

CHAPTER 16

Metaphors to Live By in the Diaspora

Conceptual Tropes and Ontological Wordplay among Central Africans in the Middle Passage and Beyond

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In their classic study *The Birth of African American Culture* (1992 [1976]), anthropologists Sidney Mintz and Richard Price called attention to the fictive kinship that enslaved Africans in much of the Americas forged with those who had been their shipmates in the Middle Passage. They argued that such ties—imagined by bondspeople as virtually consanguineous—were emblematic of the process of “creolization”: the formation of a new diasporic social and cultural praxis among people who “usually [had been] randomized . . . by enslavement, transportation and seasoning.” Such creativity was possible because, while strangers to each other socially and often linguistically, Africans caught in the trade shared “deep-level cultural principles, assumptions and understandings” (about such things as “the nature of causality . . . divination . . . the active role of the dead” among the living) and also perceived the “similarities among symbols used in ritual throughout Sub-Saharan Africa.”¹ As a result, they could join together to confront the trauma of enslavement, usually by first creating new “dyadic

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1. Mintz and Price (1992 [1976], 14, 43–45, 53, 87; 94 [for “similarity of symbols,” quoted from Victor Turner]).

[one-on-one] relationships.” This they did during the Atlantic Passage itself, “even in the realm of the Arts, to choose a less likely example [than that of the formation of shipmate bonds]”:

Not only was drumming, dancing, and singing encouraged for “exercise” on many of the slavers, but [European observer John] Stedman tells us how, at the end of the nightmare of the Middle Passage, off the shores of Suriname [where he resided from 1773 to 1777]: “All of the slaves are led upon deck . . . their hair shaved in different figures of Stars, half-moons, &c. which they generally do the one to the other (having no Razors) by the help of a broken bottle and without Soap.”²

What Africans were mostly “randomized” on the slave ship and in slavery was the consensus among historians in the 1970s. Today we know it was common for large numbers of them to experience the Middle Passage and bondage itself in the company of people with whom they shared considerable cultural understandings (Lovejoy 2009; Thornton 1998). This new knowledge does not invalidate Mintz and Price’s signal achievements, which were to demonstrate the need for detailed historical contextualization in studying cultural change in the diaspora and to emphasize that understanding the African past was crucial to this endeavor. Indeed, in the context of the 1970s and subsequently, many historians, myself included, took their argument to be similar to that of E. P. Thompson (1966 [1963]): one cannot comprehend the way people (free or enslaved) come to grips with their experience of a changing social and labor system without understanding their prior cultural worlds.³

That said, it is now apparent that the historian must go beyond the identification of underlying “cultural principles” described in rather abstract terms (“we seek to conceptualize these principles without reference to specific, overt manifestations,” wrote Mintz and Price [1992, 45]) to understand what Africans of diverse origins may have had in common and to follow their negotiations regarding culture among themselves and with others. Fortunately, research since the 1970s has taken us closer to this goal. Advances have been particularly great with respect to previously understudied West Central Africa, a single “culture area” that provided about 46% of the enslaved brought to the Americas.⁴ Then too, new approaches towards “culture,” centered on “conceptual metaphors,” offer ways of better capturing the dynamics of reconfigurations within this category.

2. Ibid. 48.

3. See Gutman (1976, xvi–vii, 196–197, 324–325), citing an unpublished version of Mintz and Price’s work.

4. For slave-trade estimates here and subsequently: TASTDB (2016).

I will argue that for most of those trafficked from West Central Africa, perhaps also for many West Africans, the creative impulse that led to shipmate bonding came from the homeland; indeed, it manifested itself in the hair-shaving scene described by Stedman, but not recognized by Mintz and Price as a key ritual of fictive kinship. Western Central Africans shared not only “deep-level cultural principles,” but also conceptual metaphors that created, expressed, and constantly remade such principles: metaphors that flowered on the surface of day-to-day experience, both public and domestic. Among such tropes were canoe metaphors regarding migrations under duress within Africa itself, the formation of new social and affective links even in normal times, and the overcoming of individual and social calamities. Complementing and enriching such expressions were analogies formed through nominalist wordplay that built ontological bridges between things designated by phonetic homonyms (or near-homonyms) irrespective of their “melodies.” (The Bantu tongues are generally tonal languages.) I will demonstrate that these diverse metaphors crossed the ocean—and thus were present in the Atlantic Passage—using primarily documentation on southeastern Brazil (Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Minas Gerais, Espirito Santo) in the 19th century, a region and period in which western Central Africans and their children predominated in plantation settings.

Because of these “figures of speech”—actually “figurations of the real world” for those who enunciated them, not simply “rhetoric” or “discourse”—the horrific experience in the slave ship recalled similar social memories of harrowing liminal passages in the past, even to people of different origins. In doing so, it also brought to mind ways of dealing with such transformations, not just by individual and dyadic action, but in community. The enslaved, in effect, were able to confront the greatest calamity of all, the Atlantic trade, not with a “Blind Memory,” to use Marcus Wood’s term (2000) for utter incomprehension, but with a “clairvoyant” one: a memory that enabled them collectively to understand—and withstand—their ordeal and devise strategies to overcome it.

While I will not undertake a similar analysis of metaphors from West Africa, enough evidence exists to suggest that many people from that region shared key understandings with Central Africans, at least about the meaning of the Middle Passage.

ENSLAVED WESTERN CENTRAL AFRICANS, THE SHIPMATE METONYM, AND BRAZILIAN MALUNGOS

Recent studies show that western Central Africans traded to the Americas came mostly from societies not far from the Atlantic coast, even in the 19th

century when slaving penetrated the continent more deeply. Data from captured slave ships indicate that between 1831 and the abolition of the Brazilian trade in 1850, over 80% of western Central Africans came from an “Atlantic Zone” only somewhat more expanded to the east than in previous centuries—that is, reaching inland from the Congo estuary to just beyond Malebo Pool, from Luanda to the Kwango River, and from Benguela to the south-north stretch of the Kwanza River (Almeida 2012; Bukas-Yakabuul and Domingues da Silva 2016).⁵ (Most captives from slaving further inland did not enter the commerce from the coastal region [Harms 2010].) This counters Joseph Miller’s conclusion (1988) that the majority leaving West Central Africa by this period came from the deep interior.

Furthermore, it is now the consensus that Kikongo (spoken by the Kongo in the lower Congo/Zaire River area) and other “Forest Savanna” languages mostly north of the river, as well as the Western Savanna (or *Njila*) languages south of it (including Kimbundu inland from Luanda and Umbundu in the Benguela highlands, spoken respectively by the Mbundu and Ovimbundu), and even the Eastern Savanna tongues beyond the Western group to the Great Lakes, are all closely related.⁶ They derive from ancestral languages that diverged from a Bantu expansion route out of the Cameroons through the tropical forest between ca. 3,000 and 2,000 years ago (de Filippo et al. 2012). This is a great change since the 1970s, when most scholars agreed that the eastern and western Bantu language groups had diverged from their origins in the Cameroons 5,000 or more years ago, following expansion routes that skirted the forest to the West and East. The present consensus has implications beyond language. In principle, Eastern Savanna groups are more closely related in culture to their Western and Forest Savanna cousins than was once thought. Furthermore, it is now recognized that renewed contact between communities on separate “expansion branches” has generally strengthened affinities. In particular, neighboring Kongo and Mbundu groups have interacted intensely since at least 1000 AD, with the result that not only their languages but also their cosmologies are closely related (Slenes 2002).

With this as background, we may return to Mintz and Price’s discussion of shipmate bonding. In retrospect, a notable part of their assertion that the experience in the slave ship loomed large in Africans’ imaginations was evidence that enslaved people in the Caribbean often used the metonym “ship” for “shipmate”: to wit, *sippi* (“ship”) in Suriname and *batiment*

5. See also Candido (2013).

6. I use Ehret’s terminology (2001).

(French for “great ship”) in Saint Domingue. One may add to this *carabela* (Spanish for “caravel”) in Cuba (Barcia Zequeira 2003, 113–117). In Brazil, the term was *malungo*, not a Portuguese word, whose etymology Mintz and Price did not elucidate. Still in current use today, with the broadened meaning of ‘comrade, companion, partner’ and ‘foster sibling’ as well as that of ‘mate on the same slave ship’ (Houaiss and Villar 2001, 1,824), *malungo* almost certainly comes from *ma-lúngu*, whose stem (*-lúngu*) exists in several varieties of Kikongo and Kimbundu. This is a “plural” form for ‘large [dugout] canoe,’ but one that has an augmentative singular meaning (cf. English *waters* for ‘ocean’); it literally signifies ‘gigantic canoe.’⁷

This explanation of *malungo*, together with the equivalent Caribbean metonyms, might signal that shipmate bonding resulted essentially from ‘routes,’ the common Middle Passage itself. Alternatively, ‘roots’ may have been at work, that is, widespread African norms for forming close relationships (Hawthorne 2008, 71–72). I will take the latter tack, even while recognizing that the Atlantic crossing probably intensified social memories of previous passages. I begin by noting that two words phonetically close to *ma-lúngu* suggest related African antecedents for the latter, in its metonymic sense. One is Kimbundu *ma-lunga*, designating in ancient times a chief’s territorial power charm that “‘lived’ [like a beneficent ancestral or nature spirit?] in a specified river or lake” (Miller 1976, 55–63). Hawthorne (2008, 55) proposes that *malungo* comes from this word, an etymology less convincing in form and meaning than *ma-lúngu*. Nonetheless, I will show that the proximity of the two Central African terms probably enriched the meaning of *ma-lúngu* for many bondpeople.

A second word is another designation for ‘shipmate’ mentioned by Mintz and Price: the Trinidadian *malongue*, also rendered *malongwe*, *malong*, and *malonga* (Warner-Lewis 2003, 36, 40). This could well be a variant of

7. See discussion in Slenes (2000 [1991–1992]), based on an interview with two Angolan informants; Johnston (1919–1922, I: 366, 380, II: 227), on canoe words in Kimbundu and Kikongo variants and on *ma-* as a “plural” prefix with the singular meaning of ‘gigantic’ for nouns with *li-* as singular (indicating ‘large’) in many Bantu languages; Cannecattim (1804), a Kimbundu dictionary, with *ri-lúngu iaianéne* (respectively ‘big canoe’—*ri-* being a variant of Johnston’s *li-* prefix—and ‘large’), as the definition for *barca*, *barco* (‘boat, ship’), but literally meaning ‘very large canoe,’ for which the plural indicating ‘gigantic’ would be *ma-lúngu*. I now add, for Kikongo, Laman (1936, liii and entry for *-lúngu*), identifying *ma-lúngu* as a plurale tantum (plural form with singular or collective meaning), for *lu-lúngu*. Other *ri-/ma-* words in Kimbundu and *lu-/ma-* words in Kikongo confirm that *ma-* in both languages can confer a singular meaning of ‘huge’ to this class of nouns. (My sources throughout for these languages are, respectively, Assis Jr. [1948] and Laman 1936; I ignore, however, the diacritics for Kimbundu, which indicate accents, not tones.) ‘Small canoe’ (both languages) is normally *u-lúngu*, with plural *mau-lungu* or *mo-lungu* (Kimbundu) and *ma-lúngu* (Kikongo).

ma-lúngu, since in the formative years of the slave quarters in Trinidad and Tobago (before 1751), as in Brazil (before 1701), the great majority of bondspeople came from West Central Africa. Indeed, an 1854 wordlist for the Libolo, who spoke a form of Kimbundu, gives *ma-loñgu* as the plural of ‘canoe’ (Johnston 1919–1922, I: 367, 801). In the “central” variant of Kikongo, however, the singular *lu-lôngo* means “marriage, . . . steps taken to marry.” *Kwenda [to go] lu-lôngo* signifies “to move out of one’s house (the groom) to go to the home of the wife or to her village,” while *kwenda ma-lôngo* (again the augmentative “plural”) means “to go far, to a foreign land.” Finally, *weka [to become] ma-lôngo* is “to have disappeared, have died,” literally “to have become (very) far away.” (See Laman 1936, stem entries, for all Kikongo words cited.)⁸ The sequence, describing movement over ever-greater distances with increasing separation from the homeland, ending in “social death” from the perspective of those left behind, suggests an alternative source for Trinidadian *malongue/malongwe/malong(a)*. Yet, since dugouts of various sizes were the preeminent vehicles for traveling in river-crossed West Central Africa, these Kikongo expressions were implicitly linked to ‘canoe’ as well as to ‘marriage’ elsewhere into an affinal group (usually another matrilineage, the Kongo, like the Mbundu and most of their neighbors to the east, being matrilineal). This suggests a likely “dialog” between *ma-lôngo* and *ma-lúngu*, similar to that between *ma-lunga* and *ma-lúngu*, in the minds of people prone to nominalist wordplay.

This chapter, in fact, is an essay on these and related dialogs. I will follow western Central Africans and their metaphors across the waters to Trinidad, Suriname, and particularly Brazil’s 19th-century Southeast, which offers ideal conditions for my purpose. Slaves in record numbers, about three-fourths from West Central Africa, were brought to this region from 1791 to 1850, as planters grasped opportunities for profit following the Saint Domingue revolution and the abolition of the slave trade to the British Caribbean.⁹ New plantation areas, dominated by properties with over 50 slaves, emerged from the wilderness. According to censuses in 1849–1850, 32% of the total population of Rio de Janeiro province and 49% of that of Vassouras (a major coffee county in Rio’s Paraíba Valley) were African-born; the same was true of 72% of slaves in Vassouras. Plantation counties in São Paulo had similar demographics (Slenes 2000, 223).

8. Laman’s most often used markings are the acute (´) and grave (`) diacritics, indicating, respectively, a falling and a rising tone from the syllable so marked to the next.

9. TASTDB indicates 81%, 16%, and 3%, respectively from West Central Africa, East Africa, and West Africa (to Brazil’s Southeast and South). These figures probably underestimate West Africans, who often entered as “western-Central” or were transshipped by coastal trade from Bahia.

On the large properties before 1850, Africans consistently formed the great majority of adult bondspeople, with Kimbundu and Kikongo speakers being the largest groups after ca. 1820, the latter probably in first place from about 1835. Without a doubt, vibrant speech communities involving the languages mentioned and Umbundu existed well past 1850. The large number of Bantu borrowings in Brazilian Portuguese, the 20th-century lexicon and metaphors from challenge songs (*jongos*) with roots in West Central Africa, and some residual vocabularies in black communities today point to this conclusion (Slenes 2013; Vogt et al. 2013 [1996]). So too do the vocabularies of 19th-century Kongo-inspired community cults of affliction-fruitation in the Southeast, aimed at curing individual and social illnesses, one registered in 1900, drawn largely from Kimbundu and Kikongo, another in 1854, from Kikongo (Slenes 2007). (In Cuba, the other major importer of western Central Africans in the 19th century, Kikongo was particularly prominent [Schwegler 2000]). In this essay, similarities between the Brazilian cults of affliction-fruitation (forerunners of the Brazilian Macumba and Umbanda religions) and those documented in the Kongo in the early 20th century provide the bridge for understanding canoe and related metaphors in the Atlantic Passage.

CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS AND ONTOLOGICAL WORDPLAY

I focus in this chapter on “conceptual metaphors,” that is on analogies—metaphor in the narrow sense (“*x is y*”), metonymy, simile—that people use “to conceptualize one domain of experience in terms of another” (Kövecses 2015, 2). I am especially concerned with shared tropes of this type, which I understand to be the result, in each human group, of a particular complexly contextualized bodily, environmental and sociocultural-linguistic experience over time. My inspiration for this approach is in anthropological practice from the 1970s on, centered on metaphor (Fernandez 1986; 1991; MacGaffey 1986; 2000), as well as in cognitive science research that, since George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s *Metaphors We Live By* (1st ed. 1980), places analogical thinking at the center of human cognition. As Zoltán Kövecses (2015, 83) puts it, “metaphor [in the broad sense] has the power to create reality for us; it is the major way in which the human cognitive system produces nonphysical reality, that is, the social, political, psychological, emotional . . . worlds.” In 1992, anthropologist Marilyn Strathern (1992, 47) captured the way things were heading in a provocative new definition of “culture” that turned James Fernandez’s play on words (his predilection for an

“An-trope-ology”) and Clifford Geertz’s spider-man metaphor (“Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun”)¹⁰ into a protocol for research: “culture consists in the [shared] way people draw analogies between different domains of their worlds.”

For a social-cultural historian, this focus on metaphor—whether or not it succeeds in encompassing all of “culture”—is highly attractive. First, it is not readily apparent how “deep cultural principles” can be identified in the documentary sources historians use, whereas (shared) metaphors, particularly ones acted out in ritual, can, in principle, be found. Second, the focus on tropes—specific paths of reasoning connecting otherwise diverse things—can provide a crucial key for understanding symbols, “which begin in metaphoric statement and can be translated back into such statement” (Fernandez 1986, 31). Third, the stress in cognitive science from Lakoff and Johnson (2003 [1980]) to Kövecses (2015) on an “experientialist” understanding of metaphor creation (taking into account the physiological and neurological makeup shared by all people, as well as the huge diversity of “context” in which they live and which impacts body and brain from birth) dovetails nicely with a social history approach to culture in the tradition of E. P. Thompson (1966 [1963]). In both formulations, the emphasis on the counterpoint between people’s “experience” and their interpretations thereof avoids the debates that have long bedeviled anthropology about the primacy of “society” and “culture.” Finally, a metaphor-centered approach challenges rigidities in the “linguistic” and “ontological turns” (for the latter, see Viveiros de Castro 2014), whose proponents sometimes posit that human beings are “thought” by their language or existential metaphysics, conceived as rule-bound systems of syntax, semantics, or logic. By evoking the creative connections of poetry, the “metaphorical turn” pivots toward individual and collective agency—even while recognizing that people can long suspend themselves in a particular “web of significance” (if they see sense in it) before spinning another.

In what follows, I argue that throughout much of West Central Africa the dugout canoe was a key “vehicle” in intertwined conceptual metaphors by which people *migrated, achieved cures for individual and social ills, married, formed alliances, died, and reached fruition in the afterworld and in the here-and-now*. These were tropes, constantly reiterated in rituals, socialization practices, and other public discourse, which linked crucial domains of historical experience. One might say they composed a highly original set of variations on the “structural” conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY,

10. Fernandez (1986, xv), Geertz (1973, 5).

much cited by cognitive scientists as a figuration of reality common to many cultures (Kövecses 2015, 2–3). LIFE IS A CANOE PATH, I suggest, sums up these variations; note the Kikongo expression ‘to take the [circular] canoe path’ (*dia-lúngu nzíla*), that is ‘to cut in the opposite direction (to meet up again), or to go around something.’

This overarching metaphor was reinforced by other analogies derived from nominalist assumptions about the power of words. Such assumptions, reflecting human perception of the creativity of Mind and Language, perhaps have near universality in “enchanted worlds.” In the Judeo-Christian tradition, God creates the universe with “the Word,” which brings to life the preexisting concept in the Deity’s mind. So too, in English today, we still say “speak of the devil” when a person about whom we are talking (“naming” our minds’ concept) suddenly enters the room, and in Brazilian Portuguese many well-known euphemisms for the devil—“the tailed one,” “the repugnant one”—are still available for those who wish to avoid “calling” Him. Thus, it is not surprising that, ca. 1910, Kikongo speakers often used descriptive circumlocutions when speaking of a leopard (*-kúmbu*, ‘roarer’) or a child (*-kónko*, ‘grasshopper’), here to avoid alerting a type of witch, *mfúmu andoki*, who might cause harm.

It is in this context that the power of homonyms to suggest ontological connections arises—a power perhaps especially great in tonal languages, where phonetic homonyms, differing only in melody, abound. In thinking about Central Africa, I take my cue from Wyatt MacGaffey, who gives numerous examples of serious wordplay from the Kongo. Most of these are from ritual contexts, involving religious specialists. But one, regarding hunters, suggests how widespread nominalist thinking was in this society (MacGaffey 1986, 259, n2):

A hunter who impregnated his wife the night before [hunting] has *m’via* on him, which will spoil the luck of the entire party (*m’via*, “bad luck”; *mvia*, “penis”). The ill luck may be averted if he wears a strip from her *taba* [“perineal cloth”] around his forehead so that the two of them may have two different fortunes (*bunzu*, “good fortune”; *mbunzu*, “forehead”).

Here, my focus is on nominalist metaphors that articulate with canoe tropes in Kongo and in the Atlantic Passage. I draw particularly on early-20th-century ethnographic sources on the Kongo, notably missionary Karl Laman’s extraordinary Kikongo dictionary containing about 80,000 entries (1936, but researched between 1891 and 1919), as well as Brazilian 19th-century documentary sources.

NGÚDI: CANOES, CROSSINGS, BEACHES

Day-to-day travel by canoe, often in rough waters, was until recently a necessary part of social and economic life in much of West Central Africa (Vansina 2004, 210–226). This deep environmental and social experience probably underlies the prominence of canoes and the respect for their drivers in metaphors about individual and collective “crossings.”

MacGaffey (1970, 20–23; 1986, 58–60), in analyzing Kongo “praise names,” or the initial parts of clan histories, notes that a typical tale of origin begins with migration motivated by a natural or social calamity, for instance, “there was a plague of locusts, and famine arrived. So the clans dispersed and crossed the Nzadi [River].” Crossings were by dugout: “we came from Kwingibiti, traveling in thrice nine canoes [*malungu*]” (the word in brackets is MacGaffey’s). Similar myths of origin, including references to multiples of “three” (considered an auspicious number), can be found far in the interior of West Central Africa. Jan Vansina (1978, 34, 42–44), writing about the oral histories of the Kuba, a Western Savanna group, notes that “all aristocratic clans in every chiefdom . . . claim that they came with their dynastic clan. A suspicious number of . . . such clans (multiples of nine) is found in each chiefdom.” In people’s minds, canoes figured prominently here; Vansina stresses “the tenacity of the concept of travel by water in the collective representations [of the Kuba] about migration.” Indeed, he observes that “a common praise name for the Kuba king is ‘the great canoe in which the . . . [diverse Kuba groups] have crossed.’”

Here too, the similarity to Kongo stories of origin is patent. MacGaffey notes that the Nzadi [Zaire], in the praise name cited, is a mythical river, also known as *ka-lùnga*. This latter term among the Kongo, Mbundu, Ovimbundu, and neighboring peoples to the east signified ‘great body of water,’ “the river . . . to be crossed by the deceased before he arrives in the land of the dead” (Laman 1953–1968, III [1962], 15, 60), or the abode of the dead itself (*mpémba*), conceived as a place for the soul’s fruition. Among these same Atlantic Zone groups and also others far into the interior, including the Kuba (Miller 1976, 59–61), *ka-lùnga* (or a variant form) was a title, apparently “of great antiquity,” applied to a major chief. Whether the title and its associated power charm (*ma-lunga* in Kimbundu, mentioned earlier) preceded *ka-lùnga*’s signification of ‘ocean’ and ‘netherworld’ (Vansina 2004, 191) or arose later, all these meanings seem inextricably linked in the oral-history stories of origin; the *ka-lùnga* chief, to guarantee his people’s well-being, necessarily had to have the power of a diviner, who, to cure individual and social ills, could safely cross “great rivers,” metaphorically “the passage between worlds,” and return. One finds this

explicitly stated in a study on the Zela, a people related to the Luba Katanga in southeastern Angola, on the border with Zambia (Boulanger 1974, 35). It is also implicit in the widespread Central African story about the foundation of civilized kingdoms. In the original Luba tale, Kalala Ilunga—note the name—is able to command passage in a canoe over a raging river, while his pursuing uncle, whom he would later oust as monarch, is repulsed by the canoe-driver (De Heusch 1982, Ch. 2).

Likewise, among the Kongo, one finds *kála ñsóngi* (from *sóngá*, ‘to guide’), meaning “to be a diviner, by one’s word or way of speaking,” and *sònga* (a homonym of *sóngá*), “to conduct a legal case” or “to guide . . . a canoe adroitly along the length of a shore.” Also relevant is the praise name regarding Mbamba Ka-lùnga, a clan founder who “guarded [*walungila*] the gates of the King’s enclosure” (MacGaffey 1970, 20, his brackets). *Ka-lùnga*, the place of fruition in death, comes from *lùnga*, “to arrive home, at one’s objective; to be full; to be just; (as noun) full moon; (as adjective) complete,” while *walungila* ‘[he] guarded’ is clearly conjugated from *lùnga* ‘to care for, guard.’ Significantly, *ñlúngi*, ‘guardian, protector,’ derived from this *lùnga*, is a phonetic and tonal homonym of two other *ñlúngi*, one a variant of *u-lúngu*, ‘canoe,’ the other meaning ‘returning time or season.’ Then too, *ñlùngu*—from *lùnga*—means ‘perfect, complete’ and ‘reaching the zenith’ when applied to the sun, while *ñ-lúngu* is still another variant for ‘canoe.’ Finally, there are the imposing *mfúma* (‘silk-cotton tree’) and *ñsànda* (a species of ficus), associated with the *mfúmu* (‘local chief’), particularly his mediating power with nature spirits and ancestors; from these trees, dugouts were commonly made, some carrying upwards of one hundred people.¹¹ These two metaphoric vectors—*lùnga/lùnga* and *mfúma-ñsànda/mfúmu*, their derivatives and connotations—provide the key to understanding the implicit wordplay in a song from the northern Lemba cult, as it existed in 1919 (Fu-Kiau 1969, 24–25, 118; Janzen 1982, 188). This was a community cult of affliction-fruition, a cult aimed at curing personal and group illness (thought to be caused by afflicting spirits or by human witchcraft that mobilized spirits), with membership that was drawn from a given territory, not restricted to a single lineage or clan.¹² The Lemba song portrays the preeminent astral “Big Man,” the sun, as a “canoe” that *guides and soothes* the fears of a dead soul on the downward swing of its recurrent journey into *ka-lùnga* waters. (Cf. the play above: “zenith-perfect/canoe,” “canoe/guardian/returning time.”)

11. Laman (1953–1968: I [1953], 127); Harris (2013, 40), on *likondo*, or *ñsànda*.

12. Janzen (1982, 1992); Van Dijk et al. (2000).

The “Kongo cosmogram”—an ancient symbol—represents the sun’s path as a circle or reclining oval, crossed in the middle with a vertical and a horizontal line, the latter symbolizing the east-west *ka-lùnga* barrier (east on the right) that separates this world (above) from the spirit world. The intersections of these lines with the circle represent the four cardinal points and the “moments of the sun” on its daily course (Thompson and Cornet 1981, 43ff). Lemba initiation rites, like those of other such Kongoleses cults, “performed” the cosmogram, that is, acted out ritual death, followed by “rebirth” and fruition (the release from “illness”) in *this* world. The latter process is not portrayed in the song cited, but certainly was an expectation of those who “survived” the first half of the ordeal, and who, *after final fulfillment, would thenceforth consider themselves to have formed a special group bond*. These considerations are important, since I have documented in detail (Slenes 2007) three religious movements in southeastern Brazil (in 1848, 1854, and 1900) that were clearly related in morphology and vocabulary to community cults of affliction-fruition studied in great depth by missionaries in the Kongo in the early 20th century. The 1848 movement was at the heart of a major plan for slave revolt on plantations in Rio de Janeiro, while the second, in São Paulo, also involved plantation slaves (as well as free people) and had political overtones, which is not surprising, since the Kongoleses cults, as noted, often addressed social crises in this world—including rampant slaving and forced labor—that might ultimately be attributed to malevolent human beings. The comparison shows that the Brazilian movements clearly evidenced the cycle of death and rebirth in their rituals. Indeed, in the sources on the cult from 1900 (the *Cabula*, in Espírito Santo) the religious space has the form of a Kongo cosmogram; it is a circular area cleared in the forest, marked by candles at the cardinal points (the eastern, then western points marked first), with the eastern end (nearest the ocean) named *carunga* and bearing an altar. In the lexicon of today’s African Brazilian religion Umbanda, derived from the 19th-century cults of affliction, *calunga pequeno* [*sic*], ‘little *calunga*,’ refers to the cemetery, while *calunga grande*, ‘big *calunga*,’ is the ocean (Houaiss and Villar 2001, 578).

The extended metaphor here reconstructed places the canoe as the central vehicle in a major rite of passage, traveling into *ka-lùnga*, yes, but hopefully not ending there. Before proceeding further, however, it is necessary to discuss images of kinship that are also part of the metaphor and that provide a corrective to the perhaps inordinate emphasis on the leadership of Big Men in praise names and songs of ritual. Missionary-ethnographer Léon de Sausberghe (1963; 1966), concerned with the importance that matrilineal peoples of West Central Africa give to affinal kin, notes that the

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proverbs he studied of ten different peoples, from the Yaka and Yansi to the Cokwe and Lunda (together occupying most of the huge area between the Kwango and Kasai Rivers), commonly refer to a married woman as a “canoe.” Alternatively, it is marriage itself that is the canoe, connecting the “two beaches” (embarkation/landing points) of the “river”—in other words, linking two matrilineages. In both variants, the metaphor stresses that the canoe may disappear (the “married woman” may die, or the “marriage” may be dissolved by the separation of the partners or the death of one of them), but the link between the two *beaches*, the alliance that had been established between matrilineages, would live on.

The goal of maintaining ties with affines, however, is not incompatible with remembering the ancestral roots of the lineage. MacGaffey (1986, 92), reviewing his research in the light of de Sousberghe’s findings, writes that the Kongo “apparently lack the image of the married woman as a canoe . . . , but it is implicit in the ‘nine canoes’ of [their] tradition, each the origin of a [matrilineal] descent group.” In Kongo praise names, in other words, the (migration) canoe is the married woman (that is, carries the married woman), who establishes a new lineage at the point of arrival—one that then prospers, of course, only if it exchanges subsequent “women-canoes” with new groups of affines. That the metaphor could indeed commonly move in either direction is evident in a variation on the trope from an Eastern Savanna group, the Kaonde, in present-day Zambia. Historian Christine Saidi (2010, 22, n48) obtained the following oral account regarding the “Kaonde queen mother’s role during the battles of the nineteenth century”:

The men dug out a tree trunk . . . for the queen mother to sit in, and then the elders filled it with special medicine. The queen mother was required to stay in this hollowed out wooden bowl during any war. . . . [I]t was believed that as long as she was sitting in the medicine, the Kaonde would win the war.

Reading this, a student of the Angola-Brazil connection cannot help recalling that *ndongo* is a word for a large dugout canoe in Kimbundu and that the small drum used by slaves in *jongo* challenge songs in the 19th-century hinterland of Rio de Janeiro was called *candongueiro*. Portuguese *-eiro* is a suffix indicating agency, here, as it were, attributing “voice” to the drum itself; indeed, in both Kongo and Brazilian-*jongo* sources, the hollowed-out drum is a conduit for messages from the spirit world (Thompson and Cornet 1981, 80; Slenes 2013, 69–70). The European suffix is clearly added to *ka-ndongo*, the *ka-* in Kimbundu being a diminutive prefix. “Little canoe”? No, little “hollowed-out log,” like most Central African drums and the *ndongo* dugout itself.

In dictionary work in progress, so far focused on five languages—Kikongo and Yaka (Forest Savanna) and Kimbundu, Mbala, and Pende (Western Savanna)—I have found that *-longo/-loongo* words often refer to a tree trunk (or a log) and, by extension, to a wooden plate or *bowl*. (Note that plates in West Central Africa were traditionally made from wood: Guthrie 1967–1971, III, 180.) In Kimbundu, both *ndongo* and *longo* exist (respectively ‘large canoe’ and ‘small canoe’), as well as the verb *ku-longa*, signifying ‘to load/carry; embark.’¹³ These results suggest that many enslaved people from the Central African interior, arriving in the Atlantic Zone with *-longo* words for ‘tree trunk,’ could easily have perceived the resonance of this vocabulary with *-lungu* terms (*ma-lungu*, etc.) for dugout canoe, even though they themselves normally used *-wato* words when referring to such watercraft (Johnston 1919–1922, I, 366ff.).

More importantly, the tree trunk, log, and hollowed-out log (dugout, drum, and bowl) sequence, combined with the “voices from the spirit world” heard through the hollowed-out drum, particularly in the context of the “canoe ↔ married woman” migration metaphors, suggests a connection between all these things and the *mfinda*. This is ‘the forest’ in Kikongo, which (like *ka-lunga*, and throughout West Central Africa) is the abode of the spirits of the dead, indeed, for the Kongo, the spirits from “the first times” (Laman 1936). The Kaonde queen, like the Kongo chieftain, brings great power to her people precisely because her dugout bowl is a conduit to these ancient spirits. In the same way, the dugouts used in migration—hollowed-out logs from the *mfinda*, remembered as launched under duress—embodied the continued presence and protection of the ancestral line from which the founding mothers of the lineages, and thus of the clan itself in its new home, originated.

Far away in Trinidad, presumably in the 19th century, the enslaved “grandfather” of a woman interviewed in 1989 by anthropologist Maureen Warner-Lewis arrived from “near Angola, near the Potogi [Portuguese].” He and his other *malong*, most knowing the diverse, but related meanings of *-long-* and *-lung-* words, many perhaps even the significance of *kwenda lu-lòngo/ma-lòngo* in Kikongo,

. . . all come together in one ship and come alive. So they consider themselves brothers. If they drown, everybody drown together. They [are] in the belly of one woman—that’s how they consider it—and they dying [are going to die] in their mother[’s] belly if the ship sink. The sea is a mother, they say. [Warner-Lewis 2003, 38, her brackets.]

13. For *longo*: Cordeiro da Mata (1893), entry *ndongo*.

Warner-Lewis's perceptive comments on “the semantic extension of ‘mother’ in some Bantu languages”—to ‘womb,’ ‘belly,’ even ‘village clan section’—are all apropos to explaining these metaphors. Indeed, they perhaps point to the *ngúdi* (‘mother’ in Kikongo), “in the abstract sense of ‘root’ or ‘source’” (Ibid., 38) or “great originating water” (Laman 1936), of the “tropic” current that carried the “canoe-mother,” “ancestral-migration,” and “*ka-lùnga*-fruition” metaphors across the Atlantic.

CLAIRVOYANT MEMORY

In an earlier essay (Slenes 2000), I argued that enslaved western Central Africans who crossed the ocean in a *ma-lúngu* would have discovered that almost all perceived the experience as a passage through the multiple *ka-lùnga* ‘waters.’ I proposed that this could have been a first step toward the formation of a common identity. I will now carry the argument further, in the light of the preceding discussion of canoe metaphors, particularly the confirmation of wordplay on *lùnga* and *lúnga* derivatives in a Kongo praise name and a Lemba song. This led me to conclude that stories of migration by canoe within Central Africa were interpreted within a conceptual framework typical of the community cults of affliction, an idea strengthened by the subsequent examination of canoe metaphors regarding kinship; “initiates” passed through dire trials, akin to “death,” but yet could hope (if properly prepared spiritually) to make the liminal passage to fulfillment in a new life marked by a new sense of community. Could enslaved Central Africans in the Atlantic *ma-lúngu* Passage have understood their experience in the same way? To answer this question, I have delved more deeply into Kikongo *-lung-* homonyms; in effect, following Fernandez’s theory of symbols, I have tried to see if the Kongo cosmogram, which presumably “beg[an] in metaphoric statement [by native speakers],” might conceivably be “translated back into such statement.”

Laman’s massive Kikongo dictionary, composed with intense interest in ethnographic and religious vocabulary, is probably the only dictionary for the Atlantic Zone languages that lends itself to this analysis. Fortunately, it is relevant to my focus, given the importance of Kikongo in the 19th-century diaspora. This dictionary, indeed, suggests a “metaphorical translation” (consistent with native understandings of “founding” migrations within Central Africa) that may then be considered a plausible hypothesis about how enslaved Kongolese interpreted the Atlantic Passage.¹⁴

14. All words are from Laman’s “central” Kikongo variant.

Placing the elements of this translation on a Kongo cosmogram in a sequence appropriate to the latter’s symbolic meanings and with the words closest to *u-lúngu*, ‘(small) canoe’ and *ma-lúngu*, ‘canoes’ or ‘ship’ (augmentative “plural”) in boldface, we begin reading downwards, following the sun as it dives toward the *ka-lúnga* line into “night” in the west. First, we encounter *lúngwa*, with two definitions, one of which is “to struggle, . . . , normally without success; . . . to die.” *Ma-lúngwa* (from *lúngwa*) follows, with variant *ma-lúngu* (identical to *ma-lúngu*, ‘ship,’ except for tone); this augmentative “plural” means ‘Suffering,’ a euphemism for ‘dead person, a case of death.’ For many native speakers, this word would surely have recalled *Kimpassi*, also ‘suffering,’ the name of a territorial cult of affliction in the southern Kongo region, documented from the 17th to the 20th century.

After reaching *ka-lúnga* in the sense of ‘fruition in the abode of the dead’ (from *lúnga*, ‘to arrive home, be full, etc.’—see above), we move upwards, toward the eastern end of the horizontal *ka-lúnga* line and the other, more hopeful meaning of *lúngwa*: “to struggle, . . . to execute something with trouble, . . . torment.” Breaking through into “morning,” we encounter *lúngalakana* (from *lúnga*, ‘to care for, guard, reign’), meaning ‘to assemble; to be wise.’ Moving further upward, we reach a culminating sequence of words (all from *lúnga*) for perfection and for astral bodies and people arriving thereat: *ñlúngu*, mentioned above, “fulfillment, . . . reaching the zenith (the sun), plenitude” (cf. again *ñ-lúngu*, a variant for ‘dugout’); *ñlúngi*, ‘someone perfect’ (cf. again the three *ñlúngi* above, for ‘dugout,’ ‘guardian,’ and ‘returning time/season’); *bi-lúnga ngòlo byabyonsòno*, “the assembled members; . . . fully perfected [and with *nsòno*, ‘signifying marks’],” clearly persons initiated into a corporate body (see *lúngalakana*, above); finally *na lúngu-lúngu*, “replete . . . ; perseverant until arriving at the objective,” and *ma-lúngu-lúngu*, “Very Full Moon” (augmentative “plural”).¹⁵ These last items are clearly related to *ñlúnga* (singular and plural), equivalent to Kimbundu *ma-lunga* (plural of *ri-lunga*), met earlier. In today’s dictionaries, these words simply refer to wrist or ankle rings denoting distinction. Intriguingly, however, in the Lemba cult a special *ñlúnga* bracelet—a power charm akin to the ancient *ma-lunga*?—was awarded to one who successfully completed the death/rebirth initiation cycle and became a priest (“someone perfect,” *ñlúngi*).

The evidence that Kongo cults of affliction were recreated as institutions in Brazil makes it plausible that their priests and new initiates might have

15. The double acute diacritic (ˆ) is like the single acute (´), but indicates a fall from an extra high starting point; words with this marking are derived from roots having a grave diacritic (in this case *lúnga*). Laman (1936, xv).

“remembered” the Atlantic crossing—a truly calamitous forced migration—in terms not only of canoe-kinship metaphors for constructing a new *ma-lúngu* community, but also of “spirited” forward-looking rites of passage through “death” to eventual fulfillment in a new life: in Kikongo terms, from *ma-lúngu* (“Suffering, dead person”) to *ma-lúngu-lúngu* (“Very Full Moon,” or “absolute plenitude”). But could this understanding have arisen on the slave ship itself? MacGaffey (1986, 126ff) again provides the essential clue, with ethnography illuminated by Laman’s dictionary. He notes that the homonyms *nsála* and *nsála [sic]* are used by Kikongo speakers to make analogies between, respectively, “feather, plumage, ‘leafy plumage of a tree’” and “soul” (in Laman: “principle of life, life itself”). Wordplay also links these words to a near-homonym, *nzála*, meaning “(finger-/toe-) nail.” Then too, the Kongoleses make analogies between trees and people, likewise foliage and hair. The two metaphoric vectors converge in thinking about human beings, helped by the exuberant demonstration of life in both growing nails and hair. Not surprisingly then, in the two most detailed descriptions of cults of affliction in the Kongo area in the early 20th century, a *Kimpasi* among the Mpangu in the south and a *Bakhimba* among the Yombe in the northwest, the final ritual marking the boundary between “death” and the beginning of a new community life of fruition in harmony with the spirit world is the shaving of heads (Van Wing 1959 [1921/1938], 464; Bittremieux 1936, 51–52).

The descriptions of the Brazilian cults, based on interviews rather than direct observation, do not include this detail. It is quite possible, however, that Stedman’s account of the slaves shaving their heads “one to the other” on catching sight of Suriname’s shore is a variant of the *Kimpasi* and *Bakhimba* communal embrace of Life. (Since shaving with “a broken bottle and without Soap” must have been painful, it is doubtful that people emerging from this traumatic Passage would have wounded each other for purely festive-artistic reasons.) Depending on the time period (Stedman may be recounting a scene witnessed by others), western Central Africans accounted for 30% (1773–1777) to 42% (1761–1777) of all Africans landed directly in Suriname between 1750 and Stedman’s leave-taking. Their precise provenance is not known, but Stedman gives a detailed description of Africans in Suriname performing a dance that Robert Farris Thompson (2005, 75) identifies as typical of the northern Kongo region. The “different figures of Stars, [and] half-moons” on the shaved heads in Stedman’s scene could also have Kongoleses referents. Fu-Kiau (1969, 126–128) notes that the moon is considered a healer and a symbol of fertility (thus, of social well-being). Furthermore, she/he is both female and male: the wife of the sun, yet the husband of the *star*. Since the moment of “rebirth” only announces a coming plenitude, the “half-moons” mentioned by Stedman,

given the imprecise shaving instrument, could represent the crescent moon; for the same reason, the stars might be the morning star.

Yet we cannot discard the hypothesis that the moment described by Stedman involved West Africans. In both the Candomblé Ketu and the Candomblé Congo-Angola of Salvador, Bahia (the former considered to be predominantly West African in origin, the latter a combination of elements from West and West Central Africa), initiates have their heads shaved as part of the ritual; furthermore, those initiated together form a *barco*, a ‘boat’ or ‘ship.’¹⁶ These could be remembrances of the slave trade and of the formation of new community ties in Brazil. Alternatively, the Atlantic commerce here too may have reinforced prior cultural imperatives. Among the 20th-century Yoruba (formed from the same groups that, in Bahia, called themselves *Nagô* and became the dominant element in Candomblé Ketu), entrance into the priesthood is a “birth to a new life” and is marked by the shaving of heads (Verger 2003, 39, 43). Then too, in the 18th- and 19th-century Bahian captaincy/province, western Central Africans were usually a significant minority of incoming bondspeople. The Candomblés of today may well represent a long dialogue between the two traditions.

This brings us again to Mintz and Price’s other watershed contribution to diaspora studies: their emphasis on the need for detailed research regarding the contexts in which Africans of different origins engaged each other and Europeans. With respect to southeastern Brazil in the first half of the 19th century, I have argued that harsh working conditions and limited chances for manumission on large plantations led slaves generally to “turn inward” upon the quarters and define their social identity with cultural markers from the home continent. In many small properties, on the other hand, where owners’ power was usually more limited, “hard bargaining” between masters and bondspeople resulted in higher manumission rates and perhaps also strategies of slaves and freed people aimed at cultural approximation with Luso-Brazilians (Slenes 2011 and 2012). Whatever the case, western Central Africans’ determination to form affective alliances on the interlinked waters of kith (‘friends’ in Old English) and kin, would have guided them in their struggle to create the good society implicit in their metaphors. The canoe-migration stories in particular, argues MacGaffey (2000, 209), “should be read as models of the contrast between social disorder and an ideal order of right government, right marriage, and right eating [i.e., right appropriation].”¹⁷

16. Johnson (2002, 114, 119); personal communication from Andrea Mendes.

17. My brackets; Kikongo *dīa* means ‘eat/take/appropriate.’

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