

## Introduction: Kongo Atlantic Dialogues

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### Introduction

Articles in this issue that relate to the Kikongo speaking peoples of Central Africa and the Kongo diaspora to North America and South America are derived from papers presented at the annual Gwendolen M. Carter lectures sponsored by the Center for African Studies at the University of Florida. The Carter series is designed to offer the university community and the greater public the perspectives of Africanist scholars on issues of pressing importance to the peoples and societies of Africa.<sup>1</sup> The topic for the 2014 conference was “Kongo Atlantic Dialogues: Kongo Culture in Central Africa and in the Americas.” Susan Cooksey and Robin Poynor proposed the conference topic, and together with Hein Vanhee of the Royal Museum for Central Africa, assisted by graduate student Carlee Forbes, invited some thirty speakers and discussants to address issues of the Kingdom of Kongo, the related Kongo peoples, and aspects of diaspora culture in the Caribbean, South America, and North America that can be related to those Central African peoples. The inspiration for the conference was the *Kongo across the Waters* exhibition, a collaboration of the Harn Museum of Art at the University of Florida and the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium, and the book of the same title.<sup>2</sup>

The exhibition, the book, and the conference addressed a period of some five hundred years of contact between the Central African peoples associated with, descended from, or linguistically and culturally related to the Kingdom of Kongo and those peoples transported across the Atlantic as a result of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Briefly stated, five broad ideas were explored in the exhibition and the book, and these were broadened in the subsequent conference. The exhibition addressed Kongo and North America, as did the book. The conference extended the discussion to include the Caribbean and Brazil.

**Robin Poynor** is Professor of Art History, University of Florida. His recent work addresses relationships between the Yoruba of Nigeria and Yoruba Americans, those who have adopted aspects of Yoruba religion and attempt to live a Yoruba lifestyle in the United States, specifically those in Florida, which led to his co-edited (with Amanda Carlson) *Africa in Florida: 500 Years of African Presence in the Sunshine State* (2014). That project inspired *Kongo across the Waters*, both an exhibition (2013-15) and the book of the same title.

**Susan Cooksey** is the curator of African art, Harn Museum of Art, University of Florida. Cooksey has curated a number of original exhibitions, including “Kongo across the Waters” (2013-15) in collaboration with the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium; “Africa Interweave: Textile Diasporas” (2011); and “A Sense of Place: African Interiors” (2009).

**Carlee Forbes** is a doctoral student in African art history, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Her University of Florida master’s thesis focused on Kongo raffia textiles and mats. She worked as a curatorial and editorial assistant for the “Kongo across the Waters” exhibition and book.

<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v15/v15i3a1.pdf>

The first issue to be addressed was the fact that a highly organized political formation largely south of the Congo River had established itself by the fifteenth century. In 1483, it was visited by Portuguese sailors, and the Portuguese recognized it as a kingdom. Not only were the Europeans intrigued by the kingdom, but the Kongo elite were fascinated by the Portuguese and what they brought with them. In the ensuing decades, this extraordinary encounter between Central Africans and Europe led to an exchange of objects and ideas. At the earliest contact, Europeans admired Kongo art with its complex geometric motives, displayed in textiles and ivory sculpture. The Kongo elite, and eventually the more common people, converted to Christianity, and Kongo artists started producing the objects of the new Christian religion and gradually developed their own styles. Kongo representatives were sent to Europe and to Brazil.

The second issue treats the trans-Atlantic slave trade. By the seventeenth century, Europeans were increasingly in search of slave labor for their New World plantations and they started looking for it in Central Africa as well as in other regions of the continent. Although not all of the Kongo king's subjects were of free status, Kongo initially refused to sell its own. Instead they provided enslaved Africans who came from further inland. This dramatically changed in the late seventeenth and in the eighteenth century. Internal conflicts within Kongo combined with growing pressures from various European slave trading nations. The result was the increasing victimization of many unfortunate Kongolese who were shipped across the Atlantic to the Caribbean and to North and South America. North American archaeological evidence, for example, suggests that the first generations of enslaved Kongolese drew on their cultural memories to engage in rituals in order to obtain spiritual comfort and protection in extremely difficult living conditions.<sup>3</sup>

The third topic deals with changes in Central Africa in the nineteenth century with the ending of the slave trade and the growing trade in agricultural produce in response to the rapid industrialization of European nations. These changes created many new opportunities for Kongo chiefs and commercial entrepreneurs. Wild rubber, ivory, palm oil, and palm nuts were exchanged for European spirits, weapons, textiles, ceramic ware, and many other consumer goods that were accumulated by successful chiefs and merchants. Such articles were "consumed" to enhance their owners' status, and they were displayed on graves as prestige items. The nineteenth century trade revolution led to increasing political competition, and artists were encouraged to innovate and produce the finest objects for their wealthy patrons. This period is characterized by a flourishing of the arts in Kongo, reflected in the arts of leadership, initiation, and commemoration, and in ritual objects for divination, healing, and protection (*minkisi*).

A fourth topic addresses the fact that as African American communities and cultures developed in the Americas, as a result of complex processes that involved cultural emancipation but also creative borrowing and creolization, a number of traditions emerged that clearly bear the imprint of Kongo culture. Examples of these are found in basketry, figurative pottery, decorated walking sticks, commemorative objects, and last but not least music. And finally, contemporary reflections on Kongo history, religion, philosophy, iconography, and art endures, stimulating creative artists working in Africa, as well as in the Caribbean, South America, and the United States. By borrowing from Kongo technique, sculptural forms, or iconography, contemporary artists addressing global audiences infuse their works with some of

the narrative and aesthetic power previously mastered by Kongo artists, whose names recent history has most often obliterated.

The four papers in this issue of the *African Studies Quarterly* do not pretend to address all of the topics brought up in the exhibition, book, and conference, but they are continuations of discussions surrounding some of the questions addressed. They are loosely related in that they all focus on the cultures referred to as Kongo, and all developed out of presentations at the Carter conference. Three articles address the impact of the kingdom and the Kongo peoples over time and space—in both North and South America. The fourth returns to present day Central Africa to address changes that have taken place there in the recent past.

Jason Young suggests that “Black culture in the plantation Americas is not only connected to African pasts through a set of documentable cultural behaviors, practices or beliefs—as indeed it is—but is also connected to similar insurgencies around the Atlantic—in Africa, throughout the Americas and in Europe.”<sup>4</sup> While the articles by Jeroen Dewulf and Marina de Mello e Souza address traditions in the American Northeast and in Brazil that likely began at an earlier time and continued, Young addresses nineteenth century Low Country practices.

We have chosen to place the Young article first because he addresses broad ideas that have to do with identifying specific African elements in the cultures of the New World. In his contribution, he notes the “hefty weight of academic opposition” that hampers the tracing of new world traits to African sources, citing Foucault, Gilroy, and Sally and Richard Price, whose work criticizes the seeking of sources for African American culture or suggests that it is or can be a “vexed matter.” He quotes Gwendolyn Midlo Hall as suggesting it is “highly political.” Richard Price, Young states, “charges scholars who chart the persistent role that the long arm of Africa played in the cultures of blacks throughout the Americas . . . with bending or ignoring counter evidence to support ideological positions.” Young states that Sally and Richard Price argue that researchers “intent on proving a chosen historical scenario can almost always locate some objects or design styles in one tradition that closely resemble some objects or design styles in another.”<sup>5</sup> Young asserts, however, that in creating folk cultures, “enslaved Africans drew on remarkably resilient aspects of African culture that spurred on cultural developments in the Americas even as these cultures remained plastic.” He suggests that the “formal and aesthetic relationships at play here are not merely the result of some random comparisons of what seem to be similar cultural practices.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, as organizers of the exhibition and conference, we ask: cannot specific African transfers be traced as well as European transfers? We suggest that they can, although perhaps not as easily since the records for African participation in the amalgamation of transatlantic cultures are much sparser. Yet today more data are discovered in documentation through ships’ records and sales documents related to the sale of humans.<sup>7</sup> Diligent research has brought to light other documents formerly hidden away in archives.<sup>8</sup> Archaeological investigation has added further physical documentation.<sup>9</sup> Thus, many more resources are now added to the objects and design styles that the Price and Price reference in their dismissal.

Young emphasizes the fact that historical relationships between peoples are a source to be examined. To illustrate this idea, he looks to the ceramic face vessels created at a specific time and place—in the mid-nineteenth century at Edgefield, South Carolina. Formal and aesthetic connections alone may not be convincing. These must be considered in combination with

historical documentation. The face jugs appear about the same time as the late arrival of a slave vessel, *The Wanderer*.<sup>10</sup> At least one hundred of the four hundred Central Africans transported aboard *The Wanderer* ended up at Edgefield, and a number of them were assigned at one time or another to the potteries located there. It was here that that face vessels were first made, at about the same time the new workers were being incorporated into the labor force of the potteries. Specific information about the individuals aboard the *Wanderer* was later recorded by Charles Montgomery, who sought the memories of certain persons who were aboard the ship. The names and the locations from which some of these individuals originated in the Kongo region were recorded in his 1908 publication for which he interviewed survivors.<sup>11</sup>

The articles by Dewulf and Souza address the practice of electing kings for special occasions—both in the American Northeast and in Brazil. Both the Kongo court and its traditions seem to be expressed in numerous places in the diaspora, sometimes in the context of lay brotherhoods within the Catholic Church. Evidence suggests, however, that even without the supporting matrix of the Catholic Church, ideas of Kongo royalty were articulated. The court reflected in the diaspora is not the Kongo court as it existed in pre-Portuguese times, but as it had changed in response to that contact. Kongo elites almost immediately incorporated European practices into the court and adopted European ways into their daily lives. Upon the 1491 baptism of the *manikongo*, for example, crucifixes, swords, and figures of saints were introduced to be displayed and manipulated in religious events and court practices, as recorded by visitors. Illustrations created for Capuchins and others demonstrate the blending of European and Kongo culture. Thus a type of creolization had taken place in Africa prior to its occurrence in the new world.

By the height of the slave trade in the eighteenth century, Christianity had been practiced for over one hundred years. Kongo memories in the Atlantic diaspora were those that had already incorporated both Portuguese and Kongo practices. Events and celebrations among the enslaved are recorded all over the American Diaspora from New England all the way to Argentina.<sup>12</sup>

Jeroen Dewulf provides a background for the widespread phenomenon of black brotherhoods, ultimately springing from Iberian traditions introduced to the Kongo, but modified in light of Kongo experience. Similarities in the traditions of black brotherhoods in New England in the eighteenth and nineteenth century and Brazil have been noted.<sup>13</sup> All perhaps stem from the Portuguese pattern noted in Central Africa. The fact that those in New England existed suggests that such systems must have been in place in Africa prior to their being introduced into North America, since the Catholic Church within which such brotherhoods had thrived was not a major player in the American northeast. Enslaved Africans must have had experience with them in Africa, or perhaps in the Iberian Peninsula. For example, black brotherhoods and the related celebrations are known to have been introduced to Lisbon at least as early as the end of the sixteenth century, where at least nine such brotherhoods have been documented. The phenomenon was widespread, especially in Portuguese dominated regions. The Portuguese governed regions in Africa—São Tomé, Mozambique, and Angola—but also controlled their colony in Brazil, where great numbers of central Africans were deposited. Black brotherhoods existed in all regions dominated by the Portuguese. However, Dewulf finds evidence that such brotherhoods existed in non-Portuguese

regions, and even in regions dominated by Protestants and thus outside the nurturing structures of the Catholic Church. Such organizations as black brotherhoods throughout the diaspora, in both Portuguese regions and in other areas, and the events that those fraternities sponsored, likely led to a number of results such as black solidarity, the construction of black identity, mutual aid, and social mobility. In some cases they even led to manumission when brotherhoods collected funds to purchase freedom for members.

Discussions of events organized by black brotherhoods in North America question Berlin's assumption that connections among black people in North America were limited to informal occasions.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, it seems some were well organized and structured—such as those discussed in Dewulf's article. He notes that in mid-nineteenth century Massachusetts African Americans dressed in their best, carried drums, banners, guns, and swords, and elected a chief magistrate on an occasion known as "Negro election day." Similar events have been recorded from the mid-eighteenth into the nineteenth century not only in Massachusetts, but also in Rhode Island, New Hampshire, and Connecticut. Such records document occasions in which enslaved people of African descent elected a leader they referred to as "governor" or "king." During these events feasting, dancing, parades, and the firing of guns were common. Such "kings" were provided with emblems of royalty including crowns and swords.

While Dewulf looks at Kongo king celebrations in Protestant North America, Marina de Mello e Souza investigates Kongo kings festivals in Brazil, where Catholicism was dominant but also where most of the enslaved people were from Central Africa. Most Kongo kings events were thus carried out in communities dominated by Central Africans, although those from other regions of Africa and other ethnic identities participated, and the organizations did seem to draw from a number of African cultures. Within the context of Catholic lay brotherhoods, a privileged space was created in which enslaved Africans and their descendants could not only venerate their patron saints, but they could also create identities and reinforce social ties, thus building solidarity. These organizations and events were not secret. Indeed, they were encouraged by both masters and government officials, and Catholic priests supervised them. Feasts were celebrated on the premises of the groups, but their activities – such as parades often moved into the streets as well.

Kongo kings festivals in Brazil have been interpreted differently depending of the lens through which they were viewed and the time period in which they were experienced. In the nineteenth century, masters perceived the *congadas* (festivals) as a sign of Europeanization and concomitant subjugation, comparing them to medieval events. Conversely, black participants viewed the role of Kongo kings as symbolic of an unvanquished Africa, considering that the Kongo kingdom remained on more or less equal footing with Portuguese monarchs until the nineteenth century. Identifying with the Kongo kingdom provided a rallying point for African slaves in Brazil and created greater solidarity and a greater sense of power when mediating with outsiders. Africans, and savvy observers of Kongo court life in Africa, knew of the internalization of Catholic and European culture that occurred in the Kongo region over hundreds of years, and was transmitted to the *congadas*.

Just as cultures in the Americas changed in response to various African presences, and specifically Kongo presence, as noted in the three articles mentioned above, the Kongo region of Central African has also responded to continuous bombardment of religious, philosophical,

political, material, and scientific introductions from both Europe and the Americas. John Janzen's article draws our attention back to Central Africa and present-day Kongo. Janzen focuses on a different set of issues, specifically health and healing, important considerations in the context of the Atlantic Dialogue. Again, Kongo religion is addressed, but it is not the primary focus. As Janzen proposes, "'Science' and 'spirit' are shorthand terms that represent two prominent aspects of health and healing in postcolonial Kongo." The distinction, he asserts, is not a contradiction pitting present practices (science) against those of the past (spirit), and it is not a dichotomy between introduced biomedicine and the traditional medicine as practiced by *banganga*. Instead, the understanding and practice of science in healing works alongside the "continued use of spiritual healing and views of the world that engage spiritual forces—human as well as non-human." Janzen asserts that while earlier popular understanding of healing through *banganga* may continue to some degree, it has been for the most part supplanted by scientific knowledge. Yet, the new knowledge is "used and prioritized . . . in the interest of reinforcing even deeper Kongo social and moral values."

Close examination of African societies in the Black Atlantic World, as seen in the first three of the following articles, affirm their reliance on firmly rooted memories of Kongo cultural practices to create more cohesion and maximize their social and political standing. Even as the power of the Kongo kingdom dwindled, it achieved a level of parity with Europeans that transplanted Kongo and other Africans exploited for political and social advantage, in the context of new cultural forms. Likewise, on the African continent, as the fourth article suggests, health practitioners benefit from their memories of Kongo traditional healing and from knowledge of biomedicine to create new and effective treatments and cures. The four articles thus illuminate the legacy of Kongo cultural practices and ideologies as they are recalled and reconstructed to inform lives of Kongo people and their descendants in the Kongo Atlantic world.

## Notes

- 1 For over twenty-five years the Center for African Studies at the University of Florida has organized annual lectures or a conference in honor of the late distinguished Africanist scholar, Gwendolen M. Carter. Gwendolen Carter devoted her career to scholarship and advocacy concerning the politics of inequality and injustice, especially in southern Africa. She also worked hard to foster the development of African Studies as an academic enterprise. She was perhaps best known for her pioneering study *The Politics of Inequality: South Africa Since 1948* (1958) and the co-edited four-volume *History of African Politics in South Africa, From Protest to Challenge* (1972-77).
- 2 Cooksey, Poynor, and Vanhee 2013.
- 3 In the exhibition, this was illustrated by materials from the Chesapeake Bay area, the Georgia/South Carolina Lowcountry, and New Orleans, the three major North American areas to which Central African were traded.
- 4 Young in this issue.
- 5 Price and Price 2000, p. 296; see also Young in this issue.

- 6 Young in this issue.
- 7 The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, for example, provides information on more than 35,000 slave voyages involving more than twelve million Africans transported to the Americas between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Vos 2013b addresses the slave trade. Hall 2005, working with sale documents, traced original, manuscript documents located in courthouses and historical archives throughout the State of Louisiana to create The Louisiana Slave Database, which contains 99,419 records.
- 8 In a panel at the 56th African Studies Annual Meetings titled “The Church and Social Life in Angola before 1900,” Vos 2013a and Candido 2013 discussed gaining access to rarely used parish records from the bishop’s archives in Luanda to uncover previously hidden dimensions of social and political life in precolonial and early colonial Angola. The archives of the bishopric, kept in the old Jesuit mission of Luanda, have rarely been used by historians of Angola since access has been difficult. The panel demonstrated the benefits to be gained from such parish records, but it also highlighted limitations of using official religious documents for the writing of African history.
- 9 For example, archaeologist Mark P. Leone, Department of Anthropology, University of Maryland, College Park has teamed with colleagues and the Historic Annapolis Foundation to organize the Archaeology in Annapolis project. In Leone 2013, he and his students addressed Kongo evidence. The group intends to promote better understandings of Annapolis’ diverse past through the interpretation of material culture. Other archaeologists are likewise intent on relating their excavations and findings to the African and African descended peoples who lived on the sites in the past. Christopher Fennell, founding editor of the *Journal of African Diaspora Archaeology and Heritage*, has worked on the African Diaspora Archaeology Network. Fennell 2013, addresses the broad issues of interpreting Kongo connections to archaeological sites. Kenneth L. Brown of the University of Houston addresses African-American archaeology of both the slave and tenant in excavating the Levi Jordan Plantation in Texas and the Frogmore Plantation in South Carolina. See, for example, Brown 2001.
- 10 In 1858, *The Wanderer* illegally imported some four hundred Africans onto Jekyll Island, Georgia. This took place a half-century after the United States had banned the trans-Atlantic slave trade.
- 11 Montgomery 1908.
- 12 Dewulf cites Thornton 1993.
- 13 In citing sources that compare European festivals and Brazilian Kongo king festivals, Souza cites Araújo, Fernandes, Gimenes, and Lima, all referenced in her article below.
- 14 Berlin 1996.

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