

KONGO

across the Waters



Edited by Susan Cooksey, Robin Poynor, and Hein Vanhee



Africa

TERVUREN

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Kongo and the Archaeology of Early African America

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The *Kongo across the Waters* exhibition and publication are very timely from the perspective of archaeologists. Researchers employing archaeology to obtain greater insights into the cultural lives of African descendant populations in the Americas are enjoying a period of great vitality and interdisciplinary collaboration. As a result, numerous archaeological studies have uncovered the impacts of Kongo culture on communities across the Americas over the past few centuries. Archaeologists find these legacies of the Kongo in the tangible remains of private spaces made sacred, in the material compositions that attended ritual and prayers and on pottery transformed from the mundane to the profound. People who subscribed to cultural belief systems such as the Kongo experienced wrenching social upheavals and transformations in those time periods, as did their descendants in the Americas. Cultures evolved dynamically as well, in interactive encounters that analysts often refer to as *processes of creolization*. This chapter focuses on observable cultural connections that existed even within the currents of such dramatic changes.

Archaeological research on African diaspora populations has expanded significantly over the past few decades in scope and in the diversity of locations, time periods and questions pursued. Our work has been enlivened by interdisciplinary approaches, collaborative projects and a resulting abundance of new data sets. Colleagues studying the history of the transatlantic slave trade have compiled exceptionally detailed, comprehensive data sets that provide insights into the movements of captive Kongo people over time. Oral history accounts of specific locations and individuals provide additional data for comparative study. Interpretations of past oral histories and documentary evidence can be tested against the data uncovered in the archaeological record, and points of correlation and contrast can be further analyzed. In the brief space of this chapter, I highlight several of these interdisciplinary projects and archaeological finds. To provide such a concise overview, I refer the reader to recent publications for detailed bibliographies and source discussions for the numerous studies that I summarize here.¹

As discussed in other chapters of this volume, Kongo society was dramatically impacted by the transatlantic slave trade from the late sixteenth century onward, with factional wars forcing diverse members of the culture into the holds of slave vessels bound for the Americas. Individuals of all social statuses, including defeated political officials, craftspeople, priests, healers, farmers and laborers were swept into bondage by cycles of warfare. As a result, captives from the Kongo comprised up to a third of the enslaved laborers in many locations and time periods in sites throughout the Americas. The Kongo culture thus had significant impacts on the cultural expressions found in those many locations spanning North America, the Caribbean and South America in the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries. Many poignant artifacts and cultural expressions have been uncovered in the Americas and interpreted as representations of evolving facets of Kongo cultural beliefs and practices. Enslaved laborers newly arriving in the Americas from the Kongo continued to shape material culture in accordance with beliefs and practices learned in their homeland before capture. Later generations born on plantations in the Americas learned those traditions from their elders and continued to develop those beliefs and practices in new ways.

Artifacts and expressions in the Americas that have been related to Kongo culture have typically been interpreted as evolving representations of a core symbolic repertoire deployed extensively within Kongo society. This core symbolic repertoire included an ideographic expression, or cosmogram, called *tendwa kia nza-n' Kongo* or *dikenga dia Kongo* in Kikongo, which I will refer to as the *dikenga* (fig. 12.1).

Material culture evidence and ethnohistorical accounts of Kongo culture demonstrate that the *dikenga* had developed as a long-standing symbolic tradition long before European contact in the late fifteenth century. This core symbol summarized an array of metaphors and beliefs concerning the nature of the cosmos, the identity of the Kongo as a people and their relationships and interactions with ancestors and powerful spiritual forces. The diagram to the right in fig. 12.1 depicts a rendering of the more embellished form of the *dikenga*, which consists of perpendicular axes set within a circle or ellipse, with four smaller disks at the ends of the axes. The small circles represent the “four moments” of the turning cycles of the sun, cosmos, spirits and life. The larger and central circle or ellipse represents such a cyclical nature of earthly life and the natural world, the spiritual journey of the soul and the evolution of spirits. The axes communicate multiple metaphors of boundaries, relationships and oppositions. The horizontal axis was referred to as the “line of Kalunga” and represented a permeable boundary between the land of the living and that of the spirits. The vertical axis emphasizes that this boundary can be crossed and manifestations of spirits can be summoned into the realm of the living for aid and protections. A principal metaphor for the Kalunga line is the reflective surface of a body of water, showing a mirror world of the dead and spirits in relation to the realm of the living.

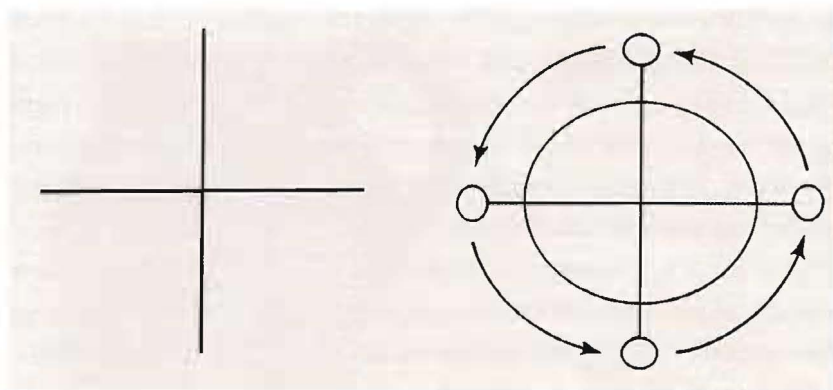


Fig. 12.1. Rendering of the *dikenga dia Kongo*.
Diagram by Christopher Fennell.

Relating to the cycles of the sun and cosmos, these intersecting axes were also viewed as aligning with the cardinal directions of north-south and east-west.

Fully embellished, ideographic versions of the *dikenga* were incorporated as material compositions in the regalia of political rulers, high-status individuals, priests and healers in the Kongo (see cat. 2.32). Such embellished renderings can be interpreted as “emblematic” expressions that represented the sodality of the social group and were typically displayed in overt, public settings, much like the deployment of national flags. A simpler, more abbreviated form of the *dikenga* was used as well, but for more personal and instrumental purposes (see the diagram on the left of fig. 12.1). The crossed lines of the central axes were the simplest form of the *dikenga*, drawn on the ground along the cardinal directions to designate a ritual space for an individual to testify as to their truthfulness and righteous intentions. Healers in the Kongo transformed mundane spaces into stages for healing ceremonies and supplications to the spirits by demarcating these axes along the cardinal directions within a private space.

Priests and healers also created material compositions that invoked the permeable boundary of the Kalunga, using reflective objects such as quartz crystals, to connote the flash of scintillating water and the realm of spirits. These constituent objects selected for symbolic connotations were called *bilongo* in Kikongo. Such compositions also frequently included *bilongo* colored white as a symbol of the purity and power of the dead and spirits. Collections of *bilongo* were concentrated in compositions called *minkisi* (or *nkisi* in the singular), which also contained *bilongo* such as binding vines, animal claws and teeth to communicate the strength and vitality of the spirit to be summoned for aid and protection (cat. 4.9). Smaller-scale *minkisi* could be placed at the axis ends within a private space to define the crossed lines and intersection point of the *dikenga*. Supplicants and ritual specialists would then open a ceremony by standing at the intersection of the axes—the point of contact with the spirits—and proclaim their truthfulness and virtuous intention.

More elaborate *nkisi* compositions included *nkisi nkondi*, which consisted of a wood sculpture of a powerful figure, with a cavity carved in the abdomen area, into which reflective and white colored *bilongo* were placed (see cat. 4.1 to cat. 4.4, for

example). The eyes of a *nkondi* were typically highlighted in white to communicate its direct engagement with the spirit world. When supplicants made requests of the powerful spirit invoked by a *nkondi*, the ritual specialist and supplicant drove a small iron wedge or nail into the wood of the figure as a testament of their intentions and to animate the prayer. Examples of smaller *minkisi* and of *minkisi nkondi* from the late nineteenth century are to be found in several museum collections (such as those shown in cat. 4.5 to cat. 4.12). However, multiple lines of evidence demonstrate that these cultural practices and compositional designs were in use by Kongo people from the outset of the period of the transatlantic slave trade.

Extensive data from the records of Portuguese missionaries and colonial officials, as well as surviving material culture dating back centuries, provide evidence of the remarkable spectrum of *minkisi* compositions within the Kongo culture. From simple to elaborate, these material compositions were employed in a range of public and private settings in the Kongo (see cat. 3.6, for example). Turning to the Americas, we find continuing developments in these beliefs and practices performed in the private and public spaces of the Kongo Diaspora.

Symbolic Configurations of Materials and Spaces in the Americas

Numerous archaeology sites in the Americas have yielded artifacts that have been linked to Kongo cultural heritage. Investigations of these sites involved multiple lines of evidence. Documentary evidence and oral history accounts related to these sites indicated that the particular locations excavated by archaeologists had been the work or residence spaces for enslaved Africans. These sites were located in regions in which Kongo people comprised a significant percentage of the enslaved labor force during the relevant time periods of the occupations under investigation. Such sites yield a few main types of material compositions that have been interpreted as having strong connections with Kongo cultural practices. These include pottery marked with crossed lines and cast into bodies of water, figural pottery forms reminiscent of Kongo aesthetics, personal objects with symbolic motifs consistent with *nkisi* compositions and personal spaces containing caches of material compositions that served to demarcate the crossed axes of a *dikenga* within that dwelling.

Pottery Incised, Cast into Waters and Sculpted

Colonoware is a term applied by archaeologists to a form of earthenware pottery found extensively on plantation sites along the eastern coast of North America and dating from the late 1600s through the early 1800s (fig. 12.2 and cat. 5.5 to cat. 5.7). Some analysts propose that this pottery was produced by enslaved African laborers on plantations for their own use and at times for trade to nearby plantations and markets. Others contend that some distributions of colonoware were produced by Native Americans for trade to plantations. There is a strong consensus about the end users of this type of pottery that considers them to be predominantly the enslaved

Fig. 12.2. Colonoware vessel. Courtesy Judicial Center Site, Charleston, South Carolina.



African laborers on plantations. Enormous volumes of colonoware were produced, used and discarded at those sites.

A highly intriguing subset of colonoware artifacts consists of twenty-six bowl bases on which the end users had etched crossed lines within a circular base rim, and these bowls were apparently cast into estuary rivers adjacent to rice plantations in South Carolina (fig. 12.3). Scuba divers in South Carolina have brought these artifacts to archaeologist Leland Ferguson over the years, reporting the locations in estuaries where they retrieved the artifacts.² These were small bowls and a form of ceramic container consistent with *minkisi* compositions used among the Kongo. Ferguson and other analysts have speculated that the enslaved laborers sanctified these bowls as ritual offering containers by scratching the axes of the *dikenga* within the surrounding circle of the bowl's base rim and filling the bowl with herbs as *bilongo* ingredients to which they attributed metaphoric meanings in prayers. If the bowls and their contents were then cast into the glimmering surface of the estuary by a supplicant standing at the water's edge, one can speculate that this was a poignant invocation for a spirit to cross the Kalunga line into the realm of the living to provide aid and protection. Research by Luis Symanski and his colleagues in Brazil has uncovered similarly constructed and marked earthenware pottery at plantations sites once occupied by enslaved Kongo laborers.

Archaeologists have recently investigated possible connections between colonoware produced on coastal plantations in South Carolina and stoneware vessels produced in the backcountry region called Edgefield, South Carolina. The Edgefield potteries were founded by European Americans who relied on enslaved African Americans for both unskilled and craft labor. Stoneware storage vessels of remarkable size and aesthetic beauty were shaped by African American craftsmen in those potteries starting in the early 1800s. Archaeologist J. W. Joseph and his colleagues have proposed that cross-line markings on Edgefield vessels may have related to Kongo symbols and may also provide evidence of a connection between earlier colonoware potters on coastal plantations and ornamental practices later adopted in Edgefield operations.³



Fig. 12.3. Colonoware vessels with etched cross marks. Courtesy of the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology; photographs by Emily Short.

By the early 1860s, potteries in Edgefield also produced a new set of remarkable figural vessels, called “face vessels” due to their sculptural configuration (see cat. 6.21 to cat. 6.24 and ill. 12.1). Whole and fragmented face vessels have been curated in private and museum collections and recovered in archaeological sites. Analysts observe the resonance of these face vessel designs with the sculptural qualities of ritual figures produced in Kongo traditions, such as the use of white color symbolism for the eyes and teeth, reminiscent of sculptural forms such as a *nkisi nkondi* (e.g., see cat. 4.1). These face vessels were also produced in Edgefield just after the arrival of numerous new captive laborers brought directly to that area in 1858 on an illegal slave shipment aboard the *Wanderer* from West Central Africa. Oral history interviews of those 1858 captives and their descendants demonstrated their Kongo heritage and uses of terms from the Kikongo language.

Elements of Bilongo and Minkisi

Numerous work and residential sites of enslaved African and African American laborers in North America have yielded individual artifacts consistent with the *bilongo* elements with cross-line configurations, white color symbolism and reflective surfaces invoking the metaphors of the Kalunga line and flash of spirits. Mark Leone and his students discuss such examples in the following chapter, describing the space occupied by African Americans in a residence and work space in Annapolis, Maryland. A number of excavations in the city have yielded such finds. Other prominent

examples include the Locust Grove plantation site near Louisville, Kentucky, which dated from the 1790s through emancipation in 1865 and was investigated by Amy Young and her colleagues.⁴ The living space of enslaved laborers at Locust Grove included notable artifacts clustered within that space—a white clay marble with cross lines etched across it, three glass prisms from a chandelier and a pewter spoon with cross lines scratched into its handle, bringing out the white color of the metal. Along with these objects was a Chinese coin, which was made with a circular shape and a square punched out of the center, yielding an object one could perceive as representing perpendicular axes within a surrounding circle. For a number of finds at such sites, it is unclear if the separate objects found associated in a space were once encompassed within a *nkisi*-like container of organic material that later disintegrated.

Archaeologists must proceed with great care in formulating interpretations of artifacts uncovered in occupation sites. For example, symbols such as crossed lines are prosaic in character and appear as independently developed motifs with varying significance in many different cultures. In one research project, I investigated the history and archaeology of neighboring farms owned by two generations of an extended German American family named Demory in the backcountry of northern Virginia. A small house on their property was built around 1780 using distinct German building traditions and occupied through the nineteenth century. That extended family of German American immigrants and farmers also owned enslaved African Americans who worked on their lands and who may have been housed in that small cabin. Fig. 12.4 shows a small clay sculpture of a skull that I recovered from the floor space of that small house; it was located in association with other artifacts dating from the 1830s through the 1860s. The back of the sculpture includes cross-line marks and inscribed initials. As I have detailed elsewhere, the most persuasive interpretation of this artifact, all of its attributes and context, is that it was created by German Americans in accordance with their own beliefs in methods for spiritual invocations that were developed independent of African traditions.⁵

Fig. 12.4. Clay skull from Loudon County, Virginia. Photograph courtesy of Christopher Fennell; diagram of inscription on back of skull courtesy of Christopher Fennell.



Other sites in North America have shown the ways in which people of Kongo heritage very likely created ritual spaces within private residences configured to invoke the *dikenga* (see, for example, chapter 13 in this volume). Kenneth Brown and his colleagues investigated the remains of residences of enslaved and later free African American families at the Levi Jordan plantation in Brazoria, Texas, near Galveston on the Gulf Coast. The plantation operated from 1848 until emancipation at the end of the Civil War.⁶ Documentary evidence shows that Jordan owned a sloop and very likely traveled to Cuba and transported captive Africans to his plantation before the Civil War. Families of free African Americans stayed on in the previous slave quarters until 1888, raising crops as tenant farmers and paying rents to Jordan's heirs. Those families summarily abandoned the quarters in 1888 and had little time to remove their possessions from the houses that they and previous generations had occupied for decades. What they left behind astounded the archaeologists.

In a house site that Brown referred to as a "curer's cabin," the space of the residence was demarcated as a ritual area by deposits of objects in the floor (fig. 12.5). Concentrated materials were deposited at the four cardinal directions along the perimeter of the room. This was notable since the building was not oriented along the cardinal directions. Deposits in areas 1, 2 and 4 in the space of this small house, as depicted in fig. 12.5, were consistent with *bilongo* and *minkisi* materials. The deposit in area 1 (to the east) included objects consistent with the remains of a *nkisi nkondi* composition—contrived iron wedges like those driven into *nkondi* to activate it, and internal *bilongo* objects such as a small white porcelain doll figure and glass thermometer that once contained shimmering mercury. No wood sculpture was recovered in area 1; such an organic element would have disintegrated in the soils that filled the abandoned house site after 1888. The deposit in area 2 (north) consisted of a stack of silver coins dated 1853 and 1858. White ash, burned white shells and iron nails were located in a cache within the hearth wall in area 4 (south).

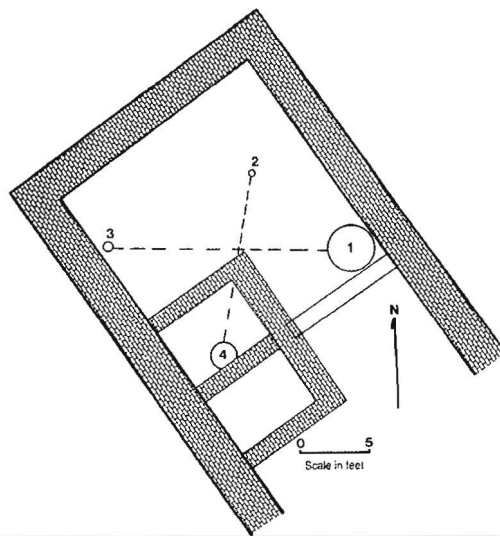


Fig. 12.5. Floor plan of the "curer's cabin" at the Levi Jordan plantation site and location of caches of objects. Diagram by Christopher Fennell based on Kenneth Brown's data.

The west deposit, in area 3 within this spatial configuration, contained something different—three nested iron kettles, iron chain fragments that likely once wrapped around those kettles and numerous other metal objects in a concentrated deposit. This west side of the space appears to have held a small altar composition, called an *amula* to Zarabanda, which consisted of iron kettles filled with other iron objects as symbols of resilience, power and vitality. This religious observation was developed by Kongo people in Cuba, which incorporated Kongo cultural practices and the Yoruba people's symbolism for the powerful *orisha* Ogún, a subdeity for whom the Yoruba often dedicated private altars in their homes and residential compounds. Along with Kongo captives, enslaved members of the Yoruba culture in West Africa were brought in large numbers to the ports and plantations of Cuba. After decades of interactions in Cuba, people of Kongo heritage began to create similar altars to this powerful figure and referred to the subdeity as Zarabanda. This small residence at the Levi Jordan site in Texas thus presents evidence of the rich continuation of Kongo beliefs and practices and also of their development in new directions over time.

Legacies of Perseverance and Power

This chapter has provided just a brief overview and a few examples of archaeological discoveries of the cultural creativity of the Kongo people and their descendants in the Americas. One can see in these material compositions a powerful and enduring heritage of Kongo cosmological beliefs and artistry in engaging with the world in a dynamic and profound way. As researchers, we experience a great privilege in uncovering, explicating and honoring these material traces of creativity and perseverance by cultural actors who confronted formidable adversities.

Notes

1. Fennell, *Crossroads and Cosmologies* and "Early African America."
2. Ferguson, *Uncommon Ground*, "The Cross Is a Magic Sign" and "Early African-American Pottery."
3. Joseph, "One More Look" and "All of Cross."
4. A. Young, "Risk Management Strategies."
5. Fennell, *Crossroads and Cosmologies*.
6. Kenneth Brown, "Interwoven Traditions" and "Ethnographic Analogy"; Brown and Cooper, "Structural Continuity."