

# Kongo King Festivals in Brazil: From Kings of Nations to Kings of Kongo

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**Abstract:** Popular culture in Brazil owes a great deal to African cultural elements that have been reorganized and reassembled through various and multiple historical processes. One particular festivity that takes place in many regions and has occurred since the beginning of Portuguese colonization consists of the coronation and celebration of black kings. This happened under the veil of Catholic brotherhoods that congregated groups of Africans and their descendants, who were slaves, freed or free born individuals. In the eighteenth century these were known as “black king celebrations.” The celebrated individuals were identified as “kings of nations” and represented specific ethnic or multi-ethnic groups. The designation *congada* appeared for the first time at the beginning of the nineteenth century to refer to such celebrations, and as time went by the ethnic black kings gradually turned into “kings of Kongo.” In the course of the nineteenth century, the king of Kongo festivals became, as a result of historical processes that had begun in the sixteenth century, the place of an affirmation of a black Catholic identity and a reinforcement of communitarian links, mainly among groups of Central African ancestry. Today the *congadas* are still performed by black and racially mixed groups, mainly in the southeast of Brazil.

## Introduction

As early as the seventeenth century the choosing and celebration of a king among African communities and their descendants in Brazil was a widespread practice throughout all areas of the region into which Africans had been introduced. King celebrations took place within Catholic brotherhoods dedicated to the devotion to a patron saint. The process that led to the establishment of these celebrations, directed both to the spiritual entities and to affirming the authority of leaders before the communities they represented, must be understood in the context of social relations within Brazilian slave society.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the period of the slave trade the majority of enslaved people in Brazil were from the region of present day Angola, or West Central Africa, although other regions of the continent were surely represented as well. The celebration of the black kings was seen mostly

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(although not exclusively) within communities of Bantu-speaking origin. Such kings represented ethnic identities or “nations” based on the slave trade context, referring to such identities as Mina, Angola, and Benguela.<sup>2</sup> The election and celebration of black kings who held authority over groups organized around identities built with elements drawn from a number of African cultures have been documented since the eighteenth century. In spite of the fact that different ethnic groups lived in close proximity due to the design of the slave system, people tended to establish social ties with those coming from neighboring regions and with those sharing similar cultural backgrounds. The ways in which they organized themselves and related to their surroundings and to others resulted from various factors connected both to the group itself and to the social structure in which it took part. The latter played a major role in view of the fact that the people in question had to submit to the violence and the restrictions of the slave system.

In colonial Brazil, Catholic lay brotherhoods provided a privileged space in which enslaved Africans and their descendants were able to build new identities. Accepted and even encouraged by their masters and government officials, the brothers of these fraternities were supervised by the parish priests. However, much about the meanings of the events celebrated by the brotherhoods certainly escaped the comprehension of the masters as well as that of the supervising priests and government administrators. The significance expressed through celebrations conducted by the brothers were not fully comprehended—especially the festivities in which a king was chosen.

Such brotherhoods existed in every region in which Portuguese colonization had been established, and the black king celebrations were often a part of such organizations. Both brotherhoods and black king events were still vigorous during the age of the Brazilian empire, and although they no longer have the social function they once held, the tradition survives to this day. Many black communities were able to seize the space opened up by the dominant system to transform the Catholic brotherhoods into places not only for the practice of the faith, but also as a means of building ties of solidarity among their self-identifying groups and for consolidating identities.

Many historical studies of the brotherhoods have been carried out by both Brazilian researchers and others, especially North Americans.<sup>3</sup> However, the feasts celebrated by members of the brotherhoods on their premises as well as processions on the city streets were until recently more often studied by folklorists and ethnographers who described what they saw but did not go further in trying to understand the meaning behind those events.

Fifteen years ago, in my PhD dissertation, I had already dealt with this theme and sought to understand the reasons for the existence of kings in the black men’s brotherhoods, what roles they played in the group, both real and symbolic, and what sort of relationships they had with the wider spectrum of the slavery based society. In using travel writings and memoirs, brotherhood documentation, and previous academic studies, I proposed an interpretation of a certain aspect of these celebrations of black kings, linked to dances and performances presented by the king’s court, according to a format that seems to be the result of a combination of contributions that come not only from Portugal but also from Africa.

Nineteenth century accounts by travelers who witnessed these dances describe feasts quite similar to certain medieval court ceremonies or to popular parades of the medieval period. Yet

the travelers seem to have been limited in their knowledge and based their presumptions on what they knew – European feasts. Richard Burton is the sole observer who, in describing the performance of a black court, straightaway associated it with the leading elite of the Kongo. Besides their traditional titles, they had proudly adopted those of the European nobility, beginning as early as the first half of the sixteenth century. Burton described a *congada* he watched in 1867 on the premises of the Morro Velho mine in the Sabará area, where iron was mined by an English company. He says the men who turned up at the main house “were dressed, or imagined themselves to be dressed, according to the style of the *Água Rosada* house, descended from the great Manikongo and hereditary lords of Congo land.”<sup>4</sup> In a note he says the *Água Rosada* dynasty held legitimate rights to the Kongo crown. We cannot say if the identification was made solely by him or if, during the performance of the play, there were other elements, perhaps in the verses, indicating a dynastic affiliation evoked by the dancers of the *congada*.

This leads us to turn to what was happening on the other side of the Atlantic, in and around the lands of Angola that had supplied the ports with the enslaved. The Kongolese society, governed by bloodlines, or *kanda*, such as those evoked by Burton, had from the early sixteenth century taken certain elements of European culture for their own, especially those pertaining to Catholicism and to rites connected to political power, such as titles and honorifics. Burton was aware of this. When he watched the festive representation of an African embassy, while other foreign observers saw rites rooted in European lore, Burton recognized court ceremonies of the Kongo. Since he had never visited that region of the African continent, Burton must have known them from written or oral accounts.

Just as nineteenth century observers saw these events through the prism of European popular festivities, so too did those of the twentieth century. In this way, even until recently, the *congadas* were understood as an incorporation of European festivities and symbols by the Africans and their descendants in Brazil. In spite of the evidently African elements in dances, rhythms, lyrics, and clothing, the interpreters, mainly folklorists, didn’t see precisely how much Kongo was alive in the *congadas*.<sup>5</sup> But when we observe the Kongo kingship rituals performed in the Brazilian feasts, we notice that those holding the feast conceive of it as a rite invoking their mythical African past in which Kongo played a major role. The exalted Catholicism acknowledged in the feast, which included masses and processions and took place in honor of the brotherhood’s patron saint, was more than a path to integration into the master’s society. Moreover, it was definitely more than mere acceptance of a position of almost absolute subjection, guaranteed, in the end, through the violence of slavery. It was also a reminder of the Christian Kingdom of Kongo, which had proved itself capable of preserving its autonomy regardless of Portuguese dominion over the Angola region, which until the nineteenth century was a relatively small area whose main axis was Luanda. As a partner of Portugal, Kongo had been granted entry into the Atlantic trade circuits. Kongo thus had a unique history of relations with what was an empire of worldwide dimensions at the time. For a period of over three centuries, Portugal and Kongo maintained diplomatic and economic relations that faced moments of greater and lesser tension. Throughout the period, Portugal’s intent to conquer was relentless, but so were the efforts of the Kongolese rulers to resist.

Kongo was never made a part of the Portuguese empire until the actual colonial period, which began at the end of the nineteenth century. In spite of this, the royal and ecclesiastical authorities of Portugal used the acceptance of Catholicism on the part of the ruling elite to reinforce their image as an imperial power. It was not only in Brazil, but also in Portugal, that a king of the Kongo was celebrated in the feasts of the patron saints of the black male brotherhoods. And both in the center of the colonial rule and in the American colony (Brazil), an independent nation after 1822, these celebrations were understood in different ways by masters and slaves or free blacks, by those who watched and described, and by those who held and lived them.

As far as the masters were concerned, in Brazil the festivity was a confirmation of their own positions of power, a demonstration that the Africans and their descendants had joined the Catholic religion and reproduced patterns of sociability with a European hue, such as the organization in brotherhoods.<sup>6</sup> Besides, the feast held to celebrate Catholic saints in which the king of Kongo was honored reminded them of the king's conversion to Christianity, which could be construed as a Portuguese conquest. Thus the imperial Portuguese power was understood as being honored in the event. On the other hand, to those holding the feast, the choice of representatives who linked their community with that of the masters and government officials was an important aspect of social organization. In addition to the practical aspect, the representations, dances, and songs performed around the king and those close to him (his court), strengthened a connection with the past and their own historical association with Kongo, which was also seen as a Christian nation by the central Africans.

The Brazilian feast kept alive a memory based on African enslavement and the resulting diaspora in which different ethnic groups from West Central Africa gathered under a new identity—that of Black Catholics. Both Africans and their descendants, the enslaved and the free, not only shared social conditions but also originated in the same region of Africa. And it was a king of Kongo who was chosen to be invested with the leadership of groups organized around the lay brotherhoods and meant to represent these Black communities in dealing with church and state authorities. These leaders, called “black kings,” were initially associated with various ethnic groups and different “nations.” Often in the eighteenth century documentation references *mina kings*, or *ardra, benguela*, and *angola* allude to these many “nations.” But from the nineteenth century on the majority of black kings were called “Kongo kings,” a denomination used even into the present. In my understanding, this process corresponded to the consolidation of a Black Catholic identity that diluted the original ethnic identities and helped to form a Black Brazilian identity in which Africa is referred to in a mythic way through the rituals of the festivities.

Kongo had played a major role in the region of present day Angola, home to many of those enslaved and transported to Brazil. In my view, at the time Black Catholic Brazilian communities consolidated, and as they developed their own identities and their capacity to fit into Brazilian society, albeit in a marginal position, Kongo took the place of a broader ancestral Africa capable of granting identity, an identity signifying a Catholicism that had already been internalized while still on African soil. At the same time, the ruling groups accepted the religious celebration of the king of the Kongo because they saw it as an innocent Africanization of the festive kingships that were a part of popular festivals such as the Empire of the Holy

Spirit, widespread in both Portugal and Brazil. But for those who held the feast, it was a sign that pointed to a still unconquered Africa. Thus it signified an identity that, although Catholic, was fundamentally African—not European.

This becomes even clearer when we consider the warlike dances performed in many situations in Kongo, but always associated with the chief's show of power and usually termed *sangameno* in the documentation. The same occurs when one considers the description of the rites practiced when chiefs granted an audience as well as those practiced by the retinues that accompanied the chiefs on their travels, either on long or short trips, carrying banners with crosses and including priests—either European or local African clergy—and musicians playing.<sup>7</sup> I am not the only one who, upon scrutinizing the documentation, has made these connections. Burton noticed them when watching the *congada*, and it may have been only to his eyes that it meant not black theatre copying the white man's ways, but African theater making its way through African feasts rooted in Europe. The masters enjoyed the exotic flavor of the singing and dancing in their own way, but for them the sounds were grotesque and the steps monkey-like.<sup>8</sup> For them the feasts surrounding the Black kings expressed the peaceful integration of the Africans and their descendants into Brazilian slave society.

My main contention with regard to Burton's perception may be the lens through which we see the events. For Burton, African societies, even that of Kongo, which had adopted Catholicism and Portuguese names, were still primitive, backward, and meriting only curiosity. Today we no longer observe Africa and Africans through the prism of evolution, juxtaposing the primitive and the developed. Instead we survey such situations from the standpoint of historical processes and the logic specific to each people, in accordance with the analytical tools of our time. And when looking at a cultural phenomenon through the lens of history, that is, seeking to understand how the *congadas* came into being, taking into account the long term and Atlantic circulation, we confirm the extent of African contributions to the forming of Brazil, its culture, and its society. Even in analyzing a ritual court whose members wear European clothing and that celebrates a Catholic saint, we can discern the direct link to Africa, the building of identities, and the reinforcement of social ties based on a common past, real or mythical, with which a major part of the group identifies itself. It is an African past that was already infused with European elements such as capes and feathered hats, titles of nobility, and Christian names, which were widely used by Kongo elite ever since the beginning of the sixteenth century.

To this day, Kongo occupies, as does Mozambique, a privileged place in the construction of the collective memories of Brazilian communities who lay claim to their African roots. Both *congo* and *moçambique* are today words primarily designating musical groups who differ between themselves, are often rivals, and are component parts of the Catholic festivities in honor of Our Lady of the Rosary and Saint Benedict. In these celebrations the kings and their courts parade through the streets together with musicians and dancers performing several choreographed numbers. The *congada* is one of the popular feasts still held in spite of the great changes brought about by modern ways of communication and transportation and the spread of the market economy to the farthest corners of Brazil's hinterland. Such changes usually lead to the abandoning of practices based on tradition. Although the *congada* is no longer primarily a black event and attracts people from all backgrounds, it still plays a role in strengthening

communal ties and attributing specific identities in many regions, especially in the southeast. Within this framework, the king and queen of Kongo continue to live, dressed as they should be and identified by power symbols such as scepters and crowns. To this very day, the Kongo and the Manikongo represent an important reference point for many black communities in Brazil who set up their identities evoking cultural and social historical specifics that are useful to them as diacritical signs.

## Notes

- 1 I addressed these celebrations in my PhD dissertation published (published as Souza 2002).
- 2 Note that not all of these “nations” indicate West Central African origins, but as I will explain, the king celebrations are closely linked to Kongo histories.
- 3 The list of titles is long but it worth mention some of them: Scarano 1978, Borges 2005, Brandão 1985, Soares 2000, Mulvey 1976, Kiddy 2005, Reginaldo 2011, and Oliveira 2008.
- 4 Burton 1869, vol. 1, pp. 237-38.
- 5 Some of these interpretations are: Araújo 1959, Fernandes 1977, Gimenes 1948, and Lima 1948. Exceptions to this interpretation were Mario de Andrade and Câmara Cascudo, who, even not going too deeply, noticed the presence of strong references of African history and culture in festivities such as *congada* performed by the Afro-descendent community. See Andrade 1982 and Cascudo 2001.
- 6 Catholic brotherhoods are based on medieval guilds and were part of the colonial administration in Brazil, and the internal organization of black brotherhoods is similar to the European ones.
- 7 See Souza 2012a and Souza 2012b.
- 8 See, for instance, Castelnau 1949, pp. 171-72, and Spix and Martius 1938, pp. 127-30.

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