

Response to Cécile Fromont's "Under the Sign of the Cross in the Kingdom of Kongo: Religious Conversion and Visual Correlation in Early Modern Central Africa"

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I was fascinated to read Cécile Fromont's detailed account of the long history of Christianity in the Kongo, and particularly to learn of the age of the Christian state there. Just as in India, where the Syrian church predates most of Christianity in Europe, it suggests that much European missionary activity, particularly in the nineteenth century, garnered its material support as a result of widespread ignorance about the longevity of the historical presence of Christianity on the two continents. "Darkest Africa" had in fact had the light of Christianity available to it for centuries. The aspect which predictably interests me most, however, is the theoretical argument that Cécile Fromont makes for the idea of a "space of correlation". She proposes this over other possible theoretical models of "'transculturation', 'acculturation', or 'third-space'" (113) on the grounds that it offers a concept of exchange that avoids the questions of power relations that she suggests are always highlighted and emphasized by the others. Instead of the antagonism of colonial relations, the "space of correlation" offers an equitable common ground "in which ideas belonging to radically different realms can come together, interact, and generate new understandings" (112).

The first thing to say is that these other theoretical models that Fromont names are not all the same, nor were they all developed to describe the same phenomenon. In fact, transculturation, a concept invented by Fernando Ortiz in 1940, was specifically designed as an alternative to the idea, at that time dominant in North American anthropology and sociology, of "acculturation". Ortiz' primary interest was to develop a concept in which different cultures could be seen to engage in a process of reciprocal exchange, so that each modified the other. He developed this primarily with respect to the effects of different waves of immigration on Cuban society, but also specifically in terms of his history of the two primary commodities in Cuba, tobacco and sugar, which he argued not only operated in a dialectical relation to each other as the formative material dynamic of Cuban history, but also created a dialectical relation between the Americas and Europe: if Europe transformed the Americas with its need for sugar, tobacco exercised its own powerful transformation on European culture. Ortiz was concerned to show that different ethnicities and commodities, and the cultural concepts characterizing both, could exercise mutual transformative relations on each other—in contrast to the idea of acculturation, which assumed that the process of immigration involved a one-way process of assimilation. Homi Bhabha's "third space," developed fifty years later in the context of postcolonial immigration into Europe, was similarly concerned to resist the idea that cultural assimilation in the process of immigration should be solely a matter for the immigrant community. The dynamics of the third space generates the new creative form that an exchange, or clash, between two different cultures generates. Here again, the concept is designed to balance a previous account of cultural exchange in which the power relation was conceived of as solely one way: hybridity transforms both elements.

So it could be said that both transculturation and third-space are concerned to develop very

similar projects to Fromont's "space of correlation". The difference, however, is that this particular space of correlation is in fact more one-sided. While it allows for the meeting and merging of Kongo and Christian views, it is primarily the Kongo view that is changed in the encounter. It is true that, as Fromont observes, "the perimeter of Christian orthodoxy was widened to recognize and include Kongo modes of devotion", but, in contrast to say the transforming power of tobacco on the culture of Europe, European Christianity itself was not significantly changed in its own practices—it simply reaffirmed its Franciscan toleration for indigenous forms of Catholic Christianity. So while there may not have been an antagonistic power relation, there was something of an imbalance, which one might describe in terms of power, in the extent to which European and Kongo religions were changed. At the same time, I am not sure why the crucifixes that Fromont describe are not available to analysis in terms of sameness and difference as she suggests (p. 113): it would seem to me, from the descriptions that she gives, that these crucifixes are both recognizably Christian (the same) and yet at the same time markedly different (Kongolese), as she shows in such painstaking detail the inflections and additions that the Kongolese artists made to them. Their sameness and their difference is what makes them so fascinating. It is here, however, that the difference between their relation to the two cultures becomes evident, a difference that it is hard to describe without invoking some forms of power. Whereas it is easy for a European or North American today to detect their difference from a more orthodox Christian crucifix, there is no still-existing Kongolese non-Christian culture that can easily provide an estimation of the difference between the crucifix and the pre-Christian Kongolese cross. Indeed it is not even certain that there was such a thing.

At one level, Fromont wishes to emphasize the different trajectory that Portuguese missionary expeditions and colonization took in the Kongo from the (broadly) contemporary, more violent history of the Portuguese colonies that were developed in Brazil and (briefly) in Canada or the Spanish invasion of the Americas. Neither missionary work nor colonialism ever took a uniform pattern, and certainly before the technological superiority of Europe had been developed in the nineteenth century, it was very usual for missionaries, traders and colonialists to become involved in local power struggles as in the Kongo or in Bengal. Power relations between Europeans and non-Europeans in earlier times, in other words, were comparatively more balanced. Under the influence of the experiences of twentieth-century decolonizations, Postcolonial Studies tends by contrast, as Fromont suggests, to emphasize situations of imbalance and subaltern struggle against the colonizer. It is good to be reminded that colonial history was often rather different.

At another level, Fromont wishes to develop, as we have seen, a way of talking about cultural exchange which views and considers that exchange more equitably. Where I would disagree with Fromont would be the claim that in the Kongo this process was free from power relations. The intervention of the missionaries, as she shows, was very much caught up with local power relations, and Christianity, as she also shows, continued to play its part in the political struggles of the Kongo. While I do not agree therefore that in the case of the Kongo, power relations were avoided—indeed everything about the history of Christianity in the Kongo that Fromont describes suggests the very opposite—it certainly seems to me useful to develop concepts that are appropriate for the analysis of particular cultural artifacts where, whatever the power relations that may be operating around them, the artist him or herself has utilized elements drawn from two or more cultures in a creative and individual way without wishing to foreground a

political reading of their relationship. While this is harder to avoid in written forms, such as poetry or fiction or translation, where the words will always register some kind of response to the larger situation in some degree, in art or in music the different elements can be situated in the more neutral environment that Fromont describes, particularly in relation to the use of motifs, such as the cross, in which the artist is drawing on and utilizing its historical significance in different traditions. Her thesis makes productive sense with respect to the ambiguous use of the cross and the hybrid crosses and crucifixes that she discusses. In the space of creativity, whether secular or religious, the larger political struggles are subsumed into an aesthetic dimension in which different cultural influences, beliefs, and sources are brought together by local artists without any immediate sense of the political history of their origins. Fromont's "space of correlation" thus enables a framework of analysis where we can observe in detail the forms of exchange and translation that are taking place within the specific forms of individual religious icons or works of art, without presupposing what the nature of that exchange may be. What this loses, of course, is the idea that the artist is seeking to make any intervention into the larger cultural context with this particular artifact; what it gains, on the other hand, is the ability to focus on the aesthetics rather than the politics of the artifact, to consider the individual work in its own precision and complexity and to foreground its different historical genealogies. This seems to me to be a very useful innovation and one that offers a range of enabling productive possibilities for the analysis of art and religion, as well as the relations between them.