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THE ORIGINS AND EARLY HISTORY OF THE KINGDOM OF KONGO, c. 1350–1550*

By John Thornton

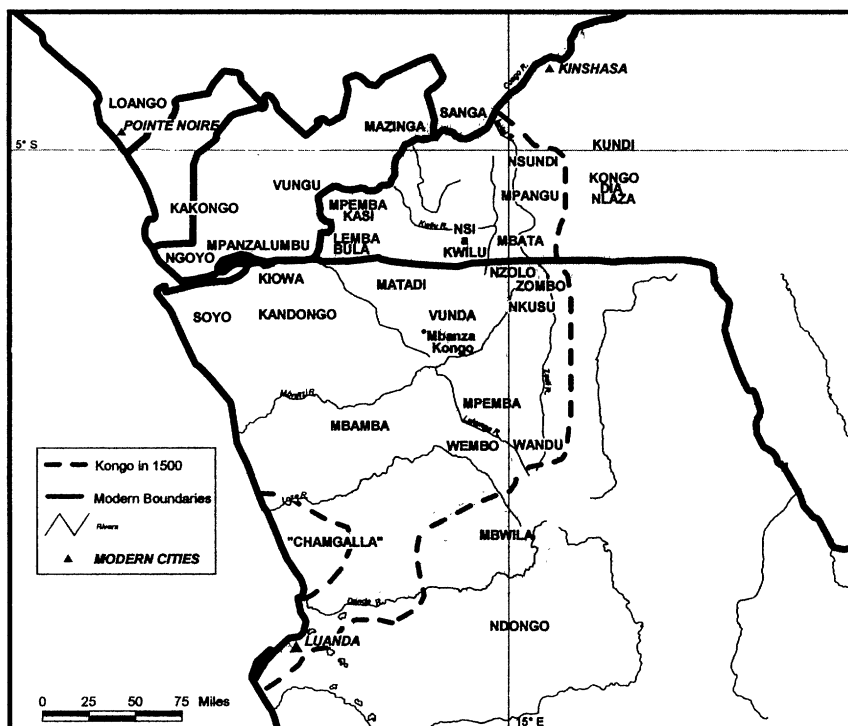
Until the Portuguese sailor Diogo Cão first visited Kongo in 1483, it kept no written records, although the subsequent conversion of Kongo and its history of engagement with Europe soon made it one of the best described of all countries in Atlantic Africa. Well documented as events of Kongo history are after 1500 or so, both by its own literate elite and by visitors from Europe,¹ discovering its origin and earlier history still requires the typical combination of archaeology and oral tradition. There have been a number of attempts to use oral tradition (archaeology has made little progress yet)² throughout the twentieth century, typically employing contemporary historical traditions with older ones recorded by various witnesses since the sixteenth century. However, just as an attempt to understand Kongo social structure by combining modern anthropology with the observations of older travelers failed to consider the evolution of Kongo's society over time, so the mixing of older and newer traditions uncritically has failed to take into consideration the historiography of oral tradition.

In particular, historians of Kongo tradition have not taken into account that accounts of history from oral sources are themselves interpretative histories that incorporate primary sources and secondary explanatory narrative, and thus have their own historiography. By understanding Kongo oral tradition and sorting out what is primary and what is secondary we can better use tradition as a source for history. Fortunately, the fact that traditional histories have been recorded so frequently in the past makes this task easier, and will produce a new and somewhat different version of Kongo's origin.

* I would like to thank Father Jos Roosen for his enthusiastic correspondence, including copies of documents, Hein Vanhee for more documentary support and a critical reading, Wyatt MacGaffey for many years of discussion, and Linda Heywood for her commentary and conversation.

¹ For example, the first half of the sixteenth century is almost exclusively recorded in documents of Kongo origin, such as the letters of Afonso I (1509–1542). Most of the documentation relevant to the earliest times is published in António Brásio, ed. *Monumenta Missionaria Africana* (1st series, 15 volumes, Lisbon, 1952–1988), hereafter abbreviated *MMA*. Good bibliographies of other texts, including unpublished material can be found in modern histories, such as Ann Hilton, *The Kingdom of Kongo* (Oxford, 1985); John Thornton, *The Kingdom of Kongo: Civil War and Transition, 1641–1718* (Madison, 1983); Graziano Saccardo [da Leguzzano], *Congo e Angola con la storia dell'antica misione dei Cappuccini*, 3 vols., (Venice, 1982–1983).

² For a survey of work relevant to the question, see Bernard Clist, "L'archéologie du royaume Kongo," in R. Lanfranchi and B Clist, eds. *Aux origines de l'Afrique Centrale* (Paris, 1991), 253–58.



West Central Africa c. 1500

Prepared by Kathryn J. Miller (2001), Millersville University Geo-Graphics Lab

Source: World Map (1999), ESRI Data and Maps (CD-Rom), Redlands, California

Understanding Kongo's Recent Oral Traditions

Belgian Redemptorist historian Jean Cuvelier has been the most influential historian to write of Kongo origins;³ his approach has dominated the historiography ever since the French publication of his first efforts in 1930–31.⁴ Cuvelier lived in the Kikongo-speaking parts of the Belgian Congo/Congo from 1907 until his death in 1962, with only a few breaks for vacation and research. He was a master of the sixteenth- through eighteenth-century documentary record, which he and other Belgian missionaries systematically gathered from libraries and archives all over Europe. Cuvelier translated and published a large number of these, including a collection of early seventeenth-century documents and travel records of such important sources as Girolamo da Montesarchio (1650s/1660s), Lorenzo da Lucca, Marcellino d'Atri, and Luca da Caltanissetta (1690s to 1720s).⁵

³An earlier, less thorough attempt was by Joseph van Wimp, *Études Bakongo* (Brussels, 1921).

⁴Jean Cuvelier, "Traditions congolaises," *Congo* 2, 4 (1930), 469–87; 2, 2 (1931), 193–208.

⁵Jean Cuvelier and Louis Jadin, *L'ancien Congo d'après les archives romaines* (Brussels, 1954); Cuvelier, *Jerôme de Montesarchio, missionnaire apostolique...* (Namur, 1956); long

But above this, he was also a consummate collector of oral tradition. In 1926–1928, Cuvelier took up the post of inspector of schools, and in this capacity systematically visited the whole Belgian part of Kongo, and also crossed at least briefly into Angola.⁶ In addition to his educational work Cuvelier made an extensive collection of oral traditions, village by village and clan by clan. In some cases, it seems, Cuvelier commissioned local people, often local leaders,⁷ to produce versions of relevant traditions, but in others, he made use of existing documents, mostly written since the late nineteenth century and kept in various private collections of documents held by clan chiefs (*mfumu za makanda*) and other influential individuals.⁸ As soon as he returned from the field in 1928, Cuvelier started to publish the traditions he had collected in the original Kikongo in the missionary newspaper *Kukiele*.⁹ He eventually published his entire corpus of some 500 clan traditions in Kikongo in 1934 as *Nkutama a mvila za makanda* (Catalogue of praise names of clans), an alphabetized listing of all the clans he knew, typically each with its motto and migration story, as well as the name of the village where he obtained it.¹⁰ By presenting tradition in its original language and

excerpts of writing of Marcellino d'Atri and Luca da Caltinassetta published in the Zairean review *Ngonge Kongo* (1960).

⁶ For details of Cuvelier's life and work I am indebted to my correspondence in 1995–96 with Joseph Roosen, then archivist of the Redemptorists in Jette, who has compiled a typescript biography, "Notice biographique de Mgr. Jean-François Cuvelier (1882–1962)." These archives, along with other Redemptorist materials housed elsewhere were concentrated at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, section KADOC, in 1998, according to Hein Vanhee.

⁷ Such a text is "Nota's over de streek MPANGA" a typescript of tradition according to the chief of Mbanza Kimbauka (thanks again to Roosen for the copy), now located at KADOC 4.8.17.3.1.1/2. The publication of the text in *Nkutama* (1934 ed.), 44, shows how Cuvelier typically edited and abridged the texts, leaving out "mythical elements" and focusing on the *mvila* and the migration tradition. I have not yet been able to consult the 18 boxes of Cuvelier's documentation housed in the collection at KADOC 7.2, Jean Cuvelier, which contains many original versions of these traditions. Thanks to Hein Vanhee for these references.

⁸ This supposition is based on the fact that the majority of the documents, if not all, were written in an orthography of Kikongo that was first introduced by British missionaries in the 1880s (and not in Portuguese or Portuguese-influenced orthographies). In Jean Cuvelier, *Nkutama a mvila za makanda* (Tumba, Congo, 1934), the primary place of publication, Cuvelier made extensive use of quotation marks, apparently to indicate direct quotation from other sources. Orthographic irregularities in these quotations suggest direct quotation from other written sources. Moreover, in "Traditions congolaises," Cuvelier often makes reference to "our authors" when speaking of his sources.

⁹ Cuvelier, "Traditions congolaises," 469–70. One should note that all quotations from tradition given in "Traditions congolaises" can be found in the original in Cuvelier, *Nkutama*.

¹⁰ Cuvelier, *Nkutama*. Additional traditions were published as "Nkutuma a mvila za makanda," in *Kukiele* in 1935 (apparently considered a second edition), and a partial serial republication, also entitled "Nkutuma a mvila za makanda" was attempted, again in *Kukiele* in 1944 (seen as a third edition). In 1971, Cuvelier's successor as the leading Redemptorist historian of Kongo, J. de Munck, issued a revised fourth edition in Matadi, including traditions that he had collected in Angola in 1960 as well as the earlier revisions. Nevertheless, there are many variations between the various versions of the traditions, the order of presentation is somewhat changed, and typographical errors and other textual problems occur. Much of this will probably be cleared up by close study of Cuvelier's original materials at KADOC.

in fairly raw form, Cuvelier did scholarship great service.¹¹ These sources have been invaluable for Kongo historians, although most Western historians, unable to read Kikongo or unable to obtain these publications, have relied upon Cuvelier's secondary works to understand tradition.¹²

If Cuvelier influenced most modern historians, he acknowledged that his own work was deeply influenced by that of the Kongo traditional historian Petelo Boka, a catechist for the Redemptorists. It was Boka's Kikongo manuscript notes on Kongo history, written in 1910, that provided the oral traditions for Cuvelier's first attempt, a manuscript of 1926, to use various oral traditions to trace the origin of the kingdom.¹³ In his history, Boka presented the clans as the primary organizing cornerstone of Kongo, and in his origin tradition an unnamed king settled Kongo by sending the founders of various clans out from his capital at Mbanza Kongo after a great celebration and dance. The founders of the clans each repeated their mottos (*mvila* [plural *zimvila*] or *ndumbululu*) as they danced, then set off on their journeys.¹⁴

Cuvelier added some new sources, these being earlier accounts like that of the Capuchin Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi, who visited Kongo in 1664–65, to Boka's oral traditions from the early twentieth century, thus incorporating the assumption of an unchanging oral history whose variants were local but not temporal, especially since these earlier accounts did not describe Kongo through the idiom of the dispersion of clans. Cuvelier reconciled this apparent contradiction by suggesting that the seventeenth century tradition dealt with the origin of the country, while Boka's account dealt primarily with its early territorial growth. Thus the two traditions complemented each other, with the older writings giving the first part of Kongo's traditional history, and later traditions giving its territorial growth up to the arrival of the Portuguese. From that point on, contemporary eyewitness documents took over to complete the country's history. Cuvelier was

¹¹ He did a certain disservice, however, in editing the traditions so as to eliminate most of the stereotyped causation tales that explained the movements of the clan, thus depriving them of much of their literary context. For a full accounting of the way a clan tradition might be told, see quotations in MacGaffey, *Custom and Government*, 30–35; see also Daniel Ransbotyn de Decker, "Notes sur l'histoire du royaume Kongo à travers d'une tradition orale." Typescript kindly supplied to me by Wyatt MacGaffey.

¹² When I began to look for this text in 1991, I found that there was no copy on deposit in any library in the United States. My thanks to Kiangu Sindani for sending me a copy of the 1972 edition he purchased for me in Kinshasa, and to Joseph Roosen for a photocopy of the 1934 edition.

¹³ Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, KADOC, Archives E. de Jonghe, MS 43, "Kongo in vroeger eeuwen."

¹⁴ Petelo Boka, "Nsosani a kingudi. Luzayilu lua makanda ye Zimvila zazonsono....," 15 September 1910, was found in the Redemptorist Archive in Leuven in 1996 (partial photocopy supplied to me by Roosen). Cuvelier published the text (found on pp. 87–94 of Boka's MS) in the original Kikongo in the missionary newspaper *Kukiele* (1928) and most of it in French translation in "Traditions congolaises."

particularly gratified to know that Boka had originally come from Vungu, a region that seventeenth-century kings said was the original homeland of Kongo.¹⁵

Cuvelier began producing his synthesis in a series of Kikongo articles in *Kukiele* (1928–29)¹⁶, written for a Kongo audience, and a French article for a European audience in 1930–31,¹⁷ culminating in his book *Het oud koninkrijk Kongo/L'ancien royaume de Congo*, published in Dutch in 1941 and French in 1946. Cuvelier's synthesis found its way into other Kikongo language publications, including the general though brief history of Kongo that his colleague and successor Joseph de Munck published for the first time in 1956.¹⁸

Given its importance to Cuvelier's work and that of many Western historians to follow, it is worth considering Boka's own methods and those of other Kongo traditional historians.¹⁹ Though his sources were often transmitted orally through generations, Boka worked more or less as any other historian, by collecting sources and creating synthesis. He started with what he considered the bedrock of tradition, the *mvila* or clan motto, his most important primary source. Traditionalists regarded this motto, which was typically in poetic or proverbial language and memorized verbatim, as something immutable and thus potentially preserving information of unlimited antiquity. João Makondekwa, writing a Kikongo treatise on child rearing in 1968, believed that a person's education was only regarded as complete when he had learned these essential parts of the past.²⁰ Mottos, along with other memorized items such as lists of names of ancestors, office holders, and stops on migration routes, were the primary sources of oral history, just as documents might be for written history. Boka was conscious that his history was only a start, and indeed he titled it "Research into the History of all the Clans and their Praise Names." In his introduction to the work, Boka urged his readers to ask old people and collect the traditions of their own clans so that eventually all these local histories could be worked into a comprehensive description of the clan migrations and relationships.²¹

¹⁵ As it happened, Vungu was also the center of early interest in writing tradition in the twentieth century, Wyatt MacGaffey, *Kongo Political Culture: The Conceptual Challenge of the Particular* (Bloomington, 2000), 18–42.

¹⁶ These articles bore the common title "Mambu ma kinza nkulu a nsi a Kongo." It is interesting, therefore, that the first attempt to produce a synthesis of tradition and detailed study of modern documents was written in an African language.

¹⁷ "Traditions congolaises."

¹⁸ Joseph de Munck, *Kinkulu kia nsi eto* [1956], 2nd ed. (Matadi, 1971).

¹⁹ The approach that follows owes its inspiration, though not its exact form, to Ivor Wilks, "The History of the *Sunjata* Epic: A Review of the Evidence," in Ralph A. Austen, ed., *In Search of Sunjata: The Mande Oral Epic as History, Literature, and Performance* (Bloomington, 1999), 25–57.

²⁰ João Makondekwa, "Nsansuka ye longoka ye Mwisikongo," (recorded by April-July 1968, transcript with English translation by Hazel Carter, University of Wisconsin, Center of African Studies), 160–74.

²¹ Redemptorist archives (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, KADOC), Boka, "Nsosani," unpaginated introduction. This section was not published by Cuvelier.

Historians like Boka combined these primary sources with interpretative accounts that explained or elaborated on the information they gave and which were intended to fill in the gaps in factual knowledge left by the sparseness of the primary sources. Boka's interpretive materials were drawn from logical connections such as similarities in names or content of mottos as well as a set of stock explanations that can be located in folklore and involved political ideology and religious values.²² In the case of modern clans, since Boka's day at least, explanation focused on why the clan migrated (many of these are stereotyped, involving conflict, witchcraft, or other disputes), and then an account of the clan's journey including river crossings, stops at villages, and the foundations of other villages, finally arriving at the village of the person giving the tradition.²³

Cuvelier's work, and that of many Western historians who followed his lead, accepted the validity of these synthetic histories, although they replaced the folkloric explanatory materials and substituted speculations founded more firmly in Western traditions of social science (drought, population growth, or war). Like Boka, Cuvelier believed that there might be a master genealogy or migration table that would link all the clans to Mbanza Kongo and the ancient kings. Belgian colonial authorities, as well as missionaries joined this quest.

Kongo historians were perfectly willing to accept Cuvelier's reworking of Boka's work, which he published first in Kikongo, including adding the older written sources and the social science oriented explanations.²⁴ In 1960, for example, H. Matota produced a variant account of the origin of Kongo using the same principles, one of the first attempts by a Kongo historian writing in Kikongo to be published,²⁵ and ten years later, Raphael Batsíkama ba Mampuya ma Ndawla, then one of Congo's most prominent historical writers and student of traditions, produced a comprehensive history of the kingdom from its origins to the eighteenth century in French. Batsíkama's work is particularly interesting as its footnote apparatus includes references to *zimvila* and to documentary sources, while its approach remains close to that of Boka.²⁶ The search continues to interest

²² For an important study of the political and religious ideology that underlay these folktales, see Luc de Heusch, *Le roi Kongo et les monstres sacrés* (Paris, 2000).

²³ For a thorough explanation, with many examples from the area north of the Congo River, see MacGaffey, *Kongo Political Culture*.

²⁴ Camilo Afonso, a Kongo historian from Angola whose thesis ("O contributo da tradição oral no estudo da história de Angola: O caso dos Bakongo," University of Lubango, 1991), is a model for the publication of tradition texts, told me (in Lisbon where he was serving in the Angolan embassy) in 1999, that many of his informants and his father, a noted amateur student of Kongo history, possessed only two books: Cuvelier's *Nkutama* and de Munck's *Kinkulu*.

²⁵ H. Matota, *Niuka Kongo* (Kisantu, 1960). The book adopts an eastern perspective and thus relates the earliest events to "Mbamba Kalunga," an early clan founder as well as the king of Kongo.

²⁶ Raphael Batsíkama ba Mampuya ma Ndawla [sic Ndawla], "Voici les Jaga," 178–218, conveniently reprinted in *L'ancien royaume du Congo et les BaKongo* (Paris, 1999). In his introduction and notes, Batsíkama mentions the publication of earlier studies in Kikongo in newspapers like *Kongo dya Ngunga*, *Kongo dyeto*, *Kongo dya wene*, mostly published in the late 1950s. I have been unable to obtain copies of these works for this study.

traditional Kongo historians, in both Congo and Angola, where, for example, Miguel Ferraz Alberto, head of the Democratic Sovereign Conservators Party, an Angolan party that seeks to restore the kingdom of Kongo, has produced a number of mimeographed historical works that incorporate this search for a master genealogy. Like other Kongo historians, Alberto's tracts are based on tradition, traditional explanatory lore, and primary and secondary works like Cuvelier or Ralph Delgado, whose history of Angola is based entirely on documents.²⁷

Likewise, Western scholars followed Boka's lead as developed by Cuvelier. Georges Balandier's influential 1965 historical description of Kongo followed Cuvelier explicitly on early history,²⁸ as did that of W. G. L. Randles in 1968.²⁹ Later writers such as Kajsa Ekholm and António Custodio Gonçalves took the explanations of Kongo social structure presented by Boka, combined it with field research, and developed interpretations of Kongo's origin and history as struggles between autonomous clans and the state.³⁰ Henrique Abranches, working independently with traditions gathered in the coastal region of Soyo (modern Angola) also worked with the same general principles.³¹

Ann Hilton, whose reconstruction of early Kongo history made very little direct use of modern traditions, still accepts Boka's idea of a *kanda*- (or clan)-based original structure that lasted into the historic period and shaped Kongo's history, borrowed from Cuvelier, and especially Ekholm. Her idea that "*kanda* chiefdoms" were an early and very important early social form was refined by including other types, such as "*kitome* priestly chiefdoms" and "*extra-kanda*

²⁷ "Lista Nominal dos Grandes Reis Soberanos que vibraram o trono do Grande Estado Unido Reino do Kongo....," a kinglist with commentary in Portuguese based on both documentary and traditional sources, for example. It is the only kinglist I have seen that names seven ruling kings of Kongo before the arrival of the Portuguese, for later kings it differs in details from other published lists. A master genealogy is attached, "Nkutama a mvila za makanda: Kadi a Mbuta okuvo, Kilambata, Nsinga kia kondua e sina..." (parts in Kikongo, parts in English). This, in spite of its title, is not directly based on Cuvelier or other lists of *makanda* known to me. My thanks to Ferraz Alberto, who sent me a selection of these undated but recent texts, as well as additional materials of a similar nature in letters to me dated 21 October 1998 and 20 March 1999. Also see Partido Democrático dos Conservadores Soberanos de Angola, Gabinete Executivo, "História de Angola," Ofício no. 0012/C.I./PDCSA/97, Luanda, 4 August 1997, mimeograph distributed to participants at the conference "Construir Angola: As Fontes e sua Interpretação," Luanda, August 1997.

²⁸ Georges Balandier, *Everyday Life in the Kingdom of the Kongo, Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries*, tr. Helen Weaver (New York, 1968, original French 1965).

²⁹ W. G. L. Randles, *L'Ancien royaume du Congo des origines a XIXeme siècles* (Paris, 1968).

³⁰ Kajsa Ekholm, *Power and Prestige* (Uppsala, 1972); António Custódio Gonçalves, *Kongo, le lignage contre l'état* (Évora, 1985), 27–44.

³¹ Henrique Abranches, *Sobre os Basolongo. Arqueologia da Tradição Oral* (Gand, 1991), and followed up in texts on a web site, www.netangola.com/p/textos/news5.html, "O Mito Solongo de Diogo Cão e o seu contexto" (c. 1998).

chiefdoms" whose existence was suggested by sixteenth and seventeenth century documentation rather than modern tradition.³²

All of these interpretations, however, whether Western or Kongo failed to appreciate that Boka's project was a work of secondary history: his primary sources were clan mottos, and the stories of the foundation were simply interpretative schemes. That such schemes had a certain concreteness or that stories of the foundation had been repeated in the past made them seem to be primary sources, when they were not. Indeed, Cuvelier realized that the clan mottos and migration stories he collected, if used as primary sources on their own and without the secondary apparatus, spoke against the origin story as Boka presented it, but argued that this was because they were ancient and had become corrupted over time.³³ Furthermore, he was probably aware, as Wyatt MacGaffey has pointed out in discussing Kongo tradition, that clan stories are linked to modern-day political rights and often hotly contested, and sometimes fabricated.³⁴ It was this that probably convinced him to present his collection of traditions as a catalog, organized by clan, rather than his original plan of presenting them as a systematic history.

Several lines of approach undermine the literal use of Boka's or even the earlier traditions as primary sources. In the first instance, there is the difficult problem of linking the secondary elements of tradition, like the narrative origin story, to documented reality. It is quite possible, using contemporary documents alone, to trace the evolution of Kongo's political structure from the sixteenth century to the present. From these sources it is clear that Kongo was dominated by the state in its earliest documented period, not by autonomous clans, as tradition implies, and as a number of historians who accept the tradition assert. This is not to say that people did not calculate their kinship relations as important in making marriages and alliances, or that kinship groups did not dominate local society; they might have, though there is little direct evidence that they did.³⁵ Factions founded on kinship principles (as well as other principles such as clientage and slavery)³⁶ contested control of the state, but they were branches of the royal family, their bases were appointive offices, and the locus of struggle was at

³² Hilton, *Kingdom of Kongo*, 8, 19–31.

³³ Cuvelier, "Traditions congolaises," 194–95.

³⁴ MacGaffey, *Custom and Government*, 22–35.

³⁵ Hilton, *Kingdom of Kongo*, is one of the most careful attempts to show the power of local clans in early times. Her initial statement, 19–22, makes the assertion on the basis of modern tradition as reported by Cuvelier and others, and by anthropology that reflects more recent social organization. The seventeenth-century evidence she cites later is mostly either confirming the existence of kinship rules or ambiguous.

³⁶ It is worth noting that the semantic field of the word *kanda* (*dikanda* in the seventeenth century) included such diverse groups as choirs of angels, or a governing group, today it is often used to mean race, nation, or even items of similar classification. It can therefore mean any faction, though certainly kinship groups would be included.

the point of transition between kings.³⁷ When the Jesuit Mateus Cardoso witnessed the funeral of Pedro II in 1622, he noted that the mournful music was played out in twelve distinct bursts, “neither increasing or diminishing ... to show that the twelve families [*gerações*, almost certainly translating *makanda*]³⁸ of Congo which proceed from the first kings, all cry and mourn the death of their king.”³⁹ These were the clans of seventeenth-century Kongo, branches of the royal family held together by the state and dominated by the king; to prove this, Cardoso also documented the descent of three of the clans from King Afonso I (1509–1542).⁴⁰

The clans of Boka’s history, whose own traditions are documented in *Nkutama* and elsewhere and can be collected today, and which do not claim origins in the royal family, are in fact not particularly ancient. After studying the texts of oral traditions from *Nkutama*, *Kukiele*, and other sources, both Wyatt MacGaffey and I concluded independently that the traditions are the product of the nineteenth-century “trade revolution” in West Central Africa.⁴¹ These traditions, with their stories of migration, actually retraced trade routes pioneered in the commerce in peanuts and wild rubber that led to widespread migration along these roads by tens of thousands of porters. Needing to connect stopping places along the routes, they created fictive kinship relations in chains of villages even as they formed the clans, corporate groups intended to insure security and gather capital.⁴² Thus, not only were the migration traditions that seemed so ancient to Cuvelier and those who followed him relatively recent, but most of the clans

³⁷ This is the main thrust of my analysis of Kongo’s seventeenth-century political structure, John Thornton, *The Kingdom of Kongo: Civil War and Transition, 1641–1718* (Madison, 1983), 38–53.

³⁸ The idea that important things come in multiples of three is important in Kongo thought: today the number of clans that departed Mbanza Kongo is usually nine or twelve: Boka listed nine. Naming the nine or twelve original clans is an important part of the search for an original genealogy, and there is little agreement on it. Given this background, the number is probably not an accident, MacGaffey, *Kongo Political Culture*, 71–72.

³⁹ Mateus Cardoso, “Morte de D. Alvaro III rei do Congo e eleição de D. Pedro II Afonso,” 1622, fol. 172, *MMA* 15: 490.

⁴⁰ Mateus Cardoso to Francisco Rodrigues, 1624, in *MMA* 7: 291–2. His own knowledge of still earlier kings who would also have descendants might have allowed the list to be expanded to the appropriate number had his purpose been the development of a master genealogy.

⁴¹ Earlier, before I had read the larger corpus (but having seen Cuvelier’s citations from it in “Traditions congolaises” and *L’ancien royaume*), I had accepted MacGaffey’s argument that modern traditions would not help in the reconstruction of the foundation of the kingdom or its early history, but argued that the traditions did relate to the post-1665 period (see *Kingdom of Kongo*). This, I now believe, is only partially true, and their real locus is post-1850.

⁴² MacGaffey, *Kongo Political Culture*, 69–76. My own insights were developed by long conversations with MacGaffey as I grappled with the traditions, particularly in 1994. See John Thornton, “Documentos escritos e tradição oral num reino alfabetizado: tradições orais escritas no Congo, 1580–1910,” *Actas do II Reunião da História da África (Luanda, 1997)* (Lisbon, 2000), 447–65. For the social and cultural background, see John Thornton, “São Salvador/Mbanza Kongo: Kongo’s Sacred City,” in David Anderson and Richard Rathborne, eds., *Africa’s Urban Past* (London, 1999).

themselves, regarded as the ancient bedrock of Kongo society, were also not much more than a century old.

Boka's recounting of Kongo's origin as the history of the migration of clans is in fact one of a long series of re-castings of the origin story to suit political circumstances of the times. It also constituted his own reflections as a historian on what appeared to be a probable explanation of the clans' mottos and memorized itineraries. Boka's work stood at the end of a long historiography, which can be reconstructed thanks to older collections of tradition. In the sixteenth century, according to the earliest explicitly historical work that relied on oral tradition, as Kongo was knitting together a centralized government, its origin was represented as a federation of provinces. In the seventeenth century, when centralization was complete and the kings were at the height of their power, the foundation was cast as the victory of an army led by a heroic king. When Kongo dissolved in civil war after the disastrous battle of Ulanga (Mbwila) in 1665, the foundation was regarded as the work of a wise and skillful blacksmith who settled disputes; in 1710 both this and the earlier version of a conquering hero were extant simultaneously—a reflection of the civil war's own contested principles. Finally, after 1850, it was Boka's version as a series of migrations from the ancient capital that took over, as the trading clans dominated politics and contested the power of the king. In each instance, the origin story has reflected the constitution of the country as an emerging state, a consolidated unitary monarchy, a shattered kingdom attempting to recover from civil war, or an identity for an emerging commercial class.⁴³

Problems of Older Traditions

If Kongo's history was not dominated by independent clans before the nineteenth century, clearly its earlier traditions must have had different primary sources, and this is reason enough to pay special and close attention to earlier traditional histories. Indeed, there is nothing quite resembling a *mvila* in any writing before the nineteenth century. The closest thing we have to a *mvila* was in the signature of a letter of King João II (1688 to post-1716) to the Capuchin Girolamo Merolla, announcing himself as one "who tramples the lion in the kingdom of his mother," a boast that relates to holding political power (lion skin carpets are power symbols in the regalia of rulers) and resembles linguistically the boasts found in *zimvila*.⁴⁴ It seems to be a personal boast, however, and not the motto of a clan.

The primary source of earlier times—the equivalent of today's *mvila*—was a memorized list of kings, and perhaps a chronicle of events in the reigns of the most important. Kinglists were very durable, and quite free from political manipulation. In 1844, for example, a mulatto priest from Angola named Francisco das Necessidades obtained a list of kings of Kongo from the foundation to

⁴³ Thornton, "Documentos escritos."

⁴⁴ João III to Girolamo Merolla, 22 February 1688, in Girolamo Merolla da Sorrento, *Breve e succinta relatione...* [1692], 2d ed. (Bologna, 1726), 301, "O seu fliho espiritual O principe de Congo D. João Manuel Grilho que piza o leão no Reino de sua Maij."

the reign of Henrique II, whose coronation he attended. Comparing this list with documented events and contemporary letters of the kings themselves reveals a high degree of concordance.⁴⁵ Where there are some variations and these throw off the numbering system in places, it is typically for minor kings with short reigns. He failed to include King Pedro I, who ruled for about three years in the sixteenth century (1542–1545), thus making the Pedros too low by one number. Likewise, he failed to recognize King Garcia III and his successor João II who ruled at Bula as a rival branch during the civil wars; since they were never crowned in the capital, this might be justifiable oversight. If das Necessidades' list misnumbered some kings in 1844, just a few years earlier there must have been a better list, for when the king proudly announced himself as "I, the king of Congo Garcia the Fifth" in 1803, he had to have known that four other Garcias had ruled before him (including the problematic Garcia III), even though the last of them had died a half-century earlier, in 1752.⁴⁶

An earlier list, made about 1758, is even more accurate when compared to documentation; it includes Garcia III but not his successor João II, although its author or his sources clearly had read Cavazzi's history with its kinglist from the 1650s. (Kongo historians never flinched from using documents to supplement memory.) But it also had details not found in Cavazzi, particularly the double Kikongo names that kings bore, from the earliest kings forward, some of which can also be confirmed by documents, and are not found in any printed source.⁴⁷

The rise of clans replaced this type of primary source, just as it altered historiography. Just forty years after das Necessidades wrote out his kinglist, English Baptist missionaries at São Salvador could find no trace of this historical memory. As evidence, they pointed out that even senior members of the royal court who were in a good position to know could only name a few of their former kings. When missionary Carson Graham published a kinglist in 1931, it included only kings who had ruled since the late eighteenth century.⁴⁸ Furthermore, it is obvious that even Cuvelier did not locate a better kinglist in his diligent researches that included visits to Angola and historical accounts of royal origin. Most of Cuvelier's published kinglists were derived from documents, and when he reported kings based on oral tradition, it was mostly the same late eighteenth-century names that the Baptist list contained. It is interesting that the king who was ruling when the Baptists came to Kongo had misnumbered himself, as Pedro V. Had he

⁴⁵ Published as "Serie dos reis de Congo..." in *Boletim Oficial do Governo Geral de Angola* (1858). A very similar list was reported by Alfredo do Sarmiento when he visited Kongo in 1856, and published in his book *As sertões d'Africa* (Lisbon, 1880). Sarmiento's list, however, may have simply been extracted from das Necessidades'. The best study of kings and various documentary kinglists is found throughout Saccardo, *Congo e Angola*.

⁴⁶ Garcia V to Governor of Angola, 6 July 1803, *Arquivos de Angola* 19 (1962): 56.

⁴⁷ Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro (Rio de Janeiro), Lata 6, doc. 2, "Catallogo dos Reis do Congo" dated, according to the cover, 16 November 1758, though there appears no internal chronology that confirms a date later than 1752. The author was a partisan of Kimpanzu rulers, and based on handwriting in the text, might have been educated in Kongo.

⁴⁸ Carson Graham, *Under Seven Kongo Kings* (London, 1931), appendix.

had das Necessidades' list (which itself misnumbers Pedros), he would have been Pedro VI, and had he known of the 1758 kinglist he would have been Pedro VII.⁴⁹

Both Cuvelier's and the Baptists' kinglists started with Zuzi, or José I (1779–85), the first ruler of a line of kings from the southeast part of the country, and in effect the tradition was not that of the monarchy but of the Kivuzi clan which hailed from that area and was ruling in the late nineteenth century.⁵⁰ The idea that Kongo was a junction of clans and that clans were the crucial element had actually displaced the system that valued keeping the entire list of kings regardless of their kinship affiliations. Thus kinglists might be preserved as long as they were incorporated into the history of a clan, but only those relevant to the clan history. Since those days, of course, the publications of Cuvelier and others in Kikongo, French, and Portuguese have “fed back” into tradition, and one can find kinglists in accounts based on tradition once again.⁵¹

If the rise of clan traditions appears to have destroyed the kinglist traditions, some clan traditions might incorporate those lists. For example, a clan tradition in *Nkutama*, while presented in the form of the usual migration tradition, also gave the descent of a number of rulers of Matadi in the eighteenth and probably early nineteenth century, including mention of one of their number we know from documents to be King Garcia IV who took power in 1743.⁵² It is like the royal tradition (of the Kivuzi clan) first recorded by the Baptists, but it actually reaches farther back in time. While tradition might be rearranged to serve the present methods of preservation, older primary sources in the form of lists of rulers could still be carried on, even in the period when the kinglist was put aside in favor of clan traditions.

In addition to his kinglist, das Necessidades also brought another document back to Angola, a document written by someone in the court of King José I in

⁴⁹ Pedro V ruled in the early 1760s, he was attested with this number by Cherubino da Savona, a contemporary witness; according to das Necessidades, there was another Pedro who ruled in a confused period following the death of Afonso V in 1785. Das Necessidades called him Pedro V because he had left out Pedro I Nkanga a Mvemba, son of Afonso I, who ruled briefly from 1542–45 before being overthrown by Diogo I, so that all his Pedros are one number too low. Thus the nineteenth century Pedro V, had he known of das Necessidades' list, should have been Pedro VI, and if he had a list based on knowledge of the mid-eighteenth century should have been Pedro VII. The 1758 list is correct up to Pedro IV (died 1718) but predates the advent of Pedro V.

⁵⁰ Actually, the traditions of the Kivuzi place its origins in the nineteenth century, as a long Kikongo account published by Cuvelier reveals, “Mambu ma Kinza Nkulu mu Nsi a Kongo,” *Kukiele* 5 (1931), 55, with a French translation of most of it in “Traditions Congolaise,” 205–20, see also *Nkutama*, 71. The Kivuzi were probably a branch of the Kinlaza clan (whose origin dates to the mid-seventeenth century) who had established themselves in Nkondo. José I, their leader in 1780 still considered himself a Kinlaza.

⁵¹ Miguel Ferraz Alberto's “Lista” is remarkable in that it has included very ancient kings not named in any of the earlier kinglists, and his source of this information is interesting. Other elements of his list seem based on Cuvelier, though there are divergences throughout. Compared with the documentary record, it is not always accurate for later kings.

⁵² Cuvelier, *Nkutama*, 72, Garcia's name and dates are revealed in Instituto Histórico e Geografico Brasileiro, lata 6, doc. 2, “Catalogo,” fol. 5.

1782, which related the story of Afonso's baptism and early reign, including a long account of how the Christian king had his mother buried alive for refusing to remove a small idol from her neck, and it shows us another face of tradition. This story was not true, and moreover there is no mention of it in contemporary records or early seventeenth-century accounts of Kongo history, but it was fairly ancient by the time it was recorded in 1782. It seems to have come into circulation about a century earlier, being repeated in a number of later seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century sources. The story has survived into the modern era in a clan motto as, "Dom Afonso Mvemba Nzinga buried his mother alive for the sake of the Savior King."⁵³ The story serves a purpose other than simply remembering history, for it is intended to show that a good king (and Afonso is seen in a positive light in the proverb) is so impartial that even close relatives are not exempted from harsh but warranted judgments.⁵⁴ This narrative properly belongs, therefore, in the group of explanations rather than as a part of a chronicle. However, since the story had become attached to the kinglist by Afonso's name, it survived the transformation of tradition.

Another example of the durability of narratives attached to the chronicle is found in the account of the origins of the dynastic rivalry that would eventually destroy the kingdom. In 1710, Bernardo da Gallo noted that the Kongo civil wars of the previous half-century had resulted from the division of the royal family into three branches, which he named as Kimpanzu, Kinlaza, and Kinkanga a Mvika, which we can date from contemporary documents to the 1620s and which was indeed a crucial moment in Kongo's history.⁵⁵ Memory of this important historical event remained, for the kinglist of 1758 notes the same three names in conjunction with this event.⁵⁶ While the kinglist disappeared, the idea of the triple division of the royal family did not, as a modern clan named coincidentally Kinkanga, whose motto was recorded in *Nkutama*, declared, "Kinlaza, Kimpanzu, Kinkanga: three stones on which Kongo cooked."⁵⁷ This motto incorporates a proverbial expression for items that come in threes. In more recent times it has been employed by Kongo historians for a variety of purposes: Alberto Manuel Ferraz has it for three provinces that dominated Kongo,⁵⁸ Henrique Abranches for

⁵³ Cuvelier, *Nkutama*, 70. In Kikongo: "Don Funsu Mvemba Nzinga wazikidi ngw'andi a kimoyo kakwikila nkanka a Ntinu Nkangi."

⁵⁴ I owe this interpretation to Manuel Ferraz Alberto, as well as some other Kongo members of the audience when I discussed this at the conference "Construir Angola" in Luanda, in August 1997. The proverb might also reflect the idea that the king was so powerful and the state so absolute that he could kill any person with impunity, an interpretation that Ferraz Alberto also accepted.

⁵⁵ For historical specifics of this period, grounded on contemporary documents, see Thornton, *The Kingdom of Kongo*, 50–53.

⁵⁶ Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro, lata 6, doc. 2, "Catálogo," fol. 2v.

⁵⁷ In Kikongo, "Kinlaza, Kimpanzu, Kinkanga makukwa matatu alambila Kongo"; Cuvelier, *Nkutama*, 73; Thornton, "Documentos escritos," 463.

⁵⁸ Ferraz to Thornton, 21 October 1998.

three districts that dominated Soyo in ancient times,⁵⁹ and Batsikama for three clans that were ancestral to the Kongo Kingdom.⁶⁰

Even proverbs, then, can be made historical by adding relevant information within their form, but each of the “stones” takes a different slice of history of greater or lesser trustworthiness to fit into the form. Obviously, the clan mottos might record historic information that had been maintained orally for as long as three centuries, although it might lose its context.

In summary, it is clear that despite the mutability of some elements of tradition, Kongo could and did preserve historical memories for quite long periods of time. Genealogies and lists of kings are the best preserved since they required literal memorization and the record suggests that they were relatively free from political manipulation. On the other hand, narratives of events have been subject to considerable manipulation for ideological, explanatory, or political ends, and might be removed from the original context to appear in proverbs or *zimvila*. With these principles in mind, we turn to an attempt to reconstruct the earliest periods of Kongo history using the earliest recorded sources.

Using Tradition: The Origin of Kongo

Duarte Lopes, a Portuguese New Christian who served as Kongo’s ambassador to Rome, wrote the first explicitly historical description of Kongo in 1588. Lopes’ account, which is no longer extant in its original form, was revised and augmented by an Italian humanist, Filippo Pigafetta, after he interviewed Lopes in Rome and then published in 1591. The work was intended to convince Vatican authorities that Kongo was a Christian kingdom of good standing and thus worthy of having its own bishop, and therefore did not deal very much with the pre-Christian period. It has no account of the foundation of Kongo or any king before João I Nzinga a Nkuwu, the first Christian king. In describing the country, Lopes presented pre-contact historical information primarily in dealing with the provinces, each of which was carefully and separately described.

Pigafetta presented Kongo as if the entire territory were governed by six provinces—Mbamba, Soyo, Nsundi, Mpangu, Mbata, and Mpemba—though each had many sub-provinces under it. This may or may not have been the way Lopes reported the provincial organization to him, and in any case Pigafetta added some of his own editorial emendations to make Kongo fit into the emerging understanding that Europeans of the day had of Africa. It seems unlikely, however, that Kongo had such a neatly organized space; the six-province scheme is just as likely to be a multiple of three of which the Kongo were fond. In 1526, Afonso requested priests to be sent to all his provinces, which he itemized as Nsundi, Mbamba, Mbata, Wembo, and Mpangu, still six, but a different list from Lopes.⁶¹ Another list of 1529, probably also originally from Afonso, but presented in a

⁵⁹ Abanches, *Basolongo*, 26 and 59 n. 27.

⁶⁰ Batsikama, *L’ancien Kongo*, 179–226.

⁶¹ Afonso to João III, 18 March 1526, *MMA* 1: 461–62.

letter to the king from Portugal, named Nsuñdi, Mbamba, Wandu and Soana.⁶² In 1607 Cosme Álvares, chaplain of king Álvaro II and secretary of Marquis António Manuel of Funta, the Kongo ambassador to Rome, gave a list of 35 territories of Kongo that included both the large provinces and a great many smaller ones as well, with no indication that all fit into a comprehensive six-province scheme.⁶³

Lopes did not give, or Pigafetta did not record, the history of all the provinces he described; those he did include, all northern and eastern provinces, appear to have been previously independent territories that joined Kongo voluntarily or involuntarily. Mbata, Kongo's eastern province, was the most important—it “was in ancient times strong and great and spontaneously joined with the kingdom of Congo of its own free will, without war, as there were strong dissensions among the great men, and because of this it is privileged above all other provinces.” One of these privileges Mbata had over other provinces was the right to have their rulers chosen by the king of Kongo from within their own royal line, without following any fast rule with regard to age or exact relationship to previous rulers. This, Lopes or Pigafetta believed, was so as to have no usurpation or rebellion, which ended the dissensions that had led it to join Kongo. Moreover, should the royal line of Kongo end, Lopes added, the rulers of Mbata would succeed as kings of Kongo.⁶⁴

Some details about Mbata found in Lopes' tradition are confirmed and expanded by earlier sources, strongly suggesting that the constitutional elements reflected in this narrative and interpretive history were relevant in the early as well as late sixteenth century. In 1514, Afonso I wrote that he had been concerned in the early days of his reign (c. 1509), when he faced opposition to his accession within Kongo, that his enemies might get Dom Jorge, the Mwene (lord of) Mbata “who was the head [cabeça] of our Kingdom” and who “was his uncle, and he who would be king should be his closest relative,” to repudiate him. In the end Dom Jorge supported Afonso. In 1529, probably responding to earlier statements by Afonso, João III of Portugal decided to write a letter to the ruler of Mbata, “who is the first voice of Congo, and they cannot make a king without him, according to the custom of the country.”⁶⁵

Lopes also gave the history of three other provinces, Mpangu, Nsundi, and Mpemba. Mpangu, lying north of Mbata, was “in ancient times a free kingdom which governed itself” but had been conquered.⁶⁶ The Carmelite missionaries

⁶² João III to Afonso, *MMA* 1: 531–34.

⁶³ Notes of Cosme Álvares, 1607, *MMA* 15: 404.

⁶⁴ Pigafetta, *Relatione*, 37; de Santissimo Sacramento, “Relacion,” *MMA* 4: 368 and “Relation” *ibid* 4: 410.

⁶⁵ João III to Afonso, undated, possibly late 1529, *MMA* 1: 535. This letter would seem to be in response to an earlier letter, of 1526, for which a three-year delay seems long. Some scholars have seen this long delay as a snub, but the delay depends upon exact dating of the text. However, Afonso did not mention Mbata being the first voice, etc. in the extant 1526 letter, so João's information on it must be from another source.

⁶⁶ Pigafetta, *Relatione*, 36.

who visited these regions in 1583, were told that Nsundi had once been a “another kingdom, even though small”;⁶⁷ Lopes indirectly stated that it too had been conquered when he noted while discussing Mpangu that “it [Mpangu] was conquered after the country of Sundi.”⁶⁸ Mpemba, in this tradition, was “the center of the state of Congo and the origin of the Ancient Kings and the land where they were born,” thus the original territory to which other provinces were added.⁶⁹

The accounts of the other two main provinces, Mbamba and Soyo, do not contain many historical details. Mbamba was represented as an important and powerful province, ruled by a close relative of the king, and managing its conquests to the south,⁷⁰ but the tradition made no mention of its history. Soyo’s ruler, it maintains, simply was a member of the royal family.⁷¹ Lopes believed the ruler in 1491 was an uncle of the king, and moreover, in dealing with the last years of the reign of João I (who died about 1509) noted that the Mwene Soyo was frequently at court and was well esteemed by the king as a counselor. He persuaded João not to remove Afonso, his son and future successor, from his office as ruler of Nsundi, and subsequently advised Afonso on the best way to fight in the civil war that followed the king’s death, while providing him with crucial military support.⁷² By way of support, a late fifteenth-century account by Rui de Pina says that when Soyo’s ruler was baptized in 1491, the king of Kongo “made a grant to him of 30 leagues of land along the coast continuing inland for ten leagues with all its vassals and incomes”.⁷³

Lopes’ tradition, as the oldest one, provides us with important insights into the early kingdom, suggesting that it was formed by voluntary and compulsory agglomeration of neighboring states around a central core, but it is certainly incomplete. Aside from what can be constructed from the provincial histories, it contains no continuous narrative of the pre-contact period, and moreover does not record the names of early kings. If one imagines that there had been a narrative of early expansion that Lopes knew when he came to Rome, it would probably be as described above. It is possible that this narrative came up in the sixteenth century as an interpretation and replaced an earlier one that was lost. But we cannot know of such a narrative, and we must take it as an act of faith that this is the earliest version of Kongo history and accurately reflects the earlier period.

Kinglists and genealogical information recorded in the early to mid-seventeenth century accounts of tradition help to fill the gaps of Lopes’ account, however. Given that kinglists have been the most reliably transmitted information, followed by genealogies, we can glean more about the origin from these texts,

⁶⁷ Diego de Santissimo Sacramento, “Relacion,” *MMA* 4: 368; “Relatione,” *ibid.*, 4: 410.

⁶⁸ Pigafetta, *Relatione*, 37.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 25–27.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 43, 48–49.

⁷³ Rui de Pina, *Chronica del Rei D. Joham II* (MS of ca. 1512) cap. 58 *MMA* 1: 66.

recognizing that those narrative elements that differ from the reconstructed narrative we could create from Lopes' or Pigafetta's account may reflect constitutional changes rather than historical recollections.

The Jesuit priest Mateus Cardoso made extensive historical notes about the early kingdom in letters and historical accounts written in 1622–1624, and the Capuchin missionary Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi da Montecuccolo wrote a very detailed account of early Kongo history from information he collected when he visited Kongo in 1664, but only published in 1687. Although he did not remain long in Kongo, Cavazzi most likely drew on the knowledge and perhaps writings of another Capuchin, Girolamo da Montesarchio (resident from 1648 to 1668), as well as written Jesuit sources that are no longer extant, possibly including the chronicle that the Jesuit Manuel Afonso was said to be composing in 1635.⁷⁴

Cavazzi's account of Kongo's origin, the most detailed, begins with genealogical information about "a man by the name of Eminia-n-Zima married to a certain Luqueni Luansanze, daughter of Nsa-cu-clau, and sister of Npu-cuan-sucù, who bore him a baby, who was also called Luqueni," who was the first to take up the prerogatives of the title Mutinù, which means king."⁷⁵ Cardoso's history of 1624, while lacking the genealogy, called this son Motino Bene or perhaps Motino Üene, which in fact is a title meaning either "a certain king" or "king of the kingdom."⁷⁶ In his account of 1622, however, Cardoso confirmed Cavazzi's account of his personal name as Motino Aluquene,⁷⁷ and in his letter in 1624 he noted that the person he was then calling simply Motino had "as another name Nime."⁷⁸ All these indications are consistent with naming practices since the late fifteenth century at least that added a father's given name as a second element to a son's given name, making this king Lukeni lua Nimi or Lukeni, son of Nimi (who was himself son of Nzima).⁷⁹

Taken together with earlier documentary sources, the genealogies recorded by Cavazzi and Cardoso also allow us to make some chronological estimates

⁷⁴ John Thornton, "New Light on Cavazzi's Seventeenth Century Description of Kongo," *History in Africa* 6 (1979), 253–64.

⁷⁵ Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi da Montecuccolo, *Istorica Descrizione de' tre regni Congo, Matamba ed Angola* (Bologna, 1687), Book 2, para. 86 (this form of citation is also marked in the Portuguese translation of Graziano Maria [Saccardo] da Leguzzano, *Descrição histórica dos tres reinos Congo, Matamba e Angola* [2 vols., Lisbon, 1965]).

⁷⁶ The reading "Ntinu Wene," which Cuvelier believed to be correct, assumes that the extant nineteenth-century copy of the original, MS 8080 of the Biblioteca Nacional de Lisboa, includes a copying error: that in writing "Bene" the copyist mistook the letter "Ü" for a "b," a likely possibility in a faded text. MacGaffey, supposing that the text is correctly copied reads it as written and translates it as "a certain king." MacGaffey, *Kongo Political Culture*, 23–24.

⁷⁷ "História," chapter 13, fols. 14–14v; Mateus Cardoso, "Morte de D. Alvaro Rei do Congo e eleição de D. Pedro II Afonso," fol. 174, *MMA* 15: 494.

⁷⁸ Cardoso, 1624, *MMA* 7: 291.

⁷⁹ On the naming conventions, described first in 1545, see John Thornton, "Central African Names and African American Naming Patterns," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd series, 50 (1993), 727–42.

about the period before the arrival of the Portuguese. In the sixteenth century, the Portuguese historian João de Barros wrote that King Afonso I was eighty-five years old at his death in 1542,⁸⁰ which means, taken literally, that he was born in 1457. Furthermore, Afonso himself declared at the start of his reign in 1509 that he was the first born of his father Nzinga a Nkuwu,⁸¹ which means that Nzinga a Nkuwu was probably not more than about twenty at that time, making his date of birth as about 1437. We cannot go farther back than this from the documented history.

Fortunately, Cardoso provided some information in the form of details about the successors of the founder that might allow us to make an informed guess about the chronology of the early kings who ruled between the founder Lukeni lua Nimi and Nzinga a Nkuwu. He related that the founder's son was "Encu a Motino" [Nkuwu a Ntinu], whose own son in turn was Nzinga a Nkuwu, the first documented king of Kongo (born, as we have seen above, c. 1437). Nzinga a Nkuwu, however, only came to the throne after two cousins (one of whom Cardoso named as Quinanga in his 1622 account) had ruled, together making five kings.⁸² Cardoso contradicted this in his 1624 history when he noted that there were six pagan kings of Kongo from Ntinu Wene to Nzinga a Nkuwu.⁸³ A possible partial resolution is to have Nimi a Nzima as the first king (of Cardoso's six), and making his son Lukeni lua Nimi, traditional founder of Kongo and taker of the title *ntinu*, as the second king. This would include Nimi a Nzima as a king of Kongo, perhaps because his son made his conquests under this authority.

Lukeni lua Nimi, who took the title *ntinu* and is regarded as the founder of Kongo must have died quite young, because his successor and son Nkuwu a Ntinu was not allowed to succeed his father upon his death. Instead, Cardoso related that first his cousin Kinanga and then another cousin, presumably children of his father's siblings, ruled before him.⁸⁴ If we anchor a chronology of Nkuwu a Ntinu's life on the birth of his eldest son in 1437 and allow him to be between 20 and 35 at that point (to allow daughters or non-surviving sons), he would have been born between 1402 and 1427. This leaves the question of the birth date of his father, the founder of the state, Lukeni lua Nimi.

Cardoso noted that one of the reasons Lukeni lua Nimi decided to found his own state was that he was a younger son of his unnamed father and thus not in line to inherit. While one should not take this reason too seriously since it might simply be a conventional explanation for ambition, Lukeni lua Nimi's name does tend to support it. At least in recent times, Kongo parents sometimes name children in honor of ancestors. If this pattern is followed, they will first use the pater-

⁸⁰ João de Barros, *Decadas de Asia* (Lisbon, 1552), excerpt in *MMA* 1: 142.

⁸¹ As he noted himself in his letter to the nobility, 1512, *MMA* 1: 262. This letter was written on his behalf in Portugal, but probably based on an earlier letter, sent shortly after he became king and mentioned in later correspondence, Afonso to Manuel I, 5 October 1514, *MMA* 1: 294.

⁸² [Mateus Cardoso] letter, 1624, *MMA* 7: 291.

⁸³ Cardoso, "História," cap 15, fol. 15v.

⁸⁴ Cardoso, "Morte," fol. 174, *MMA* 15: 494.

nal and than maternal grandparents, followed by the paternal and maternal parents.⁸⁵ Lukeni's given name was then the namesake of his mother, Lukeni lua Nsanze, suggesting that he was at least fourth born. The fact that he died leaving a non-adult son suggests that he was not particularly old. Allowing him to have the son who would eventually succeed him at age 20-35 (in 1402-1427), so as to allow for daughters and non-surviving sons, he would have been born between 1367 and 1402.

It is therefore possible within these limits to say that Nimi a Nzima, in many respects the real founder of Kongo even if he did not bear the title *ntinu*, was active and operating in the last half of the fourteenth century. Cardoso, writing in 1624, placed the origin of Kongo "some three hundred and fifty years ago," or 1270, which seems too early by half a century for even the most extreme assumptions of reign length and birth dates. But it is hard to imagine that Cardoso had any particular basis for his estimate, at least from the evidence he left behind, and so we can let the later date stand.⁸⁶

From chronology we can now turn to reconstructing whatever is possible of the narrative history of the early Kongo using the same sources. In doing this we leave the relative security of the kinglist to the ideological world of narrative history, and we will privilege a narrative history closest to that of Lopes and Pigafetta. According to Cavazzi, Nimi a Nzima was ruler of "the province of Corimba, which is a part of the kingdom of Coango extending along the banks of the Zaire."⁸⁷ Since people without Cavazzi's knowledge of African languages and geography heavily edited his text, this probably contains two typographical errors, writing "Coango" when "Congo" is meant, and spelling "Corimba" and not "Coimba."⁸⁸ Girolamo da Montesarchio, who traveled extensively in the region along the south shore of the Congo River in the 1650s and probably supplied Cavazzi with these details, left his own autographed manuscript free of copying or typographical errors. In this account, the Capuchin noted that "the first Kings who dominated Congo left from Coimba [not Corimba] and crossed the Zaire [Congo River] and began to dominate the lands of Congo."⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Thornton, "Central African Names."

⁸⁶ Cardoso, "História," cap. 13, fol. 14.

⁸⁷ Cavazzi, *Istorica Descrizione*, Book 2, para. 86.

⁸⁸ Another possibility, is that Corimba represents Elemba (assuming the Co- is the locative *ku-* and that "l" replaces "r"), whose ruler was known as the "Grandfather of the King of Kongo" in the 1650s. Girolamo da Montesarchio, "Viaggio al Congho cioè è Relatione scritta da un nostro Mesionario Cappuccino P. Girolamo da Monte Sarchio della Prov[inci]a di Napoli, morto in Arezzo il 29 Maggio 1669," fol. 38 in Calogero Piazza, ed., *La Prefettura apostolica del congo alla metà del XVII secolo. La relazione inedita di Girolamo da Montesarchio* (Milan, 1976). Elemba was located near the Mpumbu area not far from the Kwango River, so far away from Vungu or Mpemba Kasi. The name Kwimba (a phonetic rendering of the term) is common in many parts of the Kikongo speaking world.

⁸⁹ Da Montesarchio, "Viaggio," fol. 20. I have also consulted this MS directly on microfilm. Note that most of this same ground is covered, with additional details in Jan Vansina, "Notes sur l'origine du Royaume de Congo," *Journal of African History* 4 (1963), 33-38.

Slightly earlier tradition confirms this general narrative, but called his original homeland Bungo [Vungu]. This was the name given the founder's homeland both by Cardoso and by Kongo's own King Pedro II, who reported at about the same time great sadness that this country "which was the root and origin of his land" was destroyed by "Jaga" invaders in 1624.⁹⁰ Vungu was a place name of considerable antiquity and had a long connection to Kongo. In 1535, Afonso I mentioned "Ibungo" as one of the areas over which he claimed to rule as king, though he did not indicate that it was any more special than the several other areas over which he was also king.⁹¹

In any case both of the later Italian sources agreed that the first place the founder conquered was Mpemba Kasi, a territory lying just across the Congo River from Vungu, suggesting that perhaps Coimba might be a town or sub-district of Vungu. Local traditions of the region support them, for Girolamo da Montesarchio observed that the female ruler of Mpemba Kasi whom he visited in the 1650s was called "Mother of the King of Kongo," a title reminiscent of the one given to Mbata, though one should add that the Kikongo word "ngudi" means mother, but might also mean "source" or "origin."⁹²

The story of the first king crossing the Kongo from Vungu to conquer Mpemba Kasi, first province of Kongo, may not have any basis, however; as Wyatt MacGaffey pointed out in his study of nineteenth-century tradition, the idea of a river crossing, surrounded by ideological stories, may be more of a cosmological necessity than a statement of literal truth.⁹³ While there is little doubt that the seventeenth-century Kongo elite believed that their dynasty had originated in Vungu, or at least across the Congo River, this is not supported by earlier tradition. According to Lopes, Kongo began not across the Congo River but in the province of Mpemba and annexed the other provinces from that core, leaving out any river crossing at all. But the location of the province of Mpemba that Lopes or Pigafetta presents as the core of old Kongo is not consistent with other geographical knowledge of the mid-sixteenth century. In an inquest into a treasonous plot conducted in 1550, witnesses indicated that Mpemba was south of Kongo beyond the Mbidizi (M'brige) River (where Lopes' account places the provincial capital). What seems likely is that Lopes or Pigafetta conflated Mpemba, the large southern province, with Mpemba Kasi, the smaller northern province, thus putting both Lopes and the later Capuchins in agreement over the original core of Kongo.

Transplanting the origin place of Kongo from Vungu to Mpemba Kasi still leaves Cavazzi's narrative of Nimi a Nzima's life to examine, but as we have already seen, narratives are less reliable than genealogies. Nimi a Nzima lived as a lord and raider, according to Cavazzi, building up petty domains and having them dissipate, but eventually he took up in some craggy rocks and decided to

⁹⁰ Cardoso to Rodrigues, 1624, *MMA* 7: 295.

⁹¹ Afonso to Paulo III, 21 February 1535, *MMA* 2: 38.

⁹² Da Montesarchio, "Viaggio," fol. 20.

⁹³ MacGaffey, *Kongo Political Culture*, 70–77. It is ironic that for many of the north Kongo regions, Vungu is also a center by virtue of its position on trade routes from Boma.

charge toll to passers-by. When absent from this domain he charged Lukeni, his son, with the duty of collecting tolls. Lukeni required an aunt, one of his father's sisters, or one of his father's brother's wives, to pay the toll, and when she refused, he killed her along with the unborn child that was in her womb. His father did not punish him, Cavazzi believed, because the Kongo admired such bloodthirstiness,⁹⁴ but a more likely explanation is the one still given to the well known story of Afonso killing his own mother "for the sake of the Faith"—that this was the sign of a ruler who upholds the law in all its rigor even against relatives, as a token of impartiality.

Lukeni's grisly double murder, though it and the circumstances surrounding it are at least possible in the natural world, therefore, is a tale that we must not take too seriously given its ideological significance, and for that reason too we must have some doubts about the whole context that the original teller gave it. The raider or bandit taking refuge in the rocky heights of the region was well known—and the area on both banks of the Congo River around Vungu is particularly characterized by sharp-sided, flat-topped mountains called *tadi* in Kikongo, and the place name Matadi, "rocks" is common in the area.⁹⁵ The region was subject to periodic raids from across the Congo in the seventeenth century, da Montesarchio noting a number of serious ones in the 1650s which he attributed to "Aiaca" or "Jagas," a generic Kikongo term applied to rootless people who often lived by raiding.⁹⁶ Lemba, in this same area, would serve as a fortified refuge for a whole line of seventeenth-century kings.⁹⁷ Thus the story of Nimi a Nzima's raiding, his ephemeral estates, and the refuge in the rocks as well as Lukeni a Nimi's own crossing of the Congo River might have been nothing more than a storyteller's elaboration, similar to the "Cabbage Patch War," a tale used to explain migrations in recent traditions in Kongo that linked them to disputes between women working in a cabbage patch. Or it may have been historical speculation based on concrete knowledge of the area and its society. Either way, it was probably more to provide context than a memory of real historical events.

Some traditions of the area around Mpemba Kasi collected in the seventeenth century support the idea that Nimi a Nzima's polity, whether it included Vungu or not, was larger and more complex than Cavazzi or Cardoso's traditions of conquest suggest. A local tradition, probably also collected by da Montesarchio around 1650, but reported by Cavazzi, noted that "in Esiquilù [Nsi a Kwilu in the Kwilu River valley] ... they revere a site hidden deep in the forest, which by ancient tradition was the residence of the first kings." Worthy people had told him that any-

⁹⁴ Cavazzi, *Istorica descrizione* Book 2, para. 86.

⁹⁵ The modern town of Matadi, is of course, the best known. In the seventeenth century, there was also a marquisate of Matari (ɾ has evolved into ɖ since then) just south of Mpemba Kasi.

⁹⁶ Da Montesarchio, "Viaggio," fols. 20–20v.

⁹⁷ John Thornton, *The Kongolese Saint Anthony. Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Antonian Movement, 1684–1706* (Cambridge, 1998), 19–22, 135.

one who looked upon the site would die.⁹⁸ This is evidence that the kings of Kongo had ruled elsewhere in the region before moving their capital to Mbanza Kongo, and that their domain was larger than just Mpemba Kasi. This might also help to explain Cardoso's claims that more kings ruled Kongo than the genealogy supported. The fact that Kongo formed an alliance with Mbata during the reign of Nimi a Nzima supports the idea that he possessed Nsi a Kwilu at that time, since this territory bordered on Mbata and Mpemba Kasi did not. This certainly suggests that at the least Nimi a Nzima had occupied the area at some earlier point in his reign.

Seventeenth-century traditions stress the conquest elements of the foundation of Kongo, but the genealogies support the concept of voluntary alliance found in Lopes' sixteenth-century version, particularly in the attention they pay to the alliance with Mbata as an independent kingdom. Cavazzi supports this in part when notes that Nsa-cu-clau [Nsaku Lau], father of Nimi a Nzima's bride, later "took possession of Batta" which "in those days was a kingdom," and which he maintained in considerable independence, a general line that is supported by Cardoso's tradition as well.⁹⁹ Indeed, Cavazzi subsequently noted that the descendants of Nsaku Lau eventually submitted to Kongo's authority, and were then granted the title "Neacondiamene Congo [Ne akondi a mwene Kongo]" meaning "Lord uncles of the King of Kongo."¹⁰⁰ According to Cardoso, this title was "Encande Amanicongo," which he thought meant "uncles of the kings of Kongo," but in fact might be "*e nka[ka] andi a mwene Kongo*," or "the grandfather of the king of Kongo," because, Cardoso also noted, Mbata leaders addressed the kings of Kongo as their *ntekolo* or "grandchildren."¹⁰¹

While this implies that Lukeni lua Nimi assigned this province to one of his followers, first with a lot of independence and then as an honored subordinate, what seems much more likely is that this is a survival from an earlier tradition that focused on the alliance of Mbata with Kongo, which later historians recognized as a surviving primary source but needed to fit into the existing historiography. Lopes and the earlier documents show that Mbata joined voluntarily with Kongo in order to insure succession in a single lineage, and while Cavazzi's tradition no longer states this motivation, the genealogy certainly supports it.

In fact, it quite likely that the reference to Lukeni lua Nsanze as a "daughter of Nsaku Lau" refers to this *kanda*, rather than the actual father of Lukeni's bride. Early twentieth-century traditions employed the expression "his father was Nlaza [*se andi Nlaza*]" to refer to general membership in the Kinlaza *kanda*, and not to a

⁹⁸ Cavazzi, *Istorica descrizione*, Book 1, para. 234. It is probable that Nsi a Kwilu, whose name means "country of the Kwilu" in Kikongo, was not a separate district from Mpemba Kasi, but rather a generic name for the whole region drained by the Kwilu.

⁹⁹ [Cardoso], "História," Chapter 15, fols. 16.

¹⁰⁰ Cavazzi, *Istorica descrizione*, Book 2, para. 89.

¹⁰¹ Cardoso, "História," cap 15, fol. 16. As written in the MS, a nineteenth-century copy of the original (probably by a non-Kikongo speaker), this text does not make sense. These amendments are proposed by François Bontinck in his French translation, "L'histoire du royaume de Congo (1624), *Études d'histoire africaine* 4 (1972).

biological father.¹⁰² This would explain why the tradition recalled the detail that Lukeni lua Nsanze was the sister of Mpuku a Nsuku, probably the actual ruler at the time on behalf of the Nsaku Lau, and thus the more immediate founder of the line that continued to rule Mbata under Kongo's protection. The descendants of Nsaku Lau were still ruling with Kongo's protection later in the seventeenth century, though when Kongo's own elite fractured in the civil wars and ceased its protection, the Nsaku Lau split and was actively engaged in a civil war around 1700.¹⁰³

Lopes' note that the rulers of Mbata would succeed in Kongo if the royal line ever ran out also suggests that this early alliance was much more equal than seventeenth- or even sixteenth-century sources present it. What may well have happened was an alliance in which the ruler of each kingdom guaranteed the succession of the heirs of the ruler of the other kingdom. Kongo's great power and success allowed it eventually to dominate Mbata, but that domination may have been a later development, still remembered but reinterpreted in the narrative.

The alliance with Mbata suggests that Kongo may have had other alliances with small polities nearby, though the later narratives do not support it as these alliances played a smaller role in the later development of the kingdom. When Afonso I gave his royal titles in 1535, he listed a string of polities, many located along the north bank of the Congo River from its mouth inland, including Vungu, Ngoyo, and Kakongo as an area he ruled over as "king."¹⁰⁴ These territories, at least in the sixteenth century, were not simply subordinate provinces of Kongo—for example neither Mbata, nor the provinces that Lopes said had been added by conquest like Nsundi and Mpangu were included in the list. Rather they were states over which he had a different, less authoritative, relationship.

Referring to Loango, Lopes noted that it was "widely believed [*è fama*]" that in the past Loango had been subject to Kongo, but had since drifted away and was now only a "good friend" of Kongo's king.¹⁰⁵ Loango is not on Afonso's list of the lands over which he was king, but Loango traditions of the mid-seventeenth century recorded by Dutch geographer Olifert Dapper made Loango a one-time dependence of Kakongo, which in turn was a part of Afonso's titles in the early sixteenth century.¹⁰⁶ It is possible that the rise of Loango in the mid- to late sixteenth century had gradually pulled these allied states away from their ties to Kongo. In fact, Loango adopted an aggressive policy in the region in the seventeenth century, for King Pedro II complained that Loango was sponsoring invasions of rootless "Jagas" in the region.¹⁰⁷ Had Afonso presented a tradition like Lopes (in fact, his list of titles is a sort of tradition), he might have included more

¹⁰² Cuvelier, *Nkutama*, 70–71.

¹⁰³ Thornton, *Kongolese Saint Anthony*, 99.

¹⁰⁴ Afonso to Pope Paulo III, 21 February 1535, *MMA* 2: 38.

¹⁰⁵ Pigafetta, *Relatione*, 14.

¹⁰⁶ Olifert Dapper, *Naukeurige Beschrijvinge van Africaensche gewesten* (Amsterdam, 1668), 144.

¹⁰⁷ Cardoso to Rodrigues, 1624, *MMA* 7: 295.

about this federation, but by Lopes' day it was probably not as important in Kongo's history as Mbata's alliance had become.

In contrast to what might be described as a weak but probably voluntary federation to the north of Kongo, Afonso's titles also included a number of territories over which he claimed to be "lord," most lands lying farther south. These included the Ambundos (people living between Kongo and Ndongo in the upper Dande River region), Angola (Ndongo), Quysama (Kisama, south of the Kwanza), Matamba, and others. These territories were humbled by Kongo armies in the sixteenth century and forced to pay tribute, as Matamba was around 1517, for example, but were not fully integrated into Kongo. They had a different status from the regions over which Afonso was "king," thus suggesting a way of understanding the sort of federation that Nimi a Nzima may have controlled as one based on a voluntary league of equals and not as tributaries cowed into submission by shows of force.

Federations of this type may have been common in west Central Africa in the period. Indeed, the whole region east of the Nkisi to the Kwango was once united in a loose federation called the "Seven Kingdoms of Kongo dia Nlaza," included in the titles of Álvaro II in 1583.¹⁰⁸ Cardoso referred to the people of the area as "Momboares" or "The People of the Seven"¹⁰⁹ in a detailed account of the eastern region.¹¹⁰ The rich region, and its polity of uncertain but possibly quite deep antiquity, was more or less incorporated into Mbata in the course of the later sixteenth century.

Tradition places the foundation of Kongo not in the years that Nimi a Nzima and Lukeni lua Nimi ruled in Mpemba Kasi, but with the conquest of the region around Mbanza Kongo, the future capital of Kongo. Cavazzi, following the model of great conqueror that the seventeenth-century historiography supported, related that Lukeni lua Nimi took Mbanza Kongo immediately after his conquest of Mpemba Kasi. This allowed him to declare himself king and take the title *ntinu*. In so doing, he created a new state, Kongo, and moved its capital to Mbanza Kongo. Tradition credits him with founding the city; archaeology eventually may or may not support this claim.

In any case, according to seventeenth-century tradition, Lukeni lua Nimi found the area under the control of another polity. Cavazzi named the ruler of this polity as "Mabambòlo Manipangalla,"¹¹¹ while Cardoso pronounced him "Mani Cabunga."¹¹² According to Cardoso, the Mani Cabunga [Mwene Kabunga] was a sort of "pope" to people in a wider area, to whom they brought supplications to

¹⁰⁸ Donation of Alvaro II to Holy See, 20 January 1583, *MMA* 3: 238.

¹⁰⁹ Portuguese typically pluralized Kikongo words by adding "s" to the singular form. The singular was therefore Momboari, or a combination of the class prefix for persons (*mu-*) with the number seven (*bwadi* in modern Kikongo; in the seventeenth century "r" was used where "d" is used today).

¹¹⁰ Cardoso, "Relação de alevamento, 1622," *MMA* 15: 533.

¹¹¹ Cavazzi, *Istorica descrizione* Book 2, para . 86.

¹¹² Cardoso, "História," cap. 2, fol. 2v.

God, a role Mwene Kabunga continued even after his conquest and subsequent intermarriage with Lukeni lua Nimi's family. In Cavazzi's account, Mwene Mpangala performed none of these roles, but was simply a petty lord whose descendants were assigned some of their former lands after the conquest (in the same manner that he represents the settlement with the Mwene Mbata). Every year, he noted, they made a symbolic representation to the rulers of Kongo to protest the usurpation of their lands and titles.¹¹³ These residuals suggest that as in the case of the conquest of Mpemba Kasi, the original terms may have been a more complex integration and not simply a conquest. Seventeenth-century tradition would have focused more on the claim of conquest to support the constitutional concept that the whole country was conquered and the ruler had the right to appoint and dismiss governors at will.

Modern scholars, following Cuvelier, have identified Cardoso's Mwene Kabunga as a *kitome*, or a specialized priest whose field of mediation included territorial deities. In seventeenth-century Kongo there were many *itome*, and one of their functions was to sacralize the political elite. Unless the rulers and the *kitome* performed a ceremony representing the conquest of the region, they could not expect to receive any tribute or obedience.¹¹⁴ These *itome* were regional, for according to Girolamo da Montesarchio, the duke of Nsundi had to travel outside his domains to Ngimbo a Mburi to receive permission to rule from the *kitome* of the region.¹¹⁵ Since in historic times the Mwene Vunda played a role in the selection and coronation of the kings, the assumption has been that the Mwene Vunda was either a political or literal descendant of the Mwene Kabunga.

Cuvelier, citing modern traditions of the Nsaku and other clans, created connections between Vunda, Mbata, the Mwene Kabunga, and a number of historical figures to make this office a key one in the early history of Kongo. Ann Hilton, taking this analogy to its logical extreme, argues that everywhere in Kongo that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century sources report sacralizing *itome*, such as the lands south of the Congo River or in Soyo, there was a former rule by *itome* as political rulers.

However, this neat correspondence between the conquest, the Mwene Kabunga and the Mwene Vunda, and the role of the Mwene Vunda as a *kitome* is hardly as complete as we would like. For one thing, it ignores Cavazzi's account, which has no religious elements of this type in it, and moreover, gives different names. In addition, in testimony given in an inquest into a treasonous plot against Afonso's grandson Diogo I in 1550, witnesses noted that the Mwene Vunda in the mid-sixteenth century ruled a substantial domain as a more or less secular lord, including a number of subordinate titles between Mbanza Kongo and the Mbidizi River, and that the position of Mwene Vunda was in the king's gift. Moreover, the

¹¹³ Cavazzi, *Istorica descrizione*, Book 2, para. 86.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Book 1, paras. 175–77.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*; da Montesarchio, "Viaggio," ff. 34–34v.

inquest also refers to the Mwene Mpangala as a subordinate of the Mwene Vunda, and that his position as well was in the king's gift.¹¹⁶

The role of the Mwene Vunda in sacralizing the king is also unclear from the records. Cardoso noted his symbolic role in the enthronement of Pedro II in 1622, where the Mwene Vunda and several other nobles were among the "Bembacasis, who are great nobles of the court." He made an important throne speech in place of the Mwene Mbata, who could not attend. Indeed, it is clear in this account that the Mwene Vunda's roles were done with the Mwene Mbata, or were done in substitution for the Mwene Mbata, who did not attend the 1622 coronation.¹¹⁷ There is nothing in Cardoso's account or other earlier ones that make the Mwene Vunda perform the role of *kitome* any more than the Mwene Mbata would have. Indeed, what seems more likely is that the king had outgrown the alliance role of the Mwene Mbata in the seventeenth century, and had substituted an official under his complete control in his place. These elements complicate the idea that the Mwene Vunda was some sort of *kitome* just because he helped to crown the king, or that he was connected religiously or politically to the Mwene Kabunga of Cardoso.

At best we can say that these elements of the tradition probably simplify the actual process of integration of the second territory added to Lukeni lua Nimi's domain, what was to be the core and nucleus of Kongo. At any rate, Kongo's subsequent growth, whether under Lukeni a Nimi or his successors, took place in the Inkisi valley, commencing with the conquest of Nsundi, followed by the conquest of Mpangu to its south (the order in which these took place according to Lopes). Mbata, which lay south of these states, was allied with Kongo much earlier, however, and it may have aided the conquest.

These new provinces, as well as Mpemba and Mbamba, whose histories are unknown, grew under Kongo's direction to become large and varied polities. Cavazzi describes this process briefly:

Then he [Lukeni lua Nimi] gave the districts to his followers and paternal relatives, and these generously imitated him with generous rivalry, not less gallantry they enlarged territories, and in this way as time went on a great Kingdom was formed....¹¹⁸

This program simplifies Kongo's expansion and its government, in the way of seventeenth-century traditions generally, giving the kings complete discretion over the appointment of provincial governors, a point echoed by Cardoso who said that after the conquest, Lukeni lua Nimi "divided what he had won among his captains, giving to each one a province, and creating them proprietary, tributary lords, this not for life, but for however long the said Motino-Bene wanted it, and this custom continues today among the kings of this kingdom."¹¹⁹ Tradition,

¹¹⁶ "Auto de Devassa," *MMA* 2: 252, 257, 259.

¹¹⁷ Cardoso, "Morte," fols. 171, 172, *MMA* 15: 485, 490.

¹¹⁸ Cavazzi, *Istorica descrizione* Book 2, para. 88.

¹¹⁹ Cardoso, "História," Cap. 14, fol. 15.

therefore tells us little about the nature of this expansion, although by using sources from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century we can at least confirm its general outlines.

Nsundi, possibly because it was the first direct conquest of the new Kingdom of Kongo, like the other later conquests, was annexed directly to the crown and then assigned as a temporary fief to the most senior and important of the king's officials. But the history of Nsundi shows us that Kongo administration was entering a new phase, in which royal governors would expand provinces that they administered under the king. This seems to contrast with the policies of kings when they were ruling only Mpemba Kasi, Nsi a Kwilu, and a few neighboring districts. The structure of Kongo administration revealed in most seventeenth-century sources suggests that these lands, and some lying to the west, like Kiowa and Kandongo that lay on the border with Soyo, were ruled directly by the crown, who appointed each small district's governor itself.¹²⁰

But in Nsundi, the kings annexed the newly conquered territories not to the royal domain, but to Nsundi itself, so that it soon grew not only to larger size, but also to greater administrative complexity than the earlier districts. Nsundi was probably the first of these expanding provinces, since tradition by the fifteenth century had it assigned to the senior son and likely successor of the king. Nsundi's expansion in the late fifteenth century, according to contemporary documents, went northeastwards, along the south bank of the Congo, and even across the Congo, into Nsanga and Masinga. This latter phase was underway in the late 1480s and early 1490s, since King João I Nzinga a Nkwu employed Portuguese soldiers in the area, which fought to subdue "rebels" (implying an earlier phase of at least nominal subordination) there, or at least along the Congo in 1491. The work was arduous, for the Portuguese military expedition of 1509 seems to have been deployed in the same area.¹²¹ Many of these campaigns in Nsundi were directed by João's son, and after 1491 were accompanied by Portuguese missionaries who noted that he made war for "many years" in Nsundi, with "repeated battles, and always victories on the part of the Prince [Afonso]."¹²²

¹²⁰ See the list of marquisates that were a part of the "royal throne" of Kongo (opposed to other marquisates that were under other provinces such as Mbata, Nsundi, Nsoyo, or Mbamba) in António de Oliveira Cadornega, *História geral das guerras angolanas (1680)* (mod. ed. Manuel Alves de Cunha and José Matias Delgado, 3 vols., Lisbon, 1940–42 reprinted 1972), III, 194. Cadornega may well have based his description of Kongo administration on documents in the possession of various Kongo kings who took refuge in Angola during the civil wars, see for example, *ibid.*, III, 308–10, where information was obtained from Miguel de Castro, secretary of King Daniel.

¹²¹ On the acquisition of Nsanga and Masinga, see Cardoso, *História*, fol. 16. Contemporary records can be found in Rui da Pina's account of 1492 and its later (1512) chronicle version, in *MMA* 1: 135–36. On the 1509 expedition, see Armada de Gonçalo Rodrigues (1509) in *ibid.* 4: 60–62.

¹²² Francisco de Santa Maria, *Ceu*, cap. XIX in *MMA* 1: 95. Although this chronicle was composed many years after the events, the author cites and quotes many unpublished documents found in the archives of the "Cónegos Azuis," which are no longer extant. For this passage, he seems to have used letters of missionaries who accompanied Afonso in Nsundi about 1492 and remained with him some years. Other, more contemporary sources (which do not give the name of the province) include Afonso's own letter to Manuel I of about 1509, now lost, but its text serving as the basis for several accounts: Martín Fernández de Enciso, *Suma de Geographia* (Seville, 1519), fol. 109; João de

These conquered territories were integrated into the province: in 1491 the victorious Kongo king deprived the defeated “rebels” of their “fruits, rents and tributes ... and all degree of nobility,”¹²³ and presumably gave these to his subordinates.

Mbata, in many respects a co-beneficiary of Kongo’s greatest power, also expanded during this period, adding its conquests to its own domain. Its expansion was primarily eastwards, as Mpangu, its northern neighbor, was conquered after Nsundi and added to the royal domain. Mbata looked across the Inkisi into the lands between the Inkisi and the Kwango: according to Lopes they were always at war with their “heathen” neighbors and had added many lordships to their territory.¹²⁴ The titles of the dukes of Mbata in 1648 show the results of this eastern expansion, including: Nzolo, Zombo, and Kundi near the Malebo Pool, running parallel on the south side of Nsundi’s own expansion.¹²⁵ Mbata conquered some of the areas, but also accepted the submission of small kingdoms, whose ruling elite retained its role as local governors.¹²⁶

Kongo’s expansion in the Inkisi valley continued in the last years of the fifteenth or early sixteenth century and sometimes included them, along with the Ambundos, in the states over which Kongo was “lord” to the south. It was probably through its expansion south of Mbanza Kongo, into Mpemba and Wembo, both of which lay on and south of the Mbidizi valley, that claims were later placed in the upper reaches of the Inkisi valley, south of Mbata. Wandu was annexed as a large independent kingdom according to Cardoso’s tradition,¹²⁷ and listed as being ruled by one of Afonso’s sons in 1526¹²⁸ (though apparently continuing to retain its own aristocracy).¹²⁹ Nkusu a smaller state, first mentioned as being under Kongo’s lordship in 1535,¹³⁰ was annexed, but apparently never placed under direct royal administration.¹³¹

Mbamba also expanded under the direction of a member of the royal family. It is unclear when Mbamba was conquered, not until after Nsundi and Mpangu, according to tradition, so perhaps only in the late fifteenth century. In about 1512,

Barros, *Decadas de Asia* Decada I, Book 3, cap. 10 in *ibid.* 1: 142–3; and Afonso to Manuel I, 5 October 1514, *ibid.* 1: 294–5.

¹²³ Rui de Pina, *Untitled Chronicle*, 1492, fol. 98va, in Carmen Radulet, ed., *O Cronista Rui de Pina e a “Relação do reino do Congo”* (Lisbon, 1992).

¹²⁴ Pigafetta, *Relazione*, 37–8.

¹²⁵ Manoel Alfonso (Duke of Mbata), Order, 16 November 1648, in *MMA* 10: 274.

¹²⁶ Biblioteca Nacional de Madrid, MS 3533, Teruel, “Descripcion narrativa,” fol. 78.

¹²⁷ Cardoso, “História,” fol. 16.

¹²⁸ João III to Afonso (ca. 1529), *MMA* 1: 534.

¹²⁹ Biblioteca Nacional de Madrid, MS 3533, “Descripcion Narrativa de la mission serafica de los Padres Capuchinos ... en el reyno de Congo” (ca. 1664), fol. 103.

¹³⁰ Afonso to Paulo III, 21 February 1535, *MMA* 2: 38.

¹³¹ So it was governed when visited in 1648 by Capuchin missionary Antonio de Teruel, Biblioteca Nacional de Madrid, MS 3533, de Teruel, “Descripcion narrativa,” fol. 148.

Mbamba, then probably under Afonso's son Henrique,¹³² became involved in a defensive war with "Munza," a lord of the "Ambundos" (the Dembos region of Kongo's mountainous southern border), in which the royal army intervened and fought successfully,¹³³ and campaigned there again under the king's command in 1517.¹³⁴ The fact that Afonso and his successors took the title "lord of the Ambundos" strongly suggests, however, that the expansion of Mbamba southwards and westwards towards the coast under royal guidance was just beginning in the early sixteenth century.¹³⁵ The lands that were added in this direction, even though royal armies under the direction of the king participated, were annexed to the province of Mbamba, as were the conquests of Nsundi, rather than being placed directly under the crown of Kongo.¹³⁶

The integration of Soyo on the west coast into this emerging kingdom is more mysterious. Lopes did not say how it happened, but did note that Soyo's ruler was of royal blood, which suggests that it was added in the same way that Nsundi, Mpangu, Mbamba, or Mpemba were, through conquest and reassignment to appointees from the royal family. Lopes believed that the Mwene Soyo of the late fifteenth century was an uncle of Afonso, perhaps a brother of Nzinga a Nkuwu, and therefore a royal appointee. But Soyo began to move away from Kongo's control in the 1620s, and as a result eventually became a major player in the complex struggles between rival branches of the royal family that followed and would lead to Kongo's disastrous civil wars in the late seventeenth century.¹³⁷ This made it possible for Soyo to claim later a degree of independence in Kongo's original constitution which it may not have enjoyed—certainly its claims to independence did arise from its place within the lineages of the Kongo royal house as much as any initial independence.¹³⁸

Nevertheless, Soyo did expand during the fifteenth century under Kongo's auspices in much the same way that Nsundi or Mbamba did. When the Portuguese baptized the Mwene Soyo in 1491, Nzinga a Nkuwu made him a sizable grant of land along the coast and removed all royal dues and duties from it.¹³⁹ Cardoso, relating tradition of the seventeenth century when Soyo was pulling away from Kongo, but familiar with the original chronicle where this was recorded, made the

¹³² Henrique was listed as the lord of Mbamba in a letter of Afonso to João III, 18 May 1526, *MMA* 1: 461; this was a different Henrique than his son who became bishop, who is listed in the same document as receiving his income from the tribute paid by Mpangu.

¹³³ Afonso to Manuel I, 5 October 1514, *MMA* 1: 312.

¹³⁴ Auto que mandou fazer ... dom Afonso Rey de Congo, 27 April 1517, *MMA* 1: 398.

¹³⁵ Afonso to Manuel I, 5 October 1514, *MMA* 1: 294.

¹³⁶ Pigafetta, *Relazione*, 6 (Mbamba); 35 (Nsundi).

¹³⁷ The story is told in more detail, but allowing Soyo to be independent from the beginning, which may not be true, in Thornton, *Kingdom of Kongo*, 54–55, 66–73.

¹³⁸ For an interesting study of Soyo's history, largely from its modern traditions and a few documents, see Abranches, *Basolongo*. Modern Soyo clans claim descent (as most other Kongo clans) from Mbanza Kongo, but provide few hints about the documented parts of its history.

¹³⁹ Rui de Pina, *Chronica delRei D. Joham II* (MS of ca. 1512) cap. 58 *MMA* 1: 66.

grant include the title to the whole province and not just a stretch of coast.¹⁴⁰ In any case, by the time that Lopes wrote in the 1580s, Soyo was said to have absorbed other smaller states into its own domain, and was said to control a district near Mbanza Kongo called “Mombalas.”¹⁴¹ The name of the region means “people of the court” and is referred to in seventeenth-century administrative documents as the “Estates of the Mbala,” an important source of revenue.¹⁴²

Resistance to its eastward expansion made Soyo focus on the south coast. The lands along the Congo, its easternmost borders, seem to have been quite resistant. Mpanzulumbu, located along the north bank of the Congo and perhaps on its islands was still defiant in the early sixteenth century¹⁴³ and was only added to Kongo titles as a “conquista” in 1535, and thus independent of Soyo.¹⁴⁴ This certainly suggests that Soyo's expansion may have been directed more to the south in the late fifteenth century, and the granting of lands to the ruler of Soyo might have been an indication of this mechanism.

But Soyo's expansion to the south would be difficult. Although Kongo rulers had taken Luanda Island and its immediate vicinity by 1500,¹⁴⁵ the southwest coast of Kongo proved quite resistant, and was still unconquered by the end of the 1540s. Chamgalla (perhaps Nsi a Ngala), the principal southern state,¹⁴⁶ was both independent and threatening Kongo as late as the start of Diogo's reign in 1546, when he described it as his “principal enemy.”¹⁴⁷ When Jesuit missionaries arrived in 1548, the rulers of two smaller provinces under royal control that lay along Soyo's eastern border, Kiova and Kandongo, were preparing to attack

¹⁴⁰ Cardoso, “História,” fols. 21v–22.

¹⁴¹ Pigafetta, *Relazione*, 34. Hilton, *Kingdom of Kongo*, 23, argues that “Mombalas” was what she calls a “greater *kanda*” or a lineage that controlled a region south of the Zaire. She links it to a series of Soyo provinces located south of the Zaire, which in the late seventeenth century included one called Pambala (for the location, see map in John Thornton, “Demography and History in the Kingdom of Kongo, 1550–1750,” *Journal of African History* 18 (1977). She then goes on to equate all references to Mbala in various sources refer to it, particularly the interesting reference to “our family of Quibala” in a letter cited in the judicial inquiry of 1550. This approach, it seems to me, loses out on the precise use of the term in Kikongo by conflating all references to various areas. While the particular region to which Hilton refers to in her use of Lopes is on the east of Soyo, and hence closer to Mbanza Kongo, it certainly is not the sort of district that Lopes describes as lying virtually within the city.

¹⁴² Pedro II to Juan Bautista Vives, 23 June 1622, *MMA* 7: 36. For an explanation of the term in Kikongo, see François Bontinck, “Les Quimbaires: Note sémantique,” *Africa* (Rome) 31 (1976): 47–48.

¹⁴³ Afonso to Manuel I, 5 October 1514, *MMA* 1: 319.

¹⁴⁴ Afonso to Paulo III, 21 February 1535 in *MMA* 2: 38.

¹⁴⁵ Pacheco Pereira, *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis*, Book 3, cap. 2, mod. ed. Epiphânio da Silva Dias (Lisbon, 1905), 134.

¹⁴⁶ Chamgalla is located between the Zenza and Mbidize rivers on the map of Fernão Vaz Dourado of 1570 in Armando Cortesão and Avelino Teixeira da Mota (eds.), *Portvgallia Monvmenta Cartographia* (6 vols., Lisbon, 1960), plate 267.

¹⁴⁷ Diogo I to Diogo Gomes, 15 August 1546, *MMA* 2: 147–8.

Chamgalla.¹⁴⁸ But when the southwest coast was finally conquered, its states, along with Luanda Island and the lands immediately east of it, were given to Mbamba and not to Soyo.¹⁴⁹

Conclusion and Summary

Having reviewed what oral tradition has to say about the origins and early years of the Kingdom of Kongo, it is now possible to make a qualified statement about the probable course of events, free from the essential source criticism of the preceding sections. While some of this must still remain speculation (and the reader can refer back to the specific arguments to decide whether or not to accept the speculation as reasonable), it also takes into consideration what is more or less certain in the study of early Kongo tradition.

The earliest origins of Kongo begin around 1350–1375 with Nimi a Nzima, ruler of Mpemba Kasi. An ambitious man, he made a number of conquests, especially along the south shore of the Congo River, including at least Mpemba Kasi and Nsi a Kwilu, and as his domain gained strength, he entered into an alliance with Mpuku a Nsuku of the neighboring polity of Mbata. The purpose of this alliance was so that each of the two states could insure succession to their domain in a particular line of descent—in Nimi a Nzima's case, for his immediate children; in Mbata's for those in Mpuku a Nsuku's clan, who were descended from Nsaku Lau. The alliance was sealed by a marriage to Mpuku a Nsuku's sister Lukeni lua Nsanze, and from this union came Lukeni lua Nimi, one of Nimi a Nzima's younger children.

Nimi a Nzima or his successor Lukeni lua Nimi also entered into similar alliances with a number of polities that lay north of the Congo River, including Vungu, immediately across from Mpemba Kasi, but also extended along the north shore of the river to the coast and including Ngoyo and Kakongo as well. In time, the emerging Kongo state would overshadow these small kingdoms and they would recognize its ruler as their king, though they never surrendered administration of their domains to the southern ruler to the degree that Mbata did.

Lukeni lua Nimi was the vigorous product of his father's alliance with Mbata, and he made conquests of at least the region of Mbanza Kongo, then led by rulers either bearing the title of Mwene Kabunga or Mwene Mpangala, or perhaps divided between them. At any rate, using this for a base, Lukeni a Nimi began expanding his state to the point where he decided to move his capital to this region and found a new state, which encompassed his father's old domains, called Kongo.

Between the foundation of Kongo by Lukeni lua Nimi around 1390 and the late fifteenth century, Kongo grew and expanded. New domains were conquered and integrated into the kingdom as royal provinces, ruled by selected members of

¹⁴⁸ Jacome Dias to Jesuit headquarters, 1 August 1548, *MMA* 15: 154; the unnamed enemy of this text is given as Changalla in second letter of the same date, *ibid.*, 15: 160. Italian quotations and summaries of these letters also occur in *ibid.* 1: 179–80.

¹⁴⁹ Pigafetta, *Relazione*, 6.

Kongo's royal family for terms that made them replaceable at will. While these new domains—such as Nsundi, Mpemba, Soyo, Mbamba, and Mpangu—were under the royal will, they became regional centers into which smaller districts were integrated as sub-provinces; the older domains, especially those of the original state, remained small and under direct royal supervision. Kongo's expansion continued in the sixteenth century, as regions on both the east and southern sides of the kingdom were added and annexed, many as royal provinces or parts of existing royal provinces, including areas like Ndongo, Matamba, and other Kimbundu-speaking areas that were forced to pay an occasional tribute though they retained more or less full independence.