# Chapter Two

## Kongo and the Iconoclastic Controversy

The Portuguese arrived on the west coast of Africa a hundred years before the discovery of the New World, but they brought with them the same combination of fear for gold and political Catholicism that the Spaniards would come to carry all the way across the Atlantic. In the form of an oracle, Christian Kongolese discovered for much of a year trade with the Islamic merchants of North Africa. In the Portuguese learned what they conquered the Moorish Spain for, and what they had come to Africa for, the Portuguese discovered the Kingdom of Kongo, the land of the Mani. Kongo was a Christian state, and the Mani Dongo, the King of Kongo, was a Christian. Dongo, in organizing and blessing the maritime expeditions that pushed further and further along the west coast of the Atlantic continent, the voice of the Portuguese state. Kongo was trying to establish independent access to gold by circumventing the trans-Saharan Muslim trade

ambiguous. On a close reading, it is impossible to determine whether the injunction against "graven images" prohibits the making of any image at all, or the making of an image of God, or the worship of such an image, or the making and worship of an image of a false god.[19] In other words, it does not tell us precisely what an idol, or graven image, is, or decide whether or not there is a category of permissible sacred images.

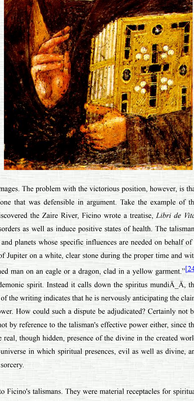
The other condemnations of idolatry in the bible also fail to settle these issues. But many of them do emphasize the fact that idols are objects made by artificial rather than divine means. In Deuteronomy 27:15, we find the following passage: "Cursed be the man that maketh a graven and molten thing the abomination of the Lord, the work of the hands of artificers" (*opus manuum artificum* in the Vulgate). Psalm 13:15 similarly condemns idols as "the work of human hands" (*opera manuum hominum*).[20] The adjective *facticius*, from which *fetiao* and "fetish" are derived, is clearly a synonym for such formulations. But in what way is the sin of idolatry connected to the fact that an image has been made by human hands?

Different iconoclasts answered this question in different ways, but the answers are compatible and best conceived as aspects of a unitary though multifaceted response. To begin with, the iconoclastic position emphasized the fact that every process of human fabrication shapes some material substratum. But that substratum is an inadequate vehicle for communicating the divine nature. As the early Church father, Clement of Alexandria put it in his "Exhortation to the Greeks:" "… a statue is really lifeless matter shaped by a craftsman's hand; but in our view the image of god is not an object of sense made from matter perceived by the senses, but a mental object. God, that is, the only true God, is perceived not by the senses but by the mind."[21] There is an unbridgeable chasm between the invisible, spiritual reality of God and the visible, material entity that the artisan produces in an attempt to convey that reality. It is true that God once embodied Himself in a material substratum in the mystery of the Incarnation. But, as the Byzantine iconoclasts argued, this means that Christ has a dual corporeal and spiritual nature. While the corporeal nature can be adequately conveyed by a finite and sensuous piece of matter, the infinite spiritual nature remains forever beyond its grasp.

Yet the contrary belief is not merely an epistemological error, what contemporary analytic philosophers might call a category mistake: It is, rather, a grave moral failing and spiritual danger as well. The early mediaeval theologian, Hugh of St. Victor, placed human fabrication third in a hierarchy of productive activities. (Though Hugh was not himself an iconoclast, the opponents of sacred images found his conceptual framework useful). God creates out of nothing, *ex nihilo*. Nature develops the seeds that God has planted within it; that is to say, it unfolds the organic forms with which it has been endowed. But human fabrication proceeds by arranging the elements of the created world in some new configuration.[22] While in one respect this ties the process of making to a pre-existent reality, since the elements are not themselves made by human effort, in another respect it releases it into the realm of uncontrolled fantasy, since the recombination of elements is in principle unconstrained. The iconoclasts drew a moral conclusion from the tertiary position of human making in the ontological hierarchy. For them, the artisan as a pseudo-creator is always liable to be seduced by his or her own reveries, to take what is illusory for something real. This encourages the sin of vanity, the mistaken notion that the imaginatively guided hand can create *ex nihilo*. That sin is nowhere more grievous than when an image of the divine is concerned. For here human fantasy, which is really just a kind of spinning in the void, presumes to be able to capture the divine essence itself.

In 1 Corinthians: 4, Saint Paul calls the idol "nothing in the world," an empty phantasm without any correlate in reality. For the iconoclasts, this does not apply only to the images of other people's gods. It must be the case regarding any visual representation of the one true God or even of the saints as spiritual beings. But the phantasmal nothing that is the sculpture or painted icon is liable to acquire an unintended spiritual power. By a deep affinity, it may attract "unclean spirits" who have fallen from grace as a result of their own vain fantasies, their own pretensions to rival the power of the Creator. The Byzantine and Roman Catholic worlds were filled with stories of bleeding crucifixes, weeping statues of Mary, icons of the saints that healed the sick or delivered victory to armies in battle. The iconoclasts dismissed none of these tales. Instead they accounted for the stories by explaining that the images involved had been transformed into the perverse bodies of fallen angels, the material vehicles of demonic activity.

The strategy of the iconodules was to deny the most important premise of the iconoclastic argument, namely, that there is no meaningful connection between the material image and the divine nature. At first, they proceeded by attempting to establish such a connection in the case of what the Eastern Church called *acheropoietoi*. The word is a negation of *cheiropoietos*, which is Greek for "made by human hands" (of which the Latin *facticius* is a translation). *Acheropoietoi* are images *not* made by human hands, but produced instead by a supposedly miraculous intervention. The most famous example is the veil of Veronica on which Christ's visage is said to have been impressed when the Savior used it to wipe his face during the Passion. (The shawl bearing the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe is another, New World example.) The iconodules argued that the *acheropoietoi* are obvious instances of images commensurate with their divine or saintly models. But their argument does not apply to the far larger number of sacred images made by human hands, and these images, after all, were the primary targets of the iconoclastic attack.



Hand-made sacred images required a different line of defense. This led the iconodules to appeal to the concept of "participation" (*methexis*) that originated in Plato's Dialogues and was developed further in the neo-Platonic tradition. The world of particular things – in Christian parlance, the created world, lacks the permanence, moral excellence, and full intelligibility of the eternal forms that are so many aspects of the Divine Mind. Yet that world is more than sheer nonbeing. The visible derives its reality, its status as something rather than nothing, from its participation in the invisible. The Creator has communicated His own Being to the creation, albeit to a diminished degree. When pushed to its most extreme expression, the notion of participation becomes that of the indwelling presence of God in the world. But since God nonetheless remains distinct from what he has made, that presence takes the form of obscure signs and secret significations, of metaphysical allegories and objective metaphors. The color white is not merely a sensory vibration; it is an expression of spiritual purity or eternity. The ostrich signifies justice because of the perfect equality of its feathers. The unicorn can only be captured by a virgin if it rests its head in her lap; it is a symbol of Christ, who is begotten twice, once by the Father alone, and the second time in the womb of Mary.[23] For the Christian neo-Platonists, these are not arbitrary connections, meanings that we project into objective things. They are real communities of essence and exist independently of whether or not anyone recognizes them. Beginning most forcefully with the three sermons, "Against Those Who Deprecate Holy Images," written by Saint John of Damascus in the early eighth century, the iconodules developed this symbolic conception of reality into a justification for images of God and the saints. The entire visible world can be interpreted figuratively, since it is everywhere suffused with divine goodness and reality. But this means that the visual image made by the artisan is also able to communicate something of spiritual being. The language of art is no different in this regard than the symbolic language spoken by all of creation.

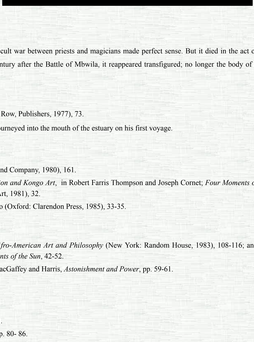
The iconodules triumphed over the iconoclasts in both the eastern and western Churches, not least of all because the laity, especially the poor, was emotionally attached to sacred images. The problem with the victorious position, however, is that it had no clear criterion for distinguishing between those images and idols, at least none that was defensible in argument. Take the example of the Renaissance priest and neo-Platonist Marcilio Ficino. In 1489, seven years after Cao discovered the Zaire River, Ficino wrote a treatise, *Libri de Vita*, whose third book presents instructions for making magical talismans to treat medical disorders as well as induce positive states of health. The talismans must be constructed from materials and impressed with images associated with the stars and planets whose specific influences are needed on behalf of a client. For instance, in order to assure a long and happy life, one should make an image of Jupiter on a white, clear stone during the proper time and with the appropriate incantations and rituals. The planetary god is to be depicted as "A crowned man on an eagle or a dragon, clad in a yellow garment."[24] Ficino insists that this procedure does not result in the infusion of the talisman with a demonic spirit. Instead it calls down the spiritus mundiÂ¸Â¸ the energies of the neo-Platonic world soul, by way of astral conduits. But the defensive tenor of the writing indicates that he is nervously anticipating the claim of some zealous Church official that star demons are the real source of his talismanic power. How could such a dispute be adjudicated? Certainly not by appeal to the fact that the talisman is made by hand. So is the permissible crucifix. And not by reference to the talisman's effective power either, since the crucifix is also able to protect the believer from enemies, or even to ensure long life. The real, though hidden, presence of the divine in the created world that grounds the iconodules' argument is, literally speaking, an occult notion. And, in a universe in which spiritual presences, evil as well as divine, are capable of inhabiting material things, it is difficult indeed to distinguish white magic from sorcery.

This is the problem the Portuguese faced in Kongo. The traditional *minkisi* were similar to Ficino's talismans. They were material receptacles for spiritual powers and were used for medical purposes broadly construed. The Catholics claimed that they were inhabited by demons. But then, one culture's demon is the soul of another's sainted dead. The Portuguese merely masked the absence of a rational criterion for distinguishing between allowable images and idols by calling the *minkisi* "fetishes." For it was no longer possible to condemn images on the grounds that they were made by hand. The concept of the fetish was an iconoclastic anachronism in what had long been an iconodule culture.

It is not quite true that the Catholics had no criterion at all to justify the destruction of fetishes. Such a criterion existed, but it had nothing to do with theological argument. It consisted instead in a pragmatic test of magical superiority.

For the first century and a half of Portuguese involvement in Kongo, Catholic clerics were not very enthusiastic in pursuing the destruction of the traditional *minkisi* that were still being used in the provinces. They contented themselves with establishing their religious dominance in Mbanza Kongo. In part, this was because many of them were more interested in enriching themselves from the slave trade than in evangelizing the remote and sometimes unfriendly villages. However, in 1645, the first Capuchin mission arrived in the capital city.[25] The Capuchins were an Apostolic Prefecture of Spanish and Italian priests under the direct authority of the Pope. The members of the order were chosen in accordance with the Franciscan ideal, and so exhibited an unusual degree of asceticism, endurance, and sectarian enthusiasm. Their primary goal was to eradicate the "religious abuses" still taking place in the provinces by means of a thorough going evangelization. With the secret permission of the *mani Kongo*, Garcia, they moved ruthlessly to challenge the power of the provincial *banganga* and their *minkisi*. Because the fetishes were inhabited by demons and their owners had sold their souls to the devil, the priests had to oppose them with the white magic of Christ. The Capuchins had no doubt that they would prevail in the end since they possessed superior occult abilities stemming from their utter submission to the will of the Lord. They believed that they could produce rain and heal the sick. They also cast out demons and cursed the indigenous sorcerers. One Capuchin is supposed to have pronounced some Latin words over the sacred tree of a *kitome* priest; as a result, the tree withered and the priest's wife died. Later, the clerics performed exorcisms with the Pope's explicit authorization in order to dispel plagues of locusts that presumably had been summoned by witches.

However, it proved to be more difficult to destroy the *minkisi* than the Capuchins anticipated. Their iconoclasm provoked intransigent resistance by the *banganga*. The traditional practitioners were willing to incorporate Catholic artifacts and prayers into their ritual equipment, but they refused to capitulate when asked to commit professional suicide. So they fought using the very weapons that the Capuchins were seeking to destroy. They employed the *minkisi* to induce distress in their opponents, who were the real sorcerers from their point of view. Apparently, the Capuchins often allowed their fear of demons to get the better of evangelical zeal, for, in the face of *nganga* "witchcraft," they usually fled. Sometimes the magical battle spilled over into physical conflict as well. The villagers, who were often as passionately attached to the *minkisi* as were the indigenous practitioners, wept when the statues and other containers of medicine were cast into bonfires, and tried to snatch them from the flames. In one incident, a Capuchin was beaten to death by the outraged participants in a ritual employing *minkisi* when he attempted to smash and burn the objects. The *mani Kongo* retaliated by sentencing those involved to slavery and by issuing a public order for the destruction of all *minkisi*. He established severe penalties for the practice of traditional "magic" and had two *banganga* executed for burning down churches. But it was all to no avail. The Capuchins became discouraged and gradually left the provinces for the comfort of the Portuguese settlement in Luanda. Soon that settlement launched the invasion that would result in the destruction of Kongo Catholicism. Triumph in a battle of magical powers was the only criterion the Capuchins knew for proving that the *minkisi* were fetishes, idols inhabited by demons with powers inferior to those of the true God. The problem was the priests were defeated.



The world that was pregnant with capitalism was one in which an occult war between priests and magicians made perfect sense. But it died in the act of giving birth. Not so the concept of the fetish. A little more than a century after the Battle of Mbwila, it reappeared transfigured; no longer the body of a demon, but an instrument of enlightenment.

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[1] Quoted in Peter Forbath, *The River Congo* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1977), 73.

[2] The accounts are inconsistent here. According to some, Cao first journeyed into the mouth of the estuary on his first voyage.

[3] Quoted in Peter Forbath, *The River Congo*, 102.

[4] Quoted in *Ibid*, 118.

[5] Basil Davidson, The African Slave Trade, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1980), 161.

[6] Philip Curtin, quoted in Robert Farris Thompson, *Kongo Civilization and Kongo Art,* in Robert Farris Thompson and Joseph Cornet; *Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two* Worlds (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1981), 32.

[7] I am following the account in Anne Hilton, The Kingdom of Kongo (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 33-35.

[8] Quoted in Davidson, *The African Slave Trade*, 158-159.

[9] See Peter Forbath, *The River Congo*, 86-87.

[10] See Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983), 108-116; and Thompson, Kongo Civilization, in Thompson and Cornet, *Four Moments of the Sun*, 42-52.

[11] MacGaffey, "The Eyes of Understanding: Kongo Minkisis," in MacGaffey and Harris, *Astonishment and Power*, pp. 59-61.

[12] *Thompson*, Flash of the Spirit, 117.

[13] MacGaffey, p. 63.

[14] Werner Gillon, *A Short History of African Art*, p. 285.

[15] Its catalogue number is 34.28.13. MacGaffey discusses it on p. 71.

[16] Its catalogue number is 1954.1.2338. Macgaffey discusses it on pp. 80- 86.

[17] Hilton, *Kingdom of Kongo*, 62.

[18] Hilton, *Kingdom of Kongo*, 62.

[19] See Barasch, p. 48.

[20] Both quoted in *The Gothic Idol*, p. 27, p. 30.

[21] Quoted in Barasch, p. 52.

[22] *The Gothic Idol*, p. 35.

[23] Eco, Art and Beauty, pp. 54-55.

[24] Quoted in Yates, p. 70.

[25] Hilton's account, which is being followed here is on pp. 154-198.