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Rituals of Resistance

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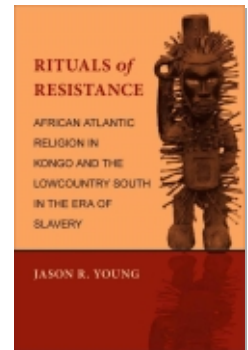
Published by Louisiana State University Press

Young, Jason R.

Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Lowcountry South in the Era of Slavery.

Louisiana State University Press, 2007.

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Saline Sacraments, Water Ritual, and the Spirits of the Deep

CHRISTIAN CONVERSION IN KONGO AND ALONG THE SEA ISLANDS OF THE DEEP SOUTH

Sarah was a slave; and a dutiful one at that. When Sarah spoke, she comported herself with all of the deference demanded by the master class: “‘Your servant, massa; your servant missus.’ Then a pause, and the hands meekly folded before her.”¹ She was well liked and highly regarded by members of the master class:

Sarah was not, and from the circumstances could not have been, a romantic or sentimental creature, full of fancies and vagaries, and artfully seeking to impose her visions and dreams upon more simple and credulous people. Such a physiological embodiment as hers never developed much fancy, and such a life-history of toils and hardening processes would have effectually eliminated any tendencies to cultivate the romantic, had her nature been by any possibility receptive. Her face was altogether honest, with its deeply marked lines of suffering; and her whole expression clearly evinced those plain, practical, sensible qualities which had gained her so good a reputation.²

Still, Sarah’s Christian faith was peppered with occasional paroxysms, which she termed “mazes.” During one incident, Sarah rose from her quarters during the midnight hour and, in a fit of screams and shrieks, entered the “Big House” and burst into the bedroom of the plantation’s owner, minister Charles Raymond. He recalled Sarah’s screams as the most “agonizing groans ever vented by tortured humanity.” Sarah stood dazed, with her eyes glassy, her hands extended before her, and her visage shrouded with a lifeless hue. In a moment she collapsed prone on the floor and said, “O Lord, I’m damned! O master, I’m in hell! O Jesus, do save me.” So she continued for thirty minutes, “bathed in a cold sweat, and with pulse scarcely perceptible, until at last her agony ceased from utter prostration.” Morning arrived, and once again fully in control of her faculties, Sarah reported, without suspense or apology, that she had simply had one of her “mazes.”

Given Sarah's usual disposition, Raymond could scarcely make sense of the outburst: "So quiet! So sensible! So undemonstrative! How had good old Sarah ever been the subject of such a vagary?" When the second maze hit Sarah in broad daylight, Raymond was forced to concede that the fits were "no somnambulistic feat, growing out of disordered digestion or incipient dyspepsia. The physical theorists upon the subject were nonplussed." If the theorists were confused, the same may not be said of Sarah, who knew that the mazes were directly related to the unconverted condition of her soul. When Sarah's mistress attempted to educate her in the manner of proper Christian conversion, to assure her that "mazes" played no part in the path of religious redemption, Sarah responded curtly that white folks were different from "colored" persons. Only after Sarah's third maze did she finally come through jubilantly with the certainty that, having seen hell, she had been taken to Jesus to have her sins forgiven: "Sins all gone, bress de Lord! Leff um down dere under dat tree. Amen! Bress de Lord! Took 'emself right out'n 'emself." So was Sarah converted, and her bouts with the mazes ceased.³

Recounting her own experience, Elizabeth Roberts, a former slave of the Georgia coastal islands, reported that it was the water that washed the sins away, and so, she said, baptism must be performed when the tide is going out. Roberts recalled that as converts congregated along the river bank for the ritual, they did not direct their prayers to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; rather, the preacher prayed to the river, asking that all sins be taken away, noting that the water washed all sins away.⁴

This chapter focuses on the complexities and subtleties that often attend ritual belief and practice. It does not posit conversion as a clear and discrete movement from a precessional realm of belief to a successional one. Indeed, conversion rarely entails the complete abandonment of former belief systems, nor does it imply a total embrace of new spiritual theologies. The notion of conversion as discrete movement wrongly suggests that older beliefs are too rigid to negotiate a changing spiritual environment and presumes that new belief systems are impregnable, unaffected by older notions. Instead, the "new" belief system is understood largely through the context of the "old." That is, the precessional belief system does not simply replace the successional, and the former is not simply discarded. Rather, a notable adaptability of belief most marks conversion whereby older belief systems affect the newer and vice versa. This notion of conversion is complicated all the more when one considers that even

religions that differ quite widely may contain significant similarities with respect to notions of God, the afterworld, or ritual. Different religions, in fact, may overlap in important ways such that clear distinctions between one realm of belief and another, between an old belief system and a new one, may be difficult to locate.

The Christian conversion of Sarah and her fellow slaves reflect one instance in a broader African Atlantic negotiation with the Christian faith that occurred at various times and in varied locales throughout the Atlantic world.⁵ Through a comparative analysis, this chapter addresses the manner in which Africans in Kongo as well as their counterparts in the New World interacted with Christianity and baptism, navigating similar issues of coercion, conversion, and belief. On both sides of the Atlantic, the faithful proved adept at resolving and amending Christian doctrine and dogma in line with their own cosmological conceptions and with the immediacy of their own condition. Religious doctrine and practice in the two locales reveal such malleability that under the general rubric of Christianity, one witnesses widely variant rituals and rites. One notes in this chapter at least five different forms of Christian practice, including (1) European missionary efforts in Kongo under the aegis of papal authority; (2) Kongolese Christianity, which acted as a state-sanctioned and urban-based ritual movement associated with the royal court; (3) rural-based peasant practice in Kongo, which operated as a theology of resistance and ritual protection against the slave trade; (4) Protestant missionary efforts in the Lowcountry, which worked in concert with slaveholding interests; and (5) a slave theology, which developed in the antebellum period in coastal Georgia and South Carolina and sought to mobilize the slave body and behavior away from the pains and oppressions of the master class.

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the dynamics of the slave trade and related historical events connected each of these articulations of Christianity. Writing in reference to the religion of slaves along coastal Georgia and South Carolina, one scholar maintains, "The mere fact that a people *profess* to be Christians does not necessarily mean that their Christianity is of the same type as our own. The way in which a people interpret Christian doctrines depends largely upon their secular customs and traditions of the past. There is an infinite difference between the Christianity . . . of whites and colored, due in the main to their different modes of life and social backgrounds."⁶ To be a Christian or a convert in such a complicated religious landscape is neither simple nor obvious.

There are no clear binaries that may be used to explain the religious faith or practice of any of the peoples treated in this chapter, no Manichean distinctions between the converted and the unconverted, the faithful and the heretic. As a result, our notions of what it means to be a Christian, or to be converted, must be malleable.

As noted above, Kongo and the Lowcountry were intimately linked for centuries by the dynamics of the slave trade, and many of the victims of the trade in Kongo found themselves enslaved along the coastal region of Georgia and South Carolina.⁷ Catholic missionaries in Kongo had exposed at least some enslaved Africans to the tenets of Christianity through their work in Kongo. In fact, Protestant missionaries in South Carolina occasionally described black spirituality as a curious superstition reminiscent of Catholicism. Thomas Turpin, one such missionary, encountered a relatively isolated group of slaves along the South Carolina Sea Islands in 1834, whereupon he noted that they had “societies organized among themselves; and that those societies were very corrupt, and appeared to be very much under the influence of Roman Catholic principles; and . . . they did penance.”⁸ Christian Oldendorp, a Moravian clergyman and poet, interviewed hundreds of West Indian slaves during the late eighteenth century and noted that “the Negroes from the *Congo* nation who came to the West Indies have, for the most part, a recognition of the true God and of Jesus Christ” due to the role played by Portuguese and Italian missionaries.⁹ Jane Landers documented similar developments in Spanish colonial Florida, where enslaved West-Central Africans, fleeing the plantations of Georgia and South Carolina, reported their exposure to Catholicism while in their homelands.¹⁰

The prior experience and exposure of some Africans to Christianity in Kongo undoubtedly colored their interactions with Protestant missionaries in the Americas. They likely drew upon a vocabulary of Christianity and of Christian conversion that developed in Kongo as early as the late fifteenth century and persisted through the era of the slave trade and into the antebellum period in certain New World plantation communities. This vocabulary of Christian conversion became significant when large numbers of Kongolese, held captive along the Sea Islands of the Georgia and South Carolina coasts, developed their own responses to Christianity in the New World. An understanding, therefore, of the experience of Christian conversion and baptism in Kongo is essential to any investigation of similar themes in the American South.

Christianity and the Kongo Court, 1491–1645

Christianity came to Kongo during the late fifteenth century, when Franciscan priests baptized King Nzinga a Nkuwu as João I in 1491. In the months and years immediately following the conversion of the king, many members of the royal court and nobility also adopted the faith. A Catholic church was constructed at Mbanza Kongo, capital of the country, and a number of European missionaries arrived in Kongo, offering sacraments and conducting mass. Still, European missionaries had some difficulty maintaining the faith in its early phases as many clerics perished in Kongo's tropical climate. Those hardy enough to withstand the climate suffered from a chronic shortage of priests with which to conduct effectively the business of conversion and maintenance of the faith. In fact, King João's conversion was rather short lived, and by the turn of the century, he ceased to practice as a Catholic, returning to indigenous Kongo beliefs.¹¹ Many members of the Kongolese elite again followed suit. The history of Christian conversion in Kongo may very well have ended there had it not been for João's son, Afonso. As it stands, however, the story of Christian conversion in Kongo has very much to do with Kongo rules of royal succession, visions in the sky, and the intervening hand of God in the lives of ordinary men.

Kongolese succession rules were not governed by primogeniture. Instead, candidates from competing royal clans sought endorsement from the court and provincial nobility. This support proved crucial because it ensured arms and men to fight the bloody battles that occasionally attended vacancies at the throne. Candidates able to amass larger and more powerful networks tended to win these battles and, eventually, the throne. These skirmishes could last for weeks and months as several would-be kings struggled for possession of the kingdom. In the interim, the throne remained vacant. Rather than compromising the ultimate stability of the kingdom, these battles proved decisive, affording newly invested monarchs significant power over recently defeated rivals.¹²

Evidence suggests that for Afonso, the battle for succession to the throne served as a testing ground between his own Christianity and the "pagan" ways of his brother. Unlike his father, Afonso remained steadfast in the Catholic faith: "We have renounced definitively all of the errors and idolatries in which our ancestors believed up until now. We have learned that our Lord Jesus Christ, human and divine, descended from heaven to earth to be

made incarnate in the womb of the glorious Virgin Mary, his mother. For the well being of all mankind . . . he was killed upon a wooden cross in the city of Jerusalem, was buried and risen from the dead on the third day.”¹³

Afonso believed that his own adherence to the Christian faith had placed him in conflict with his father and members of the Kongo elite, noting that “because we remained firm in the true faith . . . we were hated by the king (João I) and by the nobility of the kingdom.”¹⁴ The king had sent his son to oversee the governance of Nsundi, one of Kongo’s provincial regions, and for the prince, the office at Nsundi represented an exile, distancing him from the more important matters occurring at central court. But rather than encouraging Afonso to fall more in line with the beliefs and rituals of the monarch, which by the turn of the century had moved well away from Catholic practice, this semi-exile only strengthened Afonso’s resolve and faith. In fact, he suffered his position with great contentment and satisfaction because he saw it as a service to the Lord.

In 1509 Afonso learned that his father was very near death and that his brother, Mpanzu a Nzinga, had seized the throne with the blessings of the nobility and provincial lords.¹⁵ Despite the distance, both political and religious, that separated Afonso from his father, the exiled prince still felt himself to be the only rightful heir to the throne. He felt that his brother had occupied the throne “in a manner indignant and against all justice.”¹⁶ Certain that he was the proper heir, Afonso left Nsundi for the capital city to “take possession of the kingdom according to the old customs,” that is, through battle.¹⁷ Afonso had determined that only Christians could join him on his trek to the capital, so when he arrived at the Mbanza Kongo his total force numbered only thirty-seven men.¹⁸

Afonso’s difficulty in amassing a large army suggests the relative weakness of the Christian faith in Kongo at the turn of the sixteenth century. Still, his willingness to march to the capital and engage in battle, to pit thirty-odd Christians against a well-manned and well-armed force, suggests the power of his own personal faith in Christianity. When he arrived at the capital he found himself considerably outnumbered, facing an army of massive force. For Afonso, the ensuing battle had both political and religious implications. He knew full well that the people of Kongo, whom he described as “almost all infidels and idolaters,” wanted to see his brother installed as king. Still, he found comfort in the certainty that “power does not reside in a large number of men, but in the will of the Lord. That’s why we had confidence.”¹⁹ Afonso was sure that with the grace of God, “it was

not necessary to have a large number of men.”²⁰ He was convinced that God would grant him the victory against the infidels who had received the Gospel but turned away from God’s good graces. So began the battle.

The soldiers exchanged arrows and swords until, suddenly and without warning, Afonso’s opponents turned around and began to retreat desperately, though Afonso did not know the cause of their withdrawal.²¹ He gave chase only to find that many in his brother’s company had fallen dead. Afonso subsequently won the battle and the Kongo throne and determined immediately that the victory had been granted by divine intervention. He soon learned that his opponents had retreated due to the appearance in the sky of a tremendous vision. An image of St. Jacques, to whom Afonso had prayed for divine intervention just before the battle, had appeared in the sky mounted atop a horse and accompanied by a band of armed cavalymen. In addition, a large white cross could be seen emblazoned in the heavens. These images had so frightened Mpanzu a Nzinga and his men that they forfeited the throne and retreated as quickly as possible. Afonso interpreted the victory as a miracle granted by God, and after the victory, he imprisoned Mpanzu a Nzinga and sentenced him to death.²² Such an unlikely victory confirmed in Afonso the ultimate truth of the Christian faith.

Whether this story of divine intervention is apocryphal or not, Afonso certainly embraced it as a none-too-subtle warning to any would-be competitors of his divinely inspired mission. In this, Afonso’s legitimation included the familiar trope of Christian victory over “heathens” used by rulers and soldiers alike in contexts as varied as the Crusades, the Boer War’s Battle of Blood River in South Africa, or American Indian relocation policy. With Christianity as the new reigning political cult, Afonso found little difficulty in convincing his subordinates to adopt the religion, which they did in great numbers during the early years of the sixteenth century.

Although Afonso’s victory had been confirmed by divine intervention, his position atop Kongo’s throne was yet less than stable. As an outcast prince zealous in his adherence to an already discarded faith, who claimed neither manpower nor arms, his leadership would likely have been challenged by rivals. And yet Afonso (1506–43) enjoyed the longest and certainly one of the most important reigns in Kongo’s history.²³ He devoted his initial energies to shoring up support for his rule. He made a deliberate effort to connect political power and influence with religious faith, and over his

long reign he developed an impressive Christian state infrastructure that operated primarily among the royal court and provincial nobility. To begin the process, Afonso sent his son Henrique to Portugal to be educated in the Portuguese language, the classics, and the humanities. Henrique learned to speak Latin fluently, received training as a cleric, and eventually enjoyed promotion to the bishopric. In addition, Afonso constructed schools in the capital of the country devoted to the education of the nobility's children. These schools instructed students in the classics and trained them in the Christian faith. The success of these schools, which hundreds of students regularly attended, is well documented.²⁴ Afonso wrote persistently to papal authorities requesting building materials for the erection of new churches and schools, and he continued to ask that more missionaries be sent to Kongo to perform the sacraments.

Just as Afonso fomented an infrastructure of royal Catholic practice, he also engaged in an equally zealous program to rid the country of "infidels" and "idolaters." He actively "burned numerous idols" and waged a year-long campaign against a "fetish house" he desperately wanted to destroy.²⁵ Christianity, as practiced by Afonso, may be understood as something of a ruling doctrine, a set of practices, rituals, and beliefs mobilized as a way of ensuring power and granting favor in direct opposition to competing practices. For Afonso, Christianity served as both a faith and a political campaign. By eliminating infidels, that is, would-be competitors for the throne, he ensured his own power base and developed that manner of support that had escaped him in his initial installation. For members of the royal elite, conversion to Christianity made clear political sense, especially at a time when the king was not only denouncing but also violently eradicating other practices. By the end of his reign in 1543, Afonso had effectively instituted Christianity as part of the body politic in the country, supported by a newly strengthened Christian church. His efforts to educate Kongo's young, his tireless attempts to suppress other ritual practices and his undying faith in Catholicism combined to establish Christianity in Kongo from the sixteenth century onward. Even fifty years after Afonso's death, the royal court continued to support Christianity. At his own installation, Alvaro II (1587–1614) announced himself: "Alvaro II, by the grace of God, augments conversion to the faith of Jesus Christ."²⁶

The Kongolese elite, however, did not accept the faith as presented by European missionaries at face value. Even as Christianity assumed increasing importance at court, Kongolese officials practiced it through their own

cultural lens. Kongolese converts regarded Christian missionaries in much the same way as they did indigenous Kongolese ritual experts (*nganga*; pl. *banganga*) and demanded that they act accordingly. Just as *banganga* secured plentiful rains and bountiful harvests, so were Catholic priests expected to perform similar functions. When droughts struck Kongo in 1674, Kongo officials blamed Capuchin missionaries, arguing that while the converted regions of the country suffered, the so-called pagan districts enjoyed plentiful rains and harvests. This, the officials argued, was the direct result of several excommunications that the clergy had recently performed, and the officials demanded that the relevant parties be absolved. When the missionaries refused, they were summarily expelled from the area.²⁷ King Garcia II (1641–61) argued similarly in 1645 that several military defeats were God’s way of punishing the kingdom for the sins of early leaders who had not been Christian. Fearful that the sins of the father were being visited upon the sons, Garcia II appealed to Rome in hopes that Kongo might be shielded from past iniquities. The pope fulfilled Garcia II’s request, offering the kingdom an absolution and benediction for past transgressions.²⁸ These events suggest that ritual practice in Kongo, though under a Christian idiom, continued to respond to the immediacy of everyday life.

From its earliest introduction until the mid-seventeenth century, Christianity remained a faith closely associated with the royal court and provincial nobility. Kongo elite developed literacies in European languages, and Kongolese heads of state maintained regular correspondence with papal authorities and European monarchs. The nobility dispatched ambassadors to European metropolises to discuss matters of state and sent their children to be educated in the manners of Christianity. For their part, European missionaries arrived in Kongo, always woefully undermanned, to perform holy sacraments, install royal officers, and conduct Christian rituals.

Christianity in Kongo, 1645–1704

In the mid-seventeenth century Capuchin missionaries established churches and schools in the provincial areas that served primarily families of the nobility and the retinues of provincial lords. Though they operated in the rural sector, these schools and churches had little effect on the local populations, who remained largely illiterate well into the eighteenth century. Moreover, most ordained priests in Kongo came from the noble class.²⁹ Even during the eighteenth century, when the missionary establishment

in Kongo was greatly decreased, Catholic informed ritual practice never entirely disappeared at court.³⁰

While Christianity developed as a ritual cult closely connected to and controlled by the court, spiritual practice in the village sector operated differently. Kongolese monarchs enjoyed special access to the spiritual realm, which they used to justify their authority and empower other members of the ruling class. In the outlying village sectors, local religious leaders, called *kitome* (pl. *itome*), governed the spiritual life and well-being of the community. The *itome*, a network of community religious leaders that extended from the capital to the outlying areas, validated noble governance through ritual installation and ensured the safety and prosperity of each village community through the resolution of disputes and the maintenance of prosperity, community health, and rains. Other individuals, called *banganga* (sing. *nganga*), assured the individual health of any member who sought luck or protection from hardship. In effect, the king, *kitome*, and *nganga* all laid claim to spiritual access to the otherworld, and although their relationship was not explicitly contentious, the *kitome* and *nganga* could pose a potential threat to the king's ritual status.

It is in this context that missionaries introduced Christianity into the village sector during the mid-seventeenth century. For much of the sixteenth century, and well into the seventeenth, Kongo nobility opposed the practice of indigenous religion. As a result, villagers often regarded the arrival of Christianity as an intrusion upon local religious practice. Afonso regularly destroyed fetish houses and idols throughout the country. For Afonso, Christianity represented a type of royal doctrine that opposed other forms of ritual practice, and villagers often perceived of Christian missionaries as extensions of the central authority of the king. In fact, Catholic missionaries and adherents to indigenous belief often clashed. One missionary, Luca da Caltanissetta, suggested as much when he wrote, "At one point some men and women told my interpreter that my mission was evil because I showed myself to be an enemy of the 'feticheurs' and burned their idols; they added that they were unable to forsake the practices of their country. . . . They turned to the 'feticheurs' in order to get healing from the devil, honored in these idols. This response demonstrates the profound disposition of all inhabitants of this unfortunate kingdom of Kongo."³¹

Caltanissetta's statements highlight the contentious relationship between village inhabitants and the Christian clergy who acted as a new arm of

the politico-religious power residing at central court. The burning of idols was important not only for Christian missionaries, bent on removing all traces of the devil from the Kongo countryside, but also for the Kongo court, intent on removing the potential for spiritual and religious competition from outlying areas. This state-sponsored campaign to rid the country of “feticheurs” further cemented the position of the king at the apex of Kongo’s religious establishment, vested with special access to the spirit realm. When Capuchin missionaries arrived in Kongo in 1645, they sought actively to convert in the rural and outlying regions. The Kongolese regarded Capuchins and the Jesuits who preceded them as ritual experts on the order of an *nganga* and thus as representing a real threat, sanctioned by the king and ruling elite, against rural religious leaders.³² Whereas the king encouraged the establishment of a priestly order over which he exerted considerable control, villagers often rebelled against the intrusion.³³

Still, Capuchin missionaries proved themselves exceptionally successful with respect to the distribution of certain Christian sacraments, especially baptism. Unlike the Kongo nobility, whose introduction to the faith included instruction at school or attendance at mass, the village faithful experienced Christianity first and foremost in receiving baptism, which principally involved the conferring of salt sacrament.³⁴ Catholic baptismal ritual called for the priest to place a small amount of salt on the tongue, followed by holy water.³⁵ Though priests proved terribly unsuccessful in the conferring of other rites—marriage, confession, the last rites—they were successful with baptism, or the eating of salt, *yadia mungwa*, as it was called locally.³⁶ Caltanissetta acknowledged that the Kongolese referred to salt as the central aspect of the baptism and recounted the following story: “I was in the process of distributing salt to several people when heavy showers came; I told them to take shelter in some neighboring hut until the rain stopped, and afterwards to return for the rest of the ceremony. . . . They promised me that they would return, but, thinking themselves baptized, they did not reappear.”³⁷ After having learned from that experience, Caltanissetta thought it necessary to administer the salt at the end of the ritual.

This is not to suggest, however, that the Kongolese attached no spiritual importance to water. To the contrary, a critical component of Kongolese perceptions of the otherworld included reverence for Simbi water spirits. These spirits, common especially in the relatively dry coastal zone, inhabited local rivers, streams, ponds, and other bodies of water. In fact, many Kongolese regarded them as pervasive and “made offerings to them whenever

they approached water, crossed a ford with a strong current, [or] fished.”³⁸ Notably, these spirits demanded obeisance, which they rewarded with fecundity, and deplored disobedience, which they punished with disease and death.³⁹ These spirits caused certain fatal diseases, often contracted in the rain, the victims of which would be ceremonially thrown into bodies of water, rather than being buried according to normal custom, for fear that failure to sacrifice them to the water would result in a cessation of the rains. Anne Hilton relates that in the seventeenth century, missionaries began insisting on burying the victims of these rain-borne afflictions, but if the rains subsequently failed, “the people dug them up and took them to the water.”⁴⁰ The Simbi spirits could take human form but were easily detected due to certain physical abnormalities. Indeed, the Kongolese venerated albinos, dwarfs, twins, and cripples as Simbi spirits incarnate. Or Simbi spirits might attach themselves to healers, aiding them in their work to cure the sick.⁴¹

While the Kongolese had preexisting notions of the spiritual powers of water, no evidence suggests that they transferred their reverence for Simbi spirits onto the sprinkled water featured in the Catholic baptism, and European missionaries made no effort to encourage among their would-be converts any such connection. As a result, Kongolese villagers referred not to the cleansing power of water when describing baptism but to the power of the salt. In line with the general belief that evil people and spirits detested salt and would thus avoid a baptized person, they conceived of the salt and not the water as conferring the blessing of baptism.⁴² When Capuchin priests recognized that villagers thought of baptism as a rite of protection from evil spirits, they attempted to break the association between salt and salvation. Their efforts failed miserably, as few were persuaded to accept the rite without the requisite salt.⁴³ During the last decades of the seventeenth century missionaries baptized as many as 340,000 in Kongo, with certain missionaries conducting upward of 50,000.⁴⁴ Bernardo da Gallo, a Capuchin missionary writing in 1710, noted that in the rural regions, people were baptized in great numbers, without having a true knowledge of the faith.⁴⁵ Da Gallo acknowledged that many among the village sector had a “true awareness” of the Christian faith and were, in fact, “*bons chrétiens*.” He maintained that many others, even after having been baptized, never developed a true understanding of the faith and never “abandon[ed] their pagan customs”; as a result, “the evangelical seed” was “suffocated by diabolic discord, and never fully formed.”⁴⁶

Capuchin missionaries who traveled throughout the countryside conducted annual baptisms en masse, and local liaisons translated key Christian concepts—such as the Holy Bible, priest, God, excommunication, and the meanings of the cross—not only into local tongues but also into local cosmologies. In the translation of key Christian terms, the Kongolese developed iconographies and sacraments with multiple meanings, thereby molding Christianity toward Kongolese belief, ritual, and rite.⁴⁷ When translated into kiKongo, key Christian concepts took on a complexity of meaning not always understood by Christian missionaries. Itinerant Kongolese Christians, accompanied by European missionaries, traveled the countryside, translating key terms, spreading the gospel, and administering sacraments. This raises the very real possibility that communications occurred between the translator and the congregation without the knowledge of priests.⁴⁸

European Christians adopted the kiKongo term for God, *nzambi*, to denote the Christian God.⁴⁹ The Kongolese term *nzambi* could mean “soul” or be used generally to refer to an ancestor or other deity.⁵⁰ In this way, the term *nzambi a mpungu*, meant to denote “God Almighty,” connoted the first, highest, or greatest ancestor, deity, or spirit.⁵¹ *Nzambi a mpungu* took much of its meaning from the context within which it operated. In the family the term referred to a maternal uncle or father; when used in an otherworldly sense, the term connoted the founder of the land of the dead—or an ultimate creative power. *Nzambi a mpungu* only carried meaning contextually, allowing the Kongolese faithful to interpret it variously.⁵²

Moreover, Christian priests adopted the title *nganga*, thus using the term for indigenous Kongolese ritual experts, a group missionaries roundly dismissed as “fetishers.” In that capacity they performed all of the rituals expected of that office, including providing individual charms for protection as well as consecrating and coronating kings. The activities over which Christian priests presided resembled analogous Kongolese rituals that shared the same essential vocabulary.⁵³ Missionaries translated the term *nkisi*, the indigenous term Europeans used to denote Kongolese “fetish cults,” to mean “holy.” As a result, there was no linguistic distinction between Christian religious practice and other indigenous rituals. One missionary, for example, described the experience he had as he approached a large group of people while walking along the road: “Big and small, man and woman, everyone yelled: *en ganga anquissi zambi ampong [nganga a nkisi nzambi a mpungu]* which means in their language ‘holy priests of God.’”⁵⁴

Similar difficulties attended the translation of other words. Missionaries translated “church” as *nzo a nkisi* or *nkisi* house, “Holy Bible” as *mukanda nkisi*, and “excommunicate” as *loka* (curse, conjure, bewitch).⁵⁵

The villagers’ desire for baptism and their concomitant opposition to a state-sanctioned Christianity may seem curious. The apparent paradox may be resolved, however, through an examination of the state of the Kongo kingdom during the latter seventeenth century. The era that began with the rule of Garcia II in 1641 and ended with the death of Pedro IV in 1718 marks a crucial period in the history of Kongo, when peasants and villagers found themselves in the midst of near-constant civil war, succession disputes, and Kongo’s increasing involvement in the slave trade. The Battle of Mbwila in 1665, the most crucial conflict of the period, pitted the Kongo kingdom against Portuguese forces at Angola in a bitter boundary dispute in which Kongo’s King Antonio I was killed along with other high-ranking nobles. The country subsequently fell into an extended period of bloody yet indecisive succession battles that rapidly deteriorated into decades of civil war. Most Kongoleses, including the nobility, fled the capital city during this period as the highly centralized Kongo state all but dissolved. In the absence of centralized political authority, nobles and provincial lords established new allegiances in the latter part of the seventeenth century. The influence and power of these provincial warlords grew, as did internecine warfare and slaving activities and many of the nobles and ruling elite established commercial relationships with European traders on the coast vis-à-vis the slave trade. Through clientage networks and precarious alliances, these nobles waged intermittent and bloody battles throughout the outlying regions in hopes of supplying European traders on the coast with slaves. As a result, thousands of Kongo’s villagers found themselves in the crossfire. Slaves were valuable commodities during this period for several reasons. Slaveholders could force bondsmen into agricultural labors, helping to provision warlords and soldiers or press them into military service, thereby increasing the fighting capabilities of warring factions. And increasingly, slave traders sent these captives into ever-growing transatlantic slaving networks in exchange for munitions and money.⁵⁶

In this context, the villagers’ widespread demand for baptism makes sense as a salt sacrament conceived as a protection against evil people and spirits. With baptism as its central rite, Christian conversion in Kongo clearly spoke to real and immediate concerns regarding the power and

reprisals not only of evil witches, neglected deceased, and vengeful neighbors but also of powerful nobles and slave traders. More than ritual ablu-tion, baptism, via the spiritual power of salt, protected the convert. And Christianity, the vehicle through which baptism was administered, served as the site for the adaptation of new spiritual information to very real and immediate conditions. Considering the political situation in Kongo from the mid-seventeenth century through the first quarter of the eighteenth century, the widespread popularity of baptism resonated for the many people who participated in the rite.

Many among Kongo's rural population perceived of the baptismal rite as something of a social leveler. Some sources contend that many Kongolese underwent the rite simply to win the prestige of being called "Dom," a title of respect afforded to the converted. If, as is true, the primary victims of the transatlantic trade came from the outlying rural regions, then some of the participants might have sought advantage in the assumption of a moniker of social prestige, hoping that it would afford some protection from the slave trade. Luca da Caltanissetta made the point quite strongly in 1697, when he wrote, "If it is true that the inhabitants of this kingdom want to be baptized, it is only for the power to be called Dom and not to be taken for pagans."⁵⁷ The connection that Caltanissetta made between baptism and power suggests that some Kongolese co-opted a ritual practice to achieve a deeply personal yet political end: protection from the slave trade through the social status afforded by baptism. The rural population certainly would have contrasted their own poverty and vulnerability against the relative prestige and power of Kongo's lords and provincial nobility, who raised armies and profited by capturing slaves and delivering them to Western traders along the Atlantic Coast. In the mid-seventeenth century, another priest, Giovanni Francesco da Roma, recounted his own experiences: "Everyone of them, no matter how poor, wants to be called by the title Dom."⁵⁸ For da Roma and other missionaries, the very idea that there were presumed titleholders among Kongo's poor and rural population was a matter ripe for ridicule and consternation. When a godfather requested of da Roma that he baptize a young boy under the title Dom Julien, the priest responded with a mixture of anger and hilarity and reprimanded the godfather for a request that he found utterly ridiculous.⁵⁹

The village sector interacted with Christianity primarily in the confer-ring of baptism, a ritual that for them assured safety from witches and slave traders and freedom from the reprisals of evil spirits. The theology

of the religion was translated into Kongolese spiritual notions in ways that significantly altered its meaning.⁶⁰ Moreover, the baptismal rite itself was conducted through a translator and performed for large groups of people at a time. The numbers of priests in Kongo remained woefully small, especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and this situation was only exacerbated in outlying regions. Indeed, da Gallo maintained that there were some regions where “due to the small number of missionaries, many people pass their entire lives without hardly ever seeing a priest.”⁶¹ The adoption of some of Christianity’s rituals by Kongolese in the rural sector—including baptism and the taking of social titles—must be regarded as markedly different from the experience of members of the Christian urban elite. As mentioned earlier, education in schools, training in seminaries, travel to European metropolises, and more regular contact with clergy characterized Christian conversion at court.

In this way, one notes the establishment of two rather distinct negotiations with the Christian faith in Kongo between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries: one headquartered at central court and radiating outward through provincial lords and nobles and a second that operated in the rural and outlying regions of the state and was practiced by those who, as a response to the exigencies of the transatlantic slave trade, saw opportunities for protection and status in the ritual of baptism. In both instances, Christianity was, at best, a faith highly mediated by Kongolese notions of spirit and cosmos—so much so that conversion, such as it occurred in the country, “rarely involved any fundamental religious change.”⁶²

What did it mean, then, to be a Christian or a convert in such a complicated religious (not to mention political) landscape? Being baptized, especially in the village sector, did not preclude one from engaging in indigenous rituals, observing prior practices, or holding fast to other beliefs. Baptism in no way entailed the surrender of one form of ritual practice for another. Kongolese converts continually negotiated and tested Christian precepts and tenets against other ritual forms. Some of the elite may very well have studied Christian theology in Europe (one thinks here of Henrique, Kongo’s first bishop), whereas others saw it as little more than a ritual protection.

Despite the varied complexities and subtleties associated with Christian conversion in Kongo, John K. Thornton contends “with confidence that a form of Christianity, practicing its local variations but recognized in Rome as orthodox and accepted by European priests operating in the country,

had become the national religion of Kongo.”⁶³ Notwithstanding the great degree of what he terms “syncretism” in the faith, Thornton maintains that because Catholicism did not arrive in Kongo through colonial agents (as was the case in most other African locales), Africans themselves determined the main contours of religious and theological translation and adaptation.⁶⁴ And so they did, transferring their own vocabularies of faith unto Christian ritual and rite. Thornton maintains that “Christianity ‘conquered’ Kongo peacefully—but at the cost of adapting itself almost wholly to Kongolese conceptions of religion and cosmology.”⁶⁵

But if this is so, then Thornton may have stretched the definition of “conversion” beyond its limit. The fact that Christianity in Kongo “adapted itself almost wholly” to Kongolese religious precepts and that Kongolese Christians rarely underwent any fundamental religious change raises several concerns. May a person who, after having been baptized in an outlying region of the country, be rightly regarded as a Christian even though he has not experienced any religious change and understands the primary rites and agents of the religion in terms of previous Kongolese rituals? The answers to this question raise other, equally compelling matters. Thornton notes that church leaders regarded much of Christian practice throughout Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as highly unorthodox. The correlation of festivals of ancestor worship and Christian holidays as observed in Medieval Spain, for example, never oppugned the Spanish as valid Christians. In this sense, Thornton argues that to regard the Kongolese as anything less than Christian is to establish Europe, perhaps unwittingly, as the sole province of valid Christian expression, even when that expression controverts orthodox Roman Catholicism. However, to magnify the role, extent, and depth of Christianity in Kongo is to give short shrift to the persistence of traditional African religious expression, which continued to play a central role in the lives and belief systems of the Kongolese throughout the period for which Thornton regards Kongo as a Christian country.

Notably, Thornton argues for the validity of Kongolese Christianity by virtue of the fact that European missionaries considered it so. Even as they decried the persistence of Kongolese traditional religion in the expression of the faith, Thornton maintains that missionaries rarely argued that the presence of so-called fetishistic practice disqualified the Kongolese as Christians.⁶⁶ Because they were severely undermanned, European missionaries regularly wrote from Kongo to church authorities to request that additional

priests be sent to the region to help with the massive work entailed in the conversion of the country. In this light, missionaries may have emphasized or even exaggerated the successes won in the numbers of baptisms or the degree to which the country was being converted.⁶⁷ Catholic missionaries in Kongo might even have overlooked the persistent “transgressions” of the Kongoleses in the conversion process in official reports in order to give the overall impression that Christian conversion in the country was proceeding well enough, if only the work might be further supported by sufficient reinforcement.

Bernardo da Gallo’s general assessment of the state of Christianity in Kongo during the early eighteenth century is, for example, quite dismal. He decried mass baptisms because many of the presumably converted had little or no true knowledge of the faith and as a result either continued to practice their own religion with some inflection of Catholic faith or abandoned Christian practice altogether. In a rather pointed passage, da Gallo expressed great concern for the veritable absence of European missionaries in some of Kongo’s rural regions and for the Church of Kongo in general.⁶⁸ Blaming failed missionary efforts, da Gallo conceives of European missionaries as errant fathers to the nascent Kongo church: “The father who leads the church, instead of securing the child in the Catholic faith, turned his eyes to the left and so the church . . . began to fall back into ancient superstitions. The little children . . . due to a lack of evangelical sustenance were left to fall prey to all vices . . . and became the miserable slaves of the devil and the hell-fire.”⁶⁹ Despite this rather dark portrayal, da Gallo still maintained that the Christianity of Kongo was a “true Roman Catholic Christianity, albeit seriously weakened” by a lack of sufficient numbers of missionaries to do the job.⁷⁰

Notwithstanding the degree to which European missionaries may have exaggerated the prevalence of Christian conversion in Kongo, Thornton’s assessment raises concerns for another reason. To regard European missionaries as the primary judges of valid conversion establishes them as the principle arbiters of the basic threshold of Christian conversion in Kongo. That some European missionaries accepted Kongoleses religious expression as sufficiently Christian is a matter of great import, the merits of which must be weighed against Kongoleses assessments of the same. This is true all the more in the face of evidence that the Kongoleses themselves developed not only their own understandings of what constituted valid Christian

conversion and ritual practice but also their own Christian theologies. In the life and significance of Dona Beatriz, treated below, one notes a particularly Kongolese interpretation of Christianity, its missionaries, and of baptism as its central conversion ritual.

The Kongolese Saint Anthony

Perhaps the most notable example of Kongolese Christianity was the eighteenth-century campaign of Kimpa Vita, baptized Dona Beatriz.⁷¹ In August 1704 Kimpa Vita lay upon her bed, deathly ill. After seven days of violent sweats and wild visions, she resigned herself to imminent death. Then, as if by miracle, her sickness abated and calm was restored to the young girl through the image of St. Anthony, dressed like a Capuchin monk. Transfixed, the twenty-year-old woman listened and became possessed by the saint.

The tale of the young woman and her possession by St. Anthony soon spread to surrounding areas. She reported that St. Anthony had entered her head and replaced her own soul, thereby describing an experience consistent with Kongo cosmology, where those with special otherworldly sight often experienced visions and possession.⁷² Indeed, the Kongolese often regarded illness as a spiritual summons such that a person afflicted with a particular disease might be initiated as an *nganga* specially suited to address that very sickness.⁷³ Dona Beatriz had already established herself as gifted when, as a child, she had a vision of two children, white in color, who came to play with her and give her gifts.⁷⁴

Dona Beatriz further established her special gifts when she underwent initiation as an *nganga*, a process that formally invested her with the power to communicate with the other world. As an *nganga*, Beatriz could practice as a diviner or interpreter of dreams; she might see visions, hear voices, or experience possession while in trance, during which time beings from the other world might enter her head. In this way, the *nganga* traversed the parturition of otherworldly waters and entered the realm of the dead. In fact, Beatriz reported the repeated experience of death on Fridays and subsequent resurrection on Mondays, when she returned with special insights derived from the spirit world regarding Kongo.⁷⁵ As she experienced death and resurrection during this period, she consulted God during her absences from this world.⁷⁶

Perhaps most striking, Dona Beatriz challenged the theology espoused

by European missionaries. God had revealed to her a more accurate and thoroughly revised version of Christianity. Jesus was not born in Bethlehem but in the Kongo capital, Mbanza Kongo; Nazareth, the location of his baptism, was actually the northern Kongolese province of Nsundi. Moreover, Beatriz maintained that takula wood, whose bark produced a red dye used often in marriage and rites of passage ceremonies, was the blood of Jesus Christ. The color red in Kongo cosmology marked the interstitial space between the land of the living and the land of the dead. This association with the color red reflected the sunrise and sunset, the moments when the sun emerged from the land of the dead in the morning and returned there each evening.⁷⁷ St. Francis, Jesus, and Mary were all Kongolese according to Dona Beatriz, who maintained further that Mary, mother of Jesus, was descended from slaves. In a country embittered by decades of civil war and slave raiding, the notion that the Son of God was also of slave lineage must be seen as a veritable ideological and theological revolution for Dona Beatriz and her followers, and as a despicable blasphemy for European missionaries.

Dona Beatriz expressed deep concern for race relations and decried the Catholic Church for the lack of black saints in the church's pantheon. At the same time, however, she imagined a world without race. During an interview with Bernardo da Gallo, Dona Beatriz revealed herself as St. Anthony, to which da Gallo replied caustically, "So, what news do you bring from on high? . . . Tell me about heaven, are there any blacks from Kongo[?]"⁷⁸ Dona Beatriz responded that, in fact, there were blacks from Kongo in heaven, but that there is no color, neither black nor white in heaven, presumably portending an afterlife free of racism.⁷⁹

In addition, St. Anthony revealed truer versions of the Ave Maria and Salve Regina to Dona Beatriz, the text of which she recited as follows:⁸⁰ "*Salve* you say and you do not know why. *Salve* you recite and you do not know why. *Salve* you beat and you do not know why. God wants the intention, it is the intention that God takes. Baptism serves nothing, it is the intention that God takes. Confession serves nothing, it is the intention that God takes. Prayer serves nothing, it is the intention that God wants."⁸¹ Intention in the act of worship was, for Dona Beatriz, the critical marker of its validity. Without intention there was no prayer, baptism, cross, or sacrament. This had tremendous implications for European missionaries who, in the face of Beatriz's new theology, could no longer argue that the thousands of baptized Kongolese in the rural regions were valid Christians.

Indeed, in the midst of Dona Beatriz's movement, Christian missionaries discovered that scores of Kongolese now refused to accept the once popular baptismal rite, in line with Beatriz's claim that the sacraments serve nothing. Laurent de Lucques was surprised to learn that parents were no longer bringing their children to him to be baptized because of the teachings of Dona Beatriz. Incensed at this turn of events, de Lucques reported that the "ministers of Satan had so suppressed baptism that between Bamba and Soyo, we had not baptized anyone."⁸²

Moreover, Dona Beatriz engaged in a sustained program of burning so-called fetishes, including the cross, which, she argued, had itself become mixed with superstitious practice.⁸³ Well before the arrival of European missionaries, the Kongolese revered the cross icon as a visual representation of one's relationship to the world, denoting the cycle of life that leads man from birth to death, through the other world and into rebirth.⁸⁴ In burning the Christian cross as a fetish, Dona Beatriz suggested that both inside and outside the context of Christian worship, the cross carried simultaneous and multiple meanings for the Kongolese faithful such that its presence could invoke Christianity even as it marked the intersection of this world and the next common to the whole kiKongo speaking world, both Christian and non-Christian.⁸⁵ Beatriz argued that the cross, as an icon, had failed to distinguish itself as a ritual symbol markedly different from other ritual symbols.⁸⁶ Dona Beatriz's revised Christian theology makes clear that European missionaries were not the only arbiters of valid Christian practice and that the Kongolese had erected their own definitions of valid Christian practice.

Although a religious and spiritual movement, Beatriz's campaign contained clear political overtones as well. St. Anthony had warned Beatriz that "God would punish the people if they did not return to the then abandoned capital."⁸⁷ For most of her life, incessant civil wars had seriously compromised Kongo's stability, making life at the capital city tenuous at best. Her demand for the reoccupation of Mbanza Kongo harkened back to a golden age, a previous period of peace and stability that had eluded the country for several decades. At the same time, however, this ostensibly political aim included clear social and religious overtones. The Kongolese viewed Mbanza Kongo as something more than the political seat of government. Indeed, the capital city served as a ritual and common ancestral site with which outlying regions and tributary states identified.⁸⁸ The disruption at

Mbanza Kongo reflected a political as well as a ritual crisis in the country, and Dona Beatriz's call must be seen in this light.

Still, Dona Beatriz was not the first Kongolesse prophet to have sounded such alarms. As early as 1703, a prophet emerged announcing that God would punish the people of Kongo unless they reoccupied the capital city.⁸⁹ One year later, Mafuta, another prophetess and associate of Dona Beatriz, had similar premonitions. Mafuta claimed to have seen an image of the Virgin Mary, who, having lain prostrate at the feet of Christ, begged that mercy be shown to the people of Kongo. The people of Kongo, and especially the king, had angered Christ, Mafuta reported, by their reluctance to reoccupy the capital city. As evidence of her prophecy, Mafuta produced an oddly shaped rock she had found in the Ambriz River. The stone resembled the battered head of a man, and Mafuta described it as an image of Christ, his face beaten by the hoes and knives of women and men who worked on religious holidays. Defiant in the face of da Gallo, Mafuta refused the priests' demand that she confess her blasphemous sin—pitting her powers of prophecy above their authority. Instead, Mafuta spread her message further, attracting many adherents who were amazed by the miracles that the old prophetess performed. In one instance, she healed a gravely ill woman who had been struck by a poisonous snake using only the sign of the cross and the name of the Trinity. Mafuta became so powerful that King Pedro granted her an interview and, against the objections of da Gallo, refused to punish the prophetess for having proffered her presumably blasphemous message. King Pedro's wife seems to have been among her most devoted adherents.⁹⁰ In addition to miracles, Mafuta offered as a remedy to Christ's anger a new form of prayer whereby believers recited the Ave Maria three times and invoked divine mercy three times at nightfall.⁹¹ Like Beatriz, Mafuta opposed the use of all Kongolesse ritual objects and implements, including Christian crosses, in line with the belief that they had been diverted away from their proper use in favor of evil ends.

In effect, Mafuta played the role of John the Baptist, preparing the way for what would become a much more extensive movement. Even more, the dual campaign of Mafuta and Beatriz suggests that political opposition and spiritual insight could take on undeniably gendered forms. Though the followers of both Mafuta and Beatriz were both men and women, their leadership may point to a particular provenance that women may have had over spiritual matters of national sovereignty and unity.

The life and work of Dona Beatriz illustrates conversion as a continual negotiation between different realms of belief. Her mediation of Christianity along with her initiation as *nganga* complicate notions of conversion. Dona Beatriz embraced a faith and developed a theology that responded to the immediacy of Kongolese conditions reflected in civil strife, war, and an increasing slave trade. Social disruption plagued Kongo throughout much of her life, and the war captives taken from these battles served to satiate the ravenous appetites of New World plantation communities for labor.⁹² Dona Beatriz saw the slave trade as a moral evil based on greed and a relentless desire for goods.⁹³ Her campaign attempted to rid Kongo of the evil that plagued it, and her voice remains critically important as a statement in opposition to the impending tragedy of the slave trade. Though state authorities eventually captured and executed her in 1706, her movement persisted. For years after her death, thousands of “little anthony’s” devoted their lives to the movement, remaining staunch in their opposition to civil war and the slave trade.⁹⁴

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, then, Christian missionaries had exposed an unspecified number of Kongolese to Christianity. While some, especially those close to central court, converted to the faith, many others in the outlying regions adopted some of the tenets of the religion as part of their larger engagement with other preexisting religious practices. When residents of the rural region did adopt Christianity, they typically did so in an attempt to address the social and political disruptions wreaking havoc throughout the country. Some were certainly aware, to varying degrees, of basic Christian precepts, though that knowledge had little or no effect on their everyday lives or on their spiritual understandings.

The Slave Trade and Conversion during the Middle Passage

In theory, all captives destined for the transatlantic slave trade had to be certified Christian in preparation for their passage from Africa to the New World. Established by King Phillip III of Spain in 1607 and confirmed in 1619, this certification implied religious instruction followed by baptism.⁹⁵ Religious instruction justified the claim made by many Europeans that the slave trade represented an essential good for Africans because it brought them into contact with the Christian God. In practice, however, the exigencies of slave trading and concomitant desires for the maximization of profit all but stifled any rituals of repentance and purification. Owners wished

to avoid excessive and extraneous expenses, especially for slaves particularly weakened and dying, whose physical condition made no pretense or promise of return on further investments. Many owners delayed religious instruction, baptism, and taxes until the very last moment.⁹⁶

Catholic priests conducted religious instruction at points of embarkation along the Kongo coast with the aid of African translators. Some scholars argue that the degree to which this instruction would have been understood by a multilingual body of captured Africans is “an open question,” that the instruction given most slaves and the baptism itself was in fact little more than a caricature whereby “cynical and careless priests fulfilled their duties by last minute sprinklings from a hog trough filled with holy water rigged hastily aboard ships ready to leave.”⁹⁷ Such callousness obviously stemmed from the owners’ desire not to waste the cost of saving souls that death would soon release.⁹⁸ John Thornton contends that catechists might spend an hour with a whole group of captives, rewarding those who showed themselves particularly adept at learning with tobacco while the others “received some knock on the head as a penance.”⁹⁹ As the slave trade increased along West-Central African ports of embarkation, captives were procured from further and further in the interior of the country, far from the Christianity of the Kongolese central court or outlying country. Some captives may have been merely passing through Kongo on their way to the Atlantic Coast, rendering virtually meaningless missionaries’ attempts at shipboard conversion.

As noted above, many Kongolese captives believed salt, rather than water, conferred the ritual baptismal blessing, so their engagement with water baptism at slave ports would not have been perceived by them as a proper baptism. Remembering their own prior experience with the faith, Kongolese captives would have maintained counternarratives to Christianity than that experienced during the Middle Passage. Many followers of the Antonian movement were enslaved after the execution of Dona Beatriz in 1706, and they would certainly have had their own notions of Christianity that remained contrary to the religious instruction they received during the Middle Passage. For many of them, Christianity was a religion with Kongolese roots that asserted millenarian aims toward a reunification at Mbanza Kongo. The hasty and inadequate attempts to convert them during the Middle Passage would have done little to rupture their own belief. Still, the Kongolese experience with and exposure to Christianity in Kongo did establish a certain ritual lexicon that they could utilize

throughout the Americas to help them mediate their interactions with Protestant missionaries in the New World.

Missionaries conducted the conversion of captured Africans in an atmosphere of extreme violence. Contextually linked with the horrors of capture and sale, baptism could not have connoted spiritual cleansing and rebirth for would-be converts who were so imminently at the threshold of death. The violence of enslavement certainly would have affected would-be converts' engagement with the catechists and priests that they met at points of embarkation and disembarkation. Notwithstanding the lack of missionaries in Kongo, the halfhearted attempts of many missionaries, and the disparity between the religious experiences of the town and countryside, conversion to Christianity among Kongolese, such as it was, remained willful. That is, the faithful, both in town and in the country, accepted Christianity on their own terms, adapting it to suit their own conditions and their own notions of spirit and cosmos. No such intent can be deciphered through the baptisms performed along Kongo's ports or at varied New World ports of disembarkation. The efforts to baptize slaves reflect slaving interests' need to justify coercion and their desire to veil violence behind the promise of eternal salvation rather than the spiritual rebirth of would-be converts.

When Laurent de Lucques, a missionary in Kongo, came face to face with the violence of slavery and the Middle Passage, he justified the pain and suffering that he witnessed by suggesting that the victims would enjoy otherworldly redemption. In 1708, after having completed his missionary service in Kongo, de Lucques returned from Kongo to Europe via Brazil aboard a slave ship that departed from Luanda. De Lucques recalled that the ship soon assumed the appearance of a hospital. Confusion reigned on board as some slaves cried and moaned while others, at the edge of sanity, laughed. Space was so constricted in the hold of the ship that the captives could scarcely move or bring food from hand to mouth. In fact, de Lucques himself fell ill with fever during the trip and believed that his life would end at sea. He wondered whether the pains suffered by the captives would be compared best to hell or purgatory and finally settled on the latter because the many sufferings aboard ship were temporary and hell is eternal. And yet, even in the midst of such horror, de Lucques comforted himself and justified his faith in the notion that those who "endure these sufferings with patience, would find the means to extirpate their sins and acquire great merits for their soul."¹⁰⁰

Eighteenth-Century Missionary Activity in South Carolina and Georgia

Two years after de Lucques's voyage aboard a slave ship, Francis Le Jau, an Anglican missionary to St. James Parish in South Carolina, encountered a small group of enslaved Africans who requested that he admit them into holy communion. Although the congregants were regular churchgoers, Le Jau did not eagerly welcome them. He wrote, "I have in this parish a few Negroe Slaves and were born and baptized among the Portuguese. . . . They come to Church and are well instructed so as to express a great desire to receive the H. communion *amongst us*, I proposed to them to declare openly their Abjuring the Errors of the Romish Church without which declaration I cou'd not receive them."¹⁰¹ In noting that the would-be converts desired communion "*amongst us*," that is, among Anglicans, Le Jau acknowledged that both priest and parishioner understood full well the significant differences between Kongolese Christian theology and the practices of Anglican Protestants in South Carolina.¹⁰² After an eighteen-month term of religious instruction, two of the men were still interested in taking communion and Le Jau finally welcomed them. But before administering baptism to the converts, he required that they take an oath, to wit: "You declare in the presence of God and before this congregation that you do not ask for the holy baptism out of any design to ffree (sic) yourself from the duty and obedience you owe to your Master while you live, but merely for the good of your soul and to partake of the graces and blessings promised to the members of the church of Jesus Christ."¹⁰³

Despite his best efforts, Le Jau still found himself confounded by the degree to which slave converts managed and manipulated the doctrine to suit their own spiritual and temporal needs. Considering the ability of the black faithful to render freedom and resistance from a doctrine that presumably ensured docility and submission, Le Jau wondered if "it had been better if persons of a melancholy constitution . . . had never seen a book."¹⁰⁴

In colonial South Carolina, Anglican ministers saw it as their duty to uphold secular authority. In this sense, colonial preachers spread a doctrine of civil obedience to all of their followers, both white and black, free and enslaved.¹⁰⁵ But the question of slave obedience was especially important to Anglican ministers in colonial South Carolina. Indeed, most ministers joined the ranks of slaveholders shortly after their arrival in the colony because parsonages and glebe lands often included slaves.¹⁰⁶ In order to

convince members of the colonial elite (and themselves) that the conversion of slaves served a positive good, missionaries assured masters that slaves would be more tractable and docile as Christians. Indeed, Le Jau attacked aspects of slave culture deemed inconsistent with the productive interests of the plantation. Rather than allowing slaves to engage in the feasts and dances they typically enjoyed on their day of rest, Le Jau required slaves interested in baptism to “promise they’l [*sic*] spend no more the Lord’s day in idleness, and if they do I’l cut them off from Comunion.” Le Jau made the case rather plainly, assuring planters that Christian slaves “do better for their Master’s profit than formerly.”¹⁰⁷

To be sure, the actual numbers of slave converts during the eighteenth century remained small. A 1724 report sponsored by the bishop of London revealed the low rate at which missionaries had spread the faith among slaves. Missionaries blamed the failure to convert slaves on several factors, including the “planters’ reluctance and outright resistance, the great size of the parishes, the scarcity of the clergy, linguistic and cultural difficulties with African-born slaves, the absence of legal support, and the sheer size of the task.”¹⁰⁸

Enslaved West-Central Africans, some of whom had been exposed to the tenets of Catholicism, played a crucial role in the early development of the colony. Writing in “African Dimensions of the Stono Rebellion,” John Thornton argues convincingly that the leadership as well as many of the participants in the South Carolina Stono uprising of 1739 consisted of slaves from the kingdom of Kongo. The military tactics employed by the rebels, their expertise with weapons, their use of military banners, flags, drums, and their reported dancing all point to their prior experience as soldiers in eighteenth-century wars in Kongo.¹⁰⁹ More recently, Mark Smith has built on Thornton’s work to argue not only that the Stono rebels were from West-Central Africa but also that the very date of the rebellion, September 8–9, 1739, held portentous religious (Catholic) meaning for the captives. That is, the Stono rebels “revolted when they did because of their specific veneration of the Virgin Mary, [and] their general commitment to and understanding of the Catholic calendar developed in Kongo,” which held September 8 to be the day of Nativity of the Virgin Mary.¹¹⁰ Smith argues that Stono rebels summoned Mary “because of her Kongolese historical significance and her protective and revolutionary power.”¹¹¹

The Stono rebels cut a path southward during the uprising, hoping to reach Spanish Florida and thus secure sanctuary in the Catholic outposts

of St. Augustine. In this, the rebels followed a course first established in the late seventeenth century, when, in 1687, a group of Carolina slaves fled their masters, stole a canoe, and made their way to St. Augustine, requesting that Spanish authorities there baptize them in the “true faith.” Spanish officials not only performed the sacrament but also protected the runaways from Carolina slaveholders who traveled to Florida in search of the fugitives. More fugitives from Carolina followed suit, and in 1693 Spanish officials in Florida adopted a general policy of manumission for all escaped slaves from the British North American colonies.

Between 1693 and the Stono Rebellion waves of fugitives arrived in Florida from South Carolina and neighboring Georgia, eventually establishing a black town called Garcia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose.¹¹² In this light we better understand the aims and ultimate motives of the Stono rebels, who were as interested in sanctuary as they were in open revolt. Indeed, some argue that the Stono Rebellion was “less an insurrection than an attempt by slaves to fight their way to St. Augustine.”¹¹³ Catholic missionaries interviewed the newly arrived runaways, who informed the clergymen that they were familiar with Catholicism due to their exposure to the faith in their homeland. Still, parish priests in colonial Florida remarked in horror that some presumably Catholic refugees could not understand Catholic doctrine and “still prayed in their native tongue.”¹¹⁴ As a result, even when fugitives acknowledged familiarity with the faith, parish priests still required them to be baptized anew and subjected them to additional religious instruction. This was the case for two Kongolese slaves in Florida, Miguel and Francisco, who received provisional baptisms administered by parish priest Francisco Arturo because, though nominally Catholic, the two had been baptized in their home country and prayed in their own language.¹¹⁵ This example illustrates further that even if some Catholic priests acknowledged the Christianity of Kongolese converts as valid—even if wrought with heathen practices, as Thornton argues for Kongo—priests in other regions of the African Atlantic clearly regarded the Christianity of some Kongolese as a thoroughly unacceptable expression of the faith. Notwithstanding the perception of Catholic clergy, the very exposure that some Kongolese had with the faith colored the manner in which they dealt with slavery and freedom in the Americas. The Stono rebels mobilized their exposure to Christianity as a means to restore their freedom, a practice that is inherently resistant. Of the Kongolese who dared to escape from Georgia and South Carolina to venture southward

to Spanish colonial Florida, surely some regarded themselves as devout Catholics. Still others may very well have seen in the invitation to freedom an opportunity to parlay their former exposure to Catholic precepts into a promise of manumission.

With Protestant power firmly entrenched in the Lowcountry, it is highly unlikely that a viable community of black Catholics would ever have developed in South Carolina or Georgia. While some fugitives made their way south to Spanish Florida to seek sanctuary with Catholics, the vast majority remained in the Lowcountry, casting their lot with the Anglicans who attempted, though at times only halfheartedly, to proselytize slaves. In this sense Lowcountry slaves, whether or not originally born in Kongo, whether or not Christian, had to make certain conciliations to Anglican missionaries.

Indeed, coincident with the flight of Lowcountry slaves southward toward Florida was another movement that also set its sights on the souls of South Carolina slaves. In 1738, one year before the Stono Rebellion, a singular religious zeal, embodied in the person of George Whitefield, captivated South Carolina. Whitefield, upon his arrival in South Carolina immediately criticized the brutality and violence of slavery and the slave trade and excoriated planters for their failure to adequately convert bondsmen. His theology ostensibly espoused the equality of all human souls, regardless of race. And indeed, the Great Awakening marked the first significant conversion of slaves to Christianity. Whitefield's theology of equality attracted slaves who, though relatively small in number, attended his revivals faithfully.

But Whitefield was no Moses, so rather than shepherding his flock away from slavery's chains, he acquiesced to the power of Pharaoh's slaveholding plantocracy, eventually becoming one of their number. Only five years after attacking southern slaveholders, Whitefield acquired a slave plantation in the mid-1740s. He remained an opponent of the slave trade, though he enjoyed its bounty, arguing that the trade "will be carried on whether we will [it] or not; I should think myself highly favored if I could purchase a good number of them."¹¹⁶

A generation later, slaves looked, once again, to the church as a possible guarantor of freedom. In the midst of revolutionary rhetoric regarding natural rights, some churches took bold stances against slavery. In 1784 a Methodist conference took up the issue of slavery and established the Emancipation Laws, requiring all members to emancipate their slaves and resolving that

slavery was “contrary to the laws of God, man, and nature—hurtful to society; contrary to the dictates of conscience and pure religion.”¹¹⁷ Baptists followed suit five years later, condemning slavery as a “violent deprivation of the rights of nature.”¹¹⁸ But the reactions of slaveholders were so swift and severe that Methodists suspended the Emancipation Laws just six months after they were initially adopted. Baptists again followed suit by distancing themselves from their earlier antislavery positions. Because evangelicals proved unwilling to adopt a firm antislavery stance, independent black churches took shape throughout the South and in the urban areas of the North as the eighteenth century drew to a close. In 1790 Andrew Bryan, a former slave who had converted during the Great Awakening, established the First African Baptist Church of Savannah, Georgia, the oldest independent black church in the country. It was not until the antebellum period, however, that slaves would be attracted to the Christian faith in large numbers.¹¹⁹

Antebellum Missionary Activities, 1831–1845

The increase in the number of enslaved Africans captured in and around Kongo’s several ports and arriving at points of disembarkation in the Americas between the last decade of the eighteenth century and the early decades of the nineteenth century coincided with increased Methodist and Baptist missionary efforts in the Lowcountry directed at the enslaved population.¹²⁰ During the first 150 years of slavery in the United States, only a small minority of slaves received any instruction in the Christian faith. The objections and indifference of slaveholders along with the paucity of missionaries served as serious obstacles to any sustained program for the religious instruction of slaves during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹²¹ As late as the 1840s, C. C. Jones, a prominent missionary and proponent of the religious instruction of slaves, lamented that “the systematic religious instruction [of the slaves] has never received in the churches, at any time, that general attention and effort which it demanded; and a people have consequently been left, in great numbers, in moral darkness, and destitution of the means of grace.”¹²²

Missionaries found themselves in the precarious position of attending to the religious instruction of slaves while assuaging planters’ fears that this instruction “be exhorted in a safe and salutary manner, *‘qui ne leur donnerait point d’idées.’*”¹²³ James Andrew, a Methodist missionary and

slaveholder from Georgia, acknowledged as much in 1831 before an audience of the South Carolina Agricultural Society when he maintained that “any attempt on the part of [missionaries], to pay anything like marked attention to the religious instruction of the slaves was met on the part of the owners [particularly those of the Lowcountry] by a decided refusal. . . . Not only did [the religious instruction of the slaves] hold out no inducements of honor or ease, but, in addition to its hardships and privations, it required so much prudence and delicacy of management, that most were afraid to enter upon it.”¹²⁴

In order to gain access to would-be slave converts, missionaries espoused a doctrine that pleased southern planters in its emphasis on slave obedience and temperance. Many southern planters opposed the religious instruction of slaves on the grounds that it was “the cloak assumed to cover the nefarious designs of insurrection.”¹²⁵ On one South Carolina plantation the religious instruction of slaves was “done [only] in the daytime and confined to that part of the Bible which shows the duties of servants and masters.”¹²⁶ Missionaries responded to planter demands for a theology of obedience and deference as evidenced by the 1852 publication of William Capers’s *Catechism for the Use of the Methodist Mission*, which emphasized the role and obligations of the dutiful servant: “Let as many servants as are under your yoke count their own masters worthy of all honor . . . and they that have believing masters, let them not despise them because they are brethren, but rather do them service because they are faithful and beloved.”¹²⁷ Slaveholder John Tucker of All Saint’s Parish, South Carolina, provided religious instruction to his slaves once every fortnight between the months of November and May and three times during the summer, each service consisting of a catechism emphasizing honesty, faithfulness, chastity, and discipline.¹²⁸

Many abolitionists vehemently opposed the missionaries’ emphasis on slave obedience. In 1829 David Walker highlighted the hypocrisy of many missionaries: “I have known pretended preachers of the gospel of my master, who not only held us as their natural inheritance, but treated us . . . as though they were intent only on taking our blood and groans to glorify the Lord . . . and told us that slaves must be obedient to their masters or be whipped. They chain us . . . and go into the house of God of justice to return him thanks for having aided them in their infernal cruelties.”¹²⁹

Abolitionists increasingly pressured slaveholders throughout the antebellum period and in 1836 and 1837 drafted petitions to Congress for the

abolition of slavery. Moreover, they distributed abolitionist literature widely throughout the slave South.¹³⁰ Under these conditions, slaveholders watched any movement that looked to the improvement of the slave—as in religious instruction—with great suspicion.¹³¹ In fact, the abolitionist movement revealed a striking ambiguity with respect to the religious instruction of slaves. On the one hand, abolitionist agitation provoked a clear reluctance on the part of planters to instruct slaves in the Christian faith for fear of potential rebellion.¹³² On the other hand, planters relied on the presumed religious instruction of slaves as the centerpiece in their arguments regarding slavery as a positive good.¹³³ Reverend William Barnwell, minister to slaves in Beaufort, South Carolina, wrote in 1831, “I have thought sometimes when surrounded by upwards of an [*sic*] hundred of them singing and praying together that I would be glad if some of my Northern Brethren could take a peep at us. Surely they would not revile me for keeping as bondsmen in the flesh, those who I am striving to make free in the Spirit.”¹³⁴ When in 1833 outbreaks of cholera reached Charleston, Reverend Barnwell’s attentions turned, at length, to the country’s enslaved population:

I assure you that in our neighborhood here, there is at present a far greater concern for the souls of the negroes, than for their value. And though should [*sic*] the Cholera be permitted by the Almighty to take off many of them, some persons amongst us would be reduced to poverty, yet I believe this would be nothing in their sight to the loss of their Negroes’ souls. . . . The true way of doing the Lord’s will respecting them is to labor for the conversion of their souls, for without this, they cannot be happy . . . not even if they exchange places with their Owners. . . . Those of us who are leading them into the Glorious liberty of the Sons of God . . . have powerful prejudices to overcome in the minds of those . . . [who are] disposed to associate Religious instruction of the blacks, with Insurrection. If therefore our Northern brethren would let us alone in this matter . . . they may be assured that Religion would prevail. . . . Otherwise they may provoke our legislatures to rash Enactments on the subject, and thus subject the Blacks to hardships and even more deplorable ignorance, and expose those of us here who are on the Lord’s side to persecution and odium.¹³⁵

Despite the pressures of abolitionists and the strictures of southern planters, South Carolina Methodists established in 1831 a special depart-

ment designed specifically to minister to the slave population.¹³⁶ Although some measure of religious instruction reached the slave population in the eighteenth century, due in large part to the work of George Whitefield and the Great Awakening, by 1830 only a very small percentage of slaves in the region attended church regularly or even heard a sermon.¹³⁷ Andrew Bryan admitted as much in 1831, when he wrote, “That the various denominations of Christians have done *something* we thankfully admit. But alas! *Much, very much* yet remains to be done. . . . The Negro, through whose sweat and labour we have derived this substance, has too often been suffered to languish in ignorance the most imbruted.”¹³⁸

After fifteen years of missionary work in the region, a symposium on the religious instruction of the slaves was held at Charleston in 1845, attended by ministers and planters from South Carolina and surrounding states.¹³⁹ In preparation for the meeting, conference organizers sent a pamphlet to planters requesting information regarding slave conversion, piety, and baptisms. The forty-four responses that they received for the May 13 conference served as the basis of discussion for the three-day meeting. While the published proceedings of the meeting proposed the utility of religious instruction to the slaves as a catalyst for slave obedience and deference, the report makes clear the persistent and imposing barriers to the religious instruction of the slaves. The prevailing perceptions of slave conversion based on the 1845 meeting at Charleston highlight the efforts made by some missionaries to instruct slaves, but a lack of widespread conversion of slaves to any of the main evangelical denominations.¹⁴⁰ Participants at the meeting noted the distance of many plantations from churches and the insufficiency of accommodation (were it practical to attend), the lack of missionaries devoted to the service, the general inability of slaves to understand the gospel, the exorbitant costs involved, and the poor state of religious devotion on the part of the planters themselves as impediments to the effective instruction of slaves.¹⁴¹ No less an authority than C. C. Jones observed that the “numbers of professors of religion, in proportion to the whole, is not large, that can present a correct view of the plan of salvation. . . . *True religion* they are inclined to place in *profession . . . and in excited states of feeling. And true conversion, in dreams, visions, trances, voices.*”¹⁴²

Notably, missionaries also pointed to the influence of the Catholic Church as a barrier to Protestant missionary efforts. That a significant number of African captives had prior experience with Catholicism was a point

not lost on several Protestant missionaries. South Carolina authorities and clergy expressed concern that the Catholics in Spanish Florida presented a real threat to the slave holding population by encouraging slaves to escape. An anonymous English reporter in South Carolina remarked in the mid-eighteenth century that “amongst the Negroe slaves there are a people brought from the Kingdom of Angola in Africa, many of these speak Portugueze [*sic*] . . . by reason that the Portugueze have considerable settlement, and the Jesuits have a mission and school in that Kingdom and many thousands of the Negroes there profess the Roman Catholic religion.”¹⁴³ In the mid-1830s Thomas Turpin, a prominent missionary who spread the gospel on several Sea Island plantations, maintained that although a third of the slaves under his charge were affiliated with the local Baptist church, Baptist preachers rarely visited the churches to which the slaves ostensibly belonged. As noted earlier, Turpin suggested that some Sea Island slaves had organized what appeared to him to be Roman Catholic societies.¹⁴⁴ C. C. Jones maintained that some slaves had “grown up in a Christian land and in the vicinity of the house of God, [and] have *heard* of Jesus Christ.”¹⁴⁵ During the antebellum period at least some of South Carolina’s slaves attended one of several Catholic churches in the coastal region. Both St. Mary’s as well as St. Finbar’s churches in Charleston, South Carolina, held mass regularly attended by slaves.¹⁴⁶

Massive numbers of Kongolese arrived in the Sea Island region during the final period of the legal slave trade and as many as 40 percent of slaves in the region were of Kongolese origin.¹⁴⁷ The persistence of “Roman Catholic principles” in the spiritual lives of coastal slaves suggests that some of the enslaved Africans in the Sea Islands continued to hold at least some appearance of a prior exposure to Catholicism in Kongo. The distinctions between the town-orientated Catholicism and the rural-based Christianity in Kongo continued to carry significant import for Kongolese captives in several areas of the New World. As noted earlier, Christian Oldendorp, the Moravian clergyman and poet who interviewed hundreds of West Indian slaves during the late eighteenth century, noted that Kongolese captives enslaved in the West Indies had, for the most part, a recognition of the true God and of Jesus Christ due to the role played by Portuguese and Italian missionaries in Kongo. Oldendorp qualified that statement further by acknowledging that the greatest evangelical success was achieved for those Kongolese who lived in urban areas, closest to the missionary establishment. Those who lived “far from them [the Portuguese] deep in the

inland had a religion that was a combination of Christian ceremonies and heathen superstition.”¹⁴⁸ Even the presence of Roman Catholic principles among some of Carolina’s slaves did not qualify them as valid Christians in the eyes of Protestant missionaries. Turpin, though noting the influence that Catholicism had on some Sea Island slaves, still characterized slave religion in the region as superstitious. “I observed,” he wrote, “having to contend with all this superstition and ignorance, together with their prejudice against Methodism, that I had added very few to the Church; and I had, moreover strived very little to do this, but rather strived to beat down their prejudices and to establish a better principle of religion among them.”¹⁴⁹

That some slaves resident in the Sea Islands had some previous experience with Catholicism through the work of missionaries in Kongo does not mean that Kongo slaves in Carolina were necessarily Christian upon arrival in the New World. But Catholicism and its attendant missionaries, churches, and schools had been a part of the Kongolesse body politic, social, and religious since the end of the fifteenth century. A certain familiarity with Christian dogma and doctrine would have emerged among Kongolesse of all classes—whether Christian or not—in the three centuries between the arrival of Christianity in Kongo and the end of the legal slave trade in the United States. While this familiarity would not, in itself, constitute conversion, the prior experience that some Lowcountry slaves had with Christianity shaped the manner in which they responded to Protestant missionaries. As noted above, the Kongolesse developed a vocabulary and language of ritual practice that enabled them to respond to Christianity on their own terms. Enslaved Africans carried this tradition of religious mediation and adaptation with them as they were dispersed throughout the African Atlantic, providing their contemporaries and progeny with the tools to negotiate the mandate of Christian conversion in the plantation Americas. The shift that some slaves made from a Catholic ritual milieu toward a Protestant one—though informed by a larger African Atlantic vocabulary of Christian conversion—would not have been simple or assumed. The differences between the two religious experiences, especially the differences between rituals of conversion in the two cases, must be addressed. But in both cases, either salt sacrament among Catholics in Kongo or total body immersion for Baptists in the Sea Islands, converts mediated the faith and its rituals to respond to the immediacy of their lives and the specificity of their own symbolic and cosmological constructions.

Slave Responses to Christianity

Although both the Methodist and Baptist denominations led the antebellum revival movement that gradually brought modest numbers of slaves into the Christian fold, by the dawn of the Civil War most Christian slaves had converted to the Baptist faith. Although the actual numbers of converted slaves remained small throughout the antebellum period, certain Christian rituals assumed great importance. In fact, “de biggest meetin’ house crowds was when dey had baptizing,’ and dat was right often,” one slave remarked. “Dey damned up de crick on Sadday so as it would be deep enough.”¹⁵⁰ Baptismals were social events and the community gathered to support them.

The Baptist denomination appealed to slaves for a variety of reasons. Baptists maintained an open organizational structure that allowed for mixed, though segregated, congregations, and they sanctioned independent black religious associations that operated outside the direct purview of the master class. Baptists facilitated the relationship between the missionary and would-be convert by allowing religious leaders from within the slave population to become exhorters of the faith. Moreover, Baptists emphasized the conversion experience over catechistic instruction, thus allowing for greater latitude in slave religious expression. Baptists also accepted, in greater measure than other denominations, enthusiastic and highly charged emotional expression of the faith, including the ring shout. All of these factors are generally agreed by scholars to be significant as regards the religious conversion of slaves to the Baptist denomination.¹⁵¹

Other theories, however, look to Africa in an attempt to explain the popularity of the Baptists among slaves. Noting the varied rituals of water immersion in Africa and the deep reverence for river priests on the continent, Melville Herskovits argued that slaves came to the Americas with strong traditions of water immersion rites that they transmuted onto Christian baptism in the New World.¹⁵² Certain Christian symbols, as in the river Jordan, for example, were symbolic representations of both an ostensibly Christian, yet deeply African spiritual meaning. The prevalence of the imagery of the river Jordan in the musical traditions of slaves further emphasized this connection. That is, the River Jordan reflected a multitude of African rituals of water immersion in the Americas.¹⁵³

Given the great significance of baptism rituals among Lowcountry slaves, it is certainly reasonable to assume—as do Herskovits and others—that

water immersion rites in Africa informed the Christian conversion experience of slaves in the plantation Americas. But these immersion rites would not have initially resonated with West-Central African captives, for whom salt was the *sine qua non* of Christian conversion. And yet West-Central Africans did gravitate toward Protestant baptismal rituals, a matter that likely reflects the results of the cultural and religious interactions that occurred between Africans of varied backgrounds, commencing on the slave ship during the Middle Passage and continuing on the plantations of the American South. That is to say that in their interactions with West Africans, West-Central African captives may very well have applied spiritual meaning to baptismal waters. They would certainly be predisposed to do so, as water baptism conformed perfectly with the cycles of death-burial-resurrection featured in *nganga* ritualism as reflected, for example, in the life of Dona Beatriz. In effect, water baptism as mediated by West Africans served as the mechanism through which West-Central Africans transferred their beliefs across the Atlantic.

This highlights a view of slave culture as a composite, the product of separate elements that, through interaction and exchange, produce slave cultural practices. Far from being either indecipherable or individually soluble, these cultural elements reflect the particular and ongoing relationships that existed between enslaved Africans of varied origins. In this view not only West-Central Africans but also West Africans contributed the necessary memories and materials for the transposition of African water rites to Christian baptism.

Where Herskovits's treatment generalized African ritual experiences, more recently, scholars have investigated the specific relationships between African rituals and slave conversion. Margaret Washington, for example, links slave conversion in the Lowcountry with initiation rituals found among Africans of varied ethnicities throughout West Africa's Windward Coast, including Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Senegambia. In particular, Washington focuses on the role that secret societies played as the primary organizing units for a multitude of social, cultural, religious, and governmental enterprises. Operating much like their Western analogues, as in social organizations, political parties, and federal agencies, these societies managed diplomatic affairs, established generally recognized standards of behavior, provided education for youth, and acted as agencies of socialization.¹⁵⁴

Washington's treatment of initiation societies in Sierra Leone, including the Sande for women and the Poro for men, reveals a ubiquitous so-

cial and political institution that operated throughout precolonial Sierra Leone and Senegambia. Washington argues that some “adaptive concepts of community (and aspects of spirituality) inherited from secret societies fused with Gullah interpretations of Christianity, becoming part of the folk religion in the slave quarters.”¹⁵⁵ In particular, the initiation into Poro and Sande was regarded as a spiritual death and rebirth that culminated in dramatic displays and celebrations much on the order of slave baptismal rituals. Moreover, the leaders of these societies were responsible for the temporal as well as the spiritual well being of the societies’ members, serving as the primary mediators between this world and the otherworld. According to Washington, these leaders performed a role similar to that of the Gullah elders—spiritual and religious leaders chosen from among the slave community as guides and interpreters of Christianity. In both cases, the leaders served as spiritual ushers, shepherding their followers from a state of symbolic death toward spiritual rebirth and reintegration into the larger community. For enslaved Africans, this reintegration was symbolized in the conversion experience and the baptismal ritual.

Washington argues moreover that the stamp of West African secret societies can be discerned at each stage of the Christian conversion ritual. Indeed, in the slave South, the black faithful organized themselves into “black societies” resembling the Poro and Sande initiation societies of Sierra Leone. These black societies were, like their African counterparts, “units of organization that regulated conduct and served to integrate individuals into the plantation community.” Within those societies, “Gullahs practiced their own version of Christianity, and created their religious folk-culture.”¹⁵⁶

Notably, initiation societies were common not only in Sierra Leone but also in various parts of West and West-Central Africa. In Kongo, for example, Kimpasi societies constituted one of the most important ritual and religious institutions in the country. Kimpasi groups comprised a loose federation of acephalic, though closely related, societies located throughout the country. Based in uninhabited areas, especially densely wooded or secluded regions, Kimpasi societies were situated around large open enclosures hidden by trees, logs, and thorny underbrush. Members of these societies concerned themselves principally with alleviating societal suffering and hardship and thereby invested its initiates with the regenerative healing and protective powers of the otherworld.¹⁵⁷

Dona Beatriz’s initiation into a Kimpasi society sheds light on several of the central themes treated in this chapter. At her initiation, Beatriz was

brought to the Kimpasi enclosure and, through a series of rituals, fell into a symbolic death characterized by a deep catatonia. She was then brought to the initiation altar, which included a large earthen mound in the middle of which stood a large wooden cross, symbolizing, at one and the same time, Christianity and the junction of this world and the next world common throughout kiKongo-speaking regions. On either side of the cross lay other ecclesiastical goods, including censers and aspirators. In addition, several *kitekes*—human shaped sculptures ritually invested with the power to seek out malfeasance, jealousy, and greed—guarded the altar. Other items, such as the claws of a predator meant to “capture” wrongdoers, served metonymically to heighten the sense of ritual potency. Once inside the enclosure, Beatriz was ceremonially revived, though, after her ritual foray into the land of the dead, she returned possessed of a new, otherworldly soul. In the subsequent weeks and months, she, like other new initiates, met secretly at the Kimpasi enclosure and learned a new language that symbolized her passage. Novitiates into the society also enjoyed exemption from several taboos and social restrictions that applied to other people.¹⁵⁸

Because of their newly earned powers, Kimpasi initiates were both revered and feared by others in the community and Catholic clergy roundly denounced them. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, Kimpasi societies actively opposed the theology of Catholic priests (Dona Beatriz being a prime example). One Capuchin described Kimpasi as “an extremely secret and redoubtable society; more redoubtable even than the Ministers of the Holy Inquisition are amongst us. . . . No chief, however great, has power over them. They are convinced that if they mark their opposition to them they will die from magical influences.”¹⁵⁹

In all likelihood, the social and ritual organization and operation of African initiation societies from various West and West-Central African societies played crucial roles in the subsequent development of slave culture and society in the New World. If, as is true, Washington’s treatment of West African secret societies along the Windward Coast illuminates slave ritual practice in the Lowcountry, then the same is true all the more of enslaved Kongolese, who enjoyed both a demographic majority in the region and whose initiation societies had already been engaged in a century’s long conflict with Christian theology in West-Central Africa. The response of enslaved Africans to the mandate of Protestant conversion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries merely reflects a continuation of this transatlantic interaction.

That the following discussion focuses on the relationship between slave Christianity and Kongo ritual practice does not discount the crucial role that Africans from other regions played. Indeed, Washington's central contention—that West African secret societies affected the manner and course of religious conversion and cultural formation in the Lowcountry—is convincing, shedding light on both the long arm of Africa in the cultural formation of blacks enslaved in the New World and the great adaptability and versatility of slaves, who so elegantly managed and manipulated certain cultural elements in a new ritual and social context. Her conclusions run parallel to my own formulations.

Significant numbers of enslaved Kongolese developed strong tendencies toward the Baptist faith. Even where rituals of water immersion in Kongo (performed after the Catholic fashion, without total body immersion) and Christian baptism in the slave South differed quite markedly, certain cosmological and symbolic notions, first developed in Kongo, made slaves more amenable to Christian conversion. Even absent the formal similarities between African water immersion rituals and Christian baptism, certain theoretical and symbolic connections persisted.¹⁶⁰ This informs studies of cultural continuity between Africa and the Americas by demonstrating that these links need not be identified solely in the formal affinities that connect ritual practices in two locales but might also be the offspring of intellectual processes. Moreover, this draws our attention, once again, to the discussion first raised in chapter 1 regarding tradition. Enslaved Africans not only received a cultural and religious inheritance from Africa but also actively engaged in the process of putting Africa to use in their own lives.

Slave conversion and Christian baptism for the slaves of coastal South Carolina and Georgia reveal the very conscious and deliberate efforts made by captive Africans and their descendants to maintain and transmit meaning for themselves even in a context of violence and coercion. Christianity in the Sea Islands was refracted through the lens of slaves' own memories of Africa and the immediacy of their condition as bondspersons on the plantation. At least one scholar suggests that "there is very little mention of the cardinal dogmas of the church. . . . The antebellum Negro was not converted to God. He converted god to himself."¹⁶¹ Writing of her own experience as a missionary and teacher in the Sea Islands in 1865, Mary Ames was surprised to find "they [slaves] know so little of the life Christ; not knowing even of his birth."¹⁶² Other observers noted that many slaves

“almost completely reconstructed the most important events of the Bible,” chronicling them in such a way as to defy imitation.¹⁶³

As a ritual of community import, the conversion experience in the slave South took on a rather formalized pattern, generally acknowledged by the community as valid.¹⁶⁴ The following example is typical:

I was chopping in the field. I began to feel faint and sick. It seemed that I was going to die. . . . I fell to the ground and said, “goodbye and farewell; I am going to die.” . . . The next thing I knew I was in a helpless condition. My body lay on the brink of a great and dark pit. . . . I realized my helplessness and surrendered. . . . I didn’t see anything but myself and the other white images like me. . . . It seemed as if a great burden were lifted from me, and my soul took a leap and left the old body. . . . My soul took the air, and having wings like a bird I flew away into a world of light with thousands of other images like myself.¹⁶⁵

The conversion began with a life-threatening fever or illness. But this affliction was no mere physical ailment, it was a sin sickness, a malaise of the soul.¹⁶⁶ So serious were its symptoms that the convert felt herself in the presence of Death. Soon after, she was released from her body to view the shell of the woman she once was. Now released from the burdens of the body, the convert was transported to the fires of hell, witnessed its flames, knowing it full well to be the final resting place for those whose lives continued on the path of sin. And then, as if by miracle, God delivered the poor sinner, snatching her from the bowels of hell to be transported into the bosom of heaven: “The darkest hour of the night is just before the break of day. The darkest hours of my life as a slave came just before freedom, and in the same way, in my trials with sin, when everything seemed lost I was delivered.”¹⁶⁷

New converts saw heaven, Jesus, the angels, and even themselves as symbolically white, a feature peculiar to the conversion experiences of former slaves. Black converts often had visions during and after the baptism of being carried on a white chariot or a white horse to the glowing heavens and God. One convert remembers, “I saw myself a little body, pure white.”¹⁶⁸ During these visions, converts saw also God and Jesus as white as well as the walls of the Heavenly City, the robes of the angels, and the Holy Mother.¹⁶⁹

In the Lowcountry, slaves understood the baptismal waters to be a bound-

ary between this world and the next that could be crossed at the moment of baptism. When one resident of the Georgia coastal region was baptized, she came up smiling: “Oh Jedus . . . uh see Gawd onduhneet’ de water! Uh fin’ me Gawd. ’E look ‘puntope me!”¹⁷⁰ This revelation corresponds with the notion that true religion can only be found in the underwater spaces, the murky swamps or in any number of otherworldly places. So one spiritual encourages would-be converts to search the darkened and hidden away corners for true religion:

O where d’ye tink I fin’ ’em?
I fin’ ’em, Lord, in de graveyard.
I fin’ ’em in de boggy mire.¹⁷¹

The perception of water as a spiritual boundary was not merely metaphoric or symbolic. Instead, the black faithful experienced it as real, such that God and other spiritual beings could be seen under the water’s murky surface. Edmund Ruffin suggested as much when, on an agricultural survey in South Carolina in 1843, he came across a series of natural springs and fountains the local blacks deemed inhabited by special water spirits. These Cymbee spirits resembled sprites or nymphs and lived below the surface of certain springs, lakes, or fountains. One elderly South Carolina slave described the Cymbee that he had seen as a boy: “She was seated on a plank which was laid across the water, & . . . the long brown hair of her head hung down so low, & so covered her face & whole body & limbs” that no other feature of her visage could be seen.¹⁷² Ruffin reported that though descriptions of the Cymbee are few in number, “they are nevertheless believed by the negroes to be frequent & numerous.”¹⁷³

The springs and fountains in which the Cymbee spirits lived commonly disappeared entirely only to reappear in a nearby locale. For this, Ruffin offered an explanation: “As mentioned previously in regard to *matters of fact* of these fountains . . . , and which facts are in strict accordance with the cavernous foundation which I suppose, these fountains sometimes suddenly disappear entirely, & in other places, new springs burst out.”¹⁷⁴ Blacks explained these phenomena differently, arguing that the disappearance of a spring denoted that the Cymbee “has died, or has been offended & abandoned her residence.” So when one plantation owner enclosed his spring “with masonry & raised & confined its water, an old half breed Indian of the neighborhood, who was half negro in blood, & wholly in

habits & superstition, remonstrated with him, upon the ground that the cymbee might be made angry & leave her haunt, & that then the spring would be dried.”¹⁷⁵

Ruffin’s Cymbee correlates with the Simbi water spirits mentioned earlier, emphasizing the close similarities between notions of the spiritual powers of water in both Kongo and the Lowcountry. That some of the slaves drew not only on their African heritage but also on Indian spiritual beliefs suggests the role that cultural interaction played in the creation of slave culture, a point to which Ruffin makes reference, noting that “in Indian folklore dwarves, water babies, and old women variously inhabit springs and other wet places.”¹⁷⁶

Water acted as both barrier and passage connecting two opposing yet complimentary realms.¹⁷⁷ Indeed, one South Carolina folktale reminds the Christian faithful that if you want to find Jesus, you have to go down below: “Yes, Buddy, dat is de way I fine him I went down below.”¹⁷⁸ The newly converted dies so as to enter a new world: “I knew at that time that I was in another world, and I knew that I had left my earthly body behind.”¹⁷⁹ Slaves did not necessarily perceive death as a negative. Rather, some thought of it as a relief from the drudgeries of slave life, an avenue toward freedom:

See the Christian lyin on his deathbed,
An’ a death come a-steppin in;
You heah dat Christian say to death,
O death, you are welcome.¹⁸⁰

Elizabeth Roberts recalls of a baptism she witnessed, “One by one he dip em in duh watuh an dey is buried in baptism.”¹⁸¹ The connections between baptism and death are highlighted also by the practice in Kongo of burying men “in the marshy bank of a river . . . and then allowing the waters to flood the site,” which had been dammed for the purpose of creating a watery grave.¹⁸² In the Lowcountry, blacks further cemented the notion of baptism as a symbolic death by carefully preserving the long white robes worn during the ritual “to serve as their [burial] shrouds one day.”¹⁸³ The image of death and rebirth in river baptisms coincides with the practice of denying church membership to anyone who had not first died and been reborn. In regarding baptism as but a spiritual death, slaves looked to the Bible: “We are buried with Him [Christ] by Baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so

we also should walk in the newness of life; except a man be born of water and the spirit he cannot enter the Kingdom of God.”¹⁸⁴ During her baptism, Easter Lockhart of South Carolina “seemed to walk real light. . . . [She] looked down and [her] gown was floating on top the water.” She knew full well that the ritual conferred upon her a new life, that the “Lord done reached down from Heaven and created a new soul.”¹⁸⁵

Taken together, then, several cultural elements largely explain the attraction of West-Central Africans to Protestantism. A centuries-long experience with the mandate of Christian conversion by Catholic missionaries in Kongo and its environs prepared much of the groundwork for eventual conversion. But Kongoleses captives held in the slave South had yet to overcome the largest obstacle to their large-scale conversion, namely, the transition from regarding baptism as principally a ritual of salt protection toward a belief in the spiritual capacities of water. This task was likely aided not only by their own experience with death and rebirth as embodied in Kongoleses *nganga* but also by their own conceptions of Simbi/Cymbee spirits. Crucial also were the cultural interactions between West-Central Africans and West Africans, whose rituals of total water immersion served as the basis for the spread of new ideas about the spiritual uses of water. This interaction led ultimately to a notion of baptism as a ritual of death and rebirth in which water signified the line of demarcation between the realm of the living and that of the dead.

In addition to these factors, one recognizes also a set of striking affinities that attend slave conversion experiences with those of Dona Beatriz mentioned earlier. In both instances one notes the oncoming of a great distress. For Beatriz this stress resulted in a morbid fever; and in fact, only after Dona Beatriz found herself “at the moment of death, in agony” did Saint Anthony finally descend to enter the spirit and heal her afflicted body. Lowcountry slaves understood this as a sin sickness, attended by the very real knowledge that the punishments of hell are real. In both instances one notes the transmigration of the soul and an acknowledgment of the body as a vessel, a mere shell within which inhabits the substance of the soul. A return to health follows, and with it the burdens of a new insight, a new understanding of life and its consequences, in effect, a conversion of the spirit from one realm of being to another.

This is not to say that the conversion experiences of slaves harkened back simply onto the possession ordeal exhibited by Dona Beatriz. Antebellum slaves did not simply replicate a ritual practice that appeared in Kongo

nearly one and a half centuries earlier. Instead, Lowcountry slaves drew on the cultural and spiritual vocabularies of faith and conversion that spread throughout the African Atlantic during the era of slavery and the slave trade. One must not understand the experiences of Dona Beatriz, or of antebellum slaves, for that matter, as individualized, as localized in the body of the convert. In fact, individual spiritual expressions indicate much larger spiritual understandings and reflect the cultural and social milieu that conspire to support, produce, and interpret them. Thus Dona Beatriz as prophet is less an anomaly—some oddity to be studied in its peculiarity—than an embodiment of early-eighteenth-century Kongolese notions of life, death, conversion, and prophethood. So, too, the rather formalized conversion experiences of slaves in the Lowcountry region comprise the elaboration of certain theories of ritual experiences and understandings. The similarities between Kongolese spiritual experience and New World slave conversion suggest a certain connection between the peoples involved or, as I am arguing, a certain vocabulary of ritual expression that existed in varied African Atlantic sites throughout the period of slavery and the slave trade.

This vocabulary of ritual expression could be found, for example, in Brazil, where in 1666, Dionigio de Carli, an Italian Capuchin missionary came across “a black woman, who kneeled, beat her breast, and clapt [*sic*] her hands upon the ground.” De Carli inquired as to “what the good woman meant by all those motions with her hands; and a Portuguese answered . . . ‘Father, the meaning of it is, that she is of the kingdom of Congo, and was baptized by a Capuchin; and being informed you are going thither to baptize, she rejoices, and expresses her joy by those outward tokens.’”¹⁸⁶ Notwithstanding the deep devotion displayed by that woman, Catholic priests in Brazil encountered much the same frustration as their colleagues in Kongo, noting the paucity of priests in the country along with a significant language barrier between clergy and would-be converts. One Brazilian priest expressed sentiments that echoed around the African Atlantic:

Even if they were baptized in Angola . . . rarely or never does one find that one knows what he received in the baptism and to what he is obligated to God, and they are totally ignorant of everything that pertains to the substance of the mysteries of Our Holy Faith; and thus with this blindness they persevere after coming from Angola among the Christians, and in the face of the Church for a space of many years, after being 4,

5, and 6 years in the house of their masters, without knowing what is necessary for them for their salvation.¹⁸⁷

Much like missionaries in other American locales, Brazilian priests found irksome self-professed Christian slaves who continued to engage in divination, conjure, witchcraft, and ritual medicine. Slaves of West-Central African provenance presented Brazilian priests with special challenges, principally because many of them regarded themselves as Christian, though their practice stood in direct opposition to crucial aspects of Catholic liturgy. Some priests in Brazil expressed great irritation because they were obliged to correct what they regarded as a multitude of errors and misconceptions, “principally in the Angolan slaves in which predominated, in some, so much ignorance that they did not have anything more than the name of Christians.”¹⁸⁸

In other regions as well Kongoleses slaves continued to assert their own independent vision and interpretation of Christianity. Catholic priests in Saint-Domingue (Haiti) noted that enslaved Africans from Kongo were familiar with Christianity, though they continued to indulge in so-called heathen practice. At least one missionary in Saint-Domingue, Father Moreau de Saint-Méry, acknowledged that there were many Congos who had some idea of Catholicism, though their religion was very much mixed with various idolatries and reflected a “monstrous assemblage” of Christianity and paganism.¹⁸⁹ In Venezuela, black Christians, if not the Vatican, canonized San Juan Congo, a public hero, whose image “combines the colour and wavy hair of the mulatto with the semi-erect phallus of many Kongo *nkisi* figures (ritual objects).”¹⁹⁰ Monica Schuler recorded hymns in Jamaica directed to the power and presence of *nzambi a mpungu*.¹⁹¹ Writing in the late nineteenth century, L. Crookall, a Protestant missionary in British Guiana, recounted his confusion at being addressed by a deferent Christian by the title “Gorgonzambe.” Upon inquiring into the meaning of that title, a local resident replied, “In Africa de medicine man am de doctah for a’ we body, but you am de doctah for a’ we soul; and de African name for de minister am Gorgonzambe [*Nganga a Nzambi*], which mean God-doctor. When de soul am sick you mus’ gib us medicine.” To this, Crookall pointed the patient “to the Great Physician, who alone can heal the maladies of the soul.”¹⁹²

In the Lowcountry, slaves mediated the Christian faith and its meanings not only in conversion and baptism but also in the very symbols of the faith. For example, Sterling Stuckey argues that the prevalence of the

cross in the baptismal ritual “recall[ed] Bakongo religious mythology.”¹⁹³ Building on the work of Robert Farris Thompson, Stuckey argues that the cross represented specific Kongolese notions of life, death, and rebirth.¹⁹⁴ For Stuckey, “Christianity provided a protective exterior beneath which more complex, less familiar (to outsiders) religious principles and practices were operative.” Stuckey argues further that some of those aspects of Christian practice deemed peculiar to slaves were actually “outward manifestations of deeper African religious concerns.”¹⁹⁵ In this sense, enslaved Africans knew what members of the master class did not know, namely, that their veneration of the cross was not Christian but African in nature. Stuckey’s position raises the thorny question of cultural and religious authenticity. To regard slaves’ engagement with baptism primarily as a protective cloak for African ritual is to forestall the possibility that some, even if only few in number, engaged in the ritual as veritable Christians. To be sure, Stuckey is correct to suggest that Christian missionaries, not to mention most slaveholders, exerted only little effort toward proselytizing slaves. In light of the small numbers of enslaved Christians on the plantation, the communal acknowledgment and popularity of baptisms suggests that other meanings and interpretations were at work. Water baptism, as Michael Gomez suggests, “allowed for varying religious perspectives to engage in the ceremony simultaneously.”¹⁹⁶ In all likelihood, African interpretations of the ritual predominated until well into the antebellum period.

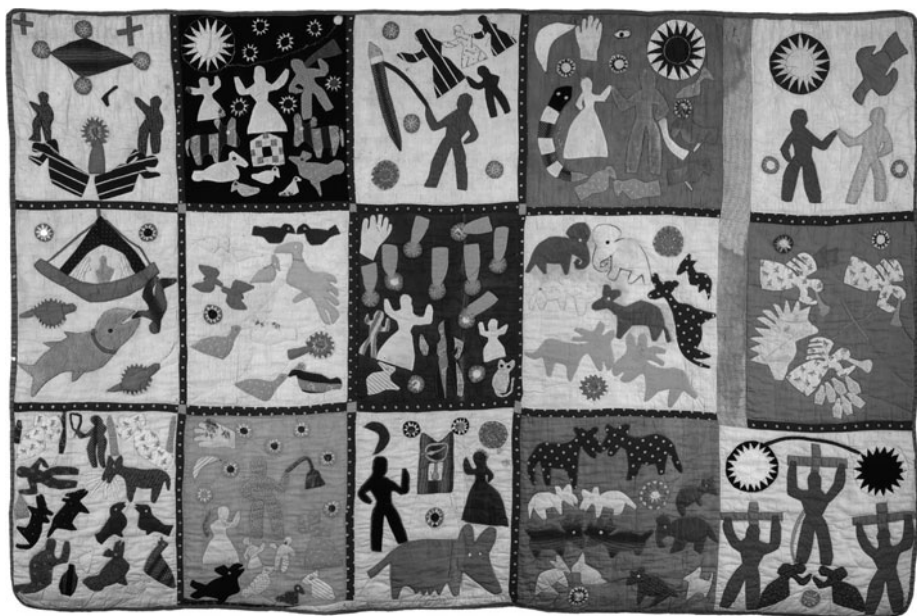
My own view, though not radically different from that espoused by Stuckey and others, is that the cross likely stood as a symbol of dual significance from which participants could draw a variety of meanings, both Christian and non-Christian. This certainly seems to have been the case in Kongo, where the cross was mobilized by various people in different ways. If members of the Kongo elite adopted Christianity and the cross as a politico-religious tool to enhance their power over potential religious and political competitors, then Dona Beatriz saw the same icon as merely another “idol,” subject to eradication. Africans of Kongolese descent, even if they did not think of themselves as Christian, would likely recall the varied uses to which the cross had been put in Kongo in both Christian and non-Christian arenas. In this way, the cross carried simultaneous if also alternate meanings for the black faithful whether inside or outside a context of Christian worship. Its presence could act as both an invocation of Christianity and a marker that symbolized the junction of this world and the next. In areas where slave populations of Kongo descent were largely

represented—as in Charleston, Savannah, or cloistered within Sea Island communities—these multiple understandings would have been readily recognized and likely shared with slaves from other regions of Africa.¹⁹⁷

Archaeologist Leland Ferguson has analyzed bowls made by slaves in South Carolina that were decorated with cross-marked cosmograms. The bowls were found under water, suggesting ritual submersion or baptism, and were inscribed with counterclockwise arrows at the end of the cross marks, indicating probable resonances not only with the Kongo cosmogram but also with the counterclockwise movements of slaves during the ring shout.¹⁹⁸ The bowls are part of a much larger network throughout the African Atlantic religious complex, linking the emblazoned cross seen by Afonso in the sixteenth century and the crosses burned as fetishes by Dona Beatriz. Crosses carried multiple interpretations and may be interpreted variously, signifying at one and the same time Kongolesse notions of the cycles of life and death, the ring shout, and Christianity.

The quilts of Harriet Powers, an artist born into slavery in Georgia and renowned for her appliquéd Bible textiles, contain multivalent symbols, including Kongo cross motifs, situated within otherwise Christian contexts, highlighted by the depiction of Jesus' crucifixion in the lower right panel (fig. 1). The small sun, located directly below Jesus, suggests the continued counterclockwise movement of the sun and rests at "high noon" for the underworld. This high noon positioning implies Jesus' transition into the otherworld and reflects his eventual rebirth (resurrection), a notion consistent not only with Kongo cosmology but also with slaves' notion of baptism as a movement from a worldly life to spiritual death and rebirth. Powers renders the relationship of mirrored opposition and movement between this world and the next, so central to Kongo cosmology, through the two sets of mirrored bodies, figured around a central sun in the upper left panel. These mirrored bodies, and indeed many of the bodies figured on the quilt are set with one arm akimbo, the other raised in the air, a gestural posture that acts as the physical embodiment of the crossroads marking the junction between the land of the living and that of the dead.¹⁹⁹ In the quilt, the Kongo cosmogram and the cross appear side by side in the upper left panel, suggesting the multiplicity of potential understandings. The cross in this instance belies simple interpretation and stands as neither a strictly Christian symbol nor a mere replica of a Kongo cosmogram.²⁰⁰

The cross represented a variously marked point where different geographies, iconographies, and belief systems merged: the Kongo with the Americas,



Pictorial quilt by Harriet Powers

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Bequest of Maxim Karolik. Photograph © 2007 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

the Christian with the non-Christian, this world with the other world. We can think of the cross, then, as a graphic emblem of African Atlantic religiosity that remained amenable to interpretation and reinterpretation for the faithful.²⁰¹ The invocation of the baptismal at the water's edge coincided with Kongolesse notions of the otherworld, of spiritual cleansing, and rebirth.

A baptism required careful planning so as to correspond to optimal conditions. The faithful might have to “wait till a Sunday wen a ebb tide come at a good time.”²⁰² Liza Basden of Harris Neck remembered that “they always hole em [baptisms] on the ebb tide; that’s so the sins be washed away.”²⁰³ Rosa Sallins, also of Harris Neck, maintained that “we alluz baptize on duh ebb tide [because] duh watuh washes duh sin away.”²⁰⁴ Slaves outside of Harris Neck also adhered to the same practice. On Possum Point “dey alluz baptize on duh ebb tide cuz duh ribbuh is spose tuh wash duh sins away.”²⁰⁵ When Samuel Lawton conducted research on the religious lives of Lowcountry blacks in 1939, he found the practice still prevalent: “Dey baptizes de candidate in de outgoin’ tide so de tide kin carry de sins on

out to de deeps ob de sea. Effen you baptize in de incoming tide, de water will wash de sins right back up on 'em."²⁰⁶ In effect, the spiritual power of water washes sins away, even absent the name of Jesus.

While the condition of the tide might affect the date and time of a baptismal, adverse weather conditions were not likely to cause a rescheduling of the ritual. In *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* Newbell Niles Puckett notes that "no matter how bitter the weather may be when a person is baptized he can never catch cold."²⁰⁷ God so protected the convert that they "ain mine gittin wet in duh ribbuh."²⁰⁸ Writing in *Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands*, Lydia Parrish, upon observing a river baptism, notes similarly that "although the water was bitterly cold, the young people behaved very well, and only one squealed a little—which was considered very bad form." The faithful knew full well that they and the officiating minister "ran no small risk of catching cold, but to this penance they most cheerfully submit[ted]."²⁰⁹ If you did not come up like a lamb, the congregation suspected that your conversion had not been authentic and the baptism needed to be performed again.²¹⁰ Perhaps the black faithful drew on an old Negro spiritual to help them withstand the cold:

Chilly water, chilly water
Hallelujah to that Lamb.
I know that water is chilly and cold,
Hallelujah to that Lamb.
But I have Jesus in my soul,
Hallelujah to that Lamb.
Satan's just like a snake in the grass
Hallelujah to that Lamb.
He's watching for to bite you as you pass
Hallelujah to that Lamb.²¹¹

Because baptism transformed the soul, the material conditions of the water were irrelevant. In fact, converts might think of the freezing water of a baptism as a test of sorts, for if the soul was pure, the water would do the convert no harm. So goes the spiritual, sung frequently at baptisms:

Sister, if your heart is warm
snow and ice will do you no harm. . . .
You must mind how you step on the cross
your foot might slip and your soul get lost.²¹²

The cooling of the body had other resonant meanings for slaves. In spirituals related to death and dying, slaves commented on the cooling of the body and the subsequent onset of the afterlife: “When-a my blood runs chilly an’ col’, Ize got to go, ize got to go, ize got to go.”²¹³ Slaves along the coastal region of Georgia and South Carolina observed a spiritual reverence for the water that rinses the sins away and prepares the convert for a new life. Acknowledging this power, the preacher often made a prayer in its honor: “Duh preacher he make a great prayuh tuh duh ribbuh.”²¹⁴ Though traditional Christian figures and symbols were not completely absent, the preacher and the congregation that accompanied him exhibited a parallel reverence for the river such that “fo heah baptize each ub um, he say a prayuh tuh duh ribbuh an ax fuh all duh sins tuh be wash away.”²¹⁵

The baptismal ritual in the slave South operated as a complex and variously marked ritual. These multiple understandings would have been both implicit and explicit. This layering of meaning upon meaning would have been both spoken and unspoken to the various participants and onlookers at the baptismal ritual such that any given member of the congregation would have variable access to the ritual. We need not contend that each and every participant was fully aware of the resonances between slave baptismal and Kongolese rituals. Certainly, some were fully aware of the signs and symbols. Others, however, may not have recognized the conjunction of the cross as a symbol, both Christian and non-Christian, or the relationship between river baptism and the Kongolese conception of a watery otherworld.²¹⁶ Cultural resonance between different Atlantic locales, as in Kongo and the Lowcountry, was held in the ritual’s symbolism (the living water, the cross) and not necessarily in the body of each and every adherent. In the baptismal itself one finds all of the signs, symbols, and allusions that connected it with Christian sacrament and with other (and for our purposes here, Kongolese) notions of spirit and cosmos. We are suggesting here a notion of culture that is collective, a social dynamic that is, at any given point, larger than the individuals who come together to create it.

The revelatory experience of southern slaves—the experience of soul sickness, death, travels through a fiery hell followed by heavenly redemption, and a return to earthly realms—relates to the revelatory experiences of Christians in Kongo. A specific historical trajectory linked Christian conversion in Kongo with that experienced in the slave South. The conversions of Lowcountry Sea Island slaves connect historically, conceptually,

and cosmologically to those cavalrymen and that white cross emblazoned in the sky that marked Afonso's conversion, to Dona Beatriz's travels through death, heaven, rebirth, and takula wood, and through an African Atlantic ritual vocabulary of revelation, iconography, death, and rebirth.

Trance and Spiritual Ecstasy

As a ritual of corporate importance, slave baptism reveals slave agency and resistance in the antebellum period. In response to a planter-sponsored theology that demanded duty, compliance, and restraint, slaves developed a theology that highlighted free will and the improvisation of the slave body. Some slaves noted, "When white folks go to meetin', they never crack a smile, but when colored folks in church, you'll hear um laugh er mile."²¹⁷ The slaveholder, under the aegis of drivers and overseers, compelled the slave body to conform to a set labor regime and ignore daily abuses and oppressions. But the same may not be said of the praise-house meeting or the baptismal rite in which slaves laid bare the pains of this world in ritual prayer, trance, song, and dance.

Margaret Washington detailed the critical role that praise houses played in the development of black religious societies in the antebellum South.²¹⁸ First built in the slave South during the antebellum years as mechanisms of social control, these modest structures were erected by planters determined to proscribe the mobility of bondsmen by depriving slaves from different plantations the opportunity of gathering and worshiping together. In theory, the proscription of slave mobility ensured an obedient slave population, more easily monitored and controlled. In practice, the praise house became the center of the slaves' religious life, and one of the primary locales for ritual practice and ecstasy. Slaves assembled at the praise house on several nights throughout the week and on Sunday afternoon to worship. Song and dance accompanied prayer as the faithful formed a circle, performing the ring shout.²¹⁹ The manner of worship in the praise house often struck deep emotional chords in the hearts of observers. So Charlotte Forten offers a portrait of slave ritual practice rendered in shadow and light:

The large, gloomy room, with its blackened walls,—the wild, whirling dance of the shouters,—the crowd of dark, eager faces gathered around,—the figure of the old blind man, whose excitement could hardly be controlled, and whose attitude and gestures while singing were very

fine,—and over all, the red glare of burning pine-knot, which shed a circle of light around it, but only seemed to deepen and darken the shadows in the other parts of the room,—these all formed a wild, strange, and deeply impressive picture, not soon to be forgotten.²²⁰

Even when slaves were constrained to attend church services under the watchful eye of members of the master class, they continued to attach their primary religious loyalties to the praise-house congregation. Indeed, slaves remained critical of the hypocrisy they saw in the Christianity of slaveholding whites. Perhaps Frederick Douglass articulated this hypocrisy best. Writing in *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, the author expressed concern that, in view of his critical statements about Christianity, readers might question his faith. To clarify his position, Douglass set himself the task of differentiating the Christianity of Christ from that of the slaveholder:

Between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. . . . We have men-stealers for ministers, women-whippers for missionaries, and cradle-plunderers for church members. The man who wields the blood-clotted cow skin during the week fills the pulpit on Sunday, and claims to be a minister of the meek and lowly Jesus. . . . He who sells my sister, for purposes of prostitution, stands forth as the pious advocate of purity. . . . We have men sold to build churches, women sold to support the gospel, and babes sold to purchase Bibles for the *poor heathen!* *All for the glory of God and the good of souls!* . . . The dealer gives his blood-stained gold to support the pulpit, and the pulpit, in return, covers his infernal business with the garb of Christianity. Here we have religion and robbery the allies of each other—devils dressed in angels' robes, and hell presenting the semblance of paradise.²²¹

Douglass, and no doubt many of his comrades similarly bound under the threat of the lash, saw too much hypocrisy in the religion of the master class and readily acknowledged that the Christianity of the master was not the Christianity of the slave. Instead, the religion of slaves, hidden away under the cover of darkness or amid wooded areas, was a self-contained ritual practice. The spirit moved in the praise house, where slaves knew and

felt God in very personal ways, as a seeing, listening God. While whites laid their primary religious loyalties with the church, slaves experienced religion in the praise house. Indeed, the slave faithful had first to obtain permission from the praise-house congregation before petitioning the master and the church for official membership.²²²

Much like the hidden enclosures of Kimpasi rituals, praise houses were deeply recessed in wooded areas or otherwise nestled in swampy nether spaces, often overlooking slave cemeteries that stood as a constant reminder of the imminence of death, the close proximity of the grave. To be sure, there were practical reasons for slaves' preference for worship in wooded areas. The seclusion of the praise house offered a measure of autonomy and a moment's reprieve from the purview of the master class. On the close relationship between the praise house and the cemetery, Harriet Jacobs, a fugitive slave, wrote:

His grave was marked by a small wooden board, bearing his name, the letters of which were nearly obliterated. I knelt down and . . . poured forth a prayer to God for guidance and support in the perilous step I was about to take. As I passed the wreck of the old meeting house, where, before Nat Turner's time, the slaves had been allowed to meet for worship, I seemed to hear my father's voice come from it, bidding me not to tarry till I reached freedom or the grave. I rushed on with renovated hopes. My trust in God had been strengthened by the prayer among the graves.²²³

Slaves developed their own geography of spiritual power in the world represented in the very structure of the praise house, which conformed to slaves' particular forms of worship. In this, the praise house afforded a manner of worship that emphasized a particular liberality of movement, a point of no small importance for a people held in bondage. The location of the praise house in wooded areas ensured yet another type of freedom, that is, the freedom from the purview of whites. On another level, the construction of the buildings in spiritually specific spaces—connected both to cemeteries and the spirits generally resident in outlying areas—allowed slaves to establish praise houses as loci of power and communication between this world and the next.

To all outward appearances, the buildings were anything but impressive; they were small, dilapidated structures located on the outskirts of the

plantation. As northern missionaries arrived at Port Royal Island during the Civil War, they often described the houses as rather humble structures, often “merely a larger and nicer negro hut than the others.”²²⁴ Harriet Ware, a northern missionary and teacher who traveled to the Sea Islands describes the frame of the praise house as “made very roughly of boards whitewashed, inside an earth floor covered with straw, rough wooden benches, the pulpit and altar made in the same way, but covered entirely with grey moss.”²²⁵ Given its unimpressive structure and its location in the outer reaches of the plantation, the praise house often failed to attract much attention from outsider observers. By overlooking these structures, most whites completely missed the spiritual practices that took place inside. Indeed, Harriet Ware, finding the structures “rough and ordinary,” opted not to venture inside.²²⁶ And former slave Simon Brown recalled that “slaves never said a word to . . . white folks” about their particular brand of worship.²²⁷

Though unadorned, the praise house cloaked within its walls the heart of slave spiritual and religious practice. Frederick Law Olmsted notes that the owner of one house “told me that having furnished the prayer-house with seats having a back-rail, his Negroes petitioned him to remove it, because it did not leave them *room enough to pray*. . . . It was their custom, in social worship, to work themselves up to a great pitch of excitement, in which they yell and cry aloud, and, finally shriek and leap up, clapping their hands and dancing, as it is done in heathen festivals. The back rail they found to seriously impede this exercise.”²²⁸ Of particular note, slaves made demands regarding the construction of the praise house. For them, the very architecture of the cabins need be made amenable to their particular form of worship. Above all, there remained a paramount concern for the space and mobility afforded in the praise house. Writing of St. Helena Island, T. J. Woofter reports that “there is no doubt as to the antiquity of the building, for it nestles beneath a great oak half-hidden by a screen of cassina bushes such as only time can erect. It is built of log framing, with rough clapboards on the sides and roofed with hand-split shingles. Inside the oil lamp yellows the small pine pulpit of the leader, but leaves the faces of the audiences almost in the dark. The floor is uneven and the hand-made benches have no backs.”²²⁹

Notwithstanding their presumed “antiquity,” praise houses first appeared during the late antebellum period, when white missionaries began to make some headway in convincing planters of the importance of the religious instruction of slaves. They proliferated quickly, however, and were com-

mon features of the southern landscape into the early twentieth century. One writer notes that “on every one of the old plantations you will come across a tiny building furnished with rude backless benches and a leader’s stand in front.”²³⁰ In some cases the benches were not only without backs but displaced entirely, having been pushed against the walls of the praise house so as to effect better the space necessary for worship.

W. E. B. Du Bois describes this manner of worship and maintains that the “frenzy” was an essential element of black religion, “more devoutly believed in than all the rest. . . . Many generations firmly believe that without this visible manifestation of God there could be no true communion with the invisible.”²³¹ This worship, he continues, “varied in expression and form from the silent rapt countenance or the low murmur and moan to the mad abandon of physical fervor,—the stamping, shrieking, and shouting, the rushing to and fro . . . the weeping and laughing, the vision and the trance.”²³² James Smith, a black preacher, described slave religion in this way: “The way in which we worshipped is almost indescribable. The singing was accompanied by a certain ecstasy of motion, clapping of hands, tossing of heads. . . . The old house [itself] partook of the ecstasy; it rang with their jubilant shouts, and shook in all its joints.”²³³ That the old house itself partook of the ecstasy suggests that the very structure itself participated in the ritual, that it, too, mere mud, wood, and dust, engaged in the religious fervor experienced by the slaves inside. No small number of observers described the praise house in terms that highlight its being, its very real presence. As Mrs. William R. Wister, a teacher in South Carolina’s Penn School for newly freed men, recalled, the “Praise House filled slowly. It was a small one-roomed cabin that looked weirdly alive as you approached it through the darkness.”²³⁴ The buildings enjoyed only so much light as might be provided by an open door or by a flickering candle or oil lamp, the shadowy effects of which contributed to the sanctity of the structure.²³⁵ Because the buildings were roughly built, any light emanating from inside shone through the many cracks and crevices of the building, much as a beacon welcoming would-be worshipers.²³⁶

Of course, the rituals performed within the praise houses, as in the ring shout, contributed to the life of these houses: “The faithful begin first walking and by-and-by shuffling round, one after the other, in a ring. The foot is hardly taken from the floor, and the progression is mainly due to a jerking, hitching motion, which agitates the entire shouter, and soon brings out streams of perspiration. . . . Song and dance are alike energetic,

and often, when the shout lasts into the middle of the night, the monotonous thud, thud, thud of the feet prevents sleep within half a mile of the praisehouse.”²³⁷ In dancing the ring shout, with its slow, sedimented steps inscribed around an ever-revolving circle, slaves marked off an autonomous sphere of spiritual practice. Taken together, praise-house worship—in its seeping light, backless benches, song, sound, and dance—comprised an invaluable space over which slaves maintained ultimate control.

The record of the master class as it related to worship at the praise house is mixed. Whereas some perceived it as a mechanism for social control, others saw in its communal expression the very real possibility of rebellion. For their part, Christian missionaries were largely appalled by praise-house worship. One observer writes, “We cannot determine whether it has a religious character or not . . . but it is probable that they are the barbarous expression of religion handed down to them from their African ancestors.”²³⁸ Others were not so kind, linking the religious experience of slaves to lascivious frolic, savagery, and “idol worship.” Still, some slaves went to extraordinary lengths in order to participate in praise-house worship. Peter Randolph, a former slave from Prince Henry County, Virginia, notes the manner in which slaves might arrive at these ceremonies: “The slaves assemble in the swamps, outside the reach of the patrols. They have an understanding among themselves as to the time and place of getting together. This is often done by the first one arriving breaking boughs from the trees, and bending them in the direction of the spot.”²³⁹

Despite their slight stature, humble constitution, and early establishment as mechanisms for social control, planters came soon to understand the rebellious potential of praise-house worship. After Nat Turner’s slave rebellion, for example, many slaveholders in Virginia forbade worship in the praise house, opting instead to appropriate the nether reaches of their own church balconies and galleries for slaves’ use. Previously mentioned runaway slave Harriet Jacobs recalled that “slaves begged the privilege of again meeting at their little church in the woods, with their burying ground around it. It was built by the colored people, and they had no higher happiness than to meet there . . . and pour out their hearts in spontaneous prayer. Their request was denied, and the church was demolished.”²⁴⁰

Even after the antebellum period praise-house worship continued in black churches throughout the country. One reverend reports in the early twentieth century, “When the ole spirit hit you, honey, I’m gonna tell

you the truth, you're not of yourself. . . . I 'member one time old Deacon Jones got to shoutin' so that he actually flew around the altar, not a hand or foot touchin'." ²⁴¹ So recalled John Bivens, a former slave from Sandfly, Georgia: "Wen we git tuh duh ribbuh some uh duh folks is so happy an dey scream an jump roun so much dat some uh duh udduhs hab tuh hole um." ²⁴² Simon Brown reports that for slaves, this manner of spiritual zeal was common. Sometimes the candidate would come "up from the water so happy that he'd begin to shout right out in the pond, and it would take both deacons to bring him safe to shore." ²⁴³

Indeed, this manner of religious practice continues to inform contemporary African American religious life. Writing in *Quicksand*, Nella Larsen describes the experience of Helga Crane:

It was a relief to cry unrestrainedly, and she gave herself freely to soothing tears, not noticing that the groaning and sobbing of those about her had increased, unaware that the grotesque ebony figure at her side had begun gently to pat her arm to the rhythm of the singing and to croon softly: "yes, chile, yes chile." . . . She did notice, though, that the tempo, the atmosphere of the place, had changed. . . . Men and women were swaying and clapping their hands, shouting and stamping their feet to the frankly irreverent melody of the song. Without warning the woman at her side threw off her hat, leaped to her feet, waved her long arms, and shouted shrilly . . . and then, in wild, ecstatic fury jumped up and down. . . . Little by little the performance took on an almost Bacchic vehemence. Behind her, before her, beside her, frenzied women gesticulated, screamed, wept, and tottered to the praying of the preacher, which had become gradually a cadenced chant. . . . It went on and on without pause with the persistence of some unconquerable faith exalted beyond time and reality . . . and as Helga watched and listened, gradually a curious influence penetrated her; she felt an echo of the weird orgy resound in her own heart; she felt herself possessed by the same madness; she too felt a brutal desire to shout and to sling herself about . . . and in that moment she was lost—or saved. ²⁴⁴

In their particular brand of worship, slaves redirected their bodies and their behavior away from the dominance of the master class. ²⁴⁵ In place of master class imperatives toward submission, the praise meeting and the baptism imparted a resistant improvisation and free will. This reading

differs from the treatment traditionally afforded slave religious expression. Frantz Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, argues that

the native's relaxation takes precisely the form of a muscular orgy in which the most acute aggressivity and the most impelling violence are canalized, transformed, and conjured away. At certain times, on certain days, men and women come together . . . fling themselves into a seemingly unorganized pantomime, which is in reality extremely systematic. . . . Shakes of the head, bending of the spinal column, throwing of the whole body backward. . . . The river bank down which you slip as if to show the connection between the dance and ablutions, cleansing and purification—these are sacred places. . . . In reality your purpose in coming together is to allow the accumulated libido, the hampered aggressivity, to dissolve as in a volcanic eruption. Symbolic killings, fantastic rides, imaginary mass murders—all must be brought out. The evil humors are undammed, and flow away with a din as of molten lava. . . . When they set out, the men and women were impatient, stamping their feet in a state of nervous excitement; when they return, peace has been restored . . . it is once more calm and unmoved.²⁴⁶

Eugene Genovese suggests that slave religious practice inspired docility and submission because, while it enabled the slaves to do battle against the slaveholder's ideology, it did so defensively within the system it opposed; offensively it proved a poor instrument. In short, Christianity "softened the slaves by drawing the hatred from their souls, and without hatred there could be no revolt."²⁴⁷

Most observers discuss spiritual ecstasy as an individual experience, something that, in a given ritual context, occurs to a certain person: a particular flailing and flinging of the body to and fro. But this is clearly not the case. For indeed, the faithful regarded religious excitement and ecstasy as community events. The community produces the ecstasy, and the trance only emerges once the community of believers conspires to create the necessary conditions—a particular percussive rhythm, a certain hymn, a special ritual practice (i.e., baptism). In this way, ecstasy does not belong to the individual as much as it belongs to the entire community. God does not speak to the person in trance as much as through the person in trance, the body in ecstasy being little more than a vessel, a line of communication through which the community comes into closer contact with God.

In the moment of ecstasy, the body in trance is not controlled (or even

controllable for that matter). Rather, the spirit that moves through the body and, by extension, the body itself is communally shared and protected. If, as suggested above, the congregation communicates with and knows God through the body in trance, then that body, and the messages it conveys are directed at all members of the community and are not the exclusive property of the individual in trance. That is, the body in trance is harbinger of community. Because it is not controlled, or controllable, the body in ecstasy is neither subject to the plantation labor regime, nor to notions of ownership. It is in the moment of religious ecstasy that the slave body ceases to be controlled or owned by members of the master class. By extension, the slave body ceases to be a commodity. The body and the spirit that moves through it are transcendent at that moment, unbridled, governed from on high. Without ownership there is no slavery, and so in that moment, the believer briefly enjoys freedom. So suggested one antebellum commenter regarding slaves' particular brand of worship, noting that "in religion he finds also an element of freedom which he does not find in his hard life. And in these wild bursts of melody he seems to be giving utterance to that exultant liberty of soul which no chains can bind, and no oppression subdue."²⁴⁸ In this way, the resistant body rejects the ideology of slavery in an attack aimed at the very system of commodity exchange that would have bodies bought and sold.

This chapter represents the first of several investigations into an African Atlantic religious complex that developed during the period of the Atlantic slave trade and included West and West-Central Africa along with the slave populations of the New World. Specifically, this chapter describes this religious complex as a site for the accommodation and interpretation of the rituals of Christian conversion, namely, baptism, in two locales: the Kongo kingdom of West-Central Africa and the coastal region of South Carolina and Georgia. Africans and their enslaved counterparts in the New World negotiated the signs, symbols, and meanings associated with Christianity through the development of complex vocabularies and iconographies of conversion and baptism. In this way, the meanings associated with Christianity were characterized by a notable fluidity and adaptability of belief in ways that challenge simple notions of conversion.

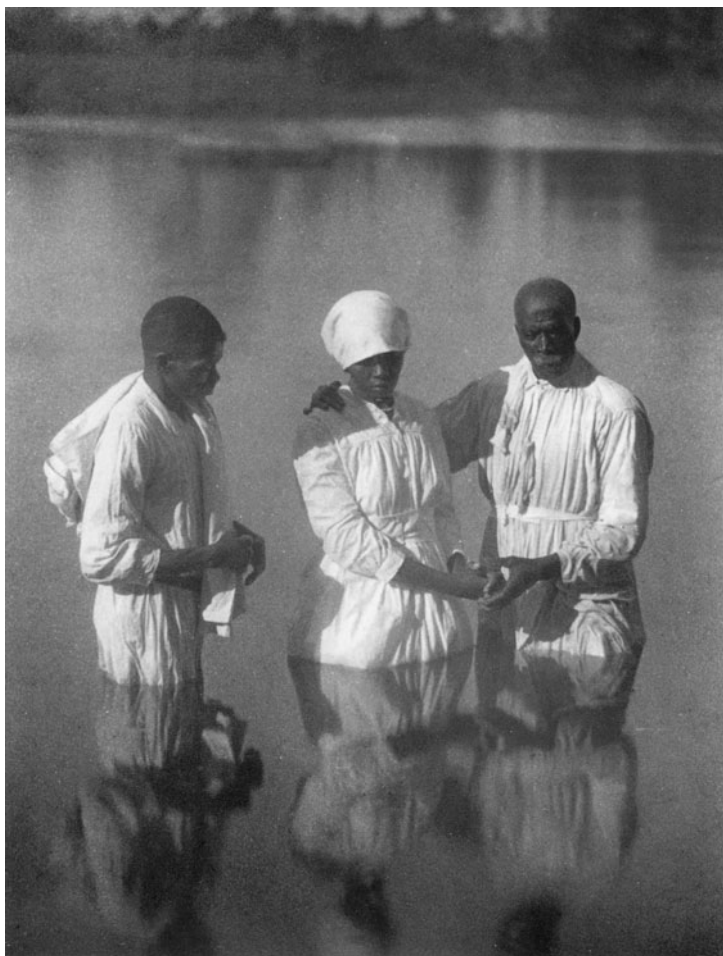
Like the chapters that follow, this chapter focuses on both the aesthetic and theoretical aspects of cultural continuity. In fact, I argue in this chapter that even in the absence of formal cultural affinities (i.e., different

rituals of conversion), the cultures of the Atlantic are linked philosophically and theoretically in the ways in which African diasporic peoples think of themselves, their beliefs, and their environments. These cultural continuities are not the result of some passive inheritance of an African past; they reflect the willful efforts made by people determined to maintain and construct meaning for their lives, even in dire circumstances. As a result, this investigation emphasizes the Kongolese and their counterparts in the New World as historical agents and subjects.

In both Kongo and coastal Georgia and South Carolina, the recently converted interpreted Christianity as a tool of resistance. Many Kongolese converts adopted baptism as a protection against the evils of the slave trade, and Dona Beatriz developed a movement that was both religious and deeply political in its aims. Enslaved Africans in the Lowcountry utilized the baptismal ritual to resist the brutalities of the master class.

Most studies of slave resistance highlight slaves' persistent opposition to the formal institutions of slavery, focusing on forms of resistance such as theft, work slowdowns, feigned illness and injury, arson, self-mutilation, running away, and poison.²⁴⁹ But slaves opposed more than the systems of slavery that oppressed them; they opposed the very theoretical and religious underpinnings that supported and justified the enslavement of Africans in the first place. Missionaries and some planters justified the oppressions of the slave in this world with the promise of eternal salvation in the next world. That is, they sought to bring the "heathen" souls of Africa into the light of Christian salvation through the propagation of the Christian faith. Such was the case for Capuchin missionary Laurent de Lucques, who rationalized the brutalities of the slave trade by noting that those who endured their sufferings with patience "would find the means to extirpate their sins and acquire great merits for their soul."²⁵⁰ He deemed the pains and oppressions of slavery a necessary evil and viewed the slave trade as part of a larger civilizing mission that promised the austerity, sobriety, and (most important) the obedience of the slave.

But many slaves defied this theology of submission and, in the face of the demands of austerity, sobriety, obedience, and the promise of salvation in the next world, engaged in the rituals of Christian conversion as a means to resist the condition of slavery, assert their free will, and articulate their own theologies of resistance.²⁵¹ Slaves' own notions of baptism—the reverence for water, particular notions about the nature of death and the cycle of life, and the "shout"—all undermine the authority and theologies



***Baptismal Scene* by Doris Ulmann**

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Gift of William Clift in memory of Otelia Barnes and Dora Zeigler. Photograph © 2007 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

upon which slavery is based. Along with this, slaves opposed the commodification of their bodies, the notion that they were only valuable in their capacity to work. Slave rituals of conversion attest to the slave body as a vessel for the expression of spirit, ritual, and rite. In this way, the re-socialization of the slave body during the rituals of conversion—as in the ring shout, the praise-house meeting, and spirit possession—challenge the very underpinnings of slavery itself.

Coda

Few have captured southern black ritual life as well as photographer Doris Ulmann. On Lang Syne Plantation, South Carolina, located on a peninsula at the junction of the Congaree and Wateree Rivers, Ulmann conducted photographic investigations into the lives of the four hundred Lowcountry men and women who labored there. Many of them had lived on the plantation since the antebellum period.

Ulmann's photographs of the baptismal ritual on the plantation are marked by soft opposition: white gowns against a murky water's surface, the tense stillness of the bodies of the faithful juxtaposed against the rippling motion of those same bodies reflected in the water, and the intense focus of the foreground against a hazy and undifferentiated backdrop. The candidate stands eyes averted, head bowed low, surrounded by the deacon to her right and the preacher to the left. Ulmann's photos of black baptisms imply a vast majesty in the natural landscape as against the meekness of the faithful. Ulmann's attitude toward her subjects on Lang Syne was "reflected in her delicate use of natural light and the soft focus lens . . . designed to induce spherical aberration—that is, a lack of sharpness at the edges of the image."²⁵² In this, the observer notices a sense both of that which is to be seen, marked by sharp focus, and that which is to remain unseen, marked by shadow and haze.

In fact, Ulmann's photographs are perhaps most telling in that which we do not see. We do not see the immersed body or the wetness of the newly born as she returns from the other side. Ulmann remains silent on that which is most sacred and, perhaps, in that way speaks volumes regarding the sacredness of the rite.