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The notion of “N’zambi Ampûngu Tulêndo”: an outcome of the *kôngo* being-force concept

By

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Abstract: a language is a dynamic feature of a culture which usually undergoes mutation as time elapses. The Kôngo concept of the *n’kisi* or *mpûngu* (seen nowadays as essentially akin to the concept of fetish) as undergone a transformation during the time which as blurred its equivalence with the word *mpungu*. This differential evolution led to the later trouble the missionaries had to explain the use of the component *Mpungu* in connection with the divine Father, Nzâmbi Ampungu Tulêndo.

To avoid affixing the connotation of the fetish (*n’kisi*, *mpungu*) to the divine name, the missionaries tried to interpret the component “Mpûngu” in the name of the Supreme Being, as a superlative intended to modify the attribute Tulêndo (power).

In this article the author shows the weakness of the superlative interpretation and demonstrates that the word *n’kisi*, a synonymous of *mpûngu*, meant originally power; it alludes to the Bantu concept of the being-force which Placid Tempels has discovered among the Bantu ethnics of Katanga (DRC). Thus the expression Nzâmbi Ampûngu Tulêndo shows to the Supreme Being as the highest concept of the Kôngo being-force.

1 Introduction

The expressions “N’zambi Ampûngu Tulêndo”, “Nzâmbi Ampûngu” or “Nzâmbi Mpûngu” are among those adopted by the Christian church, since the pre-colonial time, among the Kôngo ethnics of central Africa (Angola, DRC, Congo and southern Gabon) to convey the concept of the Supreme Being. This usage has been continued despite the later inability of the missionaries to provide a correct interpretation of the component *mpûngu* included in those expressions.

In their attempted interpretations of this expression, Protestant and catholic missionaries have tried to attribute a superlative function to the term *mpûngu*. The idea which is behind this initiative is that these names of God allude to His almightiness. This interpretation allowed the missionaries to avoid the connotation of *n’kisi* (usually translated nowadays by fetish) which the Kôngo ethnics affix to the term *mpûngu*.

This article intends to show the weakness of the superlative interpretation of the expression of Mpûngu Tulêndo and will offer a new interpretation which will depict the concept of *mpûngu* as naturally akin to the concept of *n'kisi*. This will be sustained despite the use of the word *mpûngu* in connection with the divine name and despite the negative connotation of fetish wrongly affixed today to the concept of *n'kisi*. This interpretation will show the concept of N'zâmbi Ampûngu Tulêndo to be the outcome of the African being-force world-view exposed by Placid Temps in his book *la Philosophie bantoue*.

2 Methodological approach of my work

The history of science shows us that the departure, in the sixteenth century, of the scientific inquiry from the deductive teleological approach of Aristotle to an essentially inductive approach brought with it the centrality of the problem of the methodology due to the need of justification introduced by the use of a non-deductive process whose validity of the conclusion could not be read directly from the premises; and the use of a methodological approach ensure also that the researcher tries to arrive to knowledge as opposed to mere belief (Ladyman 2001: 5, 26, 31)

To pursue a methodical approach in the study of the meaning of an expression requires of the researchers the use of various scientific tools among which can be found ethno-linguistic and historical and grammatical analysis. W. Folley says about ethno-linguistic: "it is an interpretive discipline peeling away at language to find cultural understanding." (Lemba-Masiala 2007: 23) But a language is not a static entity whose meanings are fixed as in a marble; hence the various semantic mutations of its expressions must not be completely forgotten.

In this perspective ethno-linguistic will be used in this paper in conjunction with the historical grammatical method of interpretation; this later implies that the hermeneutical enterprise must be sensitive to the historical context and setting of the expression being examined as well as to the grammar or word usage associated to it. (Erkel 1999)

A fruitful scientific research implies the use of a theory or some hypotheses as starting block. Hence my study start from the hypothesis that the first interpretation of the component *mpungu* in the expression "Nzambi Ampungu Tulendo" as inducing a superlative came from Holman Bentley, an English missionary who was shocked by the use of the word *n'kisi* in connection with the Christian faith in an ancient catholic catechism. Since he could not link the concept of *n'kisi*, seen as akin to fetish, to the name of the Supreme Being, Bentley tried to enforce a meaning of the component *mpungu* which is far away from this concept.

The second hypothesis of this paper is that from its original denotation including a divine spiritual meaning, the concept of *n'kisi* has sustained through the time a transformation which has finally hidden its original divine connotation and finally blurred its connection with the *kongo* concept of Nzambi Ampûngu Tulendo, the Supreme Being.

Thus I will make an ethno-linguistic study of the concept of the *n'kisi* by keeping the hermeneutical effort assorted with historical grammatical interpretation in order to not lose the various mutations of this *kongo* concept in the time. This implies the desecrating

the differences between the concept of *n'kisi* and the concept of fetish, which are both wrongly taken to be synonymous.

Thus, contrary to the superlative interpretation proposed by the missionaries of the second evangelization, i.e., the evangelization of the Congo during the colonial time, by recovering the original connotation of the word *n'kisi*, which will be shown to be equivalent of *mpûngu*, one arrives at the true meaning of the expression of Nzambi Ampûngu Tulendo in the deep understanding of the *kôngo* tribesmen's tradition.

The concept of *n'kisi* properly demonstrated as implying the notion of power and as being synonymous of the concept *mpugu*, will enable me to make a connection between the Bantu notion of being-force described by Placid Tempels and the notion of Nzambi Ampungu Tulendo, the Supreme Being, in the mind of the *kongo* tribesmen.

3 The origin of the concept of fetish

It is an historical fact that a language is a living entity that undergoes various mutations as time elapses. We speak of a "dead language" when we allude to Latin, implying by this expression, not really that this language is not any more in use, but meaning in a deeper way that all mutations and adaptations have ceased to occur in the course of its use.

The *kôngo* language, as a living entity, could not be static; this is more the case as we know that the *kôngo* culture has gone through deep transformations since its encounter with the Western civilization in the fifteenth century. According to Dianteill (2002: 62) it is these very transformations that lead Karl Laman to start the collection of the reminiscences of the *kongo* culture. One of these mutations has led to the hiding of the original meaning of the word *mpûngu* in the expression "Nzambi Ampûngu Tulendo". Van Wing (1959: 295) puts it this way: "Despite the efforts of Bantuists the meaning of the two words, *Nzâmbi* and *Mpûngu* remains obscure".

As I said above, the purpose of this article is to show that the *kôngo* word "*mpûngu*", as alluding to the Supreme Being, refers to the idea of spiritual power and therefore to the concept of *n'kisi*. This thesis may seem awkward to a nowadays *kôngo* ear, which, due the negative transformation of the meaning of the concept of *n'kisi*, as been accustomed to think of this later as alluding essentially to the notion of the fetish.

The term of fetish, considered nowadays as essentially equivalent to the term *n'kisi*, originated from the Portuguese *feitiço*. Hegba (1979: 17) explains that this word *feitiço* should be a derivation of *factitium*, a fabricated, artificial object. According to van Wing (1959: 381) the word fetish was given by the Portuguese in fifteenth century to statutes and similar objects found in the hands of the natives in the Kingdom of Kôngo. Corroborating this perception of the notion of the fetishes as alluding to a human-made things, Lemba-Masiala (:2007: 160) explains that "a fetish is an object made in wood, in ivory, in stone, in clay or in metal to which is given an anthropomorphic form".

4 The original meaning of *n'kisi*

The *kôngo* culture is mainly on oral one. According to historical records the fixing of the *kôngo* concepts in books by the missionaries of the first evangelization (i.e. the pre-colonial missionaries), using the Latin alphabet, started with the translation of a

Portuguese treatise on Christian doctrine, published in Lisbon in 1624 (Bentley 1895: IV). This church manual has been reported to be the first printed book using the *kôngo* language. Bentley affirms that the catechism was still in use in schools in Madeira, Portugal, when he was writing, that is in 1895.

In this catechism the word *n'kisi* is alluded to as meaning spiritual power. Thus the expression “*Canca anquissi yanzua muquissi acuna E-oma*”, which is included in this church manual and which should be written properly as “*Kânka an'kisi ya nzo an'kisi ya kuna Rôma*”, meant to the author of the catechism: “Holy Faith of the church of Rome”. Bentley reports that according to this earliest *kôngo* written document the church was called “*nzo an'kisi*” (the house of *n'kisi*), and the Bible was “*nkând'an'kisi*” (the parchment of *n'kisi*).

The very fact that these expressions are found in a catechism, a sacred Christian book, and two centuries after the first encounter of the *kôngo* people with the Westerners, means that their use, at the moment of the writing of this church manual, i.e., in the seventeenth century, was not pejorative in the mind of the *kôngo* tribesmen. It rather alluded to the natural perception they had of them as referring to their own concept of the spiritual divine power. Otherwise the catholic missionaries of that time (the first evangelization) could not have kept linking these *kôngo* expressions to their highest idea of divinity two centuries after the discovery of the Kôngo Kingdom by Diego Cao.

Thus one understands that when the *kôngo* people told the missionaries of the first evangelization that they use *n'kisi nsi*, the traditional *n'kisi*, they meant that they use their native spiritual power; the spiritual divine power used by their ancestors. Bittremieux (1936: 135) seems to understand it this way when he writes: “the cult of *n'kisi tsi* seems to me as the main manifestation of the religious feeling among our populations Bakôngo, Baluangu, etc.”

Speaking of the original denotation of the word *n'kisi*, Batshikama (1971: 188) affirms: “up to seventeenth century and even maybe beyond, the missionaries who evolved in the Kingdom of Kôngo, used the word *n'kisi* to designate religion and all that is sacred.” Did the word *n'kisi* mean exclusively fetish, the missionaries would refrain to use it in connection with the “holy faith of Rome”.

5 The kinds of *n'kisi*

The obvious implication of this is that before the intrusion of Western influence and during a longtime in the first evangelization, the *kôngo* religious culture was seen by the Christian church as including the conception of three kinds of powers: the divine, the human and the demonic. The divine and the human were traditionally associated with *n'kisi* in the initiatory schools, while the demonic was fought. (Bahelele 1977: 50).

One of the tasks of the initiatory schools, for instance, was to fight the demonic powers. But in the mind of the *kongo* tribesmen these demonic powers are identified to witchcraft or to some negative kind of *n'kisi*. We learn from van Wing (1959: 427-428) and Bittrémieux (1936: 31-32) that the initiatory sessions were organized as a means to fight witchcraft through the use of the divine and/or the human power, i.e. *n'kisi*. Thus I can conclude that the *kongo* tribesmen, the Besikongo, used the *n'kisi tsi* (the traditional divine and human powers) to fight witchcraft and the demonic *n'kisi*.

6 The veiling of the original concept of *n'kisi*

The mutation that the *kôngo* language went through was not only the work of the destructive influence of the Western missionaries and laymen' misplaced zeal and/or malice, but also the result of the resistance of the *kôngo* people to this destruction of their spiritual culture. This last instance is illustrated by the abandonment of the expression "*N'kângi Kiditu*", which originally meant: "Christ the Savior" (de Munck 1971: 34; Batshikama 1971: 257), due certainly to the change of the meaning of the verb *kanga* (to set free, from which one get *n'kangi*, the one that sers free, or saviour), to its nowadays opposite meaning: to close; to arrest; to bind. The Lingala language, spoken in both banks of the Congo River, still point to the original meaning of the word *kanga* in one of its derivative, i.e., the verb *kokangola*, which means to set free.

Speaking about the misplaced zeal of the missionaries during the pre-colonial time Matukanga (1996: 130-131) explains that:

"Prisoner of times, Fra Luca has seen only diabolic superstitions in the paganism in which surroundings he lived during twelve years; the epithet "diabolic" is that which recurs more often under his pen.

"The report of F. Zenobio Da Firenze comes back again on this and insists on the superstitious rites of the Kôngo."

The consequence of such a wrong perception of the *kôngo* culture the first missionaries developed was the bedeviling of the divine spiritual elements it included, and this will eventually lead to the "separation of Africans from their cultures and history". (Bangura 2012: 110). This is illustrated by the fact that two centuries after it has been written in connection with the catholic faith, the expression "*Kânka an'kisi ya nzo an'kisi ya kuna Roma*" seemed to Holman Bentley (a missionary of the second evangelization), in its use of the word *n'kisi*, "objectionable and mystifying for the *kôngo* mind". The word *n'kisi* has lost all divine connotations in the daily use and even in the collective memory of the Besikongo. This explains why the concept of *n'kisi* is wrongly seen today by the *kôngo* tribesmen as only a human made power (Lembe-Masiala 2007: 166).

7 Bad consequences of the assimilation of *n'kisi* to fetish

The wrong assimilation of the concept of *n'kisi* to the notion of fetish induced a set of negative consequences. It caused the *kongo* religion to be seen by most researchers up to now essentially as a devotion of the ancestors and the use of fetishes (Diantéill 2002: 70). This is contrary to the perception the *kôngo* initiates had of their sacred tradition; they believed that similarities exists between Christianity and the religion of their ancestors.

About the existence of these similarities Fukiau (1969: 146) reports: "A lady of Nzala who was "Mumbanda-lemba" told me this: "It's astonishing to see that what I have been taught at Lemba about God is seen also in the church." According to Fukiau these similarities account for the quick reception of Christianity by the *kôngo* tribesmen.

These similarities became obvious to missionaries like Carpenter (1952: 76) who wrote that: “Congo tribal life is closely akin to that of the ancient Hebrews, and much that is far removed from our own [Western] experience is clear and natural to the Congolese.” Carpenter didn’t give details about the nature of these similarities, but he pointed out that: “More than one missionary has remarked that he understood the Old Testament far better after a term in Congo than ever before.” This last affirmation shows that the similarities had something to do with the religious teachings.

8 The meaning of the word *mpûngu*

The question now is: what is the meaning of the word *mpûngu* when used in connection with the Supreme Being? In other words: what is the meaning of the term *mpûngu* in the expression Nzâmbi Mpûngu Tulêndo? Two theories have been offered so far to answer this query.

The first of these two theories has been developed by the missionaries of the second evangelization, i.e. the evangelization of the Africa during the colonial time, who could not accept the idea expressed by their predecessors that the concept of *n’kisi* had a divine connotation before the encounter of the Westerners with the *kôngo* culture. This first theory affirms that in the expression “Nzambi Ampûngu Tulendo” the word *mpûngu* is used superlatively as a modifier of the word *tulêndo*. As for the second theory, it affirms that the word *mpûngu* is a synonymous of *n’kisi*. This last point of view, the one that Bentley calls “objectionable and mystifying”, it is also the opinion this paper sustains.

8.1 The superlative theory of Bentley

Holman Bentley was a protestant missionary. He belonged to the Baptist Missionary Society of England. Bentley founded the Wathen station which is now known as Gombe Lutete, in the territory of Mbanza Ngungu (Democratic Republic of Congo). One of the literary contributions of Bentley to the *kongo* culture was the publication of a Kikongo-English dictionary.

Bentley did adopt the first solution in the query about the meaning of the word *mpûngu* in the expression Nzâmbi Ampûngu Tulêndo. To him the word *mpûngu* is a superlative; it is only in this way that Nzâmbi Ampûngu Tulêndo means the Almighty. In the appendix to his *Kikôngo-English dictionary* he justifies his position by giving us instances of the use of *mpûngu* as a superlative.

- *Mpungu-ngolo*, the Almighty.
- *Mpungu-nkanka*, the Savior, who has given us the greatest example of devotion self-sacrifice.
- *Mpungu-zayi*, the All-wise,
- *mpungu-vuvu*, .the supreme hope, great expectation, expectation of great things.

In all these expressions *mpungu* modifies a singular term, which is the natural way of expressing the superlative form, even in English, as can be seen in these examples given in the *kongo* literature:

*“I besi Mputu **basundidi fululu** mu ntomosono a nsi.”* (Disengomoka 1968: 27)

Europeans are the most perseverant in the improvement of one’s land.

*“I bulu **kialuta longa** muntu kinkongo.”* (Bahelele, 1977: 27)

It is the animal which most teaches man to be a hunter.

*“Wazola vo bamvana mbungu **ilutidi mu nene**.”* (Bahelele, 1956: 34)

I wanted to be given the biggest portion of wine.

In these examples the modified word is never in plural, which is the usual way of using the superlative. “the most intelligent” will translate into Kikongo language as “*waluta ngangu*”, “the most loved” will correspond to the idea of “*waluta zolua*”, the most powerful will give in the *kongo* language: “*waluta ngolo*”. To put the words *ngangu*, *zolua* and *ngolo* in plural will allude to these ones as that which is superseded instead of that in which the other subjects are superseded.

Thus never in the use of the superlative will the modified word be in plural. But, contrary to this rule, in the expression “Nzâmbi Ampûngu Tulêndo” the last word, which is the one supposed to be modified by the word *mpungu*, is in plural. And this weakens the hypothesis sustained by the protestant Baptist missionary. If Bentley were right the correct spelling of the name of the Supreme Being in Kikongo should be “Nzâmbi Ampungu Lêndo”, but this rendition does not conform to the traditional and the Christian usages.

8.2 The superlative theory of van Wing

Van Wing was a catholic missionary, member of the Company of Jesus. He stayed a long time among the Bantandu in the territory of Madimba (DRC). His biggest scientific contribution is the study of the culture of the Bantandu and the different tribes that surround them.

Van Wing (1959: 295) speaking of *mpûngu* uses a different approach than Bentley. For him, “Joined to verbs such as to sing, to speak, the word *mpûngu* means excellent singer, excellent speaker.” The catholic missionary is cautious about the affirmation of the superlative function. But in fact the outcome is the same as with Bentley; if “excellent” is used in connection to God it can only imply a superlative, since for the *kongo* tradition He can not be superseded. However, used in connection with the explanation of the concept of “Nzambi Ampûngu Tulendo”, the weakness of any assimilation of van Wing’s affirmation to the superlative theory appears more intuitively than in the case of Bentley. This is plausible because, contrary to the examples he gives, in the expression “Nzâmbi Mpûngu Tulêndo” the modified word, *tulêndo*, is not a verb.

The motto of the Kindamba, one of the clans of the *kongo* tribesmen, offers a good parallelism with the examples given by van Wing. It reads: “*Ndamba ngolo; ngolo sala; ngolo dia; ngolo nua; mawonso ngolo.*” (A Ndamba is a strong man; strong in working, strong in eating; strong in drinking; in everything strong.) The use of the word *ngolo*, strong, is similar to the instances offered by van Wing as inducing an Excellency. In fact it is impossible to induce a superlative function in the use of *ngolo*

in this motto. What we have here is rather a contraction due to a poetic language. The expression should be understood as: “*Ndamba i n’kua ngolo; ngolo mu sala; ngolo mu dia; ngolo mu nua; mu mawonso ngolo.*” This rendition is in conformity with the English translation I gave. Hence *ngolo nua* is synonymous with *mpungu nua* and mean only strong in drinking and nothing more.

8.3 Weakness of the superlative explanation

The logical implication to be drawn from the weakness of the first theory of the interpretation of the word *mpûngu* in the expression Nzâmbi Ampûngu Tulêndo is that the superlative explanation of the missionaries must be played down, as far as the expression Mpûngu Tulêndo is concerned. Maybe seeing this difficulty van Wing (1959: 295) cautiously avoid to voice aloud the superlative function and reminds us that: “*Mpûngu* is also the generic name of a whole class of special [*n’kisi*] which are mainly protective and inhabited, so they say, by the spirit of an ancestor.”

8.4 *Mpûngu* as alluding to *n’kisi*

The trouble the missionaries and their successors had in reading the expression “Nzâmbi Ampûngu Tulêndo” in connection with the concept of *n’kisi* is that this name of the Supreme Being has retained its original meaning of a divine *n’kisi*, a divine spiritual power, embracing all authority, while the term *n’kisi* has already been distorted by its wrong assimilation to the demeaning notion of fetish, a man made power.

The *kôngo* culture has retained the equivalence of the concept of *mpûngu* and *n’kisi* in the very appellation of the Supreme Being. Hence, considered in their original higher meaning of the concept of the *n’kisi*, *mpûngu* means spiritual power. Thus God as the highest spiritual power is a *n’kisi* or a *mpûngu*. But to discriminate the Supreme Being from His creation, i.e. from lower powers, He is referred to as Mpûngu Tulêndo, or the power, the *n’kisi*, that includes all authority.

9 The *mpûngu* and the being-force concept

One of the aspects of the Bantu worldview, as for all Black-Africans, is the unity of the invisible and the visible. John Mbiti (1972: 13) expresses the same thought by his affirmation that for the black people of Africa, there is “no demarcation between the spiritual and the physical”. Far from being a simple relational harmony, this unity is essential and ontological.

When a *kôngo* tribesman inquires about the health of his fellow being the expression he uses is: “*kolel’e?*” or “*Siêmi e?*” This literally means: “are you strong?” or “are you resistant?” This implies that for the *kôngo* people wellbeing is the manifestation of power, or, to put it otherwise, being is force, which force the *kongo* culture calls: *makinda ngolo*. For Kimpianga (1989: 29) in the *kongo* ontology every being is endowed with *makinda ngolo*; and the interdependence of beings is essential to the quality and the quantity of this living force. Thus the ontological unity of the visible and the invisible naturally led the *kongo* people to conceive the Supreme Being as a force, *Mpûngu*.

That for the Bantu being is force is the core of the discovery Placid Tempels (1945: 37) made about the ontology of the Baluba of Katanga. According to Tempels, in this ontology the *mûntu* (term which is usually inappropriately translated as man) is

essentially a vital force endowed with intelligence and will. Thus it was natural for the Bantu to view God, the Supreme Being, the highest being, as the highest Being-force, as the highest power in the hierarchical order of this ontology. And this highest power, *mpûngu*, for the *kôngo* people, embraces naturally all authority, hence the expression “*Mpûngu Tulêndo*”.

This conclusion is reinforced by the fact that the *kôngo* tribesmen viewed themselves and the Supreme Being in the same ontological perception, as shown by their proverbial expression: “*Nzâmb’i mûntu ampil’ankaka*”, God is another kind of *mûntu*. Tempels (1945: 37), found, among the Baluba of Katanga, the same concept of the essential unity of the *muntu* and God voiced in the expression: “*Vidye i muntu mukatampe*”.

Here it must be reminded that the concept of *mûntu* is not the equivalent of the Western concept of man. Thus through these expressions the Bantu ontology doesn’t affix any corporeal nature to the Supreme Being, since for them *mûntu* is essentially a consciousness, and not a physicality. Thus the resemblance of the *muntu* to the divine Being alluded in these expressions is qualitative but not quantitative; which is obvious, since the Supreme Being embodies all authority, *tulêndo*.

10 Conclusion

One of the sad consequences in the encounter of the West and the African civilization was the bedeviling of the concept of *n’kisi*, which originally alluded to spiritual power in its highest denotation. Originally the concept of *n’kisi* was akin to the concept of *m’pûngu* and it was used in the expression “*N’zâmbi Ampûngu Tulêndo*” as alluding to the Supreme Being as the highest power in the ontological hierarchy.

The wrong and exclusive negative connotation affixed to the concept of *n’kisi* after the seventeenth century led the missionaries of the second evangelization later to attempt a definition of the concept of *N’zâmbi Ampûngu Tulêndo* far removed from the concept of *n’kisi*, a definition rooted in the hypothesis that *mpûngu* is a superlative modifying *tulêndo*.

The various attempts to interpret the *kôngo* concept of the Supreme Being, by resorting to the superlative meaning of the word *mpûngu* are weak and not conclusive. Thus, the logical interpretation points to the fact that the *kôngo* concept of the Supreme Being is the outcome of the Bantu concept of being-force. Hence the concept of *mpûngu* in the expression *N’zâmbi Ampûngu Tulêndo* alludes to *n’kisi* as a spiritual power, but the one which embraces all authority, *tulêndo*.

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