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KONGOMANIA AND THE NUMBERS GAME

In response to two pieces I wrote in the 1990s, and a section of my book *Cultural History of the Atlantic World* (2012), David Geggus has charged me with fomenting "Kongomania." I am a specialist in the history of the Kingdom of Kongo, it is true, and in both pieces, Kongo's history was an important part of the argument. In spite of my own fondness for Kongo and its role in the world, I plead not guilty.

My goal in these works was to propose that African ideology and African military culture (not just Kongo's) played roles in the Haitian Revolution, roles that had been largely overlooked. In arguing the ideological case, I chose to illustrate it with examples from Kongo, while explicitly acknowledging that other African ideologies might also have played a role, and encouraging others to follow through (specifically mentioning Yoruba). In the military case, the argument was divided about equally between Kongo and Dahomey. These were chosen largely because they were present in Saint Domingue in substantial numbers, but also because their military cultures were well documented.

Geggus's claim that the "question of numbers needed close attention because the strength of Thornton's arguments about the Kongolese contribution to the Haitian Revolution depends a good deal on demography," is exaggerated. Both articles were presented as case studies, and neither article relied on demography to support its argument. My purpose in bringing out demographic data was only to show that Kongolese and Dahomeans were a sizable segment of the population, which even Geggus's revision of the demography supports.

Given the relative unimportance of demography, it is unfair of Geggus to claim that I had "limited acquaintance with its [Saint Domingue's] primary sources." Had demography been a critical concern, it was only because I did not look diligently into the vast trove of scattered and largely unpublished raw data that Geggus has assembled, an important contribution to the country's demographic history. Once one goes beyond these important sources for the demography, the charge is completely misplaced. Even a glance at the footnotes

make it clear that I certainly did make ample use of primary sources, both printed, manuscript, and archival. In preparing the two articles, I had visited archives in Paris, although my goal was clearly not to present a fully researched project, which would have required much more time. I believe that the research was more than enough to get a feel for what the primary sources said.

As I defend my methods and approach for those articles, it would be worthwhile to consider what has come from them 30 years later. In "I Am the Subject of the King of Congo," I used an understanding of Kongo's political ideology to try to explain some elements of ideological statements in the Haitian Revolution.[1] I did not claim that these statements were the only source of Haitian ideology but only that it provided an example of how we might employ African systems of thought as well as European ones to understand ideology.

Macaya, who wrote the words of the title, was making a claim for an African origin of the revolutionary ideology.[2] It was because Macaya's statement was well known, evoked Kongo, and I was a specialist in that field that I was drawn to it. My investigation, preliminary at least, was to explain one aspect of revolutionary ideology as expressed by one leader who had evoked the Kingdom of Kongo. To illustrate Macaya's ideas, I tried to explain how the ideological landscape of Kongo was divided, between concepts of absolutism on one hand and a more republican concept on the other. I believed that I could detect the African manifestation of this tension in revolutionary Haiti. Noting this, I closed the article with a statement that it was likely that other regions might have added their own ideological components to the mix.

In retrospect, I am less convinced by that ideological pairing than I was at the time. I do feel that Kongo's ideology in Africa relied on conflicting concepts of governance. It might be possible to tease out a coherent ideological statement from them, but I am not sure that it could be universally applicable to ideology in the Haitian Revolution. The country did evolve, relatively soon after its independence, into two opposed lands, the Republic of Haiti and the Kingdom of Haiti. But I am not so sure now as I was then that the diverse ideological concepts of the Kingdom of Kongo shaped Haiti's future.

More recently, I have focused on the Christian part of Macaya's statement: the Kingdom of Kongo was Christian and it was Christian ideology that underlaid it. His allusion to three kings rests on the Kikongo proverbial phrase "*makuwa*

1 John Thornton, "'I am the Subject of the King of Congo': African Ideology in the Haitian Revolution," *Journal of World History* 4 (1993): 181–214.

2 François-Joseph-Pamphile de Lacroix, Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de la révolution de Saint-Domingue, 2 vols. (Paris, 1819), 1:25.

ma tatu malambila Akongo," or "the three stones on which Kongo cooked," but he used it as a way to reflect a tripartite division. With regard to the division of Kongo into political-familial factions in the mid seventeenth century (this division is still remembered in the twentieth), tradition held that was "*Kikanga, Kimpanzu, Kinlaza: makukuwa matatu malambila Akongo*."[3] In fact, I contend that the most important role that Kongolese played in Saint Domingue the welding of Christianity to a base of African traditional religion. Wyatt MacGaffey, an anthropologist who has studied modern Kongo in provocative ways, maintains that Kongo's greatest contribution to American religion was Roman Catholicism.[4]

One needs to recognize that the introduction of Christianity to Kongo did not come from the work of the Portuguese missionaries there, but from the 1486-90 visit of a group of Kongolese nobles to Lisbon, where they engaged in intense study of Christianity.[5] The nobles formed an interpretation of Christianity and subsequently propagated it throughout the country through school teachers drawn from the Kongolese nobility. European clergy were few and pressed for time, valued as much for their unique capability to perform the sacraments as for their teaching, leaving room for Kongolese teachers to forge their own interpretation of Christianity.[6] Their interpretations allowed ample room for the propitiation of local spiritual entities who had no place in Christian cosmology, much to the consternation of visiting European missionaries.

In the period when I wrote my paper, the historiography of the Haitian Revolution was dominated by claims about the role of Vodun, then ascribed to West Africa, especially Dahomey, or more specifically to people speaking Fongbe and Yoruba. Even then, the claims about Vodun's role in the Revolution were challenged—most pointedly by Geggus himself.[7] By making this Christian statement Macaya inserted an African-oriented Christian component of the three kings .

Although I was interested in the secular concepts of royal power until about 1993, a central focus of my more recent work has been an effort to understand how Kongolese Christianity influenced religion in greater African America.

3 Jean Cuvelier, ed., *Nkutama a mvila za makanda* (Tumba, Democratic Republic of Congo: Imprimerie de mission, 1934), 73.

4 Wyatt MacGaffey, "Constructing a Kongo Identity: Scholarship and Mythopoesis," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 58 (2016): 171.

5 John Thornton, *A History of West Central Africa to 1850* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 38–39 and 43.

6 John Thornton, "Afro-Christian Syncretism in the Kingdom of Kongo," *Journal of African History* 54 (2013): 53–77.

7 David Geggus, "Haitian Voodoo in the Eighteenth Century: Language, Culture, Resistance," *Jahrbuch für Geschichte von Staat, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* 28 (1991): 21–52.

Recently, I showed how Christianity from Kongo shaped the American religious dynamic, by describing ways in which Catholic saints could be co-revealed as divinities from the Fongbe and Yoruba traditions in both Cuba and Haiti.[8]

In much of Africa, most religious activity is local and continuously revealed. By this I mean that it functions in a system in which local spiritual forces are operative and must be supplicated by specialists who are able to communicate, directly or indirectly, with the spirits. These spiritual entities are not usually universal, but are confined to their locales, typically at the graves of ancestors. There are also spiritual entities with territorial jurisdiction and minor entities found in various places.

Because these spiritual entities are usually profoundly local and do not leave their places, travelers in Africa would expect, as they moved from one place to another or across ethnic lines, to consult these local spirits in place where they were rather than spirits found near their original homes.. More important still, African spiritual entities were unable to cross oceans and thus could not manifest themselves in the Western Hemisphere.

However, this general rule of localism was violated in a few places. In Senegambia, where Islam was present, the only uniform deity was God himself, Allah. Local spiritual entities had devolved into being the jinn, or perhaps into the soul (or spirit) of a powerful Sufi *shaykh*, or ancestors, if propitiated, who were present at their graves. There were few Muslims in Saint Domingue at the time of the revolution, however.

The other two exceptions were Kongo, where Catholic saints had been equated to territorial deities. These saints could easily be encountered on both shores of the Atlantic, and in the Fongbe- and Yoruba-speaking region where deities were also mobile and could operate beyond one locale. The three exceptional religious regions that had movable deities were already recognized by the time that Pierre François Xavier de Charlevoix began the evangelization of Saint Domingue. Charlevoix noted three religions among the Africans: the Islam of Senegambia, the Christianity of Kongo, and the snake god (Dangbe) of (Fongbe-speaking) Allada.[9]

8 John Thornton, ""The *Kingdom* of Kongo and Palo Monte: Reflections on an African American Religion," *Slavery & Abolition* (2015): 1–22; John Thornton, "African Traditional Religion and Christianity in the Formation of Vodun," *Slavery & Abolition* 43 (2022): 730–757.

9 Pierre François Xavier de Charlevoix, *Histoire de l'Isle Espagnole ou de S. Domingue,* 2 vols. (Paris: Hippolyte-Louis Guerin, 1730-31), 2:196

That the Kongolese were Christian was recognized at the start of the evangelization of Saint Domingue by Jesuits in the early eighteenth century, and it seems quite likely that the Kongolese did some evangelization of their own in Saint Domingue, as they were known to have done in Brazil and the Danish Virgin Islands. The existence of ordinances prohibiting the African-descended population from evangelizing among themselves in Saint Domingue suggests that Kongolese may have done this there too. Saint Domingue's priests, hampered by regulations and limited in number, might not have been the primary evangelists.[10]

I do not want to tie religious membership to demography to excess. Those three regions did represent a substantial portion of the African-born population on the eve of the Revolution, but it was the mobility of the Fon and Yoruba, rather than their numbers, that made their deities important in Vodun. The other groups, whose spiritual universe was local only, were those from the Gold Coast, the Bight of Biafra and the Windward Coast (together perhaps as many as 20 percent of the total, although probably less). These were joined by West Central Africans such as the Mondongos who came from non-Christian areas around Lake Mai Ndombe, victims of the wars between the Kingdoms of Great Makoko, Boma, and Bolia (and civil wars within Bolia).[11]

One might want to exclude also Kikongo speakers of northern dialects from outside the Kingdom of Kongo (from Ngoyo, Kakonda and Loango) who were not formally Christian. But although those areas were not officially Christian, the religion was not unknown to them. Kongo's coastal province of Soyo had played a strong hand in the politics of Ngoyo and Kakonda since the seventeenth century, and Soyo's shrine of Our Lady of Pinda was the destination of regular visits from northerners. Another shrine, located in the north and also dedicated to the Virgin had the form of a figurehead from a shipwreck. The Virgin had miraculously dug a well and a spring around herself. While not fitting into orthodox Christianity, or maybe even into Kongo's particular brand of Christianity, this shrine demonstrates that the idea of Catholic saint was present and understood even in that area.[12]

Christians from Kongo proper were liturgical Catholics as well as worshippers of saints, a fact clearly attested to by the mixed mission to Kongo in 1780-88. The mission found that populations that had not had a visit by a priest in living memory still knew relevant Catholic prayers and songs, thanks to the local basis

10 Thornton, "African Traditional Religion," 15–17.

11 Thornton, *West Central Africa*, 272–274. All the languages in the region are part of the larger Bantu group..

12 Thornton, *West Central Africa*, 177–178, 249, 305.

of Christian education.[13] Northerners who were not likely to be liturgically Christian, or to use the usual Catholic prayers and hymns, but were attuned to Christian saints as movable deities, might have played an especially important role in wedding the saints to the Fon and Yoruba deities in Saint Domingue.

A fact, noted by both Sweet and Mobley as well as Geggus, is that the famous Revolution-era chant "Bomba" and some of the other "magico-religious elements" found in Saint Domingue, were in a northern dialect, and thus from these outside areas. There is an explanation. While Mobley and Sweet maintain that this dialect was the lingua franca of all West Central Africans, the dialect is based especially on the problematic Baudry wordlist that Geggus critiques. Even if Kongolese Catholics were a smaller sample of the larger population, it would not be numbers but the capability to bridge the gap between African traditional religions and Christianity that counted.

In Africa as in Saint Domingue, however, there were lesser spiritual entities: water sprites, fairies, and the many spirits that were incorporated in spiritual vessels that were commonly called "idols" and "fetishes" by European missionaries. Spiritual workers identified these in Africa and discovered new ones in Saint Domingue—necessary, because the African ones did not have the capacity to cross oceans. The origins or inspirations for the entities discovered could be wildly various, from indigenous American (often associated with objects dug up from ancient villages, called thunderstones) to fairy tales from French settlers, or similar discoveries by various people of different ethnicities. What they had in common was that they were not entities specifically from Africa.

Vodun was then a combination of the Fon and Yoruba gods including Dangbe with Christian saints, but also incorporated worship of many of the other deities named in late nineteenth-century descriptions of Haitian Vodun, as presented by Catholic priests or Kongolese who recognized them in Saint Domingue. Kongolese would play an important part in forming this connection: in Kongo's variant of Christianity, non-Christian local spirits were also available to offer supernatural help, and practitioners had an inventory of techniques to locate them.

Thus, continuous revelation in Saint-Domingue would enrich and diversify the African components of the mix. Most arriving Africans would also immediately recognize churches as places devoted to the propitiation of territorial deities, those of the Americas. In the same way, traits of Yoruba and Fon deities could be matched with those of Christian saints, as they were known in Kongo (and

13 Thornton, *West Central Africa*, 305.

clearly also in Europe). The resulting synthesis, which we can call Vodou, was not itself a revolutionary ideology, but it could be evoked for spiritual aid in revolutionary struggle.

The argument of numbers is potentially more important in my second paper, "African Soldiers in the Haitian Revolution." Because it deals with military affairs and war, the numbers of people from one African region or another may be more important than for ideology. The purpose of "African Soldiers" was to outline distinctive features of Africa's military culture that contributed to the revolt, and it highlighted Dahomey and Kongo together. As in my first paper, this one was a plea to consider what Africans brought with them from Africa that contributed to the revolution, not a plea for any one ethnicity. It was an attempt to get around the idea that the Africans had somehow pulled off the miracle of defeating experienced European armies with enthusiastic but simple agricultural laborers. Here, Geggus's demography-dependent claims are weakened by the fact that these two groups together did indeed make up a very substantial proportion of the population, and that their ideas about military organization and tactics would be important. One might add, moreover, that both countries' tactical approaches were also widely practiced elsewhere in Africa.

The opening salvos of the revolution in 1791 were, as Geggus points out, largely led by Creoles. This was because the initial outbreak was organized by the *commandeurs d'atelier*, some 200 of whom, it was alleged, met to plot the August rising. Likewise, in the earlier phase of the revolution, the rebels congregated in the wreckage of the estates where they worked, again led by Creoles.

Regardless of where leadership began, it was necessary to learn how to fight against European armies, or armies fighting in European manner. In the early rough-and-tumble period, new military units emerged, with wildly varying leadership. Battle deaths, the breaking up of bands, and the ongoing recruitment of new units mixed up the rank and file of the fighters, so that there was probably never a clear distinction among most fighters as to ethnicities or origins once a more permanent organization grew up after a year or two. But I believe that Jean François and Biassu's statement that the real fighters were veteran soldiers from Africa, who had not yet learned two words of French, can be substantiated for this period.[14]

14 This famous quotation appears in translation in David Geggus, *The Haitian Revolution: A Documentary History* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2014), 86–88.

One powerful reason for believing this is that a good deal of the revolution was fought with an art of war that was distinctly African.[15] In Kongo and Dahomey, military operations were quite different from those in Europe, usually involving small groups of soldiers (often called "platoons" in European sources) attacking from cover, advancing, retreating, fleeing, regrouping, and redeploying. Multiple platoons would engage at once, and normally musketry rather than hand-to-hand fighting prevailed. When an objective was to be taken, however, massed infantry, often in deep columns, would be deployed, and "*arme blanche*" fighting became the norm, but with swords rather than bayonets.

In eighteenth-century Kongo and Angola, virtually all fighting was conducted in this combination. Soldiers did no formal drill, nor did they fight in tight formations as was normal in Europe. They could do this because horsemen were not present in enough numbers to force infantry to form up into a tight mass. However, in Dahomey the cavalry armies of Oyo could force fighters to adopt tactics that could deal with horsemen. Unfortunately, the source material relating to Dahomey does not include any actions involving cavalry; there is evidence only for the methods of fighting that resembled what took place in Kongo and Angola.

In recent years, military historians and theorists have come to recognize the African mode of fighting, calling it "swarming" and pointing out its role as an effective technique. Sean Edwards, a researcher, writing for the National Defense Research Institute, showed the value of swarming tactics with examples going back as far as classical antiquity.[16] The experience of US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and even more so the tactics of the Ukrainian army in its war with Russia, have only strengthened the appreciation that military theorists have for swarming as a tactic.

Swarming has its shortcomings, however. It works notably better as a defensive strategy, especially in situations where defense in depth is important, than it does in static warfare or battles involving fortified locations. In the latter situations, linear attacks, such as those described in the eighteenth-century encounters between the Kongo army and attackers from Portuguese Angola, would be necessary. Not surprisingly, fortified locations, often very complex ones, dotted the landscape of West Central Africa in the eighteenth century.

15 For further description, see John Thornton, "Was There a Military Revolution in Africa?" in *Global Military Transformations: Change and Continuity, 1450–1800,* Jeremy Black, ed. (Rome: Nadir, 2023): 507–528.

16 Sean J. A. Edwards, *Swarming on the Battlefield: Past, Present, and Future* (Washington, DC: RAND, 2000).

In fact, the military success of the Haitian Revolution relied on effective combinations of static or linear formations and swarming approaches. The Haitian insurgency therefore relied on two distinct types of units. The first were soldiers trained in European methods of linear fighting. These were the embryonic units first organized by Spanish instructors and later French ones, from which the famous demi-brigades of the colonial army developed. They were often led by people who had learned this technique through their collaboration with France and Spain. Many if not most were Creole, as one might expect.

The other type of unit was less known and less often described. The units consisted, as Jean François wrote in 1791, of "blacks who do not know two words of French, but were accustomed to war in Africa." The sources most often call these groups "bands," but not infrequently "cultivators" or just "Africans." Modern historians have often called them "guerillas" and linked them to the "peoples' army" tactics of the many insurgent movements of the 1950s and 1960s. Were it not that this military technique was common in Africa, it might seem a sort of natural development of people who had no previous experience of warfare.

However, contrasting the way in which swarming was practiced in Africa and its practice in Saint Domingue gives another dimension to the discussion. In spite of romantic ideas that swarming is a natural development of untrained fighters, or the scornful claims of European officers that it was disorganized and ineffective, swarming demands considerable knowledge and skill. It seems much more likely that swarming came to Saint Domingue with soldiers and some officers from African armies who had used these techniques fighting in Africa.

The tactic requires an understanding among all members of the unit on what to do once they advance to firing range: fire until return fire becomes thick, and then break and run. But this was not the retreat of panic, for they would also need to rendezvous soon after and then re-engage. Not only that, but the various small units would be most effective if they did not act separately but coordinated their movements before the engagement and understood that they were only one part of a larger attack. The individual soldiers would thus have a planned approach but also would follow certain established customs of behavior ("doctrine" in military terms) as to how to form, reform, and return together as a cohesive unit.

In my article, I drew out a difference between the demi-brigades organized mostly by Creoles or mulattoes, often with Spanish or French guidance, and the "bands,"

whose membership was more often African and who typically fought by swarming. Thomas Madiou, writing from the recollections of war veterans (who he never names) observed of band leader Sans-Souci that his followers "were Africans who refused to let creole blacks lead them." They would not follow "military order" and fought "as in Africa, divided by tribes." Madiou also noted that "Lamour Dérance, also African, did not want to organize the Congos in regular troops," and in a footnote explained that "one gives the generic name of Congos to Africans of all the tribes of the west coast." Ultimately, they wanted to follow the "African system, which is contrary to all civilization." In other words, they were opposed to the domination of those leaders who were anxious to restore the plantation system, which, while not restoring slavery, would restore the system of production that slavery created.[17] While the designation of "Congo" was generic in 1802, it might, in the period described here, have had a perceived origin in West Central Africa.

The decisive defeat of the French army during the campaign of 1802-03, in which Toussaint and later Dessalines combined linear and swarming tactics to outmaneuver and ultimately destroy the French army, saved Haiti and the revolution. The tension between the bands and demi-brigades would also define the way in which independent Haiti negotiated between the plantation system and smallholding peasant modes of production.[18]

People from the Kingdom of Kongo, caught up in its violent civil wars of the late eighteenth century, were not as numerous in Saint Domingue, as they seemed to me to be when I wrote in the 1990s—an understanding achieved through the research done by David Geggus and others. As a specialist on Kongo, I used the kingdom as a proxy for other potential contributions from Africa to Haitian religion and the military culture of the Haitian Revolution. My hope was that exploration of other African influences from elsewhere might expand Africa's role in shaping Haiti, but I did not wish to set off "Kongomania."

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17 Thomas Madiou, *Histoire d'Haiti,* 8 vols. (Port-au-Prince: Courtois, 1847), 2:322.

18 For more on the tension between these two systems, see Johnhenry Gonzalez, *Maroon Nation: A History of Revolutionary Haiti* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2019).