

PREFACE

“To surrender to ignorance and call it God has always been premature, and it remains premature today.” – *Isaac Asimov*

The scars of hearsay defile history. Our faithful confidence in writing all but relegates oral narratives to novelty, even as layers of translation, transposition, and cultural interpretation make the wisdom of text equally subjective. Indeed, context is easily lost in the passage of time or even the subtle perspectives and agendas of authors. Still we trust writing.

Granting scribes the deference we do gives one person's bias the power over a collective and contextual consensus that might more appropriately define an account. This tragedy of ignorance may consume the most poignant lessons of our forefathers. African oral traditions, for example, the primary source of indigenous history on most of that continent, are normally discounted in favor of inherently biased European narratives. The result is an uninformed account of events better understood through the African soul: a kaleidoscope of race, religion, politics, and tradition. In the process, African influence on Europe and America is discounted and even ignored, while exaggerations of Europe's effect on Africa abound. Consider Christianity and the slave diaspora.

Though most people associate it with Europe, Christianity was actually well established in Africa prior to its European debut. A geographical proximity to Palestine meant trade routes would naturally make Africa a target of Christianity's early predilection for proselytizing. By the end of the first century A.D., Egypt's nobles and wealthy traders patronized Christian literature, theatre, and missionary activities, helping develop a well-educated Christian society in Africa long before Europe. Even at its inception, though, Christianity's manifestations were not uniform.

Following the death of Christ, his disciples quickly splintered into factions, often with perspectives that could not be reconciled with one another. Unlike Islam (which had the Quran as a guide),

there were no official sacred texts containing the teachings of Jesus. As a result, his life was interpreted in many ways. Christians separated by great distances were likely to have very different ideas of what their religion asked or stood for and how to achieve its goals.

One early group of disciples, the Gnostics, developed a stronghold in Egypt. They collected various writings and studied the works of numerous witnesses and scholars on the life and messages of Jesus and are today considered by many to be the first Christian scholars. Because of their high levels of education and their structured regimen, the Gnostics were well respected and their views on God and Christianity had a certainty and consistency that built credibility over vast areas.

Despite their influence on the early history of Christianity, however, the Gnostics lost prominence when another major faction, based in Rome and influenced by the Apostle Paul, had its creed and practices officially adopted by the Roman Empire, then an expanding power with the foresight to recognize the motivational and political value of religion. The Empire's far-flung conquests needed a sacred text to unify their kingdom. With the guidance of their official priests, the Romans brought together a specific collection of writings by early Christians and proclaimed them to be inspired by God. More than three hundred years after the death of Christ, the Romans declared these writings the true testament of the life and teachings of Jesus and simultaneously denounced all others as heresy.

The Roman collection, known today as the New Testament, remains a central part of the Bible. Meanwhile, the Gnostic faction of Christianity, slandered as heretics and generally uninterested in waging wars of either religious or military domination, quickly fell out of favor. So while Christianity became both a reason and a tool for

Europe to quarrel, the Gnostics, whom some current scholars consider the most pure Christians, found themselves relegated to obscurity. Despite this virtual exile, Gnostic-influenced Christianity continued to flourish relatively unchallenged throughout North Africa until the arrival of Islam in the seventh century.

Islam's belief in one God, acceptance of Jesus as a prophet, and its message of equality among races, brought it Christian converts as the word quickly spread throughout North Africa. The two religions fought for supremacy it was not long before their shadows were cast far over the jungles of Central Africa. Arab dhows sailed further down the East African coast and European ships ventured beyond known West African ports, searching for viable routes to Asia. Centers of trade and culture sprang up further south along the coasts as opportunists went deeper into the interior, seeking gold, ivory and anything else of value.

Europeans established direct contact and began trading with tribes along the West Coast of Africa, employing Roman Catholic priests to subjugate the masses and bring them the Church's word. Their strategy was to convert the rulers of the many kingdoms in West Africa and use their influence to convert the citizenry en masse. In this manner, the European colonists could wield influence over the commercial and social activities of kingdoms through the Church.

Portugal's strategy of religious-based subjugation achieved its greatest success in the central West African Kingdom of Kongo, where the Portuguese were forced to turn by French and English supremacy in other parts of Africa. Along the great river Congo in the area of modern-day countries such as Angola, Gabon, Congo-Brazzaville, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, Portugal found a foothold. From Kongo's first contact with the Portuguese in 1483 to the establishment of permanent Portuguese missionaries in 1491

and the Catholic baptism of King Nzinga A Nkuwu, who sent his son to receive a Catholic education in Portugal, religion was the tool of the colonialists. Upon his son's return and ascendancy to the throne, the young ruler adopted a Portuguese Christian name, Alfonso, and the Christian alliance with Kongo's rulers was sealed.

King Alfonso developed an even closer trading and cultural relationship with Portugal, permitting missionaries to open schools across the kingdom. These missionaries were charged with bringing the word of their God to the population and often chastised the Kongolese for practicing indigenous religions, using shame, manipulation, deceit, bribery and any other means available to further their message. They also had a distinctly commercial purpose.

Although the relationship between Portugal and Kongo held the outward appearance of a sovereign-to-sovereign link, the introduction of the European slave trade in the seventeenth century removed any illusions of equality. Initially, the Portuguese did not personally raid the Christian Kongo for slaves, instead encouraging the Kongolese to make forays into neighboring non-Christian populations to find captives that could be sold to the Portuguese who could, in turn, sell them on the international market. This strategy worked well and minimized the risk of injury or death to Portuguese slavers. A trickle of slaves, captured in wars of scant political purpose, soon became a steady river. It was never enough. The very heart of Kongo was being exorcised in a physical operation that paralleled the spiritual efforts of thousands of missionaries on the ground. The insatiable appetite for slaves weakened the Kingdom of Kongo to the point of collapse.

Although the wealthiest and most powerful state in the Atlantic region of Central Africa for hundreds of years, Kongo finally collapsed under internal and external pressures. Antonio I,

the last great king of the unified Kongo, was killed by Portuguese troops at the battle of Mbila in 1665. By the turn of the eighteenth century, the capital city of the unified Kongo, Mbanza Kongo (also known as São Salvador), had been abandoned and the kingdom broke into small territories ruled by warlords and members of the former Kongolese nobility. The glory and might of the Kongo became a memory.

Though technically still a monarchy, Kongo's power and armed forces localized into villages and small provinces. Many small and medium-scale wars were fought in the struggle for power. Wars meant captives and captives meant slaves; slaves meant money to trade for more arms.

Converted to a religion in whose name death and slavery were being condoned, the Kongolese saw more and more of their friends and family taken away never to return. While some Church leaders argued that the Bible supported slavery, even those who did not openly support the trade were controlled by their colonial overlords and did nothing to articulate a conscience against it. Indeed, many churches directly profited from the trade, making their incentive to end the practice minimal.

During those days, a great percentage of the slaves brought to America came from the Kongo. Their perspectives on God, resulting from their experiences, oral history, and beliefs in their kingdom as a collective entity, directed their attitudes in the New World and among their fellow slaves. These first African-Americans necessarily interpreted the Bible very differently from their European captors and Christianity in the New World struggled to reconcile the differences. Still, both slave and master increasingly had a common God and an identical set of religious guidelines, perhaps avoiding even greater adversity.

It is against this background, and the ensuing complex weave of politics, greed, coincidence, misfortune, and human misery, that the story of Kimpá Vita and her sacrifices changed the face of African religion while simultaneously helping shape the destiny of North American culture, religion, and a new nation's collective persona. It is a story with a specific time but with a timeless context. While the Church belittled her achievements and ignored her pleas for inclusion, the message Kimpá Vita brought invigorated a kingdom, even as it terrified the secular and non-secular power structure. People began to believe that God could reach Africans without speaking through the Church or a monarch.

Great religious texts and ideals will always be interpreted, construed, misinterpreted, and misconstrued for the benefit of a particular cause. There will always be people who use religion as a tool to help themselves and others, but greed and profit at the expense of others remains a constant temptation. The ubiquitous need to belong has so often catalyzed its unfortunate corollary: the need to exclude. In the midst of this confusion, struggling for authority, are those who purport to speak directly for God.

ONE - Reflection

“When beauty is abstracted then ugliness has been implied; When good is abstracted then evil has been implied.” – *Tao Te Ching*

If not for the heart, killing would be easy. But a memory twists and turns and takes new forms to make you believe it could have been lived differently. Where does it end, this revisionism? In this life or the next? How must I embrace the truth?

Staring into the flicker of a yellowed wax candle, lonely and impotent against the dark, humid night, I reach for peace. The sound of the gentle flowing water is all around me. There is no horizon. In this thickness I cannot even see the shore.

I am floating along with the blood that drains all the countless lands of Africa, emptying its heart. Kongo, fair green land of God's promise, passes by on my left as the darker, ominous lands of the Jaga and other fearsome cannibal races creeps by on the right. I glide quietly down the center, wary of the course. Where it ends, all waters, all hearts, and all lands mix together until none is discernable.

My pirogue, expertly crafted from a single tree, wide bottomed and stable as an island, has a sharp bow and narrows to a perfectly pointed front that parts the water with ease. But I am in no hurry. Only by organizing my thoughts and putting them in context might I overcome the reluctance for home poisoning me. I drift ever farther from the consequences surely awaiting my return.

I glance down my dirtied legs, past all the insect bites that cover my skin. Between my old, calloused feet sits a large wooden box, intricately inlaid with silver and gold. Sacred symbols and representations adorn its top and sides and its generous interior holds ashes, splinters of wood, a skull, and whatever bones I could find; a reminder of the sins of the father. I have covered it with a tightly woven white cloth.

"Dear Lord, hear me now," I say, hearing my own voice echo inside my ears. It sounds arrogant as it booms across the water, this

personal appeal, making me feel selfish and insignificant. The remainder of my prayer I do not voice aloud.

Days are dark and omens bode no favor. The sun blinds instead of illuminating with light as that of the moon: thin and pregnant with suspicion. Shadows melt into nothingness only to be recast in new, even more cryptic forms. Stars are confused and hang without life. Such is the state of Creation. So do our hearts feel.

Simbi, the ubiquitous spirits of nature and our oracles in times of confusion, provide no direction. We find only contradiction in their signs. Things that once meant everything have faded to insignificance. We are lost, like serpents confined within a circular wall. Our souls evaporate before us like the last rains of the season, overpowered by the relentless heat of purposelessness. Days of no consequence continue to unfold.

Even to breathe takes great effort, strangled as I am by what has happened and my failure to intervene. My thoughts conspire each day to defeat sanity and leave me dwelling only in what could have been. I alone know the dull edge of the sword impaling my heart. I alone hold it in place. So many burdens, realized and forsaken, are borne by men like me: men who seek answers they will not believe.

“Dear Lord,” I continue in a whisper, “my king’s mind has been poisoned by the greed of those who mix their own words with Yours. Kongo is fractured by contests of ego and our children, our brothers and our sisters leave this earthly paradise never to return. If not in the afterlife, when shall we meet them? Where once there was hope, now there is fear. Mothers and daughters are torn apart, fathers and sons stung by shame, and each day our guilt grows. The path to salvation is not a straight line and our blindfolds keep us stumbling at every bend.”

I feel the tension in my shoulders as I sigh. “Your minions are impersonal, austere, and ominous. They speak of love but with actions that leave us wanting. They praise intelligence and forsake our logic, transforming dreams of dignity into nightmares of disgrace. For Your love, in Your name, and to Your glory, we accepted Your terms. We have lived as the meek, confident of our sacrifices. Still we submit.”

I recall a different destiny: one of honor and pride and all God’s children living as brothers and sisters. The world began to reveal its secrets and the thick sweetness of the water flower filled the air with honey, making the nights fragrant and welcoming. Those days had hope, like the blood sunset as rain clouds disperse. Our fears had an end and it was visible to all.

I sift through the years with disorderly recollections. In them I feel God’s love and hear His voice, but it is only a whisper. I alone must make sense of this story. Few will believe it. Fewer still will have the courage to study, to learn and find the light inside. Were I not an old fool and a sinner, crippled by greed and driven by self-interest, I might have seen it. I alone might have changed this course, forsaking my visions of heaven and divine mission and the infallibility of men for the mortal emotion of a father’s love. Each night, my bed sags from the weight of my choices. This is the sword: double-edged and without cause. With the sharpest of cuts and the mystery of which will be the one to bleed life dry.

There were times we doubted and even challenged the message. It was our failure and, indeed, we must now accept that and pay a price dearer than we might have, decaying as we are beneath God’s gaze and our own misguided defenses. Pride and brotherhood are fading, as well, carried away with our hopes and dreams and the visions we once shared.

“You have given us much, my Lord, yet what has been taken from us feels like everything.” I feel tears running down my cheeks and into my mouth as I form the words. My ankles burn even as a light rain cools my face to accompany my tears.

Now we must heal wounds that still bleed. With strong legs I would retrace steps, retell the tales, and rebuild the mighty walls of Mbanza Kongo. But incapacity is my poison and pain the reminder of my sin.

“Help me,” I say aloud, my words ringing like bells in an empty church across the great water. Such insolence, I think to myself. “Give me the wisdom to answer the questions a thousand minds will surely ask. Give me the strength to put aside my anger and speak only of the light you gave us: without vengeance, without malice and without ill will towards the deserving.”

As I float along with the river that will always flow, many thoughts find me. I accept that faith has no explanation. Politics, religion, love, and honor can justify much, but not this: never this. A child must raise his head for explanations, not understanding the why. So must we raise our eyes to the heavens; so must we give faith that our years on this earth have been insufficient to let us appreciate a design.

“Show us that we have not been forsaken, Lord.” My hands are clasped in prayer and my whispers grow even softer. “Provide us the grace to understand the lessons You chose. Give us the strength to find meaning where our perception has been mistaken. Show us You love us, even as we are taken from our land and families to be sold like the cloth we weave: submissive, yielding, and lifeless.”

I open my eyes. “Recognize Yourself in our hearts, dear Lord, and hear Yourself in our voices. Show us the wars we fought for You were not in vain and the lives we ended not meaningless. We

have built for You monuments, given for You blood, let go for You our children. Today, only questions remain. We drown in our own tears and the heavens weep with us.”

My small candle flickers with the wind. It is near its end. I close my eyes to see again the darkness. “We cannot know what You are building, dear Lord, but we have seen Your hand.”