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Christian Architecture Within the Kingdom of the Kongo:  
A Case Study of the Igreja de Jesus

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Art History

by

Alexandra T. Henry

December 2021

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The Thesis of Alexandra T. Henry is approved:

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## Introduction

The arrival of Portuguese navigator Diogo Cão (ca.1452 -1486) to the estuary of the Congo River in 1483 marked the beginning of European intervention within the central African Kingdom of the Kongo. In search of easy trade access and Christian allies, Cão and his crew erected large stone markers known as *padrões* to commemorate their mission from the king of Portugal, João II (r.1481 – 1495). A large kingdom located within the western portion of central Africa, the Kingdom of the Kongo encompassed parts of present-day Angola, Cabinda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Gabon, and the Republic of the Congo. The spelling of Kongo (with a ‘K’) is directly related to the KiKongo speakers that founded the kingdom, while the alternative spelling of Congo (with a ‘C’) stems from the Portuguese translation of the name. Despite much European documentation and a familiarity with the West African coastline much about the Kongo remained unknown to Europeans until somewhere around the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

The work scholars have compounded through the use of immediate and non-conventional sources have allowed for the continued understanding and interpretation of Kongo history. Documents and objects collected in European archives have allowed Western institutions to construct documented histories; and from there scholars have slowly been able to both contest and create more comprehensive understandings of African history. The use of tangible items such as art objects in culmination with oral

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<sup>1</sup> Alisa LaGamma, Josiah Blackmore, Christine Giuntini, James Green, Ellen G. Howe, Phyllis M. Martin, Adriana Rizzo, John K. Thornton, and Kristen Windmuller-Luna. 2015. Kongo: power and majesty. (21)

histories have heavily assisted in this process. Kongo scholarship primarily focuses on the kingdom's history and art objects. This leaves little room to expound on the more intimate gathering architectural spaces. Archaeological studies have been done on provincial capitals and foreign controlled settlements, though very little can be found on many early Christian churches built during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>2</sup> Ritual items and other material objects allow for better awareness of differing ceremonial practices and traditions; therefore, the ceremonial spaces where they would be centered around hold just as much importance towards progressing our knowledge of cross-cultural Kongo religious practices.

The lack of scholarship engaging with early sixteenth and seventeenth century churches leaves only minute fragments of information to be found on small historical blogs and tourist sites.<sup>3</sup> These churches can function as ritual objects, becoming places to convene and participate in a common religious syncretism among the locals the various Christian sects that were present. Churches can hold other ritual objects as well as display pertinent art used in the perpetuation of Christian beliefs. The establishment of Catholic Churches within the Kongo correlates with European intervention throughout the Americas and Asia. It is also the continuity of some of these churches that places them

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<sup>2</sup> Bernard Clist, Els Cranshof, Gilles-Maurice De Schryver, Davy Herremans, Karlis Karklins, Igor Matonda, Fanny Steyaert, and Koen Bostoen. "African-European Contacts in the Kongo Kingdom (Sixteenth-Eighteenth Centuries): New Archaeological Insights from Ngongo Mbata (Lower Congo, DRC)." *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 19, no. 3 (2015): 464-50.

<sup>3</sup> Amélia, Maria. "Angola Field Trip: Seven Historic Churches Tour, February 2009." <http://angolafieldgroup.com/historic-tours/>.



within such elevated levels of importance to understanding history. Within my work I hope to further the narrative of the Kingdom of the Kongo by incorporating history, discussions of important cultural and religious items, and how these all culminate to help inform us on one of the Kongo's churches, the Igreja de Jesus which will be discussed in more detail in chapter 3. The first chapter will help to establish the well documented history of the Kongo, while chapter 2 will center on religious syncretism between traditional religion and Christianity.

## Historiography

Scholarship on the Kongo along with its relationship to Christianity have been a topic of interest for decades; the country's conversion, connection to Europe, and role within the slave trade were points of intrigue to historians and anthropologists alike. Scholars such as Basil Davidson, Georges Balandier, David Birmingham, and Jan Vansina were writing in the first decade of modern study of African history; their early attention to Kongo conversion fixated on political implications and gains as a means for rulers to maintain control. The extensive work of both Kongo and Western anthropologists, like Ann Hilton, were then able to make connections between the kingdom's politics and religion.<sup>4</sup> The Kongo's relationship with Europe guaranteed the kingdom's place within Portuguese, Spanish, French, Italian, and Dutch archives. Eventually with the incorporation of oral traditions along with the anthropology of the Kikongo-speaking peoples, scholars have been able to cultivate a more comprehensive narrative of the Kongo kingdom. A comprehensive look into the literature is an important and necessary first step for trying to grasp a better understanding of the kingdom itself. Delving into the work of these authors and their progress over the decades creates a preliminary place to start research on lesser researched Kongo subjects, such as Catholic churches built and sustained with the Kingdom.

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<sup>4</sup> John Thornton, "Afro-Christian Syncretism in Kingdom of Kongo," *Journal of African History* 54/1 (2013): 53–77.

Focusing on the ramifications of Afro-Euro relations from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century, Davidson's *Black Mother: Africa, the Years of Trial*, centers on the slave trade's effect on the Swahili coast, Guinea, as well as the western Congo basin. From c. 1450 to c. 1850, Davidson argues that "Africa grievously and continuously suffered from a connexion with Europe that was neither one thing nor the other: neither the equality that could open wide channels to the outside world, nor the sharp subjection that could provoke and stimulate, however blindly or unintentionally, the rise of African reassertion, political change, and economic growth". Davidson marks these years of trial through the origin, development, and growth of the slave trade as it both paralyzed and isolated the indigenous inhabitants.<sup>5</sup> Focusing on early European traveler's accounts and modern ethnographic research, Georges Balandier's *Daily Life in the Kingdom of the Kongo: From the Sixteenth to Eighteenth Century* supplies a quick survey of the kingdom's encounter with the Portuguese followed by discussion of the social, economic, artistic, and religious aspects of Kongo life. Primarily based on records written by early and modern Christian missionaries, some of Balandier's observations of these records are fairly one dimensional while leaving minimal room for critique. Both works amass lengthy reference lists while disseminating survey knowledge that has been well documented in European archives, though they do not adequately discuss the importance of religious syncretism as it pertained to the traditional religion and Christianity.

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<sup>5</sup> Basil Davidson, *Black Mother: Africa: the Years of Trial*, Kiribati: London, 1961.

Spanning from the late fifteenth century to 1900, Jan Vansina's *Kingdoms of the Savanna* primarily focused on the political history of major Central African states (Angola, Congo, Zambia) as well Lozi, Luanda, Luba, Kazembe, the Kongo, and the colony of Angola. With an understanding of the limitations or gaps within the literature Vansina creates this synthesis through recorded variations of oral traditions as well as missionary and colonial literature from Angola and the Kongo. His work emphasizes not only a comparison in trade, but kingdom structure similarities both within and out of Africa. Vansina explores themes such as succession, civil unrest, strong leadership, the involvement of outside power, exploitation, indirect ruling systems, and state dissolution.<sup>6</sup> *Trade and Conflict in Angola: the Mbundu and their Neighbors under the Influence of the Portuguese, 1483-1790* by David Birmingham reaches beyond the Mbundu Kingdom and Angola<sup>7</sup>. The welfare of neighboring kingdoms such as Luanda, Kasanje, and the Kongo easily affected the lives of the Mbundu and peoples of Angola. Taking source material from European archival centers, Luanda, Lisbon, as well as with the published oral traditions of the Lunda, Imbangala, Mbundu, and other peoples of Angola, Birmingham's work itself provides insight into Portuguese controlled Africa as well as early Angolan history.<sup>8</sup> Assessing the formation of dominant African kingdoms, Birmingham centers on the continuity of Mbundu history. He attempts to analyze

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<sup>6</sup> Jan Vansina, *Kingdoms of the savanna*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966.

<sup>7</sup> Vansina and Birmingham were publishing work during the latter half of the twentieth century that would continue to be referenced and utilized in later scholarship on the Kongo.

<sup>8</sup> David Birmingham, *Trade and Conflict in Angola: The Mbundu and their Neighbors under the Influence of the Portuguese, 1483-1790*, Oxford, 1968.

African-Portuguese relations in Angola within African terms rather than through European history. Regarding time range Birmingham's work is more restrictive, though Vansina and Birmingham both utilize similar extensively published resources. While plentiful in material, these sources still primarily lend themselves European archival sources.

The archival material from the authors discussed heavily revolves around European voices. What makes this problematic is exclusion and the less obvious omission of voices from those archives. Obvious exclusion stems from the indisputable omission of minority voices from an archive; even the mere creation of an archive creates a space of privilege where we can assume one point of view takes precedence over another. Less obvious exclusion happens when scholars take and simply regurgitate what is being told to them from a primary source. As a piece of history an object takes on certain historical value that can either be questioned or taken as fact. All pieces of history are capable of being biased and partial in their representation; therefore, it is necessary to evaluate sources. When looking into the past of any country once under colonial rule complications are likely to make themselves known. The archive may easily lead scholars to center themselves around the viewpoint of those in a position of power. Because these are the sources held within well-known institutions and circulated between scholars, they are taken as concentrated fact without further evaluation. And when these documents are predominantly produced by the aggressors within history the need for speculation and deeper examination becomes not an idea, but a necessity. And while one's attention can be brought to the natural imperfections put in place by the archive, it is still easy to fall

victim to it. While some remain stagnant in their interpretation of material, others not only make use of what is available to them, but go beyond to incorporate sources not commonly utilized by academics.

Historians and scholars of the twenty-first century such as Pernille Ipsen, Pamela Scully, and Clifton C. Crais succeed in not only understanding these archives but in the retelling or reexamination of them. As a common problem faced by all these authors, the solution begins to be found in the interpretation of sources available to them. By being aware of imperfections and omissions within the archive, historians are accountable for responsibly filling in the gaps. This responsibility rests with being able to further examine and discuss indigenous populations without primarily relying on the words of European sources. Ipsen, Heywood, Crais and Scully all attempt to follow this by utilizing other disciplines besides history to examine primarily European archives discussing black populations during the transatlantic slave trade. By reexamining archives these same academics were able to create a more comprehensive look at black women affected by the Atlantic slave trade. Each author does this through their approach to the material. By choosing to focus on the economic, social, and personal lives of black women and the world around them, scholars can cultivate intrigue within a larger audience. An understanding of women through the activities and events they took part in demonstrates the progression towards a more comprehensive historical narrative.

From the beginning of Joseph Miller's *Volume 1 of Women as Slaves and Owners of Slaves: Experiences from Africa, the Indian Ocean World, and the Early Atlantic*, the author calls for the use of both slavery studies and women's studies to create a 'viable

theoretical framework' to better link and showcase the value of these two disciplines when used together.<sup>9</sup> Miller's introduction reflects the need for cross-disciplinary work to create scholarship that better appreciates the complexities of these women's lives within the transatlantic slave trade. By examining the women involved (both enslaved and not enslaved) Miller can demonstrate the importance they played in the transatlantic slave trade's economic and social complexities. Similarly, Ipsen, Heywood, Crais and Scully try to convey these intricacies by looking into the lives of African women from the Gold Coast, Central, and South Africa. It is through their lives that we can better comprehend the multiplicity of the effects of the transatlantic slave trade. These reexaminations and cross-disciplinary practices not only provide scholars insight into underrepresented groups within the scholarship but further our understanding of existing African cultures and how they intermingled.

*Daughters of the Trade: Atlantic Slavers and Interracial Marriage on the Gold Coast*, follows five generations of marriages between African (Ga and Akan) women and European (particularly Scandinavian) men in the Atlantic slave trading port of the Gold Coast - Christiansborg, (located in present day Accra) while also examining how racial difference was created within intimate encounters during the slave trade. Already common practice within the Gold Coast community at Osu, Ga families would form relationships between themselves and Danish traders through the formation of households

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<sup>9</sup> Joseph Miller, *Women as Slaves and Owners of Slaves: Experiences from Africa, the Indian Ocean World, and the Early Atlantic*, in *Women and Slavery*, Vol. 1, Ohio University Press, 2007, 1-42.

or cassare marriages<sup>10</sup><sup>11</sup>. The book comments on how these unions between Ga women and Danish men were originally organized in Ga fashion, though later began to shift towards mixing European forms of family and marriage as well. Ipsen explores how the making and evolution of this community assisted in shaping the accumulation of wealth by GA-Danish women and their descendants; the transfer of economic power as well as political later, in Osu from the Ga elites to the traders at the Danish fort; as well as the continued development of racial hierarchies.

Overall Ipsen's work attempts to demonstrate how "the increasing strength of the European colonial system shaped the individual lives and families of West African and European slave traders, and how the spatial organization and the material culture of these families shifted in a European direction". By utilizing the Atlantic slave trade, she believes we can better understand how slavery and blackness became linked, "and, more broadly, how the meaning of racial difference changed from its early modern to its more rigid and biological modern version". By reexamining three types of source groups:

...letters and documents from the Danish administration at Fort Christiansborg to the trading companies and to the king of Denmark in Copenhagen; documents and letters from the chaplains at the fort to the

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<sup>10</sup> Cassare or "keeping house" refers to interracial marriages that took place between European men and African women. While prohibited in many European colonies, Cassare marriages had become a respected custom within Gold Coast slave trading towns. This arrangement allowed for the survival and success of European men while African families secured alliances. These men would often also have families and wives back in Europe.

<sup>11</sup> Pernille Ipsen, *Daughters of the Trade*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017.



bishop of Zealand in Copenhagen and to the Danish companies trading in Africa; and finally, northern European travel accounts about West Africa.<sup>12</sup>

Problematic for primarily being European documents, Ipsen attempts to remedy the issue by relying on documents that focus on the interactions with African trading partners as opposed to those being centered around restrictive colonial ideology like many colonial archives. Ipsen argues that because European success was predicated on the involvement of African traders and populations the archive was forced to create well documented accounts of their interactions.<sup>13</sup> While an invaluable component to the success of European endeavors within Africa, there is still only so much that can be accounted for when reading through a European document. In the end Ipsen's book succeeds in creating a more comprehensive picture of the lives of Euro-African peoples and how changing racial dynamics affected their lives on the Gold Coast.

Her decision to focus on Euro-African women gives agency to an underrepresented group within a larger historical narrative. Interesting for its intricate study of Scandinavian history regarding the profiteering off Africans while encountering the multigenerational encounters between the two, what really creates a compelling narrative is how Ipsen portrays these women as both active participants within the system while reminding us how they were victims of it as well. Ipsen's decision to further examine the role of women as not only homemakers, but well-informed businesswomen

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

speaks to how African populations were able to respond to growing European influence within the continent. This complicates notions of simple victimhood by allowing readers to empathize and better understand the ways these women were able to succeed in a system designed to primarily assist men. Consequently, Ipsen leaves more to be inquired over the development of racial hierarchies within Africa. This flaw in the examination of African history as it relates to slavery plays into the draw backs of working primarily with a European archive and can be seen in many other scholar's work as well.

Authors Scully and Crais go beyond what many scholars have done in their book, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography*, by examining the life of Baartman prior to her introduction to Europe while attempting to humanize her in the process.<sup>14</sup> By having their readers look beyond Baartman's arrival to Europe we are able to see a more complete image of the woman. Rather than the image of a naïve person brought to a more 'civilized' and 'modern' Europe, we are informed that Baartman was probably more aware of those around her and other cultures than many would have originally believed. And by disputing common misconceptions in regard to Baartman's life, Crais and Scully have managed to write a more compelling and humanizing life story.

Both Scully and Crais attempt to reconstruct Baartman's life while providing insight into how she may have been perceived and reacted to a world that aimed to only exploit her based on gender and race. This historical biography aims to bring voice to the

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<sup>14</sup> Clifton C. Crais, and Pamela Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2011.

voiceless, which leads to further questions of interest and further study, though it leaves much to be assumed on the part of the authors and readers attempting to view this through a feminist or post-colonial lens. Scully and Crais' emphasis on agency, giving more power in the narrative to Baartman regarding what choices she possibly made during her exploitation in Europe, seems to possibly undermine the high potentiality of sexual assault, coercion, and other factors that could have forced Sara Baartman into participating in these performances. Despite the multitude of scholarly works about the life of a woman best remembered for the atrocities she endured abroad; little is discussed in terms of who Sara Baartman really was. And rather than settle with the lack of immediate resources looking into the colonial life of Baartman, Scully and Crais use the world around Baartman, going as far as utilizing genealogical research as means to locate possible relatives, to attempt reconstructing her life. By not singularly focusing on the inevitable victimization of this woman, the authors can bring a fuller picture and deeper empathy to a story typically told through an examination of racial science.

Linda Heywood's *Njinga of Angola: Africa's Warrior Queen*, stands as the first comprehensive biography in English of the queen of one of the largest kingdoms in what is now modern-day Angola. A combination of biography and military history, Heywood describes Njinga of Ndongo as an extraordinary leader with expert military and political skills who ruled from 1624 to 1663. She emphasizes that Njinga's legacy resides within her attempts to rebuff foreign encroachment while preserving her kingdom. This contributes to the author's claim that Njinga was "the most successful of the African rulers in resisting the Portuguese", which assisted in perpetuating her legacy as it was

carried along with slaves brought to the American colonies. Highlighting the warrior queen's life and continued resistance to European intervention creates another intricate piece to the larger historical puzzle that takes place during the Atlantic slave trade. Njinga's reign emphasizes both the prowess and militaristic capabilities of African kingdoms in early modern history. Heywood also successfully uses Njinga's life to inform her audience of a lesser-known history while also bringing some semblance of agency to a powerful African women ruler in the process.

Heywood's book is a necessary introduction to an important figure for not only African history, but world history. Utilizing primary sources in the form of letters and diaries from the warrior queen's contemporaries, Heywood sheds light on a proficient political and military leader; one who she rightly places among other great European rulers such as queen Elizabeth I, Russia's Catherine the Great, and Isabella of Castille. The warrior queen's story offers another examination of the intricate part women had to play within the slave trade. Heywood's book informs us on the fact that women played substantive parts in the resistance to European forces within Africa during the slave trade.

The use of inter and cross-disciplinary research method have enabled new interpretations and understandings of Kongo history. John K. Thornton and Linda Heywood along with art historian Cécile Fromont have expounded on the work of earlier scholars by using both Western and non-Western archives. Focused on not only the political and religious aspects of the kingdom's conversion scholars have given more thought to cross-cultural cohesion and religious syncretism. While extensive work has been written on a variety of Afro-Christian hybrid objects, like Kongo crosses, there still

remains a lack of information on the Christian structures housed within the kingdom at the time. A number of Christian churches built within the Kingdom of the Kongo remain standing and in use today, though detailed information about these edifices is minimal. This leaves a lot to inference in regard to the importance of these structures in the cultivating and ministering of Christian ideology and faith.

An active participant in Christianity and its continued development from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, the west African Kingdom of the Kongo was an integral part of the Atlantic world. Art historian Cécile Fromont's work *The Art of Conversion: Christian Visual Culture in the Kingdom of Kongo* and "Under the Sign of the Cross in the Kingdom of Kongo: Religious Conversion and Visual Correlation in Early Modern Central Africa" are important texts that demonstrate a successful presentation of facts and theory through the use of visual analysis and a nuanced interpretation of visual objects. The conversion of the central African Kingdom of the Kongo has been a subject of debate for many years. Scholars such as Fromont and John Thornton have made clear cases for the kingdom's willful conversion, demonstrating the cohesion between cultures through the synthesis of traditional central African and European religious traditions and symbolism.

Drawing from an array of mostly unpublished documents as well as images, Fromont examines cross cultural interactions between central Africa and Europe. Utilizing Kongo archival material the author offers insight into both art and visual culture to examine and understand Kongo Christianity. An example of cultural comingling and development, Fromont discusses the Kongo crosses as a means to bring together both

European and Central African artistic themes. Kongo crosses drew stylistically from both cultures to create a cross-cultural language that both Africans and Europeans could understand. This functioned as a way to bridge gaps between the two cultures while naturalizing Christianity within the local populace.<sup>15</sup> By examining various Kongo crosses and detailing both their central African and European intricacies Fromont allows the reader to visually make connections to the fact that these cultures were consistently interacting with one another over the centuries. Fromont's work offers an easy to follow narrative detailing the way Kongo visual culture has transformed over the centuries. The book's specificity on the development of Kongo Christian visual culture is pivotal, though neglects the examination of art associated with nonelites while also lacking more of a focus on Kongolese archives as opposed to European ones.<sup>16</sup> Despite colonial misrepresentation that undermined the Kongo Christian identity, she states that Christianity remained an important part of the kingdom well into the nineteenth century.

Whether purposeful or inadvertent there will always be a need for the reinterpretation of sources. It takes a historian willing to examine sources from a variety of perspectives to create a history that is truly closer to accurate representation. These reexaminations require scrutiny and a willingness to go beyond well-known archives. This means the inclusion of oral histories and access to local scholars from the areas

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<sup>15</sup> Cécile 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*, no. 59/60 (2011): 109-23.

<sup>16</sup> Cécile Fromont, *The Art of Conversion: Christian Visual Culture in the Kingdom of Kongo*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014.

being studied from afar. By making these histories a part of a larger global world history and bringing more attention to them we can create a more complete history for not only those historically known to be in positions of power, but for everyone. As a common problem faced by all these author's, the solution begins to be found in the interpretation of sources available to them. By being aware of imperfections and omissions within the archive, historians should be accountable for responsibly filling in the gaps. This responsibility rests with being able to further examine and discuss indigenous populations without too heavily relying on the words of their oppressors. Authors like Fromont, Thornton, and Heywood all attempt to follow this by utilizing other disciplines besides history to examine primarily European archives discussing black populations.

Probably one of the most well documented Kingdoms within Africa, scholarship on the Kingdom of the Kongo has been plentiful. Comprehensive books compiling archival data, oral traditions, and cross-disciplinary research methods have given rise to a vast amount of survey books such as Suzanne Blier's *Royal arts of Africa: the Majesty of Form*.

An examination of the way traditional African kingdoms employed architecture and art to define themselves, Blier's work informs and expands the readers understanding of African kingdoms as intricate structures that have been in practice and have continued to function for centuries.<sup>17</sup> Detailed descriptions of how differing kingdoms exerted power and defined themselves allows for differences as well as similarities to be

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<sup>17</sup> Suzanne Preston Blier, *Royal arts of Africa: the majesty of form*, London: Lawrence King, 1998.

identified. These similarities between kingdoms may offer insight into the decisions made by the Kingdom of the Kongo's ruler when having to deal with foreign entities, namely Europeans. Blier examines an array of royal art from the Asante, to the Edo speaking people of Benin, the Dahomey, the Kongo, the Kuba, the Yoruba, and more, to offer complex cultural readings of these artworks. Drawing on numerous illustrations and an array of individual objects including masks, thrones, royal regalia, crowns, textiles, jewelry, and body decorations Blier can move beyond simple formal analysis and assess these artifacts as important complex cultural art objects that examine questions of kingship, state cosmology, women's positions at court, as well as diplomacy, and war.

With an assessment of the Kongo Kingdom's Mbata province, the authors of "African-European Contacts in the Kongo Kingdom (Sixteenth-Eighteenth Centuries): New Archaeological Insights from Ngongo Mbata (Lower Congo, DRC)" explore the province's most affluent center, Ngongo Mbata, which was well known within historical records. During the seventeenth century Ngongo Mbata became an important settlement for the Kingdom of the Kongo. The research done at the actual archaeological site provided the authors with a better understanding of the monumental stone structure situated within there. This structure showcased the presence of European interaction, mostly Portuguese, though still leaves much to be discovered in regards to the development of this settlement.

Preliminary history of the Capital of the Kongo provides useful information that correlates and assists in exposing a fuller picture of the kingdom's history. While the historical backdrop the authors provide as a foundation to build upon for their own work



proves useful for accumulating relevant sources, it only does so for so long. This province can be utilized as an example of how the Manikongo dealt with distanced portions of his kingdom while allowing them to have more control over their religious practices. The limitations of Blier's work and others like it originates from the specificity of the material itself. The work centers on royal arts, which leaves many questions about the artifacts more commonly utilized by the local citizenry. The work also breaks into different sections, allocating time to varying kingdoms over a series of time, which takes away from the specificity needed to examine the Kingdom of the Kongo in better detail. The supplemental information provided about the Kingdom of the Kongo is necessary for understanding how provinces like Mbata functioned within the larger kingdom while having the distance that it did from the capital.

## **Chapter 1: The Beginnings of Afro-Euro Coexistence in the Kingdom of the Kongo**

At its height during the fifteenth century the kingdom stretched between 50,000 and 115,000 square miles. Its hilltop capital, Mbanza Kongo, was situated within present day Angola. With about two to three million inhabitants, the kingdom's capital encompassed royal residences and burial grounds, celebratory gathering spaces, a royal court called the mabazi a mambu (mambu, "argument"), and by the end of the sixteenth century a space was allocated to the Portuguese as well as several churches. Continued Portuguese intervention in the Kongo's political and social affairs would result in the gradual degeneration of the kingdom and lead to its eventual abandonment.<sup>18</sup> Rather than a land shrouded in unfamiliar majesty, the Kingdom of the Kongo has always been one of cultural commingling well since the fifteenth century. With much of its history resting within European archives dating back to the arrival of the Portuguese and oral tradition, interpretative and critical examination of sources necessary.

It was widely believed within the kingdom that upon death a person would have to cross an expansive body of water to reach the place of the ancestors, an area believed to be submerged within the water beneath the earth. Conversely, Mbanza Kongo, later to be renamed São Salvador by the Portuguese, was located on the highest mountain in the region.<sup>19</sup> The natural climate surrounding the capital accentuated the areas connection to the spiritual realm, making it an ideal location. Characterized by territorial expansion and

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<sup>18</sup> Suzanne Preston Blier, *Royal arts of Africa: the majesty of form*, London: Lawrence King, 1998. p. 201

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* p. 204.

technological innovation, early Kongo history attests to a complex and dynamic society. The development of political authority and social classes came around 100 A.D. while iron and steel work began about as early as 350 B.C..<sup>20</sup> From its inception, Kongo royalty has been closely linked with the art of smithing; smiths having to undergo similar initiations to that of chiefs. The sounds of smithies and foundries would have been audible throughout Mbanza Kongo. Consequently, the kingdom was often compared to iron, which was epitomized through the creation of axes, hoes, and weapons. Smiths also played an important role in the purification and protection of any new royal residence.

With an economy based on an intricate system of commerce, exchange comprised of trade between the interior, the coast, equatorial forests, and the savanna. Dissimilar to some of its most notable contemporaries like the kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay, the king of the Kongo had direct control over several differing ecological zones. Governors were responsible for collecting important key resources within their provinces. To provide safety to regional chieftaincy centers, towns were built away from main roads and on hills<sup>21</sup>. Items such as shell money, copper, salt, and raffia cloth were then sent to the capital, where the king would redistribute them to different provinces. While small craft items and agricultural products were freely traded within local markets, long distance trade involving key resources remained exclusively within the hands of the king and governors.<sup>22</sup> While abundant in natural materials, one of the regions most important

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<sup>20</sup> Suzanne Preston Blier, *Royal arts of Africa: the majesty of form*, London: Lawrence King, 1998.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 88

<sup>22</sup> Harms, Robert. *Africa in global history with sources*. 2018

features for Europeans was the Congo River itself. An important nexus of trade, the tight control the Kongo king held over commerce caused the Portuguese to be prudent in their initial interactions with the Manikongo.

Predating foreign intervention, the Kingdom traces its beginnings to a political marriage between Nima a Nzima, of the Mpemba Kasi, and Luqueni Luansanze, of the Mbata, in perhaps as early as 1400. Through their child, Lukeni Lua Nimi, the foundation of the Kingdom of the Kongo began with its very first Manikongo or ruler. While highly centralized, the kingdom was also known for its textiles, ivories, well-organized state structure, and strong sovereigns.<sup>23</sup> Through these kings absolute power was instilled, though that power was not hereditary. Qualified electors were responsible for choosing the king from a selection of eligible candidates. This placed pressure on the transition of power for the king, making it imperative that he assert his legitimacy as a political, spiritual, and military leader.<sup>24</sup> The need to prove and solidify power meant the king of the Kongo had to depend on a wide range of regalia as well as symbolic associations to both demonstrate and solidify power.

The use of symbolism and myth to bolster political and religious control were methods already familiar within Europe. Things like commissioning royal portraits or religious artworks for one's own civic or spiritual gain was a familiar practice in countries like France, Spain, and Portugal. The implementation of carefully constructed

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<sup>23</sup> Suzanne Preston Blier, *Royal arts of Africa: the majesty of form*, London: Lawrence King, 1998.

<sup>24</sup> Cécile Fromont, *The Art of Conversion: Christian Visual Culture in the Kingdom of Kongo*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014.

images easily assisted in administering particular thoughts and perceptions among local citizenry. The strategic commissioning of art objects as well as the application of various symbolic myths have always traditionally helped in curating carefully constructed narratives. The need for distinct and powerful symbolism created a conscientious need to accept and carefully control what foreign cultural and traditional practices could thrive within the kingdom. With the art of smithing being so closely connected to Kongo royalty and the conversion of the Kongo king, prominent icons to indigenous spirituality like crosses began to develop new meaning. With European intervention the comingling of African and European symbols of power was inevitable.

European involvement in the Kongo was inevitable and African kingdoms already had experience intermingling with differing communities within the continent. The Portuguese's arrival guaranteed the Kongo's place in European affairs and diplomacy. This would also ensure the Kongo's future issues with the Portuguese over a myriad of issues ranging from the slave trade to territory expansion. Cão and his men did not return to the Kongo until 1485. Accompanied by the captives he had taken (all of whom could speak Portuguese and report on their travels to Europe now), Catholic priests, carpenters, and stonemasons, Cão and his delegation were welcomed to the capital. An important result of this encounter was the willful conversion of the Kongo monarch, Nzinga a Nkuwu (r. 1470 - 1509), who took the name João I after the king of Portugal.

King Nzinga a Nkuwu's baptism was recorded to have occurred on May 3, 1491.<sup>25</sup> This would lead to a succession of changes: the king's name was changed to João I, Catholicism would eventually be declared the state religion, and local temples and idols would be inescapably destroyed. A variety of reasons have been proposed for the Kongo king's acceptance of Christianity. Whether political ploy or a genuine act of spiritual revelation, there is no denying the intricate and almost seamless cohesion of the kingdom's adoption of Catholicism. Under João I large reforms were enacted based on the knowledge gained from the Portuguese and the Kongolese men who had been to Europe, though it was under his successor and son, Afonso I Mvemba a Nzinga (r. 1509 - 1542), that Christianity was officially made the kingdom's state religion.

Rulership over the Kongo would remain stable for another several decades under Diogo I Nkumbi a Mpudi (r. 1544–1561), Álvaro I Nimi a Lukeni lua Mbemba (r. 1568–1587), and Álvaro II Mpanzu a Nimi (r. 1587–1614). The kingdom would eventually fall into the hands of invading warriors called the Jaga after years of internal conflict. Eventually with assistance from the Portuguese king the Kongo was able to dispel the Jaga. The Kongo's vulnerability consequently allowed for the Iberian realm to establish the colonial city of Luanda.<sup>26</sup> Rising desires to increase trade gradually caused the Portuguese to establish themselves along the central west African coast. Having taken

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<sup>25</sup> Cécile 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*, no. 59/60 (2011): 109-23.

<sup>26</sup> John K. Thornton, "The Kingdom of Kongo and the Thirty Years' War," *Journal of World History* 27, no. 2 (2016): 189-213.

over the Kingdom of Ngola, which had been located just south of Kongo, the Portuguese changed the spelling to “Angola” and quickly created a colony there as well in 1575.

Having faced a mix of optimism and resistance, Christianity had inevitably prevailed in becoming the state religion. This religious shift within central African history would be defined by the populations increased involvement in political, commercial, and religious early modern Christian networking. Despite the conversion of the Manikongo being in longstanding debate among scholars, the comingling of differing religious ideas and practices was a familiar routine among varying African populations. Primarily used to assist in assimilating conquered or submissive communities into the larger kingdom, religious beliefs from these newly conquered lands would be absorbed into the larger religious narrative. This practice would enable the Kongo to develop new hybrid Afro-Christian religious symbols which came in the form of carefully crafted objects like metal crosses and beautifully constructed churches.

It was the kingdom’s relationship to Christianity and its European contacts that would play an important role in both its success and downfall. When examining the adoption of Christian symbolism and other visual identifiers the events that occurred near the king’s baptism demonstrate this implementation of Catholic motifs. It was a few days after the baptism when two men who had also been baptized with the king experienced similar visions of the Virgin Mary. The next day one of these men came across an exotic black stone with a cross carved into it. When brought to European priests it was deemed a reaffirming sign to the Catholic faith. From within the Kongo the story of the black stone legitimized the conversion while the priests witnessed the event as an act of divine

intervention. This is where the cross becomes a point of convergence between both groups by becoming a sign of Kongo nkisi, or a “holy thing”. Christianity within the Kongo began to include familiar local religious motifs to create something both accepted by the Kongo peoples as well as the Catholic Church. The cross comes at a pivotal time for a budding religion within a foreign land and becomes an example of a communion for both Africans and Europeans to express themselves.

The development of Christianity within the Kongo inevitably caught the attention of various missionary orders, one being the Company of Jesus (later called the Society of Jesus), which was founded in 1540. While an integral factor in the spread of Christianity in Africa, documentation of Jesuit intervention within the continent remains difficult to come by. The kingdom’s initial interaction with the Jesuits came after a request for more priests from the Manikongo Dom Diogo (r. 1545 - 1561). Jesuits: Father Jorge Vaz, Jacome Dias, Cristovao Ribeiro, and priest in training Diogo do Soveral arrived in Mbanza in 1548. By 1560 more Jesuits had been led to the Angola area by 1st Captain-Governor and Conqueror of Portuguese Angola, Paulo Dias de Novais (ca. 1510 - 1589), who would take over the area and found Luanda as ‘São Paulo da Assumpção de Loanda’. Dias de Novais allocated land to the Jesuits, who would then utilize the space for the Church of Jesus (Igreja de Jesus) and the College of Jesus. Focusing primarily on ministering to Africans located in the interior of Angola, the Jesuits focused their operations in two main centers: the Kongo capital Mbanza (which was later renamed São Salvador or “Holy Savior” after a Jesuit church that had been dedicated to the Savior) and Luanda. Jesuit integration within the Kongo community was more successful in the



southern regions of the kingdom, concentrating roughly in present day Angola. With the Jesuit's mission intertwined with Portugal's involvement in Africa, the settlement of Angola would become the European country's most important settlement. Luanda's distance from the Kongo capital as well as its establishment and control by the Portuguese enabled the settlement to have virtually autonomous rule over itself. Oral traditions suggest that the political structure initially encountered by the Portuguese was organized into varying autonomous polities that recognized the Kongo King. It was in the later stage of the Kingdom that direct administration of these territories happens through conquest.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Bernard Clist, Els Cranshof, Gilles-Maurice De Schryver, Davy Herremans, Karlis Karklins, Igor Matonda, Fanny Steyaert, and Koen Bostoen. "African-European Contacts in the Kongo Kingdom (Sixteenth-Eighteenth Centuries): New Archaeological Insights from Ngongo Mbata (Lower Congo, DRC)." *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 19, no. 3 (2015): 464-50.



*Figure 1: Map of Central West African Kingdoms, fifteenth century. The distance between various towns and the capital are crucial to understanding how certain places remained virtually autonomous.*

Once considered a viable ally responsible for the kingdom's introduction to Christianity, the relationship between the Kingdom of the Kongo and the Portuguese gradually deteriorated over increasing issues over resources and religious autonomy. The first Kongo-Portuguese War took place in 1622 after years of increased aggression from the governors of Portuguese Angola. After Portugal's initial attempt to conquer the Kingdom of Ndongo, Portuguese governor Mendes de Vasconcellos made an alliance with the Imbangala or Mbangala, a group of ruthless mercenaries from the south of the Kwanza River. Utilizing the Imbangala, de Vasconcellos was able to acquire slaves while

devastating the Ndongo. de Vasconcellos' successor João Correia de Sousa, would later use the Imbangala to attack Kongo territories, first targeting Kazanze, which had been harboring runaway slaves from Portuguese Angola. Under the command of Captain Major Pedro de Sousa Coelho 20, 000 Mbundu and Portuguese forces, along with the Imbangala, invaded Nambu a Ngongo, located within the Kongo province of Mbamba. Once taken, Sousa Coelho led nearly 30,000 men against the forces of the Marquis of Pemba Cosme and the Duke of Mbamba Paulo Afonso in Bumbi.<sup>28</sup>

Armed with faith, sword, and shield the Duke of Mbamba went against the Portuguese only to be slain along with an assortment of lesser nobles and thousands of soldiers. The aftermath of the battle of Mbumbi led to widespread discontent and anti-Portuguese sentiment within the whole of the Kingdom of the Kongo. Kongo-Portuguese relations had worsened, and the Kongo inevitably declared war on Portuguese Angola. Another consequence of the loss had been due to king Pedro II's (r. 1622 – 1624) agreement to support a Dutch invasion of Luanda. The Dutch had captured Luanda in 1641 and attempted to reinstate relations with the Kongo. This would lead to the expulsion of nearly all Luso-African and Portuguese merchants from the area. Violence over territory and access to economic endeavors would lead to not only a second, but eventual third war between the Kongo and the Portuguese. By the Third Portuguese war

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<sup>28</sup> John K. Thornton, "The Kingdom of Kongo and the Thirty Years' War," *Journal of World History* 27, no. 2 (2016): 189-213.

the Dutch were forced to surrender Luanda and withdraw from Angola. A new Portuguese governor was instated, and the Portuguese regained control over Luanda.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> John K. Thornton, "The Kingdom of Kongo and the Thirty Years' War," *Journal of World History* 27, no. 2 (2016): 189-213.

## **Chapter 2: Christianity Thrives in the Kingdom of the Kongo**

The Kingdom of the Kongo's "miraculous" conversion to Christianity and its effect on the region's external and internal political, religious, and foreign affairs have been and remain an important topic of discussion among historians and anthropologists. Africanists like John K. Thornton have argued that a suitable understanding of the kingdom's conversion has been hindered by the continued existence of misconceptions about the Kongo's relationship with Europeans and the effect that relationship had on Christianity. Simply equated to colonial coercion through the implementation of a foreign religion, the Manikongo's conversion has often been viewed as superficial. The Manikongo's request to be baptized in 1491 addresses the voluntary nature of the conversion by its ruling class.<sup>30</sup> Though it is important to note that it was under his son, Afonso I, that Christianity became naturalized within the Central African kingdom through the intermingling of Christianity with Kongo mythology.

Outlined in a series of letters to the Pope and his vassals, Alfonso detailed his intended narrative of ascension. He described himself as a Christian prince on the verge of defeat against his heathen brother, Mpanzu a Nzinga. Having called upon Saint James, who is said to have appeared with a calvary of horsemen, Afonso was able to overcome his enemies. Emerging victorious as the sign of the cross branded the sky, Afonso not only solidified his allegiance to the faith but connected himself to traditional Kongo mythology. Art historian Cécile Fromont considers Afonso's narrative an equation to the

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<sup>30</sup> Thornton, John. "The Development of an African Catholic Church in the Kingdom of Kongo, 1491-1750." *The Journal of African History* 25, no. 2 (1984): 147-67 (147)

kingdom's founding hero, Lukeni, as both rulers appear to take control through military prowess while bringing a new form of knowledge to the land.<sup>31</sup> Afonso's battle for the throne correlates with the Kongo's indirect road ascension, which explains the king's need to establish and solidify power through symbolism and mythology. The king's use of Christianity to solidify his reign does not only demonstrate adherence to a foreign ideology, but an acute awareness of its mythology as well. The similarities between Afonso's ascension and that of the Christian ruler Constantine's demonstrates this well. The incorporation of familiar Kongo imagery with prevalent Christian motifs in the form of hybridized religious items like the Kongo Cross illustrates how the continuation of Christian practices over the centuries continued and thrived.

Even after a century marked by divisive civil warfare that helped fuel the growing demand for slaves overseas, prevalent hybridized Kongo-Christian religious movements like the Antonian movement were still able to develop and thrive. Years of conflict between the Kongo and Portuguese along with civil unrest culminated into the development of two rival power centers by the 1660s: the capital city of São Salvador and the province of Soyo. During a successional dispute São Salvador was ransacked in 1666 and then again 1669. Soyo installed a new king both times though the noble families of São Salvador responded by moving to the countryside; therefore reducing the population within the capital from 50,000 in 1650 to 3,000 in 1672.<sup>32</sup> The rest of the

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<sup>31</sup> Cécile 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*, no. 59/60 (2011): 109-23. (113)

<sup>32</sup> Robert Harms, 2018, *Africa in global history with sources*.

century was plagued with more civil unrest and the collapse of centralized power within São Salvador, which enabled a variety of political and social changes to take place. These long years of conflict coupled into the development of an idea of a unified Christian Kongo with São Salvador as a symbol of national unity. This idea was widely circulated by a young noble woman by the name of Beatriz Kimpa Vita (1684 – 1706).<sup>33</sup>

Born into a Kongolese family of high nobility, Dona Beatriz was taught as a traditional Kongolese practitioner while also being educated on the Christian faith. Like many within the Kongo, she held an inclusive attitude towards Christianity without rejecting traditional cults. At the age of twenty she became ill only to regain her health a few days later claiming that Saint Anthony (the patron saint of Portugal) had possessed her body. She had been commanded by God to end the civil war within the Kongo and reunite the kingdom by reoccupying the abandoned capital of São Salvador. When her message was rejected by the nobles she began to preach in villages claiming to be the reincarnation of Saint Anthony. Dona Beatriz began to preach that the Virgin Mary and Jesus were Kongolese, going even further to claim that Jesus had been born in São Salvador and was baptized in the Kongo province of Nsundi. Dona Beatriz was able to take elements of Christianity and reinterpret them into versions that seemed more authentically Kongolese.<sup>34</sup> While the movement represented the distrust the Kongolese had for Europeans (including clergy) it also represented a desire to create a more relatable Christian imagery where Christ was seen as African.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid (192-193)

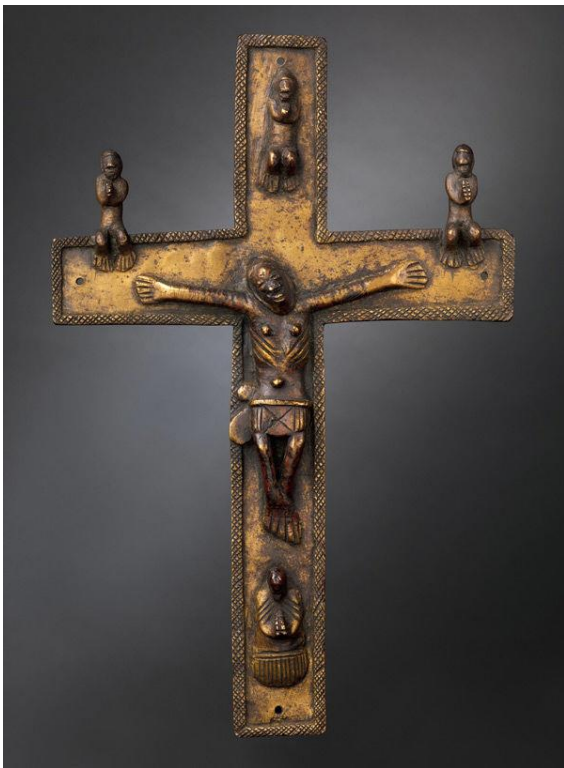
<sup>34</sup> Ibid (193)

Both Portuguese and Kongo entities utilized religion as a means of exerting control. By bringing Christianity to central Africa the Portuguese attempted to act as cultivators of the Catholic faith while underhandedly implementing it as a means of control over the new Christian kingdom. Jesuit presence and the creation of Catholic churches like the Igreja de Jesus could have played an important role in examining the use of religion as a means of regulation not only by Europeans, but by Africans as well. The use of distinctive Catholic/Christian symbolism while catering to local indigenous populations gave Europeans a better opportunity to gain access to African trade and resources. The Kongo crown already had a history of utilizing religious symbolism while intertwining foreign religious ideologies as a means of legitimizing control. Symbols like crosses had already held a place within Kongo culture, so when interwoven with Christian ideology Kongo kings were able to implement it as another means of demonstrating their right to the throne.

Following the conversion to Christianity by both local dignitaries and kings, prominent indigenous symbols of transition like the cross began to take on a new meaning. Christian icons were being utilized for political as well as religious purposes by Kongo rulers that acted as earthly representatives of the sky god Nzambi Mpungu. These rulers were able to utilize Christian art as a more potentially direct way to get in communication with the ancestors. The sign of the cross had become an important visual tool in both artistic and religious comingling between the Kongo traditions and Christianity. After Afonso I's victory over his brother he erected a large wooden cross within the capital at Mbanza Kongo not only to assert his political, but his spiritual



authority. With the manikongo's conversion to Christianity came demands from the Portuguese for the destruction of traditional Kongo religious objects, which had been labeled as 'idols'. In response to this, European missionaries as well as Kongo kings began to distribute rosaries, medals, and crosses. Crosses were utilized as signs of devotion and left on graves and altars, similarly to how they were used in Europe. Though like traditional Kongo religious objects, these crosses also functioned as modes of protection, cures for illnesses, and amulets of good fortune.



*Figure 2.1: Crucifix, 16th–17th century. Kongo peoples; Kongo Kingdom, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic of the Congo, or Angola. Brass (solid cast); H. 10 3/4 in. (27.3 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Ernst Anspach, 1999 (1999.295.7). Photograph by Peter Zeray.*

*Figure 2.2: Right: Master of the Orcagnesque Misericordia (Italian, active second half 14th century). Crucifix, 1370–75. Tempera on wood, gold ground; 18 x 13 1/4 in (45.7 x 33.7 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Samuel H. Kress, 1927 (27.231ab)*

At a glance the Kongo cross exemplifies the standard elements of a Christian cross. The central figure demonstrates Christ's crucifixion; an emaciated Christ looks on with arms stretched and feet crossed. Based on earlier European prototypes, this cross incorporates what we would expect from local art styles within the Kongo. While the position and overall look of the crosses brings about thoughts of the European religious representation of Christ, the details allude to the piece's African heritage. The face of Christ is difficult to recognize while his hands and feet have been flattened, connecting to Kongo interpretations of heightened spiritual power. The large eyes of Christ are a common artistic motif in Kongo art, demonstrating the supernatural vision of someone possessed by a deity or ancestor.<sup>35</sup> Two figures also flank Christ as one more rests below his feet, while the identity of these figures are unknown, they could potentially be ancestors or mourners. The loincloth around Christ's waist also appears to be representative of the locally crafted African raffia cloth. The 'X' shaped marking at the center of Christ's loincloth is another traditional Kongo symbol believed to heighten the power of the crucifix and it assists the user in communicating with the other world. Overall, the Kongo Crucifix in comparison to a European counterpart is very similar in composition, though varies in artistic detail. This cohesion of Christian and traditional Kongo religious elements demonstrates how both African and European ideology were able to come together and coexist within the Kingdom of the Kongo.

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<sup>35</sup> LaGamma, Alisa, Josiah Blackmore, Christine Giuntini, James Green, Ellen G. Howe, Phyllis M. Martin, Adriana Rizzo, John K. Thornton, and Kristen Windmuller-Luna. 2015. Kongo: power and majesty.

A means to understanding how Christianity was readily accepted by the kingdom's nobility may coincide in familiar Kongo Cosmology. Similar to how many differing sects and facets make up Christianity, there is no singular Kongo cosmology, though as stated by Metropolitan curator Alisa LaGamma there would have been well-known foundational principles already in place by the time the Portuguese arrived in the sixteenth century:

A foundational precept of the Kongo belief system is the division of the universe into two parallel realms of the living and the dead... The realm of the living is characterized as black, in contrast to that of the ancestors, Mpemba, which is blanched of color and identified with the chalk or white kaolin drawn from riverbeds... Red is the color transitional states between white and black. The living regularly invoke the intervention of influential forces in Mpemba, including *bakulu* (the ancestors), *bisimbi* or *bakisi* (local nature spirits), and *minkisi* (spirit personalities that empower fabricated objects or charms)... *Nkisi* (pl. *minkisi*) is the complex of physical matter, rules, songs, and ritual actions associated with his activation of a specific spiritual force. It is deployed to identify and punish those responsible for afflicting others with any number of problems, among them, sickness, or death.<sup>36</sup>

For the Kongo the appearance of the Portuguese marked the arrival of an ethereal embassy from its counterpart in Mpemba (which would be the King of Portugal in this

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<sup>36</sup> LaGamma, Alisa, Josiah Blackmore, Christine Giuntini, James Green, Ellen G. Howe, Phyllis M. Martin, Adriana Rizzo, John K. Thornton, and Kristen Windmuller-Luna. 2015. *Kongo: power and majesty*. (30)

case). The encounter led to Kongo nobility incorporating Christian elements into its existing belief system. Consequently, Roman Catholic priests were eventually associated with *banganga*, “while their references to the ‘holy’, ‘sacred’, and ‘divine’ were translated to *nkisi*”.<sup>37</sup> This cohesion of religious elements only reinforces the idea that the Kongo’s conversion was more than simple European interference.

The kingdom’s inclusion of Christianity within existing traditional African principles was a pivotal turning point for the Kingdom of the Kongo. Not only an expansive kingdom with access to a variety of resources, the Kongo became an important Christian center during the fifteenth century. Intent on creating an independent Kongo church, Afonso created a kingdom-wide educational system led by schoolmasters called *mestres de escola*. These schoolmasters, who were literate in both Christian tenants as well as Portuguese literature, were responsible for educating the rural populace. By 1624 these *mestres de escola* had already translated Marcos Jorge’s *Doutrina Christã* (Christian Doctrine, 1566), a Portuguese catechism, into Kikongo.<sup>38</sup> Prior to that, in 1534 the papacy made São Tomé (a Portuguese island colony) an episcopal see with the Kongo as one of its branches. Despite Afonso’s efforts to establish a self-sufficient church within the Kongo, a Portuguese bishop remained in control over the ordained clergy, which meant the ordination of any Kongolese was a rarity. Portuguese bishops were inclined to work in favor of European interests; consequently, refusing to appoint priests which forced the locals to rely heavily on the laity (*mestres de escola*), making relations tense

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid (34)

<sup>38</sup> Ibid (94)

between the Portuguese and the people of the Kongo.<sup>39</sup> In response, the Kongo king would occasionally withhold services and income from bishops as well as their supporters while paying and continuing to appoint lay teachers. Portuguese intervention within the church had little sway due to the religious education of the people coming directly from those appointed by the Manikongo. Campaigns led into areas held by the Kongo crown by Angola governors also contributed to the upset between the Kingdom of the Kongo and Portugal. These continued transgressions would lead to public condemnations by Kongo rulers.

An examination of history as well as stylistic choices is necessary to understand the formation of Afro-Euro cross-cultural identities and how symbols of power can be reinterpreted and utilized within different cultures. Jesuit structures like the Igreja de Jesus, as well as other Catholic structures provide a means to analyze how African and European identities were created, sustained, and coexisted. Despite the impact of Jesuit intervention in the Kongo and their contributions to the promotion of Christianity within central Africa, immediate access to information is difficult to come by. By comparing and juxtaposing clear signs of cultural intermingling with more subtle ones, one can see how both worked independently and collectively to support power structures by both Kongo royalty and European enterprise to maintain that control. The Kongo could take better control over its Christian religious practices presumably because of its distance from Europe and the Manikongo's control over how religion was taught to the masses. While the Kongo did not hold the autonomous right to appoint bishops like some

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid (95)

European countries, it still held fierce control over the religious messages interpreted and distributed throughout the kingdom.

### **Chapter 3: Case Study: The Igreja de Jesus (Church of Jesus)**

#### *History*

Already subject to heavy Portuguese influence, the Kongo had naturally been equipped with an existing church and local bishop by the time Jesuit presence made itself known within the Congo-Angola<sup>40</sup> region. By 1548 four Jesuits- Fathers Cristovao Ribeiro, Jacome Dias, and Jorge Vaz, as well as scholastic (as members in training for the priesthood were referenced), Diogo do Soveral, journeyed to the Kongo capital of Mbanza Kongo at the request of Afonso's successor, King Dom Diogo I. The request had been made to King João III of Portugal, who had then passed the request to the Jesuits.<sup>41</sup> Over time Jesuit intervention was more successful within the southern parts of the region, primarily within the Portuguese controlled Angola area due to the country's prevalent involvement within the continent. By 1560 four more Jesuits had joined another Portuguese mission within Angola, this time led by Paulo Dias de Novais (ca. 1510-1589), grandson to the famous explorer Bartholomew Dias (ca. 1451-1500). Once the area was pacified from native resistance and Dias de Novias was able to establish beneficial missionary and commerce activity within the region he awarded the Jesuits land to build upon.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> The spelling of Kongo (with a 'K') is directly related to the KiKongo speakers that founded the kingdom, while the alternative spelling of Congo (with a 'C') stems from the Portuguese translation of the name.

<sup>41</sup> Festo Mkenda, Review of *Jesuits and Africa*. Oxford Handbooks Online. Oxford University Press. August 2016.  
<https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935420.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199935420-e-56#oxfordhb-9780199935420-e-56-bibliography-1>.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid

Within Angola the Jesuits worked from two primary centers: Mbanza and Luanda (which was reported to have up to 8,000 Christians in 1593). The Jesuits were able to successfully disseminate their message to the local population by catering to the Kongolese people; for example the translation of important Christian texts like the *Cartilla de la Sagrada Doctrina* (“Ideas of Christian Doctrine”) into Kikongo by Father Mateus Cardoso in 1624.<sup>43</sup> The Jesuits had also established a growing number of Christian villages within the Angola interior. These villages were then catered to by both Portuguese and Angolan catechists while also being regularly visited by the Jesuits as well. Given the Kongo’s inability to appoint local Kongolese bishops, primarily due to Portuguese interference, foreign priests, like the Jesuits, were present primarily to administer the sacraments while lay peoples remained in charge of Christian education.<sup>44</sup> When the Portuguese Crown claimed the right to appoint bishops to the Kongo in 1534 it allowed for continued hold over the kingdom from a distance which subsequently gave authority to the Jesuits.<sup>45</sup> Many of the ministries the Jesuits had established were maintained well into the eighteenth century. Another important task to the Jesuits were the education and ‘civilizing’ of the local Kongo populations.

After Governor Paulo Dias de Novais regained control over Luanda from Dutch occupation, the lands awarded to the Jesuits were utilized to build a school and church. One Jesuit college was built in São Salvador in 1623 and another in Luanda in 1622,

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid

<sup>44</sup> John Thornton, “Afro-Christian Syncretism in Kingdom of Kongo,” *Journal of African History* 54/1 (2013): 53–77.

<sup>45</sup> John Thornton, “Conquest and Theology,” *The Journal of Jesuit Studies* 1, no. 2 (2014): 245-259, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22141332-00102006>.



though what was believed to be the overall crowning achievement of the Jesuit mission within Angola was the main church in Luanda. Located next to the Presidential Palace, the Igreja de Jesus (Church of Jesus), also known as the Igreja dos Jesuitas, was the former church associated with the Jesuit college established within the city in the early seventeenth century. The school dedicated to the church was an important learning center for Angolans as well as Brazilian students studying to join the priesthood. The college's students also participated in delivering catechetical instructions in Kimbundu to the natives. Seven Jesuits along with five missionaries served the Colégio, which also had a technical school attached to it.<sup>46</sup> As the second structure built by the Jesuits, the Igreja de Jesus was described as the Jesuits' crowning glory and perhaps the largest concrete structure at the time. Construction began in 1612 and continued for several years. It was described at one point as the most sumptuous church within Luanda. The church followed typical Jesuit tradition in its creation; constructed in the Baroque style, the Igreja de Jesus was designed to mirror other Jesuit churches at the time.

Portugal's allegiance to Spain in the early seventeenth century left the country's colonies vulnerable to attacks from the Netherlands<sup>47</sup>. Considered one of Spain's most aggressive enemies at the time, the Netherlands repeatedly raided and conquered

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<sup>46</sup> Festo Mkenda, Review of *Jesuits and Africa*. Oxford Handbooks Online. Oxford University Press. August 2016.  
<https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935420.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199935420-e-56#oxfordhb-9780199935420-e-56-bibliography-1>.

<sup>47</sup> Prior to its independence and recognition of the seven northern provinces in 1648, the Low Countries were controlled by the Spanish crown. Mounting tension over religious suppression and taxation eventually gave rise to the Dutch Revolt, which would lead to a separation of northern and southern provinces in the Low Countries.

Portuguese territories during what became known as the Dutch-Portuguese War. Portuguese frustration over the country's involvement in Spanish affairs, like the Eighty Years' War<sup>48</sup>, culminated into a revolution within the country in 1640. While the Portuguese hoped to quell relations with the Dutch during the rebellion, the Dutch attempted to expand their colonial holdings within the central African region. By 1641 Luanda and Benguela came under Dutch occupation; the Portuguese governor and other refugees were forced to flee inland to Massangano. The boarding school (the Colégio de Jesus) became the Governor's residence while the church was utilized for the governor and parliament's councils. Portugal was unable to dislodge the Dutch from Luanda, which inevitably affected the colony's supply of slaves to Brazil. In response Brazilian colonists were able to raise money and launch an expedition that ultimately unseated the Dutch from Angola.

After regaining control the Portuguese renamed São Paulo de Luanda (St. Paul of Luanda since its foundation on January 25 of 1575) to São Paulo de Assunção de Luanda (St. Paul of the Assumption of Luanda). By the eighteenth century though the Jesuits had been expelled from both Portugal and its colonies. Under the direction of Marquês de Pombal, who was the Secretary of State at the time (1st Minister and Economic Minister of King Dom José I), all of Jesuits church goods and items were confiscated and in turn the Igreja de Jesus in Luanda fell into a state of degradation over the years. The church

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<sup>48</sup> The Dutch War of Independence or the Eighty Year's War was a revolt against Phillip II of Spain by the Seventeen Provinces. King Phillip regained control of most of the provinces, though the north persisted to rebel until they were able to oust Hapsburg armies. Despite its autonomy battles persisted overseas, which included Dutch colonial attacks on Portuguese holdings. This was due to Portugal's dynastic union to Spain.

underwent major reconstruction in 1953 under the direction of architect Humberto Reis. The original façade of the church was preserved, though changes were made to the roof over the central nave, which today has saddleback roofing that rests on a metal structure. It was then blessed and reopened in the winter of 1958 by the Archbishop of Luanda at the time, Dom Moisés Alves de Pinho. Then from 1961 to 1975 the church was utilized as the main headquarters of Angola’s Military Chaplain until the church was adapted to be able to offer liturgical services and was then given back to the Archbishop of Luanda. Sometime after 1975 the structure officially became a parish church and three years later the church became the Cathedral See of the Archdiocese of Luanda.<sup>49</sup> The Igreja de Jesus today stands as a National Monument within Angola.



*Figure 3.1: Façade of the seventeenth-century church, Igreja de Jesus, in Luanda, Angola*

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<sup>49</sup> Maria Amélia, “Angola Field Trip: Seven Historic Churches Tour, February 2009,” <http://angolafieldgroup.com/historic-tours/>.

*Society of Jesus and the Il Gesù*

Founded in 1540 by St. Ignatius Loyola, the Society of Jesus has been involved in over a hundred nations over the years. John O'Malley has commented on the outstanding amount of artistic patronage and production the Jesuits were involved in:

“Nothing in the founding of the Jesuits in 1540 and in the behavior of the Jesuits at that time suggested any particular engagement with the arts. True, the ten founders led by Ignatius of Loyola were, as a collectivity, exceptionally well-educated. All ten held the prestigious Master of Arts degree from the University of Paris. But that education was relentlessly bookish and intellectualised, with no provision even for literature, let alone painting, sculpture, and architecture.”<sup>50</sup>

He continues to discuss the relevance St. Ignatius's dedication to focusing on the formal education of lay students towards the middle of the sixteenth century, “the humanistic philosophy of education the Jesuits espoused required active engagement by the students, which meant that performing works of literature, not simply reading them, was essential to the programme.”<sup>51</sup> Inevitably the Jesuits would need to build functional schools and churches to continue their work. As a new order they would naturally have to grapple with architecture. With St. Ignatius behind the idea of a grand church in the center of Rome an agreement was reached between the order and Cardinal Alessandro Farnese (1520 – 1589), grandson of Pope Paul III. From that agreement Il Gesù was created.

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<sup>50</sup> John O'Malley, “The Jesuits and the Arts in the Tridentine Era,” *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 104, no. 416 (2015): 481–493, p. 487 - 488.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, p. 489.

Farnese was not only influential at the time, but Rome's leading patron of the arts by the mid-sixteenth century<sup>52</sup>. Benefiting from early onset nepotism, Farnese was wealthy enough to patronize a variety of arts throughout the city. Farnese's grandfather had been the one to officially approve the Jesuits in 1540 and therefore the Farnese family had deep connections to the order. This relationship helped to perpetuate the Cardinal's lavish spending on the church, which assisted the Jesuits in becoming one of the leading orders, with an extravagant church to match. Strife was felt between the Jesuits and the Cardinal though over the size and decoration of the Gesù, which ultimately culminated into a church that was probably a bit more sumptuous than the Jesuits would have wanted. The Jesuit's original plan to use brother architect, Giovanni Tristano, to create a big, single-aisled hall comprising of a shallow apse and side chapels were set aside to allow Farnese's architect, Jacopo Barozzi Vignola, to work on the project. Vignola settled with a Latin cross plan that composed of a cupola, deep apse, and single nave, side chapels. Construction was done with the assistance of Jesuit architect supervisors: Giuseppe Valeriano (until 1590) and then Giovanni de Rosis (1590-9).<sup>53</sup>

The Gesù became a model for many Jesuit churches abroad. While not obligated to retain the model, the fact many Jesuit churches resemble the mother church reflect the influence and persistence of the style. One explanation for this continuity in style abroad could potentially be attributed to the dissemination of church design prints. While many

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<sup>52</sup> Clare Robertson, *"Il Gran Cardinale" : Alessandro Farnese, Patron of the Arts / Clare Robertson*. New Haven ;: Yale University Press, 1992.

<sup>53</sup> Gauvin Alexander Bailey, *Between Renaissance and Baroque: Jesuit Art in Rome, 1565-1610*, University of Toronto Press, 2003, p. 193.

Jesuit churches are considered Baroque in style, many others were not, to accommodate the customs and tastes of locals. Detailed church prints would make the architectural details of il Gesù accessible in areas where the Jesuits were located. This would allow for a transfer of ideas between both Europeans and Africans. Designed with a single nave without aisles, the church does not have a narthex which assists in centering the congregation's attention on the high altar. Interconnected chapels replace possible aisles and the transepts have been shortened to bring notice to the end altars. These same exterior and interior architectural designs can also be seen in the Igreja de Jesus' design. With the Jesuit's resources and their mission to educate it would have been pivotal for them to work with local craftsmen and architects within the Kongo, who would then have been able assist in closely emulating the Gesù's architectural structure abroad. Whether architectural or artistic, there was most likely indigenous participation in the church's construction. As a religious communal space that also functioned as a school there would have presumably been local participation. The church's continued use today speaks to its perpetuated importance to the populace even after so many years.

Accommodation seemed to supersede conquest, allowing Jesuits to exercise a lot more flexibility than other Catholic orders; permitting them then to reach a variety of audiences. This method of flexibility came directly from St. Ignatius' Jesuit manual, the *Spiritual Exercises* (1548). Designed as an adaptable set of instructions made for a spiritual director to lead a religious retreat with the ultimate goal of helping the participants find God's love. Culminated with an understanding that the participants must freely come to Christ, the Jesuits were able to be a lot more tolerant of non-European

societies. This made their missionary work more of a perceived “conversation” as opposed to full on “conversion”.<sup>54</sup> Despite this flexibility the Jesuits were still very unwilling to adapt elements of foreign religion, which ultimately put them at a great disadvantage in areas where locals were willing to exchange cultural and intellectual ideas. Regardless, the Jesuits retained perhaps a more progressive stance that allowed them to share both Christianity and European culture.

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<sup>54</sup> Gauvin Alexander Bailey, *Art on the Jesuit missions in Asia and Latin America, 1542-1773*, Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1999, p. 4.

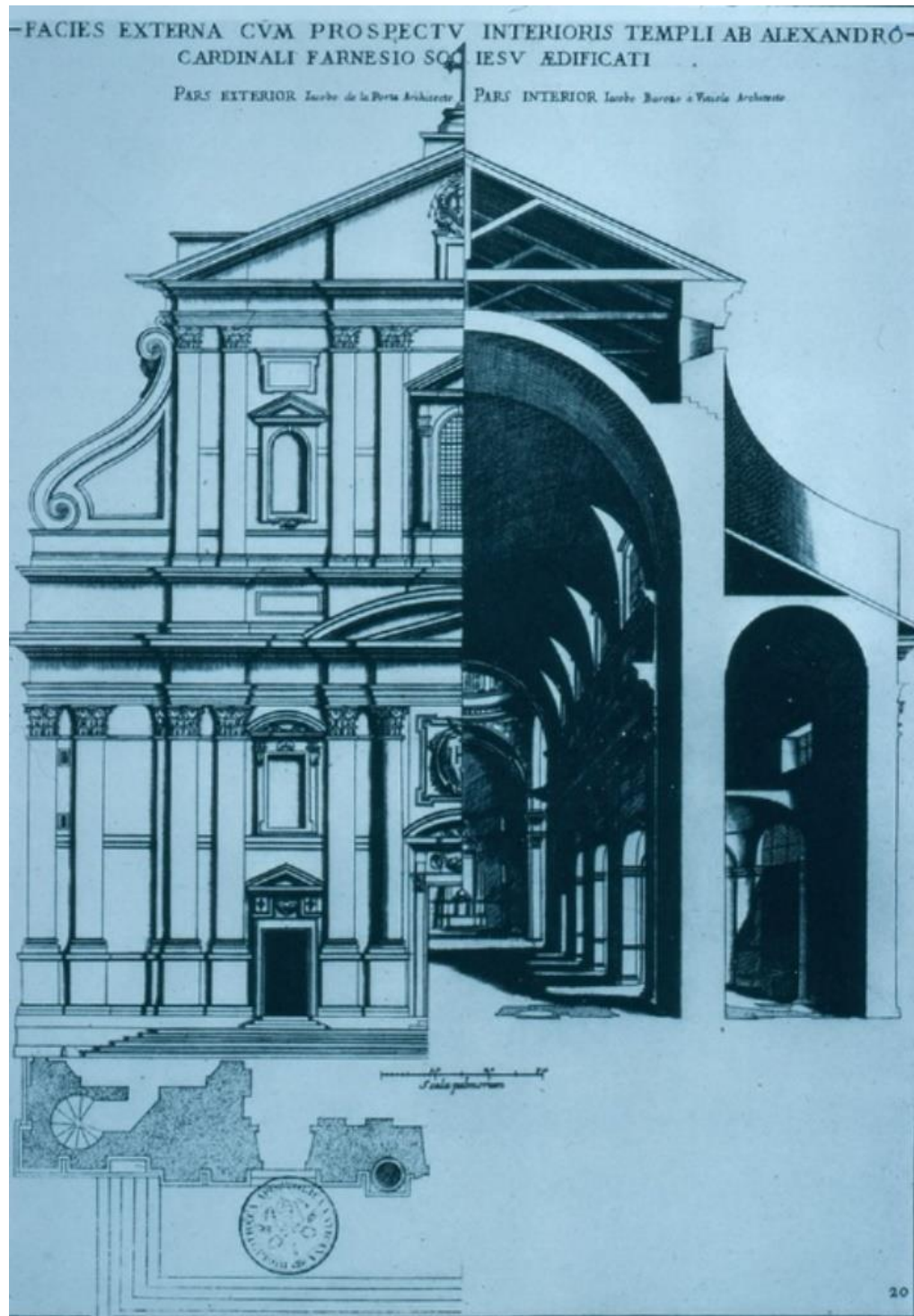


Figure 3.2: Il Gesu: plans: façade and interior, 1684, Rome



### *The Igreja de Jesus*

Encapsulating Renaissance humanism, Jesuit missionaries were thoroughly trained from a young age.<sup>55</sup> Trained to be able to debate and minister, these missionaries were chosen representatives of European culture. The Jesuit's devotion to classical rhetoric inevitably led to the belief in art's ability to be a visual equivalent to sacred oratory. Bailey expresses the Jesuit's artistic prowess held through

harnessing art's mimetic realism, expressive power, and emotive capabilities (what John of Damascus called 'anagogic' and I call the 'delight factor'), missionaries could move non-Christians to abandon their faiths for Christianity – or at least to respect it – incite Protestants to return to the Catholic fold, or teach Old Christians and neophytes alike to live their lives in a more pious and Christian manner.<sup>56</sup>

The Jesuit's desire to educate and bring others to Christianity through art paved the way for churches like the Igreja de Jesus to exist. The continued use of this baroque church demonstrates the success missionaries had within the Kongo. The ornately designed façade corresponds with the grandeur and opulence closely associated with baroque architecture. The perceived allowance of local aesthetic to be displayed on the church may speak to the Jesuits tolerance and willingness to make the locals feel more comfortable with the new religion. Churches would function as religious spaces, but were

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<sup>55</sup> John W. O'Malley, Gauvin A. Bailey, and Giovanni Sale, *The Jesuits and the arts, 1540-1773*, Philadelphia: Saint Joseph's University Press, 2005.

<sup>56</sup> Gauvin Alexander Bailey, *Art on the Jesuit missions in Asia and Latin America, 1542-1773*, Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1999. (8)

also utilized for education. Religion and education were important to the Jesuits, which is why many of their churches had schools attached to them, this is the case for the Igreja de Jesus.

When looking at the Igreja de Jesus' façade two things immediately stand out: the church's rich sandy color and the familiar Jesuit architecture. Constructed specifically for the Society of Jesus, it only seems fitting that the Igreja de Jesus' architecture mirrors that of the Jesuit's mother church in Rome as well as that of the New Cathedral of Coimbra in Portugal. From the positioning of the pilasters over the podia to the curvilinear tympanum over the entry way, the Igreja de Jesus encapsulates the anticipated architectural model of a Jesuit structure. The church not only mirrors the overall shape and architectural additives expected of a Jesuit church, but it also establishes itself as its own edifice within the community. The Cathedral in Portugal is modeled similarly to the ornate exterior of the Gesù through the balanced arrangement of pilasters, triangular pediments, volutes. The rectangular shape of both lower facades creates a stable bases for the ornate volutes to accentuate the upper portion of the façade. These similarities showcase an idea which would have been easy to share among European countries close to one another. Though this continuity shared in churches in different continents demonstrates the success in the transfer of these ideas.

Perhaps the unique color as well as the repetitive diamond patterning along the entablature speak to the individuality within the structure as a Christian building built for and within Africa. Despite its differences from the mother church in Italy, connection between the structure and the Society of Jesus is very clear from the Jesuit insignia

positioned at the top of the building along with the Latin motto underneath that reads: “Ad maiorem Dei gloriam” (or For the greater glory of God). Inside, the church appears to be comprised of a single, large nave with short adjoining transepts. Similarly, to Il Gesù, the central focus of the interior seems to be the altar and tabernacle located near the rear of the church. While the Igreja de Jesus’ interior may have changed due to years of political contention outside, the overall layout of the structure still exemplifies what one would expect from a traditional Christian house of worship. An interior comparison between the Igreja de Jesus and the Gesù show the similarities in composition between the structures. Both churches have a simple central plan comprised of a solitary nave that draws attention to the ornate altar in the back. The tabernacle sits to the back as well, nestled within a smaller apse for the Igreja de Jesus compared to the Gesù. While years of turmoil may have changed the interior of the Igreja de Jesus the large open nave has remained consistent. With little information available about the interior design of the Igreja de Jesus prior to the churches reconstruction there can be little said if the church’s interior walls housed elaborate frescoes like the Gesù in Italy. Another feature the present church appears to be lacking is a pulpit, which would have been an important feature for the Jesuits, who were concerned with having their sermons well heard and seen by their congregations. The church in Angola follows the basic formula for a Jesuit inspired church, though within the church the design appears to be more simplistic. This may be due to years of turbulence caused by Portuguese and Dutch intervention. Nevertheless, the Igreja de Jesus stands as an important symbol of Kongo Christianity.



*Figure 3.3: interior Igreja de Jesus*



*Figure 3.4: interview view of Igreja de Jesus*





Figure 3.5: *Il Gesù interior*



Figure 3.6: Left: Middle: *Il Gesù*, exterior view of the west façade, Rome, Italy.  
Figure 3.7: Right: “Cathedral of Coimbra, Portugal” by truques is licensed under [CC BY 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/)

The Igreja de Jesus' ability to withstand years of contention within and outside its walls directly correlates with the success of religious syncretism within the region of the Kongo. To assume this was primarily accomplished by the effective work of European missionaries and pernicious foreign conquerors hoping to successfully civilize the Kongo undermines the complex creation of a religious syncretism between Christianity and traditional African religious ideology. Out of reach from the Capital at Mbanza Kongo and able to withstand the continual changing of hands over the years, the Igreja de Jesus was able to thrive in large part due to the personal dedication and adherence to religion conducted by the local Kongoleses peoples. The kingdom's conversion to Christianity is a genuine one. Effortlessly demonstrated in the cultivation of Afro-Euro religious thought and practices. The manikongo's own personal conversion and the continued devotion to Christianity by the crown in subsequent years heavily contributed to its survival. This religious syncretism was done in a myriad of ways: through the hybridization of Kongo/Christian objects and religious ideas. This intertwining of both African and European religious thought helped create a thriving Christian community within the Kongo. This community was then able to take Christianity and mold it into a religious devotion and practice that benefited their own personal spiritual needs.

Functioning similarly to other entities within the Kingdom of the Kongo, Luanda held autonomy over itself as a Portuguese controlled colonial settlement. The church's distance from the capital as well as personal devotion coupled with the active work of the missionaries easily allowed for the continuation of Afro-Euro Christian practices. The habit of accepting and intertwining religious ideologies is nothing new to many African

kingdoms. The ability to absorb and further develop already existing religious traditions and beliefs made usurping newly conquered lands more of a manageable transition. By creating commonality between the capital and numerous providences, the Kingdom of the Kongo was able to create not only a mostly unified, but expansive kingdom. Newly conquered lands would then be required to offer tribute to maintain peaceful autonomy. Luanda's position within Portuguese controlled Angola only continued to perpetuate this growing sense of autonomy though African tradition was still very important. The Igreja de Jesus is a unique building that was able to function from within a unique position. The Jesuits arrived and established a church within the area, enabling cross-cultural exchange between Africans and Europeans. This exchange of ideas can be found in artwork, though it can also be clearly seen in the design and make of the church.

Kongo scholarship remains tied to tangible material and European archives, while little can be found on the varying important architectural structures within the Kingdom, namely the churches. Having become a distinctly Christian kingdom, the church would have been an important place of convergence for locals. These would function as education centers for missionaries to not only educate locals on the faith but introduce them to European culture as well. This exchange of thought and ideas allowed for the Kongolese to inevitably connect and feel comfortable with Christianity. We can assume that items such as Kongo crosses among other important Christian objects would have been utilized inside and decorated the Igreja de Jesus. Though due to a lack of sources and the fact that the church endured a lot of tumultuous destruction over the years, there is little to be known of how the inside was originally decorated. Though rather than focus

on the church as a simple structure we can focus on it as a religious object mutually utilized by the Jesuits and locals. Religious syncretism among Kongo locals gave rise to a strengthened unique Christian identity that European missionaries did not completely agree with, though the churches distance from Christian centers in Europe gave it autonomy to continue as it was. The church remains in use today and should be seen as a cultural icon demonstrating the development of Afro-Euro architecture and art combined.



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