

Human–Plant Interaction and Spiritual Healing among the Miskitu

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Introduction

Among many indigenous people, plants are frequently considered to be sacred, such as plants containing psychoactive compounds used by indigenous people in Mesoamerica (Díaz 2010). In the Amazon, psychoactive drugs are often used in healing rituals when making contact with the spirit world and when seeking spiritual protection (Rosengren 2002). In Ecuador, magical plants are used for spiritual cleansing (Cavender and Albán 2009). Plants may also be part of a sacred landscape, such as among the Maori of New Zealand, Australian Aboriginal people, and Native North Americans (Whitt et al. 2003; Hall 2011; Shahid et al. 2010).

In these and other animist worldviews, human and nonhuman worlds are commonly tied together by relations of reciprocity and respect, and the responsibility for the natural world is “based on an understanding of the relatedness, or affiliation, of the human and nonhuman worlds” (Whitt et al. 2003: 4). In indigenous animist cultures there exists a sense of kinship between humans and other beings of the Earth, such as plants and animals. Plants are commonly considered animate, with communicative capacities. They are seen as “volitional, intelligent, relational, perceptive, and communicative beings” (Hall 2011: 100). They are engaged with as subjects (as opposed to objects) in respectful dialogical relationships; as powerful other-than-human “persons” (Hallowell 1960; Harvey 2005). In this article, I focus on human–plant interaction in relation to spiritual healing among indigenous Miskitu healers in northeastern Nicaragua.

Setting and Methods

Fieldwork, based on qualitative, anthropological technique of participant observation, took place during eleven months between 2005 and 2008 in the eastern Nicaraguan port town of Puerto Cabezas (also known as Bilwi). The town, with a population of about 30,000 inhabitants, is the regional capital of the North Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region and the most important settlement on the Miskitu coast. In addition, several follow-up visits

to the field have been taking place. A total number of 38 informants were interviewed, including 14 healers. Informal and semi-structured interviews, group discussions, and extended case studies with key informants were carried out. I also participated in various healing rituals and herbal therapies where I observed and recorded how healers applied therapies, prescribed treatments, and gave advice to their clients. Interviews were generally carried out in Spanish. An interpreter was used when people only spoke Miskitu. The stipulated ethical codes advocated by the American Anthropological Association were followed.

The Miskitu

The Miskitu people live in southeastern Honduras and northeastern Nicaragua. They number about 150,000 people and about two-third live in Nicaragua, mainly in the North Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region (Dennis 2004). Many live in the regional capital Puerto Cabezas or in villages and settlements along the Caribbean coast and along the Rio Coco on the border with Honduras. Fishing and farming are common means of subsistence. Historically, the Miskitu have had trade relations with Europeans since the 17th century. Both escaped and freed African slaves have arrived at the Miskitu territory during the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, mainly from Belize and the Caribbean islands (Dennis 2004; García 1996). The Moravian Church was established during the second half of the 19th century. It is still the most important church on the Miskitu coast, although today many also belong to various Evangelical churches and to the Roman Catholic Church.

Miskitu cosmology and healing practices are today a mixture of indigenous, Afro-Caribbean, and Christian beliefs. Some Moravian church reverends are also herbal healers. As it is common to all Miskitu healers, they have a vast knowledge about herbal healing and how to cure this-worldly illnesses. It is common to use herbal medicine for a number of mundane ailments, such as infections, snakebites, intestinal parasites, skin problems, respiratory disorders, hypertension, and malaria, as well as for abortion and problems during childbirth and pregnancy.¹ Many Miskitu healers are also experts in healing illnesses and afflictions held to be caused by spirits and sorcery. The use of sacred plants for spiritual afflictions is, however, not accepted by the

1 Barrett (1993, 1994); Coe (2008); Coe and Anderson (1999); Dennis (1988, 2004); Fagoth et al. (1998).

Moravian church authorities and, therefore, often practiced in secrecy. The spiritual and sacred aspects of plants among the Miskitu, especially in relation to healing, is poorly understood and has so far received little attention.

Miskitu Healers

Three kinds of healers exist among the Miskitu. These are: *curanderos* (herbal healers), which are by far the most common type of healers, *sukias* (shamans), and *profetas* (prophets). Healers of all three categories, who may be both males and females, may treat spiritual afflictions and problems said to be caused in a natural way. They use plants when healing and ascribe meaning to plants based on Miskitu cosmology and worldview. They cultivate plants in their backyard and frequently go into the bush to look for medicines for their clients. The healers I met during fieldwork were generally very passionate about their plants and emphasized the importance of a reciprocal relationship with plants and treating them with respect when healing. A *curandera* (female healer) explained:

Before sunrise, I salute the plants and ask them how they are. I say the name [of the patient] and ask them to help me to cure. Then I cut the plants very carefully and make a bath for the sick person. ... When I am going to travel, I tell my plants to take care and that I will be back soon. I talk to them as if I was talking to someone. If the plants are going to work as a medicine, they must be treated with love and patience.

Another *curandero* (male healer) similarly said: “When the plants are sad, I am sad. When they are laughing, I also laugh. The plants have life, they listen when I ask them to help me to cure.” In a similar vein, another *curandero* claimed that “the plant is like a person. To cut it you have to respect it and place some money [at the roots], as if you were buying and asking for permission. You should not tear off the whole plant, just select certain parts.” Some *curanderos* are experts in dealing with ailments considered to be caused by spirits or by acts of sorcery, while others only treat this-worldly afflictions such as infections, skin problems, and intestinal problems. Many receive advice in their dreams on how to treat patients. However, the *curandero* does not have to receive a divine, spiritual gift in order to become a healer, which is the case with the *sukia* and the *profeta*.

Sukias, or shamans, who are said to know the secrets of life and death through plants, animals, and the stars (Fagoth et al. 1998: 29), rely to a large ex-

tent on their spiritual capacity and mainly treat spiritually caused illnesses (Wedel 2010). They are very uncommon these days and have been heavily oppressed by the Moravian Church as they are said to work with both good and bad spirits. To become a *sukia*, one commonly first becomes very sick and unconscious for a few days. As part of the recovery, the sufferer has visions and dreams about spirits and begins to sing in an archaic language. The *sukia* is then isolated for several months and instructed by his/her spirits through dreams and visions on how to heal with herbs. A *cuandero* who was married to a *sukia* told how his wife became a *sukia*:

First, she began to speak in her sleep about plants. She became unconscious, like dead, and only woke up from time to time to ask for coconut water. She then began to sing ... The spirits told her how to heal. ... My wife asks the patient to give her a coin and his used shirt, which she hangs by her bed. In the dream, the spirits show her if someone has performed sorcery. She tells me to go and find this and that plant (Wedel 2010: 374).

Profetas (prophets) are also very uncommon today. As with *sukias*, they mainly treat spiritually caused ailments; especially difficult cases involving sorcery. They are associated with the forces of nature, have an extraordinary close contact with the spiritual world and are often said to have become *profetas* by being struck by lightning. A man who became a *profeta* at a young age explained: “Successively, I have been hit by lightning five times. ... I dream and receive visions of small persons and angels who come with certain biblical text, prayers, psalms, and proverbs. These I use to heal because they chase away the bad spirits. ... I also use herbs and perfume” (Wedel 2010: 373).

Sorcery and Spiritual Afflictions

Many ailments among the Miskitu are ascribed to spiritual entities. The spirit known as *duende* is a kind of gnome who knows everything about herbal healing and who protects the wild animals in the forest. Three kinds of *duende* exist: the white, the black, and the most dangerous one, the red *duende*. There are many stories about people, especially hunters, who have been temporarily abducted by a *duende* and carried away into another dimension. When they come back, they are often said to have learned how to heal with plants. Some people are also said to have made a pact with the *duende* in order to receive gifts, although this can be a dangerous relationship, such as in the following narrative:

In a village upstream of Rio Coco there was a girl ... who made a pact. The *duende* brought a whole deer to her house. ... But then he asked for the life of her father, older brother, and child. She rejected. But the *duende* [nevertheless] taught her how to heal with herbs and she is now a *curandera* (Wedel 2010: 371).

The spirit *liwa mairin* or *sirena* (a mermaid) protects life in the water and is related to the human reproductive system and often blamed for miscarriages. Other well-known spirits are *prahaku* (the spirit of wind and space), *muertos* (spirits of diseased persons), *aubia* (forest spirit), and the spirit of the *ceiba* or silk-cotton tree. The *duende* and *liwa mairin* are the guardians of the animals and the environment and they may cause afflictions if, for example, someone has been hunting too many deer or fishing too much lobster, or built a house in a place where a spirit is said to live (Wedel 2010). In these cases, the cure is relatively easy. However, if a sorcerer has been involved and spiritually “worked” with the *duende*, *liwa mairin*, or some other spirit, healing the victims is considered very difficult, especially if a combination of spirits have been used (Wedel 2009b, 2010). This is often said to be the case when a sorcerer is said to have provoked *grisi siknis* or “crazy sickness,” a form of mass spirit possession that causes severe convulsions, lost consciousness, and terrifying visions (Wedel 2009a, 2010; 2012).

Sorcerers are also said to magically introduce objects and insects into people’s bodies and may bury spiritually prepared “filthy things” that can provoke illness when stepping on them, or, for example, provoke accidents, or cause the victim to commit suicide. Moreover, a sorcerer may create a pact between a person and a tree; as he maltreats the tree until it dies, it is said that the victim will suffer the same destiny. A *curandero* who complained that malevolent acts had been more common these days pointed out that “a leaf that before was used against diarrhea is today used to bewitch people.”

An illness, said to be caused by sorcery, can only be cured by a Miskitu healer. Therefore, people usually first go to a healer when ill to find out the origin of the problem. During fieldwork, several people I met said that they were reluctant to receive medical injections as biochemical substances were said to be contradictive to an illness caused by sorcery. In one case, a woman told about her husband, who was treated at a hospital and believed to be suffering from a sorcery attack. He had high fever, was shivering and throwing up, but all exams were normal and the doctors did not know what to do. The wife related: “... a sorcerer had done very strong

sorcery with the dead at the cemetery ... we had to find a very strong healer. Finally, we found a healer. He gave my husband some herbal liquids and baths. After just an hour he was well again” (Wedel 2009a: 52).

Plants and Healing

Healers distinguish between “natural” and spiritually caused illnesses. Following this distinction, the treatment is also different. A *curandero* explained: “The patient may, for example, suddenly have extreme, unbearable pain in a leg, in the testicles or in the digestive system. The [biomedical] doctor who diagnoses will not find anything. Then we know it is sorcery and we have to apply herbal medicine” (Wedel 2009a: 53). Another healer similarly said that “... sometimes it is because of bad spirits; if the person is depressed, is seeing things, speaks to herself, and is afraid of being touched. Then I use herbs” (2009a: 53). In a similar vein, a *curandera* claimed: “If someone is bleeding from the underbelly, for example, it could be because someone has done a ‘work’ with [the water spirit] *liwa mairin*. If it is legitimate, the doctor should take care of it. If it is provoked, I take care of it” (Wedel 2009a: 53; cf. 2004: 53 ff.).

Many *curanderos*, as well as *sukias* and prophets, use dreams to determine the origin of an affliction. By interpreting their own or the patient’s dreams, a skilled healer may conclude that a person is the victim of sorcery. A *curandero* told how a sorcerer spiritually attacked his son and how this became evident through his son’s dream: “A sorcerer was fighting with my son in his dream. The sorcerer hit my son over his chest. In the morning, my son felt bad and had the mark of five fingers over his chest. We had to act very fast and heal him [with herbs] as this was going to spread and paralyze his heart.”

When healers use plants for illnesses considered mundane in origin, the leaves may be boiled and then the infusion drunk or, for example, applied on the skin in an herbal bath. For spiritually caused problems, plants may also be boiled for the afflicted to inhale or rubbed on the skin (see Fig. 1). In this case, the plants must be picked in the right way with prayers and by “paying” the plant a specific amount of money. The healer, who is treating a patient, addresses the plant by mentioning the patient’s name and asking the plant for help and “not to be annoyed or egoistic.” The healing procedure that follows also takes place in a ritual context where certain secret prayers are used. Plants are also used



Fig. 1: A herbal decoction made from lemon, lemon grass, eucalyptus leaves, coriander, and oregano, prepared by a *curandero*. The patient inhaled the hot steam from the boiling pot and thereafter drank a glass of the mixture (photo by the author).

in steam baths, as the smoke is said to expel evil spirits and make the patient invisible for the affliction-causing agent. A mixture of herbs and other ingredients may be sprinkled on the ground as well, or burned with the intention that the smoke will expel evil forces. Plants may also be used to cleanse an affected house. These measures are also said to weaken the supposed sorcerer.

Many healers I interviewed said that they received spiritual messages about which plants to use when healing. A *profeta* told that since childhood a tall, blue-eyed man with long hair came to her in her dreams and instructed her how to heal her patients. Some time ago, she said, she was visited by a mother and her seventeen-year-old daughter who was very thin and who had had a terrible cough for a long time. The girl had visited a medical doctor, but had not got any better:

In a dream, he [the *profeta's* helping spirit] showed me a plastic bag with green bananas and told me that this would cure her. I gave her massage and kneaded her during the night with the bananas. In the morning, she was well. When she was twelve she had fallen from a tree, been hit, and had a respiratory problem since then. That was the reason [for her problem].

In another story, a *curandera* told about how she learned to heal with plants through dreams:

When I was a child, our house was hit by lightning ... Then, at the age of seventeen, I began to dream about angels. ... In the dream they took me to the forest and taught me about plants. When I woke up, I went there to look for them. ... When I dream, there is a kind of white angel who tells me what is going to happen. It also teaches me about herbs (Wedel 2010: 376).

In a similar vein, a *sukia* learned how to heal with plants by suddenly becoming ill and unconscious. As she recovered, she began to sing and dreamed about a man who instructed her concerning certain food to eat and liquids to drink in order to become a healer:

[T]he man never leaves me and since then I have been curing people with medical plants. I either dream about which plants to use or immediately make a diagnosis. In the last case, I am not aware of what I am saying ... I can also mention the treatment in my song. When I have finished, we go and look for the remedies and apply them (Wedel 2010: 374).

A *partera*, a traditional birth assistant, who was also a *curandera*, told how she used plants when helping people with problems during pregnancy and difficult deliveries. She had been working as a *partera* for eleven years and received several clients each day:

Sometimes, women don't take care of their bodies and bath in the sea when they are menstruating. Then, when they become pregnant, the baby will be affected by the [water spirit] *sirena*. The woman will have pain and the baby may come out too early. I make a mixture of boiled herbs and give them a massage over the belly. They also drink [a mixture of] herbs and I give them a herbal steam bath so that the baby cannot be seen and disturbed by the *sirena*. Then they will have a normal delivery. Sometimes I dream about which herbs to use. When I touch the belly, I understand the problem. My hand knows.

Spiritually Activated Plants

Certain plants are said to have a strong spiritual aspect that may be "activated" through specific prayers and rituals. When a patient is suffering from an illness, said to be caused by a spirit directly or through sorcery, the healer must apply one or more of these plants. Often, a combination of plants is used to create a powerful "medicine" or spiritual protection. Once activated, these plants are known as *kanbaya* and must be handled with great care. A *curandero* told that one could get hurt and, for example, break an arm if dealt with spiritually activated plants improperly. It is also commonly held that they may provoke miscarriage to a pregnant woman or hemorrhage to a woman who is menstruating.

Healers who are working with spiritually activated plants must also take great care to avoid anyone who recently have had sexual intercourse or attended a funeral, as these activities make the person "hot." In this condition, he/she will "clash" with the spiritually activated plants if coming into contact with

them, provoking negative effects on both people and plants. On the other hand, plants may also be used to “cool down” people in certain “hot” conditions. If a man, who recently has been unfaithful to his wife, embraces his newborn child, it is commonly held that the baby will become sick and get diarrhea. It is only after he has washed and cleansed himself with certain herbs that he can touch the child.

Some of the most common plants that may be spiritually activated are: basil, coconut, cotton, coriander, feverfew, garlic, hot chili pepper, lime, sour-sop, and plants with the vernacular names *san diego* (*Tagetes patula* L.), *zorillo* (*Cestrum nocturnum* L.), and *golondrina* (*Euphorbia serpens* Kunth). The plants may be combined to create powerful *kanbayas* known as “The Seven African Powers” or “Black Lion.” These may be used for spiritual protection or to heal spiritually caused ailments. One healer showed a *kanbaya* said to protect against and eliminate all kinds of sorcery acts. It was made with 52 different plants, alcohol, Florida Water (Cologne Water), and other ingredients (see Fig. 2).

The prayers used when activating plants are often taken from biblical psalms or sentences, especially from the Book of David, and they often involve asking the plant for protection or asking for



Fig. 2: A powerful *kanbaya* made from 52 different plants. The liquid may be drunken, applied on the skin, used in a steam bath, or sprinkled on the ground (photo by the author).

help to cure a patient. The procedures and prayers for making *kanbayas*, such as placing the right amount of money at the foot of the plant when it is picked, is highly secret knowledge that is bought and sold for large sums of money. It is not uncommon for healers to spend several hundreds of dollars on “secrets,” that is, to say prayers and procedures that could “activate” plants. In a similar vein, a cure involving spiritually activated plants is generally very expensive and may cost more than one hundred dollars.

According to Dennis (2004), people wore protective amulets and *kanbayas* during the Nicaraguan Contra War in the 1980s to prevent being hit by bullets. Today, healers commonly bury a bottle containing a *kanbaya* in the yard to protect against thieves and sorcerers. This will create spiritual protection and neutralize all kinds of sorcery within fifty meters. A healer told the following: “If a thief or sorcerer enters, he will be hit. He will become very weak and will not be able to leave the patio. At night, the *kanbaya* will also transform into something that looks like a person and this will scare away bad people.”

Another healer told how a highly secret procedure, which involved a number of plants and other ingredients, could produce a protective spirit that would temporarily materialize as a scorpion, wasp, bat, or flying serpent and under its owner’s command would sting or bite intruders. Sorcerers are also said to use these spirits for evil purposes. In the rural Miskitu community of Andres in the year of 1992, for example, a green flying spirit-serpent was said to have bitten more than sixty people who became weak, lost consciousness, and suffered convulsions. The afflicted were reputedly healed by a *sukia*.

Among healers, the plant *golondrina* (*Euphorbia serpens* Kunth) is one of the most highly valued plants (see Fig. 3).

It is used for mundane problems such as kidney infections, and is said to diminish sexual desire. When spiritually activated, however, it becomes a particularly powerful *kanbaya* used as a divinatory instrument. In this process, its name changes to “Africana No. 1,” “The African Doctor” or “The Plant That Speaks,” and is said to establish a direct contact with the universe. The following is an excerpt from a *curandero*’s prayer to the plant:

Golondrina Africana number 1. I am your owner. Today I need you. I place 50 cordobas [about 2 US dollars]. You will be with me and you will protect me in every moment. Day and night you will protect my family. You are saint and powerful, I pay you. I ask you to bring out everything occult into the light ... I ask you to speak, I want to know.



Fig. 3: “Payment” to the spiritually powerful plant *golondrina* (*Euphorbia serpens* Kunth) (photo by the author).

When *golondrina* is applied on the forehead or on the neck of someone who is unconscious, it is commonly held that the person will give correct answers to all kinds of questions, such as why a person is sick and which plants to use to cure him/her. A *curandero* said that “someone who knows how to use *golondrina* possesses a very important legacy.” The plant may also reveal the names of supposed sorcerers. The *curandero* explained:

Some illnesses make people faint and become unconsciousness [i.e., *grisi siknis*]. We take advantage of this. We place *golondrina*, or some other plant that work in the same way, in the forehead of the patient while unconscious. The spirit of the plant will use the person as an instrument and answer all our questions. The spirit knows if someone has carried out sorcery, how it was done, if it was done with the spirit of air [*prahaku*], the spirit of the river [*liwa mairin*], the gnome [*duende*], or at the cemetery [*los muertos*]. If I do this with one patient, he will tell what all the other patients have and how to cure them.

A student at the university in Puerto Cabezas told the following story about his sister who became the victim of sorcery and was cured with this form of therapy:

My sister suddenly became very sick. She had convulsions and vomited balls of hair and small insects. She was almost dead when we brought her to a *curandera* who tied a plant on her head. [While unconscious] she began to speak and told that a guy from school had performed sorcery in order to kill her. She told what would cure her and that she would become well within an hour or two. She was given *kanbaya*, a liquid of herbs, to drink. She was unconscious and we could hardly open her mouth. [The mixture] was salty and horrible to drink. Shortly after she drunk it, she became well.

According to a *curandero*, two herbal mixtures are given to patients who have been exposed to sorcery. The first decoction will neutralize the sorcery entity inside the body. If only this liquid is taken, the patient may become sick again under certain conditions. However, if a second herbal decoction is taken, the sorcery entity will disappear completely. During and after treatment, the patient must refrain from certain kinds of food and certain “hot” people and situations. A *curandero* explained, comparing the sorcery entity to “microbes”:

Herbs are given to kill the microbes that are at work. When the microbes are dead, the *curandero* gives other herbs to drive out what’s in the body. If he doesn’t do that, it will maintain there and revive when the person eats meat of tapir, monkey, turtle, or certain fish, or if he assist[s] at a funerary or come[s] in contact with a woman who is menstruating.

Plants may also be combined to create a powerful object known as *la almoadita* (little pillow) or *tub* (see Fig. 4).



Fig. 4: A *tub* or “little pillow” used for spiritual protection and divination. The *tub* is “activated” with an herbal gel (photo by the author).

This small sealed textile pillow, which healers carry with them in their pocket, contains spiritually activated plants, small stones, and some other objects, such as a one-dollar bill and possibly a small piece of a placenta. The *tub* may be used in the same way as *golondrina*, i.e., to ask questions about spiritual afflictions and possible cures when someone is unconscious. A healer explained:

I put a little perfume on it to activate it. Then I make a cross in the patient’s forehead, chest, shoulders, feet, and head. After three, four minutes, he will begin to speak and give all the information you want: who the sorcerers are, which treatment to use, and if I really am the person to take on this problem. He will tell everything.

According to Nicaraguan ethnologist Cox Molina (1998: 44), this practice, called *whitara dinkan* in Miskitu, has helped many people who seemed incurable to regain health (see also Fagoth et al. 1998: 32). However, the healer must be skilled or else the patient will continue to talk without end. When waking up, he or she will not remember anything. The *tub*, which is activated with a certain prayer, also works as the healer's spiritual protection; it may warn the healer of possible dangers in his dreams and helps him to "neutralize" and undo sorcery attacks. A *curandero* told about his intimate relationship with his protective *tub*:

I always carry the little pillow with me. It's made in my name and protects me. It knows me as his friend, as his father. It tells me what is going to happen and sometimes it tells me the words that people are going to say. It contains a spirit that speaks to me when I am dreaming. The spirit may appear as a close friend who tells me which herbs I should use to heal a patient, or it may warn me of someone who is doing sorcery against me and my family. For example, some time ago my son was very sick. We went to the doctor and I gave him tablets and injections but nothing helped. Then I dreamed about a friend who said, "take this herb and this prayer and give him to drink and wash him with this." The following morning I went to look for the herb. After only one day my son was okay.

Generally, *tubs* are made for spiritual protection, healing, or for neutralizing sorcery, but they may also be prepared with the purpose of, for example, attracting a lover or becoming a successful businessperson (see also Pérez Chiriboga 2002: 224).

Conclusion

Among the Miskitu, plants are imperative when healing and when communicating with the spirit world through dreams, visions, songs, and prayers. In a reciprocal human–plant relationship, healers address plants by "paying" them and by asking them to heal their patients. Some of these plants may also be spiritually "activated" and may acquire particularly spiritually powerful aspects. On these occasions, it becomes possible to come into contact with, and receive help from the spirit world, using an unconscious person as a divinatory instrument. In this process, plants become powerful, sacred, and intelligent beings that speak with their own "voice" in human language in a rich and engaging dialogical relationship. As plants become subjects in the non-material world of spirits and "speak" through human beings, they may reveal both the origin of an affliction (i.e., sorcery or a spirit) and its cure (including ways to neutralize sorcery). In this animistic

worldview, plants, humans, and spirits share a basic ontological reality in a participatory relational universe. Accordingly, plants are not subjugated and seen as unspiritual, separate, and inferior to humans, as is a common Western anthropocentric ontology (Hall 2011). Instead, they become active, perceptive, and sentient beings in mutually equivalent respectful human–plant–spirit interactions.

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Un dernier atelier de poterie Kongo-Mbata à Nsangi-Binsu (Bas-Congo, R. D. Congo)

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Le royaume Kongo, étant parmi les états les plus illustres du continent, s’est développé dans un territoire considérable sur la côte occidentale de l’Afrique centrale. Il est connu par nombreux témoignages écrits dès la fin du 15e siècle à la suite des premiers contacts avec l’occident.¹ Pourtant malgré l’abondance des sources, l’origine du royaume et l’histoire de son développement sont encore mal comprises. Afin de mieux les comprendre, le programme de recherche interdisciplinaire et interuniversitaire “KongoKing” financé par le Conseil européen de la recherche (CER), est actuellement en cours.²

Une des préoccupations principales du projet est la question de savoir, si les processus de centralisation politique et d’intégration économique pendant l’apogée du royaume (15e–17e s.) ainsi que la dissolution des réseaux de communication suite à son déclin ont aussi eu un impact sur l’évolution de la culture matérielle dans la région, en l’occurrence la poterie. C’est dans ce cadre que nos recherches doctorales se focalisent sur la céramique actuelle et subactuelle dans la région Kongo, c’est-à-dire à partir de la fin du 19e siècle jusqu’à présent.

Si la céramique kongo a déjà fait l’objet d’un premier examen comparatif au tout début du XXe siècle (Coart et de Haulleville 1907) ainsi que d’une série d’études ethnographiques postérieures,³ aucune étude ethnographique comparative et systématique n’y a été dédiée. Malheureusement le temps a passé et il ne subsiste plus actuellement que de très rares lieux dans la zone Kongo où on a gardé le souvenir de cette technique, ou mieux, où il est encore possible d’assister à la fabrication de récipients en terre cuite. Pourtant, afin d’être capable de mener une étude comparative aussi exhaustive que possible de la poterie kongo, tel qu’est le but de notre projet doctoral, il est indispensable de documenter les chaînes opératoires céramiques qui ont subsisté jusqu’à présent sans avoir été décrites antérieurement. C’est exactement dans ce but qu’entre

1 Pigafetta (2002) ; Balandier (1965) ; Bontinck (1972) ; Hilton (1985) ; Thornton (1982).

2 Pour plus d’infos, voir <www.kongoking.org>.

3 Darteville (1936) ; Maret (1974) ; Laman (1953) ; Mac-Gaffey (1975) ; Maquet (1938, 1939) ; Nsiesie (1938) ; Pinçon et Ngoïe-Ngalla (1990) ; Soret (1959) ; Vincke (2002).