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FROM THE OLD TO THE NEW WORLD: THE TRANSFORMATION OF KONGO

MINKISI IN AFRICAN AMERICAN ART

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

FROM THE OLD TO THE NEW WORLD: THE TRANSFORMATION OF KONGO MINKISI IN AFRICAN AMERICAN ART

By Mary Margaret McCurnin, BFA

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2010

Major Director: Babatunde Lawal
Professor of Art History

Minkisi (sing. *nkisi*) were sacred objects that housed ancestral spirits and were used for divination, healing and social justice by the Kongo people of Central Africa. When the Kongo were brought as slaves to the New World, they contributed significantly to the development of African American artistic and spiritual culture. In the Caribbean, aspects of *minkisi* have been retained in the creolized spiritual beliefs of Haitian *Vodou*, Cuban *Palo Monte Mayombe* and Brazilian *Candomble*. In North America, evidence of Kongo influence is apparent in examples of folk art and culture, including quilts, *mojo* hands, Afro-Carolinian face vessels, memory jugs and burial sites. In the twentieth and twenty-

first centuries, artists appear to have recontextualized elements of *minkisi* within their work, among these James “Son Ford” Thomas, James Van Der Zee, Betye and Alison Saar, Willie Cole and Renee Stout, creating a link between the Kongo past and the American present.

INTRODUCTION

Minkisi (sing. *nkisi*) are sacred objects or charms frequently enclosed in an image and then manipulated for various purposes such as divination, diagnosis, healing, criminal investigation, law-enforcement or homeland security among the Kongo¹ people of Central Africa. In the course of use, a typical image accumulates an assortment of organic substances on its body to signify its powers. Until recently, Westerners misunderstood and maligned these sacred images (*minkisi*) not only because of their association with occult powers, but also because of the mysterious substances attached to them. This misunderstanding is evident in much of the past scholarship on *minkisi*, which identified them as “primitive.” It was not until the turn of the twentieth century, when African art influenced European Modernism, did anthropologists and art historians begin to appreciate *minkisi* in terms of their form, content, context and cultural significance. Subsequent field studies and iconographic analyses have revealed the rich vision of the Kongo universe that the *minkisi* reflect.

¹ The Kongo are members of Bantu ethnic group. Although some publications identify them as BaKongo (the prefix “*ba*” means “people”), most scholars use the term “Kongo” to refer to the people and their culture. The term “Kongo” is used throughout this thesis in the same way, and to differentiate the ancient kingdom from present-day Democratic Republic of Congo in which it is located.

In the past, these objects played important cultural functions in Kongo culture, being used to maintain the social and spiritual well being of a given community. They were expected to protect the general public from dangerous forces—both environmental and human—and to punish criminals and other anti-social elements. The invisible spirits mediated by the *minkisi* are perceived to be benevolent and malevolent at the same time—which explains their ambivalent aspects. Some look calm and approachable; others are fearsome, while at the same time hinting at their capacity to ward off evil.

Minkisi are more commonly known by the somewhat offensive and simplistic term “fetish,” a phrase coined by European collectors, who did not understand the belief system associated with the images and their ritual functions. Without realizing the metaphorical significance of a typical *nkisi* as an icon, linking the visible with the invisible world, some Westerners mistook the veneration of the spiritual power within the sculpture as the worship of the object itself. To the early Christian missionaries who lived among the Kongo, *minkisi* were nothing but “idols;” hence they destroyed them *en masse*, hoping that their action would facilitate the conversion process. The resulting iconoclasm explains why many of the surviving *minkisi* among the Kongo are only a few decades old.² The older pieces are now in private collections and public museums in Europe and America.³

² Wyatt MacGaffey, Michael D. Harris, Sylvia H. Williams, and David C. Driskell, *Astonishment and Power*, ed. Dean Trackman (Washington D.C.: The Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 29.

³ *Ibid.*, 27.

As a result of the transatlantic slave trade between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, thousands of captives from Central Africa were forcibly transplanted to the Americas where the Kongo Diaspora was able to reestablish many aspects of its cultural heritage (though mostly in creolized forms) in the Caribbean, United States and South America. While drawing attention to Kongo influences elsewhere in the Americas, this thesis focuses on the retention, transformation and recontextualization of *minkisi* tradition in African American visual culture and spirituality in the United States.

While a great deal has been written on African retentions in the Americas, most of the publications emphasize the cultural and artistic influences of the Yoruba and Fon kingdoms of West Africa. The fact that many Kongo elements survived the ravages of the *Middle Passage* is often overlooked-- a phenomenon encouraged by the secrecy surrounding the practice of Kongo traditions in some areas. Moreover, there is a tendency in the literature to relate identifiable Kongo elements to a more recent quest for a black aesthetic sparked by the Harlem Renaissance and later reinvigorated by the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Because of the direct influence of *minkisi* on formally trained black artists such as Betye Saar, Allison Saar, Renee Stout and Houston Conwill (among others), their works have become the most popular examples of Kongo influence in African American visual culture and spirituality. While recognizing this recent quest, I will draw attention to earlier and Kongo-related *minkisi* impulses in African American self-taught/folk art, especially in graveyard decorations, memory jars, Afro-Carolinian face vessels, hoodoo *mojo* hands and quilts. In addition, I will address kindred elements in the work of photographer James Van Der Zee (1886-1983), sculptor James

“Son” Thomas (1926-1993), as well as mixed-media artists such as Betye Saar (b.1926), Alison Saar (b. 1956), Willie Cole (b. 1955) and Renee Stout (b. 1958). In short, by employing a diachronic approach, this thesis will trace the roots of *minkisi*-related elements in African American visual culture back to the first Kongo captives of the antebellum in an attempt to establish an historical continuum between the African past and the African American present.

Literature Review

As noted earlier, most of the publications on African carryovers in the Americas focus mainly on West African (especially Yoruba) influence. The 1981 exhibition at the National Gallery of Art (Washington, DC) entitled *The Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds*, organized by Robert F. Thompson and Joseph Cornet, marked a turning point in the study of African influence on African American art. In the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, Robert Thompson provides striking evidence of Kongo carryovers in African American folk art dating back to the antebellum period. He has since expanded on these carryovers in his book *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, (1983), which draws attention to the survival of Angola-Kongo *minkisi* elements in Brazil, the U.S.A. and Caribbean. Thompson also has a chapter entitled “Kongo Influences on African American Artistic Culture” in the book *Africanisms in American Culture* edited by Joseph Holloway (1990). Equally relevant here is the exhibition catalogue *Black Art, Ancestral Legacy: The African Impulse in African-American Art* (1989). It contains various highly informative essays, some of which

mention the impact of *minkisi* on both self-taught and formally trained African American artists.

Studies by African authors (particularly members of the Kongo culture) do much to counteract the colonial bias often encountered in early ethnographic literature on the peoples of Central Africa, especially the Kongo. In his book *Death and the Invisible Powers* (1993), Simon Bockie provides an overview of the social geography and religious beliefs of twentieth century Kongo communities from the perspective of an insider, challenging previous misconceptions. Early accounts by African authors can also be found in Wyatt MacGaffey and Michael Harris' *Astonishment and Power* (1993). The book is significant for its rare information on the construction and use of *nkisi* in Africa before and during the colonial era of Kongo history. In addition, it examines the influence of *minkisi* on the artwork of contemporary African American artist Renee Stout.

American social anthropologist Wyatt MacGaffey (1986, 1991) is renowned for many of his publications on the history and culture of the Kongo. Most of his information derived from field interviews with Kongo individuals and from data collected by Swedish missionary Karl Laman in the early twentieth century. By and large, these publications offer ample data to enable the art historian not only to relate form and meaning in *nkisi*, but also compare and contrast the Kongo originals with the forms they have inspired (directly and indirectly) in the African American art.

Chapter Summary

The thesis is divided into four chapters. The first introduces the reader to the history of

the Kongo people, their location, culture and cosmology as well as beliefs about life, death and afterlife. It will then focus on the context, construction, forms, content, functions, types and aesthetics of *minkisi*. The second chapter deals with the re-establishment of Kongo *minkisi* and related spiritual practices in the Americas in consequence of the transatlantic slave trade. It examines the factors that contributed to or militated against the preservation of African and Kongo elements in the Americas in general and the United States, in particular. In addition, it identifies Kongo influence in the formation of Afro-Brazilian religion of *Candomble*, the Afro-Caribbean religions of *Palo Monte* (Cuba) and *Vodou* (Haitian), among others.

The third chapter traces the manifestations Kongo *minkisi* influences in African American folk art, most especially in quilts, pottery, memory jars, charms and burial practices. Besides, it will examine the work of self-taught artist James "Son" Thomas (1926-1993) to reveal elements reminiscent of Kongo *minkisi*.

Finally, in Chapter four, I will draw attention to the factors that first discouraged academically trained African American artists from identifying with their African artistic legacy until the beginning of the twentieth century when its influence on Modern art obliged them to reconnect with it, especially during the Harlem Renaissance. Although there is no evidence yet, that the Harlem Renaissance photographer James Van Der Zee (1886-1983) was directly influenced by Kongo *minkisi*, all the same, the parallels between some of his mortuary photographs and the latter are so strong that they cannot be ignored. Hence I have drawn attention to some of the parallels in the hope that further research by other scholars will throw more light on the issue.

The last chapter will focus mainly on four academically trained African American artists (Betye and Alison Saar, Willie Cole and Renee Stout) who reference Kongo *minkisi* directly in their works. The Conclusion summarizes my findings.

CHAPTER 1: THE KONGO KINGDOM: *MINKISI* IN AFRICA

Founded in the late twelfth century by the legendary King Ntinu Lukemi, the Kongo kingdom was formerly located⁴ at the mouth of the Congo River, extending across present-day Gabon, Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo (Figure 1). King Lukemi selected the area apparently because of its rich natural resources such as copper, as well as its strategic location that enabled his government to play a prominent role in the transatlantic slave trade between Europe and sub-Saharan Africa from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries.⁵

The capital city of the kingdom Mbanza Kongo (later renamed San Salvador by the Portuguese) was situated on a high plateau, which not only provided natural fortifications, but also allowed the king to monitor and tax local and foreign merchants. When the Portuguese explorers arrived at Mbanza Kongo in the late fifteenth century, they documented a well-planned city with a population of somewhere between 60,000 and

⁴ Anita Jacobson-Widding designates the Kongo people as living between the latitudes of 3° and 6° South and west of longitude 15° East. Anita Jacobson Widding, *Red--White--Black as a Mode of Thought: A Study of Triadic Classification by Colours in the Ritual Symbolism and Cognitive Thought of the Peoples of the Lower Congo* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1979), 16.

⁵ Anne Hilton, *Kingdom of Kongo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, 1985), 32-3.

100,000 people and a palatial royal compound roughly a mile and a half in diameter.⁶ From his court, the king, with the help of appointed governors, exercised political authority over eight provinces with more than a million citizens,⁷ a kingdom that the Portuguese and other Europeans considered “the most powerful . . . in the whole Gulf of Guinea region.”⁸ However, the king and his court, the *Mwissikongo*, did not wield absolute powers. They shared their authority with special religious groups (*kitome*) who controlled sacred sites,⁹ as well as certain large familial clans (*kanda*) who exercised considerable political power due to the wealth they acquired from the copper resources in their ancestral lands and from the taxes they collected from traders who passed through their territories.¹⁰ Nonetheless, the *kitome* and *kanda* clans were under the jurisdiction of the king, though still fairly independent.¹¹ By and large, the king derived much his power from the revenue produced by these special groups, as well as from the spiritual legitimacy bestowed on him by the

⁶ *Ibid.*, 44-5.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁸ John Kelly Thornton, *Kingdom of Kongo: Civil War and Transition, 1641-1718* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), xiv.

⁹ Hilton, *Kingdom of Kongo*, 24.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹¹ This relationship was much like that of the state and federal governments of the United States.

nganga priests who presided over certain state rituals. Ancient kings of the Kongo ruled not only their own people, but also closely related cultural groups such as the Bembe, Woyo, Villi, Bwembe, Yombe and Sundi.¹²

Cosmology

Ancient Kongo religion focuses on a belief in two realms of existence, the invisible and the visible. The former, the spirit world, is the domain of the Creator God *Nzambi* as well as the oldest class of ancestors (*bakulu*) and a number of spirits (*minkisi* and *bsimbi*)—all of whom exercise great influence on the visible realm inhabited by living creatures such as humans, plants and animals. According to Wyatt MacGaffey (one of the foremost scholars of Kongo culture and religion), “the land of the dead simply inverts that of the living.”¹³ In effect, the invisible land of the dead is identical and yet opposite to that of the living--close and yet far away; scenic and yet surreal, but without the pain and disorder associated with the visible world.¹⁴ Simply put, Kongo cosmology visualizes the

¹² Evan M. Maurer, Niangi Batulukisi, and Minneapolis Institute of Arts Staff, *Spirits Embodied: Art of the Congo: Selections from the Helmut F. Stern Collection* (Annapolis: Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1999), 56.

¹³ Wyatt MacGaffey, *Religion and Society in Central Africa: The BaKongo of Lower Zaire* (New York: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 48.

¹⁴ The Kongo conceptualization of the land of the dead appears to differ depending on region, time period, level of initiation and person belief. In the following passage, the author has attempted to create an acceptable generalization, which is a blend of overarching beliefs and the author’s personal understanding.

universe as an interface of the material and immaterial dimensions of existence, the time-bound and timeless connected by the movement of the sun and at the same time separated by an immense sea known as *Kalunga*. As a result, the midnight-moon in the visible world of the living mirrors the noonday sun in the invisible realm of the dead, and vice versa. Not only that, the landscape conveys much more than meets the eye, because within it lurks invisible beings (especially de-materialized souls of dead ancestors) who interact with the living directly and indirectly- that is in ways not easily perceived by ordinary mortals.¹⁵

Earthly life is thus a manifestation of the spiritual in material forms, making death no more than a separation of spirit from matter, with the spirit returning to the realm of the invisible, though it can reincarnate in a material and tangible form in the physical world again and again. The Kongo cosmogram (*dikenga*) illustrates this cyclical notion of existence (Figure 2). Though it has a variety of related designs that reflect regional and individual interpretations,¹⁶ the popular representation of the *dikenga* is in the form of an

¹⁵ MacGaffey, *Religion and Society in Central Africa*, 64.

¹⁶ The production of the Kongo illustration of the universe was not only an artistic act but also, a ritual one, where the performer created an explanatory scientific diagram, an object of meditation, a sacred space and a tool of communication with the invisible powers that shape the process of human life, all through the incising of lines in the earth or through vivid pigments applied as decoration to the wall of a house. The human artist or deliberate intention was not essential to the production of a *dikenga*, readymade examples were conveniently found in the spiraling depths of a snail shell, an intersection of roads or in the movement of the hands on the face of a clock. For further explanation of the *dikenga*, see: MacGaffey, *Religion and Society in Central Africa*, 42-63; Robert Farris Thompson, "Kongo Influences on African American Artistic Culture," in *Africanisms in American Culture*, ed. Joseph Holloway (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 288-94; Fu-

equilateral cross with each of the four arms ending in a circular disk representing the Sun and the recurrent and often, juxtaposed dualities of the universe and the passage of time. The *dikenga* can therefore be understood as signifying a three-dimensional universe and each element of the diagram represents an area of space, time and energy in the corporeal world. It not only depicts the eternal cycles of the infinite universe but also the phases of personal or communal life. The horizontal axis represents the division of realms by the *Kalunga*, while the vertical axis is not a metaphysical barrier; rather it alludes to the imaginable heights and depths of the universe and the zenith of human development, the apex of maturity and wisdom of an individual or a community, living or dead. The point where the two axes intersect is the crossroads of contradictory and complementary forces of the universe, of life and death, the material and the immaterial, the personal and the communal; it is the eternal hub in the wheel of life, from which the motivational energy of the universe radiates, enlivening all things.¹⁷

Inhabiting the Earth alongside humans and animals were beings that are best understood as earth spirits that were once ancient ancestors and, through the repetitive cycle of life and death, became so enlightened that they were able to shed all vestiges of their former material self. In Kongo belief, the world was metaphysically layered and each sphere was defined and controlled by its spiritual inhabitants. The sky, or the dimension of

Kiau Bunseki, *African Cosmology of the Bantu-Kongo: Tying the Spiritual Knot, Principles of Life and Living* (New York: Athelia Henrietta Press, 2001), 17-43.

¹⁷ Bunseki, *African Cosmology of the Bantu-Kongo*, 35-9.

Nkadi Mpemba,¹⁸ was the domain of the distant creator God, *Nzambi* and the oldest class of ancestors, the mighty, often violent spirits known as *minkisi*. These spirits, associated with the creation of Earth and the founding of the Kongo clans,¹⁹ had lost their physical shape and any traceable familial lineage through numerous rebirths in the land of the dead, expressing their power in the form of thunder, lightning and disease. The earthly world, *Mbumba*,²⁰ was home to *bsimbi*, the benevolent and mischievous ancestral spirits who were not quite as far removed as the remote *minkisi*, yet had experienced more spiritual evolution than the recently dead. These spirits retained ties to their former clan and inhabited unusual stones or pools in these territories²¹ and due to this, were often thought of as water spirits by the Kongo.

Lastly, the land of the dead called *Mpemba* was a realm populated by the recently deceased and well-remembered ancestors (*bakulu*) and was separated from the living world by the *Kalunga* line, often visualized as an ocean. Again, these dimensions were but facets of the natural world, all spiritual beings, including humans, resided in the same physical

¹⁸ Hilton, *Kingdom of Kongo*, 16.

¹⁹ Jacobson-Widding, *Red--White--Black as a Mode of Thought*, 132.

²⁰ Hilton, *Kingdom of Kongo*, 13-5.

²¹ Jacobson-Widding, *Red--White--Black as a Mode of Thought*, 116.

space that is the earth, although on different planes of existence.²² Therefore, abandoned, overgrown villages deep in the forest were thought to be the bustling homes of the *bakulu*, though their daily activities were invisible to the eyes of the living.²³ The dead, on the other hand, could observe the lives of their descendants from their otherworldly perch and were prepared to dispense wisdom or punishment in times of human struggle. Thus, despite their substantial political might and wealth, Kongo kings and the various *kanda* and *kitome* groups were hardly the highest authorities in the land; this honor belonged to deceased ancestors. Yet, not every deceased person was admitted to *Mpemba*. Criminals and deviant social elements were denied admission and forced to roam the earth as homeless ghosts (*bankuyu*) who spent their time harassing the living and whose services could be enlisted by witches and other forces of evil.²⁴ In other words, the *bakulu* were those who had lived honorable lives on earth before departing for *Mpemba* or the hereafter.

²² MacGaffey, *Religion and Society in Central Africa*, 43.

²³ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁴ The witch was a figure of terrible dread to the Kongo, and great attempts were made through the use of divination type *minkisi* to identify and punish those who secretly harmed others out of jealousy. As most acts of witchcraft were either unintentional or done in extreme secrecy, the identification of the witch who was harming the community through his jealous actions would be very difficult without the aid of the sagacious spiritual powers of the dead. The most notorious ritual concerning witchcraft was the purging *nkasa* poison trial, in which an accused witch was administered a vegetable poison that would kill or greatly sicken the individual if evil *kundu* was present within the body, by way of severe gastro-intestinal distress. *Ibid.*, 160-8.

Communication was possible through the immense *Kalunga* barrier, though with varying degrees of difficulty, depending on the spiritual power of an individual. For humans, to see and converse with the dead at will was the predilection and talent of only a few individuals who were close to the spirit world due to time of life,²⁵ or who had been selected by spirits or deceased ancestors through trances or after undergoing initiation ceremonies.²⁶

For the ancestors, communication with the visible world appears to have been somewhat simple; they were believed to appear in a spectral form to living friends and relatives.²⁷ They may also transmit messages through dreams after receiving a request at their burial sites. Even after their physical demise, the souls of the dead would still be very fond of their former belongings, which could be used to communicate with them. In fact, objects last used or touched by the deceased were believed to be laden with the knowledge of the ancestor, as well as acting as conduits of communication, and were frequently placed on gravesites to prevent ancestral souls from returning to their former residence to retrieve

²⁵ It was thought that those close to the main transitory periods of life, be it birth or death, were closer to the world of the spirits; children felt this most powerfully, as they enter this world with the same pallor of one who has died and often depart the living world as quickly as they came. *Ibid.*, 54.

²⁶ Any individual who was born in an unusual manner or with unusual features, including twins, dwarves, albinos, those born missing limbs, feet first or breech, was considered to have connection to the otherworld or, perhaps, to be an incarnation of a spirit, giving the individual great instinctive mystical powers. See: *Ibid.*, 63.

²⁷ Simon Bockie, *Death and the Invisible Powers: The World of Kongo Belief* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 16.

them. Living descendants could visit gravesites to handle these objects and thus benefit from their spiritual powers.²⁸

Mbumba: The Physical World as a Body, Making the Intangible Tangible

In traditional Kongo thought, the physical world (*Mbumba*) is a body with human, animal, botanical and topographic manifestations--all in a constant dynamic of change caused by the passage of time and a variety of environmental hazards as well as the wear and tear of the existential process, both visible and invisible. In this belief system and its mix of benevolent and malevolent forces, the only natural form of death is the one sanctioned by the Creator God *Nzambi*--that is, death caused by the fact that one's physical body is no longer able to function properly due to old age. In this case, death is a welcome release from the toil of living and therefore not regarded as a negative event. But if a man died prematurely or while his body was still in adequate working order, no matter his age, some kind of foul play or witchcraft is suspected.²⁹ For, as Simon Bookie puts it, "almost any kind of disease or accident can be attributed to unhappy spiritual beings or to human beings endowed with mysterious powers to do harm."³⁰ At the same time, as mentioned earlier, the body represents only one aspect of the complex nature of the existential process

²⁸ Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983), 134.

²⁹ Bockie, *Death and the Invisible Powers*, 37.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

that combines the spiritual and physical; so that death is not the end of life, but just a separation of the material from immaterial self. The Kongo belief that a de-materialized soul could reincarnate in a new body encouraged them to use artistic representations to serve as functional equivalents for the body and thus make the intangible tangible in the physical world. That is why sculptures (*mintandi*) would be placed on gravesites to communicate with deceased ancestors, or created for the purpose of housing and influencing *minkisi* spirits.³¹ In this way, the visual arts constitute, as it were, a body, mediating between the physical world (*Mbumba*) and its spiritual “Other.”

The Nature of *Minkisi*

Although *minkisi* were thought to have malevolent tendencies such as causing diseases and death, they were also expected to use their powers to protect humanity from evil. Because of this, they were associated with social justice, punishing those who violated established moral codes. Kongo cosmology traces the origin of *minkisi* to a numinous being known as *Funza* or *Mpulu Bunzi*, depending on region. This being acted as an intermediary between humanity and the remote Creator God *Nzambi* and released potent forces (*minkisi*) into the landscape to aide humans in their earthly struggle. *Funza/Mpulu Bunzi* (who manifested in twisted roots, deformed branches and the praying mantis) taught the first humans the recipes to create special medicines (*bilongo*) with which to enclose/embody, activate and manipulate the powers of various *minkisi* in

³¹Frank Herreman, ed., *In the Presence of Spirits: African Art from the National Museum of Ethnology, Lisbon* (New York: Museum for African Art, 2000), 53-4.

physical containers.³² The story varies by region, as do most aspects of Kongo religion, but one anecdote claims that *Funza/Mpulu Bunzi* spoke to a man named Mukulu in a dream and gave him the ingredients and procedures for harnessing the power of all *minkisi*, so that he could pass them down to future generations for the purpose of healing and law enforcement.³³ Another account identifies the following as the first “medicinal ingredients” (*bilongo*) prescribed by *Funza/Mpulu Bunzi*: (a) *lusaku-saku*--a reed for blessing (*sakumuna*) humanity; (b) *semwa*--a medicine for preserving life (*semwa*); (c) *nkan-dikila*--a tree fruit for obliging humanity to obey certain laws and taboos (*kandamene nlongo*); and (d) *tondi*--a mushroom for maintaining a cordial relationship between *minkisi* and their handlers or priests.³⁴ Because of its emphasis on healing, a Kongo elder Nsemi Isaki (who later converted to Christianity) defines *nkisi* as

...the name of things we use to help a man when he is sick and from which we obtain health; the name refers to leaves and medicines combined together. When an individual becomes sick, he will be healed by another who collects plants, mixes them together, and gives the sufferer to drink of the mixture. It is also called *nkisi* because whoever is ill desires to be treated, an *nkisi* protects people’s souls and guards against illness. Thus an *nkisi* is also something that hunts down illness and chases it away from the body. Many people therefore compose an *nkisi* so that it may be their protector against illness. In *nkisi* also is the safe upbringing of children. It is a hiding place for people’s soul, to keep

³² MacGaffey, *Religion and Society in Central Africa*, 79.

³³ John Janzen and Wyatt MacGaffey, *An Anthology of Kongo Religion: Primary Texts from Lower Zaire* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1974), 35.

³⁴ MacGaffey, *Religion and Society in Central Africa*, 79.

and compose in other to preserve life. Everybody is very grateful to *minkisi* for helping them.³⁵

Such is their complex nature that another Kongo-born observer Kavuna Simon described *minkisi* as

... composed of earth, ashes, herbs, and leaves, and of relics of the dead. They are composed to visit upon thieves, witches, those who steal by sorcery, and those who harbor witchcraft powers. Also to oppress people. These are the properties of the *minkisi*, to cause sickness in a man, and also to remove it. To destroy, to kill, to benefit. To impose taboos on things and to remove them. To look after their owners and visit retribution upon them. The way of every *nkisi* is this: when you have composed it, observe its rules lest it be annoyed and punish you. It knows no mercy.³⁶

It goes without saying therefore, that the multifarious and sometimes contradictory functions of *minkisi* reflect the interconnectedness of opposing forces in the Kongo cosmos—an interconnectedness of day and night, good and bad, life and death, male and female, the visible and invisible and the natural and supra-natural³⁷ also evident in the *dikenga* cosmogram and its cyclical motion of time.³⁸

³⁵ MacGaffey et al., *Astonishment and Power*, 63.

³⁶ Ibid., 21.

³⁷ The term “supernatural” is often used to describe mystical entities such as spirits, ghosts and witches and the powers they possess. But in Kongo cosmology, these are not forces that are distant from the natural world and the scientific laws that define it. They are beyond the natural world but still members and actors within it. The arcane knowledge that explains the origin and behavior of such beings would be considered paranormal by western standards, but to the traditional Kongo, it is as logical and natural as physics or biology, yet still transcending mundane human activity. “Supernatural” also carries with it a Euro-centric evaluative baggage, as an educated western audience often equates belief in

Nganga: Becoming a Ritual Expert

Communicating with the otherworldly realm through *minkisi*, required special training and extraordinary talents. Sometimes, an individual, male or female, voluntarily underwent the training in the hope of becoming a ritual expert (*nganga*). Others entered the profession by following in the footsteps of their parents, as a result of health problems or after experiencing a vision or dream during which a particular spirit demanded their services. In short, in the course of becoming an *nganga*, an individual developed special skills or the supernatural power (*kindoki*) required for interacting with the spirit world and for preparing special medicines (*bilongo*) to attract a particular *nkisi* into a charm object. Frequently, this *bilongo* may be enclosed or attached to a sack, sculpture, shell, basket, calabash, tusk, horn or necklace, among other objects.

Imaging and Manipulating the *Minkisi*

While most *minkisi* objects are non-figurative, a large number are known to have human and animal forms. In such cases, an *nganga* (ritual specialist) determined how a particular *nkisi* would be represented in sculpture through communication with the spirit.

supernatural forces with ignorance. It would never be used to describe the Christian God and his saintly or angelic minions, as it would denigrate their divinity, and in the opinion of this author, it should not be used to describe the sacred forces and beings of Kongo religion.

³⁸ This apparent disparity would not be a contradiction in the Kongo mind, as it was the omnipotent *Nzambi* who set the precedent, who bestowed life on all living things, only to remove it again before too long. Bockie, *Death and the Invisible Powers*, 36.

Thereafter, the *nganga* would commission a carver to produce the image. At other times, the *nganga* would simply purchase an appropriate image from the carver who already knew how this *nkisi* should traditionally be depicted, leaving a cavity (*mooyo*)³⁹ in its belly, back or base for the *nganga* to enclose the medicinal mixture (*bilongo*) and this cavity would be sealed with a shell or mirror. Some figures may have a second cavity on the forehead for storing another *bilongo* and small sacks of medicines might also be attached to the outside of the figure.

One characteristic feature of a typical *nkisi* is that it begins a new life after leaving the carver's workshop, 'growing' with use as the *nganga* attaches a variety of charms and organic materials to its body to reinforce its metaphysical power. This process of adding more materials to an *nkisi* is called *npandulu*.⁴⁰ Through accumulation of these "medicines" or, *bilongo* on body (*nitu*) of the image, the resident spirit (*nkisi*) is obliged to respond positively to the command of the *nganga* through the instructions communicated in the *bilongo*.⁴¹ And if the latter is removed, the spirit deserts the image and the *nkisi* is

³⁹ *Mooyo* also means life or soul. Jacobson-Widding, *Red-White-Black as a Mode of Thought*, 30.

⁴⁰ MacGaffey et al., *Astonishment and Power*, 90.

⁴¹ The *minkisi* that one views in art and natural history museums are most likely no longer complete; the fragile organic material has long since rotted and elements may have been deliberately removed by Western collectors in an attempt to improve the visual impact of a piece. Although this is very unfortunate for those who wish to study the components of *minkisi*, the thought of glass display cases containing the vengeful souls of Kongo dead would be unsettling to those who still follow traditional Kongo religion. Wyatt MacGaffey, "Magic, or as we usually say, Art' A Framework for Comparing

considered polluted (*sumuka*).⁴² According to Nsemi Isaki, writing in 1911, "...the *nkisi* takes the medicinal ingredients; it becomes their being, their hands and feet, their eyes; medicines are all of these. For this reason, [an] *nkisi* [that] lacks medicine is dead and has no life."⁴³

The missionary and Kongo ethnographer Karl Laman has published a list of the "medicines" commonly found in most *minkisi*. It includes the mushroom (*tondo*), charcoal (*kala zima*), fossilized *luhezomo* resin, calabar bean (*ngongo*) and the *luyala* fruit. The names of these items are expected to have a 'semiotic' impact on an *nkisi*. For example the name of the resin *luhezomo* evokes lightning (*mpezomo*),⁴⁴ thus metaphorically urging an *nkisi* to strike like a thunderbolt from the heavens. The frightening posture and facial expression of an *nkisi* image may reflect some of its functions such the fierceness with which it is expected to repel evil forces or warn anti-social elements of the consequences of their actions.

Three kinds of *bilongo* may be found in any given *nkisi*: (a) those metonymically embodying the forces of the dead through material associated with their bodily remains or

European and African Art," in *The Scramble for Art in Central Africa*, eds. Enid Schildkrout and Curtis A. Keim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 223-4.

⁴² Janzen et al., *An Anthology of Kongo Religion*, 4.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴⁴ Wyatt MacGaffey, ed., *Art and Healing of the Bakongo, Commented by Themselves: Minkisi from the Laman Collection* (Stockholm: Folkens Museum--Etnografiska, Distributed in North America by Indiana University Press, 1991), 4.

their otherworldly place of residence, (b) those utilizing verbal metaphors that relate the name of a given substance to the behavior expected from the spirit in question and (c) items visually referencing the spirit's benevolent or malevolent powers.⁴⁵ Specific combinations of these medicines attract and direct the particular spirit desired by the *nganga*. In theory, these recipes were precise prescriptions that do not allow for deviation, though personal and regional substitutions were common, especially when *minkisi* were made by individuals who were uninitiated in the organizations of metaphysical education or otherwise unfamiliar with the details of the process.⁴⁶

The white clay or kaolin (*mpemba*) was of the utmost importance in the construction and consecration of an *nkisi*. Being the first of the *bilongo* to be prepared,⁴⁷ it falls under all three categories of medicines outlined above. The riverbank origin of the clay puts the substance into physical contact with the watery realm separating the world of the living (*Mbumba*) from that of the dead (*Mpemba*). The ritual significance of the white clay/kaolin (*mpemba*) found inserted in a typical *nkisi* image is clear: often used to outline

⁴⁵ MacGaffey, *Art and Healing of the Bakongo*, 4.

⁴⁶ There is nothing that suggests that these objects would not work but they may have been less powerful. They seem to be more along the lines of protective charms that incorporate the protective function of the general dead, rather than the multifaceted personality of a specific *nkisi* spirit. Again and again, Kongo religious though shows great flexibility in practice. Janzen and MacGaffey, *An Anthology of Kongo Religion*, 37.

⁴⁷ MacGaffey, *Art and Healing of the Bakongo*, 4.

its eyes, as well as the *nganga*'s, the white chalk bestowed psychic vision, linking the physical and spirit worlds.⁴⁸

Also included in most, if not all *minkisi* was the soil from the grave of a respected individual. This soil was thought to be charged with the spiritual powers of the deceased. Ancestral relics and riverbed stones had similar implications, in addition to connecting the visible to the invisible. Hair or nail clippings (*mfunya*) of a living person could be attached to an *nkisi*, to provide spiritual protection.⁴⁹ The saliva or shreds of garment belonging to the parties making an oath or agreement might be added to oblige them to honor the contract; otherwise, the *nkisi* would punish defaulters or traitors. If iron blades or nails are hammered onto the image, it becomes known as *Nkisi Nkondi* (Figure 3). One of the implications of this type of *nkisi* is that the iron blades will hunt down those who failed to live up to their promises. When attached to some *minkisi*, personal effects or ephemeral materials (*mfunya*)⁵⁰ were used to investigate crimes and bring criminals to justice.

Classification and Varieties of *Minkisi*

⁴⁸ MacGaffey, *Religion and Society in Central Africa*, 52.

⁴⁹ MacGaffey, *Art and Healing of the Bakongo*, 4

⁵⁰ MacGaffey, *Religion and Society in Central Africa*, 142.

Minkisi are most conveniently categorized as being “of the Above” or “of the Below”⁵¹ due to function, material components, personality, origin and operator, although these designations are not absolute and many *minkisi* derived their power from both realms.⁵² Wyatt MacGaffey writes,

Minkisi of the above were accorded more respect by *BaKongo*⁵³... Their signs included lightning, fire, weapons, fierce animals, birds of prey, and the color red. The concerns of these *minkisi* were those of men— notably maintenance of public order through the investiture of chiefs, the forging of treaties between otherwise independent groups, and the identification and punishment of criminals... *Minkisi* of the below were concerned with women’s affairs and healing; they were associated with coolness and the color white. Reproductive functions and diseases of the lower part of the body were among the concerns for which they were invoked. Seashells, often imported inland for the purpose, are among their signs.⁵⁴

⁵¹ MacGaffey, *Art and Healing of the Bakongo*, 6.

⁵² According to MacGaffey in his introduction to *Art and Healing of the Bakongo*, ancestors and evil, homeless ghosts, spirits who did not fall into the classifications of “of the Above” or “of the Below,” were also incorporated into *minkisi*, confusing any hard and fast attempts at classification.

⁵³ Formerly, *BaKongo* was the accepted title for the cultural group in question but recently, the favored term has been re-evaluated and *Kongo* is the most acceptable designation.

⁵⁴ MacGaffey et al., *Astonishment and Power*, 71.

In other words, “Sky type”⁵⁵ *minkisi* are thought to “help man acquire wealth, to defend himself against the evil deeds of others, to combat the many manifestations of sorcery and to manipulate the natural world to his material ends.”⁵⁶ When used with the best interest of the community in mind, these *minkisi* are forces of “judgment and punishment (*zengwa*),”⁵⁷ identifying and disciplining those members of the society whose selfish actions had adversely affected the well being of the whole.

Anthropomorphic *Minkisi*

Perhaps the most popular examples of the *minkisi* “of the Above” are those that epitomize the masculine virtues of “wrath, force and courage.”⁵⁸ Called *Minkisi Minkondi* (singular, *Nkisi Nkondi*), and very popular in Western collections because of their startling appearance, they are easily recognized by the nails, blades or other assorted slivers of metal (*mbau*)⁵⁹ inserted into the torso, limbs and head of the carved wooden figure (Figure 3). Often in the form of a man and sometimes close to life size, most of them assume an

⁵⁵ Hilton, *Kingdom of Kongo*, 18.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 16-7.

⁵⁷ MacGaffey, *Art and Healing of the Bakongo*, 6.

⁵⁸ Jacobson-Widding, *Red--White--Black as a Mode of Thought*, 133.

⁵⁹ MacGaffey et al., *Astonishment and Power*, 27.

assertive pose, proclaiming their formidable power through a fierce facial expression and an aggressive bodily gesture, often arms-akimbo. This pose of the *Nkondi* can be read as the symbolic Kongo gesture of *pakalala*, that communicated to the viewer that the *nkisi* was ready to accept a challenge.⁶⁰ The *Nkisi Nkondi* might also stand with its left hand resting on its hip and with its right arm raised, wielding a knife or spear in the *telama lwimbanganga* pose, a gesture that “indicates that the blade image always stands between two opposing forces, life and death, goodness and evil, the forces which build and the forces which destroy. In short, an *nkondi* in this pose is thought to have the potential to resist/challenge any power.”⁶¹ Though common, these visual aspects are not found in all *Minkisi Minkondi*, since the defining attributes of any *nkisi* were the function of the object and the behavior of the embedded spirit, as directed by the *bilongo* rather than the actual sculpted form.

The term *nkondi* references the figure’s role as a hunter of individuals who break pacts or harm the community through witchcraft or heinous crimes. The main objective of the menacing appearance was to intimidate potential wrongdoers by reminding them of the spirit’s fearsome reputation. Agitated into action through the nails driven into its body, the *Nkisi Nkondi* would search out the guilty party and inflict him/her with severe illness,

⁶⁰ Robert Farris Thompson and Joseph Cornet, *The Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1981), 171.

⁶¹ Robert Farris Thompson, “Zinkondi: Moral Philosophy Coded in Blades and Nails,” *Bulletin of Le Musee Barbier-Muller*, 31 (June 1986).

so that he would be identifiable to the community.⁶² The nails could also serve as a documentation of formal agreements and treaties; the parties involved were required to lick and swear by the nails and then hammer them into the body of the *nkisi*. In some cases, a piece of a person's clothing would be attached to the *nkisi* to establish a metaphysical connection between that individual and a given spirit, so that if the pact were broken, the *nkisi* could punish whoever was at fault.

Another example in this category, the *Nkisi Nduda*, resembles the *Nkisi Nkondi* in form and personality, but smaller in size (Figure 4).⁶³ It usually has a large mirror capped medicine compartment attached to the abdomen and a stately headdress of feathers applied to the head, which referenced the violent hunting ability of birds of prey and aligns this *nkisi* with those "of the Above."⁶⁴ In some examples, red and white clay outline the eyes, an allusion (as mentioned earlier) to the spirit's ability to see beyond the visible. Quite often, the figure has one hand raised to the mouth, holding a twig that it appears to be biting or chewing. Some scholars identify the twig as a branch of the *nkasa*, a poisonous

⁶²MacGaffey et al., *Astonishment and Power*, 76.

⁶³ "Minkisi," *Museum Volkenkunde, Leiden*, n.d., http://www.rmv.nl/rmv/e/index/fr_opening-mac.html (01 May 2009).

⁶⁴ MacGaffey et al., *Astonishment and Power*, 72.

plant used in divination rituals to identify witches⁶⁵ or the *munkwiza* vine, a plant used during the investiture of chiefs.⁶⁶

Specifically female images (*Minkisi Phemba*) are in the “of the Below” category and are expected to promote good health, fertility and safe delivery of children (Figure 5). Others are involved in funerary rituals. Delicately carved to portray the ideals of Kongo feminine beauty, these statues are in the form of women, often holding a child, and their smooth polished surfaces are generally free of encrusted offerings. The polished wood surface allows for the detailed documentation of the marks of beauty in Kongo culture, including teeth filed to a sharp point, regal coiffures and elaborate scarification across the breasts and torso. The medicine compartments are generally less conspicuous than in the *minkisi* “of the Above,” being discreetly located in the back of the head, stomach or base of the figure. The face of the figure is usually calm, exemplifying the Kongo ideals of female beauty, generosity and patience.⁶⁷

There are other *minkisi* that were sculpted in a feminine form, though they are considered anonymous, as the specific name of the embedded spirit has been lost in time (Figure 6). These are *minkisi* “of the Below” as well; the designation is apparent due, not only to their womanly shape but the inclusion of the spiral shell of a snail (*zinga*), a

⁶⁵Hans-Joachim Koloss, *The Art of Central Africa: Masterpieces from the Berlin Ethnographic Museum* (Danbury: Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated, 1990), 30.

⁶⁶Maurer et al., *Spirits Embodied*, 76.

⁶⁷ Koloss, *Africa Art and Culture*, 216.

symbol of long life.⁶⁸ This also might connect these anonymous *minkisi* to the water-loving *bsimbi*, who were thought to cause such ailments as epilepsy and could also be invested into an *nkisi*.

Zoomorphic *Minkisi*

Minkisi that were carved in the form of animals often are quite similar to both the *Nkisi Nkondi* and *Nkisi Nduda* in their display of iron nails and sharp metal blades on the body, except that they take the shape of a beast, such as a crocodile, horse, monkey/ape or dog (Figure 7).⁶⁹ Like the other *minkisi* of “the Above,” the dog-shaped *Nkisi Kozo* makes reference to the act of hunting as it “smells out *mambu* [problems] like a hunting dog” and “it follows the path of an enemy or foe by means of its senses.”⁷⁰ The dog motif is popular partly because of its perceived connection with the land of the dead and its devotion to humanity. Often, the *Nkisi Kozo* has two heads to emphasize the two realms of existence and just as this object has two heads, the dog (in general) was thought to have two sets of eyes, one observing the world of the living and the other, the invisible world of spirits. This canine was also believed to have the ability to effortlessly travel between the two realms, acting as an intermediary between spirits and the *nganga* and between beings

⁶⁸ MacGaffey et al., *Astonishment and Power*, 67.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁷⁰ Thompson, “Zinkondi.”

“of the Above” and those “of the Below.”⁷¹ Menacing in appearance due to the bared teeth, it provided protection to those who would invoke its power, much like a loyal pet, and was also employed for healing and law enforcement purposes.⁷²

Non-Figurative *Minkisi*

Although much of the scholarly and curatorial focus in the West has been directed toward the figurative *minkisi*, which may have made up only a part of a larger “material complex,”⁷³ the vast majority of the protective and healing *minkisi* used by the Kongo people were usually in the form of containers such as sacks, bundles and cooking pots.⁷⁴ They were much smaller and less expensive than the grand figurative *minkisi*; hence frequently neglected in art history books and museum collections. These types of *minkisi* were also used as tools of divination, justice and most importantly, healing and there were as “many *minkisi* as there are diseases, or rather, as there were clusters of symptoms regarded as ailments...in Kongo nosology.”⁷⁵

⁷¹ Jacobson-Widding, *Red--White--Black as a Mode of Thought*, 133.

⁷² Hans-Joachim Koloss, *Africa Art and Culture: Masterpieces of African Art, Ethnological Museum, Berlin* (London: Prestel, 2002), 215-18.

⁷³ MacGaffey, *Art and Healing of the Bakongo*, 5.

⁷⁴ MacGaffey et al., *Astonishment and Power*, 67.

⁷⁵ MacGaffey, *Art and Healing of the Bakongo*, 33.

A good example of a non-anthropomorphic style *nkisi* often used for divination is the *Mbundu*, named after the poisonous bark of the *Mbundu* tree included within its medicines. It was called *Mbundu* “because it tells the truth”⁷⁶ and the object itself consists of nets and raffia bags filled with the “usual” *bilongo*, as well as the *diiza* cactus, *nkasa* bark,⁷⁷ and a small wooden dish attached to the bundles (Figure 8). It was employed to settle serious disagreements within the community, when the ingredients within the bundles would be used by the *nganga* to concoct a potion that he would have drunk in the presence of the feuding parties. A delegate from one party would have sworn in the name of *Mbundu* that his side was being truthful and if not, let the *nkisi* prevent the priest from passing urine during the ritual. After the other side had taken an oath to the opposite affect, the *nganga* danced until the moment of truth, when he would invoke the *nkisi* and attempt to relieve himself in the presence of all involved. If he was able to do so, the accused party would have been vindicated and the matter settled.⁷⁸ To nurse a grudge or raise the issue again was to incur the wrath of the *nkisi*.

The *Nkita Nsumbu* was another popular non-figurative *nkisi* (Figure 9). Usually kept in a bag, it was employed to heal boils and bodily swelling in women, ailments

⁷⁶ Ibid., 17.

⁷⁷ *Nkasa* bark was also used in the *Nkasa* ritual, a poison trial that identified witches who became ill after consuming the substance. MacGaffey, *Religion and Society in Central Africa*, 166.

⁷⁸ MacGaffey, *Art and Healing of the Bakongo*, 20.

thought to be caused by stones and blades thrown at the victim by the *simbi* spirit *Nkita*. A dissection of an *nkisi* in this category by Robert Farris Thompson reveals that it concealed much more than its simple appearance suggested. Inside the outer casing were kaolin, nuts, seeds, shells, eggs, chalk, claws, quartz crystals, flowers, bracelets and a knife blade (Figure 10).

By and large, *minkisi* reflect the complex and esoteric nature of the Kongo universe in which the living and the dead, the visible and invisible, the material and ethereal interact in time and space. As indigenous Kongo culture and religion changed in response to the influences of Christianity and Western education, the *minkisi* have undergone a corresponding transformation. Not only do they now incorporate new elements such as padlocks and plastic objects, as well as Catholic paraphernalia, many of them have been removed from Africa and are now displayed in museums all over the world to be admired as “*art-for-art’s-sake*,” though they were originally created as a kind of “*art-for-life’s sake*.” As a result of the transatlantic slave trade, thousands of people of Kongo descent were forcibly taken to the New World to work between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries and because of the vital role that *minkisi* played in their lives while living in Africa, some Kongo captives recreated and recontextualized them in the Americas in an attempt to harness their powers to survive the hardship and uncertainties of enslavement.

CHAPTER 2: AFTER THE MIDDLE PASSAGE: *MINKISI* IN THE SPIRITUAL
AESTHETIC TRADITIONS OF THE NEW WORLD

Until the mid-twentieth century, it was the opinion of most scholars that the horrors of the Middle Passage were such that African captives in the New World were unable to remember and re-establish many aspects of their previous cultures. The general assumption was that they easily assimilated into the cultural practices of European American slave-owners.⁷⁹ The American Anthropologist Melville Herskovits was one of the first scholars to draw attention to the preservation of African cultural and artistic elements in the New World. Not only did he attempt to trace certain retentions (now called *Africanisms*) to specific African groups such as the Asante, Fon and Yoruba of West Africa, he also argued that African cultures in general share certain similarities, which facilitated their survival in a “generalized form” in the Americas.⁸⁰ Sidney Mintz and Richard Price disagreed with this theory, arguing that as African captives originated from different parts of Africa with different languages and cultures, “they could not have had a

⁷⁹ Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 3.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 295.

single collective culture to transport.” For Mintz and Price, any cultural traits that Africans had in common were adapted to new situations in the New World, creating hybrids that cannot easily be traced to a given African culture.⁸¹

Although there is abundant evidence to support some aspects of both theories, the fact remains that African retentions traceable to specific Africans abound in the New World.⁸² *Minkisi*-related African retentions from Kongo culture are a case in point. Admittedly, Herskovits’s research was instrumental in clarifying the specific origins of certain aspects of African American culture, yet he underestimated the complexity of African society and technology. Moreover, he undervalued the contributions of the people of Central Africa, in favor of the Fon and Yoruba. According to him, “The vast masses of Congo slaves that we know were imported have made their influence felt disproportionately little, though a few tribal names, a few tribal deities, some linguistic survivals and more often the word ‘Congo’ itself are encountered.”⁸³ He based this conclusion on the assumption that the political structure and culture of the Kingdom of Kongo was inferior to those of Dahomey (Fon), Oyo (Yoruba) and Benin, and that the

⁸¹ Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 8, 42-51.

⁸² For a review of some of the data, see Babatunde Lawal, "The African Heritage of African American Art and Performance," in *Black Theater: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora*, ed. Paul Harrison, Gus Edwards, and Victor Walker (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 43.

⁸³ Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, 50.

abstract religious system of the Kongo was overwhelmed by Christianity in the New World.⁸⁴ Recent research findings on the history, culture and cosmology of Kongo have since challenged these speculations, revealing extensive Kongo influence (though in hybridized forms) all over the Americas. This thesis hopes to contribute to these findings by drawing attention to *minkisi* elements in African American art.

Sticks and Bones: Kongo Influences in Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Caribbean Religions

To begin with, the records indicate that Central Africans (including Kongo peoples) “comprised nearly 45% or around 5 million of the 11 million Africans imported as slaves into the Americas from Africa between 1519 and 1867.”⁸⁵ An examination of ethnic-specific content of African carryovers has uncovered Kongo elements in what was previously assumed to be wholly of Yoruba or Fon origin. The African-derived Brazilian religion of *Candomble* is a good example. Despite the prominence of Yoruba deities (*orixas*) in the religion, the origin of the name *Candomble* has now been traced to “the Bantu *ka-n-dom-id-e*, *ka-n-domb-ed-e* or the more frequently used *ka-n-domb-el-e* [the action of praying], a noun derived from the verbal form *ku-don-ba* or *kulomba* [to praise, pray or invoke].” As Zeca Ligiero puts it, “This would seem to indicate that the earliest

⁸⁴ Ibid., 141.

⁸⁵ Linda M. Heywood, introduction in *Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 8.

Candomble terreiros [places of worship] were of Congo/Angola—Central African—origin and later came Yoruba/”Dahomey” (Agbome)—West African influences.”⁸⁶

There is a similar situation in Haitian *Vodou*. While many of its dominant elements can be traced to the Fon and Yoruba, Kongo contributions are unmistakable.⁸⁷ For instance, apart from being associated with the water, which links the visible and invisible realms of existence, the *Vodou* spirit *Simbi* “provides a path for the sun.”⁸⁸ This phenomenon immediately brings to mind the Kongo sky-bound creator deity *Nzambi*, the often benevolent, location-specific spirits (*bsimbi*), as well as the Kongo cosmogram (*dikenga*) and its reference to the “four moments of the sun.” In fact, some of the lacy ritual patterns (*veve*) used to invoke Haitian *Vodou* spirits (*lwa*) are reminiscent of the *dikenga* and other Kongo artistic motifs (Figure 11).⁸⁹ A strong Kongo connection is also

⁸⁶ Zeca Ligiero, “Candomble is Religion-Life-Art,” in *Divine Inspiration: From Benin to Bahia*, ed. Phyllis Galembo (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 102.

⁸⁷ For more details, see Luc De Heusch, “Kongo in Haiti: A New Approach to Religious Syncretism,” *Man* 24, no. 2, New Series (June 1989): 290 and Robert Farris Thompson, *Face of the Gods: Art and Altars of Africa and the African Americas* (New York and Munich: Prestel for The Museum for African Art, 1993).

⁸⁸ Leslie G. Desmangles, *The Face of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 128.

⁸⁹ For example, the *veve* of the *lwás Baron Samedi* and *Ogoun Badagrís* display a motif of interlocked lozenges that is very common within Kongo designs, including the *mpu* bonnet of chiefs, *dibindoo* funerary vessels and figurative wooden sculpture. Bunseki, *African Cosmology of the Bantu-Kongo*, 143-4.

evident in the *paket Kongo*, the “power-packed” bundles found on many *Vodou* altars in Haiti and New Orleans,⁹⁰ as well as *wanga* bottles, which both could easily be mistaken for the non-figurative *minkisi*.

The *paket kongo* is a conglomeration of earth, herbs and other organic materials, wrapped in bright colored ribbons and often studded with sequins, which are used in rituals of healing and dedicated to the *lwa Simbi* (Figure 12).⁹¹ The function of these charms make them comparable to the Kongo *minkisi* “of the Below,” though their somewhat anthropomorphic shape and the embedded straight pins which secure the ribbons and sequins also bring to mind the famous *Nkisi Nkondi*, suggesting a possible blurring of distinctions in the New World.

The *wanga* bottle charms, on the other hand, are akin to the *minkisi* “of the Above” or perhaps, charms made by unscrupulous Kongo witches (Figure 13). The *Vodou* objects confine a soul (*zonbi*) through the inclusion of bits of the individual’s mortal remains and once entrapped, the *zonbi* becomes the servant of the *wanga*’s owner. These charms can be made to affect positive or negative results and the *zonbi* of an immoral person such as a murderer would be a useful addition a *wanga* intended to cause death. In appearance, *wanga* are not standardized but often include many elements that are similar to that of

⁹⁰ Robert Farris Thompson, “From the Isle Beneath the Sea: Haiti’s Africanizing Vodou Art,” in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, ed. Donald J. Cosentino (Los Angeles: University of California Los Angeles, 1995), 109.

⁹¹ As defined in Chapter One, the *bsimbi* were Kongo ancestral spirits believed to reside in earthly features and often incorporated into healing *minkisi*.

minkisi; for example, small mirrors bound to the *Vodou* charm are analogous to those which cap the medicine compartments of the Kongo produced figures. Scissors and pins tied to a Haitian *wanga* could be understood as a New World version of the blades and nails (*mbau*) of an *Nkisi Nkondi* and the colors red, white and black often used are as symbolic in this application as they were in the medicines (*bilongo*) of the Kongo.⁹²

Unlike in Haiti where Yoruba/Fon cultural elements overshadowed other African carryovers, Kongo religious traditions are more easily recognizable in Cuba. This is partly because African captives were allowed to form ethnic associations called *cabildos*. The latter provided an umbrella for each African group to preserve much of its ancestral belief system, while at the same time incorporating European/Roman Catholic influences.⁹³

⁹² Elizabeth McAlister, “A Sorcerer’s Bottle,” in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, ed. Donald J. Cosentino (Los Angeles: University of California Los Angeles, 1995), 310.

⁹³ A significant advantage in the preservation of Kongo traditions, specifically religious beliefs and associated art objects (including *minkisi*), was the earlier exposure and conversion to Christianity. After the introduction by the Portuguese, Catholicism had been adopted by the Kongo ruling elite as the state religion by 1491 and by “the early seventeenth century, and probably earlier, most of the people in Kongo identified themselves as Christians.” The Kongo people eagerly incorporated Catholic paraphernalia personalities into the *minkisi* tradition, employing European made crucifixes, medals, relics and images of saints in the same manner they used the traditional objects of spiritual power and some territorial *bsimbi* spirits became equated with Catholic saints. Indigenous artists also produced Christian articles, constructing copper crucifixes (*nkangi kidity*) and wooden carvings of Saint Anthony (*Toni Malau*) that reflect Kongo aesthetic preferences and symbolism (for example, focus of the *mooyo*, or belly of the figure) as much as the inspirational source material. Finally, due to periods of iconoclasm when *minkisi* were destroyed, the Kongo were aware of the intolerance of Christianity and also understood how to discretely maintain traditional beliefs while under the disapproving watch of European priests and slave-owners.

Wherever the Kongo encountered Christianity, be it on their native soil or in the Americas, they viewed it “as but a new means and a new set of symbols to express

Thus, Kongo *minkisi* resurfaced in the Afro-Cuban religion of *Reglas Congas de Mayombe*, or *Palo Monte* as it is more casually known.⁹⁴ The ritual focus is the *nganga*,⁹⁵ an object undeniably connected to the Kongo *minkisi*, both in its *Kikongo* name and physical form (Figure 14). The Cuban *nganga* is both a spiritual entity from the land of the dead and the object in which it resides, a container which has been empowered by the inclusion of human remains, earth collected from a cemetery or crossroads, vegetable matter and animal remains. As with *minkisi*, these objects attract, confine and direct the actions of an otherworldly being, known as *Mpungus*, putting it under the control of the initiated operator as it inhabits the iron cauldron, clay pot or cloth bundle. The operator, called *Padre Nganga* or *Tata*,⁹⁶ can then direct the force of the *nganga* for positive or

traditional Central African beliefs.” It was this spiritual flexibility, the prior exposure to the institutions of Western religion, and the resulting fusion of iconography and belief in the form of Afro-Catholicism that would lead to both the perseverance and scholarly discounting of Kongo artistic and religious impact in the New World. See: Linda M. Heywood, ed., *Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 2, 83, 157, 257; Hilton, *Kingdom of Kongo*, 102, 195.

⁹⁴ The name *Palo Monte* refers to sticks or trees from the forest. Judith Bettelheim, "Palo Monte Mayombe and Its Influence on Cuban Contemporary Art," *African Arts* 34, no. 2 (2001): 36.

⁹⁵ This object is also known by the Spanish term, *prenda*. Thompson, *Face of the Gods*, 62.

⁹⁶ *Tata* is the Kikongo word for “father.” MacGaffey, *Religion and Society*, 69.

negative ends,⁹⁷ mirroring the moral decisions encountered by Kongo *nganga* when exercising his *kindoki* or the capacities of a fierce *nkisi*.⁹⁸ As Miguel Barnet puts it, “Everything in the *nganga*, the *nganga* itself, is a magical and telluric force. Everything in the *nganga* has a level of energy, and this will vary according to the amount of time it has resided within it as part of its message.”⁹⁹ This practice, still current in present-day Cuba, has since spread to different parts of the African Diaspora, as a result of the exodus of Cuban refugees into South America, the United States and Canada.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Lydia Cabrera, *Reglas de Congo: Palo Monte-Mayombe* (Madrid: Ediciones Universal, 2001), 126.

⁹⁸ There are numerous other elements of *Palo Monte* that would not be out of place if transplanted to historical Kongo society, running the gamut of language, objects and cosmology. The appellation *Palo Monte* refers to the forked branches collected in the forest to be used in magical work, ready-made versions of the Kongo cosmogram (*dikenga*) also used in Central Africa and the *dikenga* is also encountered in the *firmas*, diagrams traced on the floor in chalk or charcoal. Prayers are recited in *Kikongo*, the temples are called *Nso-Nganga*, negative magical acts are referred to as *endoqui malo*, and God keeps his distance and Kongo moniker of *Nzambi*.

In matters of divination, the *Tata* consults a ritual object called a *Mpake* or *Mpaka Mensu*, which is an animal horn filled with magical substances and capped with a small mirror, in which the operator peers and is able to receive symbols from the land of the dead. The only notable difference between this object and the *Mpungu nkisi* of the Kongo is the hidden natural elements enclosed within it, as identical flora and fauna does not exist on both sides of the Atlantic. The lack of African ingredients used to compose magical medicines forced the Kongo to adapt and the best possible substitutes were utilized, innovations which will also be addressed in the later discussion of North American hoodoo. See: Miguel Barnet, *Afro-Cuban Religions* (New York: Markus Wiener, 2001), 115, 121, 159; Cabrera, *Reglas de Congo*, 130.

⁹⁹ Barnet, *Afro-Cuban Religions*, 117-118.

¹⁰⁰ For more on Kongo/*minkisi* influence in the Caribbean and South America, see

In sum, since the *minkisi* played such a vital role in their daily lives, some Central African captives apparently could not do without them in the Americas and hence created similar forms in the New World. It is interesting to note that what appears to be a replica of a Kongo *nkisi*, now in Harvard University's Peabody Museum collection, was documented in former Dutch Guiana (Upper Surinam) in South America in 1883 (Figure 15).

According to J. H. Abbot who observed it in use:

This image ... is worshipped by the Bush Negroes of that country. The tribe that used this one is composed of 700 to 800 persons. The camp is a large square and in the center of this square is a stump of a tree and on this stump this image is made [to stand] fast and everyone that passes it must bow and once every month they gave the idol a feast. They tell me that in the large piece on the front of the idol there is hair and the thumbnail of their former chief.¹⁰¹

It is uncertain, however, whether this particular example was brought from Africa or created in Surinam. All the same, the association of the "hair and the thumb nail of their former chief" with the image reminds us of well-established Kongo ritual practice on the other side of the Atlantic. Unfortunately, limitation of space will not allow for more details on the survival of Kongo *minkisi* in other parts of the Americas. It suffices to say that the preservation of ethnic-specific *Africanisms* in a given country would seem to have been influenced by a variety of factors such as the number of captives from a particular

Heywood, *Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora*, 211-26, 243-85; Alfred Metraux, *Voodoo in Haiti* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 33; Barnet, *Afro-Cuban Religions*, 86- 126; Cabrera, *Reglas de Congo*, 126; Cosentino, *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, 108-14; Thompson, *Face of the Gods*, 48-110.

¹⁰¹ *Masterpieces of the Peabody Museum, Harvard University* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 11.

African group, the opportunities available for them to recreate their heritage, as well as the attitude of the slave masters toward these recreations.¹⁰² Above all, the degree to which a particular recreation or reinterpretation recalls an African original would normally depend on the artistic skills of an individual and his knowledge of the meanings or functions of that original; in which case, individuals with previous artistic and spiritual training in Africa should be expected to produce more accomplished works than novices.

From Kongo “*Mooyo*” to American “*Mojo*”: Traces of *Minkisi* in African American Spiritual Aesthetics

The enormous tropical estates of Cuba and Haiti contrasted greatly with the “peculiar institution”¹⁰³ of slavery within the United States, where vast plantations were relatively rare and many of the almost 500,000 North American bondsmen imported from Africa¹⁰⁴ and their descendants toiled alongside their owners, living in relatively small communities that were not isolated from the homes of the European Americans in the same manner as in the Caribbean. Most American slaveholders had small farms, were rather poor themselves and could usually only afford to purchase individual bondsmen, breaking

¹⁰² Lawal, “The African Heritage of African American Art and Performance,” 44.

¹⁰³ Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), 3.

¹⁰⁴ Michael Angelo Gomez, *Exchanging our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 18.

apart families and relationships built during the shared hardship of the Middle Passage. This was unlike wealthy estate owners who could meet the expense of buying African manpower in bulk, perhaps preserving familial and friendly relationships within these groups.¹⁰⁵

The fact that slaveholders in what is now the United States did not encourage the establishment of ethnic associations (*cabildos*) would seem to have prevented the preservation of many ethnic-specific carryovers to the same extent as in the Caribbean and South America. All the same, certain public and “slave” holidays such as ‘*Lectio Day*, *Gombay* and *Pinkster* enabled African captives to display their cultural heritage for public entertainment.¹⁰⁶ Such occasions did contribute one way or the other to the preservations of some ethnic-specific elements. Though slightly out-numbered by captives from West Africa, Central Africans (especially the Kongo) are now considered to have “had the largest homogeneous culture among the imported Africans and the strongest impact on the

¹⁰⁵ Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 8-10.

¹⁰⁶ Genevieve Fabre, “African-American Commemorative Celebrations in the Nineteenth Century,” in *History and Memory in African American Culture*, ed. Genevieve Fabre and Robert O’Meally (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 72-92 and Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, 3rd edition (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 52-58. For a review of the evidence, see Lawal, “The African Heritage of African American Art and Performance,” 43-47.

development of African American culture.”¹⁰⁷ Their impact on eighteenth century Louisiana resulted in the designation of an open area as “Congo Square” where African captives were allowed to gather on Sundays for recreational activities such as singing and dancing in remembrance of their African past.¹⁰⁸ Some performed rituals in broad daylight or secretly at night in their cabins, especially when certain problems obliged them to seek the help of their deceased ancestors or popular African deities. Little wonder that archaeological finds reminiscent of *minkisi* have been unearthed in Louisiana and different parts of the United States.

Even as many of them converted to Christianity, especially after the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century,¹⁰⁹ African captives did not totally abandon their spiritual practices. Individuals with special skills in rituals (especially healing) became the first spiritual leaders in the New World, before pastors and politicians.¹¹⁰ Their ritual

¹⁰⁷ Joseph Holloway, “The Origins of African American Culture,” in *Africanisms in American Culture*, ed. Joseph Holloway (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 19.

¹⁰⁸ See Ned Sublette, *The World that Made New Orleans: From Spanish Silver to Congo Square* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2008) and Gwendolyn M. Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992).

¹⁰⁹ Gomez, *Exchanging our Country Marks*, 251.

¹¹⁰ Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 38.

procedures soon came to be known as conjure, rootwork, gofering, tricking or hoodoo.¹¹¹ The American conjurer or hoodoo doctor not only resembled a Kongo *nganga* in his or her service to the community but also in the magical methods and materials employed in the construction of charms resembling *minkisi*. Items excavated from Charles Carroll's house, an eighteenth century site in Carrollton, Maryland, include a collection of beads, white potshards, quartz crystals, pierced discs and coins as well as rounded pebbles collected from riverbeds. Since they seemed to have been concealed and utilized for ritual purposes, it has been suggested that the assemblage might have been used in an *nkisi* context.¹¹² Another site, a nineteenth century cabin belonging to a midwife and conjurer on the Levi Jordan Plantation in the Texas county of Brazoria, has yielded an assortment of articles such as chunks of chalk, shards of broken mirror, metal nails and blades, shells, riverbed stones, quartz crystals and bone fragments.¹¹³ Each one of these materials has been previously identified within this paper as common elements in the construction of Kongo *minkisi* and as most of these ingredients would relate to the *bsimbi* spirits in Kongo,

¹¹¹ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 215.

¹¹² See Laura J. Galke, "Did the Gods of Africa Die? A Reexamination of a Carroll Crystal Assemblage," *North American Archaeologist* 21, no. 1 (2000), 19-33. However, the appearance of polished stone axes in the finds has led some scholars to suggest that the assemblage may very well have had something to do with *Sango*, the Yoruba thunder deity.

¹¹³ Kenneth J. Brown, "Interwoven Traditions: Archaeology of the Conjuror's Cabins and the African Cemetery at the Jordan and Frogmore Manor Plantations," in *Places of Cultural Memory: African Reflections on the American Landscape* (Conference Proceedings). National Park Service, US. Department of Interior. Atlanta, 2000, 102.

perhaps they were being used in this case to house an American *cymbi*, or water spirit.¹¹⁴

The resourceful conjurer who inhabited the cabin also made use of industrially manufactured silver coins, cast iron kettles and buttons, ready-made materials that also feature prominently in African American good luck *mojo* charms¹¹⁵ and funerary folk art.

In antebellum America, African Americans with different problems are known to have frequently sought the spiritual assistance of a conjurer who would then prepare for them charms known as *mojo hands* or trick bags (Figure 16).¹¹⁶ The Kongo presence in these objects is apparent in the “hand” metaphor for *mojo*, a term that recalls the Bantu word *handa*, meaning “escape, be rescued from death or danger” more than any resemblance to the human appendage.¹¹⁷ It is significant to note this “hand” charm is

¹¹⁴ Note the similarity of the name of the African American spirit (*cymbi*) to that of the Kongo *simbi*. Joseph E. Holloway and Winifred K. Vass, *The African Heritage of American English* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 96.

¹¹⁵ Newbell Niles Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (Montclair: Patterson Smith Press, 1926), 234.

¹¹⁶ Although hoodoo is still practiced, its popularity appears to have waned since the mid-twentieth century. This may be due to the encroachment of mass media or the improvement of educational systems in rural areas that acted as the strongholds of such belief but it also may reflect a deliberate move on the part of African Americans to distance themselves from traditions that could be considered as superstitious in the modern era. See Yvonne Patricia Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2003), 136.

¹¹⁷ Holloway and Vass, *The African Heritage of American English*, 99. Perhaps this similarity between the *kiKongo* and English words also explains the popularity of hand shaped charms in the form of fists called *figa* amongst Latin American members of the African Diaspora, and within the United States, metal hand-shaped charms have been

known as *mojo*, a word suspected to derive from Kongo term *mooyo*, which refers to the cavity in an *nkisi* for storing magical materials (*bilongo*)¹¹⁸ and “to the spirits that dwelt within magical charms”¹¹⁹ and this is appropriate as the small packets were thought to have a sentient life force or soul contained within them. The soul of the charm may be that of the owner, placed in the hand for safe keeping or an unidentified spirit captured in the object through the specific conglomeration of materials and the ritual construction of the charm.¹²⁰ Similar to *minkisi*, the entrenched spirit of the *mojo* hand must be kept content through offerings, usually whiskey, and respectful behavior if it was to be expected to labor on behalf of its owner.¹²¹

As mentioned earlier, gravesite soil once constituted an important part of the charm/medicine (*bilongo*) concealed in the cavity (*mooyo*) of a given *nkisi*. In many parts

unearthed in excavations of dwellings belonging to enslaved African Americans. See Christopher Fennel, *Crossroads and Cosmologies: Diasporas and Ethnogenesis in the New World* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007), 70-6.

¹¹⁸Jeffrey E. Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 28.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

of the Deep South, especially in Georgia and South Carolina,¹²² the soil from a gravesite is believed to have both positive and negative spiritual powers. When added to a good luck charm, it is thought to imbue the object with the virtues and wisdom of the deceased; but if used for negative “tricking,” it will injure the human target. It is interesting to note that the African American name for the gravesite soil is *goofer*, which many scholars suspect may be derived from the Ki-Kongo word *kufwa*, meaning “to die,”¹²³ apparently because of the soil’s physical contact with a corpse.¹²⁴ Small bits of a reflective foil could be added to a given *mojo* to signify, as it were, an apparitional “flash of the spirit”¹²⁵ within or to mediate between the living and the dead. This practice recalls the function of mirrors or other reflective objects in Kongo *minkisi* tradition.¹²⁶ Human detritus such as hair or nail clippings made powerful inclusions to *mojo* because, as with *minkisi*, these materials allow the resident spirit to identify the owner of the charm or the projected victim.¹²⁷ Also

¹²² It is thought that these locations represent concentrations of Kongo culture in the United States due to large populations and relative isolation from European and West African influence. *Ibid.*, 27.

¹²³ Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 625. See also Jonathan Green, *Cassell’s Dictionary of Slangs* (London: Welden and Nicolson, 2005), 625.

¹²⁴ Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society*, 38.

¹²⁵ Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 118.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹²⁷ Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*, 229.

included in many *mojo* bags are gnarled roots called *High John the Conqueror*, a phenomenon that also relates African American *mojo* to the Kongo legend which claims that *Funza/Mpulu Bunzi*, the spirit who released the *minkisi* to the physical world can incarnate in twisted roots and branches.¹²⁸

To create a *mojo*, the appropriate magical materials would be bound and contained in a package of red flannel, a fabric used extensively in the construction of traditional Kongo objects, including non-figurative sack-style *minkisi*. In traditional Kongo symbolism, the color red may be used to indicate the binaries of life such as birth and death, sunrise and sunset, the transition between states of being and the earth itself¹²⁹ and the physical plane where these forces intersect. This symbolism is still appropriate when applied to American *mojo* hands as they acted as point of connection between the physical and spiritual world, containing both organic substances and spiritual beings, and they were designed to effect change in the life of the owner.¹³⁰

The manner in which the Kongo captives were employed in the Americas impacted their ability to continue their traditions with little interruption or influence. As most

¹²⁸ Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society*, 39.

¹²⁹ MacGaffey, *Religion and Society in Central Africa*, 140.

¹³⁰ Chireau, *Black Magic*, 47.

individuals had agricultural backgrounds,¹³¹ plantation owners took advantage of their knowledge and utilized them as field workers. This afforded the Central Africans relative isolation from both European American culture and that of the other enslaved Africans, insulating the Kongo from outside influence and re-affirming cultural unity.¹³² Due to artistic talent, Central Africans were also employed as artisans, usually metalworkers, woodcarvers or potters, and through these types of media, Kongo artists were able to maintain the motifs of their homeland, passing them down to future generations of artists.

Another significant advantage in the preservation of Kongo traditions was the earlier exposure and conversion to Christianity by the Portuguese.¹³³ The Kongo people eagerly incorporated Catholic paraphernalia into the *minkisi* tradition, employing European-made crucifixes, medals, relics and images of saints in the same manner they used the traditional objects of spiritual power.¹³⁴ Due to periods of iconoclasm when

¹³¹ Joseph C. Miller, “Central Africa During the Era of the Slave Trade, c. 1490s-1850s,” in *Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora*, ed. Linda Heywood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 36.

¹³² Joseph Holloway, “‘What Africa has Given America’ African Continuities in the North American Diaspora,” in *Africanisms in American Culture*, ed. Joseph Holloway (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 41.

¹³³ Heywood, “Introduction,” 2.

¹³⁴ Hilton, *Kingdom of Kongo*, 102.

minkisi were destroyed,¹³⁵ the Kongo were also aware of the intolerance of Christianity and understood how to discretely maintain their rituals while under the disapproving watch of slave-owners. Wherever the Kongo encountered Christianity, be it on their native soil or in the Americas, they viewed it “as but a new means and a new set of symbols to express traditional Central African beliefs.”¹³⁶ It was this spiritual flexibility, combined with their relative isolation, protective secrecy and access to artistic materials that would lead to the perseverance of *minkisi* and Kongo artistic culture in the Americas.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 195.

¹³⁶ Elizabeth W. Kiddy, “Who is the King of Congo? A New Look at African and Afro-Brazilian Kings in Brazil,” in *Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora*, ed. Linda M. Heywood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 157.

CHAPTER 3: ECHOES OF *MINKISI*: KONGO ELEMENTS IN THE WORK OF FOLK
AND SELF-TAUGHT AFRICAN AMERICAN ARTISTS

In ancient Kongo culture, a gravesite was not only a site of mourning but also a liminal space connecting the world of the living to that of the dead.¹³⁷ Hence, the motif of a cemetery commonly appears in Kongo ideograms (*bidimbu*),¹³⁸ and no *nkisi* would be complete without the inclusion of gravesite soil, as no action is possible without the approval of the ancestors.¹³⁹ To empower them, old Kongo graves were adorned with symbolic items to honor and communicate with the dead. These items often included articles last touched by the deceased, terra-cotta stelae (*maboondo*) and ceramic vessels, which the deceased might need in the hereafter (Figure 17). In view of the possible derivation of the African American word for the gravesite soil (*goofer*) from the Ki-Kongo (*kufwa*), a number of scholars have suggested that the African American tradition of also

¹³⁷ Thompson and Cornet, *The Four Moments of the Sun*, 181.

¹³⁸ See the discussion of Haitian *veve* in the previous chapter.

¹³⁹ MacGaffey, *Religion and Society in Central Africa*, 67.

depositing used articles on the tombs of beloved ones might also have been influenced (wholly or partly) by Kongo culture.¹⁴⁰

Memory Jars and Face-Vessels: *Minkisi* Elements in African American Ceramics

In the Deep South of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, plaster or industrial putty was at times used to attach numerous articles to containers or so-called “memory jars” that were deposited on graves in African American cemeteries. Commonly attached to the exterior of memory jars were small trinkets, buttons, shells, shards of pottery and glass, screws, springs and pipes, though all kinds of assorted flashy knick-knacks decorate the surface of the containers (Figure 18). At times, a photograph of the deceased was included. In view of the accumulation of articles on memory jars, Robert Farris Thompson interprets them as “a kind of neo-*nkisi*.”¹⁴¹ At the same time (and in the opinion of the author) some of the jars share a great deal of similarity with Kongo funerary markers (*maboondo*), both in their symbolic form and mortuary functions.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ See Thompson and Cornet, *The Four Moments of the Sun*, 57; Thompson, *Face of the Gods*, 78; John M. Vlach, *Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Art* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 143; Theodore C. Landsmark, “Comments on African American Contributions to American Material Life,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 33, no. 4 (Winter 1998): 279; and Kara Ann Morrow, “Bakongo Afterlife and Cosmological Direction: Translation of African Culture into North Florida Cemeteries,” *Athamor* 20 (2002), 105-115.

¹⁴¹ Thompson and Cornet, *The Four Moments of the Sun*, 160.

¹⁴² Both *maboondo* and memory jars were used as grave markers and offerings, kept in the cemetery in close proximity to the mortal remains of the honored individual,

In Central Africa, articles formerly used by the dead were thought not only to be imbued with their talents, but also the power to transmit messages from the deceased when handled.¹⁴³ They could also be used to harness the talents of the deceased for the benefit of the living.¹⁴⁴ Objects that last touched the mouth of the dead individual were greatly valued, as they might still carry traces of bodily fluid, called *mfunya* in the Kongo language.¹⁴⁵ This metaphysical link was doubly strong if the last object used was a pipe, as

unlike *minkisi*, which were worn on the body, hung in open spaces in need of spiritual protection or kept in the home of the owner or housed in a shrine. The surface texture of memory jars and some examples of figurative *minkisi* appear formally similar, at first: thick encrustations of offerings and symbolic articles attached to *minkisi* resemble the bits and bobs pressed into the plaster or putty of the memory jars while still wet but significantly, the exteriors of the latter objects did not change from the moment that they were made, whereas *minkisi* would accumulate elements through use. Notably, the type of spirit the grave objects from both sides the Atlantic were designed to honor aligns the function of memory jars with that of *maboondo*. As has been discussed, *minkisi* were receptacles for the elemental, ancestral *bsimbi* and *minkisi* spirits, whereas memory jars and *maboondo* were constructed to honor and remember the recently dead. *Daboondo* stood tall on the graves of influential Kongo men, their size and decoration were relative to the achievements and power of the individual in life and the incised symbolic designs transmitted the history of the individual to future generations. See: Robert Farris Thompson, "The Song that Named the Land: The Visionary Presence of African American Folk Art," in *Black Art: Ancestral Legacy the African Impulse in African-American Art*, eds. Robert Rozelle et al. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989), 126; Thompson and Cornet, *The Four Moments of the Sun*, 77-94.

¹⁴³ Robert Farris Thompson, "Kongo Influences in African American Culture," in *Africanisms in American Culture*, ed. Joseph Holloway (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), 315.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 305-19.

¹⁴⁵ Bodily material created a connection between the worlds of the living and the dead that was so strong that families would leave the last cups and bowls used by the

it is Kongo belief that a pipe smoked by a wise man, such as a chief or king, would record his thoughts and words as he smoked, information that could be transferred to the next person to use the smoking device.¹⁴⁶ This may very well account for the presence of smoking pipes on many African American memory jars, which could also have served along with other articles as relics through which the living communicated with the dead in the hereafter.¹⁴⁷

departed on a grave as a means of *kanga mfunya* or “tying of the effluvia.” Thompson and Cornet, *The Four Moments of the Sun*, 96.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 96.

¹⁴⁷ To employ a memory jar as a tool of direct communication with the dead would be similar to the use of the *govi* vessels that house the ancestral *lwa* of Haitian Vodou. Through a ritual called *Retirer D'en Bas de L'eau* (To Retrieve from the Bottom of the Water), the soul and voice of a beloved relative is retrieved from the watery land of the dead, to be housed in an open-mouthed clay pot known as the *govi*. The mouth of the *govi* then acts as that of the *lwa*, dispensing advice and desires to its familial caretakers in a voice often audible to both the ritual priest (*Houngan* or *Mambo*) and those without the advanced levels of initiation. This ritual elevates the soul to that of a *lwa*, an identifiable spirit whose life and personality are immortalized in the *govi* and in the history of the family to which the object belongs. If a family is too poor or a soul is forgotten or not deemed worthy of the *Retirer D'en Bas de L'eau* ritual, as is most often the case, it remains one of the anonymous dead, *Les Morts* and must be contacted through other means. Thus the *govi* are quite similar to American made memory jars in the choice of vessel as receptacle of an ancestor's history and wisdom as well as a possible functional purpose of communication between the two worlds. Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: Voodoo Gods of Haiti* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970), 27-8.

The buttons on many memory jars seem to convey much more than meets the eye.¹⁴⁸ In Kongo, white buttons were attached to the *nkisi Mbumba Mbondo* to “communicate mysteries within” the object.¹⁴⁹ Could their circular shape and four-holes have reminded African captives of the Kongo cosmogram (*dikenga*) and its reference to the “four moments of the Sun”? Mass produced springs and screws used in the construction of the jars would have also have been adopted as “ready-made” illustrations of the reciprocal universe and the inevitable cycle of life and death. This theme was more traditionally represented in the shells adorning the graves of Kongo people in Africa and the Americas.¹⁵⁰ The numerous memory jars incrustated with shells and buttons, as well as the other objects mentioned, may very well be regarded as a continuation of Kongo symbolism and the *minkisi* tradition on American soil. Also, according to Kara Ann Morrow, though the “T” shaped headstones found on many black burial sites in north Florida (between the 1920s and 1950s) might suggest Christian influence, they might equally well have been “directly inspired by the Kongo cosmogram of the *Four Moments*

¹⁴⁸ Thompson, “From the Isle Beneath the Sea: Haiti’s Africanizing Vodou Art,” 114.

¹⁴⁹ For data in support of this possibility, see Thompson and Cornet, *The Four Moments of the Sun*, 43.

¹⁵⁰ Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 135.

of the Sun,” given the presence of other seemingly Kongo related funeral elements at such sites.¹⁵¹

Kongo *minkisi* influence in the antebellum South is evident as well in the so-called Afro-Carolinian face-vessels¹⁵² produced in the mid-nineteenth century by African captives working in ceramics factories in the Edgefield district of South Carolina (Figure 19). Formerly known as “monkey jugs” or “voodoo pots,”¹⁵³ these glazed anthropomorphic vessels are unique because their facial expressions and the kaolin used to define their wide-open eyes and bared teeth in a manner reminiscent of figurative Kongo *minkisi*.¹⁵⁴ This is not surprising, in view of the large number of Central Africans forcibly imported to South Carolina in the slavery era.¹⁵⁵ Here, Bantu language and culture has

¹⁵¹ Morrow, “Bakongo Afterlife and Cosmological Directions,” 105.

¹⁵² Regenia A. Perry, “African Art and African-American Folk Art: A Stylistic and Spiritual Kindship,” in *Black Art: Ancestral Legacy, The African Impulse in African American Art*, eds. Robert Rozelle et al. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1989), 36.

¹⁵³ Vlach, *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts*, 81.

¹⁵⁴ Sharon F. Patton, *African American Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 65.

¹⁵⁵ Holloway, “The Origins of African American Culture,” 28.

been preserved unlike anywhere else in the United States.¹⁵⁶ It is important to note that the slave ship “Wanderer” illegally delivered the last batch of Central Africans to the United States in 1858.¹⁵⁷ Aboard that ship was a Kongo man called Tahro (aka Romeo) whose name appears on the list of Africans employed at the Palmetto Fire Brick Works “where many of the Edgefield face vessels were made.”¹⁵⁸ Of course, there is no absolute proof yet that Tahro created any the face vessels. This notwithstanding, the very fact that many captives from Central Africa lived in the Carolinas at the time the vessels were being created suggests that the striking similarity between them and Kongo *minkisi* may be more than mere coincidence.

As noted earlier, the kaolin (*Mpemba*) in Kongo iconography signifies the spirit world (*Mpemba*), connecting it with that of the living (*Mbumba*). Therefore, chances are that a number of the face-vessels (with kaolin eyes and teeth) had been used secretly for ritual purposes—which may also explain why they were highly treasured in the past and passed down through families. Some were discovered along the Underground Railroad¹⁵⁹ and certain examples (about 1¼ inches high) would seem to have been made for use as a

¹⁵⁶ Margaret Washington, “Gullah Attitudes toward Life and Death,” in *Africanisms in American Culture*, ed. Joseph Holloway (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 152.

¹⁵⁷ Perry, “African Art and African-American Folk Art,” 37.

¹⁵⁸ Cinda Baldwin, “Edgefield Face Vessels: African-American Contributions to American Folk Art,” *The Magazine of Afro-American Culture* 5, no. 4 (August 1990): 20.

¹⁵⁹ Patton, *African American Art*, 66.

talisman or concealed on the body to perform functions similar to those of *minkisi* and thus empower an individual in his/her struggle for freedom.¹⁶⁰

To Tie a Knot: *Minkisi* in the Guise of Quilts

It appears that the secrecy surrounding the use of *minkisi*-derived forms in antebellum United States obliged many African captives to improvise with new materials that reflected both the realities of a new habitat and the need to hide an object's spiritual functions in plain sight. Detection of spiritual functions therefore becomes all the more difficult when the object in question also had practical purposes. This is particularly the case with certain African American-made quilts that were originally made to keep the body warm and yet were invested with metaphysical meanings by their makers or owners through deliberate choice and combination of colors and design motifs. As the black scholar and theologian, James Evans, has observed, the circumstances of slavery compelled many captives to use double signifiers, which conveyed one meaning to the general public (especially the slave masters) and coded messages to fellow blacks who already knew how to decipher them.¹⁶¹ This camouflage, according to some scholars,

¹⁶⁰ Perry, "African Art and African-American Folk Art," 37.

¹⁶¹ James H. Evans, *We Have Been Believers: An African American Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 146.

enabled certain quilts to be hung along the routes of Underground Railroad to guide slave escaping from the South states to reach their various destinations in the North.¹⁶²

The fact that African captives reportedly used quilts to mark and decorate burial sites (for reasons unknown to modern historians)¹⁶³ indicates that such quilts had spiritual functions, given their contact with the deceased. One can only wonder today whether some quilts were fabricated from the clothing left behind by the dead, which would then make such quilts function much like memory jars. In any case, the practice reminds one of the ancient Kongo custom of hanging an animal skin or cloth above a burial site to “arrest...evil” and protect the deceased.¹⁶⁴ There are also accounts that, in the past, newly baptized captives had quilts wrapped around them as part of an elaborate rite of passage,

¹⁶² Maude Southwell Wahlman, *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African-American Quilts*, (New York: Studio Books, 1993), 85 and Patton, *African American Art*, 67. It should be pointed out here that the popular belief that quilts were used in the Underground Railroad has recently been challenged. See, for instance, Diane Cole, “Patterns of Controversy: Debating the Legend of Quilts as Underground Railroad Maps,” *US. News and World Report*, June 24, 2007; Jacqueline, Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View: The Secret Story of Quilts and The Underground Railroad* (New York: Doubleday, 1999); and Kimberly Wulfert, "Quilts and the Underground Railroad Revisited: Interview with Historian," at New Pathways Into Quilt History - Antique Quilts & Textile Dating, http://www.antiquequiltdating.com/Quilts_and_the_Underground_Railroad_Revisited__In_terview_with_Historian_Giles_R._Wright.html (accessed May 05, 2010).

¹⁶³ Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 37.

¹⁶⁴ Thompson and Cornet, *The Four Moments of the Sun*, 191.

hinting at a synthesis of African and Christian elements.¹⁶⁵ Needless to say, this has been the case ever since the first Africans were baptized on American soil. According to James Evans, “African-American theological development can best be understood as the convergence of an African-derived worldview, the complexities of the experience of slavery, oppression, survival, rebellion, and adjustment to the New World, and their encounters with the biblical text.”¹⁶⁶ Many African American quilts reflect the complexities of this experience as well. Pieced together from recycled scraps, they keep their owners cozy, brightening up modest dwellings and at the same time providing spiritual protection, especially when possible Kongo influenced designs or *mojo* elements are included.

Harriet Powers’ *Pictorial Quilt* (ca. 1895-98) exemplifies the hybrid nature of African American visual culture.¹⁶⁷ Though inspired by biblical and historical events, and made from American fabrics, the quilt reflects African (specifically Kongo) influences in some of its motifs, patterns and overall design (Figure 20). It is divided into three horizontal rows, each partitioned into smaller panels that tell specific stories. Many

¹⁶⁵ Stuckey, *Slave Culture*, 91.

¹⁶⁶ Evans, *We Have Been Believers*, 2. See also, Albert J. Raboteau, *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 45-48 and Babatunde Lawal, “African Retention, Biblical Reinterpretations, and Double Meaning in African American Self-Taught Art,” in *Coming Home! Self Taught Artists, the Bible and the American South*, ed. Carol Crown (Memphis and Mississippi: Art Museum of the University of Memphis and the University of Mississippi Press, 2004), 61-71.

¹⁶⁷ Stuckey, *Slave Culture*, 91.

scholars have compared this quilt's design and appliqué technique to those of the "tapestries" produced by the Fon people of the ancient kingdom of Dahomey (in present-day Republic of Benin) (Figure 21).¹⁶⁸ Yet a close examination of the quilt reveals motifs strikingly similar to Kongo ideographic signs (*bidimbu*).¹⁶⁹

The act of quilting itself--the interlocked fibers and the binding of objects to one another with thread--brings to mind the Kongo concept of interconnectedness symbolized by the knotted latticework of the *zamba kya mfumu* cape and the Kongo saying that likens a secret code to the tying of a knot.¹⁷⁰ In Harriet Powers's quilts, the threads that bind the quilt top to the bottom create a subtle latticework resembling the Kongo motif of "myriad lozenges in openwork."¹⁷¹ The latter symbolizes the web of energy that sustains life, in addition to uniting all members of a given community.¹⁷² Crossed lines reminiscent of the Kongo cosmogram (*dikenga*),¹⁷³ feature prominently throughout the quilts; they delineate

¹⁶⁸ Vlach, *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts*, 48-54.

¹⁶⁹ Wahlman, *Signs and Symbols*, 89.

¹⁷⁰ Bunseki, *African Cosmology of the Bantu-Kongo*, 110.

¹⁷¹ Thompson and Cornet, *The Four Moments of the Sun*, 105.

¹⁷² Bunseki, *African Cosmology*, 142-3.

¹⁷³ Stuckey, *Slave Culture*, 91.

the panels, fill empty space in the blocks depicting the *Garden of Eden*, the *Holy Family* and the *Life of Job* and, with arms outstretched, it is on intersecting lines that the figure of Jesus suffers. In Powers' *Pictorial Quilt* and an earlier piece titled *Bible Quilt* (ca. 1886) (Figure 22) multiple suns crowd many panels, usually in groups of even numbers—all inviting comparison with the Kongo *dikenga* and its oppositional arrangement of circular forms to signify (as noted earlier) the “four moments of the sun” as it passes through the lands of the living and the dead. Not only that, her use of red, black, white and yellow patches echoes the association of these colors with the infinite cycle of the sun.¹⁷⁴

Although the emphasis on solar and lunar symbols in her quilts might have been influenced by historical events, the very fact that they also feature in an apron worn by Harriet Powers in an 1897 photograph has led quilt scholar Maude Wahlman to suggest that she might have practiced conjure or was a member of a Masonic order (Figure 23).¹⁷⁵

Also relating Powers' *Pictorial Quilt* to Kongo iconography is a motif in the panel illustrating the trials of Job.¹⁷⁶ It takes the form of a diamond shaped lozenge with a sun symbol placed at each corner. According to Powers, the motif represents Job's coffin but curiously, it resembles a design incised on an undated Kongo funerary monument (*diboondo*) that means “the grand emptiness of death, around which man perambulates” (Figure 24). At the same time, “Job's coffin” –a symbol of death and the possibility of an

¹⁷⁴ Bunseki, *African Cosmology of the Bantu-Kongo*, 140.

¹⁷⁵ Wahlman, *Signs and Symbols*, 65.

¹⁷⁶ The panel with Job's coffin is located in the top left corner of 1898 quilt.

afterlife--recalls the *ngengele* crystal, which, in Kongo cosmology, “symbolizes the transparency of death, through which we see the other world, as through water.”¹⁷⁷

Admittedly, these parallels may very well be accidental, especially since Harriet Powers’s African ancestry is yet to be ascertained and there is no evidence that she was associated with Kongo captives in Athens, Georgia where she spent most of her life. On the other hand, we know that she was in her twenties when (as noted earlier) the slave ship “Wanderer” brought a consignment of Central Africans to Georgia’s Jekyll Island in 1858. Tahro, one of the Africans in that slave ship, allegedly worked at the Palmetto Fire Brick Works where many of the *minkisi*-looking Afro-Carolinian face-vessels were made. In short, elements reminiscent of Fon and Kongo influences are so strong in Harriet Powers’ quilts that nothing should be off the table until her past and African connections have been fully investigated.

Another quilt that deserves special attention is Josie Covington’s *Album Quilt* (ca. 1895) from Triune, Tennessee. It is a patchwork of small fragments of cloth-- scraps of red,¹⁷⁸ yellow, blue, white and black; some are checkered, others floral, striped, spotted and dotted. The motifs include appliquéd, cutouts of hands, hearts, scissors, flowering plants, human feet and a female form--all surrounded by panels displaying checker board, zig zag, pinwheel, diamond, cross, stripe and bowtie patterns, all in various sizes and colors (Figure 25). Small pockets of patterns bounce against each other, competing for the

¹⁷⁷ Thompson and Cornet, *The Four Moments of the Sun*, 84.

¹⁷⁸ Note the dominance of the color red, an empowering hue used for protection in both the United States and Kongo. Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society*, 41.

viewer's attention and generating a sense of playful chaos. This is not to suggest that the artist was sloppy in her work; her choice of motifs and their informal arrangement seem deliberate, investing the quilt with a visually arresting power much more striking than that of a normal coverlet. The hand motif at the center of the textile recalls the *mojo* hand, and by including the hand in her quilt (one even cut from red fabric like a hoodoo charm) Covington may very well have been referencing the protective qualities of these charms and incorporating their power into her artwork, thus leading many scholars to suspect that this quilt might have once had a spiritual function similar to that of *nkisi*, protecting its user(s).¹⁷⁹ Prominence is also given to plant motifs, suggesting that they might have medicinal, healing or talismanic implications to the artist, as in conjure or *Vodou*. Magical plants and herbs were essential inclusions in both *minkisi* and *mojo* hands and sharp cacti and “witch-resistant plants” were planted in Kongo to guard graves and homes.¹⁸⁰ It is possible that the artist included the floral motif to instill the textile with the mystical healing and defensive qualities of certain plants.

All told, the afore-mentioned examples of African retentions from the Deep South—reputed to be the cradle of African American culture—not only reveals elements that can easily be traced to Kongo influence, but also the hybridization that has occurred over the years, a phenomenon that now serves as a source of inspiration for many formally

¹⁷⁹ Wahlman, *Signs and Symbols*, 65.

¹⁸⁰ Thompson and Cornet, *The Four Moments of the Sun*, 78.

and informally trained contemporary black artists who frequently mine their African past, sometimes unaware of their ethnic-specific or Kongo sources.

The Blues *Nganga*: The Skulls of James “Son Ford” Thomas

Though invisible to the naked eye, ancestral spirits (called *minkisi* and *bsimbi*) were thought to share the Kongo landscape with human beings, accessible only to ritual specialists (*nganga*) through dreams, trances and certain sacred signs such as cruciform-stones, gnarled roots and other human-made objects. After the Middle Passage, Kongo ritual specialists created new symbols in the United States with which they invoked ancestral spirits in times of crisis. Other African captives did something similar, making do with what they could salvage from the new environment and relying on their memory to produce objects similar to those they had left behind on the other side of the Atlantic. The emphasis on improvisation soon developed into a folk tradition through which visual and ritual recollections of the African past were passed down directly and indirectly to subsequent generations of African Americans.

The self-taught artist James “Son Ford” Thomas (1926-1993) is a product of this folk tradition. A resident of Leland, Mississippi and blues musician before his death in 1993, he is most well known for his construction of ghoulish, grinning skulls formed from the white clay he collected from the hills near his home (Figure 26).¹⁸¹ Because of the

¹⁸¹ William Ferris, "Vision in Afro-American Folk Art: The Sculpture of James Thomas," *Journal of American Folklore* 88, no. 348 (1975): 119.

mystique generated by his skull sculptures, Thomas can be regarded as an American *nganga* in whose works certain elements of Kong *minkisi* persist—elements that also lend their *mojo* to hoodoo and the Delta Blues.¹⁸²

As in Kongo, death and the supernatural were a constant presence in Thomas's life. Besides playing the Blues, he made his living as a gravedigger and embalmer for the local funeral home. He was raised by a grandfather who believed that the Delta landscape was inhabited by immaterial entities he referred to as “spooks.”¹⁸³ Growing up in rural Mississippi, Thomas was audience to folktales that were common in the Deep South,¹⁸⁴ creepy tales of “spooks” and “haints”¹⁸⁵ that combine African and American aspects.¹⁸⁶ Because of his lifestyle of jook joints and Blues music, he felt more in league with the

¹⁸² Paul Arnett, “Root Sculpture: Tornadoes Inside Eggs,” in *Souls Grown Deep: African American Art of the South, Volume One: The Tree Gave the Dove a Leaf*, ed. Paul Arnett, (Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2000), 133.

¹⁸³ Ferris, “Vision in Afro-American Folk Art,” 119.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹⁸⁵ Maude Wahlman et al., “The Hidden Charms of the Deep South,” in *Souls Grown Deep: African American Art of the South, Volume One: The Tree Gave the Dove a Leaf*, ed. Paul Arnett (Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2000), 87.

¹⁸⁶ Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*, 113-32; Chireau, *Black Magic*, 84.

Devil¹⁸⁷ than the Christian church and he put stock in the weird powers of hoodoo to curse and distress.¹⁸⁸ It was in this atmosphere, where the supernatural beliefs of the Kongo remain steadfast into the present day, “Son Ford” Thomas developed his creative process and the elements of his style and production that are evocative of *minkisi*.

Like a Central African *nganga*, “Son Ford” Thomas was artistically inspired to manufacture his artworks by visionary dreams,¹⁸⁹ as if the spirit of the object was contacting him like an eager *nkisi* looking for a home. With an idea, or “future” as he called it, now lodged soundly in his mind, the artist would collect his chosen medium of white clay from the banks of a river, in order to construct his next sculpture.¹⁹⁰ Out of the collected clay, he would form a head shaped lump, which he would then cut down until it had the desired skeletal visage.¹⁹¹ If the finished skull was to be used as an ashtray or another sort of container, the interior space would be scooped out, in addition to the

¹⁸⁷ Please note that the Devil of African American folk culture is not the infinitely evil creature of Western Christianity. He is a trickster figure that incorporates African spirits Satan as *Eshu-Elegba*. See Chireau, *Black Magic*, 84, and Thompson and Cornet, *Four Moments of the Sun*, 153.

¹⁸⁸ William Ferris, “Inside the Jook Joint: Blues and the Sculpture of James Thomas,” in *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South, Volume One: The Tree Gave the Dove a Leaf*, ed. Paul Arnett (Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2000), 247.

¹⁸⁹ Ferris, “Vision in Afro-American Folk Art,” 119.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹⁹¹ Thompson and Cornet, *The Four Moments of the Sun*, 162.

hollows designating the eyes, nose and mouth. Thomas was fond of lining the ocular cavities of these spectral sculptures with tinfoil and filling the grinning mouths with teeth, either abandoned dentures, human teeth collected at the local dentist's office or corn kernels and pebbles of similar shape and size (Figure 27). From there, the skull might be reinforced with putty, air-dried or baked and carefully painted to reflect the subtle coloring of the human bones in which the artist was so familiar.¹⁹² The finished objects often resemble the grimaced face of a fierce *nkisi nkondi* or the hollow eye sockets of *minkisi* constructed from the skulls of chimpanzees (Figure 28).

The connections that can be drawn between "Son Ford" Thomas's sculpted skulls and Kongo *minkisi* are apparent if one is familiar with the ritual construction process and symbolic materials that entrench a spirit into the African objects, as well as the initial contact by way of the *nkisi* spirit through dreams of the *nganga*. Visions are not an unusual form of creative stimulation among African American vernacular artists¹⁹³ and this may stem in part from the Kongo notion that the soul can voluntarily leave the body during sleep to travel through this world or the other, the information the soul encounters is transmitted to the bodies by way of dreams, so that the bodily self can receive communication and wisdom from realms usually unavailable due to physical limitations.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹² Ferris, "Vision in Afro-American Folk Art," 130.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 116.

¹⁹⁴ Bockie, *Death and the Invisible Powers*, 129.

Similar beliefs have been documented among rural African Americans in the early twentieth century and images received during the night were interpreted as omens regarding the future.¹⁹⁵ The sculptures revealed to “Son Ford” Thomas in nocturnal visions are landmarks in the trajectory of innovation in the African Diaspora, creative inspiration received in the same manner by the Kongo *nganga* and “Son Ford” Thomas, though a temporal and literal sea separate the two.

“Son Ford” Thomas did not appear to consider his artworks as enclosing a spiritual entity, yet many are designed as container with a hollow area waiting to be filled, be it by cigarette ashes or perhaps a passing “spook,” which is similar to the use of *minkisi* as container. The artist’s choice of white clay as medium for his skeletal busts also evokes comparisons to the symbolism of the Kongo; the white clay *Mpemba* was essential to *minkisi* and signified “the white skin of the dead, their moral rightness and their clairvoyance”¹⁹⁶ and Thomas said that when humans die, “we all going the same place, and that’s down in the clay,”¹⁹⁷ granting the medium an association with death in the mind of the artist, just as in Kongo. Add to this, the artist’s inclusion of tin foil, embedding the

¹⁹⁵ Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*, 496-504; and Georgia Writers Project, *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negroes* (Athens: University of Georgia, 1940), 5.

¹⁹⁶ MacGaffey et al., *Astonishment and Power*, 62.

¹⁹⁷ Ferris, "Vision in Afro-American Folk Art," 131.

“flash of the spirit”¹⁹⁸ in the ghostly faces, as well as bodily relics in the form of teeth and the *bilongo* has been compiled, bestowing the spark of life on a neo-*nkisi*,¹⁹⁹ influenced by the ghosts of the Kongo past and the unique creative expression of the Mississippi Blues man.

In the artworks of unsung African American potters, quilters such as Josie Covington and Harriet Powers, as well as James “Son Ford” Thomas, the viewer can sense the spiritual presence of the Kongo in the Americas despite the fact these artists did not explicitly reference *minkisi* in the form or function of their work. Kongo spirituality contributed greatly to the formation of the African American culture and aesthetics that produced these artists. That being said, these artists were also unique individuals; though inspired by tradition, they are innovative at the same time. As a result, their works serve as a bridge between the African past and the American present.

¹⁹⁸ Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 118.

¹⁹⁹ Thompson and Cornet, *Four Moment of the Sun*, 159.

CHAPTER 4: MODERN *MOJO*: *MINKISI* AND AFRICAN AMERICAN ART IN THE TWENTIETH AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURIES

Until the late nineteenth century, European American artists and critics regarded realism as the ultimate goal of art and misunderstood the emphasis on stylization in African sculpture and masks as “primitive” and a technical deficiency. Ritual objects such as *minkisi*, with their accumulation of charms were labeled as “fetishes” and relegated to ethnographic museums to underscore the prevailing Eurocentric view of African cultures as underdeveloped and superstitious.²⁰⁰ It is little wonder that many academically trained black artists rejected the ancient African emphasis on stylization and embraced academic realism in order to have their works accepted by the mainstream “fine art” community. Ironically, the same so-called “primitive” images from Africa soon became a source of

²⁰⁰ The term “fetish” originated in the eighteenth-century writings of philosopher Charles de Brosses, responding to his exposure to African sculpture. He classified African religion as “fetishism, the direct worship of particular earthly material objects as themselves endowed with quasi-personal intentionality and divine powers capable of gratifying mundane desires.” He mistakenly came to the conclusion that Africans worshiped objects such as *minkisi*, imbuing them with undeserved mystical power, rather than understanding that the veneration was directed at the invisible spirit housed within the item. See William Pietz, “Fetish,” in *Critical Terms for Art History*, eds. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (New York: University Of Chicago Press, 2003), 306-310.

inspiration for many European artists at the beginning of the twentieth century, contributing significantly to the birth of Modern art.²⁰¹

The new development encouraged many black artists to explore some aspects of their African artistic heritage in the 1920s and 1930s to create what is now known as the “New Negro” movement, otherwise called the “Harlem Renaissance.”²⁰² A review of the works produced during the Harlem Renaissance reveals that while several black artists explored formal elements of African sculptures and some even incorporated the term “fetish” in their titles,²⁰³ specific references to Kongo *minkisi* are rare. This apparent neglect may be due to the scarcity of *minkisi* in major American collections during the period. For instance, a catalogue published in 1935 by the Museum of Modern Art (New York) identified only twelve American institutions with African collections.²⁰⁴ It is also possible to attribute the neglect to the widespread association of *minkisi* with “conjure,”

²⁰¹ Mark Antliff and Patricia Leighton, "Primitive," in *Critical Terms for Art History*, eds. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 219. See also William Rubin, ed., *Primitivism in 20th Century Art*, 2vols (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984) and Carole Sweeney, *From Fetish to Subject: Race, Modernism, and Primitivism, 1919-1935* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2004), 18.

²⁰² Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro* (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925), 254-67 and Mary S. Campbell et al., eds., *Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America* (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1987).

²⁰³ For example, *Fetiche et Fleurs* (1926) by Palmer Hayden and *Les Fetiches* (1938) by Lois Mailou Jones.

²⁰⁴ Warren Robbins and Nancy Ingram Nooter, *African Art in American Collections* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 30.

“voodoo” and “superstition,” which conceivably discouraged a number of black artists from exploring their aesthetic potentials of this genre of African art.

Farewell to the Dead: Reverberations of *Minkisi* in the Mortuary Photographs of James Van Der Zee

Nonetheless, reverberations of *minkisi* are evident in certain mortuary photographs of the dead taken by James Van Der Zee (1886-1983) between the 1920s and 1960s. Admittedly, the practice of this type of photography in the United States dates back to the mid-nineteenth century, when the bereaved had pictures of the dead taken not only to soften the pain of bereavement, but also to reinforce the hope that the dead would awake in heaven.²⁰⁵ Yet James Van Der Zee’s portraits of the dead differ significantly from those of his predecessors because of his highly imaginative manipulation of the photomontage technique used to create dreamlike configurations, softening the harsh reality of death for the viewer. Because of their assemblage structure, many of his mortuary photographs (especially those published in *The Harlem Book of the Dead*) recall the *minkisi*-related features of ancient Kongo gravesites, which, as mentioned in the last chapter, seem to have survived in many parts of the Deep South.²⁰⁶ As Owen Dodson and Camille Billops aptly

²⁰⁵ See Miles Orwell, *American Photography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 24-5. See also James Ruby, *Secure the Shadows: Death and Photography in America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).

²⁰⁶ See also, John Michael Vlach, *By the Work of their Hands: Studies in Afro-American Folklife* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1991), 43-47.

observe, Van Der Zee's mortuary photographs are "more than representational reflections of mourning rites. They reveal [as well] the history of a time in Harlem, now past, when society cared for both the living and the dead..."²⁰⁷ However, there is no evidence to suggest that the artist was making intentional reference to the Kongo objects, even though the mystical and aesthetic qualities of *minkisi* had become a significant part of the African American folk life by the early twentieth century, influencing spiritual practices and burial customs. Thus, the possibility cannot be ruled out altogether that Van Der Zee's mortuary portraits had been partly influenced directly or indirectly by these practices.

According to traditional Kongo belief, one's physical body localizes his/her life essence (*mooyo*).²⁰⁸ Therefore to take a photograph of that body is to capture in the virtual image of some aspects of an individual's *mooyo*.²⁰⁹ Even after death, a photo would still contain the *mooyo* of the subject and to own such a snapshot was to invite contact with the spirit.²¹⁰ Normally, the *mooyo* of a person would be destroyed by death, after

²⁰⁷ James Van Der Zee, Owen Dodson, and Camille Billops, *The Harlem Book of the Dead* (Dobbs Ferry, N.Y: Morgan & Morgan, 1978). Quoted from the blurb on the back cover.

²⁰⁸ Kongo *mooyo* should not be confused with the Western concept of soul; the Kongo believed that man had multiple souls of various degrees of durability. See: Jacobson-Widding, *Red-White-Black as a Mode of Thought*, 307-24.

²⁰⁹ This belief may have influenced African American hoodoo spells where a photograph was employed in the manner of bodily material, such as hair or nails. See Jim Haskins, *Voodoo and Hoodoo* (Lanham: Scarborough House Press, 1978), 118-9.

²¹⁰ Jacobson-Widding, *Red-White-Black as a Mode of Thought*, 321-2.

decomposition caused all the bodily fluids to dry up.²¹¹ In Kongo thought, the photograph of an individual, living or dead, could preserve his/her *mooyo* from total obliteration. So it is that that the mortuary photographs of James Van Der Zee can easily be interpreted as preserving the *mooyo* and memory of their subjects for future generations.

Many of his photographs in *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, among others, feature images of Christ, angels, sentimental texts, patriotic insignia and ghostly transparent photos of the subject before death, deployed around the corpse. The configurations recall the *bilongo* (charms) that accumulate on a typical Kongo *minkisi* or the mélange of personal articles found on the body of memory jugs. In his portrait of a soldier, the deceased corpse is surrounded by patriotic symbols, including the American flag and illustrations of his brothers in arms, which convey his loyalty to the ideals of his country and the selflessness of his service (Figure 29). This patriotic imagery might easily inspire family members to follow in his footsteps, just as objects placed on Kongo graves would be expected to make the wisdom of the deceased accessible to descendants.

Religious images of Christ and angelic beings inspire hope in life after death--in a manner similar to the use of *mpemba* clay in the construction of *minkisi*. For just as *mpemba* acts as a conduit of communication between the visible and invisible worlds in Kongo belief, prophets, angels and Jesus Christ relate Christians to the Almighty through prayers (Figure 30). The streams of light that illuminate many of the mortuary portraits recall the mirrors and reflective items common in *minkisi*; this light seems to charge the scene with spiritual energy, while also giving the viewer a glimpse of the hereafter, in this

²¹¹ Ibid., 307.

case, the glory of Christian Heaven. The frequent juxtaposition of the animate and inanimate bodies of the deceased virtually transforms a mortuary photograph into a site of memory as well as a reliquary, mediating between the living and the dead (Figure 31).

Once again, it is uncertain whether James Van Der Zee was influenced directly by Kongo *minkisi* and burial practices, yet the iconographic parallels between his mortuary photographs and the latter are so striking that they cannot be ignored. Let us hope that future research will throw more light on the issue.

Hoodoo Nouveau: Reclaiming, Reframing and Recontextualizing *Minkisi* in Contemporary African American Art

While the leading artists of the Harlem Renaissance used their African ancestral legacy to redefine their African American identity,²¹² their counterparts in the latter part of the twentieth century mined the same legacy for different purposes. For instance, during the Civil Rights as well as the Women Liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s, black artists focused on those aspects of the legacy that could be used to empower the African American demand for equal opportunities in the United States.²¹³ As a result, some artists like Jeff Donaldson, Paul Keen and Ademola Olugebefola featured *Sango* (the Yoruba deity of thunderstorm and social justice) in their works. Others, like Betye Saar,

²¹² For details, see Anne Elizabeth Carroll, *Word, Image and the New Negro: Representation and Identity in the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington and Indiana: Indiana University Press), 2005.

²¹³ Patton, *African American Art*, 183-200.

Noah Purifoy, Ed Sorrells-Adewale and Ron Griffin explored the political and aesthetic potentials of Kongo *minkisi*.

The Liberation of Aunt Jemima (1972) by Betye Saar (b. 1926) is a transformation and recontextualization of Kongo *nkisi* imagery (Figure 32). The mirror below her breasts recalls those used for sealing the cavities (*mooyo*) of many *minkisi*. Through this piece, the artist critiques the racist stereotypical imagery of black women as natural-born cooks and maids. The figure of the nineteenth century Kentucky cook Nancy Green, dominates the composition. As the spokes-person for Pillsbury's "Aunt Jemima Pancake Mix," she soon lost her identity and became a personification of "Aunt Jemima," a mythical figure invented to sell the product bearing her name.²¹⁴ Much like the numerous cycles of rebirth that caused Kongo ancestors to transform into ambiguous *minkisi*, Green became even more removed from her actual identity when it is recognized that the character of Aunt Jemima followed the model of the antebellum Mammy, the archetypal African American female of American stereotyping.²¹⁵ Both archetype and individual, the feminine figure enclosed by the mirrored-lined case is enlivened by materials at her feet and inserted into a cavity in her torso representing memories of the past: a print of an African American maid tending to an European American child and bits of cotton like those grown by slaves and sharecroppers, as well as the empowerment of the present in the form of a Black Power

²¹⁴ Kenneth W. Goings, *Mammy and Uncle Mose: Black Collectibles and American Stereotyping* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 28 and Patton, *African American Art*, 201.

²¹⁵ Goings, *Mammy and Uncle Mose*, 14.

fist. In the manner of a knife wielding *Nkisi Nkondi*, this Aunt Jemima is heavily armed with a rifle and grenade by her side and has no time for flipping pancakes or helping birth babies. Rather, she is prepared to protect those who have been similarly stereotyped and, at the same time, confront the perpetrators of such bigotry.

In *Shield of Quality* (1974), Betye Saar enshrines the memory of her ancestors (Figure 33) in an assemblage of personal effects reminiscent of those placed on burial sites or attached to memory jars. Among the items are pieces of lace and feathers, a leather glove and a baby spoon, some of the objects belonged to the artist's aunt. Much like the Kongo *nganga* sanctifying an *nkisi*, Betye Saar considers the process of accumulating the materials to create her artworks as a "power gathering" ritual act.²¹⁶ According to her, the final product is like that of "a shaman mixing a potion and ... having the potion work."²¹⁷

The daughter of Betye Saar, sculptor Alison Saar (b. 1956) also constructs objects intended to generate some kind of shamanistic power. She says that her work is "informed by African ideas but not necessarily directly."²¹⁸ Thus, while many of her pieces resemble *minkisi* in form, their contexts and meanings are different, all reflecting personal,

²¹⁶ Jessica Dallow and Barbara C. Matilsky, *Family Legacies: The Art of Betye, Lezley and Alison Saar* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), 46.

²¹⁷ Jessica Dallow, "Reclaiming Histories: Betye and Alison Saar, Feminism, and the Representation of Black Womanhood," *Feminist Studies* 30, no. 1 (spring 2004): 75-113.

²¹⁸ Mary Nooter Roberts and Alison Saar, *Body Politics: The Female Image in Luba Art and the Sculpture of Alison Saar* (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 2000), 28.

environmental and artistic experience, her intellectual development, as well as interest in religion and African American folk culture.²¹⁹

Focusing on the human figure, Alison Saar sculpts rough-hewn wooden forms that contain elements that would not be out of place when placed beside traditional Kongo *nkisi*. Some of her figures have nails sticking out of their bodies; others have symbolic knick-knacks attached to them or *mooyo*-like compartments that conceal various articles. The nails used by the artist flush with the surface plane and sometime hold down a metal foil wrapped round the body. In *Briar Patch*, the nails not only hold down the metal straps that bind the slumbering female figure, but also protrude from the body (Figure 34). Though the artist admits this work references *minkisi*, the nails are not intended to spur the figure into action, as they are expected to do in a Kongo *Nkisi Nkondi*. Rather, the nails in *Briar of Patch* are designed to keep the figure “bound within her own troubles.”²²⁰

The wire-haired bust titled *Chaos in the Kitchen* was also “inspired, in part, by *nkisi* sculptures”²²¹ and, in part, by the relationship between a woman and her hair (Figure 35). Nails are again present in this work, though they lay flat against the figure’s patterned metal face. Conversely, the wire curls of the woman’s coiffure spring energetically from her sculpted scalp, entrapping tiny trinkets that represent her past and her dreams of the

²¹⁹ Dallow, “Reclaiming Histories,” 92.

²²⁰ Roberts and Saar, *Body Politics*, 25.

²²¹ Dallow and Matilsky, *Family Legacies*, 48.

future. Among the baubles tangled in her tresses are a pair of scissors, an abandoned comb and a small replica of the Eiffel Tower, souvenirs that document the life of this imaginary woman, recalling the accumulations of materials on a typical Kongo *nkisi* chronicling the rituals it has witnessed.²²²

Parallels can be easily drawn between *minkisi* and several other examples of Alison Saar's sculpture in which the artist hollowed cavities within the body of the figure and then enclosed symbolic materials in the interior space.²²³ In some instances, the artist sealed these compartments but in others, the cavity remains accessible through small, hinged doors that can be opened to reveal the "secrets" concealed in a given image. In the blue-hued depiction of a chanteuse entitled *Diva* (Figure 36), a colorful toy parakeet was encased within a hollow above the left breast of the figure and then closed with a piece of transparent material. Much like a Kongo *nganga* would include material from predatory birds in an *nkisi* to instruct the indwelling spirit to hunt wrongdoers like a hawk, the plastic toy empowers the spirit of *Diva* to sing like a sweet little bird.²²⁴

²²² Roberts and Saar, *Body Politics*, 30.

²²³ Dallow, "Reclaiming Histories," 98.

²²⁴ Roberts and Saar, *Body Politics*, 59.

The interior of the chest compartment of Saar's sculpture *Si J'Etais Blanc* (If I were white) is more accessible than that of *Diva*.²²⁵ Only a small hook holds its doors closed yet once inside, the viewer would surely find the contents more dangerous, as it is lined with jagged chunks of broken glass (Figure 37). The figure itself resembles a jointed, folk art doll stiffly seated on a red chair. From the waist up, his wooden skin is painted a dark brown and on the bottom half, he wears pants formed from concrete and shards of blue and white ceramic tiles. His lips are also made from ceramic shards, although pink, and his eyes are represented by bits of glass in a manner that is extremely similar to the eyes of many *minkisi*, while the cracked pieces of ceramic are reminiscent of the broken crockery that decorate Kongo and African American graves.

Si J'Etais Blanc was Alison Saar's first sculpture and it demonstrates that, from the start, she incorporated formal elements of Kongo art into her symbolic language. Although visually similar to a Kongo object, *Si J'Etais Blanc* does not house "empowering" materials like an *nkisi*; rather this spirit is "vitiated and vulnerable" due to "internalized racism."²²⁶

Similar to *Si J'Etais Blanc* due to their hinged chest compartments, the works *Love*, *Zombie*, *A Potent Hex That Robs 'Em of All Sense* and *Sapphire* are concerned with the

²²⁵ The piece has been influenced by a Josephine Baker's song (of the same title) about racial inequality. See Lisa Gail Collins, *The Art of History: African American Women Artists Engage the Past* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press), 2002, 55-56.

²²⁶ Judith Wilson, "Down to the Crossroads: The Art of Alison Saar," *Calaloo* 14, no. 1 (1991): 108.

subjects of love and lust, rather than self doubt caused by a racist society (Figures 38 and 39). While again making reference to *minkisi* in form, these works also incorporate elements gleaned from the Kongo-influenced practices of Hoodoo/*Vodou* in New Orleans, adding yet another layer of African inspiration to Alison Saar's artwork. Both sculptures represent attractive women. *Love Zombie* is full-length and *Sapphire* is a bust and both have hinged door-like breasts that can open to reveal the materials hidden inside her chest. *Love Zombie* was part of a larger installation entitled *Love Potion #9*, in which the artist decorated a room with *veve* for the passionate Haitian *lwa Erzulie* and built sculptures that embodied hoodoo love charms and their effects.²²⁷ In effect, infatuation seems to have turned the woman represented in *Love Zombie* into a kind of robot; a peep into the cavity on her chest reveals a "charred sort of heart that's been bound" and studded with nails.²²⁸ Much like their use in *Briar Patch*, the nails embedded in the heart of this passionate creature do not incite her into action as they would in an *nkisi*, rather they are a tool of depression and emotional confinement.

When the electric-tipped breasts of *Sapphire* are swung open, the previously concealed internal components suggest a more lively spirit inhabiting this artwork, lending a lustful and luminescent energy to the object. At the center of the chest compartment is a glowing crimson light bulb whose warm radiance silhouettes the outlines of the jumbled bits of red plastic that line the interior surfaces. Saar describes this work as a "shrine to

²²⁷ Ibid., 116.

²²⁸ Roberts and Saar, *Body Politics*, 38.

passion” and her choice of the color red references Western romantic kitsch (Valentine’s Day candy, for example) and lust (the glow of a red-light district),²²⁹ as well as the use of red materials to enliven the spirits of *mojo* hands and *minkisi* associated with sexual desire.²³⁰ As in *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima by her mother*, Alison Saar’s uses *Sapphire* to interrogate the stereotypical representation of some black women in the antebellum South as fierce and cantankerous mammies.²³¹ The title recalls the name of a domineering and emasculating black female character in the *Amos ‘n’ Andy* television series (popular in the US between the 1920s and 1950s) evidently cast to revive the image of the mammy.²³² Through the nude portrayal and sensual pose, Saar also could be referencing the idea of the African American “harlot” or “jezebel,” a promiscuous woman who invited the abuse of men due to her arousing appearance.²³³ Though she certainly is sexy and assertive, Saar’s *Sapphire* is no one-dimensional stereotype; she is a woman of complex internal motivation, as can be understood through all the “goofy odds and

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Jacobson-Widding, *Red-White-Black as a Mode of Thought*, 143.

²³¹ See Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks; An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Viking Press, 1973).

²³² Lisa E. Farrington, “Reinventing Herself: The Black Female Nude,” *Woman’s Art Journal* 24, no. 2 (Autumn, 2003 - Winter, 2004): 22.

²³³ Goings, *Mammy and Uncle Mose*, 67.

ends”²³⁴ that form her heart, as well as an individual of brilliant energy, the glow of which can even be seen when her heart is sealed.

The New Jersey-based artist Willie Cole (b. 1955) has also used elements of Kongo *minkisi* to counter racist imagery of blacks. His sculptural piece *House and Field*, comments on the ambivalent use of “Jocko” lawn jockey in the Old South to honor Tom Graves, a very young boy and one of George Washington’s slaves. According to the story, his master asked him to hold a lantern as American troops crossed the Delaware during the Revolutionary War (1775-1883); but by the time the troops returned, they found Tom Graves already frozen to death, holding reins in his hands.²³⁵ Hence the creation of the “Jocko” statue to commemorate his loyalty, an image that some racists later placed on their lawns to humiliate blacks or remind them of their antebellum subservience to whites. In *House and Field*, Willie Cole places two “lawn jockeys” (purchased from a craft shop) side by side, so that one represents a “house” slave, and the other, a “field” slave (Figure 40). The artist has slightly altered the appearance of the “house” slave by adding cowrie shells to his eyes and replacing his hitching ring with a Christian cross. On the other hand, the statue of the “field” slave has been transformed into an *Nkisi Nkondi* with mirrors inserted into his eyes. A medicine pack protrudes from his chest; his torso is encrusted with a clay-like substance and riddled with nails and he holds a knife in his outstretched

²³⁴ Dallow and Matilsky, *Family Legacies*, 45.

²³⁵ Goings, *Mammy and Uncle Mose*, 52.

hand. The artist also Africanized the statue's costume, covering his trousers with a raffia skirt and adding feathers to his red jockey cap.

The legendary Civil Rights' icon Malcolm X is known to have employed the "house" versus "field" slave metaphor to reinforce his call on all blacks to close ranks and fight for racial equality and total freedom in the United States. In his view, the "house Negro," or domestic servant, was happy to live a life of relative luxury and was more concerned with the wellbeing of the slave owner than himself and his fellow bondsmen. The "field Negro," on the other hand, lived a life of the most horrible conditions and fought his oppression at every turn.²³⁶ Although this contrast works well as a metaphor, the conditions of slave life as described by Malcolm X were not exactly true. The life of a domestic was hardly something to be desired, as the latter is at the constant beck and call of the master, isolated from his/her family and the social life of the slave community. In fact, the "house" slave was obliged to replace African traditions with those of the European Americans. In contrast, the "field" slave enjoyed more freedom and had more time for relaxation, socialization and most importantly, could perpetuate African traditions amongst their peers with less European influence.²³⁷

Thus, Willie Cole's *House and Field* seems to reflect this historical reality, rather than the metaphor used by Malcolm X. The artist's *House* [slave] is no traitor to his peers;

²³⁶ Patterson Sims, *Anxious Objects: Willie Cole's Favorite Brands* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 63-4.

²³⁷ Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 331-9.

his cowrie eyes suggest that he is still African, even though he seems to be caught in the trappings of European American culture. Needless to say, the *Field* [slave] also felt the influence of Western culture, signified by his uniform, but due to being surrounded by other Africans, the traditions of his ancestors were not overwhelmed; rather, they had been assimilated into his new identity as an African American. It is significant that Cole chose to represent the *Field* [slave] as an *nkisi*, as Kongo people were employed as “field hands or were used in capacities that required little or no contact with European Americans” and due to this, were able “to retain a cultural vitality that laid the foundation for the development of African American culture.”²³⁸ In short, both the *House* and *Field* [slaves] can be said to possess a “double consciousness;” that is, an awareness of being African and American at the same time.²³⁹ They are loaded with meanings, reminding us of the complexities of the black experience in the United States.

Minkisi elements also resonate in Willie Cole’s mixed media piece *Dog Eat Dog* (Figure 40). The silhouetted creatures constructed from bits of old wood and metal dashing across Cole’s *Dog Eat Dog* are reminiscent of *minkisi kozo*, with mouths open and panting, thick metal fur composed of dirty nails and a predatory drive to catch what they are instructed to pursue (Figure 41).²⁴⁰ As mentioned earlier, the domesticated dog was highly

²³⁸ Holloway, “The Origins of African American Culture,” 28.

²³⁹ For more on the concept of “double-consciousness” in black America, see W.E.B. DuBois, *The Illustrated Souls of Black Folk* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2005).

²⁴⁰ Cole works with used materials because he believes in “energy transference”

valued in ancient Kongo culture due to its aid in hunting and the belief that the animal mediates between the world of the living and that of the dead. Cole's hunters, on the other hand, are chasing each other, with the incantation "Dog eat dog" repeatedly inscribed on the whitewashed background as each dog chases one smaller across the picture plane. *Minkisi kozo* would be employed by the innocent to identify and punish those who were not but in the modern world of Cole's *Dog Eat Dog*, no one is guiltless and therefore, everyone is pursued. In other words, the modern world is so competitive that you must watch out for your own interest first, as everyone else is doing the same.

Because Renee Stout (b. 1958) has become world-famous for her reinterpretation and recontextualization of *minkisi*, no discourse on the subject in African American art would be complete without mentioning her works. According to the artist, her first contact with Kongo *minkisi* was at the age of ten. She was at the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburg (PA), taking an art class when "I saw a piece there that had all these nails in it. And when I first saw that one; it was like I was drawn to it. I didn't really know why... And I think once I got exposed to more African art in my travels as I got older, I found that I started going back to the pieces like that.... Because I feel like I'm coming back with a little more knowledge each time."²⁴¹ That experience not only laid the foundation for her current

from objects, a concept which is similar to Kongo belief. See: Sims, *Anxious Objects*, 22.

²⁴¹ Michael Harris, "Resonance, Transformation and Rhyme: The Art of Renee Stout," in *Astonishment and Power*, ed. Dean Trackman (Washington D.C.: The Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 111. See also Michelle Owen-Workman and Stephen Bennett Phillips, *Readers, Advisors and Storefront Churches: Renee Stout, A Mid-Career Retrospective* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), 3.

signature pieces, but also led her to explore African American *Vodou* and conjure practices. The result is that many of her works now incorporate talismanic objects, which reflect Kongo and African American spiritual beliefs, as well as her socio-political views and personal history. Though idiosyncratic, her images still exude powers similar to those of the Kongo *Nkisi Nkondi*, she saw at the Carnegie Museum.

In her well-known work *Fetish No. 2*, the artist-cum-*nganga* cast herself as a life-size *nkisi* by using her own body as mold for the plaster figure to produce an object that doubles as a self-portrait and charm, memorializing and protecting the body that gave it shape (Figure 43).²⁴² Just as *minkisi* act as “a hiding place for people’s souls, to keep and compose in order to preserve life,”²⁴³ Stout states, “I was using my own figure to empower myself, to give myself the strength to deal with the things you have to deal with every day.”²⁴⁴ It is a darkly painted self-portrait in the form of a female nude adorned with spherical charms pouches (the equivalent of *bilongo*) across her shoulders and strings of beads and metal charms encircling her waist, throat and wrists. Protruding from the abdomen is a rectangular compartment, capped with transparent material instead of the mirror that one would expect on a Kongo *nkisi*. Inside this compartment are delicate dried flowers, a postage stamp from Niger and an aged photograph of a small child representing

²⁴² Ibid., 134.

²⁴³ Janzen, *Anthology of Kongo Religion*, 35.

²⁴⁴ Michael Harris, “From Double Consciousness to Double Vision: The Africentric Artist,” *African Arts* 27, no. 2 (1994): 50.

“the power of the spirits, the innocent power of an infant and the artist’s ancestral African heritage.”²⁴⁵ The enlivening medicines of Stout’s *minkisi* (*Fetish No. 2* and others) are not the same as the traditional *bilongo* of the Kongo. Rather, they are personal symbols juxtaposed with articles associated with African American conjure such as strands of hair, cemetery dirt, magical roots, red brick fragments and blood.²⁴⁶ Like *minkisi*, these substances are usually enclosed in containers or bundles that conceal them but in this self-portrait (*Fetish No. 2*), the items inside the figure’s stomach compartment are visible, despite the fact that they are personal. The items contained in the figure’s stomach compartment are both the most obvious and intimate, suggesting the artist conferred her personal vulnerabilities to her doppelganger to be protected.

As noted earlier, Kongo *minkisi* served as agents of social control because of their use to warn the general public of the negative consequences of selfish behavior and evil practices. In other words, good behavior will be rewarded and the opposite will attract mystical justice. That is why Renee Stout’s *Carpetbagger Politician Goes for a Free Ride on a Homeless Woman* (Figure 44) conveys much more than meets the eye. The artist created the piece in 1998 to reflect her view that, by making empty promises instead of finding solutions, US Senator Lauch Faircloth was exploiting the plight of the poor to

²⁴⁵ Owen-Workman and Phillips, *Readers, Advisors and Storefront Churches*, 20.

²⁴⁶ Aliva Wardlaw, “Private Visions” in *Black Art: Ancestral Legacy, The African Impulse in African American Art*, eds. Robert Rozelle et al. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1989), 188.

advance his political career.²⁴⁷ The piece consists of a metal shopping basket to which the artist attaches a painting of a black Virgin Mary and pieces of rags to remind the viewer of the carts used by the homeless for transporting their personal effects. Other materials attached to the cart include “dried oranges, an *Nkisi*-inspired charm...locks of hair, and a mannequin’s hand.”²⁴⁸ Inside the cart is an image identified as that of Senator Lauch Faircloth. Note the crimson embroidery of his name done in backwards script across the figure’s throat. Draped around the figure’s neck is a small wooden box with a glass front containing a peach marzipan pig. On the handle of the shopping cart, Stout has inscribed symbols similar to the Kongo cosmograms. In ancient Kongo culture, knots might serve as charms, in addition to representing a network of social relationships in a given community.²⁴⁹ Thus, by adding the effigy of the Senator in the charm-laden basket—a configuration that reminds us of *nkisi nduda* (Figure 45)—the artist metaphorically brings him closer to the poor and homeless, perhaps to enable him to experience and fully understand their conditions.

Reverberations of *minkisi* are also evident in the works of other academically trained artists such as Bill Maxwell (b. 1934), David Hammons (b. 1943), Houston

²⁴⁷ Owen-Workman and Phillips, *Readers, Advisors and Storefront Churches*, 47.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁹ Bunseki, *The Cosmology of the Bantu-Kongo*, 114, 119, 144.

Conwill (b. 1947) and Radcliffe Bailey (b. 1973), to name only a few.²⁵⁰ A recent painting by mixed-media artist Aziza Claudia Gibson-Hunter titled *Four Moments of the Sun* (2003)—in allusion to Kongo cosmogram *Dikenga*—deserves special attention here (Figure 46). The painting features an expectant black lady adjusting her braided hair as the sun moves across the sky, hinting at the cyclical process of existence and the legacy of what the artist calls “ancestral memory”²⁵¹ that enables black artists in the United States to relate their African past to their American present.

²⁵⁰ Dawoud Bey, "In the Spirit of Minkisi: The Art of David Hammons," *The Third Text, Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Art and Culture*, Volume 8 Issue 27 (Summer 1994), 45-54.

²⁵¹ Carolyn E. Shuttlesworth, ed., *A Proud Continuum: Eight Decades of Art at Howard University* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Gallery of Art, 2005), 111.

CONCLUSION

In view of the data analyzed in the foregoing chapters identifying *minkisi* elements in African American art from the slavery era to the present, it goes without saying that Central African/Kongo influences in the Americas are much more extensive than previously acknowledged in the literature. Two layers of influences can be identified. The first layer consists of Central African retentions in the slavery era that combined with those from the Guinea Coast and the Western Sudan to lay the foundation for black cultures in the Americas. The second layer is more recent—the consequence of the Pan-African and other American Afri-centric movements that began at the turn of the twentieth century. These movements drew attention to the richness of the African past and encouraged blacks in Africa and its Diaspora to draw inspiration from their ancestral legacy

The *nkisi* figure collected from Surinam in 1883 (now in Harvard's Peabody Museum) is a classic example of a Central African carryover that survived the Middle Passage. There are similar carryovers in Cuba where Kongo religious belief survived in *Reglas Congas de Mayombe* (also known as *Palo Monte*), which makes use *minkisi* related imagery called an *Nganga* (the Ki-Kongo word for a ritual specialist). In fact, *Tata*, the Afro-Cuban term for a *Palo Monte* priest, derives from the Ki-Kongo word for father. Strong evidence of *minkisi* influence on Haitian *Vodou* is apparent as well in “power” objects called *paket Kongo*, which recall the Kongo *bilongo* (charms). In short, these

identifiable traces of specific Kongo and *minkisi* carryovers would seem to contradict the *retention* theory (advanced by Melville Herskovits) that African elements in the Americas survived only in “a generalized form” and the *innovation* theory (advanced by Sidney Mintz and Richard Price) that no group of African captives “had a single collective culture to transport” to the Americas.²⁵² As recent studies by Robert Farris Thompson and Michael Gomez point out, it is now possible to identify specific ethnic carryovers in the Caribbean, South America as well as the United States.²⁵³ The materials discussed in this thesis point in the same direction. Notwithstanding, the two theories cannot be dismissed altogether; for such is the complexity of the African Diaspora that both of them are still applicable to some data collected from different parts of the Americas.

Though not as conspicuous as in the Caribbean and South America, creolized Kongo *minkisi* carryovers were hidden in plain sight in much of antebellum United States, most especially, in African American quilts, face vessels, memory jars and graveyard decorations. In spite of the changes they have undergone in time and space, these carryovers are still apparent today and they continue to influence African American self-taught and academically trained artists. The important point to note, however, is that pre-nineteenth century African carryovers have since been reinforced by recent currents from Africa. The first current can be traced to the influence of African art on European Modernism at the beginning of the twentieth century. As a result, W.E.B. DuBois and

²⁵² Mintz and Price, *The Birth of African American Culture*, 8.

²⁵³ Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*; Thompson, *Face of the Gods*; Thompson and Cornet, *Four Moments of the Sun*.

Alain Locke appealed to black artists to mine their African past in the construction of an African American identity. The second current gathered momentum during the Black Arts movement of the 1960s and 1970s when black artists of different backgrounds explored their ancestral heritage, using it to empower the Civil Rights struggle. Thenceforth, and following the emphasis on multiculturalism in the United States from the late 1970s onward, the African past has become a source of inspiration for reinforcing the political, aesthetic and spiritual dimensions of black identity in the arts. The works of the academically trained artists analyzed in Chapter Four reflect the new developments.

Nonetheless, it should be emphasized that African American art is not homogenous. It is a medley of forms, styles, and perspectives, attesting to the diversity of the black experience in the United States. Yet certain similarities are discernible in this diversity and its visual expression—similarities that often distinguish the works of many black artists from those of their European American counterparts. These similarities derive partly from their conscious or intuitive exploration of their ancestral legacy (including Kongo *minkisi* elements) and partly from their use of the visual arts to document, reinforce and celebrate the richness of African American culture, creativity and spirituality in the United States.

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