

Nkisi nkondi: an image of transference and projective identification in the analytic process

IV International Academic Conference of Analytical Psychology and Jungian Studies
Faculdade de Filosofia, Universidade Catolica Portuguesa, Braga, Portugal
18 – 21 July, 2012

About 25 years ago I had a memorable experience in the last session with a young woman who I had seen for a few years in both individual and group therapy. As we were talking I suddenly became aware that my body was covered with knives. This image stuck in my mind (so to speak) and I was interested sometime later, when attending an exhibition of African art, to discover the *nkosi nkondi* of southern Congo and northern Angola. A *nkisi*, *minkisi* in the plural, is a container for a spirit which can be interacted with by a healer. *Nkisi* “can refer to a spirit, an amulet, a medical treatment, a mask and certain specially qualified human beings.”ⁱ The *nkisi nkondi* is a particular category of *nkisi*, normally a wooden statue, often referred to in the west as a nail fetish. In Bakongo, the *nkomo* of the *nkisi*, the nailing of *nkisi*, is a form of invocation. The *nkisi nkondi* is “a hunter who leaves to hunt in secret.”ⁱⁱ

This paper is an exercise in amplification of my experience in that last session. There are a number of features of the event of the *nkisi nkondi*, which resonate with the event of analysis. Today I want to briefly take up a few of them, under the following headings: construction, power and time.

The Portuguese explorers called the rituals, including the actions, objects, words and philosophy associated with them, which they encountered in Africa, *feitico*. In Portugal this word was used to refer to amulets and relics of the saints. The

Unpublished conference paper. Do not reproduce without permission of author.

English word fetish comes directly from *feitiço*. In Latin *facticius* means 'to do' or 'a thing made by art.'

The concepts of the fetish and fetishism as taken up by psychoanalysis function in a more circumscribed arena than the dynamics of the relationship between the client, the healer and the spirit which are present in the world of the *nkisi*. Freud describes the fetish as "an unsuitable substitute for the sexual object." It serves to deny castration and functions to split the ego. Recent work in psychoanalysis emphasises the role of the fetish in "protection against trauma and depression, release from the outward expression of hostility and contempt while expressing them secretly, relief from psychosomatic symptoms, control over separation anxiety... access to the maternal breast and full possession of the idealized mother."ⁱⁱⁱ According to Renik, "Freud spoke about blurring of fantasy and reality in his articles on fetishism, and I [Renik] have found it useful to think of the phenomenon that underlies certain analytic stalemates as the patient's use of the analyst as a fetish."^{iv}

Bracketing the psychoanalytic focus on stalemate and denial, my question is framed somewhat differently: what might it mean for the patient to use the analyst as an *nkisi nkondi*? One feature of the *nkisi nkondi* that is at odds with the psychoanalytic emphasis on foreclosure is that, according to Rush, in African aesthetics, "the seemingly contradictory ideas of the ephemeral (impermanent, fleeting, short-lived) and the unfinished (on-going, enduring, never-ending) merge in a dialectic that maintains the requisite tension between the two."^v It privileges "accumulative, assembled, sensual, embodied, efficacious" processes

Unpublished conference paper. Do not reproduce without permission of author.

which “coalesce around an active participatory, motivated and generative presence beyond that of the producer. For such aesthetic processes to work, there must be a consciousness and an experience in which the participant(s) and the art/objects/performance(s) are mutually engaged. There is no permanent closure; an open-endedness or unfinishedness is obligatory, with ephemerality at its essence.”^{vi}

MacGaffey observes that “a ‘fetish’ is always a composite fabrication, not simply an unusual natural object.”^{vii} The *nkisi nkondi* is carved by an artist, but Volavkova notes that, “This statuette is not yet an *Nkisi*, but only the basis for one... An *Nkisi* figure comes into existence only after a ceremony in which the force or “respect” (*nkinda*) is put into the image.” A *nganga*, or healer, adds “two large containers of magical material, one around the chin in the shape of a beard and one a cylinder in the middle of the abdomen.”^{viii} It is the ritual action of the healer that turns the statue into a container for a spirit. The resulting figure excites *ngitukula*, ‘astonishment,’ in the mind of the beholder. MacGaffey reminds us that “none of the containers is an image of the spirit contained in it; a figurine that is part of a given *nkisi* complex is not an ‘idol.’”^{ix} The spirit is “invisible and formless until it has been ‘fixed’ (*kumwa*) in a particular body.”^x

The spirit within the *nkisi nkondi* is roused to action when the *nganga* hammers a nail into it. The nails represent wishes and desires of the *nganga*’s clients. Someone may wish to discover what person or spirit has caused them to become ill or to have bad luck. Nailing the *nkisi nkondi* makes it angry and it goes off to hunt down the offending person or spirit. Nails can represent wishes for

Unpublished conference paper. Do not reproduce without permission of author.

protection or of gratitude. They can also be used to seal contracts between parties. The *nkisi nkondi* is a target for a range of positive and negative intentions. It is not in itself good or bad. As the Fon, of West Africa, remind us, “The same divination sign that proclaims longevity, health, and prosperity also announces a person’s death.”^{xi}

What might we say about the analyst as an *nkisi nkondi* using the categories of construction, power and time?

Construction In terms of construction, we can compare the identity of the raw analytic recruit with his or her features of heredity, experience and constitution to a statuette coming fresh from the hands of the sculptor. A supplement must be added to the grain and texture of the wood. According to MacGaffey, “The container itself is a mere object, said to be ‘empty’ (*mpamba*) until ‘medicines’ are put in it. The most central elements are the grave-dirt, kaolin, or sometimes a bone or other relic of an ancestor or of a deceased former priest of the charm, that incorporates a specific personality in the *nkisi*.”^{xii}

Training and personal analysis instil the medicinal elements into the body of the analyst in the form of concepts, psychoanalytic folklore (i.e. gossip or oral history) and mental discipline. The ritual formation of the apprenticeship insures that he or she can be recognised as a person who is available to be used as an analyst. Like the *nkisi nkondi* the analyst is ready to be put to work. The spirit of this particular analyst is ready to be activated by the transferences and projections of patients and clients.

Unpublished conference paper. Do not reproduce without permission of author.

Power The analyst and the *nkisi nkondi* are power figures. In a sense for both figures their passivity or, if you will, their masochism is crucial to the play of forces activated in the encounter. The *nkisi nkondi* receives the blows of the nails, which transmit the power of the clients demands. The analyst suffers the impact of unconscious wishes and desires. Just as the analyst distinguishes various types of transferences, the *nkondi* is pierced by a variety of “nails, spikes, knives, [and] blades... [including] *nsonso*, long iron nails used when an argument was sealed with a vow; *mbeezi*, blades that served to unite an individual to the community; and *baaku*, knives with flaring heads and tapered stems used to eradicate evil in a community.”^{xiii} The nails and the transference must be allowed to stick, to pierce the body, in order for the spirit to be roused. In the form of countertransference the spirit in the analyst “hunts in the night,” we might say the unconscious, to locate objects that have disturbed the patient, or been stolen or lost. Projective identification fixes the flows of psyche so that these objects can be identified and unbound. Patients bring to the analyst desires for revenge, wishes for security and pledges for the future which are all lodged in the body of the analysis, thus allowing for, subtle or dramatic, shifts of energy. The agency of the patient is transformed by passing through the analyst. It becomes efficacious in a way that it was not true before. In an uncanny fashion life is animated.

Time The *nkisi nkondi* bridges the world of the spirits and this world; we could say two orders of time. As Rush described it, the *nkisi nkondi* exists as simultaneously ephemeral and unfinished; of the moment and never-ending. Some *nkisi nkondi* are in the form of a two-headed dog, with one head facing the

Unpublished conference paper. Do not reproduce without permission of author.

spirit world and the other facing this world. As a transference object the analyst carries the past and incubates the future. As Jung put it, the analyst is both within the family and outside the family.

The trajectory of the nails is a trajectory in time. At the end of an intense and lengthy therapy a man and I were discussing what it would be like after we finished meeting. He said, "Oh, it will be ok for me, I will be out in the world living my life. I won't be thinking about you, but you will be sitting here wondering how I am and what I'm doing." He's right, I do sit in my room and wonder where he has got to in his life. In those moments I am like a *nkisi nkondi* sitting on a shelf or in a museum. After the nail has been hammered into the statue and the spirit has been activated the nail is just a nail, a trace of an event that passed between us. His time has move on and become invisible to me.

Another aspect of temporality that is intriguing to me is the movement into contemporaneity. A therapist has an advert in the London Review of Books which says, "Show up for your life." People who have been in therapy sometimes say, "I feel that I am living my life." This isn't a question of living in the present moment or being in the now. I use the concept as a description of participating actively in history. The *nkisi nkondi* is a channel through which people seek to discover their agency in this world and the world of the spirits.

I ask myself why it was in the last session with the young woman that the image of the knives became visible to me. Perhaps it is to do with time, that the time of her transferences had past and what I saw was the trace. Perhaps the trajectory

Unpublished conference paper. Do not reproduce without permission of author.

of her transferences had moved through me and out into her future. In fact ending therapy was connected with moving out of London.

Renik, in his paper, 'Use of the Analytst as a Fetish,' argues that "the termination phase... is sure to be crucial to the analytstis of a patient's fetishistic experience of the analytic relationship."^{xiv} This is because the fact of the ending undermines the client's fantasy of an uninterrupted fusion with the therapist. In some cases, Renik recommends that the analyst initiates termination of the therapy in order to jump-start a process of mourning. I think that this is a shocking confession of analytic despair and that it stems in part from a limited appreciation of what a fetish is.

At the time I had this experience with my client, I thought of the knives as projections and I rather moralistically felt that she and I had failed. She had failed to withdraw her projections, i.e. take the knives back. I had failed to see the knives and to make the appropriate interpretation to return them to her. Thinking about the *nkisi nkondi*, has helped me to see that in that session I was already a museum piece. It is the act of nailing the therapist that sets the desire on its way. What I saw was a trace of what had taken place between us over the years.

Conclusion In a cemetery close to a friend's house in Florida, the American poet Wallace Stevens saw some burial objects, which were clearly descended from funeral practices in Congo and Angola – traces of Africa in the New World. He made use of them in a poem as a metaphor for vision and improvisation. Once

Unpublished conference paper. Do not reproduce without permission of author.

again – the ephemeral and unfinished. The *nkisi nkondi* and the analyst are conduits for the managing of the unquenchable passions for order and for violence.

This is from the first stanza of Steven's poem:

In the far South the sun of autumn is passing
Like Walter Whitman walking along a ruddy shore.
He is singing and chanting the things that are part of him.
The worlds that were and will be, death and day.
Nothing is final, he chants. No man shall see the end."^{xv}



-
- ⁱ MacGaffey, Wyatt (1988), 'Complexity, Astonishment and Power: The Visual Vocabulary of Kongo Minkisi,' *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 14(2), p. 188
- ⁱⁱ Volavkova, Zdenka (1972), 'Nkisi Figures of the Lower Congo,' *African Arts*, 5(2), p. 54
- ⁱⁱⁱ Andrlussier (), 'Fetishism', *International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*, <http://www.enotes.com>
- ^{iv} Renik, Owen (1992), 'Use of the Analyst as a Fetish,' *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 61: 542-563, p. 544
- ^v Rush, Dana (2012), 'Ephemerality and the "Unfinished" in Vodun Aesthetics,' *African Arts* 43(1), p. 60
- ^{vi} Rush, p. 63
- ^{vii} MacGaffey, Wyatt (1977), 'Fetishism Revisited: Kongo *Nkisi* in Sociological Perspective,' *Africa* 47(2), p. 172
- ^{viii} Bassani, Ezio (1977), 'Kongo Nail Fetishes from the Chiloango River Area,' *African Arts*, 10(3), p.
- ^{ix} MacGaffey (1988), p. 191
- ^x MacGaffey (1989), p. 191
- ^{xi} Blier, Suzanne Preston (1995), *African Vodun: Art, Psychology, and Power*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 95
- ^{xii} MacGaffey (1988), p.192
- ^{xiii} Lagamma, Alisa (2008), 'The Recently Acquired Kongo Mangaaka Power Figure,' *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, Vol. 43, p. 206
- ^{xiv} Renik, p. 562
- ^{xv} Stevens, Wallace (1936), 'Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery'