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The Relations between State and Church in the Kongo in the Early Modern Period Based on Preserved Iconographic Material An Outline of the Problematic

STRESZCZENIE

Stosunki pomiędzy państwem a Kościołem w Kongo w okresie nowożytnym na podstawie zachowanych materiałów ikonograficznych. Zarys problematyki

Celem artykułu jest poszerzenie badań nad historią i kulturą Konga w okresie nowożytnym poprzez analizę wybranych źródeł ikonograficznych związanych z tym obszarem geograficznym od schyłku XVI do połowy XVIII w. Dzięki silnej infiltracji Konga przez portugalskich i włoskich podróżników oraz zakonników, będącej skutkiem postępującej chrystianizacji kraju, zachowało się bardzo dużo różnego typu źródeł, co wyróżnia Kongo spośród innych państw Afryki Subsaharyjskiej. Przyjęcie i zachowanie chrześcijaństwa było dobrowolną decyzją polityczną kongijskich władców. Dokumenty poddane analizie zostały wybrane ze względu na swój przełomowy charakter, jak też wysoką wartość artystyczną. Kolejną przesłanką do zagłębienia się w ikonografię Konga może być próba poszerzenia odbioru kultury Afryki, zwłaszcza zaś próba porzucenia europocentrycznych sposobów opisywania świata. Artykuł jest bogato ilustrowany.

Słowa kluczowe: Królestwo Kongo, ikonografia, okres nowożytny, sztuki wizualne, historia



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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to support the study of the history and culture of the Kongo in the modern period by analysing selected iconographic sources related to this geographical area from the late 16th century to the mid-18th century. The main reason for doing so is the existence of a strong infiltration of the Kongo by Portuguese and Italian travellers and monks, which resulted from the progressive Christianisation of the country as a result of the political decisions of its successive rulers. A large amount of surviving documentation makes Kongo's position unique in comparison to other sub-Saharan African countries. The documents analysed were chosen for their ground-breaking nature as well as their high artistic value. Another rationale for delving into the iconography of the Kongo may be to try to broaden the perception of African culture, especially the attempt to abandon Eurocentric ways of describing the world. The article is richly illustrated.

Keywords: Kingdom of the Kongo, iconography, modern period, visual arts, history

Introduction to iconographic considerations of images African “Others”

Sub-Saharan Africa, in the perception of Europeans at certain historical periods, was regarded as a continent without culture, history and art. In 1825, Georg W. Hegel claimed that Africa was “not a historical continent, it shows neither change nor development”¹. Of course, numerous contemporary studies indicate many regions of Africa not only with a history that is clearly variable over time, but also with strong contacts with Europe in the early modern period. In particular, strong contacts with the countries of the Horn of Africa and the Gold Coast, Southern Africa and areas of the Kongo can be mentioned.

The latter area is particularly vividly present in Portuguese writing. In 1572, the Portuguese national epic *Lusiades*, by Luís Vaz de Camões, was published, describing Vasco da Gama's expedition and search for a sea route to India. The poet cites the Kongo as “the greatest of the kingdoms known on the western shores of Africa”.

This article is an attempt to introduce the issues related to the Christianisation of the Kongo in the modern period on the basis of visual messages. Let us add that they will be of two types – European and local – African.

¹ G.H. Hegel, *Filozofia historii*, quoted in H. Zins, *Afryka i Europa. Od piramid egipskich do Polaków w Afryce Wschodniej*, Warszawa 2015, p. 7.

From the moment Portuguese explorers and clerics landed on the shores of the kingdom in 1483 (aspects of Kongo's history will be traced in detail below), Catholicism became the dominant religion in the area. According to Yale University art historian Cecile Fromont, it was this four-hundred-year tradition of Christianity in the Kongo that "helped the kingdom to maintain its independence during this period because Europeans could not colonise a Christian kingdom"². Furthermore, as the renowned scholar of sub-Saharan African history Georges Balandier states in his publication *Daily Life in the State of the Kongo XVI-XVIII century*. "Kongolese history no longer follows only African paths, but also travels along the great sea routes. For the country is no longer the main perpetrator of its destiny"³. Of course, in addition to this argument, it must be added that the libraries of Italy, Portugal and Angola (formerly part of the Kongolese kingdom) have valuable documentation – numerous collections of sources and works on the former Kongolese state. The list of surviving materials is long, as the period between the 16th and 18th centuries produced numerous descriptions by travellers, accounts and reports by missionaries, merchants and diplomats who visited the Kongo from the end of the 15th century and often stayed there for long periods. The correspondence of Kongolese kings with their counterparts in Europe, with ecclesiastical and missionary institutions is also preserved. And after the establishment of the Portuguese colony of Luanda (in present-day Angola) in 1575, also with the residents and governors there. All these documents contributed to a more or less detailed picture of Kongolese society and civilisation.

Outline of the history of the Kongo in the early modern period

In 1483, a Portuguese expedition led by Diogo Cão reached the mouth of the Kongo River (Zaire) for the first time, and already in 1491, the ruler of this state, Nzinga a Nkuwu, was baptised, taking the Christian name João in honour of the then King of Portugal. From then on, the Kongolese rulers, as well as representatives

² M. Cummings, *Art Historian Cécile Fromont Uncovers Congo's Christian Visual Culture*, "Yale News", March 5, 2019, <https://news.yale.edu/2019/03/05/art-historian-cecile-fromont-uncovers-kongos-christian-visual-culture> (accessed: 10 IV 2023).

³ G. Balandier, *Życie codzienne w państwie Kongo XVI-XVIII w.*, Warszawa 1970, p. 6.

of the Kongolese political elite, considered themselves Christians, and were seen as such by Europeans visiting the Kongo and European rulers. The adoption of Christianity in the Kongo entailed the introduction of a number of European models, skills and institutions. Writing became a means of communication not only with Europe, but was also used in the Kongo itself. Schools based on European models were also established there. The custom of using Christian names and European titles such as duke, count or marquis emerged⁴. Christianity became an important element in the ideology of power. Rulers justified their right to rule by having the support of Heaven and Christian saints. Miraculous interventions on behalf of rulers were an important part of the dynastic tradition⁵.

At the time of the arrival of Europeans, the Kongo was already formed and the strongest centre of state in the region. The Kongolese state is believed to have been formed at the end of the 14th century⁶. According to tradition, its emergence was linked to migration. The newcomers, led by Lukeni lua Nimi, subjugated the political centres operating in the vicinity of the later Kongolese capital. They established a stronghold there – the settlement of Mbanza Kongo, which became the capital of the state. After 1574 it was also called São Salvador⁷. From there, Lukeni lua Nimi began a gradual conquest subjugating more areas. The memory of the conquests made by Kongolese rulers in the period before contact with the Portuguese was established was preserved in tradition after the adoption of Christianity. Military ability was, in the ideology of power,

⁴ O. Dapper, *Description de l'Afrique*, Amsterdam 1686, p. 350; L.M. Heywood, J.K. Thornton, *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585–1660*, Cambridge 2007, pp. 208–209.

⁵ J. Vansina, *Les anciens royaumes de la savane*, Léopoldville 1965, pp. 37–45; W.G.L. Randles, *L'ancien royaume du Congo des origines à la fin du XIX^e siècle*, Paris 1968, pp. 97–104; J.K. Thornton, *The Development of an African Catholic Church in the Kingdom of Congo, 1491–1750*, “The Journal of African History” 1984, vol. XXV, no. 2, pp. 147–167.

⁶ J. Vansina, *op. cit.*, pp. 32–33; W.G.L. Randles, *op. cit.*, pp. 18–25; J.K. Thornton, *The Origins and Early History of the Kingdom of Congo, c. 1350–1550*, “The International Journal of African Historical Studies” 2001, vol. XXXIV, no. 1, pp. 89–120; *idem*, *The Origins of Congo: A Revised Vision*, [in:] *The Kingdom of Congo. The Origins, Dynamics and Cosmopolitan Culture of an African Polity*, eds K. Bostoen, I. Brinkman, Cambridge 2018, pp. 17–41; *idem*, *A History of West Central Africa to 1850*, Cambridge 2020, pp. 24–37.

⁷ L.M. Heywood, J.K. Thornton, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

an important characteristic for rulers to possess. The deeds of the pre-Christian rulers were models worthy of emulation also for later Christian monarchs.

Conflicts over power, a frequent phenomenon in the history of the state, is also a feature of many Central African states, where the rule of the monarch was contested by various individuals who either sought the throne or tried to become independent and create their own authority⁸.

The establishment of contacts with Europe and the consequent voluntary adoption of Christianity influenced the character and functioning of the Kongolese state and society. It greatly strengthened the position of its monarchs. This is because it gave them opportunities to shape an ideology of power that broke down local divisions. Until the adoption of Christianity, local rulers and chieftains justified their rule by the support of their ancestors and their predecessors providing them with assistance from beyond.

The rulers attempted to impose Christianity as a religion that was supra-regional in nature, yet closely linked to monarchical power. From the time of Afonso I, attempts were made to argue that the rulers enjoyed the support of God and the saints, who ensured their successes, including victories over their enemies. In many cases these enemies were rebels contesting the power of the rulers. The theme of the miraculous support received by victorious rulers has become an important element of Kongolese tradition. This demonstrates both the reception of Christianity among the political elite and the frequency of rebellions, perceived as a serious threat to the rulers. The possibility of defeating the enemy was generally explained by miraculous intervention. Support from supernatural forces was one of the most important qualities a monarch had to possess.

⁸ The issue of internal conflicts in this part of Africa has been addressed in the following works, which also contain extensive literature on the subject: J. Vansina, *op. cit.*; D. Birmingham, *Trade and Conflict in Angola. The Mbundu and Their Neighbours Under the Influence of the Portuguese, 1483–1790*, Oxford 1966; W.G.L. Randles, *op. cit.*; J.C. Miller, *Kings and Kinsmen. Early Mbundu States in Angola*, Oxford 1976; *idem*, *Central Africa During the Era of the Slave Trade, c. 1490s–1850s*, [in:] *Central Africans and Cultural Transformation in the American Diaspora*, ed. L.M. Heywood, Cambridge 2002, pp. 21–69; J.K. Thornton, *The Kingdom of Congo. Civil War and Transition 1641–1718*, Madison 1983; *idem*, *Warfare in Atlantic Africa, 1500–1800*, London 1999.

Kongolese-Portuguese relations were not always benign; at times there were tensions and even armed conflicts. Some Portuguese attempted to trade, mainly in slaves, outside the control of the Kongolese rulers. They also maintained trade contacts with areas within the Kongolese sphere of influence. This was particularly the case with the areas inhabited by the Mbundu, adjacent to the Kongo to the south where the Portuguese colony of Angola began to develop from 1576. In this case, trade took place bypassing Kongolese territory, depleting the Kongolese treasury⁹.

There were also tensions between the Kongolese rulers and part of the Portuguese clergy. At times, priests publicly challenged the authority of the monarchs by accusing them of a way of life unworthy of a Christian. The rulers, on the other hand, accused some of the clergy of having little commitment to pastoral activities while being very interested in worldly goods. However, there were also clergy in the Kongo who were sympathetic to the rulers. The clergy residing there did not form a coherent group, and this also applied to the Portuguese laity. Some of them supported the Kongolese monarchs by opposing other Portuguese¹⁰.

After the establishment of the Portuguese colony of Luanda in 1576, tensions also arose over territorial disputes. Indeed, Portuguese governors sometimes tried to subjugate territories under the control of São Salvador. In several cases, this led to armed conflicts. In 1622, Portuguese forces were defeated after an initial success¹¹. In 1665, on the other hand, the Kongolese army was smashed at Ambuila. The Kongolese ruler António I as well as much of the Kongolese elite were killed during the battle. The Portuguese retreated without attempting to conquer the Kongo. However, within the country itself, successive power struggles broke out between pretenders to the throne, none of whom were able to gain a lasting advantage over the others. There were frequent changes of throne.

⁹ This trade, until the establishment of the Portuguese colony of Luanda, was loss-making for the Portuguese treasury, as Portuguese officials collected duties in favour of the crown from Portuguese merchants in Kongolese territory. Lisbon therefore also had an interest in ensuring that trade routes leading to the Mbundu territories passed through the Kongo.

¹⁰ J.K. Thornton, *Early Congo – Portuguese Relations: A New Interpretation*, “History in Africa” 1981, vol. VIII, pp. 183–204.

¹¹ *Idem*, *A Re-Interpretation of the Congo-Portuguese War of 1622 According to New Documentary Evidence*, “The Journal of African History” 2010, vol. LI, no. 2, pp. 235–248.

The situation stabilised somewhat after Pedro IV (1709–1718) took the throne. His assumption of power was made possible by a compromise between the main factions of the political elite. Pedro IV was the Kongolese ruler residing once again in São Salvador, which had been abandoned in 1678 after being ransacked by João warriors, one of the pretenders to the throne. During Pedro's reign, the chiefs of the various provinces gained a great deal of independence and the monarch's power had a primarily symbolic dimension.

In the 18th century and 19th century, despite some attempts, the rulers failed to limit the independence of theoretically subordinate chiefs. At the same time, a process of disintegration of the provinces into smaller, independent territorial units was taking place. However, the idea of a Kongolese state was preserved. Competition for monarchical power also continued, even though, at least in theory, the powers of the rulers were very limited¹². At the same time, Kongo's contacts with Portugal and even Luanda were also reduced. The country was rarely visited by the clergy. In 1835, the last member of the Capuchin mission operating there since 1645 left Kongo and Angola¹³.

Christian iconography as a bonding element of Kongolese statehood

Christianity was an important part of the local culture, including the ideology of power. Crosses and shrines formed an important part of the Kongolese landscape from the moment they were erected. The inhabitants took care of them so that they were not destroyed. Even in the nineteenth century, despite the weakening of contacts with European missionaries, Christian customs were not abandoned, so that, for example, the wearing of devotional items such as rosaries and scapulars was not discarded. Without priests, catechists organised services, taught prayers and elements of the catechism¹⁴. The Kongolese rulers of the time made

¹² S.H. Broadhead, *Beyond Decline: the Kingdom of the Congo in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, "The International Journal of African Historical the Development of Studies" 1979, vol. II, pp. 615–650.

¹³ K.I. Kabwita, *Le royaume Congo et la mission catholique 1750–1838: Du déclin à l'extinction*, Karthala–Paris 2004, pp. 376–378.

¹⁴ C. Fromont, *The Art of Conversion: Christian Visual Culture in the Kingdom of Congo*, Chapel Hill 2014, pp. 65–67; T.C. Sapede, *Le roi et le temps, le Congo*

requests to the Portuguese governors in Luanda, as well as to the authorities in Lisbon, to send clergy. The participation of clerics in the enthronement and funeral ceremonies of rulers was still considered desirable. Membership of the Order of the Knights of Christ was still a sign of high status. Although it was the ruler who awarded the Order's habit, a priest had to be present at the ceremony associated with receiving it¹⁵. Even in a period of limited contact and absence of clergy, rituals referring to Christianity played an important role. Pedro V (1859–1891) had a huge crucifix in his residence as well as statues depicting Capuchins, presumably saints belonging to that order, and images of saints. These were carried in processions against natural disasters¹⁶.

Kongolese contacts with the European world also diminished during this period. The Portuguese were mainly interested in expanding into the areas south of the Kongo. It was only in the second half of the 19th century that they began to show a little more interest in the country. In 1856, they occupied the port of Ambriz. They also began to intervene sporadically in Kongo's internal affairs. In 1857 they intervened in favour of Pedro V (1859–1891) who they put on the throne in 1859 and recognised the sovereignty of Lisbon. However, dependence on Portugal was only theoretical. The ruler and other chiefs, with the exception of areas close to the Portuguese colony in Angola, such as Ambriz, had full independence. Pedro V, therefore, did not see the paying of tribute as a limitation of his independence. Paradoxically, the increased Portuguese interest was seen as an opportunity to strengthen his position, not a threat. The situation did not change until after 1885, when the monarch's power was significantly reduced. Later rulers became fully subordinated to the colonial administration.

During the pre-colonial period, even in the years of the great weakening of the power of the monarchs, the idea of a common Kongolese state was preserved, shared not only by representatives of the political elite but also by a significant part of the population. References to Christianity played an important role in shaping this feeling,

et le monde. Une histoire globale des transformations politiques du Royaume du Congo (1780–1860). Thèse de doctorat en Histoire et Civilisations, EHESS Paris 2020, pp. 145–156, 185–188, 338–341.

¹⁵ J. Vos, *Congo in the Age of Empire 1860–1913: The Breakdown of a Moral Order*, Madison 2015, pp. 27–33.

¹⁶ H. Bentley, *Pioneering on the Congo*, vol. I, New York–Chicago–Toronto 1900, p. 35; K.I. Kabwita, *op. cit.*, p. 387.

not only in dynastic tradition, rituals and iconography, but also in the buildings erected in the state capital. The stone churches, walls and the residence built from stone by Afonso I became symbols of the state. This was the case even when most of them fell into disrepair, despite local attempts to prevent it. The destruction of the stone buildings in São Salvador was not only the result of internal conflicts, especially in the second half of the 17th century, and neglect, but was also caused – paradoxically – by Europeans, and often by the clergy. The stones from the churches, walls and monarchical residences were used at the end of the 19th century, among other things, to build the Baptist mission operating there from 1879 and the Catholic mission renewed in 1880¹⁷.

The consequence of contact with Europe was the production of many written sources of a diverse nature. The Portuguese, and later other Europeans, left descriptions of the country. European accounts were not limited to descriptions of the capital and ports, as was the case with most other African countries, but also contain information about areas outside the main centres. In addition, the authors of some of the sources were people who had been in the country for a long time and were therefore well acquainted with the local realities and sometimes also with the



1. Cross from the Congo Brazzaville area, brass, late 19th century Dorotheum (Source: <https://www.dorotheum.com/en/1/3304796/> – accessed: 10 IV 2023)

¹⁷ B.P. Máximo, *A paisagem de São Salvador do Congo e o discurso colonial português frente a Conferência de Berlim (1884–1885)*, “Vestígios – Revista Latino-Americana de Arqueologia Histórica” 2018, vol. XII, no. 1, pp. 16–19.

language. Thanks to the establishment of schools for the elite, some of its representatives became literate. The Kongolese rulers kept up a lively correspondence with the court in Lisbon and with the Holy See, and later also with the authorities of the Dutch West Indies Company. Familiarity with the Kongolese court's handwriting allowed them to control the content of their correspondence when the drafters were Europeans. Some of the European written sources also contain fragments of written records of local oral traditions, particularly related to the actions of rulers. This makes it possible to learn, at least in part, the local point of view on Kongolese history and the ideology of power. European sources also provide descriptions of rituals, thus making it possible to learn about certain aspects of the functioning of the state.

European sources for the study of Kongolese iconography – an overview of the issue research

In addition to written sources, European iconographic sources also provide a better understanding of the ancient Kongo. As in the case of texts, they contain a number of important information, but also misrepresentations due to the fact that their authors were very often unfamiliar with local conditions and referred to European realities and scenography, many of them having never been to Africa and creating their works only on the basis of descriptions and oral accounts of people visiting Kongo. Despite these caveats, when carefully analysed, they are a valuable source for both learning about Kongolese realities, especially those related to the exercise of power and the ideology of authority, and the Kongolese reception of European objects and artefacts and their role in political and social life.

The material referred to includes accounts published contemporaneously, such as the cabinet works of João de Barros (1496–1570), known as the “Portuguese Livy”¹⁸ (1552), and, for example, the observations of the Portuguese “explorer” Oduarte

¹⁸ J. Barros was one of the first Europeans to take an interest in the history and geography of Asia, and in his work he drew on a wide range of sources that he collected in his office, as he had never travelled abroad. These included books bought in the East by agents of the Portuguese crown – Arabic and Persian chronicles, Chinese geographical works and Indian palm leaf manuscripts. https://www.brown.edu/Facilities/John_Carter_Brown_Library/exhibitions/portuguese/pages/imperial.html (accessed: 10 IV 2023).

Lopes¹⁹, which fed into the work of the Italian humanist Filippo Pigafetta (1591). An important source of iconographic material is also brought by the translation of the Flemish cartographers, draughtsmen and engravers, the 1598 de Bry brothers Theodore (1561–1623) and Johan Israel (1565–1609). And there are also many other compilation works, such as that of the Englishman Thomas Astley (?–1759), published between 1745 and 1747. It is also worth mentioning the extremely interesting work of the Capuchin Bernardino d’Asti from the first half of the 18th century, a figure to which we will return.

It should be added, however, that almost all these “descriptions” are at least partly deceitful. Above all, because they are often a repetition of earlier descriptions. In addition, these accounts do not so much give an accurate picture of people, events and things in the Kongo, but rather describe and comment on them at the same time, using European language and thinking patterns. This distorts the picture when, for example, social hierarchies, titles and public offices or “principalities, counties and margraves” are mentioned. The news reported in these accounts therefore refers not only to the Kongo, as unwittingly, without realising it, their authors give us a glimpse into the European social system and thinking of the time.

The usefulness of copperplates from the 17th century is very interestingly analysed by researcher Regula Iselin. In her article *Reading Pictures: On the Value of the Copperplates in the “Beschryvinghe” of Pieter de Marees (1602) as Source Material for Ethno-historical Research*, she addresses their usefulness as a source of reliable knowledge. Analysing the illustrations from the report of Pieter de Marees, a Dutch merchant and explorer, he draws attention to the travellers’ fierce chronicling. Indeed, De Marees wrote in his introduction that: “he wanted to provide information about the ‘character’ of the people in this country [the Gold Coast – authors’ note]. He also wished to describe, among other things, the types of clothing and jewellery they use, as well as their religious ideas and feelings”²⁰, and the accompanying illustrations were also intended to serve these purposes.

¹⁹ Oduarte Lopes (1550?–1600?), alternative spellings Duarte Lopes or Duarte Lopez. Cf. A. Loomba, J. Burton, *Duarte Lopes (fl. 1578–89)*, [in:] *Race in Early Modern England*, eds A. Loomba, J. Burton, New York 2007, pp. 139–140.

²⁰ *Pieter de Marees. Description and Historical Account of the Kingdom of Guinea (1602)*, eds A. van Dantzig, A. Jones, Oxford 1987, pp. 7–8.

When we transfer our analysis to the area of the modern kingdom of the Kongo, the information contained in the old prints may prove even more interesting, as this is a unique area due to the already mentioned fact that, from the end of the 15th century onwards, a significant part of the political elite there considered themselves Christians. Today, therefore, it is possible to find numerous European source materials for research on the Kongo in the 16th to 18th centuries. These include not only the reports of missionaries, merchants and diplomats who visited the Kongo from the end of the fifteenth century and often stayed there, but also the correspondence of Kongolese kings with their counterparts in Europe, with ecclesiastical and missionary institutions and, after the establishment of the Portuguese colony in Luanda in 1575, with the local residents and governors. Much of this material is directly or indirectly relevant to the study of religious change.

In addition, when analysing the surviving material, it is useful to draw on the knowledge of attitudes resulting from the so-called familiarity of the Other, as described by Peter Burke in his work *Eyewitnessing*: “Groups coming face to face with other cultures react in two ways. The first is to deny or ignore cultural differences, to liken others to themselves or their neighbours by means of analogy, whether this is done consciously or not. The other is then imagined as a reflection of oneself (...) The second common relationship is the inverse of the first. It consists of consciously or unconsciously perceiving a foreign culture in opposition to one’s own. In this way neighbours are transformed into Others”²¹.

This phenomenon is perfectly evident in most sixteenth-, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century publications on sub-Saharan Africa. This treatment is compounded by the fact that it is not only the traveller who finds himself in an unfamiliar region of the world who describes it by looking for analogies with the familiar European culture, as we have already mentioned. What is even more remarkable about the “familiarity of the Other” is that the illustrators and engravers who later created the illustrations of the travelogues and travel works had usually never been to Africa (here Bernardino d’Asti is one glorious exception). So they produced pure visual creations, which were then often borrowed by

²¹ P. Burke, *Naoczność. Materiały wizualne jako świadectwa historyczne*, Kraków 2012, pp. 146–147.

subsequent publishers. To sum up – the pictorial images to be discussed here are by no means an accurate representation of life in the Kongo in the modern period. But what else are coronation portraits of rulers of the modern period, for example? Or the persistently repeated pattern of the figure of the ruler in Hartmann Schedel's *Nuremberg Chronicle* (1493), where the same woodcut once depicts Emperor Charles IV and on another page Emperor Sigismund? It is also a certain creation, a depiction of an ideal ruler, that is, a visualisation of a figure or fact with which only a very few were given direct contact. The same situation existed with regard to the depicted figures and landscapes from Africa.

Let us also add that, since the 1980s, the nature of the Kongoese people's relationship with Christianity has been the subject of lively scholarly debate. Here, mention should be made in particular of the works of Anne Hilton in 1985²² and Wyatt MacGaffey in 2000²³ or of John Thornton and Cecile Fromont, already cited above, and of Polish researchers Robert Piętek²⁴ and Michał Tymowski²⁵. This research trend is very important, as much of the ancient documentation is the work of missionaries, so the problems and difficulties of conversion, as well as the reaction of the Kongoese to Christian teaching, are extremely important. These themes are considered extremely extensively in the writing of the period, but with a concomitant deformation of the facts relating to native cults, the discussion of which is most often limited to the "adoration of idols". European source material is thus overflowing with news of crackdowns on heretics, such as the campaign waged from 1705 by two Capuchin fathers, Bernardo da Galio and Lorenzo da Lucca, against Dona Beatriz (Kimpa Vita), a young Kongoese woman of noble birth, founder of the Antoninian sect. On the other hand, however, in the light of the research of the last three decades, Europeans in the early modern period did not see the Kongoese kingdom as "lesser" or less significant than the European monarchies. In particular, John Thornton has empha-

²² A. Hilton, *The Kingdom of Congo*, Oxford 1985.

²³ W. MacGaffey, *Congo Political Culture: The Conceptual Challenge of the Particular*, Bloomington 2000.

²⁴ R. Piętek, *Garcia II, władca Konga a Kościół katolicki*, Warszawa 2009; idem, *Kształtowanie się ideologii władzy w Soyo w II połowie XVII w.*, "Afryka" 2018, no. 47, pp. 127–146.

²⁵ M. Tymowski, *Europejczycy i Afrykanie*, Toruń 2017.

sised in his publications that: “the Kongo was not a European colony” and that “Africans were active participants in the Atlantic world”²⁶. Therefore, Europeans in the Kongolese kingdom had the position of “invited guests of a powerful and invincible king”²⁷. European writing comes to an abrupt end in the mid-18th century, when the Kongolese state finally collapses and when the influence of European missionaries almost completely disappears.

The coat of arms of Kongolese rulers and its implications

An important symbol shaping the ideology of power in the Kongo was the coat of arms of the Kongolese rulers. Its design was created in Portugal by order of King Manuel I of Portugal. In 1512, the design of the coat of arms was given to Afonso I by a Portuguese envoy. Together with the monarch’s coat of arms, the designs of twenty coats of arms were also handed over, which the Kongolese ruler could bestow at will on distinguished dignitaries. In addition, Manuel I also sent spears with pennants and mace. The king emphasised that Christian rulers and princes were in the habit of having coats of arms. A number of liturgical items were also brought to the Kongo. Another group of clerics also arrived there with the envoy. Simão da Silva, ambassador to the King of Portugal, was also to act as a judge in disputes between the Portuguese residing in the Kongo, and together with a judge appointed by the Kongolese ruler could settle cases involving the Portuguese and the Kongolese, and also acted as an advisor on military matters at the request of the Kongolese monarch²⁸.

The aim of the mission was to strengthen relations between the Kongo and Portugal and to introduce a number of European models in the Kongo. There is no doubt that religious motives played an important role. Manuel emphasised in his correspondence with Afonso I, as well as in his instructions to his officials, that the main motive prompting him to provide support to the Kongo was the desire to strengthen and promote Christianity. However, this did not mean that the Portuguese king was not driven by other, equally important motives. In his instructions to Simão da Silva, he mentioned that he was to find out what riches were in the Kongo.

²⁶ J.K. Thornton, *Africa and Africans...*, pp. 2–7.

²⁷ Idem, *The Development...*, p. 153.

²⁸ *Correspondance de Dom Afonso roi du Congo 1506–1509*, eds L. Jadin, M. Dicoratto, Bruxelles 1974, pp. 17, 27–31, 36–40, 49–51, 56–57, 59, 63.

He was also to mention to Afonso I that the King of Portugal, by assisting him in his concern to strengthen Christianity, was incurring large costs, which he should partly compensate for. One important export “commodity” was slaves²⁹. Most of them came from outside the Kongo. They were acquired during expeditions aimed at extending control over areas in the Kongo’s neighbourhood, or during actions against rebellious communities. The position of the Kongolese ruler was not fully established. He had to reckon with plundering raids by his neighbours. Moreover, not all communities theoretically located in the territories to which the ruler laid claim recognised his authority. They often posed a threat to Kongolese subjects, as well as impeding communication between the various centres of the state³⁰.

The objects sent to the Kongo were intended to play other roles besides their primary functions, for which they were made. Liturgical objects, erecting Christian temples, could be seen as a source of strength to strengthen the monarch, who had to contend with external threats as well as reckon with opposition within the state. Among the items sent by Manuel were spears with pennants, armour and chainmail for Afonso I and a tent and mace. Arguably, the Portuguese king’s intention was to transfer Portuguese solutions and customs to the Kongo. On the other hand, the other side additionally attributed other meanings to them. The endowed ruler and his entourage saw them as a source of power, enabling them to be successful on the battlefield. The pennant spears and the monarch’s armour were supposed to be effective due to their supernatural abilities rather than their technological superiority, especially as these items were only a few in number and

²⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 42–43.

³⁰ The Panggalungus, inhabitants of islands in the Zaire River, raised revolts against Afonso I. The Kongolese ruler was to be assisted in suppressing them by the Portuguese. The reward for this support was to be the captives of the Panggalungus. Even in 1548, the area between the port of Mpinda and the national capital was threatened by attacks, also the Jesuit mission that sailed to Mpinda had to receive an escort on its way to the capital. An important route connecting the capital with the only seaport in the Kongo, allowing relations with Europe, was therefore threatened. Also, the part of the Atlantic coast between Soyo province and Luanda was beyond the effective control of the Kongolese rulers in the first half of the 16th century. L. Jadin, M. Dicorato, *op. cit.*, p. 19; J. Vansina, *op. cit.*, p. 47; J.K. Thornton, *A History of West Central Africa to 1850*, Cambridge 2020, pp. 58–60; R. Piętek, *Bunt i rewolty w Kongu w pierwszej połowie XVII w.*, Siedlce 2021, p. 20.

were to remain in the possession of the monarch alone. In this way, he became a figure wielding power unavailable to others.

The design of the coat of arms, which was henceforth to be used by Afonso I and his successors, was based on the account of this monarch's victory over his pagan brother. It was said to be the result of the miraculous intervention of St James, who, after being summoned by the Kongolese ruler, appeared in the sky at the head of the horsemen, which caused panic in the ranks of the enemy. Together with the horsemen, a white cross appeared in the sky³¹. Even before Afonso I's forces moved to attack, the opponents rushed to flee, many of them fallen – they were to die at the hands of the warriors led by St James.

In describing Afonso I's victory, it is possible to learn some of the mechanisms for selecting a successor after the death of a ruler. Afonso, when he learned of his father's death, set out for the capital from the province of Nsundi, in the northeast, where he had been acting as administrator. His brother was already in the capital at the time and enjoyed the support of most of the dignitaries as well as the people of the state who were followers of the old beliefs. João I himself also lost interest in Christianity towards the end of his life. Afonso was only to be accompanied by thirty-seven³² nobles (presumably the chieftains supporting him) together with their entourage, all of whom were Christians, as Afonso did not want any pagans with him. After his victory and assumption of power, Afonso I sent news of his miraculous victory. It was personally told to King Manuel by Dom Pedro, Afonso I's cousin, who was among the few who sided with him³³. It is difficult to verify the claim that Afonso won the victory thanks to the miraculous support of St James and his entourage. On the other hand, it can be assumed with a high degree of probability that the rules governing the succession were not very precise, leading to fights between pretenders to the throne after the death of the ruler, as happened in many pre-colonial African states³⁴.

³¹ *Correspondance de Dom...*, pp. 55–56, 58–59, 61–62.

³² Or thirty-six.

³³ *Correspondance de Dom...*, pp. 55–56, 58–59, 61–62.

³⁴ M. Tymowski, *The Origins and Structures of Political Institutions in Pre-colonial Black Africa: Dynastic Monarchy, Taxes and Tributes, War and Slavery, Kinship and Territory*, New York 2009, pp. 69–75; J.K. Thornton, *The Correspondence of the Congo Kings, 1614–35: Problems of Internal Written Evidence on a Central African Kingdom*, "Paideuma" 1987, vol. XXXIII, pp. 414–418.

The tale of miraculous intervention was meant to legitimise Afonso I's power. This may indicate that, contrary to the victor's claims, he had fewer rights to the throne, or at least enjoyed less support, which also played an important role. It is not impossible that after the death of João I, Afonso's brother became ruler, or at least took control of the capital. Afonso, on the other hand, staying in a remote province, had no influence on the course of events in the capital. It was Afonso who was the attacker, he who challenged the rights of Mpanzu a Kitima to sit on the throne. The appeal to the miraculous intervention of St James was to legitimise his power. The support of supernatural forces gave greater rights to the throne than the support Mpanzu a Kitima was supposed to enjoy among the Kongolese people.

The exact course of events is not known, and it is not known what determined Afonso's success, perhaps the support of the Portuguese around him played an important role. It is also unknown how Afonso I's envoys portrayed the description of the battle at the Portuguese court. Based on their accounts, an attempt was made to create a narrative, including references to Christianity, in which the victory would be explained by the intervention of Heaven. Patterns from the Portuguese dynastic tradition were used to create such a narrative. Damião Gois, the Portuguese chronicler of Manuel's reign, citing one of Afonso I's letters, pointed out that the victory of the Christian ruler of the Kongo was similar to that of the first Portuguese king Afonso Henriques over the Moors at Ourique in 1139. There too, a miraculous intervention decided the outcome of the battle³⁵. The motif of miraculous intervention was used to legitimise Afonso's power. He imitated Afonso Henriques, who managed to become the ruler of the state he had created after his victory over the Almoravids. Kongolese staying in Portugal must have encountered the myth of the origins of the Portuguese monarchy. Once processed, it could be used to legitimise the power of Afonso I. The effective support of supernatural forces justified his assumption of power, more so than the Kongolese support given to his rival. From Lisbon's perspective, the propagation of the myth of the miraculous intervention of St James in the Kongo was both a way of consolidating Christianity in the country and an attempt to bind it more closely and introduce a number of Portuguese models there.

³⁵ *Correspondance de Dom...*, p. 63.

The design of the coat of arms sent by Manuel in 1512 symbolically represented Afonso I's victory over Mpanzu a Kitima. The red shield of the coat of arms, with an azure finial, featured the silver cross that Afonso had seen at the start of the battle, on either side of which were two golden shells symbolising St James. At the bottom of the coat of arms on a silver background was the Portuguese coat of arms (of the Portuguese kings). On each side of this coat of arms was depicted a idol cut in half. In the field of the coat of arms were five arms holding outstretched swords. The shield of the coat of arms was surmounted by a golden helmet with a royal crown on top, from which emerged five arms with outstretched swords with gold and red labrets.

The red on the coat of arms symbolised the blood shed during the battle against Mpanzu a Kitima, while the azure with silver cross represented the white cross in the sky seen during the battle. It became part of the coat of arms as victory was achieved over both enemies and the devil, while the shells symbolised St James, whom Afonso called upon when the battle began. The inclusion of the Portuguese coat of arms was to emphasise that it was thanks to Portugal that Christianity had reached the Kongo. The destroyed two idols on the sides of the Portuguese coat of arms were a reminder that thanks to this state, idolatry was eradicated in the Kongo. The five arms with swords, on the other hand, symbolised the armed men who set out from heaven to help Afonso; they were supposed to be angels. The number five symbolised the five wounds of Christ³⁶.

An explanation of the meaning of the coat of arms originated at the Portuguese court. It emphasised the importance of the miraculous intervention of Heaven's emissaries, making it possible to defeat the enemies of the faith. At the same time, it indicated that thanks to Portugal, Christianity had reached the Kongo, and that the support of the saint and his entourage had ensured the victory of Afonso I. This success was therefore possible thanks to Portugal. Unfortunately, only descriptions of the coat of arms sent to the Kongo in 1512 are known; no visual representation of it has survived. Its image appeared in the Godinho coat of arms. There, on a red background, the Portuguese coat of arms was repeated in the main part of the shield alongside the one at the bottom. Probably in this way, the King of Portugal sought to emphasise

³⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 56–57, 59, 63.

not only his unique relationship with the Kongolese monarch, but also the fact of a certain care and dependence of the Kongo in the sphere of ideology³⁷. Also there, on either side of the Portuguese Coat of Arms, the interlaced idols are depicted. C. Fromont pointed out that the destroyed local cult objects performed the sangamento war dance, they were *minkisi minkondi*, figurines regarded as objects endowed with power³⁸. The destroyed idols are also mentioned in the description of the coat of arms presented in the writings of Manuel I to Afonso I.



2. Coat of arms of the King of the Kongo. Rei de Manicongo. Antonio Godinho, *Livro da nobreza e da perfeição das armas dos reis cristãos e nobres linhagens dos reinos e senhorios de Portugal*, 1528–1541, pigment and gold on parchment, 430 x 320 mm. PT/TT/CR/D/A/1/20, Direção-geral dos Arquivos-Torre do Tombo, Lisbon, MS CF-164, folio 7 (Source: https://religion.fandom.com/wiki/Afonso_I_of_Kongo – accessed: 10 IV 2023)

³⁷ A. Godinho, *Livro da nobreza e da perfeição das armas dos reis cristãos e nobres linhagens dos reinos e senhorios de Portugal*, Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo. The coat of arms was written between 1528 and 1541, https://archive.org/details/livro_da_nobreza/page/n19/mode/2up (accessed: 10 IV 2023).

³⁸ C. Fromont, *Dance, Image, Myth, and Conversion in the Kingdom of Congo, 1500–1800*, “African Arts” 2001, vol. XLIX, no. 4, pp. 60–61; eadem, *The Art of Conversion...*, pp. 56–59.

The coat of arms was sent to the Kongo together with an explanation of it. At least some parts of these explanations were adopted in the Kongo and became part of the dynastic tradition legitimising the power of the monarchs there. The tale of the miraculous intervention of Heaven that helped Afonso Henriques to prevail against the Moors³⁹ was becoming a convenient motif that could be used by the Kongolese ruler to justify his rights to rule. Referring to a miraculous intervention was also intended to serve as a warning to figures challenging his rule. At the same time, the inclusion of the deposed idols in the coat of arms showed a new force behind Afonso, stronger than the old traditional objects of worship, a force closely linked to the person of the ruler. On the other hand, the references in the coat of arms to Portugal may have been seen not so much as an emphasis on a certain dependency, but as an indication of the sources of a distant power supporting the monarch. The depiction of the destroyed figures probably emphasised the strength of the new faith, more powerful than the traditional powers supporting Afonso I's opponent. It thus became a new effective source of legitimising power, inaccessible to Afonso's opponents⁴⁰.

As an important part of the coat of arms, European swords also became an important element defining the status of the Kongolese political elite. Sometimes the hilt of swords produced in the Kongo on the European model resembled figures of idols (*minkisi minkondi*) performing *sangamento* or adopting a hostile stance emphasising determination. Swords created according to these rules indicate the intermingling of European and Kongolese patterns⁴¹. The use of these motifs also testifies to the persistence of ancient customs and motifs that were not eliminated by the adoption of Christianity and continued, like the *minkisi minkondi*, to be seen as objects endowed with power⁴². The swords found have

³⁹ In Europe, Moors referred to Muslims living in Andalusia and northern areas of Africa, descended from Arabs and Berbers. This name, associated with the Muslim inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula, is now an archaism.

⁴⁰ The idol figures in the coat of arms are probably the first representations of *minkisi minkondi*. There are very few descriptions of these objects dating from before the 18th century. The figures themselves only attracted interest and began to be collected by Europeans around 1885. No objects of this type dating from before the 19th century have survived to our times. C. Fromont, *The Art of Conversion...*, p. 57; A. Lagamma, *Congo: Power and Majesty. The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, New York 2015, pp. 37, 45.

⁴¹ C. Fromont, *Dance, Image...*, pp. 56–61.

⁴² A. Lagamma, *op. cit.*, pp. 37–39.

been dated to the 16th to 19th centuries⁴³. The determination of age is therefore very imprecise. Rather, they seem to date from the 18th or 19th century, a period when the Kongo had limited contact with the European world and therefore the impact of traditional beliefs and customs was amplified, hence perhaps more frequent references to *minkisi minkondi*.

It was, however, the European swords that became both a status marker and a symbol of the kingdom. Later representations of coats of arms are often limited to their depiction, to the exclusion of other motifs⁴⁴. The prominence of swords attests to the importance attached to their effectiveness as a means of protecting monarchs; this was due not only to their real effectiveness on the battlefield, but also to the supernatural power attributed to the swords of the warriors who, together with St James, defeated the brother of Afonso. Ironwork was an important insignia of rulers and chieftains in Central Africa, and was attributed with protective powers against dangerous supernatural forces. Tradition attributed the ability to work iron to representatives of the political elite⁴⁵. It was therefore all the easier to attribute exceptional supernatural power to European swords. In the belief of the successors of Afonso I, they too were to be protected by Saint James together with his knights armed with swords, whose representation was in the Kongolese coat of arms.

Later Kongolese rulers attached importance to the significance of the coat of arms and the story of Afonso's victory over his pagan brother. It became an important sign of monarchs, emphasising the importance of the support of specific supernatural forces for Kongolese rulers. Consequently, Afonso's successors sought to present themselves as his worthy followers. The coat of arms was also placed on the backrest of the monarch's throne. It became an important insignia associated with a function rather than a specific person. This is shown in an engraving from the work of Olfert Dapper, depicting the insignia of the monarch just before the coronation ceremony of the new ruler⁴⁶.

At the same time, it is interesting to note that, in addition to his own coat of arms, Afonso received twenty other coats of arms from King Manuel, which he could grant at his discretion to

⁴³ C. Fromont, *Dance, Image...*, pp. 56, 59.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 56; C. Fromont, *The Art of Conversion...*, p. 49.

⁴⁵ *Idem*, *The Art of Conversion...*, pp. 43–47.

⁴⁶ O. Dapper, *op. cit.*, p. 354.

his most loyal supporters. Like the coat of arms he himself received, these were to be hereditary. However, there is no information that these coats of arms were granted to Afonso's companions and that they were later borne by their descendants. All indications are that Afonso I did not bestow coats of arms on his partisans, so that only he had a symbol referring to the intervention of supernatural forces. Unfortunately, it is not known what the coats of arms sent by Manuel represented. However, it seems that there were also references to Christianity in them, so that their bearers would have been regarded as persons supported by supernatural forces, as would their descendants. These coats of arms may have been placed on spear pennants. Thus, as magical objects, they would also be seen as a source of strength during armed conflicts.

The reception of the coat of arms, as well as the use of the story of the miraculous intervention of Heaven's messengers, was used to create a new ideology of power, legitimising the reign of the victor. Afonso I probably did not grant coats of arms to his supporters because he feared the emergence of a group that could build its position based on ideological foundations that were not fully dependent on the ruler. Coats of arms were to be conferred by Afonso I, but he would only have been an intermediary here. Consequently, the position of those who would receive them would be legitimised by the King of Portugal and not by the Kongolese ruler. The descendants of those thus awarded would also be able to claim it. A group with a legitimising position independent of the monarch would have been formed in the Kongo, and this could have been used by its representatives in the event of internal conflicts. If we treat the coat of arms as an important magical object, the possession of it exclusively by the Kongolese ruler distinguished him from other chiefs. The possession of a unique magical object was a marker of status, as in other political centres of the region⁴⁷. In the case of the Kongo, the coat of arms was a European borrowing, which nevertheless became an important element of the ideology of power. Other objects of European origin, such as white arms or costumes, became widespread among the Kongolese political elite and were a visible marker of their status, but possession

⁴⁷ J. Vansina, *History of Central Africa Civilization*, [in:] *Kings of Africa. Art and Authority in Central Africa*, eds E. Beumers, H.J. Koloss, Maastricht 1992, p. 15; idem, *Kings in Tropical Africa*, [in:] *ibidem*, p. 23; idem, *How Societies Are Born. Governance in West Central Africa before 1600*, Charlottesville-London 2004, pp. 167–169, 186–196; R. Piętek, *Garcia II...*, pp. 53–65.

of a coat of arms was reserved only for the ruler – both Afonso I and his successors.

The adoption of Christianity, particularly since Afonso I took power, had a significant impact on the transformation of the ideology of government. Further reference was made to the mythical founder of the state Lukeni lua Nimi, and his figure and deeds continued to be an important part of the oral tradition. Similarly, the traditional insignia of the monarch still played an important role. However, the change was significant, as a number of new elements were added to legitimise the power of Afonso I and his successors, based on references to Christianity. In addition to the introduction of European innovations such as writing and elements of education based on European models, the ideology of power was also restructured⁴⁸. The functioning of the state was significantly influenced by the development of a belief among the inhabitants in the necessity of the state. In the case of pre-colonial Africa, the persistence of the state in many cases was made possible by a sense of the necessity of a supernatural monarchical authority, which was a guarantor of security⁴⁹. The adoption of Christianity in the Kongo did not change this situation; however, from this point onwards, references to Christianity provided rulers with a unique status.

The evocation of a victory achieved through miraculous intervention, immortalised in the coat of arms, became an important part of the Kongolese power ideology. The frequent references by the successors of Afonso I to his miraculous victory, and their attempts to emulate him, indicate not only the importance of contacts with Europe and the associated adoption of Christianity, which had a great influence on the formation of the ideology of power, but also testify to the precarious position of the Kongolese monarchs, who had to reckon with rivals contesting their power⁵⁰. Invoking the support of supernatural forces was at least to some extent intended to prevent the monarchs' position from being undermined.

⁴⁸ J.K. Thornton, *The Development...*, pp. 147–167; *idem*, *Afro-Christian Syncretism in the Kingdom of Congo*, “Journal of African History” 2013, vol. LIV, no. 1, pp. 53–77.

⁴⁹ J. Vansina, *Kings in Tropical Africa...*, pp. 23–24.

⁵⁰ Rebellions were a common occurrence in many pre-colonial African states. Suppressing them primarily involved forces made up of the capital's population. African states were limited in their ability to conduct prolonged hostilities, especially to organise long-distance military expeditions. This made it easier for rival rulers to take shelter in areas far from the capital, from where they could attempt an armed takeover. *Ibidem*, p. 21; R. Piętek, *Bunt i rewolty w Kongu...*, pp. 28–62.

Illustrations in European materials as a source of historical knowledge – selected analyses

The earliest illustrative material on the subject of interest to us is to be found in the publication *Relatione del reame di Congo⁵¹ et delle circonvicine contrade...* [1591] – [Relations of the kingdom of Kongo with the surrounding countries...]. This is an interesting example of an otherwise typical collaboration between a person who saw Africa with his own eyes – Odoardo (or Duarte) Lopes⁵² and a literary (but also scientific) resident in Europe – Filippo Pigafetta (1533–1604)⁵³. Between 1578 and 1584, Lopes, as a Portuguese explorer, merchant and, for a time, courtier to the Kongolese ruler Álvaro I, travelled through the Kingdom of the Kongo, recording details of his peregrinations. Odoardo Lopes was born in Benevento, Portugal, and set off in April 1578 from São Antonio on a ship that belonged to his uncle to Madeira, on to Cape Verde, Saint Helena and finally to Luanda, on the Kongo coast. He probably arrived there in August 1578, and at the beginning of 1579 he set off for São Salvador (M'banza Kongo), the seat of Álvaro I, King of the Kongo, and later lived there for several years. In April or May 1583, Lopes, in his capacity as King Álvaro's ambassador, went to Rome with instructions to inform Pope Sixtus V of the plight of the Kongolese converts to Catholicism and to convey to him a request to send not only priests but also relics, rosaries and other religious paraphernalia, including an image of the Virgin, to stimulate the piety of the Kongolese people. Álvaro hoped that the Pope would also induce religious orders to establish monasteries in his kingdom with the indication that Kongolese would also be accepted into the religious ranks. It can be presumed that this was a kind of attempt to free the country from Portuguese and Spanish influence by placing it directly under papal authority.

⁵¹ F. Pigaffeta, *Relatione del reame di Congo et delle circonvicine contrade / tratta dalli scritti & ragionamenti di Odoardo Lopez portoghese; per Filippo Pigafetta: Con disegni vari di geografia, di piante, d'habiti d'animali, & d'altro...* – In Roma \: appresso Bartolomeo Grassi, [1591]. The article uses the version of the publication available at: <https://purl.pt/30467> (accessed: 26 III 2023).

⁵² Cf. note 19.

⁵³ F. Bontinck, *A la collaboration du Portugais Duarte Lopes et de l'Italien Filippo Pigafetta et paru à Rome en 1591 sous le titre Relatione del Reame di Congo et delle*, "Africa: Rivista trimestrale di studi e documentazione dell'Istituto italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente" 1981, no. 3/4, p. 579.

Lopes' mission to Europe was at the same time to provide the King of Spain and Portugal⁵⁴ – Philip II – and Pope Sixtus V with other information on relevant Kongolese issues, including the negative aspects of the slave trade. While in Rome between 1588 and 1589, Lopes came into contact with Filippo Pigafetta. Researchers and at the same time editors of subsequent modern editions of *Relatione del reame del Congo* – Willy Bal and Gorgio Raimondo Cardona have outlined the circumstances under which this true bestseller of the late 16th century was born, specifying the approximate dates of the work's composition and publication. W. Bal's findings show that: "During the second half of 1588 and the beginning of the following year, the informant (Lopes) and the writer (Pigafetta) held a series of meetings from which the *Relatione* was to emerge"⁵⁵.

Pigafetta's original 1591 publication *Relatione del reame del Congo* was quickly translated into English (1597), Latin (as *Regnum Congo* – 1598), French, Dutch (1596) and German (1598 – the booksellers were the De Bry brothers, this was the first part of their series *Les Petits Voyages* published in Frankfurt am Main). Pigafetta explains in the introduction to the publication that he was instructed by Pope Sixtus V to transcribe the account of Lopes, a Portuguese merchant who had spent twelve years in the Kongo. Lopes hoped that the Pope would support him in his mission among the Kongolese, but this did not happen. On 14 December 1589, Odoardo Lopes left for Madrid, where he prepared a written report for the King of Spain on the slave trade⁵⁶. When Lopes returned to Africa, hearing of him disappeared. His narrative provides a detailed account of events, beginning with the voyage on his uncle's ship to the coast of Central Africa, and gives an account of the history and geography of the Kongolese kingdom and its six administrative regions under the king (named by Lopes as "Don Alvarez" (presumably referring to Dom Álvaro I). The account also demonstrates the considerable extent of Portuguese exploration in West Africa in the 16th century, of which later explorers were unaware. The original first edition of the 1591 *Relatione del Reame di Congo* contains *in fine operis* eight final illustrations *in folio*

⁵⁴ Portugal was in personal union with Spain from 1580 to 1640.

⁵⁵ *Description du Royaume de Congo et des Contrées environnantes*, ed. W. Bal, Louvain-Paris 1963, quoted in F. Bontinck, *op. cit.*, p. 579.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 580.

format numbered 1 to 8. The artwork is by the Venetian-Roman printmaker and publisher Natale Bonifacio (1537–1592) “Natalis Bonifacius incidebat”. This information can be found on the map of Africa (attached to the publication) on the upper right cartouche, along with a dedication to Pope Sixtus V. The cartouche is crowned at the top by the papal coat of arms and at the bottom by the aforementioned signature of the engraver on the plate. The first illustration in the *Relatione* shows an African palm tree, the second a zebra. Most interesting from the point of view of historical analysis, engravings 3, 4 and 5 reproduce the clothing of nobles, slaves, soldiers and women. The ninth illustration, on page 15, has no title but depicts the African continent⁵⁷, while the tenth is a map of the kingdom of Kongo (page 17) – *Tavola del Regno di Congo*, with the inscription in the coat of arms cartouche: “Rome 1591”. The date of the inscription hints at the date of publication of the work, which is missing from the frontispiece. The illustrations in the work show that, although the artists tried to follow closely the ethnographic information obtained from travellers, they were not always able to free themselves from familiar artistic conventions. In addition to the aforementioned Burke, this theme was emphasised by the renowned art historian Ernst H. Gombrich in his publication *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*⁵⁸, where he repeatedly emphasises the fact that artists are limited by familiar formulas. Admittedly, F. Pigafetta’s publication introduces new iconographic types, such as as many as three engravings depicting people carried in hammocks or lectins. This depiction appears for the first time in European art, and we should add that this was an important mode of transport, since, according to travellers’ accounts, there were no draft animals in the early modern

⁵⁷ When it comes to the cartography of Africa, there are two reasons why this map of Africa is important. Firstly, Pigafetta rejects the long-held belief of the Ptolemies that the Mountains of the Moon are the source of the Nile, and secondly, he rejects the Nile as flowing northwards from two adjacent lakes in central Africa. In his painting there are two lakes in central Africa, one above the other. The lower lake feeds into the Rio de Manhic (Zambezi) and the Lorenzo Marches (Limpopo), and the northern lake feeds into the Nile, with a river connecting the two lakes. The northern lake is also located above the equator; Ptolemy placed the lakes further south. Pigafetta locates another lake to the west as the source of the Kongo and other rivers flowing eastwards. This way of disposing the map of Africa was first introduced by Waldseemüller.

⁵⁸ E.H. Gombrich, *Sztuka i złudzenie. O psychologii przedstawienia obrazowego*, Warszawa 1981.

Kongo, nor had any wheeled vehicle been constructed. As F. Pigafetta noted, “with neither yoke-drawn oxen nor bulls to carry in the whole of the Kongolese kingdom”⁵⁹, there was a “necessity to use people instead of horses”⁶⁰ so transport was carried out on the human “back”. Dignitaries – above all the king and chiefs, travelled on “Kongolese horses”. A description of this found in F. Pigafetta reads as follows: “And so, lying in a sort of tent or quasi-beds or sitting on armchairs; protected from the sun by umbrellas, the people are carried by their slaves, or by men who are stationed in various places at various posts for hire. Those who wish to travel fast must take a number of slaves with them, and when the first carriers are tired, a second set takes the load, so changing constantly, in the same way as the Tartars and Persians do with their horses. These men travel very fast, accustomed to their burdens, and by continual changes rival the gallop of the postilion”⁶¹.

It seems that visually, one of the types of sedan described in F. Pigafetta (as a type of armchair) could be linked by analogy with the papal *sedia gestatoria*. However, there is no clear evidence of borrowing and one can rather presume that the dignitary carried in a seated position (its rank is undoubtedly attested by the cylinder and umbrella) is rather an independent creation of Kongolese enterprise. The other type of sedan depicted, reproduced in the *Relatione* engravings, is the so-called *tipoye*, which was described in detail by the 20th-century missionary, anthropologist and historian Jean Cuvelier (1882–1962): “The Kongolese people take a pole three stories long, smooth, quite thick, capable of bearing the weight of a man. In the middle they nail a skin so that it forms a saddle on which the traveller sits. He holds on with his hands so as not to fall off. One man at the front and another at the back lift the pole onto their shoulders and travel eight to ten miles a day”⁶².

Alongside this refined form of the lectern, there were even simpler forms of it, resembling a hammock, made initially from ox-hide. Later, under the influence of the Portuguese, as the Italian Capuchin Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi da Montecuccolo (1621–1678) suggested in his extensive description of the 17th century Kongo and

⁵⁹ F. Pigafetta, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem.*

⁶¹ *Ibidem.*

⁶² J. Cuvelier, *L'ancien Royaume de Congo*, Bruxelles 1946, quoted in G. Balandier, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

Angola, these palanquins were sometimes modified and enriched with imported fabrics and ornaments⁶³. Moreover, ritual considerations, mentioned in unison by many travellers, stated that the Kongolese king should avoid direct contact with the ground. Therefore, there was an important need to invent means of transport, in which the care of marking the social situation has the same value as the consideration of convenience and speed of movement. Let us add, however, that in all the engravings mentioned, the athletic porters are by no means African in physiognomy, apart from their slightly wavy hair. On the contrary, the porters are characterised by somewhat eagle-like (one would like to say Roman) noses. And their robes undoubtedly allude to the Roman perizonium in the form of an apron pinned at the hips from a strip of cloth. This characterisation of the Kongolese seems to be an accurate take on the thoughts of O. Lopes as conveyed by F. Pigafetta, giving a very accurate comparative account of the visual characteristics of the Kongolese population: “Men and women are black, some approaching an olive colour, with black curly hair and others red. The men are of medium height and, except for their black skin, are similar to the Portuguese. The pupils of the eyes are of different shades, some are black, others are the colour of the sea. Their mouths are not large like those of the Negroes, and their countenances differ, like those of the people in our countries (...), some are robust, others lean, and they are quite unlike the Negroes of Nubia and Guinea, who are hideous”⁶⁴.

Indeed, the depictions of the Kongolese are extremely flattering, modelled on the figures of muscular heroes from Roman copies of Hellenistic sculptures.

More information on the costumes of Kongolese dignitaries (in addition to the aforementioned cylinder) is provided by both F. Pigafetta and the engraving from the *Relatione* entitled *Habito del Nobile e del Servitore*, which supplements his notation.

⁶³ G. Cavazzi, *Istorica Descrizione de' Tre regni Congo, Matamba ed Angola*, Bologna 1687, quoted in G. Balandier, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

⁶⁴ F. Pigafetta, *op. cit.*, pp. 6–7.



3. Natale Bonifacio, *Men carrying the king in the Congo*,
after *Relatione*, 1591, copperplate engraving

(Source: https://www.forumrarebooks.com/item/pigafetta_filippo_and_duarte_lopez_relazione_del_reame_di_congo_et_delle_circonvicine_contrade_tratta.html?c=4C531C9794C4 – accessed: 10 IV 2023)



4. Natale Bonifacio, *Another way of moving*,
after *Relatione*, 1591, copperplate engraving

(Source: https://www.forumrarebooks.com/item/pigafetta_filippo_and_duarte_lopez_relazione_del_reame_di_congo_et_delle_circonvicine_contrade_tratta.html?c=4C531C9794C4 – accessed: 10 IV 2023)

Pigafetta's text reads: "In ancient times, the king and his courtiers, as we have said, wore robes made of palm-tree leaves, which hung from the waist down, and were fastened with belts of the same material, of beautiful workmanship. At the front they also wore as decoration, and made like an apron, fine skins of civets, martens and sable, and also as decoration, a cloak over their shoulders. Next to the bare skin was a circular robe, a little like a communion (*rocchetti*), reaching to the knees, and made like a net, of threads of fine palm tree fabrics, with tassels hanging from the meshes. The communions, known as *incutto*, were thrown back over the right shoulder, so as to leave the hand free, and on the same shoulder was worn a zebra's tail, attached to a handle, according to the old custom in these pages. They wore very small yellow and red hats, square at the top, which barely covered their heads and were used more for show than as protection from the sun or the weather. For the most part, people went barefoot, but the king and some of his nobles wore sandals, like those seen in Roman statues, these too were made from the palm tree. The poorer and the common people wore the same kind of clothing, from the waist down, but made of a thicker fabric, the rest of the body was naked. As this kingdom received the Christian faith, hence the nobility began to dress according to Portuguese fashion, wearing cloaks, scarlet tabards (*tabarri di scarlatto*)⁶⁵ and silk robes, each according to their means. They also wear hoods and cloaks, velvet and leather slippers and broad swords at their sides. Those who are not rich enough to imitate the Portuguese keep their old costume"⁶⁶.

The print (no. 3) from *Relatione* shows two male figures in Europeanised costumes (although the servant has a naked torso) standing in the foreground. According to Pigafetta's account, the models came from the kingdom of the Kongo. The background of the work shows an entirely European landscape with European vegetation and an Italian city in the background. The city's unmistakably Italian provenance is evidenced by its tall buildings with several churches in the background, with imposing towers, and palaces, as well as a building covered by a dome with a lantern – a typical idea of Italian Renaissance architects.

⁶⁵ A tabard is a type of short coat that was commonly worn by men in the late medieval and early modern periods in Europe.

⁶⁶ F. Pigafetta, *op. cit.*, pp. 66–67.



5. Natale Bonifacio, *Master and Servant*,

after *Relatione*, 1591, copperplate engraving

(Source: https://www.forumrarebooks.com/item/pigafetta_filippo_and_duarte_lopez_relazione_del_reame_di_congo_et_delle_circonvicine_contrade_tratta.html?c=4C531C9794C4 – accessed: 10 IV 2023)

Let us lean for a moment on the iconographic tradition presented in the *Relatione* – it is undoubtedly a clear reference to the works published in Italy by Andrea Alciati, considered the founder of emblematics, author of *Emblematum liber* (1531), or Pierio Valeriano, author of the symbolographic compendium *Hieroglyphics* (1556). This is evidenced, in addition to the analyses already mentioned, by the following representations. A nobleman (*Nobile*) is shown with his servant, a captain with his soldiers. Social divisions are clearly accentuated, as in the engraving depicting a noblewoman, a woman of the people and a slave (ill. 5), shown according to their social rank: “The women wear three kinds of aprons; one long, reaching from waist to foot, another shorter, and a third even shorter; each apron has tassels. Another robe resembles a doublet and reaches to the waist. They also have cloaks over their shoulders, and all these garments are made of palm fabric. The women leave their faces uncovered [...] and wear the same caps

as the men. Ordinary people dress in a similar way, but in much thicker fabrics. Slaves and people of the lowest rank wear clothing only from the waist down, the rest of the body being completely naked”⁶⁷.

The engraver – Natale Bonifacio – did not know how to depict the short raffia skirts characteristic of Africa, so he showed a long dress falling in three layers to the feet of a Kongolese woman. Odoardo Lopes was, of course, familiar with the actual dress worn by Kongolese women, but he was probably already in Spain at the time the engravings were made, and Pigafetta was probably more interested in showing the European style of dress of the new Christians than their traditional nudity. Moreover, the engraver was limited to the possibilities developed within the European stylistic language, as Gombrich argued in his publication *Art and Illusion*. In some cases, however, ethnographic details are carefully depicted. Such accuracy can be clearly seen when analysing the bust on the epitaph at Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, executed between 1608 and 1611 in coloured marble by Francesco Corporale⁶⁸. The statue depicts Antonio Manuel, Marquis of Ne Vunda (known as *il Nigrito*)⁶⁹, wearing an outfit of *nkutu-type* netting made of raffia, with large meshes, worn directly over bare skin by a Kongolese nobleman.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 67.

⁶⁸ Francesco Caporale – born in the second half of the 17th century, died in Rome in the first half of the 18th century. Probably as early as January 1608, Pope Paul V commissioned Corporale to make a bust of Antonio *il Nigrita* (*cf. fn. 67*), the Kongolese ambassador who died on 3 I 1608, shortly after arriving in Rome after a three-year journey. The Pope wanted the funerary statue to be made immediately and “notice” of 12 I 1608 reported that, on the fifth day after the ambassador’s death, he “ordered the imprinting of an effigy from nature to make a statue in eternal memory”. This explains the characteristics of the individualised portrait and, in a sense, the quality of the work, remarkable especially in achieving unity in terms of physiognomy and typological interpretation. The sculptor himself supplied the black marble and received a fee of 95 scudi, with three payments on 27 III, 30 IV and 19 XII 1608, when the bust was ready. It would not be placed *in situ*, in a monument attached to the left wall of the baptistery chapel, in S. Maria Maggiore, until 1629; the date of execution of the monument itself is 1608–1611). *Cf. A. Pampalone, Caporale, Francesco, [in:] Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. XVIII, 1975, https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/francesco-caporale_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/ (accessed: 10 IV 2023).

⁶⁹ Antonio Emanuele Ne Vunda (d. 1608), also Antonio Manuel Nsaku Nvunda (or Vunta or Funda), was ambassador of the Kingdom of the Kongo to the Vatican. He was sent with an envoy by King Álvaro II of the Kongo (he was his cousin) to Pope Paul V between 1604 and 1608. Ne Vunda travelled through Brazil and



6. Francesco Corporale, Monument to Antonio Manuel Marquis Ne Vunda in Santa Maria Maggiore, Vatican City, Rome, 1608–1611, marble
 (Source: <https://twitter.com/MvembaDizolele/status/1489252538528382978/photo/1> – accessed 10 IV 2023)

The choice of engravings presented in the *Relatione*, and their posing, indicates that the publication was in fact a work of propaganda, aimed at persuading Sixtus V and Philip II to send more missionaries to further evangelise the Kongo. Lopes' mission was an attempt to establish lasting direct relations with the Holy See, bypassing Portuguese intermediation. This aspect of the work is also borne out in the tone of the book, which portrays the country in a favourable light, minimising the harsh climatic conditions and

Spain and did not reach Rome until 3 I 1608, but died two days later due to illness. Ne Vunda is now considered the first African ambassador to Europe in history. R. Gray, *A Congo Princess, the Congo Ambassadors and the Papacy*, "Journal of Religion in Africa" 1999, vol. XXIX, no. 2, pp. 140–154; K. Lowe, *Representing' Africa: Ambassadors and Princes from Christian Africa to Renaissance Italy and Portugal, 1402–1608*, "Transactions of the Royal Historical Society" 2007, vol. XVII, pp. 101–128.

exaggerating the riches of the land, especially the production of its mines. Indeed, *Relatione* portrays the Kongo as a country with a significant population of inhabitants, awaiting baptism. In addition, an important thread in the story is the frequently invoked local church in need of help. All these themes will appear in the introduction written for the publication by Francesco Pigafetta.

The book was, as already mentioned, a great publishing success translated into numerous languages. As a result, the text led to another wave of interest in the evangelisation of “black Africa”. Stronger contacts were established with the Kongo, and the Kongolese King Álvaro II appointed his own relative, the aforementioned Antonio Manuel, the Marquis of Ne Vunda (Funta), as papal legate in Lisbon, sending him on a mission to Europe as ambassador to the Pope. In addition, around the same time, in 1596, a bishopric for Kongo and Angola was established with a bishop’s seat in São Salvador (now Mbanza Kongo), where a cathedral was erected⁷⁰.

The visualisation of the Kongolese empire, although largely the product of the imagination of the engraver Natale Bonifacio, was nevertheless intended to refer to eyewitness testimony related to O. Lopes’ stay in Africa. In subsequent later editions, the collection of engravings was supplemented by additional representations (they appear in publications by the brothers Johan Theodore De Bry (1561–1623) and Johan Israel De Bry (1565–1609) and Thomas Astley (d. 1759). We should add, however, that these new publications were not based on new knowledge gained from observations of life in sub-Saharan Africa, but merely contained further interpretations of the text.

True-to-nature painted visualisations of the Kongolese and their world did not come until the mid-18th century, thanks to the watercolours made by the Italian Capuchin Bernardino d’Ast⁷¹ in his codex entitled *Missione in prattica. Padri cappuccini ne Regni di Congo, Angola et adiacenti*. This manuscript is currently kept in the Manuscripts and Rare Books section of the Central Municipal Library

⁷⁰ J.K. Thornton, *The Correspondence...*, p. 408.

⁷¹ Bernardino Ignazio da Asti (c. 1702–1757) was in Angola from 1741. From 1746 to 1748 he was active in Luanda as vice-prefect. A year later, after being miraculously cured of his illness, he returned to Woch. He presented two memoranda to the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith and wrote a manual for missionaries *Missione in pratica*. In March 1750 Bernardino was assigned to missionary work in Bahia (Brazil), where he died in 1757. R. Gray, *Bernardino, Ignazio da Asti*, [in:] *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions*, ed. G.H. Anderson, New York 1999, p. 57.

of Turin (Biblioteche della Città di Torino) (location: MS 457)⁷². It is a code written on paper for the training of new missionaries. The code consists of 15 stapled sheets, mostly illustrated with full-page watercolours. The illustrations depict moments from daily life at the Capuchin mission in the Kongo in the 18th century⁷³. Bernardino d'Asti, spreading the Christian faith, painted very personal scenes from his missionary experiences in the Kongolese kingdom of Soyo. Many of the scenes depicted in the individual watercolours demonstrate the syncretic nature of Kongolese religious customs. The somewhat sketchy and at times clumsy full-page illustrations, with detailed captions at the bottom of each, reveal, for example, the specifics of a nuptial or baptismal rite. Real African huts built on an oval plan and covered with thatched roofs appear in the background. The women and men are often almost naked or covered with straight-up white cloths. Field altars, which are very modest, appear, but so do lecterns or umbrellas. Particularly noteworthy is Plate 10, which presents the scene of a funeral celebrated by a white Capuchin friar with a breviary in his hand, rigidly seated on a red stool and singing (we know this from the caption under the illustration) the *Office for the Dead (Laudes Defunctorum)*, a prayer cycle recited for the soul of the deceased. The Capuchin is assisted in the ceremony by three Kongolese catechists (*mestres*)⁷⁴ – holding crosses in their hands. Two of them are shown in costume with their arms and a part of their torsos exposed. Young Kongolese men in the role of altar servers hold burning incense sticks. The rectangular black tomb is marked with a cross and candlesticks with burning candles stand in its corners. A tall cross is placed next to the grave. Interestingly, villagers attending the ceremony kneel or stand near the tomb, at which the traditional offerings of poultry, other food and palm wine are placed directly. From the description under the image, it is clear that these are gifts (offerings) for the missionary, which were often intercepted by catechists who were more interested in the gifts than in prayer and

⁷² Full list of cards and illustrations – <https://bct.comune.torino.it/index.php/gallerie/missione-prattica> (accessed: 10 IV 2023).

⁷³ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁴ The catechists (*mestres d'escola*) were in charge of catechising and even conducting services when there was no clergyman in the village at the time. From the second half of the 18th century until 1880, the Congo was only occasionally visited by clergymen and pastoral activities rested on the shoulders of the catechists, it is thanks to them that Christianity was largely preserved in the Congo.

singing. The missionary, on the other hand, must keep these gifts in mind, as they are necessary for his survival and that of those around him. Let us add, however, that a certain desacralisation of the ceremony involved in receiving the gifts does not in any way disturb the solemnity of the Christian sacrament.



7. Bernardina d'Asti, *Funeral*, after: *Missione in pratica*, 1750, ink and watercolour drawing, 19.5 x 28 cm, Biblioteca Civica Centrale, Turin (Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Dasti_burial.jpg – accessed: 10 IV 2023)

The work of Bernardin d'Asti, is perhaps the greatest evidence that careful observation brings with it greater religious tolerance and an understanding of the distinct historical and social conditions governing Africa, to which few clerics had to adapt at least to some extent.

Completion

The natural framework of the article did not allow for the exhaustion of the topic, but only to signal some threads related to the support provided by visual materials in the context of reading the cultural texts in question⁷⁵. The text, therefore, only introduces the problematic of analysing iconography related to a specific area of sub-Saharan Africa – the Kingdom of the Kongo in its geographic shape from the early modern period. In conclusion, it can be noted that in both the surviving written sources and the accompanying visualisations of life in the Kongo, the area appears as a territory where local customs and religion were harmoniously fused with European culture. The various Kongolese rulers fostered good relations, especially with the Holy See, which was particularly evident in the messages sent to successive popes. The Kongolese monarchs saw in conversion to the Catholic religion greater political opportunities both to unite their own subjects around this religion and to ward off undue Portuguese pressure. There was also a clear desire on the part of the Kongolese rulers to bring in expert craftsmen and to train some Kongolese in the crafts so that the local elite would adopt European models. On the other hand, however, the tolerance of the Catholic Church towards indigenous practices and rituals, unusual in other parts of the world (e.g. South America), is evident here, as can be seen in the illustrations in the manuscript *Missione in prattica*. Kongolese devotional objects, such as crosses or figurines of saints, which combine the poetics of indigenous magic and the Christian faith, occupy a separate place. Religious syncretism is also evident in the activities of the prophetess Kimpa Vita/Donie Beatriz (c. 1682–1706) and the associated movement of her Antonean followers, seeking to recreate centralised state power in the Kongo. However, the gradual waning of missionary enthusiasm in Europe, as well as the Portuguese policy of not allowing other European nations into this part of Africa, led to a significant reduction in Kongolese contact with Europe, hindering opportunities for European solutions and leading to a weakening of Catholic religiosity among its inhabitants. However, even in the late nineteenth

⁷⁵ For more on this topic, see A. Pawłowska, H. Rubinkowska-Anioł, *Źródła ikonograficzne do badań afrykanistycznych. Zarys problematyki*, "Przegląd Nauk Historycznych" 2018, vol. XVII, no. 1, pp. 79–102.

century, Christianity remained here not only an important part of the ideology of the authorities, but also an important part of the local culture, and not only of the elite. Respect for Catholic objects and religious sites, such as paintings, crosses or temple ruins, has been preserved. The inhabitants of some villages continued to care for the churches, even though they had not been visited by priests for a long time.

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