



## **Spring 2012 Newsletter**

### **Teaching the Kongo Transatlantic**

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#### **Basic Features of the Course**

The seminar “Kongo Transatlantic” which I have been teaching since 2000 explores the historical character of Western Equatorial Africa and the circumstances of the creation of several New World communities – in Jamaica, Brazil, Haiti, Cuba, and the Georgia Islands in the U.S. The KiKongo-speaking region of Western Equatorial Africa became a crossroads of the Atlantic World in 1482 when Portuguese explorer Diogo Cao sailed up the Congo river to the first rapids and left his engraving in a stone on the bank (near today’s Matadi), visited the Kongo court in Mbanza Kongo, and took several Kongo men back to Portugal, and later returned them to Kongo where they told their countrymen what they had seen in Mputu, the land of the Bamputulugezo. For five centuries the relationship of Africa to Europe and the Americas has affected millions of people and shaped the societies of the entire region. This Kongo-affected world has become the cultural ancestry of an important cross-section of New World peoples. This paper sketches some of the organization and thematic issues of a course on Kongo Transatlantic, and the challenges students face who wish to learn about this complex region and its history.

My own research in North Bank Lower Congo provides a foundation for the course and is my main reason for offering it. I utilize my own published and unpublished work in lectures and course assignments. Yet I have considered my own focused research too esoteric for most students at a large public university, although I have folded my ethnography and medical anthropology interests into both introductory and an advanced levels of other courses. By situating this upper level seminar as a broader regional, transatlantic, scope, I am able to attract general upper level students, a few of whom take the course to learn about their own ancestral identity, others who are in the graduate program of the university’s Latin American Studies Center, and the greatest number are simply interested in the regions and cultures covered so as to begin to fill what was an empty hole in their consciousness and previous education.

The seminar opens with a look at the focal region at the heart of this African area, the Kongo with a “K,” the region of KiKongo speakers, at the mouth of the Congo River, the Lower Congo, and the point of entry of European exploiters and explorers into Central Africa. Students read two histories conveying very different methodologies: Jan Vansina’s *Paths in the Rain Forest* (1990) and John Thornton’s *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World* (1998). The first of these utilizes all types of sources – archaeology, archival records, the author’s extensive field research – but the work’s central feature is its historical linguistic reconstruction of Western Bantu languages, derived from the relationships of living languages of the region. This framework and Vansina’s considerable knowledge of the region produces an authoritative history the deep political developments of the Western Equatorial African rainforest and savanna region, against the background of its environmental, technological, social, and religious concepts and key words, and their dynamic changes. The second work is based entirely on travelers’ published accounts and archival documents accumulated over five centuries of contact between Europe, Africa and the New World today found in Rome, Lisbon, Brussels, Paris, Stockholm, London, Rio, Hispaniola, Havana, Philadelphia, and of course in Point Noire, Brazzaville, Luanda, Kinshasa, Matadi, Luozi, and other archives. A further source of reading is from my own published historical writing from the North Bank of Lower Congo – e.g., *Lemba* (1982), *The Quest for Therapy* (1978) – and unpublished essays.

The second half of the course focuses on the New World settings where Western Equatorial African people have participated actively in the continuation of their African stories told by the authors of Heywood’s edited *Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora* (2002). This work, as well as others by the same authors (e.g., Heywood and Thornton 2007), reflects recent research suggesting that Western Equatorial African people and culture provided a more foundational experience for the African diaspora than has previously been appreciated.

My approach is designed to persuade the students very early on in the course that this Kongo region is actually a cosmopolitan cross-roads rooted in a rich range of Western Bantu languages that reveals their history, but it is documented in major archival materials in KiKongo, Latin, Italian, Portuguese, French, Spanish, Dutch, German, Swedish, and English. The climax of this political developmental story is the emergence of the kingdoms of Loango, KaKongo, Ngoyo, Vungu, Tio and Kongo. The Atlantic chapter of the story follows through with the mercantile trade that links markets and trade routes in the interior of the Congo Basin

with the destination points in the Caribbean, Brazil, and the United States. The Lower Congo, the KiKongo speaking region, becomes the point of entry of three colonial territories (the Congo Free State and the Belgian Congo, Portuguese Angola, and part of French West Africa) and of three modern African states (Angola, Congo-Brazzaville, and Congo-Kinshasa).

Because so much of the foundations of the Atlantic world is rooted in the historic slave trade, a course such as this has an inevitable historical character, challenging the historical literacy of most students. By the end of the course they come to understand that many of the continuities of the African diaspora are rooted in earlier African institutions and realities. For example, the Brazilian “Kings of Congo” celebrations of Carnival actually echo the Kongo kingdom. A range of New World Christianities reflecting the 16th to 19th century evangelization of Kongo society, and the regents and prophets who created a distinctive type of Kongo Christianity. Yet there are later trans-Atlantic exchanges such as the embrace of American crops and techniques (manioc, tobacco and their uses), Latin music reverberating in Congo jazz, and more recently the post-colonial movement of people and all sorts of communications that may be included in a focus on the Atlantic world.

### **Primary Sources and Research Challenges**

As a class, we also examine the contribution of anthropology and related disciplines to understanding an Atlanticized Kongo tradition. An important feature of the course assignment is the identification and interpretation by each student of primary sources – text, material culture, music or art, or documented work of a scholar or writer – of Kongo identity or about Kongo, e.g., a traveler, trader, diplomat, official, teacher, religious figure, any historic figure who left words and thoughts, material, or cultural evidence, behind. Students are provided a bibliography of relevant sources in the KU libraries, museums, and internet. Readings include works from history, historical linguistics, religion, folklore, and the work of “Kongo-Atlantic” authors. Early in the semester the class visits the Spencer Research Library to review available maps (Pigafetta-Lopez), travel accounts (e.g., Dapper 1655), ship captain’s surveys, exploration accounts (H. M. Stanley). However, in lectures I emphasize the greater “primacy” of other kinds of sources – e.g., traces of story or song text, vocabularies, living traditions found in dances, material culture, agricultural techniques and domesticated plants, architectural styles, worldviews, religious practices. The point of this assignment is to encourage students to see transatlantic African history and culture not as a closed book due to lack of records or their own lack of knowledge,

but as a field for original research in which they can participate by getting as close to the original authentic sources as possible. If a student has proficiency in a non-English language – French, Portuguese, Dutch or Haitian Creole, or an African language – the likelihood of finding suitable primary source material rises dramatically. Students’ project, presented in an initial oral report and usually also a term paper, are enumerated in the following chart.

My own agenda and pay-off from this course is unapologetically to further my own research interests on Western Equatorial African society and its diasporas. So I use my own fieldwork, research materials, interpretations, and publications in my lectures and assigned readings. The transplanted and syncretized Kongo diaspora cultures provide a refracting lens or rear-view mirror through which to explore the nuances of historic Kongo institutions and practices, and the larger picture of a transnational Kongo or Western Equatorial African world. The remainder of this paper explicates the somewhat arbitrarily constructed themes that the course utilizes to compare the historic Western Equatorial African setting with the New World communities that extend the cultural features and identities from the Old World context.

<b>Themes of comparison</b>	<b>Student project topics &amp; primary sources</b>
Verbal categories & narratives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Old World sources of Umbanda; Vansina et. al., Brazilian film;</li> <li>• KiKongo vocabulary in Jamaican culture; Schuler 1980;</li> <li>• Slave narratives: Equiano; Mary Prince; Henry Box Brown; WPA Project, Jose Aqualusa, <i>Creole</i> 1992;</li> <li>• Trickster &amp; androgynous heroes legends &amp; cycles in Old &amp; New World: Janzen, other literature sources;</li> <li>• Creolization in Haitian language &amp; culture: own experience;</li> <li>• Christianity in C. Africa &amp; Haitian voodoo: French &amp; Creole merchants’ records, Haitian grandmother’s testimony;</li> </ul>
Landscape ecologies, plant uses & signification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Water spirits in history &amp; art: films, art, exhibition catalogues;</li> <li>• Kongo &amp; Georgian plant uses &amp; meanings: Brown;</li> <li>• Plants in Kongo region, role in shaping tradition: Vansina;</li> <li>• <i>Makulu</i>, ancestral grove, trees in cemetery: Janzen notes, personal experience in Benin, other ethnographies;</li> <li>• Healing in Old &amp; New Worlds: Janzen, Covey, Slenes;</li> </ul>
Techniques, technologies, and artifacts in food production & warfare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kongo ironworking in Hispaniola: Sancon, Janzen, other;</li> <li>• Pottery, Old &amp; New World: Janzen, Young, Thompson;</li> </ul>
Gestures, song and dance, martial arts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pentecostal worship: Kongo dance films, slave narratives;</li> <li>• Kongo in Haitian voodoo: Jayaram’s own ethnography;</li> <li>• Gestures in Old &amp; New Worlds: Musee Dapper; Thompson;</li> <li>• Continuities &amp; changes in music: Janzen &amp; Ciparisse recordings;</li> <li>• African influences in Brazilian music: Metz’ own ethnography</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Capoeira martial arts: Thornton, films, own dance experience;</li> </ul>
Icons of religious practice, art, rituals, cosmologies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The female in Kongo religion: Bunzi legends &amp; shrines;</li> <li>• Kongo masks in Cuban Santeria altars &amp; modernist art;</li> <li>• Masking; Nge mask, Gabon &amp; Vansina text;</li> <li>• Catholic/Kongo religions juxtaposed: Thornton, et. al; crosses in museum collections; Fu-Kiau, Thompson;</li> <li>• <i>Minkisi, banganga</i>: MacGaffey;</li> <li>• Haitian Petro voodoo: MacGaffey, Metraux, Herskovits;</li> <li>• Voodoo traditions in America, esp. New Orleans: MacGaffey, Thompson, faculty interview;</li> <li>• death &amp; ancestors, pottery in cemeteries: Janzen; Bockie;</li> <li>• Dona Beatrice &amp; Antonines, Old &amp; New World: Thornton;</li> </ul>
Society & social institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Politics: MacGaffey &amp; Laman catechists' notebooks;</li> <li>• Stages of centralization in Congo region: Vansina, Kuba masks &amp; decorative raffia cloth in Museum;</li> <li>• Central African historical political traditions in contemporary statecraft: Vansina, personal connections to Ugandan elite;</li> <li>• <i>Kindoki</i>, historical, today, New World: MacGaffey, Janzen, Konda Jean;</li> </ul>
Resistance & accommodation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kongo &amp; slave religion in Low Country: Young;</li> <li>• The end of Angolan &amp; Brazilian slavery: Aqualusa, <i>Creole</i> 1992;</li> </ul>
Other themes & topics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Geographical knowledge; Lopez &amp; Pigafetta explorations, &amp; sequence of Central African / Atlantic maps;</li> <li>• Travelogues: Dapper; Battell;</li> <li>• Demographic impact of slave trade: Vansina, Miller, Curtin;</li> <li>• European politics at close of slave trade: archival material from missionary societies, &amp; Berlin Conference 1884-5;</li> <li>• Approaches to dealing with disability: Janzen, Batukezanga;</li> </ul>

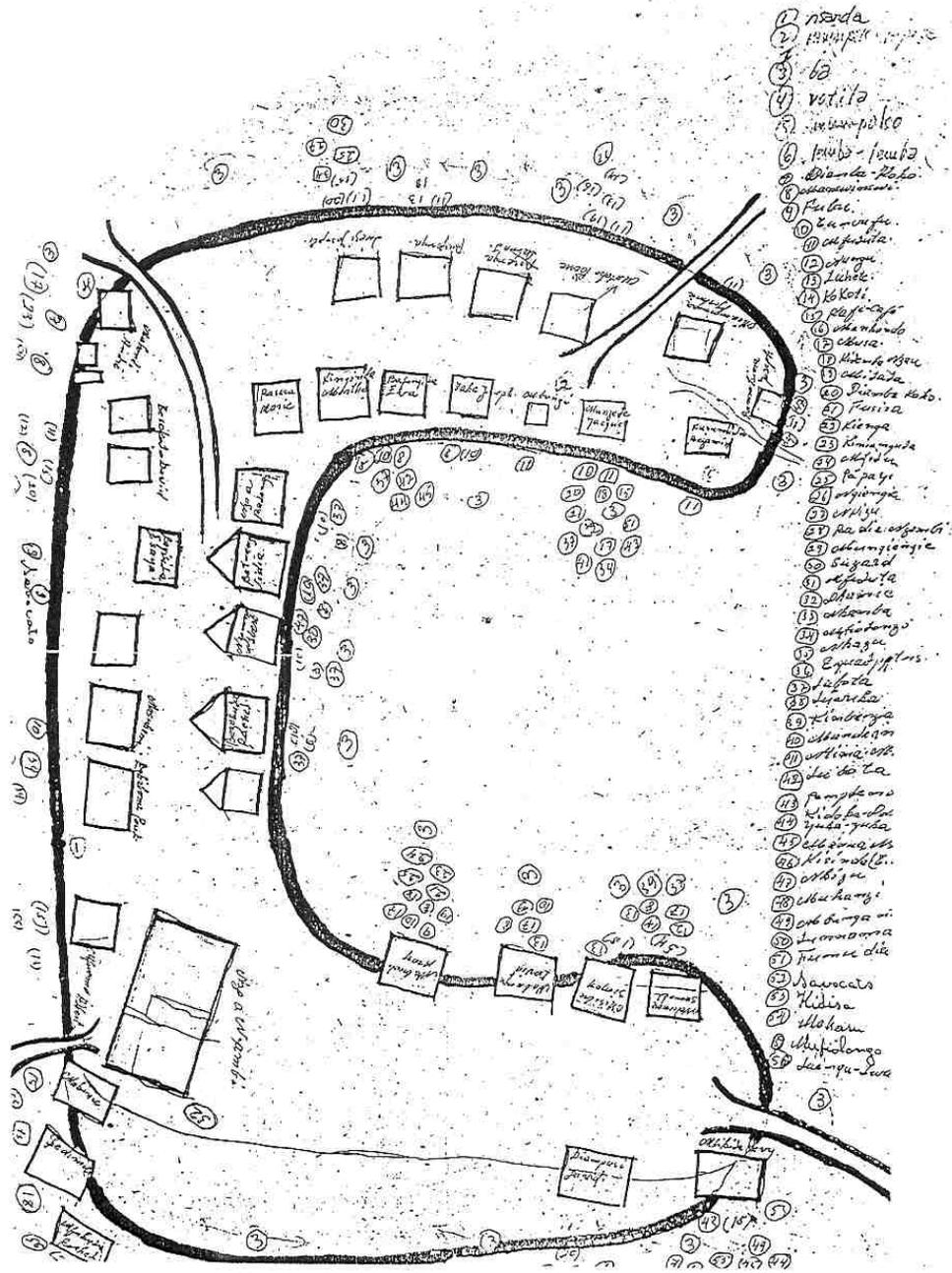
### Verbal Categories and Narratives

The most important indicator of Western Equatorial African cultural specificity – Kongo or other – in all of these New World diaspora settings is the presence of linguistic tags in the form of words, phrases, songs, and stories. African words and phrases may show up in everyday usages, or they may be performed in esoteric rituals in which earlier meaning has either been retained within the community. Language, short epithets, songs and stories told in connection with recurring events or rituals are the strongest indicator of self-conscious agency. Where words and phrases are retained and reiterated but have lost their meaning, the discerning ear of a scholar who knows the ancestral language may be able to piece together its earlier context (e.g., Schuler 1980, 2002). In some cases a term of great importance is conveyed within a ritual but the historic context and exact earlier meaning is lost. Thus, in a case that came to me, a recent adept of the Palo Cuban Kongo religion requested a clarification of the historic meaning of the key term “Kalunga” that occurred in a liturgical phrase he had been taught by his mentor. He

knew it had to do with water, but did not know the historic context of the name (referring to the cosmic waters surrounding the earth, and an attribute of God – Nzambi Kalunga). This area is one that is much in need of further research because many of the scholars who have studied these communities are not familiar with Kikongo. Frequently KiKongo or a related Western Equatorial African language is mixed with other African languages, or they are creolized with French, Spanish, English or Portuguese. Fortunately, authors in recent publications (e.g., Heywood 2002) pay attention to the African rooted language uses in New World contexts. Vansina's *Paths in the Rainforest* offers an invaluable systematic historical sketch and the course of evolution of the words that represent not just the historical evolution of Western Equatorial African society, but of the New World diaspora as well.

### **Landscape Ecologies, Plant Uses and Signification**

Kongo methods and manners of relating to the natural world, and seeing in that world many particularities, show up in New World counterparts, or sketch reports thereof. This is a rather complex topic because the reporting from the New World sites is anecdotal. Yet clearly the use made of the landscape, or of the natural world, has clearly conveyed Old World approaches to the New World settings, especially where slaves escaped their confinement early after crossing the Atlantic and were able to establish their own agricultural settlements in environments somewhat resembling their earlier homes – e.g., the over 200 Quilombos of the Brazilian rainforest, or the Georgian islands and coasts of North America. BaKongo attitudes and concepts of the surrounding natural world combine pragmatic knowledge of gardening, use of plants in the forests and savanna, the animals and birds, with a spiritual orientation that recognizes the powers of natural materials and living things and their manifestation of the spirit world – bisimbi and binkita water and nature spirits, Mbumba Nlangu the rainbow serpent, Bunzi the earth spirit, the earth embracing waters of Kalunga, as well as Nzambi-Mpungu. These names crop up in many places either in association with rituals or sacred places and spirits. Ras Michael Brown captures this special, sacred space of the physical world in his account of coastal Carolina men going for a “walk in the feenda (forest)” (2002) – thus preserving the KiKongo word and aura of the forest. Yet short of reviewing all aspects of cosmologies, I prefer to tackle this topic with a narrow element that reveals broader connections in its particularity.



**Figure 1.** 1969 botanical survey of Kumbi village in Kivunda commune, Luozi Territory, Lower Congo, by Mabanza Philippe, on instructions of the author (an anthropologist), to record “plants planted and placed by man.” Although Mabanza was given no instruction as to order of plants listed, he followed local indications of which came first, namely, the nsanda fig tree (#1, inside heavy village border line, left side), followed by mpese-mpese (#2) used to frame a chief’s enclosure, and ba (#3) the oil palm, the main plant of the ancient West and Equatorial African agricultural tradition, used for oil, raffia cloth, and palm wine. Many of the plants are fruit bushes or trees, such as payi-payi (#25) and avocado (#52); a number are medicinal plants such as kienga (#22) and lubota (#42), and lembu-lembe (#6) a sedative and a symbolic plant of the entrances, and kidiza (#53), a cactus whose sap is a powerful emetic, and one of the ingredients of poison used to catch fish.

Let us examine the nsanda fig tree, recognized in Brazil and in Kongo as an important signature plant in settlement layouts (Figure 1). In two exercises of mapping trees and shrubs in Kongo villages – a conventional village in North Manianga, Kumbi in Kivunda commune, and Manselele, healer Nzoamambu’s village near the Congo River in the south, the Nsanda tree was the plant noted first by each informant. Nzoamambu noted that “the nsanda tree was first planted, following tradition, to determine whether the site would have adequate moisture for other trees and to receive the acceptance of the Simbi water spirits. When the nsanda grew, other trees and plants followed (Janzen 1978: 163). In Brazil, the nsanda tree was also used by Kongo slaves and escaped slaves (Slenes 2004-5). A fig tree related to the African species carried some of the same meaning and function as in Kongo. The relationship to the nsanda tree and to the bisimbi was more on the order of a crisis and identity affirming use. This more spiritual side of the nsanda seems to be present in the use made of it in the life and work of Kimpa Vita, Dona Beatrice, the 18th century prophetess who sought to restore the kingdom in San Salvador (Mbanza Kongo) (Figure 2). The nsanda was the source of the bark cloth crown she and her principal adepts wore and also an indicator of her being attuned to Simbi spirits. Having to do with water, springs, and life, it was, and is, associated with the bisimbi, source of life. Is it possible that in deeper eras of Kongo history there was a more integral philosophy of the vital connection between water and human life? Between the auspicious places where water was available, the soil was good, and any and all trees could grow successfully? As in many other realms of Western Equatorial African culture a pragmatic rationale seems to have been integrated with a spiritual cosmology.

Hilary Hungerford (2007), graduate student in cultural geography, analyzed the inter-related ecological conservation aspects of the sacred cemetery, the *makulu*, in Kongo landscape conservation and cosmological reckoning. She had previously experienced rural life in Benin in the Peace Corps, which assisted her in understanding the implications of tree access and cutting prohibitions in the Kongo ancestral grove. In the diaspora, the symbolic-spiritual dimension seems to gain ascendancy while the utilitarian aspect may get entirely lost or shifted and substituted for a contingent solution.

One might also extend this picture of the discernment of the plant world to include healing. In addition to the nsanda tree, student Kristine Clark in 2009 identified seven plants that were common to the herbarium in Janzen’s *Quest for therapy in Lower Zaire* (1978: 243-249) herbarium and Covey’s *African-American Slave Medicine* (2007), which was derived from

WPA interviews of former slaves in the Southern United States. Covey's interpretation of Southern African-American medicine stressed the integration of empirical herbal treatment and spiritual or "conjuring" treatments. Landscape ecology, cultivation, and the use of wild and domesticated plants remains a relatively unstudied area of transatlantic African culture.



**Figure 2.** Kimpa Vita, Dona Beatrice, the Kongo prophetess who sought in the early 18th century to restore the Kongo kingdom by repopulating the capital, Mbanza Kongo or San Salvador, with her followers. She was tried for heresy and burned at the stake by Capuchin priest Bernardo da Gallo in 1704, but not before she had demonstrated the power of combined Kongo and Christian ritual symbols. Her use of Christian liturgies and identities were rooted in her claim that she was possessed by the spirit of Saint Anthony of Padua, and her followers were "little Anthonies." They were called the Antonines. The Antonine movement persisted after her martyrdom, a fact that no doubt accounts for the many statuettes of Anthony made by Congolese artists and found throughout the region in subsequent years, and its popularity in Afro-Brazilian religion (see Figure 3). Beatrice also made lavish use of the nsanda fig tree (*Ficus thonningii*) that is associated with bisimbi water spirits and the vitality of new communities, as discussed in this essay. The clothing and the unique crown she and her followers wore, are shown in this drawing by the Capuchin priest who had her burned at the stake, is made of bark cloth from the nsanda tree (Jadin 1961: 517).

### **Techniques, Technologies, and Artifacts in Food Production and Warfare**

The art of metallurgy has been noted in many historical sources about the Lower Congo and societies of the region. It is prominent in accounts of Kongo regional courts and dealings. Archaeological records and linguistic historic calculations indicate that ironworking reached the

mouth of the Congo River region about 400 A.D., replacing stone tools in the basic tool kit of the Western Bantu-speaking societies. Iron and copper were mined and smelted throughout the resource-rich region and may have played a role in the rise of kingdoms. After the 16th century metal figures in the mercantile trade economy both as currency (the *ngiele* rod) as well as export. In the 18th century shipping records indicate that a vessel left the Loango coast for Brazil bearing 40 tons of copper. Far scarcer is the documentation of what happened to the technical knowledge of metallurgy among slave migrants to the New World.

Recently John Ringquist (2008) has written about the central role of Kongo ironworking in Old and New Worlds. Kongo ironworkers were much sought after in the colonial plantation economies of the New World, their understanding of alloys was at the time superior to European steel. Ringquist studies the case of Maroon smiths and rebellions on Hispaniola and concludes that the superior knowledge of smelting and ironworking were critical to the survival of mountain settlements of maroons and their ability to resist capture.

This raises the question of how ironworking was socially situated in Kongo. Ringquist hypothesizes that although it was protected by the kings, it was not controlled by them and was not confined to a caste as in other regions of Africa. Therefore its practitioners were able to compete and experiment, which perhaps explains why Equatorial African iron became so highly reputed, and its makers so sought after even though enslaved to make iron and fashion the tools of colonial industries.

### **Gestures, Song and Dance, including Martial Arts**

Non-verbal performative culture provides another dimension of study of the legacy of Western Equatorial African societies in the New World. Anyone who has lived in Kongo knows that verbal and non-verbal discourses are almost always synchronized in a myriad of settings, from the work-a-day world in which fellow gardeners or hunters communicate with each other often with singing, or work together to song-dance, to public debates over bride price and land disputes. Former student Jerry Metz (2008) was able to link numerous musical instruments used historically and contemporaneously in Central Africa to the historical and contemporary instruments in Brazil, and their uses. Proverbs and bodily gestures amplify the impact of what the speaker/performer wishes to convey. Yet in the diaspora setting or in the quest to interpret physical gestures in bodies in motion or in sculptures in far flung museums, the understanding of the single gesture has proven important as a code for a range of social stances and messages. We

must credit Fu-Kiau and Thompson with important contributions in this field variously called “arts in motion” or simply the meaning of Kongo gestures (Thompson 2002; Fu-Kiau 1969; Dianteill 2002; Martinez-Ruiz 2009).

Kongo-Transatlantic students have connected with living performative traditions to demonstrate the threads of on-going life in ancestral practices. Graduate student Kiran Jayaram, an accomplished speaker of Haitian Creole, collected a recording in Haiti of a heretofore unknown “Lemba song.” Jayaram and other students had read about the Lemba trading and healing association and its far-flung diasporic extensions in Brazil and Haiti (Janzen 1982). Student Miriam Maples in 2009 combined her passion and training in dance with class readings to produce a stirring Capoeira performance as her “primary source” project, along with a historical analysis of the evolution of this Western Equatorial African martial art from war practice to self defense and slave resistance in Brazil to international high art form.

### **Icons of Religious Practices, Rituals, and Cosmologies**

As in song, gestures, and song-dance, so visual icons of Kongo religion, ritual, and cosmology have widely suggested the threads of a fuller Old World culture. Several illustrations of this process will need to suffice for the present article. Thus, in Maya Deren’s 1940s art film “Divine Horsemen: Living Gods of Haiti” the image of the encircled cross, the Kongo “cosmogram” traced in white on the floor of the hungan, flashes onto the screen in connection with the “action de grace,” the re-enactment within the Haitian voodoo séance of the Catholic sacrament of communion. In Deren’s film this action de grace occurs as a transition between possession dances to West African Dahomean gods culminating in Ogun, and possession dances to Ghede, to gods of agriculture, and the Congo and Petro loas. This resembles the choreographic position of the action de grace in another early 20th century Voudou (Herskovits 1937; Janzen 1982: 281) as an opening to performances of Petro loas in the first day-night-day phase, followed in the second day-night-day phase to Rada loas.

Students are thoroughly perplexed by this juxtaposition of a Christian-Catholic communion mass within the obviously deep African ritual of spirit possession. This scene in at least two depictions of specific Haitian Voudou performance illustrate the findings of recent scholarship (Heywood and Thornton 2007) that strongly suggests that we are witness to a New World perpetuation of the central ritual of early – from the 15th to 17th century – Kongo Christianity brought by slaves to Haiti and elsewhere in the New World. What is the ritual or

metaphoric operation by which these separate-appearing-to-outsiders performance traditions are conjoined in this manner?

Scholars have come up with models of analysis for this very typical Western Equatorial African circumstance of the blending, or merging, of seeming dichotomous cultural traditions. In speaking of Kongo religion, Thornton has used “parallel revelation” to describe the fusion of traditional African religion with Christianity (see Figure 3). Robert Farris Thompson, borrowing from and corroborating the work of Fu-Kiau, has embraced the Kongo cosmogram as a kind of dominant metaphor of deep Kongo tradition, in which the sun’s journey around the earth stands for the individual’s life as well as society’s and political regimes’ cycles of existence and transformation. Thompson has researched both Old World and New World connections of this Kongo cosmogram as central metaphor of many Kongo truths. He and some of his students have corroborated the analysis of deep reconstruction done by Fu-Kiau, who has however persistently rejected the reflection of early Kongo Christianity as the source of the Kongo cosmogram (1969, 1981). Other scholars, focusing on the Kongo cosmogram as a kind of shorthand of surviving Kongo spirituality and resistant persistence, believe to have discovered it in secret altar-like emplacements in slave dwellings in the North American interior (Fennell 2003).

In my teaching of Kongo religion and ritual, Old and New Worlds, I try to avoid giving students off-the-shelf notions like “syncretism,” “creolization,” and “hybridity,” or Thornton’s “parallel revelation,” too quickly. However, they are so seduced by these models of cultural fusion and transformation that it is almost a lost cause to help them actually understand the nature of the process by which elements or concepts from multiple traditions come together and may be transformed into an altogether new constellation of expressions. In my conclusion I will return to some of the pitfalls of explanation in the diasporic situation: of reification of continuity on the one hand, and of juxtaposition on the other.

### **Society and Social Institutions**

Social institutions (kin-based as well as larger political systems), more than any other area covered in this paper, suffered in the trans-Atlantic forced migration of the middle passage. For the most part Kongo slaves could not replicate the social institutions from which they had been wrenched: kingdoms, lineages, markets, networks or sodalities. They were forced into other institutional structures: plantations, households controlled by others, and became commodities



**Figure 3.** Two Saints Anthony, bearing similar iconography of Anthony of Padua (1195-1231), an associate of Saint Francis of Assisi, who joined the Franciscan Order; depiction of the vision of the virgin, holding the Christ child in his arm. Left, in ivory, Kongo artist, from the early Kongo Christian period. Source: Pl. 14 (pp. 208-9), J. Cuvelier, *L'ancien Royaume de Congo*. Bruxelles: Desclée de Brouwer, 1946. Right, plaster, painted; 4 inches tall; purchased by the author in an Afro-Brazilian religious relics shop in Curitiba, Parana State, Brazil, in 1993.

rather than merchants. Where and when they were able to reconstitute a semblance of their own social forms, or vestiges of social forms, what emerged was often a turned-in-on-itself set of aggressive forces that have given Kongo-derived practices a rather negative reputation (e.g., the Petro side of Haitian voodoo; the image of “voodoo dolls” with pins stuck into them, possibly derived imagery from min’kisi Nkondi; Ochoa’s (2010) reconstruction of Palo-Kongo forces to attack the Christian God at his moment of cosmological weakness from the time of his death on the cross to his resurrection). On the other hand, there have been continuations of sociopolitical social structures, at least for a time in some of the Brazilian Quilombos. But in most instances centralization of African institutions in the New World is but a memory, a celebration of the memory thereof, e.g., the King of Kongo sodalities in Carnival in Recife.

### **Resistance and Accommodation**

Much of New World African culture is pervaded with a combination of resistance to oppression and exploitation on the one hand, and degrees of accommodation, of acculturation, on

the other. Most of the themes enumerated above carry connotations of the two. Thus, water spirits and nature spirits, the very aura of nature, connote resistance to being forced onto a plantation or its slave quarters. The nsanda fig tree, a harbinger of good water on the one hand, is also an expression of the simbi spirits that give strength and force to those who resist like Dona Beatrice, or the cults of affliction and resistance of Brazil in Selenes' work. Iron working in Rinquist's account of mountain settlements in Hispaniola, are ventures of resistance. Jason Young studies historical records and oral traditions in the Georgia coastal areas where burial practices provided the expression of resistance to the effort by plantation owners to oppressively control their slaves' every aspect of life. Singing and dancing in the cemetery was the way slaves remained free in their souls and spirits (Young 2007). Evidence such as this calls for a renewed understanding of all these areas of life and history for their broader social and political purposes.

### **Conclusions and Cautions**

This essay set out to explore what light might be shed on Western Equatorial African social and historical circumstances through the mirror of New World diaspora that reflected Kongo traces, broadly interpreted. Seven somewhat arbitrarily constructed cultural dimensions were used to organize and compare scholarly evidence of cultural continuity, transformation, and adaptation during and following the forced migration of slavery. The picture that often emerges in such an exercise of cultural history, migration, and resettlement is a trans-Atlantic distribution map of traits and institutions, reminiscent of early 20th century cultural historical and diffusionist formulation of "culture circles" and "civilizations" that were soon discarded by historians and even most nationalists, only to be re-embraced by more recent promoters of "authenticity." A more rigorous use of language history by the linguistic historians (e.g., Vansina, Ehret, Schoenbrun) provides a non-teleological picture of institutions, practices, and historical changes, including the invention, spread, and disappearance of practices, with corroborative analysis from archaeology and archival documentation.

Yet once identified and in hand, what exactly does a trans-Atlantic distribution map of continuities represent, especially if it is not consciously shared by those who carry such cultural "DNA" as words, gestures, icons in their rituals, or social practices? This touchstone of reflexivity, whether in historical context or more recent, contemporary identification, has influenced recent trans-Atlantic scholarship and writing. Both historical and blended fictional

characters within very particular contexts demonstrate situated agency. Thus, Angolan author Jose Aqualusa's *Creole* (2002) features the daughter of a mid-19th century Kongo king who is enslaved and shipped to Brazil in the last slave passage, on a ship that happens to be named "Creole Nation." She manages to be rescued by a lover who in turn establishes a plantation with slaves, from where they flee to freedom in Europe. In this type of writing, self-conscious agency becomes the hallmark of cultural process, of history in the making, and of remembering that history.

Such blending of elements from multiple sources, and invention of new forms of expression and formulation, can challenge, even unsettle, the student or analyst, especially when ostensible cultural blending recognized by an outsider may be unnoticed, ignored, by the cultural insider. A student who thought she had dealt with the unique Kongo blend of Christianity and traditional forms in Kongo religion by calling it "syncretistic," and therefore impure Christianity not worthy of further attention, was speechless when I asked her if the Christmas tree in North American Christmas was not similarly "syncretic." Haitian voodoo continues to offer a particularly rich laboratory for cultural analysis, with its intricate interweaving of West Africa and Western Equatorial African, and Catholic-Christian names, spirits, ritual codes, and oral traditions. The possibility that what is called Haitian voodoo contains vestiges of 15th-18th century Kongo Christianity, juxtaposed and blended with Central and West African spirit trance, is a challenge for interpretation. Similarly, in the recreated and highly inventive Afro-Brazilian religious movements of Umbanda and Candomble veritable cosmopolitan syntheses incorporate features from a myriad of traditions and histories.

Our topic is like an unfinished open book, calling for new scholarship while cultural actors take it to its next embodiment. We do well however to heed the dangers that lurk in cultural historical reconstruction. On the one hand there is the danger of reification of cultural traditions and elements, in the name of continuity, while ignoring the inventive incorporation and invention of new constellations. Related to this is a second danger, that of stressing continuity to an extent that we miss the contextual moment in which new meaning is created. Ochoa's interpretation of the prenda Judaica in Cuban Palo Kongo religion is a magnificent tour de force, as is the insight of the Palo Kongo *banganga* who took the analogy of underground Jewish identity within Spanish Catholicism, following the Inquisition, to recreate Kongo religion within the dominant framework of that same Catholicism.

A final caution is to never minimize the infinity of creative ways in which people maintain their traditions and practices, blend them with other recognizable traditions, or invent altogether new forms and institutions. Creolization, syncretism, and hybridity, the glib hallmarks of cultural analysts, are almost never in the consciousness of the actors who supposedly perform creolized, syncretic, or hybridized language, stories, rituals, or architecture.

## Note

\* John Janzen, Professor, University of Kansas. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the African Studies Association, San Francisco, California on November 21, 2010, in the session “Atlantic Traces.”

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