

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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At the feet of a monumental cross installed in front of a church, a Capuchin friar, in full ecclesiastical garb, presides over the office of the dead in eighteenth-century Kongo¹ (fig. 1). The friar and two *mestres*, interpreters for the Capuchins and local leaders of the Church, sing the service from a book, accompanied by two children carrying the incensory and the Holy Water. A fifth man is holding a liturgical cross at the head of the tomb. A black pall inscribed with a white cross covers the grave around which all are gathered and a candle is burning at each of its corners. The congregation has brought offerings of small animals, pots, and food, which are disposed on the ground in front of the burial place.

The watercolor in figure 1 belongs to a page of the *Missione in Prattica* manuscript, conceived in the 1740s by an Italian Capuchin friar veteran of the Kongo mission as a practical guide to educate future missionaries about the nature of their work in Central Africa.² The volume takes part in a genre of illustrated manuscripts developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by the members of the Capuchin Order's Central African missions. In these guides, full-page images glossed by a few lines of text present the natural, cultural, and religious environment of the region. Accuracy and

detail are crucial to the images' didactic purposes of description of the exotic environment and prescription of the proper behavior to adopt for the novice missionaries.³

The watercolor presents, on the one hand, a friar and his acolytes, Catholic hymnals in hand, bathed in the burning incense, practicing for the congregation in the orthodoxy of the Roman Catholic Church. On the other hand, it depicts the local community and the offerings it brought to the ceremony "in favor of the souls," as the text below the image explains. For the occasion, men and women gathered at the feet of a cross, a symbol associated in the Kongo with the idea of a cyclic passage from life to death.⁴ The sign of the cross is at the center of the watercolor and at the crossroads of the several visual syntaxes and religious beliefs that permeate the image. In the vignette as in the scene it represents, two different religious discourses, two modes of interpretation have

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1. Kongo, used as a noun and as an adjective, refers in this article to the historical kingdom of Kongo, which territory extended, south of the Congo River over the western part of today's Democratic Republic of the Congo and Northern Angola. Central Africa describes the larger region influenced by the Kongo, including areas north of the Congo River and lands under the control of the Portuguese colony of Angola.

2. Bernardino Ignazio da Veza d' Asti, *Missione in Prattica. Padri Cappuccini Ne' Regni Di Congo, Angola, Et Adiacenti*, Turin Civic Library (ca. 1750), MS 457.

3. For the author of the watercolor in figure 1, his image is a matter-of-fact rendering of a Christian ceremony in the Kongo, its stated aim to warn future missionaries against the theft of the offerings. Father Bernardino cautions in the caption that the "Father Missionary must be careful to collect all [the offerings] as they are more than necessary to his sustenance and that of the Blacks at its service." The corpus of Capuchin images of Central Africa is discussed at greater length in C. Fromont, "Collecting and Translating Knowledge across Cultures: Capuchin Missionary Images of Early Modern Central Africa," in *Collecting across Cultures: Material Exchanges in the Early Modern Atlantic World*, ed. D. Bleichmar and P. Mancall (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, forthcoming 2011).

4. As discussed later, early modern sources establish the link between the cross and the belief in a cycle of death and regeneration promoted by the Kimpassi association. Authors such as Robert Farris Thompson and Wyatt MacGaffey, drawing from the pioneering work of Congolese scholar Fu-Kiau Bunseki, have amply demonstrated that, in twentieth-century Bakongo thought, the cross formed a cosmogram that still represented the cycle of life and death. See R. F. Thompson and J. Cornet, *The Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1981); W. MacGaffey, *Religion and Society in Central Africa: The Bakongo of Lower Zaire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); A. Fu-kiau kia Bunseki-Lumanisa, *N'kongo Ya Nza Yakun'zungidlia; Nza-Kôngo* (Kinshasa: Office national de la recherche et de développement, 1969).



Figure 1. Bernardino d'Asti, *The Father Missionary Helped by the Maestri Sings an Office of the Defunct*, ca. 1750. Watercolor on paper, 19.5 x 28 cm. Biblioteca Civica Centrale, Turin, MS 457, fol. 10. Photograph: Courtesy of Settore Sistema Bibliotecario Urbano della Città di Torino.

converged and now overlap. The monumental cross and smaller crucifixes taking part in the event serve for the Capuchin as univocal warrants of worship to the Christian God. They are also the point of the scene where Catholic and Kongo religious traditions meet and blur between Kongo ritual offerings to the soul of the deceased, Holy Water, and incense. A univocal European or Kongo reading of the ceremony depicted does not exhaust the religious significance of the scene, of the ritual practices it portrays, and of the objects it describes. Rather, the Capuchin sensual Christianity rendered in the theatrical staging of the ceremony, complete with music and perfume, here enters in dialogue with the devotions, Christian or otherwise, of the Kongo protagonists, all happening in the shadow of the monumental cross.

The sign of the cross played a central role in the visual, religious, and artistic encounter between Christianity and Kongo worldviews in the early modern period. As the Kongo became a participant in the religious and political networks of the early modern Atlantic, the abstract idea of the cross as well as its visual manifestations emerged as a platform for artistic and religious ideas to be communicated across cultures.

It formed a space of correlation, an activating ground where new conceptions and visual forms were molded that encompassed and transcended both European and Central African religious ideas and modes of representation.

An abundant scholarly literature exists on the early religious, visual, and material culture of the Kingdom of Kongo from its first contact with Europeans in the late fifteenth century to the eve of the era of imperial colonialism that emerged in the nineteenth century. Compelling analyses of this material based on the testimonies and studies of twentieth-century consultants and scholars from regions once under the rule of the Kongo kingdom have appeared in the seminal works of anthropologist Wyatt MacGaffey and art historian Robert Farris Thompson who have invoked in support of their methodology a "substantial stability . . . between sixteenth and twentieth century Kongo cosmology, cultic practice, and social structure."⁵ My argument,

5. See Wyatt MacGaffey's summary of historian Anne Hilton's 1985 argument in W. MacGaffey, "Dialogues of the Deaf: Europeans on the Atlantic Coast of Africa," in *Implicit Understandings: Observing,*

in contrast, relies on the contribution of early modern sources to the history of Kongo religion and visual culture.⁶ This approach allows us to acknowledge continuity but also to identify and examine change. It also offers perspective on the scope and nature of that “substantial stability.”

A space of correlation

On the sails of caravels, on the chest of noblemen, in the hands of clerics, and on the stone landmarks proudly erected along newly reached shores, the sign of the cross accompanied every move of the Portuguese explorers as a banner of conquest and a standard of proselytism. Yet when Iberians and their Christian cross reached Central Africa in 1483, its presence resulted neither in colonial conquest nor forceful conversion. Rather, Christianity entered into the political, social, and religious realm of the Kingdom of Kongo at the demand of its own rulers, without foreign coercion, and a lasting relationship was established between Europeans and Central Africans without colonization. At that time, the Kingdom of Kongo was a highly centralized polity extending across the western part of modern-day Northern Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, ruled by a powerful king through the governors he sent from the capital to his various provinces. In the contemporary chronicles describing the early relationship between Portugal and the Kongo, the Christian cross appeared repeatedly in the hands of Portuguese men, but was also taken over and put to work by Central Africans in powerful gestures demonstrating their control over the real and symbolic terms of their encounter with Europe and Christianity.

The first moments of the advent of Catholicism in the Kongo were recorded by the Portuguese chronicler Rui de Pina, writing in Portugal at the time of the events

Reporting, and Reflecting on the Encounters between Europeans and Other Peoples in the Early Modern Era, ed. S. B. Schwartz (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 255. He is referring to A. Hilton, *The Kingdom of Kongo*, Oxford Studies in African Affairs (Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1985).

6. A small number of art historical studies of Kongo Kingdom material based on twentieth-century fieldwork and some consideration of the early modern sources have been published in the past. See R. L. Wannyn, *L'art ancien du métal au Bas-Congo, Les vieilles civilisations ouest-africaines* (Champles par Wavre, Belgique: Éditions du Vieux Plaqueusaule, 1961); J. Franz Thiel and H. Helf, *Christliche Kunst in Afrika* (Berlin: D. Reimer, 1984); or P. de Donder, “Les vieux crucifix du Bas-Congo,” *Grands Lacs: Revue Générale des Missions d’Afrique* 63, no. 8 (1948):31–34.

from eye-witness accounts and official correspondence.⁷ According to his report, on May 3, 1491, the king of Kongo Nzinga a Nkuwu (r. 1470–1509) received baptism along with six of his courtiers and took the Christian name of João I on the feast of the Invention of the True Cross. The king celebrated the event with great pomp and immediately declared Catholicism the state religion, ordering that clerics be well received in all his provinces and that all local idols, altars, and temples be destroyed. The motivations for such a radical move are unclear, but a close reading of the events that occurred around the baptism elicits the visual and symbolic mechanisms at play in Kongo’s adoption of Christianity.⁸

A few days after the ceremony, two of the men baptized with the king both experienced the same vision in their sleep. They received the visit of a resplendent Virgin Mary asking them to congratulate João on her behalf for the conversion of his kingdom. The next morning, as he stepped out of his house, one of the two men found a cross carved in a foreign black stone. It was two-palm high with smooth, rounded branches, as if “worked with great industry.” “I found a holy thing made of a stone I have never seen before,” he reported to the king and the clerics, “and it is shaped as the object that the Friars held when we became Christian and that they called the Cross.”⁹ Showing the stone object to the European priests, the king asked: “What do you think this is?” “Sir,” answered the friars moved to tears, “these things [that is, the visions and the cross] are signs of grace and salvation that God sent to you and

7. Rui de Pina, “Baptismo do Rei do Congo, 3 de Maio de 1491,” in A. Brásio, *Monumenta Missionaria Africana. África Ocidental* (Lisbon: Agência Geral do Ultramar Divisão de Publicações e Biblioteca, 1952), vol. 1, pp. 124–125. See also the account of the event by Garcia de Resende, “Baptismo do Rei do Congo, 3 de Maio de 1491,” in *ibid.*, pp. 127–128.

8. A number of interpretations have been proposed for the conversion. Anne Hilton saw the royal interest in the new religion as a strategic political move by the ruling clan to secure legitimacy in the instable Kongo succession system and to control the new trading networks that emerged from the presence of Europeans. She also argued that the new religion was wholly taken over by Kongo cosmology, a position shared by MacGaffey who considered that the kings sought in the new religion the powers of a novel and mighty form of initiation; see Hilton and MacGaffey (note 5). In contrast, John Thornton argued that a real, sincere conversion took place, but to a form of Christianity that was typically Kongo rather than mimicking European Catholicism; see J. Thornton, “Perspectives on African Christianity,” in *Race, Discourse, and the Making of the Americas*, ed. V. Hyatt and R. Nettleford (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1994), pp. 169–198.

9. See Rui de Pina (note 7), p. 124.

your kingdom, and for this we give Him and you also should give Him infinite thanks." And they took the cross in procession to the newly built church where it was prominently displayed as a relic of this great miracle.

It is significant in this context of early contact between two radically different worldviews that the original moment of conversion would include a core material and visual dimension. In a moment wrought with ambiguity and uncertainty about the possibility and efficiency of the communication of religious ideas across cultures, the stone cross provided a common ground on which Europeans and Africans could anchor their dialogue. Skilled interpreters trained in nearly a decade of contact between Portugal and Kongo facilitated the conversation, but, in this episode, linguistic communication worked hand in hand with the miraculous object to enable cross-cultural exchange. In the story, the stone cross was a pivotal element thanks to which Central Africans and Europeans were able to ascertain a mutual understanding of the significance of the king's gesture of conversion and to establish epistemological common ground about the nature of the supernatural and of its worldly manifestations.

When the nobleman came across the black stone object, he immediately recognized it as a "holy thing" (in the text: *cousa sancta*), a phrase that missionary literature would later convey in the Kongo language with the word *nkisi*.¹⁰ The connection made by the early modern translators between the idea of the holy and that of the *nkisi* suggests that the term already carried at least part of its later meaning of a material object through which otherworldly forces make their presence known in this world. At a time of great violence marked by the destruction of the local objects of worship ordered by the king, the stone cross was, for the noble and the Kongo observers at large, a key symbolic substitute, a reassuring manifestation of the reality of the supernatural forces that were invoked in the baptism. From a Kongo perspective, its discovery was a revelation that legitimized the act of conversion. At the demand of the king, this Kongo

understanding of the cross as a *nkisi* was validated by the foreign clerics. In their response, the priests indeed recognized the cross as a sign, as a manifestation of God in the world, as a *nkisi*, and a holy thing. In turn, for the European clerics, the miraculous apparition of the Virgin and the discovery of the stone cross were clear demonstrations of the will of the Christian God to see the Kongo converted. Thus the stone cross marked a *space* where European and African religious conceptions could be brought together and where the two groups could reach an agreement on the authenticity and perceptibility of supernatural forces.

In this regard, the stone cross was a generated space of correlation.¹¹ It was a cultural object in which heterogeneous conceptions could be approximated in a generative process creating new ideas that both encompassed and transcended the original inputs. In the stone cross, Kongo and Christian views of revelation and the supernatural met and merged. A Kongo *nkisi* became a Christian sign and a Christian cross, a Kongo power object. In the process, the perimeter of Christian orthodoxy was widened to recognize and include Kongo modes of devotion and, in turn, Kongo religious thought was transformed by its recognition of new forms of supernatural powers. Kongo Christianity emerged at the crux of these two trends, in a form that was both recognized by the Catholic Church and enthusiastically embraced by the people of the Kongo.¹²

Spaces of correlation provide such common grounds in which ideas belonging to radically different realms can come together, interact, and generate new understandings. In spaces of correlation, local thought can evolve to encompass foreign ideas, new ideas can transform old concepts, and attributes of the other can transfigure definitions and expressions of the self. As an analytical tool, the space of correlation applies to a variety of cultural objects characterized by a range of historically and culturally specific paradigms of

10. In the seventeenth century, the word *nkisi* appears in Capuchin literature as a translation for the word and concept of "holy." In a 1651 Latin-Kikongo dictionary, the entry for the adjective *sanctus* is translated as *quianquissi* or "of the *nkisi*" and the entry for the substantive *sanctitas* (sanctity, holiness) by *uquissi* or having the nature of the *nkisi*. See the *Vocabularium Latinum, Hispanicum Et Congense*, Mss. Varia 274, Fondi minori 1896 (Rome: Biblioteca Nazionale Vittorio-Emmanuele II di Roma, 1651), f. 94v. See the discussion on the term in Thornton (note 8, p. 183). The modern *nkisi* is discussed at length in MacGaffey (see note 5), pp. 137–168.

11. Here I use the term "space" in the sense of *espace* in French, referring to a domain that is both localized and specifically defined. The phrase is partly inspired by Tom Cummins's discussion of images as "sites of correlation" in colonial legal contexts. See T. Cummins, "From Lies to Truth: Colonial Ekphrasis and the Act of Crosscultural Translation," in *Reframing the Renaissance*, ed. C. Farago (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 152–174; 326–329.

12. John Thornton has discussed the fluidity of Catholic orthodoxy in the early modern period, in contrast to the modern, post-Tridentine tendency for a closed, inflexible understanding of Christian dogma. See J. Thornton, "The Development of an African Catholic Church in the Kingdom of Kongo, 1491–1750," *Journal of African History* 25, no. 2 (1984):147–167.

change. Creole languages merging local grammar and foreign vocabulary, hybrid art from colonial contexts strategically using the ambiguity of visual representation to express a subaltern point of view, or revolutionary narratives reformulating the past from a radical, novel perspective could all be analyzed as spaces of correlation. In each of these examples, a different process of cultural change is at play from syncretism to appropriation and innovation. The interest of the idea of the space of correlation derives from its ability to examine phenomena emerging from varied historical circumstances and following mechanisms of interactions beyond dialectical relationships. In particular, it allows us to consider situations that are not necessarily defined by oppression and resistance, in contrast to other analytical or descriptive terms such as “transculturation,” “acculturation,” or “third-space,” which all consider change in contexts “involv[ing] conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict,” to use the words of Mary Louise Pratt in her definition of the related concept of contact zones.¹³ These terms have in common their focus on the role of power relationships in the molding of cross-cultural discourse. In contrast, the space of correlation centers its reflection on the syntactic strategies put to play in the creation of the cultural objects—artworks, discourse, text—through which change is expressed and enacted. Focusing on the cultural objects themselves shifts the emphasis away from dialectical relationships of “radical inequality” enounced by Pratt or difference and sameness exposed by Young as the necessary motors of change.¹⁴ Unlike the teleological tendencies of the concepts of syncretism and acculturation, it also allows us to consider the transformative powers of choice and contingency. In addition, it avoids the pitfall of creating broad and artificially coherent groups holding, for instance, Europeans or Africans as single entities without inner diversity of class, gender, or others. Rather, it allows us to single out and consider only the relevant traits from each group that are put to play in the process of change. For example, the space of correlation formed by what is often called hybrid art from colonial Latin American contexts only calls upon specific dimensions of European iconography in its reinterpretation of imported art forms.

13. M. L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 6. The idea of “third-space” belongs to Homi Bhabha; see H. K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

14. R. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 26.

Kongo myth, Christian history

The space of correlation of our story, the stone cross, owed its compelling role as agent of cross-cultural communication not only to its miraculous nature but also to its specific form. In the early modern Christian Kongo, the cross, as a sign, a symbol, and an object, provided a domain in which Central Africans could articulate Christian and Kongo ideas of the supernatural and related concepts of power, history, and legitimacy. If King João was the first king to receive baptism, it was his son Afonso I (r. 1509–1542) who operated the crucial symbolic reformulation that naturalized Christianity into a Central African religion while integrating the Kongo into the larger realm of Christendom. In a series of letters addressed to his vassals and to the Pope, Afonso outlined what he intended to become the official narrative of his ascension to the throne in a bitter succession battle against his heathen brother Mpanzu a Nzinga. In the story, the young Christian prince, overpowered by his enemy and at the verge of defeat, called upon Saint James before the final and surely fatal assault. As soon as his name was invoked, the warrior saint appeared leading an army of horsemen. The prodigious cavalry easily overwhelmed the heathen troops and Afonso emerged victorious, under the sign of the cross miraculously branded in the sky of the battle. With this narrative, the new king clearly placed his rule in the historical and symbolic realm of Christendom, presenting himself as a Christian prince fighting alongside Saint James and for whom the Cross of Constantine reappeared.¹⁵ This story also inscribed Christianity into Central African mythology by likening Afonso to Lukeni, the founding hero of the Kongo kingdom. In both the myth of origin and the new Christian epic, each man appears as he seizes leadership of the Kongo through military might and eventually brings to the land a new form of knowledge, Kongo cosmology in the first case and Christianity in the latter. The bold and innovative narrative of Afonso proved successful and became an integral part of Kongo mythology. It remained a popular

15. Saint James is here presented as “heathen slayer” in a parallel to the Iberian narrative of the Reconquista, in which he was the matamoros or “Moor Slayer.” A similar transposition was operated in Spanish America, later than Afonso’s use of the term in the Kongo, by the *Conquistadores* who fought alongside Saint James the *Mataindios*, or “Indian Slayer.” For a study of the transformation of Saint James from “Moor Slayer” to “Indian Slayer” in New Spain, see J. D. García, “Santiago Mataindios: la continuación de un discurso medieval en la Nueva España,” *Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica* 54, no. 1 (2006): 33–56.

and vivid episode in the oral histories narrated in the centuries following his reign.¹⁶

The prominence of the cross in the advent of Catholicism in Central Africa derived from its concomitant significance as a sign for European travelers and clerics and as a key motif in the Kongo visual environment. Drawing from this ambivalence, Afonso made the motif the visual cornerstone of his reinvention of the Kongo's mythological foundation. His narrative not only included the miraculous imagery of the Constantinian cross, but also encompassed an elaborate visual dimension in the form of a coat of arms prominently showcasing the sign among its emblems. The great Christian king also inaugurated his reign with the erection of a monumental cross in front of the principal church of his capital to commemorate the momentous celestial apparition at the time of his fateful victory.¹⁷ All across the kingdom, under his impetus, large crosses were built, grand and permanent visual manifestations of the mythological and historical innovations he formulated. The monuments, such as the one depicted in figure 1, stamped the Kongo landscape as Christian. They were imposing markers that celebrated Afonso's triumph as a legitimate king, memorialized the miraculous advent of Christianity in the kingdom, and in effect enacted the adoption of Catholicism by the Kongo crown.¹⁸

Yet, the sign of the cross encompassed in the Kongo more than a narrative of power, triumph, and legitimacy. In addition to the large crosses ostentatiously erected by the rulers and being used as signs in political and historical discourse, Kongo Christian crosses also took

the form of portable, elaborately crafted objects for the use of individuals and small communities. The hundreds of these Kongo crucifixes that are still extant today form a coherent corpus, ranging in size from a few inches to a couple of feet. As a group, they are remarkable for their complex yet consistent iconography that grew at the crux between Christian and Kongo religious and visual syntax. The original paradigms for Kongo crucifixes were undoubtedly the European devotional objects imported en masse by Portuguese and then Italian missionaries, but key elements of their distinctive iconography also firmly characterized them as local visual expressions, such as the ancillary figures, the incised diamond shape, and the etched borders seen in a characteristic cross in figure 2. From the rare written sources documenting their production, we know that the crosses were fashioned from local and imported brass by Kongo artists working in workshops without European supervision.¹⁹ There is no indication in the sources of the friars' involvement in the making of the crucifixes, but European examples were avidly sought by local patrons, and intently studied and reworked by local artists.

It is crucial to underline here once more that Christianity developed in Central Africa at the demand and under the control of the Kongo crown itself. The discourse of Christianity that emerged in this context grew from within the Central African worldview. Although the adoption of the new faith was from the

16. See, for example, L. Jadin, "Andrea de Pavia au Congo, à Lisbonne, à Madère. Journal d'un missionnaire capucin, 1685–1702," *Bulletin de l'Institut Historique Belge de Rome*, no. XLI (1970): 452–453. See also L. Jadin, "Aperçu de la situation du Congo et rite d'élection des rois en 1775, d'après le P. Cherubino Da Savona," *Bulletin de l'Institut Historique Belge de Rome* 35 (1963):407.

17. The Portuguese traveler Duarte Lopes, who lived in the Kongo around 1580, mentions this monumental cross; see D. Lopes and F. Pigafetta, *Relazione Del Reame Di Congo Et Delle Circonvicine Contrade, Tratta Dalli Scritti & Ragionamenti Di Odoardo Lopez, Portoghese* (Rome: Appresso B. Grassi, 1591), p. 53. See also the discussion in F. Bontinck, "Les croix de bois dans l'ancien Royaume de Kongo," *Dalla chiesa antica alla chiesa moderna. Miscellanea per Cinquantesimo della facolta di storia ecclesiastica della PUG "Miscellanea Historiae Pontificiae,"* no. 50 (1983):199–213.

18. See Bontinck (ibid.). The location marked by the cross served as burial ground for the local elite, as is depicted in figure 1: see R. Castelo de Vide, *Descrição Da Viagem Que Fiz Para Angola E Congo O Missionario Fr Rafael De Castelo De Vide*, Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa (Lisbon 1780), RES 2 Maço 4 doc 74 f. 70.

19. There is no evidence that European laymen or missionaries set up metalworking workshops in the region. On the contrary, information about local mining and metalworking was avidly sought by the foreigners but kept secret by the Central Africans whose esoteric metalworking tradition required ritual discretion. Report of the hidden mines appear in most European accounts of the region—see, for example, an eighteenth-century report by the Capuchin Cherubino da Savona commissioned by the Governor of Angola: Cherubino da Savona, *Letters*, Doc 1–3, Condes de Linhares (Lisbon: Torre do Tombo, 1769–1770) (I wish to thank John Thornton for this source). In the seventeenth century, Dutch trader F. Cappelle noted the presence of mines, as well as locally produced metal crosses—see L. Jadin, "Rivalités luso-néerlandaises au Soho, Congo 1600–1675," *Bulletin de l'Institut Historique Belge de Rome* XXXVII (1966):226. If the inhabitants of the Kongo had access to copper deposits, most surviving crucifixes are made of yellow brass of relatively high zinc content—often misidentified by European observers as gold—rather than pure copper. Cappelle again informs us that only small amounts of "a metal looking like bronze," probably a local naturally occurring brass, were found in the region. While red copper was exported from the Kongo and nearby kingdoms to Europe, the Europeans imported "yellow copper" to the region; an indicative list of Dutch imports was recorded by Cappelle, see L. Jadin (ibid.), 236–237. It is likely that the crucifixes were created from both local and imported brass. Metal analysis currently under way will provide further information on these issues.



Figure 2. Unknown artist, *Kongo Crucifix*, undated. Brass and wood, 64 x 27 cm. Current location unknown. Photo from J. F. Thiel, *Christliches Afrika: Kunst und Kunsthandwerk in Schwarzafrika* (Sankt Augustin: Haus Volker und Kulturen, 1978), pl. 87.

outset accompanied by great violence with the forceful destruction of the local objects and places of devotion ordered by the ruling elite, the new faith entered into the intellectual realm of the Kongo without overarching epistemological violence or epistemic rupture between pre-Christian past and Christian present.²⁰

20. In this regard, the advent of Kongo Christianity took on a radically different form from the cases of cross-cultural conversion in colonial contexts unfolding during the same period, in which epistemological rupture between native past and colonial present was at the core of the project of evangelization. These ideas have been

On the contrary, the first Christian kings conducted an elaborate mythological and symbolic manipulation that successfully naturalized Christianity as an expression of the Kongo worldview, while simultaneously integrating the Central African kingdom into the realm of Christendom. By underlining this key characteristic of the advent and development of Kongo Christianity, I do not intend to downplay the real violence and disruptive effects of the Atlantic slave trade, the other phenomenon brought to the Kongo by the Europeans. Rather, I want to insist on the importance of shedding the misleading conception that sees European cultural assaults as the only motor of change in pre-colonial and colonial Africa.

The Kongo cross

At the time of the advent of Christianity, and independent from any European influence, the cross was already a predominant motif of Central African art. Cruciform designs appeared in rock paintings, weaving patterns, and engravings in their simplest expression as two intersecting lines as well as in intricate geometric derivations inspired by weaving patterns. Elaborate textiles and carved ivory tusks eagerly collected by the early modern European elite for their cabinets of curiosity as well as archeological material illustrate the prevalent Kongo visual syntax at the time of the entrance of the kingdom into European history.²¹ Across the media, design patterns articulated lines, intersections, and overlaps in varied knot-like motifs organized around a central focus point and ultimately suggesting a diamond shape.²² The schematic rendering of designs

expressed at length, for example, by Nicholas Dirk as the “cultural technologies of rule” necessary to the colonial project. See N. B. Dirk, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 9.

21. Examples are found, for instance, in the collections of the Curiosity Cabinet of the kings of Denmark that are now under the care of Copenhagen’s National Museum. See E. Bassani, “Kongo Art,” in *African Art and Artefacts in European Collections 1400–1800*, ed. E. Bassani (London: British Museum, 2000). The archaeologist James Denbow excavated in the 1990s a group of decorated terracotta vessels on the Northern shore of the River Congo, with dates ranging between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries. The decoration style of the objects is stylistically consistent over the period and closely related to the other Kongo artistic productions mentioned here. J. Denbow, *Rapport des progrès obtenus au cours du projet archéologique au Congo en 1993* (Report prepared for Congolaise de Développement Forestier, 1993).

22. This conclusion was drawn from careful visual analysis of photographs and from direct observation of rock painting, ceramics, ivories, and textiles. Ezio Bassani’s evocative juxtaposition of early modern Kongo textiles and the early twentieth-century scarification

from rock painting and engraving in figure 3 summarizes the interrelation in Kongo art between the diamond shape and the cross as two parallel expressions of the same design; the cross expands into a diamond shape (fig. 3a) and the diamond shape collapses into a cross (fig. 3b).²³ Simple rotations articulate (fig. 3c) some of the other design variations observed.

Under its diverse guises, the motif of the cross carried great significance, according to early modern primary sources, thanks to its link to the religious system promoted by the *Kimpasi*, a ritual association that heavily influenced the social and political organization of the region.²⁴ The elite members of the group were extremely powerful, inspiring fear even among the highest ranked Kongo political leaders and they fiercely and successfully defended their association against the assaults of Christian proselytism.²⁵ The defining rite of

patterns on the back of a woman from the Yombe people provides a compelling example of the “substantial stability” through time of these designs suggested by Thompson and MacGaffey. Their and Fu-Kiau’s studies have guided my eye in this particular analysis of the design. However, as George Kubler famously sustained, one cannot presume that a continuity in form entails a continuity in meaning. Only an analysis of the historical sources such as that proposed here can establish how these designs were interpreted in the early modern period. See E. Bassani and M. D. McLeod, *African Art and Artefacts in European Collections: 1400–1800* (London: British Museum, 2000), p. 283.

23. The best known expressions of kongo two-dimensional representation are the paintings and engravings found on the surface of geological landmarks. James Tuckey was the first modern observer to publish Kongo rock art. See J. H. Tuckey and C. Smith, *Narrative of an Expedition to Explore the River Zaire, Usually Called the Congo in South Africa, in 1816* (London: John Murray, 1818). Particularly relevant to this discussion is number 30 of plate 9, facing page 382, which presents design variations around the motif of the cross, including diamond-shape lines and individual points arranged in a cruciform group of five, two motifs that would later be recorded in twentieth-century surveys of Central African rock art and also appear in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Kongo Christian art. The age of the Lower-Congo rock paintings is not precisely determined, although it is generally thought that they date at least as far back as the era of early modern European contact; see D. Cahen and P. de Maret, “Recherches archéologiques récentes en République du Zaïre,” *Forum ULB* 39 (1974):33–37. The relevance of the designs, in the present case, is to illustrate the use of the motif of the cross in a Kongo context independent from direct European intervention.

24. For a modern description of the *Kimpasi* see J. van Wing, *Etudes Bakongo; Sociologie, Religion et Magie*, 2nd ed. Museum Lessianum. Section Missiologique, no. 39 (Bruges: Desclée De Brouwer, 1959), pp. 420–489. In the present discussion I only consider the *Kimpasi* in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as outlined in the historical documents.

25. For references to the might of *Kimpasi* see Girolamo da Montesarchio, *Viaggio Al Gongho*, Fondo Missioni Estere (Florence: Archivio Storico dei Frati Minori Cappuccini della Provincia di

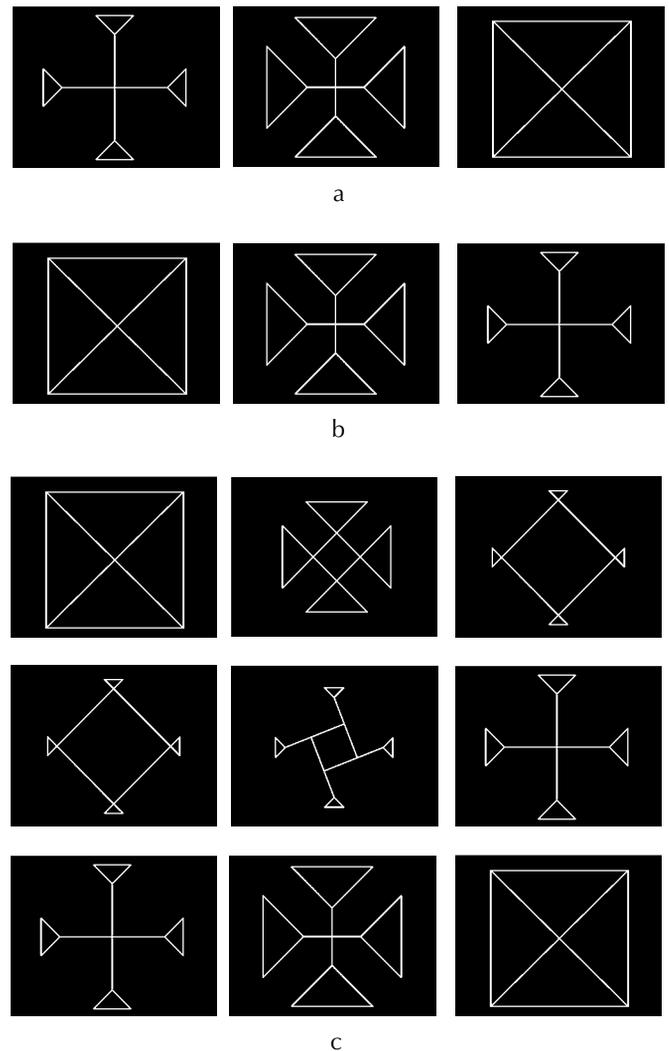


Figure 3. Schematics of Kongo rock painting and engraving designs. Drawings by the author based on Kongo rock paintings and engravings published by Paul Raymaekers in P. Raymaekers and H. van Moorsel, “Dessins Rupestres Du Bas Congo,” *Ngonge—Carnets de Sciences Humaines Kongo*, no. 12–13–14 (1963), pl. 20, 21, 26, 27, 29.

the *Kimpasi* was an initiation ceremony that staged the symbolic death and resurrection of the candidate on the grounds of a secret ritual enclosure. Novices were chosen among the Kongo elite and in the process of their admission into the group were induced to temporarily lose consciousness, later to be brought back to their senses as new members of the society.

Toscana, ca 1668), ff. 61–66v. Montesarchio also notes that the association is open to both men and women (f. 61v).

The Capuchins in charge of the Kongo mission in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries focused much of their efforts on the uprooting of the *Kimpasi*, which prominent use of the cross-like sign in its rituals and paraphernalia particularly preoccupied the friars. Girolamo da Montesarchio, Capuchin missionary to the Kongo between 1648 and 1668, observed, in puzzlement, that “the members of the [*Kimpasi*] society had at the entrance of their meeting place a great portico with the sacred sign of the cross painted in diverse colors.”²⁶ In fact, the motif not only announced the entrance to the *Kimpasi* enclosure, but also served as the ubiquitous sign for the association. Montesarchio’s colleague and contemporary Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi also saw the cross used in the association’s rituals. He wrote: “The devil had taught [the *Kimpasi* initiates] that to entice new Christians, . . . they should paint on their idols the venerable sign of the cross . . . so as to hide their pernicious sentiments and their sacrilegious impiety.” “One would not believe,” he lamented, “how many people were seduced by this ruse.”²⁷

The clerics’ concern here is with idolatry, or misplaced devotion, but their observations highlight the fluidity between Christian and non-Christian symbols and ideas. To my knowledge, it is not possible to determine whether the *Kimpasi* or its use of the cross predated the introduction of Christianity in the region, although I believe they did. Regardless of the chronology, the *Kimpasi*, Christianity, and their respective interpretations of the motif coexisted in the early modern Kongo. What is more, Central Africans acutely perceived the kinship between the two institutions’ ideas of death and regeneration as expressed in both cases by the cross. In one of many similar instances, the villagers from a remote region of the Kongo, less familiar with Catholicism than the larger population centers, greeted friar Girolamo as an *nkita*, the word used for *Kimpasi* initiates, and literally meaning someone who has come back from the Other World.²⁸ In this episode, the image of the cross prompted the association of the crucifix-bearing missionary with a local narrative of death and resurrection. The link between the missionary and the

nkita was also reinforced by the pale skin of the friar, another indication in Kongo visual vocabulary of an individual’s access to supernatural powers, an ability enjoyed, for example, by the equally fair-skinned albino men and women born in the region.²⁹ One could interpret such episodes as evidence that Christianity was from the outset wholly taken over by Kongo cosmology. I would like to suggest in contrast a more nuanced reading of the evidence that considers how Christianity became a Kongo phenomenon whose ideas and message articulated local and foreign thought and forms of representation.

Kongo symbol and Christian icon

An exceptional visual object showcases particularly well the organic process through which Kongo Christian thought emerged from local religious thought and symbolism. In 1937 Georges Schellings, a Redemptorist father, and Maurice Bequaert, a Belgian civil servant attached to the Tervuren Museum of the Belgian Congo, excavated the ruins of a Kongo church and cemetery that were in use in the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. Their exploration yielded over six hundred objects, which included local pottery, European ceramics, and Kongo artifacts of Christian form. Among these, they uncovered several tombstones, some engraved with the Latin cross, others with what they identified as a stylized Templar or Order of Christ cross (fig. 4).³⁰ The uncommon iconography of one of the markers especially caught their attention, here in a photograph published in the monthly Redemptorist newspaper *Sint-Gerardusbode* in 1949, as the original

29. The special status of albino men and women is discussed, for example, by Luca da Caltanissetta in F. Bontinck, *Diaire Congolais. 1690–1701*. Publications De L’université Lovanium De Kinshasa (Louvain, Paris: Éditions Nauwelaerts; Béatrice-Nauwelaerts, 1970), vol. 27, p. 152. See also M. de Anguiano, *Misiones capuchinas en Africa*, Biblioteca “Misionalia Hispanica” (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas Instituto Santo Toribio de Mogrovejo, 1950), vol. 7, p. 75.

30. The Portuguese Order of Christ was the heir of the Order of the Knights Templar. Upon the suppression of the Templars at the instigation of Philippe IV of France, King Dinis of Portugal obtained from the Pope the right to institute the military Order of Christ. The new institution was founded in 1319 and inherited the assets of the Portuguese Templars. The insignia of the new order was an emblem derived from the former group’s Malta cross, a crimson cross superposed with a smaller white cross, that most famously appeared on the sails of caravels during the period of the great discoveries. The Order of Christ supported Iberian enterprises overseas financially and in manpower.

26. Montesarchio (ibid.), ff. 61v–62. Note that the crosses in Kongo rock paintings are also polychromatic, mixing red, white, and black pigments.

27. G. A. Cavazzi and F. Alamandini, *Istorica Descrizione De’ Tre Regni Congo, Matamba Et Angola Sitvati Nell’ Etiopia Inferiore Occidentale E Delle Missioni Apostoliche Esercitateui Da Religiosi Capuccini* (Bologna: Giacomo Monti, 1687), p. 85.

28. Montesarchio (see note 25), f. 39 r.

photographs of the excavation file are unavailable (fig. 5).³¹ The tombstone articulated, explained Schellings, a “Navigator Cross (or Cross of the Order of Christ) sculpted in relief and at the same time a Latin Cross in one of the triangles formed by the former cross.”³² The European viewers identified the X shape as a stylized representation of the Maltese cross, the emblem of the Portuguese Order of Christ that played an instrumental role in the Iberian overseas endeavors. The two scholars were also without a doubt aware that some members of the Kongo elite belonged to the order, a distinction they received directly from Portugal, or else from their own king, who claimed, to the great indignation of the Portuguese, the privilege to bestow the honor upon his own people.³³

The reference to the Order of Christ, although apt and plausible, and probably partly accurate, does not wholly explain the engraved signs on the tombstone, which articulate two different and interrelated designs. On the one hand, two intersecting lines encompassed in a diamond shape form a Kongo cross. On the other hand, the figure is broken down on the left side where the area defined by the two main diagonals is occupied by another set of intersecting lines—one vertical, and the second, horizontal. The horizontal line originates at the intersection of the diagonals so that the two designs are intricately linked. The horizontal segment in turn intersects the vertical line at a right angle at exactly two thirds of its height, forming a Latin cross. The geometry

31. G. Schellings, “Oud Kongo: Belangrijke Ontdekking Uit De Eerste Beschaving,” *St. Gerardusbode: maandschrift der paters Redemptoristen* 53, no. 8 (1949):11–13. Schellings also described the stone in “Oud Kongo: Belangrijke Ontdekking Uit De Eerste Beschaving,” *De Standaard*, 24–25 July 1949, biz. 1–2, and “Importante découverte au Bas-Congo. Les ruines de la première église congolaise construite au XVIème Siècle à Mbanza Mbata dia Madiadia,” *Le Courrier d’Afrique*, 19/20 août 1950, 13. See also the short article by M. Bequaert that included one plate of the excavation report: M. Bequaert, “Fouille d’un cimetière du XVIIIème siècle au Congo Belge,” *L’Antiquité Classique* IX (1940), 127–128. The tombstone in figure 5 was transferred after the excavation to the portal of the Redemptorist church in Kimpangu.

32. G. Schellings, “Importante découverte au Bas-Congo.” The “Cross of the Navigator” refers to the Portuguese Infant Henrique the Navigator who reformed the Order of Christ and obtained immense privileges for its members from Pope Calixtus III, exposed in the Bull *Inter caetera quae* of March 13, 1496, in exchange for the commitment of Portugal and the Order to win over Africa to Christianity. See F. A. Dutra, “Membership in the Order of Christ in the Seventeenth Century: Its Rights, Privileges and Obligations,” *The Americas* 27, no. 1 (1970):3–25.

33. A. L’Hoist, “L’ordre du Christ au Congo,” *Revue de l’Aucam* VII (1932):258–266.



Figure 4. Diagram of the Cross of the Order of Christ, also known as the Navigator's Cross. Drawing by the author.



Figure 5. *Ngongo Mbata Tombstone*, 17th or 18th century. Stone, dimensions of the engraving: 21 x 15 cm. Photo from G. Schellings, “Oud Kongo: Belangrijke Ontdekking Uit De Eerste Beschaving,” *St. Gerardusbode: maandschrift der paters Redemptoristen* 53, no. 8 (1949):11.

of the design is complex but thoroughly thought through, as presented in the schematics in figure 6 that reproduce in scale the underlying construction of the engraving. Overall, the figure is based on the organizing concept of a slightly modified diamond shape and centers on a focal point from which the two motifs unfold (fig. 6). In this regard, the design is typical of Kongo motifs yet its structure has been reworked to accommodate the Latin cross.

Visual analysis of the tombstone alone may not permit one to declare with certainty that the motifs are indeed a combination of a Latin cross and a Kongo cross, but the context of the discovery makes the relationship clear. The cemetery of Ngongo Mbata was a Catholic burial ground

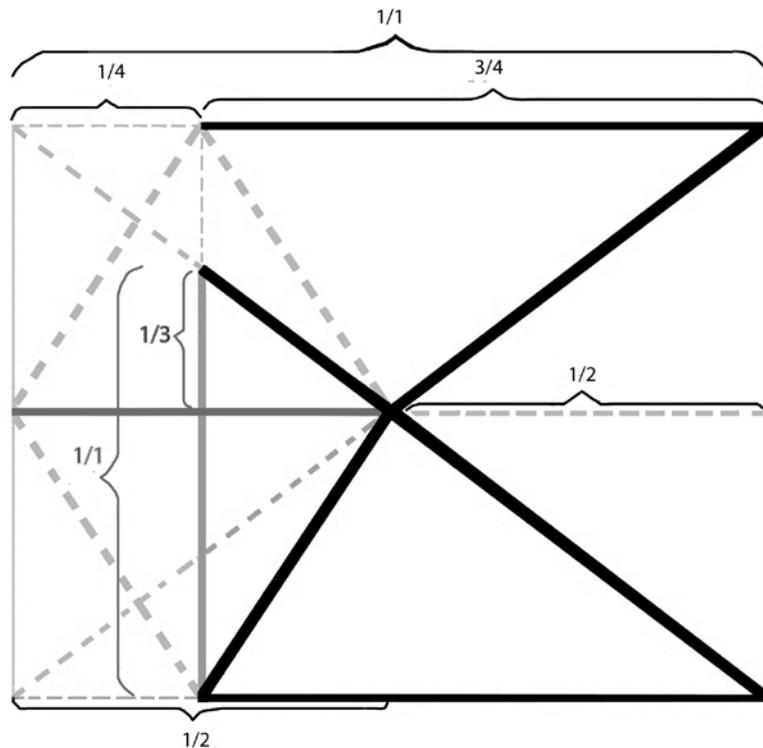


Figure 6. Diagram of the Ngongo Mbata Tombstone. Drawing by the author.

associated with a church. On this tombstone carved for a Christian patron, the maker of the engravings appears to have quoted the Kongo sign denoting the belief in an open channel between life and death in support of a Christian plea for salvation and resurrection. Such a vibrant profession of faith marked the tomb of a Kongo noble who was put to rest clad in his full regalia of Christian knighthood complete with a large iron sword. He was also provided with the comforting presence of two crucifixes and honored with a wooden coffin decorated with four brass plaques stamped with the emblem of the Order of Christ.³⁴

Most of the objects unearthed in the excavation of Ngongo Mbata by Schellings and Bequaert soon disappeared from public and scholarly view. A 1950 article by Schellings from the Flemish newspaper *De Standaard*, however, includes the photograph and description of one of the crucifixes that accompanied

34. See the description of the tomb's contents in G. Schellings, "Oud Kongo: Belangrijke Ontdekking Uit De Eerste Beschaving," *St. Gerardusbode: maandschrift der paters Redemptoristen* 53, no. 8 (1949):11–12.

the Kongo nobles in their tombs.³⁵ In addition to this image (regrettably of poor quality), I was able to identify, by comparing information from multiple sources, the photograph of another cross, collected in the twentieth century also in the region of Mbata, that is almost identical to the one found in the excavation (fig. 7).³⁶ The two crosses are actually part of a closely knit group of approximately twenty surviving Kongo crucifixes that share almost identical iconography and style and to which belonged most of the examples unearthed at Ngongo Mbata.³⁷ Mixing dark wood and yellow brass,

35. See note 31.

36. Monsignor Van den Bosch, whose bishopric stored the excavated material, noted the similarity between this crucifix and the ones unearthed in Ngongo Mbata; see file number 51.14.9 from the ethnography section of the Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale à Tervuren.

37. The Ngongo Mbata crucifix is one of the few examples of the group that retained all the ancillary figures originally placed around the body of Christ. Crosses in varying state of conservation are kept in public collections, such as the ones in the Afrika Museum, Bergen Dal, Holland Inv. N. 29-381, the Museo de etnologia de Lisboa, Portugal Inv. N. D4.1, or the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New



Figure 7. Unknown artist, *Kongo Crucifix*, second half of the 17th or 18th century. Brass and wood, 26 x 13.2 cm. Current location unknown. Photo: n. 51.14.9 from the Ethnography Section of the Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, Tervuren, Belgium.

the crucifix in figure 7 is an exquisite artifact reflecting the prestige of its owner. The black wood cross is glistening from heavy patina and its edges have been smoothed by repeated use, particularly in the space between the body of Christ and the figure under his feet, where the wood slightly curves inward from wear. The four ends of the cross have been embellished with white metal covers. The top one received particular attention; it is adorned with two architectural cornices and topped with a suspension loop. At the intersection of the wooden branches, a diamond-shaped metal plate has been affixed with a single nail placed in its very center. As in most other Kongo crucifixes, this metal plate, echoing the halos gracing the heads of Saints in Christian imagery, marks the precise meeting point of the two segments of the cross rather than crowning the head of the dying Christ. This special placement is also emphasized on the back of the cross, as in other examples. The diamond-shaped halo, centered on a single central nail, links the crucifix to the Kongo cross designs. As in the tombstone, Kongo visual syntax and religious thought are called upon and put to work in the Christian object.

The emaciated figure of Christ is attached to the cross by three pegs piercing his oversized hands and his crossed feet. His head is wrapped by a stylized representation of his coiffure and bends to the right. He is ready to expire. The limbs are thin and elongated, the ribs represented by a few simple lines. Across the hips, the dying Christ wears a short rope-like loincloth. Above him, a decorated oval plate bears, in lieu of the INRI inscription, a zigzag line reminiscent of other two-dimensional Kongo designs. Under his feet are two ancillary metal elements. First, a medal of the Immaculate Conception depicts the Virgin carried by a crescent moon in a decorated niche topped with a cross. Then, a chubby, curly-haired angel seemingly supports the higher medal. The juxtaposition of the Virgin and angel echoes the representations of the Immaculate Conception, a devotion ardently promoted by the Capuchin friars in Europe as well as in Africa, and is a reminder of the influential presence in the region of

York, inv. 1999.295.11. In addition to these objects, I recorded half a dozen Christ figures without wooden crosses that pertain to the same stylistically close-knit group. Most of the crosses unearthed at Ngongo Mbata belonged to this stylistic group, see J. Vandenhoute, "De Begraafplaats Van Ngongo-Mbata (Neder-Zaire)" (master's thesis, Rijksuniversiteit Gent Hoger Instituut voor Kunstgeschiedenis on Oudheidkunde, 1972-1973), p. 128.

the order and of its Franciscan imagery from the mid-seventeenth century to the early 1800s.³⁸

The Immaculate Conception anchors this type of crucifix to the period of Capuchin presence in Central Africa, starting around 1650, and the excavation of Ngongo Mbata indicates that such crucifixes were still in use in the eighteenth century. This period was characterized in the Kongo first by a long period of civil wars, then by the diminished power of the kings, and overall by the strong presence and subsequent gradual withdrawal of the Capuchins.³⁹ The crucifixes discussed here are therefore late creations in the Christian history of the kingdom. Yet, as we have seen, through their link to the story of Afonso that was retold and appropriated by local rulers over centuries, the crucifixes conveyed a cultural narrative whose sources could be traced back to the first moments of contact between the Kongo and Christianity. Yet, over the decades, both the story and the crosses took on various forms and new meanings anchored in the issues of their particular time and place of creation.⁴⁰ Several crucifixes similar to those unearthed in the excavation at Ngongo Mbata were collected in the twentieth century in the former powerful Kongo province of Mbata, where the city of Ngongo Mbata had flourished in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁴¹ Such tenuous evidence could suggest that,

38. The Franciscans were the champions of the very controversial doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. The Capuchins, a Franciscan order, chose the devotion as their patron saint in 1621. The iconography of the Immaculate only stabilized at the end of the sixteenth century as the woman of the Apocalypse, carried by a crescent moon, often supported by cherub heads. See the study of the iconography of the Immaculate Conception by M. Levi D'Ancona, *The Iconography of the Immaculate Conception in the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance*, Monographs on Archaeology and Fine Arts, 7 (New York: Published by the College Art Association of America in conjunction with the *Art Bulletin*, 1957).

39. The history of the period was studied in J. K. Thornton, *The Kingdom of Kongo: Civil War and Transition, 1641–1718* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983). See also for the later period Kabwita Kabolo Iko, *Le Royaume Kongo et la mission catholique, 1750–1838: du déclin à l'extinction*, *Mémoire d'églises* (Paris: Karthala, 2004).

40. See, for example, a version of the story of Afonso as recorded in the last century in the coastal province of Soyo; in Jadin, "Andrea de Pavia au Congo" (see note 16).

41. See figure 7. Another similar cross was published, for example, in Thiel and Helf (see note 6), fig. 84. The history of Mbata is known through the reports of Capuchins and secular clergy, present intermittently in the region, and is summarized in G. M. da Leguzzano Saccardo, *Congo e Angola con la storia dell'antica missione dei cappuccini*, 3 vols. (Venezia-Mestre: Curia Provinciale dei Cappuccini, 1982–1983), vol. I, pp. 408–410, vol. II, p. 345.

at a time of weakened centralized power, a local style emerged that represented a consistent and elaborate expression of the significance of Christianity and its imagery in that period of Mbata's history. This hypothesis poses the crucial question of the evolution in form and significance of the crucifixes all along the history and post-history of the Kongo Kingdom and its colonial aftermath as well as that of their possible geographical diffusion.⁴²

European realism as Kongo stylization

In the crucifixes, Central African artists not only performed an iconographic synthesis anchored in the motif of the cross, but also conducted an elaborate cross-cultural reflection on style. Formally, the Kongo crucifixes were unlike European or Kongo objects; rather, they drew from both traditions in a creative way and merged the visual discourses of Baroque Europe and early modern Kongo. The main tension at play in this process was the contrast between Kongo modes of representation and the predominant naturalism of European devotional images. Early modern observers described both figurative and abstract Central African artworks but in all cases insisted on what they perceived as the composite, conceptual nature of Kongo representation. The missionaries, for instance, often described Kongo "idols" as deformed and misshapen images bedecked with horns or even as wholly abstract amalgams put together, in the words of one of the friars, "according to each person's kind of madness."⁴³ The "idols" of these testimonies combined visual elements following a logic that was conceptual rather than aimed at rendering the appearance of the real world.

The crucifix in figure 2 is an exquisite illustration of a Central African artist's reflection on this disparity between Kongo and European forms of plastic representation.⁴⁴

42. These issues will be addressed, I hope, in future studies, informed by further material analysis, additional archaeological and archival research, and the argument presented here.

43. G. A. Cavazzi, *Missione Evangelica Al Regno Del Congo: Araldi Manuscript*, Araldi Collection (Modena 1665–1668), vol. A, bk. 2, chap. 11, p. 171. See the translation on J. K. Thornton's blog "Central African History" at <http://centralafricanhistory.blogspot.com/2008/08/giovanni-antonio-cavazzi-da.html>.

44. Although the cross in figure 2, which was collected in the twentieth century, may or may not have been created in the early modern period, its iconography and meaning derive from the interactions of that period. The central metal part was later nailed on a wooden support.

The artist disposed protagonists and motifs along the surface of a yellow brass cross, bordered with incisions on a slightly elevated band. As we have already seen, at the center of the Latin cross, where the vertical and horizontal branches meet, he incised a diamond, checkered in criss-crossing lines and surmounted by a small cross at its upper corner. The left and right extremities of the design are finished in triangular forms that create two additional X-shaped crosses. The incised diamond is the only two-dimensional element of the crucifix and serves both as the center and background of the group. Once again, the rhombus, just above the head of the corpus, is reminiscent of a saint's halo but, as in most Kongo crucifixes, it is not positioned in reference to the head of Christ, but placed to monumentalize the exact location where the two branches of the cross come together. As with the tombstone of Ngongo Mbata or in the crucifix in figure 7, Kongo cross and Latin cross here merge and unite their symbolic powers for the benefit of the worshipper.

At the lower corner of the etched diamond, the artist placed the figure of Christ—head fallen on his right shoulder, arms extended, belly caved in and knees bent, in an attitude inspiring compassion. Seven ancillary figures join Christ on the cross in a dynamic kneeling pose, hands joined in prayer, attitudes typical of this category of Kongo crucifix. Overall, the treatment of the different elements of the crucifix falls between European-inspired realism and the abstracted, symbolic renderings often associated with Kongo artistic forms. Under the dying body of Christ, for instance, the small depiction of the Immaculate Conception, represented by a head and two arms folded on the chest, hands joined in prayer, is recognizable as the Virgin thanks to the crescent moon at the bottom of her body. This type of representation of the Madonna, present on many of the crucifixes, illustrates the frequent transformation of Christian motifs from the predominant naturalism of imported objects to stylized designs that nevertheless retained key attributes of their original composition. In figures 2, 7, and 8, the Immaculate takes on diverse degrees of stylization while retaining key elements of proportion and iconography such as the Virgin's flowing garment.

The central element of the crucifix, the dying corpus of Christ, was similarly redesigned yet was never stylized to the point of abstraction; it always remained readily recognizable as a human figure. Formally, the figure of Christ was the point of the crucifixes where the impact of European and Kongo images and forms of representation on each other appeared most clearly. It is as if here the depiction of the body of Christ demonstrated the

interest of Central African artists in the foreign modes of representation and as the counterpoint it presented their own formal vocabulary. The plastic forms they created responded to these artistic differences with specific quotations and bold transpositions of elements of style hailing from the two traditions. For instance, the deep lines incised on the chest of the Christ figures in the Kongo crosses should not be seen as a stylized rendering of the anatomy of a dying body but as an abstracted quotation of European illusionistic representations of the bodily features of the crucified man: In the process of appropriation, the lines of the ribcage changed in nature from artists' plastic devices to suggest flesh in a metal object to topical quotations of the naturalism observed in imported artworks. Thus the beguiling combination of naturalism and abstraction in the crucifixes prefigure later Kongo artistic forms from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries admired for their formally ambivalent representation of the human figure depicted here in exquisite life-like renderings and there in bold, minimalist strokes. It also deepens, in this regard, our historical understanding of Central African artistic expressions at large.⁴⁵

As a genre, the Kongo crucifixes formed a space of correlation in which Kongo artists and patrons brought together Central African and European artistic categories, approximated two heterogeneous visual syntaxes, and bridged the gap between two distant forms of beliefs. In the crucifixes, the meeting of Kongo cross and Christian cross naturalized Christianity into a local discourse about the nature of the supernatural and the cycle of life and death and, in turn, transposed Kongo religious signs into visual expressions of Catholic thought.

Understanding the crosses as spaces of correlation lifts the seeming incongruity of the association of Catholic and Kongo objects and attitudes, such as in the ceremony depicted in Figure 1. In the watercolor, the cemetery of Ngongo Mbata comes to life. The exceptional tombstone and crucifixes of the burial ground bring substance to the painted scene. The now lifeless objects of the excavation as well as the gestures and devotions presented in the painting are individually rooted in Kongo or Christian religious thought, but,

45. To my knowledge, there are no extant examples of Kongo anthropomorphic artworks that can be dated to the early modern period. However, two small female wooden busts created by neighbors of the Kongo, now in the Museo Preistorico Etnografico "L. Pigorini" in Rome (inv. 4525 and 4526) offer the example of an artist's stylized rendering of the human figure in a cultural area related to the Kongo, in the seventeenth century. They are discussed in Bassani (see note 21), pp. 269–275.



Figure 8. Stylized Kongo rendering of the Virgin, detail from a Kongo crucifix, undated. Brass and wood, dimensions of the Virgin approximately 3 x 1 cm. Collection Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal, The Netherlands, inv. 29. 377. Photo: Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal, The Netherlands.

taken together, encompass and surpass the two traditions and express new, Kongo-Christian thought. The sign of the cross in particular, prominently displayed in the watercolor and showcased by the crucifixes, is the point where Kongo worship becomes Christian devotion, and Christian faith—a part of Kongo's supernatural realm.