

Response to Cécile Fromont, “Under the Sign of the Cross in the Kingdom of Kongo: Religious Conversion and Visual Correlation in Early Modern Central Africa”

by **John Thornton, Boston University**

Cécile Fromont’s work is an exciting development in a long standing discussion on the Kingdom of Kongo. The question of its conversion to Christianity, described succinctly in Fromont’s article has been hotly debated for some time. On the one hand, a substantial body of scholarly literature has seen it as insincere, a political manipulation on the part of the Kongo elite, either to make common ground for diplomacy with Europe, or to enhance the sacred quality of the Kongo elite in the eyes of its subordinates. But there are those scholars who are less inclined to see the process as a simple manipulation of symbols for a wholly material end, a group which I find more convincing.

While this argument has played out primarily using textual sources and anthropological observations, Fromont has proposed using visual elements to attempt to penetrate the issue and contribute to the breaking of the deadlock. Fromont certainly sees the events as having religious significance to the participants, and her idea of calling the cross a “space of correlation” is brilliant. The space of correlation is a sort of previously unassigned area where both traditions can find common ground, and Fromont works the imagery to show how the common ground was attained.

In presenting the Kongo crucifixes, Fromont shows how the visual iconography of the figures manages to incorporate sacred imagery from European and Kongo cultures. I think that Fromont, by pointing out the control that Kongo elites had of their church (an important point and one that has often been neglected in studies of the church in Kongo from Post-Colonial theoretical perspectives), allows the space of correlation to be one in which Kongo elites play a guiding role and thus their cultural and religious background becomes the template for the merging of cosmologies and interests.

One of the places where I feel uneasy in this elegant and generally convincing argument is in the question of the specifics of the use of the cross by the pre-Christian Kongo. In the course of analyzing Kongo culture, many scholars have had reference to modern anthropological assessments of traditional culture in the Kikongo speaking zone. While Kongo is richly documented, far more than just about any other pre-colonial African country (save perhaps Ethiopia), there are still gaps and interpretative problems with the body of evidence. While we have a surviving corpus of Kongo-authored accounts, mostly letters, they tell us little about traditional or pre-Christian culture; and while there are stunning descriptions of the country and daily life, these are authored mostly by missionaries. Missionaries were very attentive to the matters of traditional culture but their works are complicated by their own tendency to make value judgments based on their specific Catholic Reformation interpretation of the non-European world. In either case, the documentation leaves much to be desired for all its relative volume.

Those seeking to understand pre-Christian Kongo could then make several choices. There were descriptions of the culture of non-Christian, Kikongo speaking people whose territories lay to Kongo’s north, most notably the Kingdom of Loango. Alternatively, one could follow the work of modern anthropologists. A wide and varied group of anthropologists has been occupied with Kongo, starting

with the first detailed studies in the late-nineteenth century and including brilliant work by some of the leading anthropologists of the twentieth century, including Luc de Heusch, Georges Balandier, John Janzen and Wyatt MacGaffey. But Kongo also has a good stock of what I like to call “self-ethnographers,” that is Kongo people themselves who have written descriptions of their culture. Among these are the catechists of Karl Laman, who wrote extensive testimonies in Kikongo on Kongo culture and religion in the early twentieth century, and a tradition of Kongos who chose to describe their culture afterwards, some as amateurs others as professionals. Probably the most famous is Fu-kiau Bunseki.

This work has been mined and cross examined and faces two problems: first, it is about the recent period, several centuries removed from the founding events of the Kingdom of Kongo, and second, it deals almost entirely with the area that lay to the north, outside the Kingdom’s domains. Thus we are forced to take a sort of leap of faith to use the material; we have to accept that Kongo culture is uniform across the Kikongo language zone, and we have to believe that it has never changed.

Fromont is well aware of this issue, but it still challenges her assertions concerning the meaning of the cross in pre-Christian Kongo. She is very attentive to using contemporary evidence, and also issues a proviso that cultures do change. But there is no denying that some of her analysis of cruciform materials found in Kongo art, in the decoration of pottery, even ancient pottery, and cloth uses such material. The question is, of course, does the significance that philosophically-minded observers like Fu-kiau attributed to them in the 1950s and 60s reflect the meanings they had in 1491 or even 1650? This is particularly an issue since the question of the meaning of the cross in colonial and post-colonial DRC/Zaire is hotly political and anyone can decide what tradition is.

This observation is not to be taken as a criticism, only as a warning. All of us who approach serious and deep cultural issues are forced to adopt such a methodology or decide not to pose certain very interesting questions. There is no doubt that the extensive use of cruciform imagery is a pre-Christian element in Kongo visual culture, but such designs do not occur in contexts that allow us to do more than confirm their existence, rather than their specific meanings. Fromont’s approach to the topic is exciting, and to me, at least, it is convincing. But it cannot be conclusive, much as we would like it to be.