

AFRO-CHRISTIAN SYNCRETISM IN THE KINGDOM OF KONGO*

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Abstract

This article examines the way in which Christianity and Kongo religion merged to produce a syncretic result. After showing that the Kongo church grew up under the supervision and direction of Kongo authorities rather than missionaries, it will track how local educational systems and linguistic transformations accommodated the differences between the two religious traditions. In Kongo, many activities associated with the traditional religion were attacked as witchcraft without assigning any part of the traditional religion to this category. It also addresses how Kongo religious thinkers sidestepped questions of the fate of the dead and the virginity of Mary when harmonizing them would be too difficult.

Key Words

Central Africa, Equatorial Africa, African Diaspora, Christianity, comparative, religion.

The ‘Most Christian’ Kingdom of Kongo, converted even before Columbus crossed the Atlantic, was a sensation in its day, and continued to be noted frequently in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe. The conversion of the country, its relationship with Europe, and its role in the slave trade also fascinated those historians who pioneered the rebirth of the study of Africa’s history in the 1960s. Basil Davidson wrote of Kongo in his early work, as did Jan Vansina, Georges Balandier, W. G. L. Randles, and David Birmingham in the first decade of the modern study of African history. These studies focused on the conversion of Kongo primarily in political terms, as a way for the rulers to increase their power through harnessing a connection to Portugal.¹ Ann Hilton broke new ground in her richly documented study of 1985 by trying to focus carefully on the religious dimension as well as the political; while attentive to the role of royal politics in

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1 B. Davidson, *Black Mother: The Years of the African Slave Trade* (Boston, 1961); J. Vansina, *Kingdoms of the Savanna* (Madison, 1968 [orig. French pub. 1965]); G. Balandier, *Daily Life in the Kingdom of the Kongo from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Centuries*, Helen Weaver (trans.) (New York, 1968 [orig. French pub. 1965]); D. Birmingham, *Trade and Conflict in Angola: The Mbundu and their Neighbours under the Influence of the Portuguese, 1483–1790* (Oxford, 1966); W. G. L. Randles, *L’ancien royaume du Congo des origines à la fin du XIXe siècle* (Paris, 1968).

promoting the new religion, she also systematically investigated the ways in which Christianity might have interacted with the original Kongo religion.²

Hilton made extensive use of the anthropology of the Kikongo-speaking people, in large measure because anthropologists, both Western and Kongo have studied Kongo extensively since the late nineteenth century.³ Kongo is unusual in that alongside the observations of early anthropologists and scientifically-oriented missionaries, the Kongo themselves participated in describing their religious life in their own language, as represented by Kikongo language notebooks compiled for the Swedish Missionary Karl Laman in the 1910s by his catechists.⁴ Thus writers such as Hilton have had a well worked out vision of Kongo cosmology from which to begin their studies, albeit one that only describes the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

More recently, specifically religious issues have been particularly important for scholars of the African Diaspora who have investigated the conversion for the impact it might have had in the Americas when Christian slaves from Kongo went to Brazil or the South Carolina Lowcountry.⁵ Hilton's work and modern anthropology have been influential in these historians of the Americas' work, as well as that of art historians who have detected elements of Kongo cosmology in the Americas.⁶

As the question of Kongo's conversion has gained importance with the renewed interest of scholars of the African Diaspora, the nature of the conversion is increasingly discussed. All these scholars agree that the result was syncretic – that Kongo Christianity incorporated elements of Kongo's original cosmology as well as adding some Christian elements. Richard Gray, almost alone, contended that by the late seventeenth century, some parts of Kongo had become truly Christian (that is, in line with theology current in Europe at the time), though most scholars have not accepted this

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- 2 A. Hilton, *The Kingdom of Kongo* (Oxford, 1985), 9–19, 45–9, 52, 62, 89–98, and 186–208. MacGaffey approved of her method while expressing serious doubts about the specifics of her reconstruction of Kongo cosmology: see W. MacGaffey, 'Dialogues of the deaf: Europeans on the Atlantic coast of Africa', in S. B. Schwartz (ed.), *Implicit Understandings: Observing, Reporting, and Reflecting on the Encounters between Europeans and Other Peoples in the Early Modern Era* (Cambridge, 1994), 249–67, see his reservations on 255, n. 19.
 - 3 J. Thornton, 'Religious and ceremonial life in the Kongo and Mbundu areas, 1500–1700', in L. M. Heywood (ed.), *Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora* (Cambridge, 2002), 72–3.
 - 4 J. M. Janzen, 'Laman's Kongo ethnography: observations on sources, methodology, and theory', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 42:4 (1972), 316–328; J. Janzen and W. MacGaffey (eds. and trans.), *An Anthology of Kongo Religion: Primary Texts from Lower Zaire* (Lawrence, KS, 1974). MacGaffey has published bilingual Kikongo-English versions of the texts in *Art and Healing of the Bakongo, Commented by Themselves: Minkisi from the Laman Collection* (Bloomington, IN, 1991); and *Kongo Political Culture: The Conceptual Challenge of the Particular* (Bloomington, IN, 2000).
 - 5 J. H. Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441–1770* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2003), 104–15; J. R. Young, *Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Lowcountry South in the Era of Slavery* (Baton Rouge, LA, 2007), 47–59; R. M. Brown, *African-Atlantic Cultures and the South Carolina Lowcountry* (Cambridge, 2012), 90–138.
 - 6 R. F. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York, 1983); R. F. Thompson and R. Cornet, *The Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds* (Washington, D. C., 1981); C. C. Fennel, 'BaKongo identity and symbolic expression in the Americas', in A. Ogundiran and T. Falola (eds.), *Archaeology of Atlantic Africa and the African Diaspora* (Bloomington, IN, 2007), 199–232; C. C. Fennell, *Crossroads and Cosmologies: Diasporas and Ethnogenesis in the New World* (Gainesville, FL, 2007).

viewpoint.⁷ In earlier work, I sought to expand the idea of syncretism in Kongo by suggesting that political status was important. Because Kongo was not a European colony, I argued, the priests approaching the conversion adopted what I called ‘open’ syncretism, allowing a great deal of the original religion to remain and accepting the resulting mixture as appropriately Catholic. The ‘open’ model was opposed to a ‘closed’ one, characteristic of some colonial societies, which insisted on abandonment of former religious ideas.⁸

Work since that time has focused more sharply on precisely how the cosmology of Kongo and that of Christianity might have interacted; the work of anthropologists, particularly Wyatt MacGaffey, has figured greatly in focusing the picture.⁹ In general this work, including my earlier work, has focused largely on the degree to which the basic cosmology of Kongo dominated the syncretism, thus making it in some ways more Kongo and less Christian. Some, such as James Sweet, have expanded the question to argue that Kongo religion changed so little that it is probably best not to call them *just* Christians, but perhaps bireligious, emphasizing the maintenance of a core Kongo cosmology.¹⁰

Thus the question of syncretism has always implied that core values of religion are clearly defined and that there is a discernible orthodoxy; syncretism has generally been viewed as a failure to meet those standards of orthodoxy. Such a view has, however, not taken fully into consideration that religious beliefs change, and that change mechanisms within traditions make that possible: the core orthodoxy is itself changeable. Thus religious change or conversion is not simply a question of matching or suppressing core values, or finding ground between them in an intellectual way, but of harmonizing the changeable elements in both traditions. Thus, early Christianity absorbed Hellenistic elements (among others) through the vehicle of prophecy and divine revelation as much as through a process of matching or exchanging core values; so too did the development of Medieval Christianity in its engagement with the religions of north-western Europe.

The question, important in particular to those who study the Kongo Diaspora to the Americas, of whether or to what degree the Kongo were Christian is ultimately really a sectarian one over what constitute the core principles of Christianity. Throughout its history as a world religion, Christianity has incorporated outside beliefs, from its origins as a Jewish millenarian cult, to its wedding with Greek philosophy, Roman state demands, Germanic customs, and so on. The whole history of the church has involved syncretism of one or another sort, and fundamentalists in all eras have sought, through its original texts, to locate or relocate the original, un-syncretized religion. Often scholars are inclined, given this syncretism, to present Kongo as having been influenced by or as having had some contact with Christianity, while not crediting Christianity with being the religion of the

7 R. Gray, ‘*Como vero Principe Catolico*: the Capuchins and the rulers of Soyo in the late seventeenth century’, *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 53:3 (1983), 39–54.

8 J.K. Thornton, ‘The development of an African Catholic Church in the Kingdom of Kongo, 1491–1750’, *Journal of African History*, 25:2 (1984), 147–67. I have challenged the idea of forcible conversion and resistance in many American cases in *A Cultural History of the Atlantic World, 1250–1820* (Cambridge, 2012), 419–47.

9 MacGaffey’s wide-ranging work is based on solid fieldwork and a close reading of Kikongo texts from the Laman collection: see in particular W. MacGaffey, *Religion and Society in Central Africa: The BaKongo of Lower Zaire* (Chicago, 1986), 189–216.

10 Sweet directs his criticism particularly at my work: Sweet, *Recreating Africa*, 104–113.

country. Alternatively they have suggested that it was a religion of the political elite, but that did not reach the ordinary people, the ones most likely to be enslaved.¹¹

Here, I want to explore as exactly as possible how Christianity was received and disseminated in Kongo, and how it fit into the Kongo's own belief system, but also to stress how important a role the Kongo elite intellectuals played in developing its theology. My approach is not to assume that Kongo cosmology is a fixed entity that can be recovered from modern anthropological methods and applied to earlier epochs, especially as the bulk of the anthropology about Kongo comes from Kikongophone populations that live outside the primary boundaries of the Kingdom of Kongo.¹² Furthermore, as Dunja Herzak has pointed out, today different communities within the larger Kikongo-speaking world have different versions of how the cosmology is defined and works, and from an anthropological perspective, the southern Kingdom of Kongo is in fact understudied.¹³ While modern work can help us understand older texts, it is important to attempt to draw as much from the original texts as possible before reaching for the modern work as an interpretative supplement rather than as a foundation.

Most scholarship, including my own earlier contributions, assumes that Kongo Christianity was a missionary religion brought in, disseminated, and maintained by European missionaries, and the perceived ups and downs of the progress of religion were correlated with the presence of missionaries.¹⁴ In fact, a careful reading of the original sources shows that missionaries played a relatively small role in defining Christianity, and that from very early on in its history, Kongo Christianity was shaped by educated Kongo laypeople. Much scholarship tacitly assumes that the Portuguese and Italian missionaries who came to Kongo in the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries operated in the same context as the modern colonial missionary – what Georges Balandier famously called the ‘colonial situation’ – attempting to win over a non-Christian population through argument, through rewards such as medical and educational services, and through the coercive authority of the colonial state. In this scenario, the missionaries are the ones who bring the message, attempting to shape it to fit the existing cosmos, but constantly conscious that they are bringing a new religion and anxious that they replace the old one. Fixed ideas from the existing religion, however, constantly resist too great a change and the result is syncretism.

11 Brown, *African Atlantic Cultures*, 200–10; H.L. Bennett, *Africans in Colonial Mexico: Absolutism, Christianity, and Afro-Creole Consciousness, 1570–1640* (Bloomington, IN, 2003), 33–50 and *passim*; J.C. Bristol, *Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches: Afro-Mexican Ritual Practice in the Seventeenth Century* (Albuquerque, NM, 2007), 68–70 and *passim*. I challenged this position in J.K. Thornton, ‘Rural people, the church in Kongo and the Afroamerican diaspora (1491–1750)’, in K. Koschorke (ed.), *Transcontinental Links in the History of Non-Western Christianity* (Wiesbaden, 2002), 33–43.

12 C. E. Kriger, ‘The conundrum of culture in Atlantic history’, in J. C. Curto and R. Soulodre-La France (eds.), *Africa and the Americas: Interconnections during the Slave Trade* (Trenton, NJ, 2005), 265–6.

13 D. Hersak, ‘There are many Kongo worlds: particularities of magico-religious beliefs among the Vili and Yombe of Congo-Brazzaville’, *Africa*, 71:4 (2001), 614–40; Gabriele Bortolami, ‘I Bakongo: Società, tradizione e cambiamento in Angola’ (unpublished PhD thesis, Università degli studi di Sassari, 2012).

14 A. Hastings, *The Church in Africa, 1450–1950* (Oxford, 1994), 79–118. Many missionary historians have also adopted this viewpoint: see G. Saccardo, *Congo e Angola: con la storia dell'antica missione dei Cappuccini* (3 vols, Venezia, 1982–3), but also the many publications of Louis Jadin, François Bontinck, and Carlo Toso.

While in my earlier work, I approached syncretism from the missionary perspective, as bringing ‘open’ or ‘closed’ ideas about how much to include from target religions, here I want to adopt the perspective of those receiving it. Thus we can divide syncretism as being either ‘rejecting’ or ‘embracing’. In ‘rejecting syncretism’, the people of the Christianizing area adopt only the surface features of the missionaries’ religion in order to continue and perhaps to hide adherence to an original religion. In late colonial and post-colonial times, the African reaction to Christianity has often been the development of independent churches, which find middle ground between their version of Christianity and that of the missionaries. Such churches often meet with disapproval from the missionaries. In the colonial period, missionaries were on occasion able to have independent churches forcibly repressed by the colonial state, though postcolonial states have rarely done so unless the church becomes politically oppositional.

It is significant that Kongo was not a colony of Portugal, and Christianity was embraced virtually from the start of contact.¹⁵ Because its own elite took the lead in shaping the new religion, Kongo actually adopted ‘embracing syncretism’—a system of seeking out common ground with another religion in order to incorporate its features in an intelligible way into an existing religion. The working out of this process of embracing syncretism in Kongo took place in what Cécile Fromont has called the ‘space of correlation’.¹⁶

Missionaries played a role in the earliest phases of Kongo’s conversion, but a larger role, even then, was played by Kongo elites who studied the religion in Portugal and then brought it home. From the very beginning, language was a crucial element in the shaping of Kongo’s engagement with Christianity through its own educated elite. It was Kongo nobles taken to Portugal by Diogo Cão in 1483 who first introduced Christianity to Nzinga a Nkuwu, the king of Kongo at the time of contact. In Portugal, these young people were instructed in ‘the principal articles of the Holy Faith, and good customs and the language of [Portugal]’ and returned to Kongo in 1485. Then in 1488, after their discussions with the king, they along with Kongo of yet higher rank went again to Portugal as ambassadors to convey Nzinga a Nkuwu’s desire to become a Christian. Upon arriving in Portugal, the newer ambassadors were ‘immediately made Christians, and taught to speak Latin and write it in the form of Latin characters’, and they were instructed in the ‘Commandments of the Catholic Faith’, and other good customs and requisite activities expected of Christians. According to Rui de Pina, who recorded these events, King João II of Portugal thought that when they ‘returned to their country they would know one and the other language’ in order to aid the king in the expansion of the faith.¹⁷

15 The Portuguese chronicler Rui de Pina documented early contact, basing his account on the limited records of the first voyage of Diogo Cão in 1483 and a report of the baptism in 1491. The baptism account was made at an inquest conducted among six Portuguese participants upon their return, and is referenced in de Pina’s first version of the chronicle, written in 1492 but known only in an Italian translation. A Portuguese version with slightly different text was finished in 1515. Both are published in C. M. Radulet, *O Cronista Rui de Pina e a ‘Relação do Reino do Congo’: Manuscrito inédito do ‘Códice Riccardiano 1910’* (Lisbon, 1992 [orig. Italian pub. 1492]).

16 C. Fromont, ‘Under the sign of the cross in the kingdom of Kongo: religious conversion and visual correlation in early modern Central Africa’, *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 59/60 (2011), 111–13.

17 R. de Pina, in Radulet (ed.), *Cronista*, Italian version, fol. 86ra; 87va. The equivalent Portuguese text of 1515, chs LVII and LVIII, do not contain many of the details in the Italian. João de Barros, who may have seen this

Thus, ultimately the first teachers of Nzinga a Nkuwu were native speakers of Kikongo who had learned Latin and Portuguese, and were schooled in both religious traditions.

KONGO'S EDUCATIONAL ESTABLISHMENT

Those pioneer teachers, who spoke Kikongo as their first language but knew Portuguese and Latin, were able to 'change one language into the other' in order to translate one tradition for the other. Something of this process is revealed in the account of the baptism of the Mwene Soyo, ruler of the coastal province of Kongo. When the Mwene Soyo was baptized in April 1491, a large group of noble wives gathered to celebrate the baptism of their husbands and sang praises and promised to do service to the King of Portugal 'who they called *Zambem-apongo* which means *Lord of the World* among them'.¹⁸ Kikongo-speaking ambassadors and teachers, explaining the significant elements of this event to the Portuguese, appear to have provided this gloss for *Zambem-apongo*.

Their translation is problematic, however. It definitely could not mean anything like 'lord of the world' (which would probably be, in today's Kikongo, *mfumu a nza*).¹⁹ 'Zambem-apongo' undoubtedly represented *Nzambi a Mpungu*, which from at least 1548 referred to God as he is understood in Christianity, as the creator and ultimate spiritual authority. Yet, in their translation, it was being applied to a ruler in This World, and one that they themselves had met. Both Hilton and MacGaffey, using slightly different approaches, suggest that the term was applied to the Portuguese king because the Kongo believed Portugal was actually in the Other, spiritual, World.²⁰ In other, modern contexts, MacGaffey has argued that the idea that Europe (or Mputu) is a spiritual realm on earth can still be found today.²¹ He went on to regloss the terms on the basis of modern Kikongo to mean the 'greatest of all spirits'.²²

or other documents in writing his chronicle (published in 1552) makes teaching some Kongo to speak Portuguese as the primary motive for bringing the first Kongo to Portugal, *Decadas de Asia I* (Lisbon, 1552), bk III, ch. III.

- 18 R. de Pina, *Chronica*, ch. LIII, see text in Radulet, *Cronista*, 140 (this passage is not found in the 1492 Italian version of the text, italics in original). Elsewhere, I use italics to indicate words and terms in modern (post-1880) Kikongo, and older forms from documents are given with quotation marks.
- 19 On 'Lord of the World': *Mfumu* meaning lord is attested very early, in 1548 and applied to God called then 'Infumeto Zambicō pungo', Christovão Ribeiro letter, 1 Aug. 1548, published in A. Brásio (ed.), *Monumenta Missionaria Africana (MMA)*, Volume XV (15 vols., Lisbon, 1952–88), 168; also see fn. 21 below. *Nza* as the world is first attested in the catechism of 1624: see M. Jorge, and M. Cardoso (ed.), *Doutrina cristãa*, F. Bontinck and D. Ndembe Nsasi (trans. and eds.), (mod. edn, Lisbon, 1624), sec. II, par. 23. In this text, the catecheumens are asked 'who are your [spiritual] enemies' and the reply is "the world, the Devil, and the flesh", or 'Za, Cadimpemba, nitu' (the lack of 'n' is due to the fact that nasals are normally not pronounced in phrase initial position).
- 20 MacGaffey, 'Dialogues', 257–8; Hilton, *Kingdom of Kongo*, 50. On MacGaffey's regloss, see esp. 'Dialogues', 258.
- 21 W. MacGaffey, 'Kongo and the king of the Americans', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 6:2 (1968), 174–76.
- 22 MacGaffey, in a footnote to this passage ('Kongo,' 258, fn. 28), explains that W. G. L. Randles's (*L'ancien royaume*, 31) interpretation of the term as reflecting uncertainty about whether it referred to a living or dead person is wrong, as the Kongo 'do not, and presumably did not then, classify the dead as "dead"', meaning that they were considered as having a life after death. Be that as it may, the verb *fua* (to die) does

Whatever *Nzambi a Mpungu* may have meant in 1491, by the time the Jesuits arrived in Kongo in 1548, the term was well established in the eyes of the Kongo as referring to a creator deity. The transformation of this term, if there was one, must have taken place very early and under the direction of these early linguists, for one of these Jesuits, Christovão Ribeiro, wrote back to Portugal that ‘before we conduct any practices for them we ask them who created them, and they respond happily “*infumeto Zambicō pungo*”, which is to say the Lord God made me’. Indeed, he thought they used this term so confidently that ‘it appears they never knew any other god’ even if many made idols and fetishes it was only in ignorance and could easily be addressed by instruction.²³

However, simple linguistic interpretation was not the entirety of conversion; it also had a theological dimension that transcended a simple equation of supernatural entities. The king’s decision to be baptized had come from his discussions with the ambassadors who returned in 1488, and was very probably anchored in political calculations, but its theological dimension was validated almost immediately by what I have called a ‘co-revelation’, that confirmed what they had been told through a supernatural sign or miracle.²⁴ This co-revelation took the form of a simultaneous dream by two of his courtiers in which a beautiful woman told them of the goodness and wisdom of the king’s baptism, followed by the discovery of a remarkable cross shaped black stone in the river bed near the capital. The Kongo recognized this type of message as coming from the Other World, and the Portuguese priests were equally sure of it in Christian terms, for they declared the events ‘miracles and revelations’.²⁵

Assuming that some sort of acceptable miracle did take place, and that João’s ideas of a political nature were reinforced by it, one now has to consider what its implications would be. Based on the events of the miracle, one can surmise that João accepted the uniformity of the Christian God and *Nzambi a Mpungu*, as well as the existence of several new Other Worldly beings, Jesus (represented by the stone) and Mary (represented by the woman in the dreams). His son and successor, Afonso I (1509–42) would add another revelation. When he was facing down a rival for the throne following João’s death in 1509, Afonso’s outnumbered band, awaiting the final, and probably fatal charge, called on Saint James to aid them. Upon their cry, the Saint and other members of the Heavenly Host appeared to his opponents and so frightened them that they fled without driving their attack home, giving Afonso a complete victory.²⁶ This vision provided verification of the existence of yet another category of Christian Other Worldly beings, the saints.

indicate a translation from This World to the Other World, and thus a spiritual as opposed to a material existence.

23 Christovão Ribeiro letter, 1 Aug. 1548, MMA XV, 168. ‘*Infumeto Zambicō pungo*’ would be, in modern orthography, *e mfumu eto Nzambi nkwa Mpungu*; it probably meant ‘our very lord Nzambi full of greatness’ and does not include the ‘made me’ element mentioned by the priest. It suggests that there was some instability in the term at this point.

24 I first introduced this term in my book *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800* (2nd edn, Cambridge, 1998), 235–71. I have further developed it for a wide range of societies in the early modern Atlantic world, Thornton, *Cultural History*, 395–461.

25 R. de Pina, in Radulet (ed.), *Cronista*.

26 Afonso’s miracle was reported by himself in a letter originally written about 1509, but no copy is extant. He repeated some of the story in another letter, written 5 Oct. 1514, MMA I, 294–5; in this account it was a cross

Miracles and revelations are the stuff that religious change is made of, although their role in confirming religious ideas is problematic to many modern scholars. It has been tempting to imagine the story of revelations as simple manipulation, and to argue with Hilton that Nzinga a Nkuwu, who took the name of João upon his baptism, was simply pursuing a political agenda, to expand elite authority into the religious realm.²⁷ Political considerations aside, in the longer run, a theological reckoning would have to follow for Christianity to be sustained.

Simply accepting the existence of certain figures in the Other World was in many respects only the start of a conversion process; it was left to Kongo elites to decide what to make of the miracles theologically and institutionally. The work of determining how Kongo should understand these events fell largely to Afonso and his advisers, both Kongo and Portuguese.²⁸ Perhaps convinced by his own miracle, though certainly not without some political calculation as well, Afonso assembled a team of intellectuals, starting with the survivors of the original mission to Portugal (teenagers in 1484 would have only been in their late twenties at the start of his reign), and augmented by his son Henrique, who was sent to Europe to become a priest himself and eventually a bishop (as he did in 1518).²⁹ Afonso enlarged this group by sending a good many other Kongo to Portugal to study and return.³⁰ He was assisted after 1515 by Rui d'Aguiar, a high-ranking Portuguese priest and chaplain to King João III of Portugal, who took on the role of guiding Afonso himself and others of Afonso's court.³¹

THE ROLE OF THE CLERGY

It is crucial to understand that while European clergy came to Kongo from the late fifteenth century onward, the real institution of the church both theologically and organizationally fell in Kongo hands and remained there from at least the time of Afonso. Afonso moved rapidly to establish an institutional network firmly under royal control that would teach the people the Catholic faith. At the same time, he would work tirelessly to establish a theological basis for the church that could remain faithful to both traditions, an embracing syncretism that was made possible by the independence of the country and the willingness of the ordained European clergy to validate his decisions.

that appeared. Officials in the Portuguese court used the 1509 letter to compile their proposal for letters Afonso should write to his people, the lords of his kingdom, and the Pope, and probably preserved much of his language: published in *MMA I*, 256–72 and *MMA XV*, 24. The 1509 letter was probably also the basis for the account of his miracle in two other secondary sources, M. Fernandez de Enciso, *Suma de Geographia* (Sevilla, 1519), 109–10 (pencil numeration in un-paginated edition in Biblioteca Nacional de Lisboa, Reservados 717V) and J. de Barros, *Decadas da Asia* (Lisbon, 1552), *Decada I*, book 3, ch. 10 (also in *MMA I*, 141–7).

27 Hilton, *Kingdom of Kongo*, 62–5.

28 For my own early attempt to see this, see J. Thornton, 'Perspectives on African Christianity', in V. L. Hyatt and R. M. Nettleford (eds.), *Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas: A New World View* (Washington, D. C., 1995), 169–98.

29 For a biography of Henrique and his mission, see F. Bontinck, 'Ndoadidiki Ne-Kinu a Mubemba, premier évêque du Kongo (c. 1495–c. 1531)', *Revue Africaine de Théologie*, 3 (1979), 149–69.

30 Afonso to João III, 27 May 1517, *MMA I*, 406–7; Afonso to João III, 25 Aug. 1526, *MMA I*, 484.

31 Thornton, 'Perspectives'.

Thus Afonso integrated European clergy into a strategy to form a self-sustaining church that would reach throughout the country and leave him in charge. The priests of St. Eloi in Portugal had played a crucial role in the formation of the first Kongo to study in Portugal in the late fifteenth century, and in 1509, St. Eloi priests arrived in Kongo. Afonso used their arrival as an opportunity to preach a sermon to the people to lead them to convert and to establish his primacy in this task. In this sermon, which Afonso quoted in a letter in 1514, he took up the role of teacher himself, providing a sort of condensed catechism in the form of a Christian history, starting with Adam and Eve, original sin, the arrival of Jesus (with a special aside on the role of the Virgin Mary), his plan to save mankind, the role of the twelve apostles in spreading the faith, and finally linking the priests to the apostles and enjoining his people to learn from them.³² Afonso took a special interest in the behavior of the priests, overseeing their lives, berating their misdeeds, and maintaining strict control.

The clergy accepted this approach. Rui d'Aguiar, probably the priest with the highest status and most education of those who came to advise Afonso, was rapt about the king's knowledge and commitment. He described Afonso as 'not a man but an angel that the Lord sent here... in order to convert it' and went so far as to claim that the king, who neglected to eat while discussing religion, read Portuguese books on religion well into the night, being discovered sleeping on them in the morning. In d'Aguiar's eyes, the king 'knows the Prophets and gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ and all the lives of the saints and all the things of the holy mother Church better than we ourselves do'.³³ This letter, which was printed in Portugal for all to read in Damião de Góis's chronicle in 1566, makes it seem as if Afonso spoke with divine authority and this in the eyes of a highly educated European clergyman. If one rarely meets this sort of praise (and a *carte blanche* for considerable theological authority) by Europeans of people they met in the period of Overseas Expansion, it is probably because, lacking the sort of coercive mechanisms of a colonial situation, d'Aguiar was more than willing to have an 'open' vision of syncretism. This open vision was receptive to as much of the local religious beliefs as possible within a broadly defined Christianity. As such, he was perfectly willing to let Afonso be in charge and to confine his own role to discussion, provision of information and influence, rather than leadership.

In his leadership position from 1509 onward, Afonso started a large-scale education program, introducing literacy in Portuguese to the elite to produce his own teachers. He gathered 400 noble children, including some from his own family, into a school that he had built at the capital enclosed by a wooden barricade topped with thorns to keep students from escaping.³⁴ He also assigned the European clergy who arrived in 1509 to teaching literacy and presumably Portuguese to the children.³⁵ This policy soon yielded fruit; by 1514 Afonso had already sent 'schoolboys' (*moços descolla*) out into the distant

32 Afonso to Manuel I, 5 Oct. 1514, *MMA I*, 298.

33 R. d'Aguiar to Manuel I, 25 May 1516, in D. de Góis, *Chronica do Felicissimo Rei Dom Emanuel* (Lisbon, 1567) pt 4, ch. 3, published from the original manuscript (of 1545) and the printed version in *MMA I*, 361–2.

34 Afonso to Manuel I, 5 Oct. 1514, *MMA I*.

35 *Ibid.* 299–300.

provinces of Mbata and Mpangu ‘to teach them’.³⁶ According to d’Aguiar the royal school had a thousand students of both sexes (the queen taking charge of the girls) by 1516 and Afonso was beginning to transition from using European teachers to employing his own people, for he had ‘already spread around in his kingdoms, local Christian men (*homões naturaes da terra christãos*) who have schools and teach our holy faith to the people’.³⁷

But while Afonso took the theological lead in education, he also accepted the Catholic view of the sacraments, and he needed to have properly ordained priests to perform them. Until he could have his own priests ordained, the priests would necessarily have to come from Portugal. To meet the lack of ordained Kongo clergy, Afonso asked King Manuel in 1514 to send extra priests to Kongo to give sacraments to the people in Mbata and Mpangu.³⁸ The issue of clergy was problematic, for we can see in his correspondence that Afonso was not satisfied with the performance of many of the European clergy, and complained about their deportment and morality. If they had moral shortcomings, they also proved politically disloyal, siding with his enemies and threatening him with excommunication.³⁹

It was impractical to send his people to Portugal to be ordained rather than rely upon European clergy. To resolve his dilemma he sent his son Henrique to Portugal to study and he was ordained as a bishop in 1518. He returned shortly afterward to head the new church, not yet as a diocese, but as a sort of roving bishop.⁴⁰ Even after Henrique returned to Kongo, Afonso continued to request European clergy to perform the sacraments; in 1526, he asked João III to send him 50 priests, to ‘clean the leprosy and filth of idolatry’ from his country.⁴¹ That same year, he confirmed the arrival of priests in Kongo, which he said could ‘perform the sacraments, which our people are in much need of for their confirmation and salvation’.⁴² Thus, while Afonso frequently requested that priests come to his country, their role was generally to do sacramental duty, and much less to educate the people, at least once the Kongo educational system produced enough teachers.

Afonso’s plans to create his own clergy were thwarted in Portugal, however. Although Henrique returned to Kongo and probably did ordain priests before his death in 1531, João III asserted the right of patronage that Portugal had won from the Vatican in earlier periods, and claimed the right to control Kongo’s ecclesiastical establishment. In 1534, Kongo was placed under the See of São Tomé, a Portuguese colony in the Gulf of Guinea, and dependent upon that bishop. From that point onward, Kongo experienced both a shortage of ordained clergy, at least to conduct ordinary religious services, and an increasing hostility with the bishops of São Tomé and their vicars.

36 *Ibid.* 322.

37 R. d’Aguiar, 1516, *MMA I*, 362.

38 Afonso to Manuel I, 5 Oct. 1514, *MMA I*, 322.

39 *Ibid.* and 4 Mar. 1516, *MMA I*, 317, 319, and 357–8.

40 Bontinck, ‘Ndoadidike’, 149–69. Henrique was officially designated bishop of one of the sees in North Africa that the Vatican used to create bishops without fixed sees.

41 Afonso to João III, 18 Mar. 1526, *MMA I*, 460.

42 Afonso to Manuel I, 6 July 1526, *MMA I*, 469.

While he was unable to win the right to have enough ordained clergy to perform sacraments with appropriate regularity, Afonso continued his policy of having the basic evangelization and education of the populace conducted by his own people, educated in the country. In short, while normally priests would be both teachers and perform sacramental functions, in Kongo the role of education went to laypeople who would surely have been ordained, had Portugal not hindered it; the clergy proper was largely confined to sacramental roles. Afonso's energy on this score paid off. His successor, Diogo I (1545–61), reported by 1547: 'there are now many of our nation here', who, taught by the Portuguese priests, 'now teach to others of our nation, so that the Christian church . . . has grown greatly'.⁴³ Throughout his reign, in fact, Diogo sent 'chapel boys' (*moços de capela*) as missionaries to neighboring countries.⁴⁴ During an ecclesiastical inquest conducted in São Tomé in 1581, one of the witnesses testified that there was no need for priests to engage in religious instruction because of the '*mestres de escola* that the king sends to many places in his kingdom to teach Christian Doctrine to the residents and the great men, and these *mestres* are natives of the land, and that they give the faith such that the people who want to be baptized are instructed in the matters of faith as required'.⁴⁵

The erudition of these mostly noble schoolteacher-catechists was widely acknowledged by European priests. When the Carmelite missionaries arrived in Kongo in 1584 they met a certain Dom João, who they described as a 'Clerigo de Evangelio' when they came to the province of Mbamba. He was a 'relative of the kings of Kongo' and later, when they reached Nsundi province, they learned he was also a relative of the lord of that province. He knew Portuguese perfectly, having studied in Portugal as a youth. He served as an interpreter, translating their sermons into Kikongo, and he also translated confessions (as well as serving as general guide and translator). He had trained his 'people' to 'sing to the organ' meaning to sing antiphonally in European style. His church was supported by common labor on some nearby fields that produced harvests that were given to the church, as well as other gifts, which 'they call tithes'.⁴⁶

It is interesting that at some point the schoolmasters' positions as both educators and interpreters gave them an unusual role in the sacrament of confession. An early seventeenth-century summary of the kingdom's situation drawing from late sixteenth-century sources simply stated that 'they preach and confess by interpreter who is experienced in Portuguese and knows both languages well (*e sapevano bene l'una e l'altra lingua*)'.⁴⁷ This was precisely the role that Dom João played when the Carmelites visited

43 Diogo I to Pope Paul III, c. 1547, MMA XV, 146.

44 'Apontamentos de Sebastião de Sousa', c. 1561, MMA II, 477–9.

45 Arquivo Nacional de Torre do Tombo, Lisbon, Inquisição de Lisboa (hereafter ANTT, Inq Lx) Processo 2522, fol. 144.

46 Untitled account of Diego de Santissimo Sacramento, 1584, MMA IV, 362–3.

47 Biblioteca Vaticana, Vaticana Latina, Manuscrito (MS) 12156, fol. 108v. This untitled, rough, lacerated, and difficult to read manuscript (with many crossed-out sections and additions) was partially published in French translation by J. Cuvelier and L. Jadin (trans. and eds.), *L'ancien Congo d'après les archives romaines*, 1518–1640 (Bruxelles, 1954). This passage, on the book's page 119 is, I believe incorrectly translated into French, and I have read and translated from the original. According to Cuvelier and Jadin's analysis on p. 108–111, it was compiled by Msgr Confalonieri for Juan Bautista Vives, Kongo's protector in Rome around 1608, making use of both Spanish and Italian sources from the Carmelite mission (1584) and from Pigafetta's

him in 1584.⁴⁸ One feature of confession in Kongo was that it was not private; Diogo I was able to prosecute plotters on the basis of admissions in confession in 1550, and not long after Cornélio Gomes denounced the lack of privacy and confidentiality of confession.⁴⁹ Cécile Fromont has pointed out that when the Capuchins arrived in Kongo in 1645 they too noted that confession was not private, and was conducted with an interpreter. This was not simply to make up for missionary ignorance, but was also a way of insuring that proper conduct and decorum were observed, though it represented a serious strain on the usual conception of confession in European theology.⁵⁰

This lay establishment has often been lost in accounts of Kongo's church, for they left very few records of their own that have survived, and they are noted more or less only in passing in the accounts of European missionaries, such as Dom João in accounts written by the Carmelites. Nevertheless such passing references are sufficient to establish their importance to the functioning of the educational-religious system Afonso established. A few more hints about their lives and status, however, come from the personal papers of Kongo's ambassador to the Holy See, Antonio Manuel, left among his effects when he died in Rome in 1608. Among these papers are documents about his service from 1591–1600 when he was acting in the capacity of schoolmaster in Kongo. We learn that he received financial benefits from maintaining churches: while secretary of the Count of Soyo, he received a share of the duties on burials (one *lufuku* of *nzimbu* shells per service); while serving as secretary of the Mwene Mpemba and as schoolmaster in São Salvador, he was paid a monthly salary of five *lufuku* as well as a fee for each letter he wrote. Antonio Manuel was a nobleman, a 'fidalgo of the royal household', and it is likely that schoolmasters were frequently if not always of noble birth, as was Dom João before him.⁵¹ His correspondence as ambassador in Portugal and Spain attests to his level of education and his comfort in European churches. His personal devotion is attested not only by his papers, but by assessments of him by others.⁵² While he was perhaps ahead of many of his peers in this regard, and was chosen as ambassador for that reason, he may have been representative of what the Kongo educational system could and did deliver.

Thus, Afonso built an educational structure that could propagate Christianity throughout his domains, and it was they who determined the theology of Kongo's Christianity, not

1588–91 account. The text varies phrase by phrase from Spanish to Italian. This section, however, does not seem to draw on any other known source.

48 Santissimo Sacramento, *MMA IV*, 363.

49 The inquest transcript of the trial was published in *MMA II*, 248–62, and an English translation is found in J. K. Thornton and L. Heywood, 'The treason of Dom Pedro Nkanga a Mvemba against Dom Diogo, King of Kongo, 1550', in K. J. McKnight and L. J. Garofalo (eds.), *Afro-Latino Voices: Narratives from the Early Modern Ibero-Atlantic World, 1550–1812* (Indianapolis, IN, 2009), 2–29; C. Gomes to João III, 1551, *MMA XV*, 166.

50 C. Fromont, 'Collecting and translating knowledge across cultures: Capuchin missionary images of early modern Central Africa', in D. Bleichmar and P. C. Mancall (eds.), *Collecting Across Cultures: Material Exchanges in the Early Modern Atlantic World* (Philadelphia, 2011), 147–50.

51 Arquivo Segreto Vaticano (ASV) Arm II, vol. 91, fol. 137, Alvara appointing Antonio Manuel mestre of Mpemba, 16 Dec. 1600; fol. 230, Provision of Gonçalo da Silva Mendonça, Procurador of Congo, 19 Oct. 1593 (specifying rights in burials), fol. 202, Provisão of Alvaro II to A. Manuel, 19 June 1599 (specifying salary in money for Antonio Manuel serving as mestre in São Salvador and secretary in Mpemba).

52 ASV Arm II, vol. 91, fol. 241, Certificate 10 Oct. 1607.

the missionaries (who were few and devoted to performing sacraments rather than providing education). Kongo's power and independence, coupled with the willingness of the first generation of visiting European priests and missionaries, guaranteed that the resultant theological change was framed and anchored in Fromont's 'space of correlation'.⁵³

WITCHCRAFT AND IDOLS

The process of defining a Kongo Christianity was partially based on study of its texts, and partly on the initial attempts at translating Christian concepts into Kikongo, either through linguistic equation as was the case with Nzambi a Mpungu, or through miracles as with the appearance of Jesus, Mary, and the Saints. Afonso also linked the church to the veneration of ancestors, which was certainly established in Kongo from ancient times, though it is not explicitly mentioned in the correspondence of the sixteenth century. In 1526, Afonso ordered a forest that surrounded the royal graveyard cut down, and a church built there. We also know that he himself was buried in a church, so the connection was established.⁵⁴ Jesuits noted this in 1548, for they were told that the church was called 'ambiro' certainly the word *mbila*, meaning 'grave'.⁵⁵

While the marriage of Christianity and Kongo religion might be smooth at times, from the start it also involved attacking at least some practices apparently important in the old religion. In particular, right from the fifteenth century, Kongo Christians attacked what were called 'idols' and 'fetishes' and the 'temples' in which they were found. The baptism of the Mwene Soyo in April 1491 was accompanied by the collection and burning of idols. Given this early decision to destroy idols, the activity must have been accepted even by the Kongo ambassadors and first interpreters as integral to Christianity. In 1514, soon after he came to the throne, Afonso asked João III to send him firearms and cannon, for he wished to burn 'a great house of idols' and he feared 'a war would be waged against us to kill us' when he burned it.⁵⁶ While Afonso represented his early actions of burning idols as a war between Christians and infidels, it was also surely a continuation of the initial struggle for power between his faction and that of his half-brother, whose supporters undoubtedly lay behind the resistance, which Afonso only turned around by rallying key supporters.⁵⁷

But the attack on idols and fetishes was not an attack on Kongo religion; it was an attack on witchcraft using a blending of witchcraft theology found in both religions as a 'space of correlation'. MacGaffey has argued, using concepts found in modern Kongo, that Kongo religions are inclined to having witchcraft eradication movements, in which iconoclasm is an important element. He identified the burning of idols in the initial baptism episodes

53 Fromont, 'Under the sign', *Res*, 111–13.

54 Afonso I to João III, 25 Aug. 1526, *MMA I*, 479–80.

55 C. Ribeiro letter, 1 Aug. 1548, *MMA XV*, 163.

56 Afonso I to Manuel I, 5 Oct. 1514, *MMA I*, 296; D. de Góis, *Chronica*, pt. 4, ch. *MMA I*, 485.

57 Afonso to Manuel I, 5 Oct. 1514, *MMA I*, 297. The politics of Afonso's early reign are complex, but the role of religion is complicated by Afonso's insistence on presenting his struggle for power, both in 1509 and from 1511–14 as a battle between Christians and infidels. Afonso's letters are virtually our only sources for these events.

as being the first such documented episode.⁵⁸ The term *fetiço*, which Afonso uses in his correspondence, typically coupled with *idolos*, derived directly from Portuguese witchcraft terminology.⁵⁹ In Europe, witches were people who made a pact with the Devil in order to increase their own wealth and power or to harm others.⁶⁰ In Kongo, witchcraft probably did not involve the concepts of European theology but was anchored on the idea that a person could harness supernatural forces for selfish or harmful ends.⁶¹ The ideas of witchcraft in fifteenth-century Kongo are probably expressed best in the description of Afonso's rise to power, presented by the Portuguese chronicler João de Barros, but very probably based on a letter Afonso sent to Portugal in 1509. While Afonso's father was still ruling, Afonso's rival and pagan brother Panzo Aquitama (Mpanzu a Kitama) accused the prince of using 'arts' to travel secretly by night from his province of Nsundi to visit his wives, returning the 80 leagues by daybreak. This remarkable feat was coupled with drying up rivers, ruining crops, etc. in order to impoverish the kingdom and cause the nobles to rise against the king. To determine the truth of these rumors, his father made a *fetiço*, certainly an object of witchcraft, and sent it wrapped in cloth in Afonso's name to one of the king's wives named Cufua Coanfulo, telling her to use it to prevent the king from killing her and the other wives.⁶² But the wife, not knowing of such a plot, reported it immediately to the king, proving Afonso's innocence.⁶³ If witches in Kongo were regarded powerful enough to do these sorts of things, it would be enough for Afonso to argue that he was suppressing the misuse of supernatural power of witches (as his rivals accused him of doing) in attacking idols, and thus he conducted these holocausts without changing the cosmological base of the religion.

Afonso's link between the idols and witchcraft is further revealed by a remarkable study of Kongo Christian visual iconography by Cécile Fromont. Taking Afonso's description of a coat of arms he designed for Kongo in his earliest correspondence, in which he speaks of broken idols to be shown below the main shield, Fromont then points to illustrations of the arms found in Rui Godinho's Portuguese book of noble coats of arms composed between 1529 and 1548. The broken idols illustrated there are figures that are clearly of the same type and design as nineteenth-century *nkondi* figures whose raised arm gestures reveal

58 MacGaffey, *Religion and Society*, 192–3.

59 For a study of the application of this terminology in Africa, see W. Pietz, 'The problem of the fetish, I', *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 9 (1985), 5–17; W. Pietz, 'The problem of the fetish, II: the origin of the fetish', *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 13 (1987), 23–45; and W. Pietz, 'The problem of the fetish, IIIa: Bosman's Guinea and the enlightenment theory of fetishism', *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 16 (1988), 105–24.

60 For a specifically Portuguese approach, see J. P. Paiva, *Bruxaria e superstição: num país sem 'Caça às bruxas'*, 1600–1774 (Lisboa, 1997).

61 Witchcraft is described in a number of modern anthropological accounts: for example, MacGaffey, *Religion and Society*. I attempted to get at the concept from older sources in *The Kongolesse Saint Anthony: Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Antonian Movement, 1684–1706* (Cambridge, 1998) and 'Cannibals, witches, and slave traders in the Atlantic world', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 60:2 (2003), 273–94.

62 This strange name, transcribed in modern orthography as *Kufwa kwa Mfulu*, means 'death of the place', or more idiomatically perhaps 'the destruction of a place'. The dictionary of 1648 calls a shipwreck *Kufwa kwa nlungu* (death of a ship). My thanks to Panzo Abililo for a discussion of the term and its meanings.

63 Barros, *Decadas*, Decade I, Book III, ch. X. Afonso refers to a letter he wrote and sent when Gonçalo Rodrigues came in 1509, though through mischance the letter was only delivered much later: see Afonso's letter to Manuel I, 5 Oct. 1514, *MMA I*, 295 (first letter) and 297 (second version of the letter).

them to be aggressive.⁶⁴ In recent times, such figures need not serve harmful purposes (their violence is held to be against witches), but as aggressive figures, they might be harnessed as a means of witchcraft and would thus be front line targets for a witchcraft eradication movement.

The idea of Christianity as a fundamentally anti-witchcraft component of Kongo religion may also lay behind the use of the term *dia mungwa* (to eat salt) as the translation for baptism. The term derived from the practice of putting salt on a baby's tongue during the sacrament, as well as the water and oil. While it is not reported in early sixteenth-century documentation, it is referenced as early as 1548, when the Jesuit Cristovão Ribeiro complained that clergy in Kongo were inclined to give baptism to all who sought it, regardless of instruction, and that they called baptism 'eating salt'.⁶⁵ The term was first recorded in Kikongo, as 'curia mungua' in 1584 by Carmelite missionaries, and it was widely used in later times.⁶⁶ MacGaffey notes that in modern times, salt is a protection against witchcraft, and thus the earliest Christians in Kongo may have seen Christianity as an anti-witchcraft movement within their existing cosmology.⁶⁷

LANGUAGE AND THEOLOGY

Language is a powerful tool to analyze any ideology or religion, since it is the way cosmological concepts are most fully expressed. We can learn a bit more about the correlations that Afonso's group created by considering the work of Jesuits in Kongo, and especially the way that Afonso and his bilingual teachers had used language as a way of creating unities between the two religious traditions. The Jesuits were the elite of European intellectuals, created out of the Counter-Reformation with the goal of facing the theological challenges raised by the Protestant Reformation and bringing the new concepts of Christianity to the rest of the world as missionaries. Kongo was one of the first countries outside of Europe to receive Jesuits, even before Brazil. Diogo I (1545–61) invited them to come through his ambassador, Diogo Gomes, in 1546.

Gomes, a bilingual speaker of Kikongo and Portuguese and a product of Afonso's educational system, was born in Kongo in approximately 1520.⁶⁸ Elevated to the priesthood around 1545, he was serving as Diogo's chaplain when the king dispatched him to Europe in 1546. He was undoubtedly fully cognizant of the language of Kongo Christianity current at the end of Afonso's reign and was surely the source of the linguistic material offered in the first Jesuit reports on Kongo in 1548. When the Jesuits arrived in Kongo they were

64 C. Fromont, 'Dance, image, myth, and conversion in the kingdom of Kongo, 1500–1800', *African Arts* 44:4 (2011), 60–1; and C. Fromont, 'Under the sign of the cross in the kingdom of Kongo: shaping images and molding faith in early modern Central Africa' (unpublished PhD thesis, Harvard University, 2008), 90–1.

65 Ribeiro letter, 1 Aug. 1548, *MMA XV*, 151.

66 'Relatione', *MMA IV*, 402. 'Curia mungua' preserves the archaic infinitive marker *ku* – which was lost in the eighteenth century.

67 This is based on personal conversations between the author and MacGaffey in the late 1990s.

68 Bontinck, in his introduction to Bontinck and Nsasi (eds.), *Doutrina christãa*, 17, says he was born of Portuguese parents, which seems unlikely to me; I have seen no direct reference to his race or parentage in the original documents. It does seem likely that he was a *mestiço* born of a Portuguese father and Kongo mother.

already aware that their task was not to convert non-Christians, but to improve the beliefs of an existing Christian community, in accordance with the new Christian cosmology and theology developed in the Counter-Reformation. These theological interests made them as attentive to the use of language in Kongo as they were in regions where they were converting non-Christians. One of their first tasks was to create a catechism, a new tool for teaching all Christians the Counter-Reformation conception of Christianity. But their starting point was certainly the religious terminology already developed over the previous half century by Afonso, his European advisors and the schoolmasters, led in this case by Diogo Gomes.

Gomes accompanied the Jesuits back to Kongo, and then quickly returned to Lisbon, where he entered the Jesuit order himself as Cornélio Gomes. He composed the required catechism, almost surely using the basic vocabulary developed by Afonso's team, which was published at the request of King Diogo in Lisbon by a Recollet priest named Gaspar da Conceição in 1556. Unfortunately none of the 300 copies printed have survived until today.⁶⁹

If the Jesuits intervened to change the language of Kongo as revealed by Gomes, their efforts bore little fruit. The priests quarreled with Diogo over a number of issues, including the status of polygamy, the relationship between the Jesuits and the existing church structure, and the role of Portugal in Kongo. These disputes grew acrimonious and Diogo ultimately expelled them in 1555 (earning, thanks to the Jesuit denunciations, a reputation as an anti-Christian), a year before the catechism was published. The loss of the original catechism makes it impossible for us to see precisely how Christian terminology had been rendered into Kikongo in Afonso's period.

The Jesuits did not return to Central Africa until 1560 when their work was entirely confined to the emerging Portuguese colony of Angola. A brief visit to Kongo in 1587 was little more than a reconnaissance, and it was not until 1619 that a formal mission was established.⁷⁰ Mateus Cardoso, one of the original missionaries, then set himself to creating a new catechism, which appeared in print in 1624. In his introduction, Cardoso made no mention of the earlier catechism, and was probably unaware of its existence. But if that text was already lost, the Afonsine language conversion was certainly still in operation, since Cardoso refers to traditional usage in his own introduction, and we can say with some confidence that the older linguistic equivalencies, developed by Afonso's team, were very much in force.

Cardoso's forward to the catechism explained his motivations for creating it when he noticed, while first visiting Kongo in 1619, that the Kongo said many of their prayers in Latin, which they did not understand and thus garbled. Echoing a common theme in Counter-Reformation literature, he decided to produce a catechism to explain these things. However, sensing, he said, 'that I lacked sufficient competence for the enterprise' he sought the aid of the 'best educated masters of the court'. Thanks to them, the final product was 'so perfect a work' that its renown spread, and eventually 'reached the ears

69 Bontinck, introduction, Bontinck and Nsasi (eds.), *Doutrina christãa*, 17–23. Copies were still extant in the late eighteenth century in Spain.

70 For details of the Jesuit mission to Angola, see Saccardo, *Congo e Angola*, Volume I, passim.

of King Álvaro [III], who was reigning then' (Álvaro died in 1622) and 'he read it and never ceased to praise it'.⁷¹

This catechism, like the earlier one of Gomes, was therefore primarily the work of bilingual, locally educated schoolmasters whose training and linguistic skills were as good as those of someone like Antonio Manuel, who was educated in the same tradition a quarter century earlier. Elsewhere in his writing, Cardoso names one possible candidate for a well-educated schoolmaster, Felix do Espirito Sancto, 'who served as master and interpreter in my company' when Cardoso was curate in Nsundi, and who gave him information on the Kikongo etymology of the term 'Cariampemba' (*Nkadi a Mpemba*), routinely glossed in those days as the Devil.⁷²

Cardoso was well aware of the long-standing translation traditions in Kongo, and wrote in his forward about his dissatisfaction with some terms that had become traditional by his day. For example, he wrote that 'the inhabitants of Congo normally call the Holy Spirit *Monho Auquissi*' but he felt that 'one should not use these terms', as they 'do not explain the property of things well'. This was because, he stated, '*Monho Auquissi* means: Holy soul and might designate the soul of any of the blessed people' (*qualquer da dos bemaventurados*) and therefore was not 'an appropriate term for the third Person of the Most Holy Trinity'. His reasoning on this was probably that for Christians in Europe, the Holy Spirit was a manifestation of God and thus only spiritual and never human, unlike a 'blessed person' or saint. The idea that the whole Heavenly hierarchy was once human, certainly a plausible idea if one takes more recent Kongo cosmology into consideration, was also revealed in a section Cardoso did not denounce directly, this being that the Trinity was called *antu a tatu* (the three people) in the expression 'antuatâtu mu Zambiapungu imoci yaquieleca' ('three people within a single true Nzambi a Mpungu') suggesting they, too, had once had an earthly existence.⁷³

Cardoso was also unhappy with the use of 'Iquetequêlo, which' he explained, 'means fork (*forca*), and one can easily see that this term does not mean cross'.⁷⁴ His solution in these cases 'and others, as well which I leave aside for brevity's sake', was to replace them with Portuguese words, 'Espirito Santo' and 'Cruz' rather than to seek other Kikongo equivalents.⁷⁵ These terms certainly had become established in Kongo already, which meant that displacing them would be difficult, as was revealed in the dictionary compiled for the Capuchins by Manuel Robrerdo in 1648. Robrerdo, a mixed-race Kongo, was trained through the Kongo school system and then by Jesuits, and was

71 M. Cardoso (ed.), *Doutrina cristã*, Prologo de Leitor, unpaginated.

72 *História do Reino de Congo* (mod. edn, António Brásio, Lisbon, 1969), ch. 3, fol. 4v. The work has no author but is attributed to M. Cardoso.

73 MacGaffey, *Religion and Society*. MacGaffey's emphasis on the human origin of all spirits in contemporary societies is contested by Hersak in relation to some parts of the Kikongo-speaking world: see Hersak, 'Kongo worlds'. On the description of the trinity, see Bontinck and Nsasi (eds.), *Doutrina cristã*, sec. VII, par. 6, literally 'three people within Nzambi a Mupungu one the true'. The locative *mu* indicates a position of being within something else. Note, however, that the Portuguese term 'pessoas' in the original text can probably only be translated as *antu* in Kikongo, so the question of their original humanness is not so obvious.

74 Cardoso (ed.), *Doutrina cristã*, Prologo de Leitor.

75 However, they appear to have missed its usage in one place, Bontinck and Nsasi (eds.), *Doutrina Cristã*, sec. XXX, par. 4.

regarded by the Capuchins (who he eventually joined) as a careful linguist. For all that, he appears to have ignored Cardoso's admonition in the forward of the catechism, for he unhesitatingly rendered the word for cross as 'equetequelo'.⁷⁶

Cardoso's catechism reveals for the first time the language that Afonso and his supporters had created for harmonizing Christianity with the existing Kongo religious tradition. The catechism has been controversial ever since it was subject to a hostile review by Baptist missionaries who came to Kongo in 1879. W. Holman Bentley, the principle linguist of the group, charged with organizing both a dictionary and grammar of the language as well as the translation of the Bible, was interested in how the religion had been received in the days before his mission took place. He obtained a copy of the catechism, hand copied from the exemplar in Lisbon, and examining it both from a linguistic and theological point of view, wrote his evaluation.⁷⁷

Bentley's criticism of the catechism has been taken up by modern scholars, most notably by MacGaffey, who has largely accepted his evaluation, noting that it 'testifies to the misunderstandings of the missionaries of the basic concepts of Kongo religion' and from there it has passed into a great deal of the scholarly literature on Kongo and its church.⁷⁸ But Bentley misunderstood a great deal about the catechism and its production. For one, he assumed that it was the product of Portuguese missionaries whose efforts he condescendingly assessed as 'credible for those far off times, when viewed with a kindly eye, before we knew the value of greater accuracy'.

Thus he blamed what he saw as the catechism's linguistic problems on the imperfection of Cardoso's background: for example he believed, wrongly, that the use of *ku-* as a marker of infinitives (as infinitives are not marked this way now) was not simply a change in the language but the product of the missionaries' carelessness, who he imagined landed in Soyo on the coast and then worked their way inland, picking up the coastal dialects of Soyo and Mbamba and mixing them with that of the capital region.⁷⁹ He also assumed that the missionaries had only an imperfect command of the language as a barrier to determining how much coastal dialect was intermixed, and added 'it is certainly White-man's Kikongo' probably because of its sometimes grammatically correct but idiomatically inelegant language.⁸⁰

76 This dictionary, probably compiled by the Kongolese priest Manuel Ribeiro around 1648, is known only from a copy owned by the Capuchin Joris van Gheel (who was killed in Kongo in 1652), found in the Biblioteca Vittorio Emmanuele, Rome (BVE) Fondo Minore (FM)1896 MS Varia 274, 'Vocabularium congoense, latinum et hispanicum', fol. 26v. A modern edition and translation of this dictionary rearranged the terms from Latin-Spanish-Kikongo to French and Dutch-Kikongo and rendered Kikongo in a more modern orthography; J. Van Wing and C. Penders (trans. and eds.), *Le plus ancien dictionnaire bantu* (Louvain, Belgique, 1928).

77 W. H. Bentley, *Appendix to the Dictionary and Grammar of the Kongo Language: As Spoken at San Salvador, the Ancient Capital of the Old Kongo Empire, West Africa* (London, 1895), forward, vi.

78 MacGaffey, *Religion and Society*, 200.

79 Bentley, *Appendix*, forward, vi. A grammar of the Soyo dialect, Kisolongo, was published in 1915, and a quick perusal of it shows that the *ku-* infinitive marker was lost by then and surely had not disappeared in the twenty years of so before Bentley arrived: see J. L. Tavares, *Gramática da língua do Congo (dialecto Kisolongo)* (Luanda, 1915), esp. 123–40 for numerous sentence examples of compound verbs.

80 Bentley, *Appendix*, forward, vii.

In thus belittling the efforts of Cardoso and his colleagues, Bentley failed to take into consideration that the translators of the text were bilingual speakers of Kikongo and Portuguese – if anything Portuguese was their second language. The grammatical issues were due to systematic changes in Kikongo languages and not at all to the improbable mixture of dialects. As for the idiom, Cardoso's forward states that in the text, an interlinear production, the Portuguese words were placed above their Kikongo equivalents 'so that the Portuguese can learn the Muciconga language and the Mucicongos, the Portuguese'. He went on to note that 'the Portuguese words were made to respond to those of the language of Congo', so that at times the Portuguese word order was rearranged so as to keep its proper place.⁸¹ What this meant was that Kikongo formal grammar prevailed over Portuguese grammar concerning word order such as placement of number markers and adjectives, creating a stilted Portuguese text. Portuguese idiom probably prevailed at the level of sentence construction (especially since it was a translation and not an original Kikongo text), creating the strange idiom that Bentley disparaged as 'White Man's Kikongo'. In using this term, Bentley probably meant that phrase order and choice of emphasis was dictated as much or more by the idiom of Portuguese than Kikongo. The work is therefore less useful for understanding Kikongo idiom and style than for understanding vocabulary.

The choice of spiritual vocabulary was necessarily a profound statement of how Christianity had been naturalized in Kongo. For Bentley, as for modern scholars, probably the most striking vocabulary choice in the catechism is the rendering of *santo* (holy) into various forms of the root *-kis-* (most widely known in modern anthropological literature as *nkisi*).⁸² A church in the catechism is called 'nzo a muquissi' ('holy house'), Holy Oil is 'Mazi ma uquissi' and the Bible 'mucanda auquissi' ('holy book').⁸³ Bentley denounced this equivalence, for to him '*nkixi*' meant 'a charm, an enchantment, a fetish, medicine', in other words, a physical object into which some sort of spiritual entity had come to reside.⁸⁴ Bentley thought the use derivatives of *-kis-* an 'unfortunate choice', and ridiculed these associations.⁸⁵ Were the authors of Kongo-Christian translations not equating the same 'idols' that Kongo Christians had been burning since the very start with Christian objects and people?

The Dutch geographer Olifert Dapper, writing on the basis of the reports of West India Company merchants in Loango composed probably in the 1630s and 1640s (very close to

81 Cardoso (ed.), *Doutrina cristãa*, Prologo de Leitor.

82 A root form, **-kis-*, is both ancient and widespread in many Bantu languages. J. Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (Madison, WI, 1990), 146 and 297; modified in J. Vansina, *How Societies Are Born: Governance in West Central Africa Before 1600* (Charlottesville, VA, 2004), 51–2.

83 Bontinck and Nsasi (eds.), *Doutrina Cristãa*, sec. XIV, par. 3; sec. XXI, par. 1 (church); and sec. XI, par. 4 (holy oils). The last two forms indicate that it is widely used in an abstract form, indicated by the class marker *u-*.

84 'Nkixi' is so defined in straightforward terms in W. H. Bentley's *Dictionary and Grammar of the Kongo Language, as Spoken at San Salvador, the Ancient Capital of the Old Kongo Empire, West Africa* (London, 1887), 383. In its adjectival form '-ankixi', it meant 'a fetish'. Bentley's spelling, where 'x' = the 'sh' sound in English, reproduces the sound in the Kisansala dialect of Kikongo, which is spoken in Mbanza Kongo.

85 W. H. Bentley, *Pioneering on the Congo* (2 vols., London, 1900), 167–8.

the time as the catechism was written), appears to confirm this equation of *-kis-* with 'holy'. According to his detailed description of Loango's religion the word *nkisi* was clearly associated with what missionaries routinely called 'idols'. Because of its detail and use of Kikongo terminology, modern scholars have relied heavily on his description to construct an account of the unconverted, Kikongo-speaking people's religious beliefs and thus to establish a proxy for Kongo's pre-contact religion. Dapper glosses the word 'moquissi' as '*afgoden*' ('idols') and then tells of people killed by 'moquissi of toverye' ('moquissi or witchcraft'). He goes on to describe shrines and objects, some large and some portable, composed in the way that modern charms or power objects are, each named as a 'moquissi', such as 'Moquissi Thiriko' and '*Moquisi Asia Votta*', 'Moquisi Bomba', and so on.⁸⁶

There is no question that words derived from the root *-kis-* (which appear in bold in what follows) appear in the most theologically important parts of the catechism, including Jesus's death and resurrection. We hear, for example that when he died, Jesus's soul was 'never separated from his divinity', which was rendered in the catechism as '*cucatûca munauquisîco*' (*kukatuka muna ukisi ko*).⁸⁷ Here we see that Afonso's team had equated *-kis-* with divinity, in this case by putting it in a noun class (marked by an initial *u-*) typical of abstractions of or general principles derived from the root (in English often the equivalent of suffixing '-ness'). Cardoso had complained that the Kongo called the Holy Spirit 'Omonho **auquissi**', but the catechism ended up retaining the same essential theology; in the same passage it relates that Jesus's 'holy soul separated from his body', or '*Assuetuîtidi omonho andi **auquissi** munâ nitu zandi*', thus rendering Jesus's holy soul and the soul of the Holy Spirit on the same plane as divinity.⁸⁸

Yet it is not sufficient to use these examples to dismiss the Jesuits for linguistic incompetence or to claim that the Kongo had fooled the Europeans into putting their own ideas into Jesuit texts. The Jesuits were the intellectual elite of Europe; in China, their members were creditably arguing crucial points of Confucian philosophy at the same time in Chinese. They were highly conscious of language and its meanings in their missions throughout the world.

Jesuits regularly encountered objects similar to those Dapper's informants would call 'moquissi'. When the Inquisition visited Kongo under Jesuit sponsorship in 1628, a number of Kongo nobles denounced a person named Domingos in the town of Luvu for curing a Christian Mbundu by employing a complex object that included cords attached to an 'idol' in human form wrapped in cloth containers anointed with herbs. Pedro Fernandes Afonso, one of the denunciatees, said he did not know if Domingos thought the human

86 O. Dapper, *Naukeurige Beschrijvinge der Afrikaensche gewesten...* (Amsterdam, 1668), 526 (definition as idols), 531, (*moquissi* or witchcraft), and 549–53 (list of *moquissi*).

87 It consistently says that Jesus 'was killed' *abondua*, using the passive of the verb 'bonda' (in modern Kikongo the initial 'b' has become a 'v'), see Bontinck and Nsasi (eds.), *Doutrina christãa*, sec. VI, par. 1. The seventeenth-century orthography buries the key word 'uquisi' between the locative 'muna' and the final negative particle 'co', but accurately reflects the tone bridging and elision typical of Kikongo pronunciation. Bontinck and Nsasi (eds.), *Doutrina christãa*, sec. VII, par. 13.

88 Bontinck and Nsasi (eds.), *Doutrina christãa*, sec. VII, par. 13. Literally, 'it separated, his holy soul, out of his body'.

figure was God (that is, the classic definition of idolatry, thinking an object was a god), but he himself knew very well it was not.⁸⁹ D. Henriques, a Kongo noble, denounced a certain Pedro, who he knew to be a devotee of fetishism (*feitiçario*) for keeping a ‘stick of wood anointed with herbs in a bag’ with him. João Alvares Ferreria testified to cures performed by a different Domingos employing herbs and an idol, which Ferreira also testified he knew was not God. All these descriptions of objects of witchcraft (fetishism) would fit quite well with Dapper’s representations of the ‘moquissen’ or with those in Laman’s notebooks commissioned from his catechists.⁹⁰ Although the Kikongo term for these objects was not used by the Inquisition denunciates, the objects and their purposes were regularly described as idols and fetishes in the texts.

The Jesuits, perhaps because they were generally unenthusiastic about locating and burning idols, dismissed the import of the purported idolatry revealed by the Inquisition in this case. Father Miguel Afonso, writing a covering report for the Inquisition’s visit, thought that the idolatry in question was innocent, rooted in ignorance, and could be easily dealt with through more education.⁹¹ However the Capuchins, who followed them after 1645, took considerable pains to identify and describe objects of idolatry or witchcraft and practices they considered unacceptable in a Christian country, and then devoted a great deal of time to their extirpation. Surprisingly, in these lists, first compiled in 1649, none of the idols’ names included any form of *-kis-*, but instead more or less consistently included derivatives of *-teke-*, meaning a carved object or statue.⁹² The Latin–Kikongo dictionary, compiled for the Capuchins in 1648 by Robrerdo, defines ‘*idolum*’ as ‘*quiteque*’, and ‘*idolatria*’ as ‘*unçamba iteque*’ (the concept of praying to idols).⁹³ When Afonso wrote about idols, burned them, and put them on his coat of arms, he was surely thinking of them in Kikongo as *iteke*.

MacGaffey points out that in composing an *nkisi* in recent times, the actual carving is called *kiteke* until such time as it is charged by a spiritual entity that enters and possesses it, in a process he calls the ‘personhood of objects’.⁹⁴ The *kiteke* ceases to be a wooden statue and becomes the entity that possessed it, taking its name, so that the spiritual entity is the *nkisi* and the object, just a material item until it is possessed. This is undoubtedly the

89 ANTT Inq Lx, Tribunal do Santo Ofício, Caixa 9, documento 8, ‘Denunciações do Reino de Congo e Angola’ 1620–31, (no foliation); 6 Jan. 1627, denunciation by Dom Pedro Moxicongo; 6 Feb. 1628, testimony of Pedro Fernandes Afonso; 8 May 1628, testimony of Pedro Moxicongo (perhaps a different one); 20 Feb. 1628, testimony of Henrique Pedro. Most of the denunciates were identified as Moxicongo, but Pedro Fernandes Afonso is only identified as a native of São Salvador, Kongo’s capital, and could be Portuguese or mestiço.

90 Elements could be found in the dozens of various bags and statues illustrated in MacGaffey, *Art and Healing*.

91 ANTT Inq Lx, Tribunal do Santo Ofício, Caixa, 9 documento 8, ‘Lembramento de P^o Miguel A^o acerca das compitas dos Moxicongos’, unnumbered folio of c. 1628.

92 An early version: Buenaventura de Alessano, Aug. 1649, MMA X, 395–400; more detail and Kikongo terms are found in Serafino da Cortona, ‘Breve Relatione dei riti gentilichi e ceremonie diaboliche e superstitioni del infelice Regno de Congo’, (orig. written 1653) in C. Piazza (ed.), *La Prefettura apostolica del Congo alla metà del XVII secolo: la relazione inedita di Girolamo da Montesarchio* (Milan, 1976), 318–30 (allegato 8). This text translates and augments a somewhat earlier Spanish text of Buenaventura de Cerolla, ‘Relación de los ritos, ceremonias diabólicas y supersticiones destos infelicísimos Reynos de Congo’, published by V. Salvadorini, *Annali della Facoltà dell’ Università degli Studi di Pisa*, 3 (1973), 421–48.

93 BVE FM 1896, MS Varia 274, ‘Vocabularium’, fol. 44.

94 W. MacGaffey, ‘The personhood of ritual objects: Kongo “minkisi”’, *Ethnofoor*, 3:1 (1990), 45–61.

process that was taking place in Loango that Dapper described, and specifics of naming reflected this concept. Although the idea that the statute took the name of the spirit that possessed it was common in Loango, it was only later in use in the southern dialects; by the late nineteenth century, *nkisi* was used throughout the Kikongo-speaking world to describe a possessed object.⁹⁵

In his discussion of ‘moquissi’, Dapper writes that ‘the word Mokisie or Mokisses, as others call it’, is a ‘natural superstition or firm belief . . . to which they ascribe unimaginable power to do something good to their advantage or be able to do something bad to their disadvantage, or to have knowledge of previous or future things’. He went on to suggest that ‘it cannot well be called idolatry’ because, Dapper believed, ‘these people have no knowledge of or belief in any deity and also do not know a devil’. Instead, not knowing how to name divine things, they ‘only name everything Mokisie, where they understand to be some hidden powers’.⁹⁶ In short in his hostile manner, Dapper related that *-kis-* was ultimately a transcendent spiritual force, to which important powers were attributed.

The ‘hidden powers’ described by Dapper could be used for good or evil. Unlike European ideas of individual forces that were inherently either good or evil, coming from God or the Devil, Kongo usage allowed the possibility that the same power could be used for good or wicked purposes depending on the motives of the user. This is the reason the dictionary of 1648 includes witchcraft concepts that also employ the word *-kis-*. For example it lists a crime ‘done by means of the diabolic arts of Hell’ as ‘*múquissi* . . . *ibhanda bhandá* . . .’ (‘regularly striking *nkisi*’); a ‘witch’ (*‘veneficius’*) is ‘*munpanda quíssi*’ (one who strikes *kisi*), or ‘*Y quibhandabhandá múquissi*’ (one who habitually strikes *kisi*).⁹⁷ Nevertheless, the dictionary presents *-kis-* in contexts that mean ‘holy’ as well: ‘a place where holy things are kept’ (*‘sacrarium’*) is rendered as ‘*quilúndilúa quía equíssi*. *Elundilu ria úquíssi*’; ‘the act of sanctifying’ (*‘sacricola’*) is ‘*quitissa üma üa üaúquíssi*’.⁹⁸

In short, *nkisi* in seventeenth-century Kikongo referred to a transcendent Otherworldly force, which might have particular characteristics and manifest itself in named individual spirits, but still retained its generic meaning and could be used for good or evil purposes. R. E. Dennett, writing in 1906 from the perspective of Loango and replying to Bentley to defend the Catechism, argued on the basis of his own lengthy study of Loango’s religion and vocabulary that ‘Nkici was as near to the meaning of the word “Holy” as the priests of old could get’, representing as he believed a transcendent sacred force.⁹⁹

The thorny issue of the marriage of Christian and Kongo concepts of holiness was not the only one in confrontation with Afonso and his cohort. Another problem the

95 The modern usage was already established in Bentley’s day. His dictionary, which was anchored in the same dialect (Kisansala) as the catechism and the dictionary of 1648, was the basis for his claim.

96 Dapper, *Naukeurige Beschrijvinge*, 548. My thanks to Andrea Mosterman for clarifying and translating this passage.

97 BVE FM 1896 MS Varia 274, ‘Vocabulario’, fol. 53v, fol. 113v, presenting only Latin/Spanish-Kikongo. Van Wing, *Le plus ancien*, also defines ‘mukisi’ as ‘sortilege’ (spell). I have not located the Latin equivalent in the dictionary.

98 BVE FM 1896, MS Varia 274, ‘Vocabularium’, fols. 92v, 93v, 94.

99 R. E. Dennett, *At the Back of the Black Man’s Mind; or, Notes on the Kingly Office in West Africa* (London, 1906), 167–8.

Counter-Reformation Catechism proposed to address was the idea of the afterlife, or the translation of souls from This World to the Other World at death. In the Kongo Catechism, the soul was called ‘monho’ (*moyo*) that clearly referred to the immortal part of a person that was translated in death. A *moyo* might also make an Otherworldly journey as a mystical experience—through prayer ‘our souls rise from earth to Heaven’ that was ‘munâ emionho miêtu mitomboquêla cutûcabanunci yacunezûlu’.¹⁰⁰ Baptists took issue with this usage, as they did with *-kis-*, for John Weeks noted that even a dog had a *moyo* but was not buried as it had no immortal soul. Modern Baptist missionaries have fairly successfully replaced *moyo* with *mpeve*, usage that is in force today with Catholics as well.¹⁰¹ Whatever their objections, whether a semantic shift in the term or more likely the translation of a Kikongo concept into Christianity, the use of *moyo* was quite regular, in all likelihood since Afonso’s days, since it was part of the objectionable expression ‘Monho Auquissi’ that Cardoso said had been traditional in Kongo.

There were probably significant differences between Kongo and sixteenth-century Christian cosmology concerning the place of the translated dead in the Other World. Kongo cosmology in those days probably did not involve translation specifically to Heaven, Hell, or other parts of the Christian afterlife, but rather simply to the Other World, which was close by This World. Jesuit priest Ribeiro wrote in 1548: ‘Many of them tell us that they are immortal, . . . so that they do not confess, and from this it comes that a great dishonor one can do to them is to say, “your father died, your mother died”’. He went on to say that ‘pagans and the most rustic’ believed that when they die ‘they rise up, even the oldest, they say that it does not seem they die except by going to war or by a witch’.¹⁰² Certainly modern anthropological research suggests that the dead in Kongo, while translated to the Other World, remain immanent to serve or to punish their descendants until they become sufficiently old in the Other World that they undergo further transformation into higher beings.¹⁰³ However, modern conceptions do suggest that the Other World did have subdivisions, for example, a special place for witches.¹⁰⁴

The Catechism presents Heaven and Hell as places where the dead could reside, for the texts reveal the presence of *moyo* in both places. In the Catechism, for example, Jesus descended into the underworld where ‘omionho miâ aSantu Masse’ (‘the souls of the Holy Fathers’) were awaiting his deliverance. They were not in Hell itself but in the third part of the underworld (along with Purgatory and Limbo) known as the ‘bosom of Abraham’.¹⁰⁵ Other souls, besides those of the Holy Fathers, resided in ‘bulungi’,

100 See, for example, Bontinck and Nsasi (eds.), *Doutrina christãa*, sec. III, par. 11. Note that in this text ‘mionho’ is the older form *monyô* of *moyo*, which was gradually changing in Kikongo, and occasionally used alternately in the dictionary.

101 See J. Weeks, *Among the Primitive Bakongo: A Record of Thirty Years’ Close Intercourse with the Bakongo and Other Tribes of Equatorial Africa...*, (London, 1914), 282–4, who maintained that *moyo* really meant ‘life’ or ‘vital force’, an idea which is supported in the dictionary; BVE FM 1896, MS Varia 274, ‘Vocabularium’, fol. 113, ‘anima vegetiva moio a mizinguisi’.

102 Ribeiro letter, 1 Aug. 1548, MMA XV, 163.

103 MacGaffey, *Religion and Society*, 63–89.

104 MacGaffey, *Religion and Society*, 72–5.

105 Bontinck and Nsasi (eds.), *Doutrina christãa*, sec. VII, par. 14–15.

(the Kongo term for Hell). However the dictionary of 1648 distinguished ‘souls of the dead’ as ‘*mioio mia múúmbi*’ (‘souls of corpse’) from ‘the souls of the dead in Hell’ or ‘*mioio mia cua bulungui*’.¹⁰⁶

Apart from the problem of geography, Christian cosmology included the concept of salvation as the mechanism by which souls crossed to the Other World, and here, too, Kongo translation reinterpreted the whole concept to harmonize it with the Kongo vision of the process of death and afterlife, which was, in fact to avoid the issue altogether. The Catechism employed the verb *kanga* to mean ‘to save’ when translating the salvationist idea of the afterlife, as in ‘o Deus *cucanga*’ to mean ‘God saves’ in the prayer *Salve Regina* (Hail Holy Queen).¹⁰⁷ The verb meant to tie, bind, hinder, or stop in the seventeenth century (as it does today). For example, ‘to tie up’ is rendered ‘*cucanga*’ and, ‘to deliver in chains’ has among other translations, ‘*cucanga quiconi*’.¹⁰⁸ But in addition to this meaning, it also clearly meant to rescue or deliver, for example, ‘deliver us from evil’ in the Lord’s Prayer, is ‘*utucanga munâ üi*’.¹⁰⁹ It was also used to translate ‘save’ (salve) in the dictionary, so one says ‘o dezú *ucucanga* (Jesus saves) ‘*zam[pianmpnugu] ucucanga*’ (‘God saves’) or in another verb form, ‘salvare’ becomes ‘*cucanga*’ and ‘salvus’ is ‘*qacangui*’.¹¹⁰ However, the dictionary also defines more prosaic words with forms of *kanga*; for example ‘liberate’ is ‘*cucanga*’ and ‘liberator’ became ‘*mutangúu*’ (a word which also meant Savior as a title of Jesus).¹¹¹ The complicated theology of salvation was thereby transformed into protection or deliverance from evil but not necessarily the specifically Christian journey to Heaven or the abode of God.

In effect, the religious texts and religious practice vigorously embraced some ideas from European Christianity and quietly ignored others that did not readily match those of Kongo belief. It would have been easier to match and rename concepts already existing in both religions or to add new concepts into an existing system than it would have been to actively suppress differences. Christianity in Kongo retained the concept of the immanent dead by not challenging it directly and by working Christian holidays into days devoted to the dead. The most important of these was All Saints’ Day, a major holiday celebrated at graveyards more or less explicitly in honor of the ancestors, at least in the later seventeenth century and beyond.¹¹²

The question of the fate of the dead was not the only question avoided in the Kongo Catechism – it also sidestepped the Immaculate Conception. Kongo did not place particular emphasis on abstention from sexual activity as a sign of special virtue as the followers of Abrahamic traditions did. A logical equivalence would have been to use the Kikongo word *ndumba* as the equivalent of virgin, since the dictionary of 1648 translates the Latin ‘virgo’

106 BVE FM 1896, MS Varia 274, ‘Vocabularium’, fol. 54.

107 Bontinck and Nsasi (eds.), *Doutrina christãa*, sec. V, par. 1. This is one of the few places where the text uses the Portuguese term ‘Deus’ to mean God, and not ‘Nzambi a Mpungu’.

108 BVE FM 1896, MS Varia 274, ‘Vocabularium’, fols. 51v and 116v.

109 Bontinck and Nsasi (eds.), *Doutrina christãa*, sec. III, par. 8.

110 BVE FM 1896, MS Varia 274 ‘Vocabularium’, most specifically, fol. 94v. Another verb, ‘*cocola*’, is cited in these definitions also.

111 BVE FM 1896, MS Varia 274, ‘Vocabularium’, fol. 51v.

112 A. da Pavia, ‘Viaggio apostolico alla Missione ...’ in C. Toso (ed.), ‘*Viaggio Apostolico*’ in *Africa di Andrea da Pavia (inedito del sec. XVII)* (Rome, 2000, marking foliation of the original), fol. 86.

(‘virgin’) as ‘nubile woman, maiden of the age to be married’ as ‘múana **ndúmba** üa fauna ücazá’.¹¹³ Yet this term was eschewed by the literature. In the early seventeenth century, Bras Correa, a Spanish clergyman spoke against forming orders of nuns in Kongo because no woman old enough to take vows would have abstained from sex.¹¹⁴ This might explain why Bentley in giving *ndumba* as the Kikongo equivalent of ‘virgin’, adds ‘as no word has yet been found for “virgin” this is the closest possible’.¹¹⁵ In defining the positive characteristic of Mary, the catechism turned in other directions. Consistently, the Catechism refers to the Virgin Mary as ‘Musundi Maria’.¹¹⁶ ‘Musundi’ actually has no connection to sexual virtue or even age and gender. Instead, it derives from the root *-sund-* meaning to excel or be great, often used in comparatives. Thus Mary was not a virgin, but a superlative person.

CONCLUSION

Afonso and his intellectual supporters thus created a distinctly African variant of Christianity, one that included the spiritual power to protect and deliver humans to a new group of Otherworld beings such as saints, angels, the Virgin Mary, and Jesus. These beings possessed the attributes of transcendent spiritual power, *nkisi*, as did potentially many other entities in the Kongo universe. These other entities were not eliminated by the new class, though they might be redefined as agents of witchcraft, in keeping with the Kongo concept of witchcraft as use of the occult for selfish or anti-social reasons. Kongo Christianity ignored for the most part the Immaculate Conception and transformed the Christian concept of salvation into earthly protection while retaining the idea of the immanent dead from Kongo beliefs. While formally acknowledging the Christian geography of the Other World, it seems likely that this did not much concern the Kongo.

Determining whether or not Afonso’s project of harmonizing cosmologies, or working in the ‘space of correlation’, represents a real break with the past or whether it is Christian enough to qualify Kongo as a Christian country is ultimately a sectarian issue. Today, as in the past, what constitutes being Christian is subject to intense debate. Christianity went through regular harmonizations of this sort in Ancient Rome, Medieval Europe, and again in the Reformation. In many Western countries, Christians have managed to harmonize their faith with materialist science. But what is clear is that Afonso and those who followed him in embracing Christianity guided their own course in determining what Christianity would mean and how it would work in Kongo. The power and potential of this project was not felt only in Kongo. It almost certainly shaped the way Christianity was perceived in the Kimbundu-speaking territories of Portuguese Angola. Perhaps more importantly for historiography in the future, given the revitalized interest in Kongo religion among historians of the Atlantic World, it may well have played a role in the development of Christian thought in the African Diaspora.

¹¹³ BVE FM 1896, MS Varia 274, ‘Vocabularium’, fol. 63v. The Kikongo in fact reads, ‘child, young woman of age to be married’ (using the Portuguese loan word *casar* for marriage).

¹¹⁴ Bras Correa, *MMA* VI.

¹¹⁵ Bentley, *Dictionary*, 232.

¹¹⁶ Bontinck and Nsasi (eds.), *Doutrina christãa*, sec. I, par. 11.