

## Kongo Atlantic Dialogues: Kongo Culture in Central Africa and in the Americas

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"I've waited over forty years for a conference like this."—John Thornton, historian, Boston University

The 2014 Gwendolen M. Carter Conference, organized by the University of Florida's Center for African Studies and hosted by the Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art on February 21–22, was an unprecedented opportunity for international scholars from diverse disciplines to explore the Kongo Kingdom, its legacy, and its role in the diaspora. This two day conference comprised five panels—a total sixteen papers—that focused on three themes: "Kongo in Africa," "Kongo across the Waters," and "Kongo in the Contemporary Age." Additional events included presentations by two leading historians of Central Africa and its diasporas: Bogumil Jewsiewicki's preconference lecture and a keynote address by Linda Heywood. The final event, a contemporary artist roundtable (Fig. 1), brought together accomplished artists who represent the Kongo's global influence, from the kingdom's heartland in Central Africa, to Haiti, Cuba, and North America.

The Kongo Atlantic Dialogues conference was planned in conjunction with the Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art's exhibition and publication "Kongo across the Waters" (Figs. 2), co-organized with the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium. The exhibition explores the Kongo Kingdom's history through its visual expressions, and it traces how Kongo culture has contributed to the formation of African American cultures through the trans-Atlantic slave trade. "Kongo across the Waters" considers these themes in five sections defined chronologically and geographically, each of which emphasizes historical specificity and artistic innovations. Kongo and Kongo-descendant cultures on both sides of the Atlantic (Fig. 3) produced remarkable works of art whose impact continues into the present, as demonstrated by the exhibition's final section, which presents the work of contemporary artists from Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States who have drawn on Kongo art and aesthetics (Fig. 4).



"Kongo across the Waters" was inspired by a milestone in the history of African presence in North America. Five hundred years ago, the Spanish conquistador Juan Ponce de León arrived on the coast of La Florida, with two free African men among his crew. Thus, the first Europeans and the first Africans arrived in North America simultaneously, a fact of great historical and symbolic significance.

"Kongo Atlantic Dialogues" opened with a preconference lecture by historian—and, in practice, art historian—Bogumil Jewsiewicki. The presentation focused on contemporary Congolese artist Freddy Tsimba. Through Tsimba, Jewsiewicki addressed expansive thematic questions that were woven throughout the conference proceedings. How does the history of artistic expression in the Kongo Kingdom affect the region's arts today? How do contemporary Congolese and Angolan people reconcile their colonial past? Tsimba's work addresses these layers of history, as well as his preoccupation with human suffering, his Protestant background, and life in contemporary Kinshasa. Trained in fine art, Tsimba aspires to use his work to change lives; he draws on materials that signify the challenges of daily life as a means of reaching local audiences. For example, Tsimba's sculptures made from discarded bullet casings recall the role of *nkisi* as memory keepers, in this instance recording memories of recent conflicts in the DRC. Jewsiewicki also addressed public reactions to Tsimba's *Machete House* (2012), a structure made of machetes soldered together and topped with a thatched roof, constructed in a Kinshasa neighborhood. This work opens onto a larger discussion of creativity, violence, and art's capacity to elicit recollections of the past.

The first of two panels on the theme "Kongo in Africa" addressed a long history

1 (from left) Donald Cosentino leads the artist roundtable with Edouard Duval-Carrié, José Bedia, Renée Stout, Radcliffe Bailey, and Steve Bandoma.

Photo: Hein Vanhee

beginning with the Kongo Kingdom's origins and continuing into the colonial era, tracing the region's shifting political structures. Archaeologist Pierre de Maret and linguist Koen Bostoen began with a joint presentation of findings from the KongoKing research group. Their research calls for a reconsideration of the origins of the Kongo Kingdom. While many scholars have dismissed the notion that the kingdom originated in its eastern region, De Maret's archaeological findings in the Lower Congo Province of the DRC, and Bostoen's work on Kikongo languages as a reflection of sixteenth and seventeenth century population dynamics bring scholarly attention back to this hypothesis. Moving to the height of the kingdom's power and influence, art historian Cécile Fromont showed how clothing and other personal adornment resulted from interactions between Kongo and European peoples. She addressed the ensembles worn by Kongo diplomats abroad and a chief's *mpu* cap that incorporated the insignia of the Catholic Order of the Cross. These two examples combine Kongo and foreign items to create powerful visual representations of status. Together, these papers emphasized the Kongo Kingdom's complex organization, shifting power structures, and adaptability to new forces and new forms.

The second "Kongo in Africa" panel addressed the later history of the Kongo King-

(continued on p. 4)



dom, after the end of the slave trade, during the colonial era, and after independence. Historians Jelmer Vos and Hein Vanhee addressed an understudied period in Kongo Kingdom scholarship: the time between the end of the slave trade in the nineteenth century and the height of colonialism in the twentieth century. Vos offered a case study of Portuguese-appointed Kongo king Pedro V's negotiation of power during a period of European reliance on the kingdom's systems to collect tax, recruit labor, and impose order. The European support for selected Kongo leaders led to changes in trade regulations, tribute systems, and ultimately created a class of Kongo negotiators. Vanhee continued the examination of European-supported leaders by addressing the *chefs médaillés*. These new chiefs were not legitimized through ancestry or connections to migration histories; instead, they were selected and appointed by Europeans. Nonetheless, they were able to navigate the new colonial systems to establish important roles in Kongo communities. New chiefs adopted historical symbols of power, such as swords, staffs, and brass bracelets. They also modified migration histories to augment their legitimacy. Challengers to the new chiefs could draw upon other power sources, such as *nkisi* of chieftaincy, to contest spiritual power. Together, Vos and Vanhee elaborated a critical moment of transition at the end of the slave period and into the colonial period; their presentations explored how Kongo people navigated power systems and controlled expressions of status.

The panel concluded with anthropologist John Janzen's paper on health and healing in the DRC today. Janzen described the crisis that has resulted from the lack of governmental support for health infrastructure. He introduced several medical professionals who exemplify the adaptation of local healing systems and social structures. These range from Dr. Kapita Bila, the first cardiologist to iden-

tify and openly discuss the presence of AIDS in Congo (and in all of Africa), to pharmacist Flaubert Batangu Mpesa, who is using local plant species to develop more accessible medical alternatives. In addition, Janzen explored the practice of Ngunza prophets who bring divination into these health care systems.

The second set of panels, "Kongo across the Waters," turned to the global diaspora, demonstrating how Kongo culture is manifested in performances and material culture in the Americas. Historians Marina de Mello e Souza and Jeroen Dewulf addressed two aspects of Kongo performance that have been transplanted and transformed in Brazil and in the northeastern United States. Both the Congada in Brazil and "Pinkster Day" activities among slaves in Dutch-identified communities in New York and New Jersey drew upon practices related to Kongo Christianity and court etiquette to assert black agency in the oppressive context of slavery. In the nineteenth-century Brazilian Congada celebration, leaders of the festival dressed as the Mani Kongo (Kongo King) for processions, an affirmation of these Brazilians' Kongo heritage. Similarly, in Pinkster Day celebrations, slaves elected a leader—known as the Pinkster King—who processed through the community. Past scholars have viewed these processions as an imitation of European court practices, yet Dewulf asserts that these activities are much more complicated, constituting Central African culture in a Dutch-American setting. Souza and Dewulf emphasize that both celebrations come out of Kongo Catholic brotherhoods and Kongo political systems.

Linda Heywood's keynote address further explored Kongo identity in Brazil by addressing the King of Kongo ceremony as a process for making and remaking identity, focusing on three key aspects of the ceremony. The royalist elements of the event linked the Brazilian slaves to the long-standing system of

kinship in Kongo. Second, Heywood examined the performance of power and diplomacy. The Brazilian Kongo Kings' actions mirrored the actual practices of diplomacy and exchange between Kongo Kings and other leaders via ambassadors. Thirdly, she assessed the role of Christianity in identity formation, recalling that the religion had spread to most nonnoble Kongos by the sixteenth century and would have been an important part of slave identity. The second half of Heywood's talk previewed her upcoming book on Queen Njinga's legacy, focusing on Brazilian performances that incorporated references to Queen Njinga as assertions of power and authority. Heywood's keynote, like Souza and Dewulf's papers, demonstrates the enduring presence and power of Kongo in American slave performances. By referencing the King and the importance of Catholic identities, the Kongo slaves were able to assert agency within their own communities.

The second "Kongo across the Waters" panel addressed other evidence of Kongo cultural expression in the diaspora. Historian Jason Young's paper confronted critiques of diaspora scholarship and its tendency to stretch and bend evidence to illustrate African continuities. Young proposed the concept "insurgent nostalgia" as a model for the agency of Africans arriving in the New World, who chose to adapt African forms or to create new forms. Young used the iconic ceramic face vessels from South

2 Entrance to "Kongo across the Waters," Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art.

Photo: Carlee Forbes

3 Funerary objects in "Kongo across the Waters": Yombe wooden grave figure (Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium, EO.1660.32.1) and Kongo woven mat (Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium, EO.0.0.29259)

Photo: Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art

Photo: Carlee Forbes

Carolina as eloquent reflections of these cultural continuities and innovations. Archaeologist Chris Fennell presented recent discoveries that illustrated a sustained, but also transformed, Kongo cultural presence in the United States. From colonoware fragments found in a low country riverbed, to caches of charms in Kentucky, Texas, and Maryland, and fasteners buried under houses in Maryland and Virginia, these material culture remnants seem to provide evidence for Kongo practices that have been adapted to new American contexts and materials. On a similar note, anthropologist Grey Gundaker examined African-American grave adornment, asserting that we cannot simply reduce these graves to having a "Kongo aesthetic"; this reduction ignores the ritual practices and uses. Maureen Warner Lewis of the University of the West Indies presented three examples of Kongo retentions in musical instruments, musical rhythms, and dance styles in the Caribbean. Birgit Ricquier used linguistic analysis to trace Kongo cultural influence in American foodways, using the peanut as a case study. She traced the physical and linguistic movement of peanuts from Peru to Africa and finally to United States vernacular culture, where it became known as a "goober."

The "Kongo across the Waters" panels sparked lively conversation about the state of Kongo studies. In his discussant remarks for one of the panels, anthropologist—and, in practice, also an art historian—Wyatt MacGaffey called for a critical look at how we study, understand, and talk about Kongo motifs. Kongo scholarship frequently makes reference to the concept and the form of the *dikenga*, or cosmogram, as a way to summarize and visualize Kongo spiritual beliefs embedded in objects. Congolese religious scholar Fu-Kiau Bunseki's *African Cosmology of the Bantu-Kongo* (Brooklyn: Athelia Henrietta Press, 2000) describes the significance of the *dikenga* cosmogram. This cross within a circle represents a complex set of Kongo beliefs about the cycle of life and interactions between the living and spiritual realms. However, MacGaffey points out that scholars too often rely on the motif as an icon, instead of recognizing its higher importance as a practice rather than a simple visual form. For example, MacGaffey explained that in a healing ceremony, the physical act of moving over a line into the spiritual realm, performing healing, then returning to the land of the living is much more important than the act of simply drawing the cross on the ground. In short, MacGaffey declared, the cross-form cannot represent an entire Kongo cultural identity.



His comments fueled conversation among several participants and attendees who had known Fu-Kiau, including John Janzen, who worked with him closely. Their reminiscences provided valuable—and entertaining—insights into the work and the life of this foundational Kongo scholar.

A panel entitled "Kongo in the Contemporary Age" focused on Kongo identity in education, social organizations, and artistic expression. Educational psychologist José Dianzungu dia Biniakunu, former professor at the Université Marien Ndouabi in Brazzaville and founder of a literacy-focused NGO, presented an impassioned paper on the need for books published in KiKongo. Books written in the language are extremely scarce, and Biniakunu's textbook remains the only primer in Kikongo. Biniakunu hopes that introducing more Kikongo language material into the formal education will spark a greater cultural movement for and pride in Kongo culture, heritage, history, and community. Anthropologist Bambi Ceuppens described her research on the longstanding Congolese diaspora in Belgium and the social organizations with which many Congolese identify. Artist and art critic Patricio Batsikama of the University Agostinho Neto in Angola presented an overview of fine arts production in Angola today, with particular attention to artists' reinvention of icons of ethnic and national identity.

The final panel of the two-day event brought together all five contemporary artists presented in "Kongo across the Waters," each of whom makes use of Kongo references though from very distinct vantage points. The panel included Renée Stout and Radcliffe Bailey, both African American artists, José Bedia from Cuba, Haitian-American Edouard Duval Carrié, and Congolese artist Steven Bandoma. Each artist offered a presentation on their work, highlighting their connections to Kongo culture and imagery. Some incorporate imagery and iconography rooted in Kongo culture, while others allude to Kongo

religious through the prism of their own cultural background, absorbing Kongo as a generalized cultural referent thoroughly blended into their personal history. Donald Cosentino, a scholar renowned for his work in Africa and its diasporas, and Harn Museum of Art director Rebecca Nagy offered commentary and led the audience in a lively discussion. The gathering of these renowned artists was certainly a highlight for many who attended the conference. Not only did it illuminate the works in the exhibition, but it also animated the claims made in earlier panels concerning the constant transformation and reuse of Kongo ideas to create and recreate identities.

"Kongo Atlantic Dialogues" was the first event to bring together scholars from across continents and academic fields to address Kongo's history, legacy, and role in the contemporary world. The conversations resulting from this convergence of scholars and artists demonstrate the need for such interdisciplinary collaborations and discussions in the future. Because the exhibition "Kongo across the Waters" will travel to the Jimmy Carter Library and Museum in Atlanta, the Princeton University Art Museum, and the New Orleans Museum of Art, one can be assured that such conversations will continue.

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