

Haverford College

Haverford Scholarship

Faculty Publications

Anthropology

2016

Constructing a Kongo Identity: Scholarship and Mythopoesis

Wyatt MacGaffey
Haverford College

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.haverford.edu/anthropology_facpubs

Repository Citation

MacGaffey, Wyatt. "Constructing a Kongo Identity: Scholarship and Mythopoesis" *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 58(1):159-180, 2016.

This Journal Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Anthropology at Haverford Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Haverford Scholarship. For more information, please contact nmedeiro@haverford.edu.

Constructing a Kongo Identity: Scholarship and Mythopoesis

WYATT MACGAFFEY

Anthropology, Haverford College

The past thirty years have seen, particularly in the United States, a transformation in the public image of Kongo, an ill-defined entity (a tribe, a kingdom, a culture, a region?) on the Atlantic coast of Central Africa. Kongo (with K) long stood in the shadow of Congo (with C), which for at least two hundred years represented in the imagination of Europeans and Americans the heart of darkness, the homeland of fetishism and cannibalism. In the United States after the Civil War, during the age of Reconstruction and Jim Crow, “Congo” summarized America’s racial attitudes. This reputation was further darkened between 1885 and 1908 by reports of atrocities in King Leopold’s Congo and the controversies they generated. Vachel Lindsay’s poem “The Congo (A Study of the Negro Race),” published in 1912 and widely anthologized until the 1960s, lays out, layer by layer, the entire palimpsest of American fantasies about blacks, in which the “savagery” of Africa has been redeemed by Christianity but retains in America its exotic and still threatening vitality. The poem begins with “1. Their Basic Savagery,” and describes “fat black bucks” who “pounded on a table” and remind the poet of tattooed cannibals beating on a tin pan with a thigh-bone. It is unnecessary to follow his analogies further.¹

In the Americas generally, “Kongo” as an element in the population of West Central Africa known collectively as “Congos” and “Bantu” has also long been disparaged in comparison with another imagined entity, Yoruba, a construction based upon elements in the population of West Africa including Fanti, Allada, Dahomeyans, and other primarily coastal groups.² The origins of this invidious distinction lie deep in the history of European race theory,

Acknowledgments: I am grateful for the comments of J. Lorand Matony and of the anonymous *CSSH* readers. I have also benefited over the years from many conversations with J. M. Janzen and J. K. Thornton.

¹ Lindsay’s defenders excuse his embarrassingly racist perspective by arguing that he meant well. For pro and con, see “Race Criticism of the Congo,” *Modern American Poetry*: www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g_1/Lindsay/congo (accessed 3 Sept. 2015).

² I place “Kongo” and “Yoruba” in quotation marks to refer to cultural entities that have been constructed in transatlantic discourses, as opposed to Kongo and Yoruba as they are known to historians of Africa.

and not in any real difference between the cultures or histories of different groups of enslaved Africans and their descendants in the Americas. In the nineteenth century, whites were supposed to be further advanced on the evolutionary scale and thus innately superior to blacks. The “races” of Africa reproduced this relationship in such a way that those of the north of the continent were supposedly superior to those dwelling further south; West Africans were, if not civilized, at least more amenable to civilization than Central Africans (“Bantous”). As Stefania Capone has shown, authorities including R. Nina Rodrigues, Artur Ramos, Gilberto Freyre, Roger Bastide, Fernando Ortiz, and Pierre Verger subscribed to the view that the Yoruba, with their pantheon of *orisha* deities, were endowed with “religion,” whereas Congos (slaves from the Congo/Angolan coast) had only ancestor worship and sorcery. Congos, being docile, were suited to agricultural labor, whereas Yoruba made better house servants, although (paradoxically) they were noted for “resistance” and for retaining their African cultural heritage in relatively pure form. Freyre even held that the higher proportion of West rather than Central Africans in Brazil’s population meant that Brazilian civilization was less compromised than that of the United States, prompting Melville Herskovits to reply defensively that the Congo presence was in fact inconsequential.³

The independence won by the majority of former colonies in Africa in 1960 required a sweeping ideological reorientation in Western scholarship, seeking to correct a picture now seen as not only inaccurate but offensive, while still exhibiting a reluctance to accept the challenge of difference. Long represented as the homeland of barbarism, Africa was now to be admitted to the community of the civilized, and the culture of even Congos and Bantous deserved exploration. “Culture” notoriously escapes definition, but its general modern sense, “a high level of aesthetic and intellectual achievement,” emerges in Europe in the nineteenth century along with the rise of manufacturing industry and the development of a self-conscious middle class eager to associate itself with the refinements of the aristocracy. The three pillars of culture in this sense are religion, art, and royalty, all of which Africa supposedly lacked. For Hegel, a representative thinker, African thought was dominated by fetishism, a product of a childish illusion of omnipotent control of nature. A fetish therefore “has no independent existence as an object of religion, and even less as a work of art.” African kings were mere arbitrary despots, and even their despotism was cancelled out by contradictory forces.⁴ Now, a continent that formerly had no history was to be provided with a politically respectable past in the heroic form of kingdoms and empires, forerunners of

³ S. Capone, “Entre Yoruba et Bantou: l’Influence des Stéréotypes Raciaux dans les Etudes Afro-Américaines,” *Cahiers d’Etudes Africaines* 40, Cah. 157 (2000): 55–77.

⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, H. B. Nisbet, trans. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 180, 185–86.

nation-states in the making. Fetishism became “Traditional African Religion” and fetishes became “Art.” As the American “melting pot” melted down in the 1960s, to be replaced by multiculturalism and the politics of identity, demand surged for stories of ethnic origin and cultural distinctiveness. It was no longer enough to be of European or African descent. The decoding of human DNA seemed to offer Americans the possibility of pinpointing their “origins” and aroused new interest in the cultures of imagined homelands. But this new discourse continued to privilege “Yoruba” and “Kongo” as rival representatives of “Africa,” and the presentation of Kongo to the American public continued to be apologetic, an essay in defensive vindication by outsiders.⁵ This paper explores the history of an invention.⁶

KONGO IN AFRICA

The construction of “Kongo” by outsiders begins with the arrival of the Portuguese explorer Diogo Cao at the mouth of the river he called Nzari, later the Congo, in 1483. He entered into diplomatic relations with the Mani Kongo, whom the Portuguese thought of as “king” of a “kingdom,” although these terms have no good equivalents in Kongo language or political thought. In the language that came to be called Kikongo, *kongo* refers to a gathering or to an enclosure, related to *nkongolo*, a circle; any space prepared for a ritual, such as the enclosure where the Kimpasi initiation took place, could be called *(di)kongo*. If the kingdom had been what the Portuguese thought it was, an early modern state similar to Portugal itself, we would expect to find similar political systems nearby in Central Africa, but none exist. Like other African capitals, Mbanza Kongo was a center of power, prestige, economic opportunity, and ritual validation, whose influence spread over a wide but fluctuating area. The authority of the Mani Kongo was precarious and he welcomed the support of the strangers. It became secure only as he, his nobles, and his successors adopted Portuguese Christianity, took Portuguese names and titles, made war with Portuguese assistance, and entered into the Atlantic trade and diplomatic relations with other Atlantic powers. After the civil wars of the seventeenth century the kingdom lost much of its veneer of modernity, and by 1891 it was little more than a memory.⁷

⁵ L. M. Heywood, ed., *Central Africans and Cultural Transformation in the Americas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); T. Falola and M. D. Childs, eds., *The Yoruba Diaspora in the Atlantic World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); L. M. Heywood and J. K. Thornton, *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585–1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁶ For an exhaustive annotated bibliography of all things Kongo, see J. M. Janzen, “Diaspora, Kongo Atlantic,” *Oxford Bibliographies in African Studies*, www.oxfordbibliographiesonline.com (accessed 3 Sept. 2015).

⁷ S. H. Broadhead, “Beyond Decline: The Kingdom of the Kongo in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 12, 4 (1979), 615–50.

The Kongo identity emerged as a product of colonization. In the seventeenth century, *mwisi Kongo*, “inhabitant of Kongo,” meant someone from Mbanza Kongo, the populous seat of the Mani Kongo (in what is now northwestern Angola), as opposed to *mwisi vata*, a villager. The unity of the Kongo people, or “tribe,” was the creation first of administrators and historians and later of linguists. Supposedly, the kingdom was founded by a conqueror named Ntinu Wene; amid rejoicing and festivity, he assigned sections of the country to nine lieutenants, each of whom adopted a praise-name and founded a clan.⁸ Much later, according to traditions that village elders offered to twentieth-century Catholic missionaries, quarrels broke out and their ancestors left their original home, Kongo dia Ntotila, crossed the Nzadi, and traveled north to the places where their descendants now live. *Nzadi*, the name of any large river, including the Congo, became Zaire in Portuguese usage. Kongo dia Ntotila is one of the names of Mbanza Kongo.⁹ Historians took these traditions literally, following the lead of Msgr. J. Cuvelier and other Redemptorist missionaries. As a way to represent Christianity as indigenous rather than imposed, Catholic historians revived the idea of old Kongo as a Catholic kingdom, and popularized the story through the mission journal *Ku Kiele*. Today, when village elders in Catholic communities in the Democratic Republic of Congo retell stories of Ntinu Wene, the famous sixteenth-century King Nzing’a Mvemba, and the revolutionary prophetess Kimpa Vita, they present them as traditions handed down across the generations, but in fact they learned them in school and from *Ku Kiele*.

Research by John Thornton has shown that Cuvelier’s account of the origins of the Kongo kingdom fused modern village traditions anachronistically with early missionary chronicles, and he has cast serious doubt on the supposed originating conquest.¹⁰ Other research has revealed that traditions referring to Kongo dia Ntotila are told not only north of the Congo but also south of it, showing that, though Nzadi is often identified with the geographical Congo River, in oral tradition it labels a mythic transition from an original condition of social harmony to today’s social division. These traditions are not historical records but sociological models, and Kongo dia Ntotila is only one of several mythical “origins” to which they may refer, only loosely related to history. Elsewhere it is replaced by several places called Mwembe Nsundi, which led Swedish missionary scholars to assert that the people should really be called “Basundi” rather than “Bakongo.”

In traditional thought, all these places of origin, including Mbanza Kongo, are local versions of “the land of the dead,” cemeteries from which the powers

⁸ J. Cuvelier, *L’Ancien Royaume de Congo* (Brussels: Desclée de Brouwer, 1946).

⁹ *Ntotila* from *tota*, “to gather,” thus a place where many were gathered together.

¹⁰ J. K. Thornton, “The Origins and Early History of the Kingdom of Kongo, c. 1350–1550,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 34, 1 (2001): 94–95.

of chiefs and ritual experts were thought ultimately to derive. The routes followed by the founding chiefs to the present abodes of their successors were in reality the principal trade routes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, from the great market and transfer station on the river at Mpumbu (modern Kinshasa and Brazzaville) toward the brokerage houses on the coast. South of the river, the principal route ran through the real Mbanza Kongo, where the king, who even in decline retained considerable authority over trade, issued the talismans and titles that regulated it.¹¹ North of the river, various difficult tracks through the mountains led in the same direction from the Nsundi (Manianga) market through the mountains toward Cabinda and Loango. In this age of endemic petty warfare and slaving there was no public security and traders depended on the patronage of chiefs who could provide ritual insignia as *laissez-passer*. Thus the pursuit of wealth was intimately bound up with chieftaincy and magic.¹²

Linguists identified the dialects spoken in much of this area, now divided among the Republic of the Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Angola, as belonging to one language, Kikongo. But the first evidence of consciousness of a “national” Kongo identity appears in an appeal Kavuna Simon addressed to fellow readers of the Protestant mission bulletin *Minsamu Miayenge* in 1910. “What is Kikongo?” he had first to ask, and he explained that it was the language of “the Bakongo,” those who lived in the administrative province of Belgian Congo called Bas-Congo. “We Bakongo,” wrote Kavuna, “must respect our language, speak it at all times, and not allow it to be corrupted.” The context of this appeal included both rising discontent with foreign rule and awareness of incipient competition within the colonial framework between the Bakongo and other “tribes” identified as such by the administration.¹³ This consciousness of Kikongo as the property of a social group is thus specifically political. At that time Kongo men increasingly spent their working years in colonial centers where the predominant languages were those of the administration: Lingala and a corrupt Kikongo called Kileta, “government language.” The Kikongo in which Kavuna’s appeal was couched was itself a product of intensive missionary education efforts that from 1888 onward used *Minsamu Miayenge*, the Swedish mission’s translation of the Bible, and other texts to spread literacy. This written Kikongo was in many ways a European language and, as J. M. Janzen has shown, it profoundly changed Kongo thought.¹⁴ The

¹¹ Broadhead, “Beyond Decline,” 632–37.

¹² W. MacGaffey, *Kongo Political Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 61–77.

¹³ W. MacGaffey, “Ethnography and the Closing of the Frontier in Lower Congo, 1885–1921,” *Africa* 56 (1986): 263–79.

¹⁴ J. M. Janzen, “The Consequences of Literacy in African Religion: The Kongo Case,” in W. van Binsbergen and M. Schoffeleers, eds., *Theoretical Explorations in African Religion* (London: Routledge, 1984).

Swedish Bible translation was one of two—the other produced by the British Baptist mission—and both still today exert their separate influences. When Catholic missions arrived later in Belgian Congo they were less zealous in teaching literacy and approached the problems of translation in a different spirit. Thus, even where Kikongo is spoken, there is no standard form. In everyday life most people think of themselves as speaking, not “Kikongo,” but their local dialect, Kimanteke, Kimanianga, Kiyombe, and so on.

As the end of Belgian colonial rule approached rapidly, the Kongo elite, educated in Catholic schools, struggled to find a political model suited to independence. Their Kikongo newspapers, including *Kongo Dieto* (“Our Kongo,” a deliberate reply to the Belgian *Onze Congo*) and *Kongo dia Ntota*, published articles full of traditional cosmological references, moving toward the image of a world turned upside down, in which black would become white and the ancestors would return, bringing health and wealth. They formed an association that became a political party, the Alliance des Bakongo (ABAKO). They sometimes called their leader, Joseph Kasavubu, “the king,” and referred so often to the old Kongo kingdom that opposition figures parodied the title of Cuvelier’s book and joked about *l’ancien royaume ABAKO*. This ideological fantasy disappeared as the real politics of independence took over and the opposition began accusing the leaders of ABAKO of witchcraft.¹⁵ The idea of the former kingdom receded so far from the popular imagination that I once heard it said, of a man who in fact came from Mbanza Kongo, “Oh, he’s not a Mukongo, he’s an Angolan.”

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, missionaries and colonial officials in West Africa joined African scholars in the project of furnishing the Yoruba heritage with a commendable religion, rich with a degree of mythological complexity, wisdom, dignity, and organization lacking in the documentation for other African religions.¹⁶ Reports of Kongo religion and culture, on the other hand, were all negative. The Kongo kingdom had been known since the reports of seventeenth-century missionaries and travelers as the homeland of demonic paganism. In the twentieth century missionaries never ceased to deplore the prevalence of superstition among Kongo-speakers, despite a relatively sympathetic account of their belief in spirits by the influential Jesuit J. van Wing in 1937.¹⁷ In his own much richer ethnographic reports, the Scheutist missionary L. Bittremieux spared no derogatory adjectives: “superstitious, fetishistic, immoral.”¹⁸ The Kongo kingdom centered in

¹⁵ W. MacGaffey, *Custom and Government in the Lower Congo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 256–58; L. Monnier, *Ethnie et Intégration Régionale au Bas-Congo* (Paris: EDICEF, 1971).

¹⁶ J.D.Y. Peel, *Religious Encounters and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000); J. L. Matory, “The English Professors of Brazil: On the Diasporic Roots of the Yoruba Nation,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41, 1 (1999), 72–103.

¹⁷ Van Wing, *Etudes Bakongo* (Brussels: Desclée de Brouwer, 1959 [1921, 1937]).

¹⁸ L. Bittremieux, *La Société Secrète des Bakhimba au Mayombe* (Brussels: IRCB, 1936).

Angola had disappeared after two centuries of decline, leaving nothing in the recent record that lent itself to a heroic narrative, and no statues of rulers on horseback to focus modern admiration. Kongo art, in the form of wooden sculptures, was little noticed by collectors until the 1960s. They were, after all, fetishes.

KONGO IN AMERICA

After 1960, political events in the newly independent Democratic Republic of Congo, summarized in headlines as “Chaos in the Congo,” did nothing to enhance the reputation of things Kongo. Then, in 1981, Robert Farris Thompson, an art historian at Yale, at a stroke gave Kongo a public identity in the United States and redeemed its image. He mounted a major exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. titled “The Four Moments of the Sun” and, with Joseph Cornet, published an accompanying volume by the same name.¹⁹ For the first time, the public was introduced to remarkable funerary terracottas and sculptures from the hinterland of the port of Mboma on the Congo estuary, including figures carved in soapstone (*mintadi*) and highly decorated cylindrical ceramic “urns” (*mabondo*). Thompson related these figures, together with photographs of actual Kongo graves, to African-American graves in the southern states, and extended the connections to African-American music, dance, and bodily gestures. Here, then, was Art, together with convincing evidence of the continued vitality of apparently Kongo cultural themes in the New World. The book goes further still, endowing “Kongo” with royalty and, if not religion, then an ethical philosophy of exceptional wisdom and dignity.

Thompson achieved his breakthrough by collaboration with André Fu-Kiau kia Bunseki, a native of the Manianga area in Lower Congo then resident in Boston. Fu-Kiau supplied his own commentaries on the objects, often in considerable detail and with accompanying terms in Kikongo. Fu-Kiau was born and raised in a relatively isolated part of Lower Congo which nevertheless was so heavily influenced by Catholic and Protestant missionaries that it produced more secondary-school graduates than any other area. As a young man he lived in a time when, to the very eve of independence in 1960, missionaries, colonial agents, and government spokesmen openly described Congolese, particularly villagers, as primitives so shackled by clannish collectivism that they could not hope to become civilized without European help. Like Kavuna, who came from the same area, Fu-Kiau worked for the preservation of Kikongo, compiling a wordlist that showed how modern expressions such as “minister of agriculture” could be rendered. The title of the Smithsonian

¹⁹ R. F. Thompson and J. Cornet, *Four Moments of the Sun* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1981). Cornet was responsible for the field research that recovered many of these artifacts.

exhibition, “The Four Moments of the Sun,” referred to a diagram by Fu-Kiau, a cross inscribed in a circle, in a book he had published in Kikongo in Kinshasa with the assistance of the anthropologist J. M. Janzen.²⁰ The diagram, later known as a “cosmogram,” showed how Bakongo understood the universe they lived in as divided into the two worlds of the living and the dead, separated by water; the life of man paralleled that of the sun in its rising in one world and setting in the other.²¹ For Fu-Kiau, the diagram was the starting point for a vigorous demonstration, refuting Belgian belittlements, that the Bakongo had ideas, a worldview, and a moral philosophy. For the rest of his life Fu-Kiau worked to elaborate a “Bantu-Kongo philosophy,” an ideal that grew increasingly remote from Kongo realities as documented by indigenous writers and by ethnographers. He insured himself against criticism by saying that the elders had revealed secrets to him that would not be told to the uninitiated and certainly not to inquiring missionaries and anthropologists.

Belgians were not the only foreigners that needed to be convinced that there was “culture” in Africa. Thompson’s text confronted a real challenge: the latent fear in many Americans drawn to Africa that if they get too close they will discover that its cultures are repellent or, at best, so different from the familiar as not to be worth the effort required to understand them.²² His technique, with Fu-Kiau’s assistance, was to ennoble and sanitize everything Kongo to the point that all sense of a realistic human community was lost. A single example from *Four Moments in the Sun*, shows how this distancing was effected.

A soapstone figure in *The Four Moments* (fig. 90, p. 112) shows a well-dressed person holding a staff ornamented with imported brass furniture nails in his right hand. He carries an imported Dutch gin bottle in his left hand and a similar bottle tucked under his left arm. A Mboma elder, shown a photograph of this piece, thought the bottles showed that this was “an elegant man, bold and rich, and capable of buying liquors” (p. 114). Thompson quotes but ignores this

²⁰ A. Fu-Kiau kia Bunseki Lumanisa, *N’kongo ye Nza Yakun’zungidila. Le Mukongo et le Monde qui l’Entourait*, Zamenga Batukezanga, trans., Introduction by J. M. Janzen (Kinshasa: Office Nationale de la Recherche et de Développement, 1969).

²¹ Without realizing that I had invented it, I began to use the word “cosmogram” in 1970 in discussions with R. F. Thompson, who subsequently popularized it. I meant it to refer to improvised marks made on the ground as a setting for rituals. The diagram itself is authentic and represents a concept that must have been current in the nineteenth century, if not before; Ortiz reported it in Cuba, marked with terms in Kikongo, though the interpretation is not the same as Fu-Kiau’s. F. Ortiz, *Los Instrumentos de la Música Afrocubana*, 5 vols. (Havana: Ministerio de Educación, 1952–1955), 3: 166–71; W. MacGaffey, *Religion and Society in Central Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 46.

²² This is a common theme in comments on the state of African Art. See C. B. Steiner, “First Word: Discovering African Art ... Again?” *African Arts* 29, 4 (1996): 1–8; T. O. Beidelman, “Promoting Africa Art: The Catalogue to the Exhibit of African Art at the Royal Academy of Arts, London,” *Anthropos* 92, 1/3 (1997): 3–20, 9. See also T. Ranger, “Scotland Yard in the Bush: Medicine Murders, Child Witches, and the Construction of the Occult,” *Africa* 77, 2 (2007): 272–83.

opinion in favor of an extended commentary by Fu-Kiau, which leads to the conclusion that the man is a *nganga* (ritual expert) who carries two bottles because “they symbolize two different powers. He is dealing in two worlds, actual and spiritual, town and forest. He has to hold two worlds within his hands, and bring them both together.” One informant’s opinion is perhaps as good as another’s, but that attributed to Fu-Kiau ignores and in fact obscures the purpose for which these funerary objects were actually commissioned. Between 1844 and 1867 Mboma was the main port for the illegal slave trade, exporting up to twenty-five thousand slaves a year, more than at any earlier time in its history. From 1845 to 1872 it was also the main port for the “legitimate” Congo trade in palm oil, peanuts, rubber, gum copal, and ivory. In a highly competitive business environment, families grew rich. Their funerals were “unparalleled occasions for the ostentatious display and destruction of imported prestige goods,” including clothing, gin, guns, and sewing machines. Their cemeteries, the ultimate repositories of wealth from which *mabondo* and *mintadi* were recovered, are “microcosms that depict chiefs and commercial officials, slavery, economic activity, politics, social practices, esteemed foreign trade goods and objects of local manufacture from a vanished golden age in Mboma history.”²³

Eulogistic references to the wisdom and dignity of Kongo rulers pervade *The Four Moments*. “It is amazing,” writes Thompson, “how many times the image of the vanished capital returns, like a shimmering chimera, in the dispositions of judgment and decision [in legal proceedings].” Ordinary Kikongo words are adduced by Thompson/Fu-Kiau as though they were technical terms bearing deep metaphysical significance. For example, any occurrence of *luumbu*, “an enclosure, a residential compound,” becomes a coded reference to the court of the kings of Kongo.²⁴ The image of Kongo Thompson celebrates as though it were a living memory in twentieth-century Kongo villages is that of an idealized early modern kingdom, a Camelot on the Congo. This image, initiated by the Portuguese and perpetuated and elaborated by Cuvelier and others, resists challenge because it is familiar and attracts favorable judgments.²⁵

Fu-Kiau, who died in 2013, went on to an impressive career as a teacher and interpreter of African culture in the United States, with a devoted following

²³ N. Schrag, *Mboma and the Lower Zaire: A Socio-Economic Study of a Kongo Trading Community, ca. 1785–1885* (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1985).

²⁴ Thompson and Cornet, *Four Moments*, 41. It is important to mention that Thompson’s work on Yoruba culture, art, and belief is much richer, based as it is on thorough personal familiarity; see R. F. Thompson, *Face of the Gods: Art and Altars of the African Americas* (New York: Museum for African Art, 1993).

²⁵ Downstream from Thompson’s original breakthrough, the kingdom has taken on fantastic dimensions. For example: “At its height in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Kongo kingdom stretched from Gabon to Zambia.” B. Martínez-Ruiz, in *Radcliffe Bailey: Memory as Medicine*, Foreword by Carol Thompson (Atlanta: High Museum of Art, 2011), 186.

throughout the Americas. This is best summarized in a eulogy posted on Facebook: “K. Kia Bunseki Fu-Kiau, B.A., M.Ed., M.S. and Ph.D., is an indigenous African teacher, scholar, lecturer, healer and spiritual guide. He is the author of many books including ‘Simbi-Simbi: Hold Up That Which Holds You Up’ (2006), ‘African Cosmology of the Bantu-Kongo’ (2001), and ‘Self-Healing Power and Therapy’ (1991). He has lectured on African concepts of reality and African spiritual practices throughout Africa, Europe, the United States, the Caribbean and South America. He is one of the great elders of the African family and a true gift to humanity.”²⁶ Thousands of Americans have now been persuaded, through scholarly writing and innumerable museum exhibits since 1981, in many of which Fu-Kiau is quoted, that Kongo art and thought deserve serious respect. A flood of research into things Kongo has followed. This is no small achievement.

As Kongo became recognized as an identity, the hunt was on to find traces of it in the United States. The search faced the difficulty that on the continent itself Kongo is not well established as a discrete entity.²⁷ Internally, the Kikongo language zone was and is not culturally homogeneous, and externally it has much in common with its neighbors in not only Central Africa but also in the forested zones of West Africa.²⁸ Dunja Hersak has made the point that “There are many Kongo worlds” by showing differences between coastal and hinterland cultural expressions, and Raoul Lehuard has complained that artworks should be assigned to local communities rather than attributed to Kongo.²⁹

How, then, can the cultural heritage associated with Kongo be filled out? The search for specifically Kongo traces in the diaspora and the task of establishing their function or “meaning” must deal with particularities of word, object, or representation made available by reports that say, “so and so is the case.” Such reports occur at three stages in the process: the work of scholars pronouncing on Kongo presences, the evidence of such presences available for them to examine, and records of “ancestral” words, objects, or representations in Kongo itself. Reports are communications, and as such they are molded by their social context and the social role of the reporter. At each stage, multiple occasions of bias or miscommunication may occur to mislead the unwary. Careful critique of sources, basic to the historian’s methodology, is therefore

²⁶ At: hedgemason.blogspot.com/2013/memorial for tata Bunseki Fu-kiau (accessed 3 Sept. 2015).

²⁷ W. MacGaffey, “Kongo Identity 1483–1993,” in V. Y. Mudimbe, ed., *Nations, Identities, Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 45–57.

²⁸ W. MacGaffey, “The Cultural Tradition of the African Forests,” in J. Pemberton III. ed., *Insight and Artistry in African Divination* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 13–24.

²⁹ D. Hersak, “There are Many Kongo Worlds: Particularities of Magico-Religious Beliefs among the Vili and Yombe of Congo-Brazzaville,” *Africa* 71, 4 (2001): 614–40; R. Lehuard, *Art Bakongo: Les Centres du Style*, 2 vols. (Arnouville: Arts de l’Afrique Noire, 1989).

essential. The hazards of the process are well illustrated by a single Kikongo word, *mbumba*, and its career in the historical record.

In Haiti (St. Domingue) accounts of the activities of slaves in the eighteenth century mention a chant, *Eh! Eh! Bomba, hen! hen! Canga bafiot é/ Canga mound dé lé/ Canga doki la/ Canga li*. Cuvelier, a historian of the Kongo kingdom, recognized the language as Kikongo and rewrote it, with more correct spelling, as “*Eh, Mbumba, eh! Kanga bafioti, kanga mundele, kanga ndoki, kanga!*” He described it as a song in honor of Mbumba, “a snake.” He based this interpretation on passages in Bittremieux’s account of the Nkimba cult in Lower Congo, in which the central fetish is a representation of Mbumba Luangu, the rainbow, which is thought of as a snake that arises from the water and launches itself into the sky to control the rain. Generations of scholars have followed Cuvelier in translating *mbumba* as “snake” and finding snake cults in Kongo.³⁰ The chant may be paraphrased: “Eh, Mbumba, bind all the witches, black or white, bind them!” Contemporary observers, fearful of slave uprisings, as well as later scholars eager to celebrate the slaves’ revolutionary spirit, proposed creative translations to qualify the chant as a revolutionary anthem urging death to whites. More recent scholars argue that the chant was simply part of slaves’ efforts, using the cultural tools they brought with them, to control the witches they thought were responsible for the extreme hardships they experienced on colonial estates. The importance attached to signs of “resistance” and “rebellion” is weighted with racial evaluations, as we have seen, and it carries the unfortunate implication that the majority, notably women, who carried on their lives as best they could under the burden of oppression, were less commendable as human beings.

The outcome of the revolution has made it difficult to assess such humble pre-revolutionary activity, given our predilection for grand, totalizing narratives.³¹ Thornton, arguing that we should respect the belief of the colonists that it had revolutionary overtones, seeks to restore to the chant at least a “democratic” though not revolutionary significance. He cites Anne Hilton’s *The Kingdom of Kongo* and numerous sources both missionary and ethnographic to suggest that Mbumba was a fertility cult, represented by a snake or a rainbow, dedicated to “the peaceful and harmonious dimension of life,” which Hilton called “the *mbumba* dimension.”³² Therefore, “Its general terms of address, to blacks (*bafioté*) and whites (*mundele*) alike, and the invocation of Mbumba suggest that [the chant] had a social as much as a personal

³⁰ Cuvelier, *L’Ancien Royaume*, 289–90.

³¹ H. Vanhee, “Central African Popular Christianity and the Making of Haitian Vodou Religion,” in L. M. Heywood, ed., *Central Africans and Cultural Transformation in the Americas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

³² A. Hilton, *The Kingdom of Kongo* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 12–19.

significance.”³³ The invocation of *Mbumba* “suggests that it expressed the spirit of harmony and peace as an alternative to personal greed,” and “could serve as a shorthand expression of a revolutionary creed to restore justice and harmony.”³⁴ All this is ingenious and inspiring, but it is a house built on sand. The Kongo dictionaries of Van Dyck, Bentley, and Laman remind us that *mbùmba* (low tone) means “a secret”; *leeka mbùmba*, “to keep a secret, to make something mysterious.” Not surprisingly, the word appears in the name of many *minkisi* (“fetishes,” sing. *nkisi*), some of which were explicitly violent rather than dedicated to social harmony; in fact, *m’vandi a mbumba* is an ordinary expression for one who composes a fetish.³⁵ The Haitian chant was an appeal to a *nkisi* called Mbumba to do something about the witches, black or white. Hilton was mistaken in lumping together, even “for convenience only,” all occurrences not only of *mbumba* but of similar words, including (*m*)*bùmba*, the medicine bundle of a *nkisi*, and *mbombo*, which in the seventeenth century as in the twentieth indeed meant “fertility.”³⁶ Her reckless mash-up of Kongo ritual and belief has been uncritically followed by too many scholars.

The idea that Mbumba was the name of a snake or a snake cult is based on two sources: early missionary reports of such cults and a misreading of Bittremieux. Luca da Caltanissetta, for example, a Capuchin who could not witness a Kongo celebration without shuddering at the diabolical horror of it all, describes a ritual at the beginning of the agricultural season in which the people cultivate a field, with the exception of a grove at its center which is the abode of a snake. Once the cultivation is over, the people appeal “to the snake” for rain and prosperity.³⁷ This reporting is unreliable—what the missionary saw was an example of a territorial cult such as occurs all over West and Central Africa, often centered on a grove in which remarkable animals (called “totemic” in older anthropology) are treated as emanations of the spirit of the earth.³⁸ Likewise the Nkimba cult, Bittremieux wrote, is addressed

³³ *Bafyòti*, “black people,” from *fyòta* (low tone), “to become dark”; not to be confused with *fyóti* (high tone), “little.”

³⁴ J. K. Thornton, “‘I Am the Subject of the King of Kongo’: African Political Ideology and the Haitian Revolution,” *Journal of World History* 4, 2 (1993), 181–214.

³⁵ Mbumba Luangu is also the name of a “nail-fetish,” an anthropomorphic *nkondi* figure into which nails were driven (Bittremieux, *La Société Secrète*, 173). An example from eastern Mayombe is in *Etnografiska Museet*, Stockholm, no. 19.1.1192.

³⁶ Not to be confused with *mbùmba* (low tone), “a cat”; *bùmba*, “to copulate”; *mbùmba*, “bad breath, stomach reflux”; or *mbúmba* (high tone), “pottery making”; *bùmbba*, “a trap for porcupines”; and others!

³⁷ F. Bontinck, ed., *Diaire Congolais (1690–1701) de Fra Luca da Caltanissetta* (Louvain: Nauwelaerts, 1970), 111–12.

³⁸ V. W. Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), 185; W. MacGaffey, *Chiefs, Priests, and Praise-Singers: History, Politics and Land Ownership in Northern Ghana* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 71, 102–3.

“not directly to the rainbow itself, neither as snake, nor as snake-fetish, but to the Spirit of Mbumba Luangu, the rainbow, localized in [a double anthropomorphic figure in wood called] *kele ki Thafu*, the image of Mbumba Luangu.” That explains, he continues, “why the ‘snake’ and the visible rainbow are relegated to the background. This cult is rendered ultimately to the Spirit of the Earth, [the *nkisi nsi*].”³⁹ Cuvelier’s text shows that his misreading was prompted by a bygone anthropology of the “primitive mind” in which primitive religion was supposedly based on fear of natural phenomena, especially dangerous animals. Kongo beliefs are more complex and much more abstract than Cuvelier allows, but at the same time they are labile; they form a consistent, viable, and life-shaping whole, but they are products of *bricolage* rather than doctrine.⁴⁰

The project of constructing a usable “Kongo” from a position on the other side of the Atlantic is beset with difficulties, as we have seen. Besides the inevitable lacunae in the record (though Kongo is by far the best documented area in the interior of precolonial Africa), and the bias of observers, most reports on which historians rely use orthographic conventions that do not indicate tones or vowel length in Kikongo, with the result that entirely different words may look the same. In any case, the principal Kongo cultural export to the Americas was Roman Catholicism. (This fact makes “Kongo” seem less authentically African in its Atlantic “rivalry” with “Yoruba.”) After the first baptism of the Mani Kongo in 1491, Kongo adopted a Catholicism that they understood in their own terms, an “unusual” interpretation developed and taught, under the leadership of the long-lived and scholarly King Affonso Mvemba Nzinga, by a corps of teachers who were educated and often of high rank. This Catholicism was acceptable to Rome until, in the eighteenth century, Europeans adopted a view of orthodoxy that was as much cultural as theological, and began to regard all Africa as pagan and primitive.⁴¹

Once arrived in St. Domingue, Kikongo-speaking Catholics continued actively to preach and to administer the sacraments, undoubtedly reinforcing Catholicism in that country. “Syncretism” between saints and *minikisi* had already been effected in Kongo, where for example in the eighteenth century an avatar of St. Anthony of Padua was Toni Malau, a *nkisi* for good hunting (*malau*, “hunting luck”), and Our Lady of Mpinda was a rain shrine.⁴² Since for the

³⁹ Bittremieux, *La Société Secrète*, 188. The modifier *Lwangu* probably reflects the origin of the cult among the Vili, who regard “Mbumba” as one of the oldest *bakisi basi*, “nature spirits.” See Hersak, “Many Kongo Worlds.”

⁴⁰ The complexities of Central African rainbow mythology are examined in L. de Heusch, *Le Roi de Kongo et les Monstres Sacrées* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), ch. 12.

⁴¹ J. K. Thornton, “The Development of an African Catholic Church in the Kingdom of Kongo, 1491–1750,” *Journal of African History* 25, 2 (1984): 147–67.

⁴² T. Rey, “Kongolese Catholic Influences on Haitian Popular Catholicism,” in L. M. Heywood, ed., *Central Africans and Cultural Transformation in the Americas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). De Heusch was wrong to assert that in Haiti vodou and Catholicism existed

immigrants religion was not a matter of creeds and denominations but rather of recognizing and dealing with the forces that shape experience, they were quicker than anthropologists to recognize the family resemblances between the great Kongo *minkisi* and the Yoruba (Nagó, Lucumi, Rada) *orisha* that was also present in Haiti as elsewhere in the Americas. The supposed cultural difference between Central and West Africa is partly a product of colonial histories and their residue in the ecology of scholarship. In both areas of the Atlantic coast of Africa the great spirits were divided into those that are masculine, fiery, and violent, contrasted (though not perfectly) with those that are cool, feminine, and associated with water and women's concerns.⁴³ In Haiti these functions were redistributed, in such a way that the Kongo (Petro) spirits are associated with the left hand and the upward direction, and with fire and violence, as opposed to the Rada (Allada) group, marked by feminine concerns, the right hand, water, and healing. This reorganization, while it preserved the common structure, overrode purely linguistic significances so that, for example, in Haiti the *nkisi* Mbumba Maza (*maza*, "water") is associated with fire.⁴⁴

A DIAGRAM FETISHIZED

The need to identify specifically Kongo traits and to represent them in high-cultural terms responds to American needs at the time when the stories are told. In the absence of words, ritual sequences, and evidence of specific skills, archeologists and folklorists have had to make do with ambiguous signs. Such uncertainty often led, in the first years of "Kongo" research, to a fetishization of Fu-Kiau's "cosmogram" as a substantial though unconscious presence in African American folk art. Too often, merely decorative features or signs of uncertain origin were hailed as cosmograms and furnished with imputed meaning. An exhibition of African American quilts, for example, asserted that a stuffed effect in a quilt "recalls" (to whom?) a *nkisi*; that a shell motif is an "emblem of the sea, the world of Kongo ancestors"; and that a diamond or cross "may represent a memory of the Kongo cosmogram." The lack of methodological rigor in such speculations betrays an underlying condescension, though not one peculiar to writing about Africa and Africans. When the search for the cultural essentials of royalty, art, and religion runs into problems of language, translation, and strangeness, the imperative of "respectability" inclines scholars and the educated public alike to reach into their store

side by side without merging; that was not even true at any time in Congo itself. De Heusch, "Kongo in Haiti: A New Approach to Religious Syncretism," *Man* 24 (1989): 290–303.

⁴³ M. Augé, *Le Dieu Objet* (Paris: Flammarion, 1988).

⁴⁴ W. MacGaffey, "Twins, Simbi Spirits and Lwas in Kongo and Haiti," in L. M. Heywood, ed., *Central Africans and Cultural Transformation in the Americas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 211–26; De Heusch, "Kongo in Haiti," 292.

of ready-made images of romantic Others, imagining that they are conferring praise. The pressure to enlarge upon and celebrate “Kongo” (as opposed to Congo) is such that even the best work tends to condense into a “Kongo” reality scraps of information from much of Central Africa and then transport that reality across the Atlantic to merge with another collection of possibilities and speculations, similarly condensed, that should be more modestly identified as West African. No such pressure bears on, say, Igbo identity.⁴⁵

The effort to use Fu-Kiau’s diagram as a kind of DNA for things Kongo fails because the same cosmology of divided worlds is found in the forest zones of West Africa as well as in Central Africa. One example is Benin, where in Edo art a circled cross represents simultaneously the cardinal directions, the four days of the week, and the unfolding of the first day—morning, afternoon, evening, and night. The Yoruba visualize their universe as a spherical gourd with upper and lower hemispheres that fit tightly together, or as a round Ifà tray on which the diviner inscribes a cross as he begins.⁴⁶ All over the world rituals are conducted in prepared spaces oriented toward the cardinal points. Circles and crosses appear everywhere; they may have ritual significance or they may be simply decorative, as they often are in Kongo itself. In Kongo thought, things should come in complementary pairs, because any one item by itself is an oddity (*nsùnda*), unbalanced by a counterpart. One pair balanced by another gives an aesthetically satisfying fourfold result. I once bought something in the market from a woman who was more comfortable counting with peanuts than with francs. One peanut by itself, however, was insignificant, an anomaly, and so two peanuts were necessary to stand for one franc. Five peanuts amounted to two francs, the fifth one standing for the unity of the set.

In parts of the Americas where it can be shown that there were concentrations of “Congos,” the plausibility of a proposed Kongo trace is of course much greater. Though the record of the Stono rebellion in South Carolina in 1739 mentions no identifiable words or signs, Thornton was able to conclude from the Catholicism of the rebel core, their knowledge of Portuguese, their apparent origin from the port of Cabinda, their maneuvers, and especially their familiarity with firearms, that they were probably Kongolesse soldiers who had been enslaved in the course of warfare.⁴⁷ The most productive investigation of Kongo elements in the hybrid African cultures of the Americas is Janzen’s analysis of a

⁴⁵ For a well-researched but overstated study, see J. Ringquist, “Kongo Iron: Symbolic Power, Superior Technology and Slave Wisdom,” African Diaspora Archaeology Network, Sept. 2008 Newsletter. At: <http://www.diaspora.illinois.edu/news0908/news0908-3.pdf> (accessed 31 Aug 2015).

⁴⁶ P. Ben-Amos, “Symbolism in Olokun Art,” *African Arts* 6, 4 (1973): 28–31, 95; H. J. Drewal, J. Pemberton, and R. Abiodun, *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought* (New York: Center for African Art, 1989).

⁴⁷ J. Thornton, “African Dimensions of the Stono Rebellion,” *American Historical Review* 96, 4 (1991): 1101–13.

Lemba ritual reported by J. Price-Mars from Haiti in the 1930s.⁴⁸ His investigation identified not words alone but a whole ritual process, and began by analyzing detailed accounts of Lemba in Kongo itself, written in Kikongo in 1915 while the cult was still vital. From this basis Janzen was able to focus, not only on words and objects, but also on the underlying logic of the ritual, which remained the same in Haiti as in Kongo, despite merging with Yoruba and Catholic elements. His conclusion is thus firmly based on data rather than speculation.

At a still more abstract level, African cult practices embody “philosophical” reflections; they are not simply assemblages of traits. In both West and Central Africa a distinction is made between legitimate, public uses of occult power and its illegitimate use for personal benefit. In principle, everybody should respect his or her assigned position in a hierarchically ordered society, and those who pursue their own advantage (as of course, most people normally do) are “witches.” This distinction has been transposed to Cuba, where Yoruba-related *orisha* cults are supposedly disciplined, civilized, and “religious,” whereas the various forms of Bantu-Cuban Palo are regarded (at least from a “Yoruba” perspective) as “black magic,” barbaric and self-seeking. The distinction is of course judgmental, in Cuba as in Africa; it does not describe what people actually do, but constitutes what Stephan Palmié calls “an indigenous sociology of religious forms.” On one level these are functionally differentiated ritual technologies, at another they “circumscribe opposed images of sociality,” two models of the relations between individual and society. The tension between them “renders palpable the contradictions of dependency and individuation in a social world where objects at times take on the role of social actors and people mutate into things.”⁴⁹ African rituals, in the Americas as on the continent, embody a “philosophical” component that transcends the assemblage of objects and gestures that meet the eye. The manipulation in ritual of personified objects and objectified persons enables the participants to think about who they are.

Fu-Kiau’s diagram is not, in any case, an unmediated transcription of an immemorial property of the collective Kongo mind. Fu-Kiau, who had been working with Janzen, presents his book as an ethnographer’s report explaining certain concepts and rituals to outsiders, although as we shall see that is not really what it is. As an ethnographic report it is open to critique.⁵⁰ The emergence of the diagram as an object in its own right and its elaboration as a “symbol” laden with meanings is a consequence, in the first place, of literacy

⁴⁸ J. M. Janzen, *Lemba, 1650–1930: A Drum of Affliction in Africa and the New World* (New York: Garland, 1982).

⁴⁹ S. Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists: Explorations in Afro-Cuban Modernity and Tradition* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 162–68; MacGaffey, *Religion and Society*, 171–75.

⁵⁰ Janzen, *Lemba*, 187–88; R. Batsikama ba Mampuya, “A Propos de ‘la Cosmogonie Kongo,’” *Cultures au Zaïre et en Afrique* 4 (1974): 239–64.

and secondly of art-historical enthusiasm. In specific rituals, Kongo might draw crosses and circles to orient the action or to explain relationships, but they thought of secular situations in the same way. Nobody before Fu-Kiau called “the cosmogram” *tendwa kia nza-n’Kongo* or “the *dikenga*,” or thought of it as an entity in itself, still less as a vehicle for ethical instruction as it became in Fu-Kiau’s later work.⁵¹ Scholarship has ignored the comments of R. Batsikama, whose critique of Fu-Kiau is the only one by a native speaker of Kikongo. Batsikama, like Fu-Kiau, was a self-taught scholar whose own interpretations of Kongo history and culture are equally idiosyncratic, but his objections to Fu-Kiau’s methods are right on target: Fu-Kiau’s Kongo is ahistorical, uncertainly both ancient and contemporary, and his interpretations of ritual are inconsistent with the wealth of information we have from other indigenous sources. The meanings he gives for Kikongo words are often based on fanciful etymology, and he “translates” French (and English) concepts with invented Kikongo expressions to give the impression that such concepts are already indigenous. Batsikama harshly concludes that the author offers too many unsupported assertions and too much gratuitous praise of the Kongo people. His book, he says, would be more interesting if he did not try so hard to appear Christian, an “obsession” that makes him avoid delving deeply into Kongo religion.⁵²

Batsikama’s criticism is unfair in the sense that Fu-Kiau’s goals were those of an African nationalist liberated from a particularly demeaning form of colonial rule, not an ethnographer. To understand them one must read the long poem with which he concludes his original book. After listing the insults to which he has been subject (“Pig! Monkey! Barbarian!”), he writes: “I want to emerge, out to where I see a cascade of light; to overcome, to reveal, to expound, to explain to all peoples and tongues all that the ancestors confided to me. You deep thinkers, true philosophers! Think upon it!”⁵³ His “Christian obsession” is not theological but apologetic, a moral vindication of his people in terms appropriate to the missionary values of his youth. In later writings, and in his life as a lecturer and teacher in the United States, Fu-Kiau abandoned the ethnographic style for one that was frankly “philosophical.”

Scholarly commentary on “the cosmogram” among archaeologists and art historians has followed Fu-Kiau in being ahistorical, assuming that it records Kongo thought and practice since the time of the kingdom, or before.⁵⁴ In

⁵¹ A. Fu-Kiau kia Bunseki, *African Cosmology of the Bantu-Kongo* (New York: Athelia Henrietta Press, 2001).

⁵² Batsikama, “A Propos,” 254.

⁵³ My translation. This fragment is a cry of pain; the verbs the poet uses are very heavy. In the original: “*Nzolele vaika/ Ku mbazi, bu mbweni miezi/ Mu sengumuna/ Mu tendula/ Mu yalumuna/ Ye mu saasila/ Kwa zindinga ye makanda/ Mayatuikwa kwa bakulu. Lu bayinda, minyundudi miakedika, luyindula!*”

⁵⁴ For examples, S. Cooksey et al., eds., *Kongo across the Waters* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013).

fact, Fu-Kiau gives us a view of the world that was current in Lower Congo in the 1960s, after fifty years of colonial repression and mission activity, during which chiefs invested at the *nkisi nsi* were replaced by *chefs médaillés* and the great *minkisi*, such as Pulubunzi, Mbenza, and Lusunzi, were reduced to a faded memory. Other cosmologies were current at the beginning of the colonial occupation; for Mayombe, for example, Bittremieux described in detail a three-level universe.⁵⁵ To the diagram Fu-Kiau adds his interpretation: “Like the setting of the sun, a man dies, and in that death he is born in Mpemba and continues his life until he is old. In old age he dies again and is (re-) born on earth.”⁵⁶ Yet regular reincarnation was and is not a Kongo belief. Laman’s Kikongo texts from 1915 and the comments of modern informants provide evidence of a more complex cosmology in which the dead, instead of “circulating” by rebirth in this world, as Fu-Kiau has it, die successive deaths, gradually becoming *simbi* spirits and the animating forces of *minkisi* before merging with natural features such as termite hills and strange rocks.⁵⁷ A folk “philosophy” does emerge from these texts, which consists of reflections, symbolically rather than discursively expressed, on the tension between the transience of human life and the permanence of institutions. The investiture and funeral rituals of chiefs at sites associated with *simbi* spirits (pl. *bisimbi*) were central to these “reflections,” and the sense of how the world works was directly related to contemporary ritual practice and experience.⁵⁸

To Fu-Kiau’s ode to his ancestral culture, Thompson added a gloss of his own that moves the diagram into the neighborhood of the Christianity implicit in the original: “The Kongo *yowa* [*dikenga*] does not signify the crucifixion of Jesus for the salvation of mankind; it signifies the equally compelling vision of the circular motion of human souls about the circumference of its intersecting lines. The Kongo cross therefore refers to the everlasting continuity of *all* righteous men and women.” To this reading Desch-Obi added a further gloss, “Thus, Kongo cosmograms were more than mere symbols; they could also be ritually activated to mediate power between the spiritual world of the ancestors and the world of the living.” The fetishization continues: “*Dikenga* is itself the energy of the universe, the force of all existence and creation.”⁵⁹

⁵⁵ L. Bittremieux, *Mayombsche Idioticon* (Ghent: Erasmus, 1922–1927), s.v. *diyilu*.

⁵⁶ *Muntu weti fwa va kimosi ye ndiamunu a ntangu, mu mfwilu yoyo, weti butuluka ku mpemba ye tatamana zingu nate ye nuna mpe. Bu kameni nuna weti fwa diaka ye butukulu mu nza.* Fu-Kiau, *N’kongo*, 30. The saying Fu-Kiau uses to support his idea of cosmic circulation, *Nzungi, nzungi nzila*, “Man circles on the path,” is a mistaken version of the song *Nsongi, nsongi nzila*, “The guide, who shows the way,” sung while a *nganga* leads a client across a boundary.

⁵⁷ The same belief has been reported among the Vili; Hersak, “Many Kongo Worlds,” 622.

⁵⁸ MacGaffey, *Political Culture*, ch. 8.

⁵⁹ Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* (New York: Vintage, 1983) 108–9, quoted by T. J. Desch-Obi, “Combat and the Crossing of Kalunga,” in L. M. Heywood, ed., *Central Africans and Cultural*

This sort of commentary leaves Kongo reality far behind. In the lives of real human beings, “cosmology” was not an established doctrine but an ongoing discussion of everyday experiences, such as the philosopher Richard Rorty would call “a conversation between persons.”⁶⁰ Such conversations can be heard in daily life, but develop especially when afflicted persons consult a diviner in search of explanations and solutions for their problems.⁶¹ The boundary between the living and the dead was not a line on a diagram but rather the edge of the village (*mpambu a nzila*, “the parting of the ways”), on an out-going path where twins were buried and where medicines might be planted for good or ill; the edge of the forest, next to the cultivated fields, where mediating plants could be gathered for healing, and where the voices of the dead might be heard in the evening; the river’s edge, where *bisimbi*, spirits of those who have died the second death, guarded the path to the eternal *bankita*, or so some people said; the uncertain line between dreams and waking reality; the difference between hidden causes and their fortunate or misfortunate effects, a relationship that only those with four eyes could investigate. Transactions across the boundary, explicitly modeled on negotiations between neighboring villages, were incessant, including both the interventions of occult forces in daily life and the efforts of the living to procure advantage, redress, or healing. But there was no fixed model of the cosmos.

Fu-kiau succeeded in his mission to make the world pay attention to the culture of his people, but as Batsikama wrote, the results present Kongo ritual and belief selectively, glossed in such a way as to make them seem uniquely virtuous. His inspired meditation finds its validation not in the ethnography of the fifteenth or the twentieth centuries but in the reception accorded to it in the twenty-first, especially by artists of African descent who incorporate “the *dikenga*” directly or indirectly in their work. Artists are little concerned with the specifics of language, history, and culture; they frankly take a sign, an image, and build it into their work for what it means to them. For artists and many others of African descent, the *dikenga* has come to have value like that of a relic of a saint in medieval Europe: negating separations of time and space, it establishes connection to an absent origin. As an aesthetically satisfying fragment, it supports a cloud of imaginative associations. That is their privilege, even though their creations are inspired in part by the products of lazy scholarship. *Tendwa* simply means “diagram,” from *tenda*, “to make a mark,” but *dikenga* implies turning and returning, from *kenga*, “to go around a corner,

Transformation in the Americas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Martínez-Ruiz, in Radcliffe Bailey, 187.

⁶⁰ R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 156–57.

⁶¹ W. MacGaffey, *Modern Kongo Prophets* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 159–74.

to disappear,” as in folktales about a girl called Nkenge who disappears into the water-land of the *bankita* but returns, changed. For these artists, *dikenga* is like *mpemba*, white kaolin clay, which, when applied to the body or incorporated in an amulet, brings close the revivifying forces of Mpemba, the land of the ancestors.

CONCLUSION

The project of identification hovers uneasily between scholarship and myth-making. Myths offer eternal verities, but the history of West Central Africa is one of constant change brought on by the deliberate efforts of chiefs, healers, and prophets, summarized by Janzen as “the tradition of renewal,” to restore social, hygienic, and psychological integrity in response to war, slaving, disease, drought, colonial occupation, and missionary teaching.⁶² The first of these efforts was the adoption of Catholic Christianity by Mani Kongo Nzing’a Nkuwu in 1491. Others included the local performance of rituals intended to restore social harmony by renewing contact with the vital forces of nature. Of these, Kimpassi and Kinkimba are familiar because missionaries described them, but there were many others, including Mbinda, Ndembo, Na Kongo, and the Antonine Movement of Kimpa Vita. All such movements seem “religious” because they refer to invisible forces, but their opponents correctly perceived all of them as political projects.⁶³

In 1921, before Belgian authorities arrested him and sentenced him to life imprisonment, the prophet Simon Kimbangu inspired what became the best-documented revival, carried on by his many followers in the twentieth century. Kimbanguism combined Protestant Christianity with half-remembered references to the traditional cosmology of divided worlds and to the mediating role of the *bisimbi* (spirits of the earth), in a vital synthesis comparable to the Kongo Catholicism of the seventeenth century. The result was called “syncretism,” a judgment of inauthenticity that can only be made by those who do not perceive its inner integrity and have not experienced the social and psychological stresses that demand “renewal.”⁶⁴ People of African origin or descent in the Americas have carried on closely similar processes of renewal. Drawing on the arguments of David Scott, Jason R. Young rejects the prevailing view that in order to be regarded as valid, “African cultural continuities have to be preserved in some sort of formal praxis to be compared with a presumed African precedent.”⁶⁵ Focusing on African Americans of the Carolina

⁶² J. M. Janzen, “Renewal and Reinterpretation in Kongo Religion,” in Cooksey et al., *Kongo across the Waters*, 141.

⁶³ See, for example, Bittremieux, *La Société Secrète*, 210–14. Kimpa Vita was burned alive.

⁶⁴ MacGaffey, *Modern Kongo Prophets*, 180–88; W. MacGaffey, “Kimbanguism and the Question of Syncretism in Zaire,” in T. D. Blakely et al., eds., *Religion in Africa* (London: James Currey, 1994), 241–56.

⁶⁵ J. R. Young, *Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Lowcountry South in the Era of Slavery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 8.

Lowcountry, Young gives a historical account of their construction of an ethos, a way of living and thinking, a bricolage of memories, materials, and intentions that came to hand in confrontation with the conditions of slavery. Many of its elements are of Kongo origin, including explicit references to *bisimbi*, but Young is not concerned to authenticate single traits. He summarizes what he calls "a broad set of religious principles first developed in Kongo" on which he concentrates because it has been documented in exceptional historical depth. Like Janzen investigating Lemba in Haiti, he finds evidence of its presence in the American south but he does not discount the importance of other African traditions. In Kongo itself, the product of such cultural work is an ever-evolving lifeway called *fu kya nsi*, "our custom," or "our culture."

Although some scholars have argued that the African diaspora should be understood not as exile but as a continuing exchange of influence across the ocean, that case can be made for West or even South Africa much better than for Central Africa.⁶⁶ Yoruba intellectuals in Africa and others of African descent in Brazil, "ethnicity entrepreneurs," as Matory calls them, contributed substantially to the "Yoruba" idea.⁶⁷ Whereas visitors to West Africa can witness "traditional rituals," be initiated as *babalawos*, and conceivably embark on the long course of study and practice necessary to becoming a competent and accepted practitioner, there is no comparable institution among Kikongo speakers. There is as yet no substantial literature by Kongo intellectuals on their cultural heritage nor any thriving, self-consciously Kongo communities overseas to concern themselves with it. Nationalist Kongo writers such as M.-J. Koulumbu, eager like Fu-Kiau to restore the dignity of Kongo in the face of foreign misrepresentations, are generally ignorant of postcolonial work in English by Swedish and American scholars and rely on outdated books by W.G.L. Randles and Cuvelier.⁶⁸ C. Bakwa Muelanzambi in Belgium and Mbanzila Yambula in Italy have devoted theses to aspects of Kongo culture, but no field ethnographer has emerged to replace the late Gérard Buakasa.⁶⁹ Efforts have been made toward intellectual cooperation among centers in Brazzaville, Kinshasa, and Luanda, but the real handicap is the lack of a political base to serve as the constituency for a new image of Kongo.

It has been established beyond question that Africans, many of them "Congos," defended and enriched diasporic communities, using the knowledge, intellect, creativity, and skills they brought with them. An increasing

⁶⁶ K. Mann and E. Bay, *Rethinking the African Diaspora* (Portland: Frank Cass, 2001).

⁶⁷ Matory, "English Professors"; J.D.Y. Peel, "The Cultural Work of Ethnogenesis," in T. Falola, ed., *Pioneer, Patriot and Patriarch: Samuel Johnson and the Yoruba People* (Madison: African Studies Program, University of Wisconsin, 1993).

⁶⁸ M.-J. Koulumbu, *Histoire et Civilisation Kongo*. Publication de l'Association Mbanza Kongo pour Culture (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001). But see also the numerous publications of Patricio Batsikama ba Mampuya, grandson of R. Batsikama.

⁶⁹ G. Buakasa, *L'impensé du Discours* (Kinshasa: Presses Universitaires du Zaïre, 1973).

volume of detailed research has replaced the methodological recklessness of the early search for “Africanisms” in American culture, although too many of those eager to construct and celebrate “Kongo” are still content with a simplistic image summed up in a single word, and seem to feel that the humanity of Africans and people of African descent can only be validated by exalted language.

Abstract: The past thirty years have seen, particularly in the United States, a transformation in the public image of “Kongo,” an ill-defined entity (a tribe, a kingdom, a culture, a region?) on the Atlantic coast of Central Africa. The efforts of R. F. Thompson, professor of art history at Yale, and A. Fu-kiau, himself Kongolese, have done much to popularize a “Kongo” characterized more by its romantic appeal than by historical or ethnographic verisimilitude. Elsewhere in the Americas, the reputation of “Kongo” has suffered by comparison with “Yoruba,” another historically emergent Atlantic identity, based in West Africa. These identities, and the supposed contrast between them, are products of an increasingly complex trans-Atlantic discourse.