

# Dance, Image, Myth, and Conversion in the Kingdom of Kongo, 1500–1800

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**A**fter Mass on major feast days of the Catholic calendar, provincial governors in the Kingdom of Kongo organized ceremonial martial dances called *sangamentos*, a local Portuguese term adapted from the Kikongo verb *kusanga*, ‘to jump or to leap,’ referring to the acrobatic moves executed during the performances.<sup>1</sup> *Sangamentos* were festive occasions in which Kongo social hierarchies were performed, celebrated, and reinforced as rulers proudly displayed the attributes of their might and legitimacy while subjects humbly paid allegiance to reigning political and religious powers.<sup>2</sup> In a dynamic rendition of the ceremony painted around 1740 by the Capuchin friar Bernardino d’Asti (Fig. 1), dancers sport regalia that Kongo nobility adopted after the official conversion of their realm to Catholicism at the turn of the sixteenth century.<sup>3</sup> The performers wear prestige caps and shoulder nets typical of local insignia but here seamlessly combined with coats and swords inspired by European symbols of status (Asti c. 1740:fol. 18). These outfits and the *sangamento* performance as a whole, I argue in this article, were visual manifestations of the elaborate symbolic and mythological manipulations that underlay the adoption of Christianity as the Kongo Kingdom’s state religion.

## FIRST CONTACTS

The Kingdom of Kongo was a highly centralized polity founded in the 1300s, according to oral histories and archeological evidence.<sup>4</sup> In west central Africa, it extended south of the Congo River through the western part of today’s Democratic Republic of the Congo and northern Angola. Its political organization was centered on the person of the king, who ruled with absolute power over large territories from his capital city by means of governors sent from his court to provincial towns.

The regal function was not hereditary. Rather, a group of qualified electors chose the new king (called a *mani*) among a pool of eligible candidates. This system of transition rendered royal successions delicate political affairs and placed high value on the ability of the chosen king to assert his rule and establish his legitimacy in political, military, and supernatural terms. Kongo monarchs therefore depended heavily on a range of regalia, narratives, and ritual apparatus to demonstrate their power and naturalize their rule.

The Kongo kingdom entered into European history in 1483 with the arrival in west central Africa of Portuguese explorers and clerics led by Diogo Cão, who were searching for a maritime passage to India and for new converts to Christendom. In the first decade of contact, the realms of Kongo and Portugal exchanged groups of men to visit each other’s courts as both guests and hostages, dispatched embassies, and established a cordial diplomatic relationship. The result of this early contact was the willing conversion of the Kongo monarch Nzinga a Nkuwu (r. 1470–1509), who celebrated his baptism with great pomp and a *sangamento* on May 3, 1491, taking the name of João I.<sup>5</sup> The newly Christian king instigated large-scale reforms in his kingdom based on the technological, cultural, and religious knowledge that Portuguese emissaries and Kongo men returned from Europe had brought to his court.

The changes initiated by João I blossomed under the leadership of his successor, Afonso I Mvemba a Nzinga (r. 1509–1542), who imposed Christianity as the kingdom’s state religion and integrated it into the symbolic and historical fabric of the realm. The official adoption of the new faith was met with a mix of enthusiasm and opposition, but it soon prevailed and opened a new era in the history of west central Africa defined by its involvement in the commercial, political, and religious networks



of the early modern Christian Atlantic world. From this time to the nineteenth century, through centuries marked by profoundly transformative events such as civil and foreign wars and the traumatic population drain of the transatlantic slave trade, Christianity continued to play a prominent role in the shaping of political and religious life in the Kingdom of Kongo.<sup>6</sup>

*Sangamentos* were performed by people in various polities of west central Africa before and after the advent of Catholicism in the region. In the Kongo, as in neighboring kingdoms, such dances continued to be carried on in the Christian era, with slight yet significant changes in their nature, purpose, and form.<sup>7</sup> Originally, *sangamentos* were held at the time of harvest and were the occasion for tribute payment. After the adoption of the new religion, the dances remained an occasion when political hierarchy was reinforced and enacted by tax collection and the ceremonial performance of allegiance, but such practices functioned within an altered symbolic realm. *Sangamentos* changed from being celebrations of prosperity and abundance linked to agricultural cycles to festivals related to the commemoration of a particular saint's day, determined by the Christian liturgical calendar.<sup>8</sup> During both periods, they also served as preparations for war and participated in the pageantry of diplomatic receptions (Thornton 1991:1112).<sup>9</sup>

1 The Missionary Gives his Blessing to the Mani during Sangamento

Bernardino d'Asti (Italy, ca. 1740)

Watercolor on paper; 19.5cm x 28cm (7 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 11")

Biblioteca Civica Centrale, Turin, MS 457, fol. 18

PHOTO: © SETTORE SISTEMA BIBLIOTECARIO URBANO DELLA CITTÀ DI TORINO

This watercolor, authored by a Capuchin friar veteran of the central African mission, offers a dynamic rendition of the *sangamento*, a ritual martial performance staged in the early modern Kingdom of Kongo.

It is important to underline that Christianity developed in central Africa under the patronage of Portugal but at the command of the Kongo kings themselves. The new religion consequently took on a particular form that is well documented, not only by written records but also by Christian objects created in the region, such as the characteristic brass crucifix mixing Kongo and Christian visual and symbolic syntax in Figure 2. Kongo crucifixes brought together local ideas of death and regeneration expressed by the X-shaped designs on their surface and Christian beliefs in the passing and resurrection of Christ, the central dogma signified by the Latin cross and the crucifix itself.<sup>10</sup> Kongo crucifixes were the result of a generative process in which European religious ideas and artistic modes of representation were



brought into dialogue with central African visual and religious syntax. In the course of this recombination, new meanings were created that surpassed and redefined both Catholic and central African ideas and symbols from a novel, Kongo Christian perspective. *Sangamentos*, in turn, offer additional insight into the process of religious change in the Kongo kingdom, considered from the perspective of political discourse, historical narrative, and mythological thought. The dances illustrate how the adoption of Catholicism was, in contrast to the outcome of the coercive proselytism exercised elsewhere by Europeans, an independent phenomenon in which central Africans used a range of visual and narrative tools to integrate Christianity into their own worldview while simultaneously projecting the Kongo kingdom into the historical and diplomatic realm of Christendom.

### THE TWO PARTS OF THE SANGAMENTO

The Capuchin friar Girolamo Merolla da Sorrento described *sangamentos* in the late seventeenth century as performances staged in two parts. In the first act, the dancers dressed “in the way of the country” with feathered headdresses and used bows and arrows as weapons.<sup>11</sup> In the second act, the men changed their outfits and appeared wearing European hats also decorated with feathers, necklace chains, golden crosses, strings of

**2** Kongo crucifix  
Kongo kingdom; possibly 18th century.  
Brass; 40cm x 20cm (15¾" x 7¾")  
Private collection.

PHOTO: CÉCILE FROMONT

Early modern Kongo artists created crucifixes that brought together central African ideas of death and regeneration expressed by the X-shaped cross and Christian beliefs in the passing and resurrection of Christ symbolized by the Latin cross.

**3** *Saint James Matamoros at the Battle of Clavijo*  
School of Juan de Flandes (Spain, early 16th century)  
Oil on panel; 96.5cm x 68.3cm (38" x 27")  
Museo Lázaro Galdiano, inv. 3025.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE FUNDACIÓN LÁZARO GALDIANO

The swords and red coats worn as regalia by the elite of the Kongo Kingdom and prominently featured in the coat of arms of the realm echoed the most prominent attributes of Saint James, depicted here in an Iberian painting contemporary to the advent of Christianity in central Africa. Crosses and shells also feature prominently in the iconography of power in both European and central African examples.



**4** Coat of Arms of the King of Kongo in the *Livro da Nobreza e da perfeição das armas*, by António Godinho (Portugal, 1528–1541)  
 Pigment and gold on parchment; 43cm x 32cm (17" x 12½")  
 PT/TT/CR/D/A/1/20, Direção Geral dos Arquivos—Torre do Tombo, Lisbon, MS CF-164, folio 7 (detail).  
 PHOTO: COURTESY OF ANTT

The emblems on the coat of arms of the Kingdom of Kongo tell the story of the ascension to the throne of Afonso, the early great Christian king of the Kongo.

**5** Coats of Arms of the Kings of Scotland, Poland, Bohemia and Kongo in the *Livro da Nobreza e da perfeição das armas* by António Godinho (Portugal, 1528–1541)  
 Pigment and gold on parchment; 43cm x 32cm (17" x 12½")  
 PT/TT/CR/D/A/1/20, Direção Geral dos Arquivos—Torre do Tombo, Lisbon, MS CF-164, folio 7 (detail).  
 PHOTO: COURTESY OF ANTT

The coat of arms of the Kingdom of Kongo appeared in this sixteenth century Portuguese armorial in the midst of other Christian realms such as Scotland, Poland, and Bohemia.

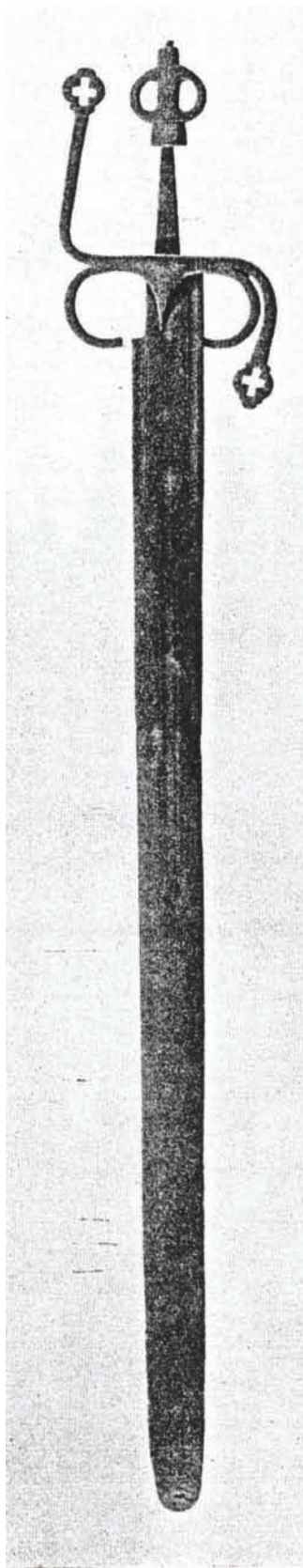
coral hanging down to their knees, and red coats embroidered with gold thread, among other ornaments. They also traded their bows and arrows for firearms, imported weapons that echo the use of European-style swords depicted in Figure 1. In the image as well as in the written text, the regalia of the performers defined two distinct parts in the ceremony that each called upon different cultural and symbolic referents. Yet these two sides formed in a meaningful, cohesive whole. The key to reading the cultural text of the *sangamento* resides, I argue, in the mythological and political transformations that took place in Kongo thought with the advent of Christianity. In this light, the early part of the show, performed with the traditional local regalia and weaponry, staged the first foundation of the kingdom—centuries before the advent of Christianity—by Lukeni, the original civilizing hero of the Kongo's creation myth. The subsequent performance, in which the dancers appeared in a mix of local and foreign attire, referred to the second founding of the kingdom in 1509 by Afonso, the first great Christian king of the Kongo.<sup>12</sup>

According to the myths in circulation in the Kingdom of Kongo, as they were transcribed in sixteenth to eighteenth century texts, Lukeni was a young foreign prince of extraordinary military skill who was banned from his homeland north of the Congo River for having murdered a member of his close family.<sup>13</sup> The disgraced youth crossed the river and conquered the lands of his future kingdom in a great military feat probably made possible by his command of iron technology, until then supposedly unknown to the people of the southern shore.<sup>14</sup> In addition to military skill and iron smelting, the prince brought to the Kongo new forms of wisdom on which the traditions of the kingdom would be based.<sup>15</sup> The earlier part of the *sangamento* celebrated this first foundation of the Kongo kingdom.

In turn, a series of letters from Afonso to the Pope and to his own vassals written around 1512 narrated the kingdom's second founding as a Christian realm.<sup>16</sup> Afonso was an early supporter

of Catholicism and ascended to the throne after a bitter battle against one of his brothers who, in contrast, opposed the new religion. Wars of succession were common in the Kongo, since the crown was not inherited but bestowed by an electoral council. With the help of the miraculous apparition of Saint James leading an army of horsemen, and under the cross of Constantine that reappeared in the central African sky on his behalf, Afonso defeated his heathen brother and won over the kingdom to Catholicism. This narrative was an ostensible attempt on the part of the new king to inscribe his reign in the historical and hagiographical tradition of Christianity. The recourse to the figure of Saint James, the Moor slayer of the Iberian Reconquista, as heathen slayer in Africa is an astute gesture on the part of Afonso, similar to the later use of the warrior saint as Indian slayer by the conquistadores of the Americas.<sup>17</sup> The later parts of the *sangamentos* were ritual reenactments of this second, Christian founding of the kingdom, during which dancers accordingly appeared dressed with what had become the characteristic regalia of the Kongo Christian nobility, a combination of insignia rooted in local symbolism with swords, crosses, and cloaks inspired by imported European objects. The particular items adopted from Europe, notably the red cape and the swords, were not coincidentally the ones central to the iconography of Saint James, as seen, for example, in the early sixteenth century Iberian depiction of the saint as Moor slayer in Figure 3. The elite performers were then no longer simply powerful men in the terms established by Lukeni, but also mighty Christian nobles emulating the example of Afonso and, through him, of Saint James.

The narrative invented by Afonso and enacted in the dances also encompassed a visual dimension. In the same letters that reported the battle, the king described to his vassals the newly created coat of arms of the Kingdom of Kongo, which he presented to them painted at the bottom of the text.<sup>18</sup> The arms had been commissioned by the king of Portugal as a gift to his



**6** Sword of status  
Kongo Kingdom (16th–19th century)  
Iron  
Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren,  
EO.1955.95.65.  
PHOTO: © RMCA TERVUREN

Kongo swords of status had a distinct anthropomorphic look. Their guard in particular echoed the movements of the Sangamento dancers, one arm up and one arm down.

**7** Coat of arms of the Kongo  
Unknown artist (ca. 1650–1660)  
Ink on paper  
Museo Francescano, Rome, MF1370  
PHOTO: CÉCILE FROMONT

The Kongo coat of arms evolved over time to focus around its principal element, five iron swords.



overseas counterpart and composed by a Portuguese artist who worked from a written account of the battle that Afonso had sent in 1509.<sup>19</sup> The central African king might have directly requested the coat of arms in this early, now lost, letter and, regardless, presented the adoption of the emblem as his own decision in subsequent correspondence (Brásio 1952 1:268).

The escutcheon, depicted in the Portuguese manuscript armorial by António Godinho, composed between 1521 and 1548, offers a further translation of the events, already transcribed by Afonso in writing and in Christian terms, in the typically European format of heraldry (Fig. 4) (Godinho 1528–1541). In a nutshell, following Afonso’s glossing, the arms are composed of the white cross of Constantine appearing in the azure of the central African sky, the shells of Saint James “whom We called upon and who helped Us,” the armored arms of the knights companions of the Saint, and, at the bottom, represent the destruction of two Kongo “idols,” broken at the waist, on either side of the emblem of Portugal, featured as Kongo’s benefactor and ally.

Afonso’s story and the coat of arms were rhetorical and visual means through which the Kongo monarch and his followers placed themselves firmly in the larger religious, diplomatic, and symbolic system of the early modern Atlantic as a land belonging to the realm of Christendom.<sup>20</sup> As one observes by considering the full page of the manuscript in which the arms of the Kongo appear placed alongside the emblems of other Christian nations such as Poland and Bohemia, this move was indeed successful (Fig. 5). Until well into the nineteenth century, when attitudes towards Africa dramatically changed under the influence of the pseudo-scientific racial and social theories of the time, no European nation seriously questioned the status of the Kongo as an independent Catholic polity.<sup>21</sup> In an era otherwise defined in many regards by the Atlantic slave trade, this distinction was significant.

Réf. 55.95.65

8 Sangamento dancer, detail of Figure 1

PHOTO: © SETTORE SISTEMA BIBLIOTECARIO URBANO DELLA CITTÀ DI TORINO

Sangamento performers demonstrated their strength with acrobatic, swaying moves, including with this characteristic Kongo arm gesture, one up, and the other down.

### KONGO MYTH, CHRISTIAN HISTORY

The letters of Afonso and the related practice of *sangamentos* also demonstrate how the adoption of Christianity in the Kongo was a process that involved a deep level of inward looking reflection on the part of the central Africans as much as it was a strategic move turned outward to the viewership of European powers. The sophisticated cultural work performed by the letters was not merely a one-way translation of Kongo events into Christian terms. If the letters successfully positioned the Kongo as part of the realm of Christendom, they also inscribed Christianity into the symbolic syntax of central African mythology.

The various recorded iterations of the origin myth as well as the narrative of the succession struggle in the letters each present a civilizing hero, Lukeni in the earlier case and Afonso in the later, who is able to seize leadership of the Kongo through military might, thanks to the control of iron, first in the form of smelting and smithing technology and later that of sword-bearing cavalry. Both men eventually bring to the land a new form of wisdom, the one, Kongo cosmology and the other, Christianity. The bold and innovative narrative of Afonso thus became an integral part of Kongo mythological thought. It repeatedly appeared, with slight variations, in later oral histories recorded in early modern Kongo.<sup>22</sup> This exceptional cross-cultural manipulation of symbols and narratives was made possible by the king's personal knowledge and particular life experience. He was well educated in central African mythology from his childhood as a Kongo prince and studied Christian theology with the first European priests in the region during the reign of his father. According to the Portuguese vicar and resident of the Kongo Rui de Aguiar, he assiduously studied the history and the teachings of the Church, and eventually mastered an impressive knowledge of these disciplines.<sup>23</sup>

The story of the battle as explained in the letters of Afonso and depicted in the coat of arms could therefore simultaneously encompass a range of meanings depending on its readership. For the Europeans, it could be a straightforward account of the providential continuity between the history of the Christian Church and that of the Kongo, as what they considered a pagan people entered into Christendom thanks to the miraculous intercession of God's mighty crusader Saint James. For the people of the Kongo, however, it could be an evolution in their own mythol-



ogy and symbolic identity, and judging from the deep and long-lasting presence of Christian ideas and imagery in the region, a satisfactory one. The strength of this transposition resides in part in the fact that the two stories are not mutually exclusive. With Afonso's narrative, Christianity becomes a new era of central African history, and in turn, Kongo takes its place within the universal history of the Church. In central African myths, Lukeni and Afonso are both civilizing heroes. From the perspective of Christian history, the coming of Lukeni in ancient times takes on the guise of a foreshadowing of Afonso's reign, a form of antiquity that prepared and announced the Christian era. The story presented pre-Christian Kongo in a parallel to Europe's own pre-Christian past as an ordered and deserving polity ripe to receive the Christian revelation. It thus set Kongo aside from other non-European lands that, from a European perspective, dwelled in more somber and difficultly redeemable states of heathenry or idolatry. Indeed, for a European audience, Afonso's miraculous celestial cross demonstrated a close link between early Christianity and the advent of the new faith in central Africa. It vividly recalled the cross that appeared to the Roman emperor Constantine at the very moment when he and his realm turned away from their own gods to embrace Christianity. The European missionaries working in central Africa took to that idea of a pagan, thus propitious history of the Kongo. The author of the watercolor in Figure 1, for example, commented several centuries after the time of Afonso that "contrary to the heathens of Brazil in the Americas who wander without Chief and without Law,<sup>[24]</sup> the Congo [...] people in Africa has always been governed by its [...] King" (Asti c. 1740:67). In other words, in the eyes of the Capu-



**9** *Nkisi nkonde*

Bakongo, Democratic Republic of the Congo (before 1914)

Wood, metal, cloth, shell, other material; 85 cm (33½")

Royal Museum for Central Africa Collection, EO.0.0.22438.

PHOTO: SCHNEEBELI, © RMCA TERVUREN

Across centuries, *minkondi*, *sangamento* dancers, and Kongo swords conveyed their foreboding message of power and strength through similar dynamic attitudes, gestures and beaming eyes. The shell at the top of the figure's head also echoes those emblematic of Saint James prominently featured in the coat of arms.

(opposite)

**10** Kongo sword of status

Kongo Kingdom (16th–19th century)

Iron, wood; 88.5cm (35")

Afrika Museum Berg en Dal, 29-692

PHOTO: AFRIKA MUSEUM BERG EN DAL

Kongo swords, *minkondi* and *sangamento* dancers also stood menacingly, arms akimbo. Decorative elements such as the crosses in this example linked the swords to other elements of Kongo Christian regalia worn by the elite dancers such as crucifixes, or the emblems of the Order of Christ.

chins, even before the advent of Christianity, the kingdom was ruled by law and order, a sure sign in retrospect that it was destined to a Christian future.

Afonso's story is central to our understanding of the complex and layered process through which Christianity became a significant part of the religious and political worldview of the people of the Kongo. Its prominent place in the recorded oral histories of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries and the repeated occurrences of the *sangamentos* testifies to its core significance in the definition and success of a Kongo Christian discourse. In the letters, and in the story, Afonso creatively reformulated Christian and local mythology and symbolism into a novel, coherent whole. In his texts, European turns of phrase, language, and narrative structure also resonate with Kongo cultural referents that together create a Kongo Christian syntax fit to express Kongo Christian ideas.

### IRON, SWORDS, AND POWER

Similarly, in the *sangamentos* and in the regalia, the visual and material elements derived from Europe were no longer foreign or "other"; rather, they became objects whose significance was also embedded in local thought. The iron swords of status carried by central African nobles were powerful illustrations of this process of transposition and appropriation (Fig. 6). The symbolic weight carried by iron in central Africa was one of the keys to the successful association of European-derived social and visual attributes of nobility with Kongo ideas of power and legitimacy. The myths discussed earlier located the creation of the kingdom at the moment of the concomitant arrival of iron technology and the civilizing hero and founding king. Visual and linguistic semantic tools centered on the figure of the king perpetuated the close link between smelting, smithing, kingship, and the origins of the kingdom. The association of kingship and smithing was reinforced by ceremonial performances and by several elements of his regalia (Balandier 1965:23, Thornton 1992).<sup>25</sup> During the ruler's coronation rites, described at length by the Jesuit Mateus Cardoso in 1622, two iron anvils were struck together, a "very old custom" that reproduced the thud of a blacksmith's hammer and accompanied by its rhythmic sound the course of the ceremonies.<sup>26</sup> Bill Dewey and Terry Childs also noted the enduring significance in the twentieth century of iron and iron working in Luba myths expressed with a similar set of metaphorical performances, which served to make "manifest the interconnections among religion, politics, and technology" (1996:62).

The newly elected Kongo monarch also received the "ancient" iron emblems of the *simba* chain and the *malunga* bracelet as attributes of his function. The gilded *malunga*, Cardoso explained, "stands for the kingdom that is given to [the king] [...] and just as the *malunga* is of iron, so the kingdom is of iron, and for this reason it is called *Congo riactari* that is to say Congo of Iron" (Brásio 1988:492). The word *malunga* itself participates in an extensive semantic field in Central Bantu languages that encompasses ideas of perfection in the sense of completeness, cyclical time, military might, and personal fortitude that are also paramount to the symbolism of iron in central Africa (Ceyssens 1998:126–33). The significance of the *topoi* of the iron kingdom and the blacksmith king may be judged from their widespread



occurrence in the foundation myths of many central African polities (de Heusch 1982:ch 5, Pierre de Maret 1980, Volavka and Thomas 1998).

Afonso anchored his reformulation of the central African foundation myth into the story of his own victory as Christian ruler precisely on the shared European and Kongo semantic link between iron and power, materialized in the swords prominently carried by Saint James and his miraculous army of knights. In the narrative of the battle, the military superiority achieved by Lukeni thanks to the knowledge of iron technology was powerfully echoed in the large iron swords of Saint James and his followers. The prominent role of the iron weapons was emphasized in the original coat of arms described by Afonso and remained the central focus of the emblem as it was simplified and refocused over time. The five sword-carrying arms of





**11** *Nkisi nkonde*

Bakongo, Democratic Republic of the Congo (before 1878)

Wood, metal, fabric, pigment, fibres, glass; 115cm (45¼")

Royal Museum for Central Africa Collection, Tervuren, Belgium, EO.0.0.7943, coll. RMCA Tervuren

PHOTO: R. ASSELBERGHS, © RMCA TERVUREN

Countless nails, shards, strips of cloth and rope knots activate this large *nkisi nkonde*, including a larger metal object, struck into his chest.

**12** Detail of Figure 11

PHOTO: J.-M. VANDYCK, © RMCA TERVUREN

The larger metal shard in the heart of the *nkisi nkonde* in Figure 11 is the handle of a sword of status.

the 1548 version (Fig. 4) soon became a simple grouping of five swords in later depictions, such as the one found in a drawing composed around 1650 by a Capuchin missionary (Fig. 7).<sup>27</sup> Likewise, the story of the succession battle evolved through the decades but the swords continued to play a key role in all of its recorded iterations.<sup>28</sup>

The symbolic currency of the weapons in European and local terms was keenly understood by the Kongo elite, who adopted large iron swords, shaped in the European fashion of the early Renaissance, as integral parts of their regalia.<sup>29</sup> These swords, which completed the funerary regalia of King Álvaro III in 1622 or were found in the elite tombs of the eighteenth century Ngongo Mbata cemetery, expressed the social position of their owner as a member of the Kongo Christian elite through a range of visual tools (Brásio 1988:489).<sup>30</sup> At one level, the general shape of the weapons echoed European examples that in and of themselves spoke of the aristocratic status of their bearer, particularly in the context of the early sixteenth century, when the use and shape of the Kongo swords was adopted from Europe. At another level, however, the material, shape, and decorations of

the weapons carried key features referring to Kongo visual syntax and to their ceremonial use in the *sangamentos*.

The martial exercises were a means for central African men to demonstrate their value as warriors and to demonstrate the aggression that they would be capable of in battle.<sup>31</sup> The swords used in the performances conveyed these latter ideas through their material, referring back to the military prowess of Lukeni and Saint James, but also through their very shape. The end of the pommel, often pierced with two holes, resembled a human head and face and conferred on the swords a distinct anthropomorphic look (Fig. 6). As Robert Farris Thompson already suggested in 1981, the guard protecting the blade was shaped to suggest the arms of a human figure, one arm down, and the other up above the head. This attitude, I would add, also directly reflected the use made of the weapon in the *sangamentos*, during which the dancers brandished their swords while stretching their arms, one up and one down, to convey physically an intimidating message of strength, power, and aggression (Fig. 8).<sup>32</sup>

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, ideas of aggression and might continued to be expressed with the same ges-



13 Detail of Figure 4, broken figures on the coat of arms of the Kingdom of Kongo  
PHOTO: COURTESY OF ANTT

The coat of arm of the kings of Kongo included the representation of an “idol,” broken at the waist, adopting the characteristic attitude of the *nkisi nkonde*, one arm up, the other down.

ture in Kongo artistic productions. Central African carvers used similar formal means in their *minkisi minkonde* (sg. *nkisi nkonde*), menacing figures looming against enemies and traitors, one arm up with a weapon, the other down on the hip (Fig. 9). Alternatively, the guard of the swords, the *sangamento* dancers, and the *nkonde* sometimes adopted the posture of arms akimbo, fists planted on the hips in a gesture of determination (Fig. 10). The wide-open, beaming eyes of the figures—like those of the dancers—complete their ominous, hyper-vigilant look. The affinity between the swords and the *minkonde* is in fact more than formal. The wooden figures were activated by the driving of nails or sharp pieces of metal into their flesh. Often, a larger, more powerful shard was struck into their heart.<sup>33</sup> In at least one instance, the activating metal piece plunged into the chest of a large and mighty *nkonde* was the top part of a Kongo sword of status (Figs. 11–12).<sup>34</sup> The wooden figure pierced in the heart with a sword offers tantalizing resonances with the European iconography of the Virgin of Sorrows and several other saints. Similarly, a shell reminiscent of the type emblematic of Saint James, which prominently fea-

tured in the Kongo coat of arms, tops the *nkonde* in Figure 8. These two details offer an evocative demonstration of how central African and European visual and symbolic syntaxes met and interplayed over the centuries in complex interlacing streams, from the first moments of contact with Christianity circa 1500 into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

There are no known examples of *minkonde* from the early modern period. However, in the light of the preceding discussion on the characteristic Kongo position of the arms, I am able to link the two “broken idols” represented in Afonso’s coat of arms to this category of menacing objects.<sup>35</sup> The painting represented two figures, broken at the waist into two pieces (Fig. 13). Their bottom halves stood in the center as two pairs of legs resting on a base or pedestal. The top parts were depicted as two upper bodies with their arms in the pose witnessed in the swords, the *sangamento* dancers, and the *nkisi nkonde*, one arm up and the other down, in a menacing stance. The so-called idols of the coat of arms were destroyed as vestiges of the Kongo’s pre-Christian past, yet the gesture with which they signified their power remained. The mighty pose of the broken figures found its way into the Kongo swords, where it continued to offer its intimidating message of strength and power, but this time at the service of the once opposing camp.

#### CONCLUSION

From the dancers to the swords, from the coat of arms to the *nkisi nkonde*, local and foreign cultural currents, early modern Kongo and Christian religious traditions run and merge in complex interlacing streams. Essential Kongo concepts that went back to its myth of creation were entwined with European ideas and images to address the circumstances of a new, Catholic organization of the kingdom. The narrative laid out by Afonso provided the prism through which to read, from a Kongo perspective, the transformations that the region experienced in the early modern period. A prominent part of the changes consisted of the adoption of some of the visual expressions of power and nobility of the European Christian tradition. The Kongo nobles borrowed from their Portuguese counterparts central attributes of the nobleman, such as the sword, and transposed them into elements of regalia reflecting Kongo’s own worldview.

Eventually, the iron swords and the *sangamento* demonstrated how local and foreign came together in the Kongo in a process in which cross-cultural change was as much an introspective exercise as it was a strategic move directed at outward viewership. The example of the Kongo highlights an important mode of visual and religious encounter in the early modern era, one in which cross-cultural change was not the product of a relationship of oppression and resistance but rather the result of an elaborate visual and symbolic conversation between one culture’s definition of itself and the possibilities that a widening world brought to its shores.

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## Notes

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1 Seventeenth and eighteenth century European sources refer to the dances using Italianized or Lusitanized verbal or nominal forms based on the Kikongo verb *kusanga*. They do not record tonality. The Kikongo term stems from the proto-Bantu root *-càng-*, ‘be pleased’, present in numerous Bantu linguistic zones (Jacky Maniacky, personal communication, April 2011). The Latin cognate of *sanguis*, *-inis*, ‘blood’, which carried connotations opposite to that of *kusanga* was not, to my knowledge, associated with the term during that period.

2 Kongo is spelled with a “K” by historians to differentiate the historical kingdom from the nineteenth century European colonial construction of the Congo, spelled with a “C.” In this article I use the term Kongo as an adjective meaning “relative to the Kingdom of Kongo” and not as an ethnonym.

3 Asti’s image belongs to a codex in a particular genre of illustrated manuscripts developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by the members of the Capuchin Order’s central African missions (see Fromont 2011a).

4 Oral testimonies of the creation and early history of the kingdom were recorded as early as the sixteenth century, for instance in Lopes and Pigafetta (1591). The 1624 manuscript by Mateus Cardoso from the Biblioteca Nacional in Lisbon also captured the history of the kingdom; see the modern edition by Brásio (1969). In the mid-seventeenth century, Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi recorded more comprehensive accounts of the origins of the kingdom that were published posthumously (Cavazzi and Alamandini 1687). Clist (1991) presents an overview of the scarce archeological data available.

5 See Rui de Pina, chronicler for the royal house of Portugal. Radulet (1992) provides a critical edition.

6 Cuvelier (1946) discusses the early period of the history of the Kingdom of Kongo. Thornton (1983) analyzes the seventeenth century. See Kabwita (2004) for the later periods.

7 *Sangamentos* were also staged in the neighboring Loango Kingdom, north of the Congo River (de Grandpré 1801, 1:116) and in the Kingdom of Matamba to the South (Cavazzi 1687:656).

8 *Sangamentos* were staged on saints’ days that held particular local significance, such as Saint James’ Day, as discussed below. They also marked feasts of the liturgical calendar such as Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, etc. See Bontinck’s modern edition of Giovanni Francesco da Roma (Roma and Bontinck 1964:129–31).

9 See also the Jesuit records of 1622, AGSJ, Rome, Lus. T. 55, f 115v published by Jadin (1968:363). Da Lucca also mentions this use, as well as that in diplomatic receptions; see the manuscript compilation of his letters by Filippo Bernardi da Firenze (1700–1717:99–100, 186).

10 For an analysis of the meaning of the sign of the cross in the Kongo in the early modern period, see Fromont (2011b). The visual and religious syntax of the Kongo and related peoples in the twentieth century, yet with insights on the earlier period has been studied in important volumes by Wing (1921), Janzen (1982), and MacGaffey (1986).

11 The exact phrase used in the Italian text is

“*all’uso del paese*” (Merolla da Sorrento and Piccardo 1692:157). The most detailed of the many eyewitness description of the *sangamento* in the early modern period was recorded around 1648 by Giovanni Francesca da Roma (1648:125–28). Castelo de Vide (1780:137), Anguiano (1950:77, 279), and Caltanisetta (Caltanisetta and Bontinck 1970:5) offer descriptions of *sangamentos* in addition to the ones quoted elsewhere in this article. Marcellino d’Atri also witnessed a *sangamento* in 1696; see the published transcription of his manuscript in Tosó and Atri (1984:141).

12 Afonso was not the first Christian Kongo king; his father and predecessor had previously converted, but he was a great advocate of the new faith and the monarch who truly established Christianity as the Kongo’s state religion and the Kongo as a Christian state. Note also that Merolla himself hints at the link between the *sangamento* and the second founding, explaining that the main ceremony takes place on Saint James’ Day as a tribute for the victory he helped secure for Afonso (see Merolla da Sorrento and Piccardo 1692:156).

13 I refer here to the oral traditions as they were told in the Kingdom of Kongo from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries.

14 Heusch (1972, 1982) and Vansina (1966) have described and analyzed creation myths in central Africa. Note that the date suggested by the narrative for the introduction of iron technology in the region is unrealistically late.

15 An anonymous report in the Propaganda Fide archives from the early eighteenth century places the origins of the Kongo Royal House in “a very sagacious and astute smith” (see Propaganda Fide Archives, SCR, Africa, Angola, Congo, vol. 1 [1645–1685] f. 141r). In turn, Cavazzi links the arrival of iron technology with that of the first kings of Kongo and notes a similar association between smithing and the founding king for the Kingdom of Dongo (see Cavazzi and Alamandini 1687:169, 290).

16 The letters are published in Brásio (1952 1:docs 68–72).

17 See Domínguez García (2006). The later reappropriation of Saint James in Afro-American religions also points to tantalizing perspectives about the role of Kongo Christianity in the shaping of the experience of enslavement among men and women of central African heritage in the Americas.

18 The image is now lost (Brásio 1952 1:263). Bontinck (1962) briefly discusses the coat of arms.

19 The now missing letter is mentioned in a 1512 text by Afonso (Brásio 1952 1:232). It is also mentioned in a subsequent brief dated October 5, 1514 (Brásio 1952 1:295). See also Thornton (2006:443, note 21).

20 Here I use the term Christendom as a concept that defines a geographical space of its own, in the manner suggested by Greer and Mills (2007).

21 The notable exception of Portugal should be noted here, as it occasionally attempted to argue the disappearance of Christianity in the Kongo in a strategic effort to justify its expansionist claims to the African realm as an extension of their colony of Angola. Indeed, it could not colonize a Christian kingdom. The need for such loud pronouncements in effect demonstrates the status quo against which they stood.

22 Several other iterations of the origin myth of the kingdom recorded in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries present a structurally similar narrative (see for example Jadin 1970:452–53)

23 Rui de Aguiar writes in a 1516 letter to the king of Portugal: “I certify to your Highness that [Afonso] teaches us and knows more than we do about the Prophets, the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ and all the lives of the Saints and everything about the Holy Mother Church [...] he does not do anything but study

and often he falls asleep on top of his books” (Brásio 1952 1:361, my translation).

24 “Without Chief and without Law” is in Latin in the text: “*sine Duce et sine Lege vagantur*.” This is a reference to the Portuguese rhyme “*sem fé, sem lei, sem rei*” used by European commentators to describe the perceived linguistic and cultural flaws of the Brazilian indigenous populations (Monteiro 2000:703–704).

25 Wannyn (1961:10) even suggests that the king received the title of *ngangula a Kongo* or “smith of the Kongo.”

26 Brásio (1988:490) printed the account by Mateus Cardoso. It is available in English (Thornton 1992). Maret (1985) also discusses the coronation.

27 The coat of arms appears in one of the two folded maps of Lopes and Pigafetta’s early publication (1591) and in Cavazzi and Alamandini (1687:274). In the late eighteenth century, Cherubino da Savona describes the “arms of the kingdom of Congo, that is to say the five swords that appeared in the air during the time of king Afonso I to defend him against his enemies” (Jadin 1963:406).

28 A version of the story recorded in 1622, for instance, attributed the victory of Afonso to a miraculous rain of swords that defeated his heathen brother (Brásio 1988:489).

29 The straight Kongo swords are close to fifteenth and sixteenth century Iberian examples, with the guard in the same plane as the blade and without the coiled hilt that defined later types such as rapiers. The European origin of the design of the Kongo swords has been the main focus for their study (Wannyn 1951). The watercolor in Figure 1 depicts two sorts of swords, scimitars with curved blades and straight blades; I focus here on examples of the later type.

30 Schellings (1950) briefly published some of the findings of Ngongo Mbata.

31 Thornton (1999:105) underlines the role played by the dances as military training. See the late sixteenth century description of “*sanguar*” as a defensive technique (Brásio 1952 4:563).

32 Robert Farris Thompson related the anthropomorphic look and gesture of the pommel to *niombo* reliquary figures (Thompson and Cornet 1981:62–63, 65). Drawing from Congolese scholar Fu-Kiau Bunseki’s teachings, he proposed a reading of the first gesture, one arm up and the other down, as an expression of the Kongo cosmogram conveying ideas of death and regeneration (Fu-kiau kia Bunseki-Lumanisa 1969). See also Barbaro Martinez-Ruiz (2009).

33 See chapter 5, “Beyond the Scripture—Physical Forms of Graphic Writing” in Barbaro Martinez-Ruiz’s forthcoming book, *Kongo Graphic Writing and Other Narratives of the Sign*.

34 Observation drawn from a personal study of the object in June 2007 in the reserves of the Royal Museum for central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium.

35 There is a considerable literature on late nineteenth and twentieth century *minkisi mkonde* but I present here for the first time evidence of the existence of an earlier similar form. For discussion of *minkisi* see for example MacGaffey (1988) and Volavkova (1972).

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