

bien rebelle fars ("and on Twelfth Night 1480," writes Eustache de la Fosse, "four Portuguese ships bombarded my ship and we were forced to surrender. I was taken on board the ship of a certain Diogo Can, who was a ribald scamp.")⁽⁹⁾

Two years later, the same "ribald scamp," Diogo Can, discovered the mouth of the Congo and sailed up the river 110 miles. The following inscription engraved on the cliffs in Vivi (Belgian Congo), was discovered in 1911: *Aqui chegaram os navios do Esclarecido Rey Dom Iouo o secundo de Portugal* (here were the ships of the illustrious king of Portugal John II). At the mouth of the Zaïre or Rio Poderoso, as the river was named in those days, Can planted the Padrao, a stone pillar surmounted by a cross.⁽¹⁰⁾

The evangelization of the Congo began, and the discovery was publicized through the learned world of Europe. A map, drawn between 1488 and 1492 and, according to La Roncière, inspired by Christopher Columbus, indicates the fact that the current of the Rio Poderoso is so powerful as to sweeten the waters of the ocean for about five leagues from the shore.⁽¹¹⁾ (*Ejus magnitudine atque dulcorare dicitur oppositum mare quaque leuets.*)

For the following two centuries, the realm of the Congo and its Christian rulers were a constant appeal to the religious zeal and proselytism of European Catholics. In 1508, Enrique, son of Alfonso, king of the Congo, was sent to Lisbon to study theology. In 1520 he was consecrated Bishop of Urica by Pope Leo X, the first Negro to wear the mitre. The Holy See received ambassadors from and sent legates to the Congo. Describing the navigation of Vasco de Gama along the African shores, Camoëns naturally alludes to the Christian kingdom:

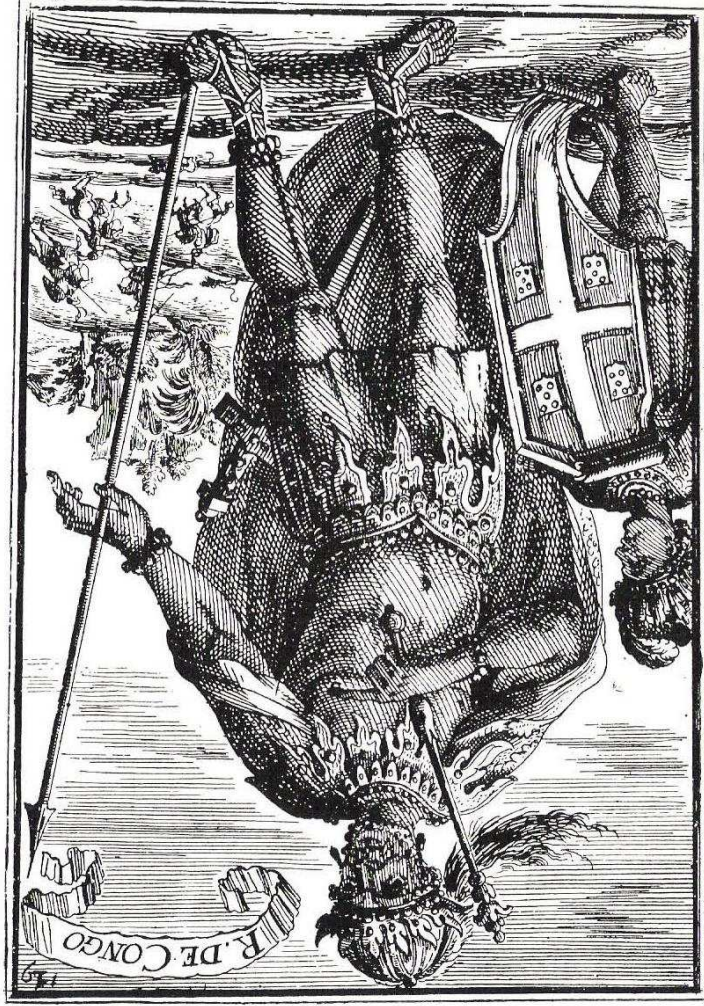
Ali o mui grande Reino esta do Congo

(Lusitades V, 13)

(The greatest realm on these shores is that

of the Congo.)

The boundaries of this kingdom included only a small part of the present province of Leopoldville, in the modern Belgian Congo. The capital of the ancient realm, San Salvador, and most of its territory, are today a part of Portuguese Angola.



THE "KING OF THE CONGO"—In the full array of a hero of Racine, the Congo ruler is thus represented in Allain Manesson Mallet's *Description de l'Uniers*, published in Paris, 1683.

Although Pigafetta most probably overrated the importance of the evangelization of the Congo realm, it is a historical fact that during the reign of Dom Sebastian, the last king of the house of Aviz, a Christian king of the Congo went to Lisbon and was most solemnly received by the Portuguese monarch. This fact made a deep impression on the popular imagination. It became legendary and, much later, may have been the origin of the strange pagents called the Congadas, that took place once a year in several Brazilian cities, in the XVIIIth century.

During Carnival time, a "royal" procession of African slaves paraded through the narrow streets of old Rio de Janeiro. A King of the Congo, his consort, and heir-apparent (the Makoko) were elected, and in gorgeous array, crowned with gilt diadems, went through the town in fine chariots. They were received by the Viceroy and the Bishop in the public square, where they performed a sort of mystery play. *I am the King of the Congo, I love to dance — I am here, I come from Portugal*: thus sang the king for a day, jiggling up and down, followed by his wife and son. Suddenly, a Cabocle (half-breed Indian) approached the Makoko and clubbed him on the head. The young African was felled to the ground and lay as if dead. Sounds of lamentations resounded in the air. The entire royal procession improvised a threnody, mourning the prince and praising his virtues. Then the sorcerers of each tribe appeared on the scene, garbed in their ritual apparel. The colored people of Brazil had not forgotten their origin. From the banks of the great African rivers, they had brought with them their masks, their spears and their matted shields. After magic incantations and passes, the Makoko came to himself, opened his eyes, sprang up and broke into a wild dance in which the king, queen and all the spectators joined. The muffled sound of the tom-tom was heard. Songs were replaced by the howling of the crowd. Lascivious rhythms carried away the captive people, celebrating the resurrection of a flat-nosed, dark-skinned Adonis. The slaves went on dancing the whole night through, forgetful of their endless sufferings. (12)

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In 1687, a folio volume of exhaustive information on "the three realms of the Congo, Matamba and Angola" was published in Bologna. It was the work of a Franciscan friar, Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi, who for many years had been the delegate of the Holy

It is a Portuguese monk, Fra Duarte Lopez, who is our in-

formant concerning this realm of the Congo. In the year 1578, he travelled in Africa. A few years later in Rome, he met the Venetian patrician Filippo Pigafetta, to whom he recounted the story of his travels. This Pigafetta, who was in all probability a descendant of the famous companion of Magellan, Antonio Pigafetta, had taken part in the siege of Paris in 1561, the account of which he published thirty years later. He also was present at the naval battle of Lepanto, 1571. In Rome, 1591, he published the book of Lopez' travels under the title of *Relazione del Regno del Congo et delle circconvicine contrade tratta dalli scritti et ragionamenti di Odoardo Lopez Portoghese* ("description of the kingdom of the Congo and the neighboring countries, from the writings of Odoardo Lopez, a Portuguese.") The book was widely read. French, English, Dutch, German and Latin translations were soon printed. A spirit of religious zeal pervades the whole work. In it, Lopez relates the conversion of the ruler of the Congo realm, in 1491, and the glorious reign of Afonso, his successor (+ 1541), the true champion of the Christian faith. There are relatively few descriptions of people and places. However, in a few pages, Lopez tells us how the king gathered together in the capital — the name of which had been changed to San Salvador — numbers of hideous images of the false gods, which were burnt on a pyre. Pigafetta writes that the "native's belief had been founded on the idea that the more awesome a god was, the more he was to be venerated."

It is sad to think that Lopez was present at the destruction of these statues without having the thought to describe them. But all the same, we owe him a great debt of gratitude for having discovered and described the Cataracts of the lower Congo. 292 years before Stanley. Moreover, the lakes of Equatorial Africa from which the Nile springs are clearly indicated on the maps which illustrate his book. If the XIXth century research scientists had glanced at Pigafetta's book, they would have avoided the many false hypotheses on this subject which have provoked endless discussion.

In Pigafetta's book, the word Congo designates a realm situated on the lower bank of the river, which he calls by the name of Zaire. It is perhaps owing to his book, so widely read in his time, that the word Congo, later applied to the river, has come down to us.

See in the Portuguese possessions of Western Africa, which he called *Etiopia Inferiore Occidentale*. In these abundantly illustrated 900 pages, Cavazzi minutely analyzes the fauna and flora of the country, giving a picturesque description of such curiosities as the *lamantin* (*il pescodonna*, the woman-fish), the pineapple and the yam (*bataia*). He shows a real understanding of the social and political organizations of the Negro realms, and seems very indignant about the heathen rites, the magic superstitions and the worship of idols. His description of music and dances is extremely accurate. All the musical instruments mentioned by him are still to be found in the Congo. (13)

It is interesting to follow in the books of Pigafetta and Cavazzi the historical vicissitudes of the African kingdoms. Pigafetta describes in detail the invasion of the Yagas (1568), identified with the present Bayaka tribe. And a great part of Cavazzi's book relates the political wisdom of Djinga Bandi, the Matamba female ruler whom the Italian writer calls "la Regina Ginga." For more than forty years, Ginga, baptized as Anna de Souza, endeavored to play the European invaders one against the other. Spaniards, Portuguese and Dutch sought her alliance.

It was from Angola and the Congo that the New World was to derive its greatest source of slaves. And the expedition of fifteen ships privately organized in Rio de Janeiro, in 1647, by Salvador Correira for the reconquest of Angola, that had been for eight years occupied by the Dutch, can be considered as one of the earliest political interventions of the New World in the affairs of the old.

Portuguese domination, founded on the dire necessities of the slave trade, persisted in Angola. But the Christian kingdom of the Congo was doomed in the beginning of the XVIIIth century, the last European visitors being *Recollets*, Franciscans from Ath (Belgium), as late as 1712. Then, for one hundred and sixty years, oblivion and barbarism fell once more on that part of

Africa Tenebrosa

Long before the days of colonization by European powers, Africa's political structures, after a period of relative splendor, weakened and were practically destroyed. It is true that in Africa the white man found fierce foes, such as the Ashantis, the Zulus, the Herreros, Overani of Benin, Samory, Behanzin of Dahomey, the Mahdi, etc. Many of them were not the exponents of a stable political organization, but merely an expression of spontaneous

resistance effected in desperate uprisings against the invaders. Overani or Behanzin, on the other hand, were but the figureheads of states in full decadence, the shadows of what they had been several centuries before the invasion.

Eight out of ten objects we admire in African artistic production were created at least a hundred or even two or three hundred years before European penetration. For some obscure, internal cause, Negro art in the XVIIIth century was already falling into decline. (14)

Great as were the errors of the European colonizers in Africa, they must be absolved from one great accusation: that of having destroyed the creativeness of the Negro.

The opinion of this writer is that artistic production decayed at the same time as the deep religious feeling that had animated the artist disappeared. A more sceptical approach to the animistic belief of yore, that inspired the carving of ancestor-statues and ritual masks, provided the decadence of plastic arts in Africa. From this time on, artistic production was limited to decorative and utilitarian purposes. In this sphere it still produces beautiful things. And European administration, especially in Belgian and French colonial territory, both encourages and stimulates the activities of the so-called *arts indigènes*.

The decadence of great African art cannot be refuted. It is comparable — *mutatis mutandis* — to the fate of religious art in Europe, where for more than two hundred years we have not seen an artistic creation inspired by faith that can compare to a medieval cathedral or a masterpiece by Giotto, van der Weyden or Michelangelo.

Thus, the decadence of African art had little or nothing to do with European penetration, and excellent art critics, such as Clive Bell, have struck a false chord when they dramatize the story of "colonial soldiers, enhancing their prestige by pointing out to stay-at-home cousins the relics of a civilization they helped to destroy." (15)

Let us illustrate this fact by examples borrowed from two men who greatly contributed to the discovery and the preservation of Negro art.

"In 1906," writes Leo Frobenius, "I visited the Kasai-Sankuru

the churches and the carving of sacred images are now mostly executed by natives, following their antique patterns. Only members of the church can fully appreciate the result of this activity. The former Apostolic Delegate in the Congo, Msgr. G. Dellepiane, had given his strongest encouragement to this initiative. In June 1936, the first exhibition of Congolese religious art was held in Leopoldville.

Full achievement will only be measured after one or two generations of artists have shown us what they can do. Meanwhile, we can agree with the wishful thinking of a French writer, M. Henri Menjaud: "If Negro art is destined to perish with the superstition that inspired it and that our civilization is forced to destroy, Christian faith can bring it to life again."⁽¹⁵⁾

II

"Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image." This was Moses' commandment to his people, as they fled from the land of Egypt, this African land where the worship of graven images was rife.

More than Europe and Asia, even more than the pre-Columbian Americas, Africa is traditionally a maker of graven images. To peoples to whom the art of writing was as yet unknown, form was the only means of preserving human thought beyond the limit of man's memory. And form became dogma, history, tradition. It would be an error however, to imagine that every figure in Negro art is a substitute for a written document.

It has often been said that Negro art was an expression of religion. But the relationship between the African worshipping and the image is very different from the attitude of the heathen in the presence of his visible god. What we commonly call an idol has never existed in Africa. What an African statue or mask represents is never a god.

The theology of most of the Bantu tribes recognizes a sole God who ordains the universe.⁽¹⁾ He created the gentii, heroic beings whose mission it was to model the visible world. This Master of the universe, indifferent to the fate of his own creation, is moved neither by prayer nor by offerings, no Negro ever thought of imprisoning his aloof and far-off divinity in any form or image.⁽²⁾ The gentii, on the contrary, who unlike the Creator were

region in the Belgian Congo. In some villages, the main streets were lined on both sides with palm trees. Each hut was adorned in a different style, a clever, delightful mingling of wood carving and matting. The men carried chiseled weapons in bronze and brass. They were clad in multi-colored stuffs of silk and fibre. Each object, pipe, spoon or bowl was a work of art, comparable in its perfect beauty to the creations of the romanesque period in Europe. I have never heard of any Northern people who could rival these primitive folk in their dignity, exquisite politeness and grace."⁽¹⁶⁾

Emil Torday, visiting the same region six or seven years later writes: "As we came in sight of Misumba, about twenty miles south of the lower Sankuru, it seemed to me that I had entered a new world. It was the most un-African place one could imagine. Stepping out of a lovely grove of palm trees we faced a long street at least thirty feet wide, as straight as an arrow. It was bordered by oblong huts, each standing alone at an equal distance from its neighbors; they were all of the same shape and differed only in their walls, which were made of masonry ornamented with beautiful designs in black. Their conventional patterns varied from house to house. . . . Though the day was still hot, the village was as busy as a hive. Everybody was working, the looms of weavers were throbbing, the hammers of smiths clanging; in the middle of the street, where was a shed, men were carving, making mats or baskets and in front of their houses, women were engaged in embroidery. Even the children were bent on some task, some working the smith's bellows, others combing the raffia for the weavers or making themselves generally useful. The whole place was a picture of peaceful activity."⁽¹⁷⁾

At the time Emil Torday visited this village, Belgian administration had, for six years past, superseded the Congo Free State. And the pastoral way of living, favorable to the preservation of popular craftsmanship, had not been disturbed.

In Africa, as in Europe or the America, industrialization, bringing a higher standard of living, may have fatal consequences for local traditional art. The radio and the movies may be of still greater danger to the survival of the *arts indigènes* than were the weapons of the white Conquistador.

During the last years, a serious attempt has been made by ecclesiastical authorities in the Congo to direct the trends of the *arts indigènes* towards Christian religious art. The decoration of