sotheby’s – African & Oceanic Art, online at https://www.sothebys.com/en/departments/african-oceanic-art).
334 Riley (1994), 57.
336 See Introduction.
337 Rush (2013), 52-56. Albert De Surgys classifies Ewe yève-vodu or yève-tro as vodu “not recruiting their followers according to their family affiliation, lineage, clan or even ethnicity, but according to their temperaments, their aptitudes, or their personalities;” de Surgys (1994), 19-20.
338 Rush (2013), 52-56.
Bibliography

URLs for webpage-only sources are cited in full in the endnotes; they are not repeated here. All URLs were accessed 26 Oct, 2019, unless otherwise stated.


Berzock, Kathleen Bickford (2003) “Power Figure (Nkisi Nkondi),” *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 29 (2) [Notable Quotations at The Art Institute of Chicago], 14-15 & 94.


