Kongolese Peasant Christianity and Its Influence on Resistance in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century South Carolina

Thesis

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By

Karen Wanjiru Ngonya, B.A.

Graduate Program in African American and African Studies

The Ohio State University

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Thesis Committee:

Dr. Walter C. Rucker (Advisor)

Dr. Leslie Alexander

Dr. Ahmad Sikainga
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Abstract

This thesis draws on recent research that utilizes the Diasporic approach in the study of slave culture in the New World. It attempts to link the old Kongo Kingdom to South Carolina through religion and resistance. It proposes that Kongolese peasants developed a variant of Christianity in the Kongo Kingdom, used it to cope with socio-political turbulence in Kongo, and continued to draw upon this religion to resist enslavement in the New World. Using a wide range of sources varying from black spirituals to contemporary observer reports, the present inquiry traces Kongolese peasant Christianity from its inception in the Kingdom of Kongo in the sixteenth century through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in South Carolina, focusing on its influence on resistance. This is a significant contribution to the existing scholarship because it gestures towards a re-evaluation of slaves who practiced Christianity. More often than not, scholars portray Christianity as a European religion, and thus depict Africans who practiced it as either acculturated or practicing a newly syncretized form of Christianity. By portraying Christianity as a European religion, scholars unwittingly negate the resilience and flexibility of African cultures.
Dedication

For my father, John Gichora. Even though you are not alive to witness my achievements,

I know you would have been extremely proud of me.
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In my quest to navigate graduate school and write a thesis, I owe my greatest debt to my advisor, Dr Walter C. Rucker, who saw potential in me and strove to ensure that I fully realized it. He was constantly there to encourage, guide, and mould me into the scholar he knew I could be. I would also like to thank Drs. Leslie Alexander and Ahmad Sikainga for providing me with invaluable support and guidance as members of my thesis committee.

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Vita

November 2000........................................Moi Girls High School, Kenya

December 2006........................................University of Nairobi, Kenya

September 2007 to 2009..............................Graduate Teaching Associate

Department of African American and
African Studies

Major Field of Study

African American and African Studies
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Introduction

I recall my initial reaction to Saidiya Hartman’s story of her first visit to Ghana: I laughed. I laughed at how disillusioned she had been when children called her an obruni (stranger), when she had expected to fit in.¹ I was not being callous to her plight. No. As an African, a Kenyan student, I just found it difficult to understand why anyone would expect acceptance because of their skin color. I did not understand camaraderie by virtue of race. I vehemently nodded in agreement when her friend, an expatriate, asked her, “When you go to Chicago, do you expect black folks there to welcome you because you’re from New York? Well, why should it be any different here?” Like the expatriate, I could not comprehend why Hartman failed to grasp that in the eyes of those she met in Ghana she would be a foreigner, and that as long as she was American, these people would consider her privileged. After all, I, too, harbored such judgments.

But that was my first quarter of graduate school in the United States. It would not be long before I understood Hartman’s quest to reconnect with Africa. I had read about

the slave trade prior to graduate school, and how it facilitated the removal of millions of people from Africa to other parts of the world. But that was about all I knew, or cared about for that matter. Until then it had been just another impersonal story that explained why there were black people in the Americas.

After a few months of living in the U.S., however, the story became personal. I began to notice that the plight of black people, wherever they were, was similar: poverty, illiteracy, and death seemed to plague them endlessly. Questions shot through my mind: were black people inherently inferior, to the degree that they could not help their situation, or was the answer hidden in history? Since I refused to accept the inherent inferiority of black people, I began to search for answers in historical texts. The more I read, the more I discovered that Africa was not as detached from the Americas as I had previously thought. I began to appreciate that at no particular time did the Diaspora emanate exclusively from Africa. I learned that even as enslaved Africans dealt with their new condition, they relied upon their African backgrounds to shape their new cultural environment, whether in birth or death, work or play, and most importantly, resistance.² As I dealt with these issues, I was intrigued when I stumbled upon scholars who sought to reposition Africa at the center of the narrative of cultural formations in the New World.

Especially interesting was a recent project which sought to create a new way of conceiving the relationship between the two locales. Historians Paul Lovejoy, Robin Law, and Elisée Soumonni led the Nigerian Hinterland Project, a major collaborative

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research effort aimed at reversing the point of origin from the Americas to Africa in the study of African Diaspora. This project was based on the assumption that enslaved Africans carried with them their cultures and their histories. Additionally, it presupposed that it is only by understanding their African background that scholars fully appreciate African influences in the Diaspora. Consequently, a new paradigm for studying the Diaspora was born.

One of the proponents of this framework, Kristin Mann, opines that if scholars are ever to understand how, when, and why slaves were able to draw on material, social, and ideological resources from their African backgrounds, those scholars must first understand that African point of origin. She writes:

So far as the African Diaspora is concerned, what we know about the past now requires a model that begins in Africa, traces the movement of specific cohorts of peoples into the Americas and examines how in regionally temporal contexts, they drew on what they brought with them as well as borrowed from what they found in the Americas to forge new Worlds for themselves.

John Thornton anticipated this approach in *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World*, when he argued that enslaved people relied on their African backgrounds to cope with enslavement. He also proposed that conditions of enslavement provided Africans with opportunities to draw on their various cultures in formulating

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5Ibid, 16.
their new lives. Thornton based his argument on the postulation that the middle passage trauma did not strip Africans of their cultures and history. On the other hand, this is not to suggest that these links remained static and unchanging. The strength of this approach is that it recognizes that the Diaspora linking Africa and the Americas has not been static. Thus whatever cultural influences enslaved Africans brought with them into the New World continued to allow them to change and adapt to the new environment.

In this thesis, I draw on recent research that utilizes the Diasporic approach in the study of slave culture in the New World. Nonetheless, rather than deal with the broad concept of culture, or the entire Diaspora, I attempt to link the old Kongo Kingdom to South Carolina through religion and resistance. I adopt Jason Young’s definition of the term resistance as, “any tactic that slaves undertook to disrupt… forced extraction of labor as in rebellion, work, slowdowns, feigned illness, and/or destruction of tools.” I argue that Kongolese peasants developed a variant of Christianity in the Kongo Kingdom and used it to cope with socio-political turbulence in Kongo, and that they continued to draw upon this religion to resist enslavement in the New World.

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Slave resistance in historical texts

Scholars across time have raised salient questions concerning slave resistance. Were slaves just grateful to have been taken out of the “African jungle,” as one author put it, so much so that they did not want to rebel? Did slaves have the will and means to resist their enslavement? Was the middle passage so traumatizing that slaves were stripped of their pasts and cultures and therefore did not have the will to resist? On the other hand, if these slaves carried their pasts and their cultures, including religion, with them, did these forces influence their way of life and affect the way they reacted to slavery? I am highly indebted to the scholars who, over time, have engaged in responding to these queries, as the present inquiry is an attempt to answer some of the questions they raise.

The discussion of slaves’ response to their enslavement began in the early twentieth century. Ulrich Bonnell Philips’ *American Negro Slavery* claims that slaves had neither the will nor the innate ability to resist their enslavement. Philips states, “The climate in fact not only discourages but prohibits mental effort of severe or sustained character, and the Negroes have submitted to that prohibition as to many others, through countless generations with excellent grace.” However, at that particular time in history, Philips was not alone in his sentiments. A contemporary historian, James Schouler, had

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written that slaves could not resist by reason of their “innate patience, docility, and child-like simplicity who was an imitator and a non-moralist …easily intimidated, and incapable of deep plots.”

It is clear that Philips did not think that slaves had the will, let alone the capability, of resisting. He calls any attempt to rebel against the white slave masters “slave crime.” In a chapter of his book entitled “Slave crimes,” he dismisses incidents of slaves’ resistance by equating them “bad behavior.” He asserts that enslaved people, having been torn away from their own cultures and customs and set in the lowest of castes in the New World saw no motivation to conform to “proper” behavior. He argues that this was expected of them, and any act of insubordination was ignored unless it was rape.

It is noteworthy, though, that Philips acknowledges that revolts were a cause of concern for the public. Philips gives accounts of the slave rebellions that created tensions in Antebellum South led by Gabriel Prosser, Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey. However, shortly thereafter, he dismisses such occurrences as rare and claims that other than these few, other events of resistance were negligible. Nonetheless, Philips concedes that slave revolts were a cause for worry. But, as he did not believe that Africans in general had the ability to develop plots and revolts that were complex, Philips attributes the revolts to the

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12 Philips, American Negro Slavery, 454.

13 Ibid, 488.
more ‘intelligent’ Africans who were evidently acculturated. He writes, “Arguments based on such data brought concurrence of negroes of the more intelligent sort prominent among who were certain functionaries of the African Church.”¹⁴ But even in this instance, he attributes slave insurrections to only those who had embraced the white man’s culture.

Not everyone was in agreement with Philips’ ideas. Herbert Aptheker’s 1943 *American Negro Slave Revolts* is a direct response to Philips’ sentiments. Having demonstrated that slaves were humans with a will to rebel against their horrible circumstances, Aptheker outlines some of the reasons that motivated slave revolts. In a rejoinder to Philips and other scholars who argued for the docility and contentment of enslaved Africans, Aptheker demonstrates, by means of extensive research on the lives of the slaves in the American South, that slaves were not content with their lot in life.

He points out that although authors such as Schouler, Herbert L. Osgood, William E. Dodd, Carl R. Fish, Emory Q. Hawk and Philips, denied or ignored presence of slave revolts, they acknowledged that there was constant fear of slave rebellions among White slave owners.¹⁵ Aptheker insists that if fear was prevalent then there must have been a valid reason for it. Aptheker subsequently cites different examples of slave revolts in the American South and describes how they sparked further paranoia among slave owners.

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¹⁴Ibid, 477.

He proposes that cases of slave insurrection were quotidian occurrences in the antebellum South.\textsuperscript{16}

Yet one could say Aptheker’s conclusion that “discontent and rebelliousness were not only exceedingly common, but indeed characteristic of American Negro slaves” was rather shaky.\textsuperscript{17} This conclusion is based primarily on the reported prevalence of slave insurrections. The weakness of his argument lies in his reliance on slave owners’ reactions to alleged plots that may or may have not occurred.\textsuperscript{18} Slavery apologists could use this statement to argue that if the alleged plots were invented, slaves were docile. However, it being an earlier work, \textit{American Negro Slave Revolts} certainly motivated original discussions on the response of the enslaved Africans to slavery.

By the 1960s, however, scholars such as Aptheker and Eugene Genovese had effectively put to rest any doubt as to whether enslaved Africans resisted their enslavement.\textsuperscript{19} The focus turned instead to the various stimulants of resistance. Topping the list of these stimulants is religion and spirituality. Many scholars generally agree that Christianity played a central role in resistance. However a division occurs among them as to how this religion should be viewed –as an African religion or a product of the New World.

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid, 162.
\textsuperscript{17}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18}Ibid, 150-208.
Sterling Stuckey in *Slave Culture* effectively argues that Afro-Christianity played a central role in stimulating acts of resistance. Stuckey asserts that this brand of Christianity served to unite enslaved people on the plantations. He specifically cites old black preachers as being unifying factors among enslaved Africans. Moreover, Stuckey demonstrates that Denmark Vesey, in the 1822 slave conspiracy in South Carolina, using his brand of “radical Christianity” in conjunction with Gullah Jack’s African religion, was successful in forging unity among diverse groups.²⁰

While Stuckey acknowledges that the brand of Christianity enslaved Africans practiced in the American South was different from that practiced by white people, he still views it as a New World creation. Stuckey clearly identifies West Central African influences on Afro-Christianity in South Carolina, such as the ring shout and the relationship of the Christian cross to the Kongo cosmogram. Nevertheless, he still portrays this fusion as something that first occurred in the American South, as opposed to in Africa. He does not discuss the prior contact of West Central Africans with Christianity in Africa and how that contact might have affected their reaction to Christianity in the New World. Instead, Stuckey contends that enslaved Africans found ways to incorporate Christian elements into their African worldview, arguing that Africans found the White brand of Christianity unsatisfactory. Stuckey insists that

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Christianity for enslaved Africans “provided a protective exterior beneath which more complex, less familiar (to outsiders) religious principles and practices were operative.”

On the other hand, Stuckey raises important questions: What exactly did it mean to be acculturated? Did the acculturated ones stop closely associating with their African backgrounds? Stuckey uses the phrases “skilled slaves” and “acculturated” interchangeably. Thus, acculturation was more related to skills and labor than to a state of mind. Stuckey convincingly argues that unlike what some scholars have claimed, acculturated slaves did not seek to distance themselves from their African spiritual base. He further advances the argument that while acculturated slaves found some aspects of Christianity deeply satisfying, they did not cease to view themselves as African.

Michael Mullin, *Africa in America*, differs with Stuckey in his discussion of the role of acculturation in resistance. Mullin structures his discussion of resistance and acculturation in a linear manner. He begins with the period in which acts of resistance were led by those he terms as “unseasoned.” These were enslaved Africans who were new to the New World and could not speak English. He proposes that these Africans resisted through attempts to recreate their African societies. Mullin proposes that these acts of resistance were never successful, as they were inhibited by their ethnic nature. He claims that it was not until the age of “assimilateds” that effective rebellions emerged, and attributes this change to the shift in leadership of these rebellions. Mullin writes:

21 Ibid, 33, 34, 35.

22 Ibid, 48.
Their leadership was of two kinds: native Africans through the 1760s and Creole (American-born) thereafter…In a long history of persistent but often ineffectual slave resistance, Africans as if instinctively cooperated when attempting to free themselves. By contrast, Creoles usually favored individual strategies to free themselves. But in the last years of slavery Creoles overcame the difficulties they had encountered in working together and organized the largest rebellions ever.\textsuperscript{23}

Additionally, he contends that the acculturated people, who he also calls “assimilates,” used “literacy, biblical imagery and class organization provided by Christian missionaries to effectively organize and lead rebellions in the American South and the Caribbean.”\textsuperscript{24} Thus, the further these acculturated people were from their African background, the more likely they were to successfully unite in acts of resistance. One identifying characteristic of Mullin’s “assimilates” was their adoption of Christianity. Therefore, it is not likely that Mullin would consider Christianity an African religion. In his opinion, embrace of Christianity was a manifestation of a slave’s distance and removal from Africa and what it stood for.

Nevertheless, John Thornton’s 2001 article “The Development of an African Catholic Church,” which focuses on Christianity in Kongo, counters Mullin’s argument that the embrace of Christianity was a sign of acculturation. Additionally, it provides a novel perspective on the historiography of slave religion by presenting Christianity as an African religion rather than a foreign element encountered in the New World. He argues that the kings of the Kongo Kingdom in the fifteenth and sixteenth century willingly

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{24}Ibid, 269.
\end{itemize}
accepted and appropriated Christianity to fit their world view. He further argues that from that period onward the Kongolese viewed Christianity as their religion.\textsuperscript{25} Thornton raises a salient point by arguing that since a significant number of enslaved Africans had encountered and appropriated European influences such as Christianity in Africa, they were not at a loss when they encountered them again in the New World.\textsuperscript{26} Therefore a slave’s embrace and practice of Christianity in the New World would not be an accurate indicator of his or her level of acculturation. This is contrary to what a number of scholarly works dealing with slavery and resistance have proposed, with others claiming that slave ships were the crucibles of new cultures.\textsuperscript{27}

Jason Young’s \textit{Rituals of Resistance} published in 2007, complements Thornton’s research on Kongolese Christianity. While agreeing with Thornton on the agency of Kongolese in their adoption of Christianity, Young is careful to note the glaring differences in the adoption and practice of Christianity between the elite and the peasants in the Kongo Kingdom. Subsequently, my research builds on Young’s discussion of Kongolese Christianity and his proposition that, just as they utilized Christianity in the Kongo, enslaved Africans in the New World continued to draw upon it for resistance. Young’s central argument that “religion operated as a central form of resistance not only against the system of slavery but also against the very ideological underpinnings that


\textsuperscript{26}Thornton, \textit{Africa and Africans}, 8.

supported slavery” features significantly in this thesis. Moreover, I concur with Young’s suggestion that prior exposure of Kongolesi slaves to Catholicism influenced their reaction to Christianity in the New World.28

However, rather than just focusing on Kongolesi Christianity as a whole, the present inquiry traces Kongolesi peasant Christianity from its inception in the Kingdom of Kongo, and follows it across different historical time periods in South Carolina, centering on its influence on resistance. This is a significant contribution to the existing scholarship because it gestures towards a re-evaluation of slaves who practiced Christianity. More often than not, scholars portray Christianity as a European religion, and thus depict Africans who practiced it as either acculturated or practicing a newly syncretized form of Christianity. By portraying Christianity as a European religion, scholars unwittingly negate the resilience and flexibility of African cultures.29

On Methodology and Sources

As noted earlier, I adopt the Diasporic approach in my research, with the Kingdom of Kongo being my African point of origin and South Carolina being the New World destination. In this project, however, I view both the Kingdom of Kongo and South Carolina not as “monolithic, static regions,” but rather as regions that underwent socio-political and economic changes that were reflected in their respective cultural and

28Young, Rituals of Resistance, 57, 58, 11, 183,

29Mullin, Africans in America, 26; Stuckey, Slave Culture, 35.
religious practices at different historical times.\textsuperscript{30} This has called for the use of a diverse range of sources to capture the dynamic nature of these regions.

In researching the Kongo Kingdom, however, the language barrier and inaccessibility of sources forced me to rely heavily on secondary sources. Most sources on the introduction and the spread of Christianity in the Kongo Kingdom are in Portuguese. Also, at this particular level of my scholarship I have not had the opportunity to conduct archival research, which would have definitely enriched my work. While I recognize that reliance on secondary sources could potentially deny my work the necessary originality and accuracy, I have attempted to overcome this shortcoming by combining a number of secondary sources on similar topics to gather enough information for analysis. Most of the secondary sources I used on the Kongo relied heavily on the written sources from missionaries and court officials with little or no sources from the general population, giving their narrative an elitist bias. To avoid the same pitfall, I would have preferred to use folklore and other forms of oral tradition, but was unable to due to the above challenges.

Nevertheless, in my research into South Carolina I attempt to overcome the same problem by the extensive use of black spirituals and slave testimonies. These sources give valuable insight into what enslaved people thought rather than what observers perceived them to think. I also employ a number of published primary sources including travel accounts, missionary reports, autobiographies, slave testimonies, witness accounts of

\textsuperscript{30}Young, Rituals of Resistance, 3.
insurrections, and trial records. The challenge I encountered using trial records, other than the fact that they can be unreliable, is the significant differences in the renditions of the various trial record editions. Thus, in the case of the Denmark Vesey conspiracy, I used various versions of the trial to ensure that I got as close as possible to the original narrative.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter deals with the Kingdom of Kongo from the fifteenth century to the eighteenth century. It analyzes the rise and spread of Christianity in the Kongo Kingdom. It gives the background to the formation of what I label as Kongolese peasant Christianity within this kingdom and how it differed from the state-sanctioned Christianity. Additionally it cites the rise of the Antonian movement of 1704-1706, as manifestation of the existing conflict between the two forms of Christianity. This section also elucidates the conditions that contributed to the massive exportation of Kongolese people to the New World.

Chapter two begins with a discussion of the settlement and economic history of the South Carolina colony. The discussion is then followed by a close examination of the relationship between the large numbers of enslaved people from the Kongo Kingdom and corresponding cultural transmissions. While this in itself is not novel, the present chapter demonstrates how enslaved Africans from the Kongo Kingdom continued to draw upon their Kongolese peasant Christian backgrounds to resist enslavement. The argument is based on the premise that the majority of those enslaved were from the rural regions and thus peasants. By comparing contemporary sources from the Kongo Kingdom with those from South Carolina, this segment highlights the manifestation of Kongolese peasant
Christianity. Finally it re-examines the Stono rebellion and casts it as an instance in which the Kongolese drew upon their Christian backgrounds to resist enslavement and to express themselves just as they had done in Kongo.

Chapter three, on the other hand, deals with nineteenth-century South Carolina, where West Central Africans continued to be a majority. It starts with a narration of the Denmark Vesey conspiracy, focusing on the central role of the African church. In addition, I examine the possibility that Kongolese peasant Christianity, or its core principles, as opposed to white evangelism, formed the basis of black churches in South Carolina. Finally I re-evaluate the role of Gullah Jack in the Denmark Vesey conspiracy by portraying him as the embodiment of Kongolese peasant Christianity.
Chapter 1: Kongo and Resistance in the Kongo Kingdom

“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.”

— Father Bernard da Gallo, a Capuchin missionary in the eighteenth-century Kongo Kingdom.\(^{31}\)

She stood bound on a stake with flames of fire engulfing her and smoke squeezing the breath out of her. She knew her death and that of her companion were imminent; there was no escaping this time. But she had resigned to her fate with dignity, for she had fought for what she believed in, and to some extent, won. She had gained numerous followers, many of whom were present at her execution and were desperately attempting to rescue her from the brutal death that confronted her.\(^{32}\)

As Donna Beatriz, whose Kikongo name was Kimpa Vita, smelled her own burning flesh and endured the excruciating pain which no doubt resulted from such a slow death, she could only be grateful that at least the life of her infant son had been


spared at the behest of Father Bernardo da Gallo and Lorenzo da Lucca, who ironically had instigated her death sentence.\footnote{Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa 1450-1950* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 107.} It was the second day of July 1706 in the Kingdom of Kongo; finally, Donna Beatriz had been captured, at the behest of Father da Gallo, and was now breathing her last. Indeed, to the state-sanctioned church in the Kongo Kingdom she had been a thorn in the flesh.

Beatriz started the Antonian movement by claiming to be possessed by Saint Anthony, an important Catholic saint. Da Gallo, a Capuchin missionary, and a close friend of the then king of Kongo, King Pedro IV, along with other Capuchins, could not tolerate it. It was not simply because she was a woman who claimed possession by an important Catholic saint; it was that her movement advanced rhetoric that challenged the legitimacy of the state-sanctioned church.\footnote{Ibid, 105, 108.} As part of King Pedro’s campaign to crush this movement, and thus to restore, “the unity of monarchy… and [the] Catholic Church,” he attacked the Antonian movement’s strongholds. The result was massive capture and enslavement of peasants, most of whom were Antonians. These added to a greater number of Kongolese Africans who had been captured and transported to the New World as slaves, owing to the civil strife that had engulfed that kingdom over the years.\footnote{Thornton, *The Kongolese Saint Anthony: Donna Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Antonian Movement, 1648-1706* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 210.}

In this chapter I discuss the introduction and spread of Christianity in the Kingdom of Kongo. I also highlight the distinct manner in which the elite and peasant
classes accepted and adopted Christianity while outlining the differences between the two systems of worship. This lays foundation to the discussion of Kongolese peasant Christianity in South Carolina in chapter two, where I argue that the unique adoption and practice of Christianity in Kongo influenced the manner in which the Kongolese resisted enslavement in the New World.

The Kongo Kingdom

By the late fifteenth century the Kingdom of Kongo was the most centralized kingdom in West Central Africa. Several written accounts exist on the origins of the Kongo Kingdom. Nonetheless, the most detailed account belongs to a Capuchin missionary, Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi da Montecuccolo. According to his account, the Kingdom of Kongo originated from a man by the name of Eminia-n-Zima who married a certain Luqueni Luansaze. She bore him a child, a son named Luqueni, and who was the first to take up the title of *Mutinu*, which means ‘king’.\(^{36}\) This son became known as Lukeni Lua Nimi meaning Lukeni ‘the son of Nimi’. Oral tradition places the founding of Kongo with the conquest of the region around Mbanza Kongo, the future capital of Kongo, by Lukeni lua Nimi. Lukeni lua Nimi took Mbanza Kongo immediately after his conquest of Mpemba Kasi. As a result he was able to declare himself king and take the title Ntinu. In so doing, he created a new state, Kongo, and moved its capital to Mbanza.

\(^{36}\)Ibid, 105.
Kongo. The event is estimated to have taken place around the mid-fourteenth century. Subsequently, by the time the Portuguese came into Kongo around late fifteenth century, Kongo had already had five successive kings and was thus a solidly established kingdom.

The consolidation of power by Kongo’s successive kings enabled it to dominate its neighbors and control its subjects effectively. Thus, the Kingdom of Kongo was in a position to influence political, cultural and religious innovations in Kongo and the surrounding regions. It enabled them to negotiate their dealings with the Portuguese from a position of strength. The implication of this was that the adoption of Christianity was not accompanied by force or any battle against the people of Kongo; rather, it was a conscious and autonomous decision made by the kings.

When the Portuguese arrived in West Central Africa in 1483, they were looking for an ally with whom they could conduct trade. The then king of Kongo, Nzinga Nkuwu, was open to foreign ideas and encouraged cultural sharing. He was interested in Christianity and the culture of Portugal in general. In 1491, King Nkuwu was baptized as Joao da Silva. He sent ambassador Kasuta to Lisbon and instructed him to ask for

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37 Ibid, 112.  
carpenters and masons to build houses of prayer and women to teach Kongoese women how to bake bread. Many of the nobles in his court followed suit and became Christians. During this period, however, the adoption of Christianity was restricted to the king’s court. The firm establishment of Christianity as the state religion and its spread did not occur until the reign of King Afonso I.42

After King Nkuwu’s death, there was a succession dispute between his two sons, Mpanzu a Kitima and Afonso, which resulted in a fully-fledged war. Historians have viewed this war as a challenge to the establishment of Christianity as a state religion.43 Mpanzu a Kitima was not a Christian, and therefore Afonso, who was a staunch Catholic, saw war against his brother as a war against pagans. Although he had a small army compared to his brother, Afonso defeated Mpanzu in battle. Afonso attributed victory to the appearance of Saint James and his heavenly host, a vision related by several chroniclers. One of them, Paiva Manso, published a letter dated 1512 in which he relates the event. He states:

We called upon the blessed apostle Saint James and as a result, miraculously, we saw all our enemies turn their backs and flee as fast as they could… after the victory we learned that those who escaped declared as one man that when we invoked the apostle saint James, they all beheld a white cross amid a great number of armed and mounted men which caused them such dismay that they could not refrain from fleeing.44

42 Young, Rituals of Resistance, 46-49.
43 Georges Balandier, Daily Life in Kongo, 46.
44 Ibid, 49.
The vision allegedly made Kitima’s soldiers retreat, granting victory to Afonso’s soldiers and thus affirming Afonso’s faith in Christianity. Although Afonso was keen on spreading Christianity, he did not impose upon his subjects the European form of Christianity. Instead he embarked on a project of Africanizing Christianity to fit Kongolese beliefs, making it more palatable to his people. While this Africanization occurred, it did not produce a monolithic form of Christianity in Kongo. Young argues that there was a distinct difference between elite Christianity in towns and peasants Christianity in the rural areas. He writes:

In this way, one notes the establishment of two rather distinct negotiation with the Christian faith in Kongo between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries: one headquartered at the 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.

Scholars have carried out extensive discussions as to whether or not people of Kongo in this historical context could truly be called Christians. Scholars, such as George Birmingham, contend that Christianity in Kongo was just a façade to impress the Portuguese. On the other hand, there are others, like Thornton, and Young, whose arguments capture the complexities and nuances present in the adoption of Christianity in

45Young, Rituals of Resistance, 48; Heywood and Thornton, Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, 62.

46Young, Rituals of Resistance, 62.


Kongo. I do not intend to join that debate, as the above named scholars have made compelling arguments for the validity of Kongolese Christianity. On the contrary, I focus on the complexities presented by the adoption and subsequent practice of Christianity in Kongo, arguing that since the elite and the peasants differed in their adoption and practice of Christianity, tensions between the two groups were inevitable. I further contend that peasants in the eighteenth-century Kingdom of Kongo used their form of Christianity to express their grievances against the elite, who continued to plunge the kingdom into civil strife.

Adoption of Christianity in Kongo

Thornton, in an attempt to prove the legitimacy of claiming Christianity as an African religion, highlights the discrepancy in the attitudes people have toward Christianity and Islam. He states that it is easier for them to accept Islam as an African religion than it is for them to accept the notion of Christianity being African. Thornton attributes this inconsistency to the close association of Christianity with Europeans, who were largely responsible for its extensive spread. In many cases, Europeans spread

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50 Young, Rituals of Resistance, 57.

51 Thornton, The Kingdom of Kongo, 106.

52 Thornton, The Kongolese Saint Anthony, 2.
Christianity through conquest. An examination of the Kongo Kingdom’s case, however, paints a different picture. Unlike in later centuries when the many regions “converted” to Christianity did so under duress, the adoption of Christianity in the Kongo Kingdom was done voluntarily.

Prior to the advent of Christianity both in the king’s court and within the populace in the villages, monarchs in Kongo enjoyed access to the spiritual realm, which they used to justify their authority. Thus, the king maintained “a house of spirit,” known as nzo a ukisi, dedicated to territorial deities. He also had a sacred grove that contained the graves of former kings, a practice that has been associated with the culture of veneration of ancestors. In the village sectors local religious leaders were more influential. These leaders, known as Kitome, governed the spiritual life and the general well-being of the community. Other important individuals were, Baganga, local priests who were consulted on issues of health and protection from hardship.\(^{53}\) It was against this background that Christianity began to permeate the lives of the people of Kongo.

When Christianity was first introduced in Kongo during the reign of King Nzinga Nkuwu, it was mainly restricted to the elite, the ruling class and the wealthy merchants. However, the succeeding king, Afonso, sought to spread Christianity beyond the urban areas into the rest of his kingdom. King Afonso, along with his son Henrique, Kongo’s bishop from 1518-1531, was instrumental in the adaptation of Christianity into the Kongolese worldview. In cooperation with European missionaries, the two facilitated the

documentation of Catholic catechisms into Kikongo. Thornton suggests that the king’s active participation in this process allowed for the emergence of a distinctively Kongolese version of Christianity.\textsuperscript{54} This was especially evident in the Kikongo vocabulary used in the catechisms. For example, the Holy Bible was known as \textit{Nkanda a Ukisi}, which can be literally translated to mean “a book with characteristics of spirits”; the church became \textit{Nzo a Ukisi}, meaning “house of spirit”; saints came to be called \textit{Moyo}, which translated literally meant the “souls of ancestors”; and the Trinity became \textit{“antu a tatu”} (three persons).\textsuperscript{55}

Thornton argues that Kongolese Christianity was widely accepted as valid even among European missionaries despite its inclusion of indigenous cultural aspects. He argues that contending against legitimacy of Kongolese Christianity is akin to establishing “Europe, perhaps unwittingly as the sole province of valid Christian expression.”\textsuperscript{56} Accordingly, all that mattered for the people of Kongo to be seen as Christian, “was self-identification which required a simple declaration of faith, such as might be found in the Creed, in which one confesses belief in the existence of a single God, His relationship with Jesus Christ, belief in the Mission and Resurrection of Jesus, and the Christian idea of the afterlife.”\textsuperscript{57}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{54}Thornton, “The Development of an African Catholic Church,” 155.
\item \textsuperscript{55}Heywood and Thornton, \textit{Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles}, 65.
\item \textsuperscript{56}Thornton, \textit{The Kongolese Saint Anthony}, 75.
\item \textsuperscript{57}Thornton, “The Development of an African Church,” 152.
\end{itemize}
Elite Christianity, the State-Sanctioned Church, Versus Kongo\-lese peasant Christianity

As noted earlier, complexities and nuances were intrinsic parts of the adoption of Christianity in Kongo. Thornton and Young argue that the adoption of Christianity in Kongo did not involve a holistic acceptance of Christianity. The people of Kongo received Christianity and interpreted it according to their own worldview. Their worldview was shaped and molded by various factors such as existing indigenous religions and social classes. The adoption of Christianity among the elite and peasants thus differed significantly.

Elite Christianity though, especially during the reign of Pedro IV, was not significantly different from the Capuchin version. This was due to the fact that the elite lived in urban areas where priests were present, and they underwent Portuguese education. An examination of Christianity practiced by King Pedro IV demonstrates that Christianity in the King’s court was more or less in harmony with European missionary standards. This king acquired the title “Defender of the Holy Faith” because of his zeal in restoring the stability of state-sanctioned Christianity in early eighteenth-century Kongo, after it had been upset by the Antonian movement. Moreover, it was during Pedro’s rule that state-sanctioned Christianity became firmly established as a state religion. Further, he was quite instrumental in crushing the Antonian movement, which had undermined the authority of the established church.\(^{58}\)

\(^{58}\)Hastings, “Christianity of Pedro IV,” 148.
Although the introduction of Christianity into Kongo did not occur under duress, the elites had more to gain by practicing state-sanctioned Christianity, as it would mean being on good terms with the king. Hastings, in *The Church in Africa 1450-1950*, outlines the major features of state-sanctioned Christianity that made it distinct from other forms of Christianity in the kingdom. The first pillar was adherence of the monarchy to this particular form of Christianity. Hastings maintains that from the moment Afonso killed his brother and took over the throne, royals never wavered in their public commitment to Christianity. Therefore, the monarchs constantly supported state sanctioned Christianity.\(^{59}\)

Next, Hastings mentions the unparalleled commitment of the Kongo ruling class, the *Mwassikongo*, to the state-sanctioned church. He maintains that the ruling class which was based in urban areas closely associated itself with the state-sanctioned church partly because of benefits that it would receive for being in favorable standing with the monarch. Other features closely associated with the state-sanctioned religion were: the churches located in the capital, along with particular rituals and priests. The kings frequently asked for more priests and support in building these churches from Portugal. Finally, the influence of the immigrant Portuguese community, along with its descendants, characterized this version of Christianity.\(^{60}\)

On the other hand, the manner in which the peasants’ form of worship differed from the elite’s is highlighted in the disparaging remarks that Capuchin missionaries in

\(^{59}\)Ibid.

Kongo made about peasant Christianity. For instance, Father da Gallo, writing of the kind of practices that still characterized Kongo peasant Christianity, compared the European missionaries to fathers who did not fulfill their duties. He wrote, “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.” Some of these “ancient superstitions” included conjure.

This is evident in the narrative of Father Pedro Tavares, who was struck by lightning as he lay in bed. Tavares had been looking for Francisco Casolla, who continued his healing practices as a *nganga* even though he had become Christian. *Ngangas* were known for the ability to manipulate the powers of *nkisi*. *Nkisi* is a ritual object invested with otherworldly power that enables it to influence special spiritual and material functions in the world. Additionally, the *nkisi* spirit itself has no physical form, but rather animates the host object, which could be a raffia bag or even a wooden sculpture. Young argues that the lack of priests and schools among the peasants in the villages allowed for the development of a distinct peasant Christianity that was less influenced by the Capuchins.

More than just embedding Christianity within their own cosmology, Kongo peasant localized Christianity in religious iconography. The work of Robert L. Wannyn,

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63 Ibid, 111.
64 Young, *Rituals of Resistance*, 57.
a Belgian ethnographer, is especially revealing about the indigenization of Christian iconography. While studying a series of metal objects from various ethnic groups in Kongo between 1931 and 1941, Wannyn noticed that all of the objects had Christian influence. Upon his questioning the natives as to when those items had been made, they consistently told him that they had been made between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries and had been passed down through generations. This period marked the time of the introduction and spread of Christianity within the Kongo Kingdom. It is noteworthy that these metal sculptures had African facial features and hairstyles. Wannyn further notes that in these icons, Christ was depicted as Kongoese in form and dress.  

Nevertheless, despite the distinctive differences between the two systems of religion, Christian principles manifested themselves widely in the lives of Kongoese peasants. They accepted sacraments of the Catholic Church such as baptism, marriage, and last rites, and they confessed their sins to the priests. When it came to nuptials, Christian marriage was deemed unbreakable. In fact, couples would live together on a trial basis, before undergoing the Christian marriage that finally bound them forever. Conversely, the glaring differences in modes and motives of worship between the two social classes no doubt caused tension – tension that became apparent in the emergence of the Antonian movement.

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Donna Beatriz and the Antonian movement

The Antonian movement of 1704-1706, led by a young aristocrat woman named Donna Beatriz, proved to be quite influential. The movement surfaced during tumultuous times in Kongo, when the land was filled with civil strife and unrest. It emerged as an expression of resistance against oppressive political authority, and it attempted to redefine Christianity into terms familiar to the majority of Kongo peasants.67 The established church did not cater to the needs of the common people of Kongo; it was more or less a tool for the ruling elite. In contrast, Donna Beatriz appealed to the religion that was accepted by the majority of people in the Kongo Kingdom, which was peasant Christianity.

The Antonian movement started with the claims of a twenty-year-old woman named Donna Beatriz Kimpa Vita that she was possessed by the Catholic Saint Anthony. In 1704 she lay very sick with high fever, and nobody knew what was ailing her. However, seven days into her sickness, she had a vision in which a man dressed in a Capuchin monk habit appeared to her and said, “I am Saint Anthony, firstborn son of the Faith and of Saint Francis, I have been sent from God to your head to preach to the people. You are to move the restoration of the Kingdom of Kongo forward, and you must tell all who threaten you that dire punishments from God await them.” With those words

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the saint moved towards her and possessed her body, and she instantly recovered from her illness.  

Turbulence in Kongo was not novel. The Kongo succession system was not hereditary, but elective. Therefore as soon as the king died, the royal electors came in and chose a successor. More often than not, the succession process ended up in chaos. After the 1665 battle of Mbwila against the Portuguese, in which the ruling King D. Antonio and many of the powerful nobles capable of claiming central power were killed, the Kongo elite involved themselves in succession disputes. These disputes plunged the country into a series of civil wars that continued until the reign of King Pedro IV (who was in power during the Antonian movement) beginning in 1695.

Donna Beatriz’s movement gained much popularity because of what it stood for. Although she was born into an elite family, her Christianity and movement targeted the peasants. In all her journeys preaching judgment against the Kongo elite and in her endeavor to inhabit Sao Salvador as a means of reuniting Kongo, Donna Beatriz was accompanied by a large group of peasants. They were willing to abandon their entire livelihoods for her, mainly because they had been the worst casualties of political

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68 Ibid, 10.

69 Thornton, The Kingdom of Kongo, xiii.

instability that had become the norm in Kongo. They were ready for change, and Donna Beatriz’s movement offered hope.  

A close look at Donna Beatriz’s movement reveals more than simply religious interest. Rather than being the motivating factor, religion in this case was used as a platform to propagate other agendas. As a woman in a patriarchal society, it would not be too farfetched to argue that a claim to otherworldliness gave Donna Beatriz the authority she needed to execute her mission. Similar arguments can be made for a related movement led by an elderly woman named Apollonia Mafuta who also claimed to have received a message from the Virgin Mary. The message was that judgment was soon to come upon Kongo if the king did not reoccupy the royal city, Sao Salvador.

The Kongolese peasants used Christianity both to satisfy their spiritual needs and to deal with crisis. During the period of the Antonian movement, the prevailing need was to speak against the greed exhibited by the elites. The state-sanctioned religion would not have provided the necessary avenue because it belonged to the elite, who were the root of the problem. Donna Beatriz exploited this void and was successful because she capitalized on the already existing tension between peasant Christianity and the state-sanctioned Church.

One of the main aims of the Antonian movement was to modify the history of Christianity so as to put the people of Kongo in the middle of it. According to Donna

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Beatriz, Jesus had been born in Sao Salvador the royal city, the true Bethlehem, and baptized at Nsundi, in River Zaire.\textsuperscript{73} In other words, she was telling her people that their royal city had divine approval, and it was their right to reoccupy it. Additionally, Donna Beatriz saw the alienation of the Kongolese peasants by the Capuchin missionaries.\textsuperscript{74}

Another dream Donna Beatriz hoped to realize was the reoccupation of Sao Salvador, the former capital city of Kongo that had been abandoned as a result of frequent strife between the different rivals to the throne. Saint Anthony declared that Kongo would come under divine punishment if it ignored the call for Sao Salvador to be inhabited. As soon as Donna Beatriz claimed possession by Saint Anthony, she set out to visit King Pedro, who was delaying the resettlement of Sao Salvador. Reoccupation of the city would mean the reuniting and subsequent stability of Kongo. It would mean an end to the frequent succession disputes that had come to characterize the kingdom. In this way, the Antonian movement presented hope of peace and stability to the peasants. When King Pedro showed reluctance to reoccupy Sao Salvador, Donna Beatriz and her followers went and set up camp in that formerly abandoned city. In a very short period of time, Donna Beatriz became a powerful and influential person.\textsuperscript{75}

Her popularity did not last, though, because she had powerful enemies in the established church. As mentioned before, the ruling elite had much to gain by adhering closely to the state-sanctioned form of Christianity and maintaining the status quo in the

\textsuperscript{73}Hastings, \textit{The Church in Africa 1450-1950}, 107.

\textsuperscript{74}Thornton, \textit{The Kongolese Saint Anthony}, 110.

\textsuperscript{75}Hastings, “The Christianity of Pedro IV,”152.
kingdom. Thus Donna Beatriz’s claims of her being a saint and Jesus being born in Sao Salvador clashed with the established church and the ruling elite. Father Gallo exerted pressure on the king to have Donna Beatriz arrested. King Pedro was caught between a rock and a hard place because he did not want to lose either the popular following that Donna Beatriz had or his camaraderie with Father Gallo.\textsuperscript{76}

The woes of Donna Beatriz began when she became pregnant by her close companion, Joao Barross. She was captured by the king’s officials and brought to trial. King Pedro was hesitant in executing Donna Beatriz and her companion because he knew it would worsen the already unstable situation in his kingdom. However, King Pedro caved under the pressure from da Gallo and his cohorts, and put Donna Beatriz and her counterpart Barros to death. By killing Donna Beatriz the king had hoped that he would repress the Antonian movement, but that was not to be. Its vibrancy kept on growing especially, in Sao Salvador where its ruler Chibenga had been friendly to the Antonians. In 1709, two years after Donna Beatriz’s death, King Pedro IV attacked Sao Salvador, the main stronghold of the Antonians. He won the battle and reoccupied it.\textsuperscript{77}

Frequent wars within the Kingdom of Kongo not only led to further instability, but also led to the capture of innumerable people who were eventually sold to European slave traders. In all of these wars, people that suffered the worst casualties were non-elites who lived in the rural areas. Subsequently, many of those who were captured and

\textsuperscript{76}Thornton, \textit{The Kongolese Saint Anthony}, 169-171.

\textsuperscript{77}Ibid, 199.
sent to the New World as slaves were peasants. Thornton, in “War, the state, and religious norms,” makes similar comments concerning the class composition of Akan speakers who ended up in the New World as slaves.

Thornton proposes that the elite, noble by birth, in sixteenth-century Akan society, embraced conservative norms and stability. This was because theirs was a class of hereditary nobles that ruled most towns. Thus they embraced a society where everybody knew and accepted their status within the society. 78 On the other hand, those who were kept in socially subordinate positions leaned more towards change. This group of people was constantly trying to better their status through acquiring wealth or by challenging the existing hierarchy. Thus the conflict between these norms was reflected in the politics of the society such that those people who came to America “were drawn from the most disturbed and changing elements of the Akan society.” 79 While not all of the people who ended up in America were peasants, it is safe to argue that the majority were.

Kongolese peasants thus boarded slave ships and found themselves in the New World, where they continued to rely on their religious heritage to deal with the new challenges of enslavement. The distinct manner in which they had adopted, practiced, and utilized Christianity in the Kongo Kingdom defined their reaction to Christianity in the


79 Ibid, 187.
New World. In Kongo, Kongolese peasants had encountered Christianity, willingly embraced it and adapted it to fit their cosmology. In this way, they had made Christianity practical. Similarly, in the New World, these Kongolese would continue to draw on their Christian backgrounds, not as just as dead vestiges of their pasts, but as living traditions that grew and evolved along with their new circumstances. Once again, the remarkably adaptable and versatile Kongolese slaves made their Christianity applicable under the distressing conditions of enslavement.

Since most of the people captured and sold as a result of civil strife in Kongo were peasants, it is most likely that the peasant form of Christianity was the main avenue through which enslaved Africans from Kongo resisted their enslavement in the New World. While significant research has been done on the influence of Kongolese Christianity on resistance in South Carolina, little has been done to specify which form of Christianity impacted this resistance. The following chapter discusses the influence of Kongolese peasant Christianity on resistance in South Carolina in the eighteenth century.

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80 Young, Rituals of Resistance, 11.
81 Ibid, 81.
Chapter 2: Kongolese peasant Christianity, Spirituality and Resistance in Eighteenth-Century Low Country South Carolina

“We don’t lak slavery. We start to jine de Spanish in Florida. We surrender but we not whipped yet and we ‘is not converted.’”

— George Cato, a great grandson of the late Cato leader of the Stono rebellion.83

Sidney Mintz and Richard Price, in *The Birth of African American Culture*, contend that enslaved Africans from different ethnicities were deliberately randomized in such a way that it was impossible to find ethnic clusters among slaves in different regions of the New World. They further suggest that slave traders and owners took this measure to prevent the unification and subsequent rebellions of slaves.84 Nevertheless, while slave owners might have truly intended to mix up slaves from different ethnicities to prevent uprisings, recent research demonstrates that this was not always achievable.

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Michael Gomez reveals that unique importation patterns allowed for specific ethnic enclaves to develop in North America. Relying on Philip Curtin’s earlier importation records, Gomez points out that Igbo speakers dominated in Virginia and Maryland, West Central Africans were the majority in South Carolina and Georgia, while Senegambians, together with Fon-Ewe-Yoruba, formed the foundational group in Louisiana.\textsuperscript{85} The Du Bois institute database of the Atlantic slave trade has recently supported Gomez’s findings; not only does it give numbers of slaves transported from Atlantic Africa during particular periods, but it also provides specific ports of embarkation and disembarkation. For instance it demonstrates that between 1700 and 1800, about 33 percent of all slaves imported into South Carolina were from the West Central African region, 19 percent were from the Senegambia, 12 percent were from the Gold Coast and 13.9 percent came from Sierra Leone. Additionally, enslaved Africans from the Bight of Biafra made up 10 percent of slaves in the same period.\textsuperscript{86} The available data makes it possible to trace the voyages of Kongoese slaves, subjects of this inquiry, to slave plantations in South Carolina during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.


\textsuperscript{86}David Eltis, Stephen Behrendt, David Richardson, and Herbert Klein, eds., \textit{The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-ROM} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
Kongolese Peasants in South Carolina in the late seventeenth and eighteenth century

As many as 56 percent of slaves brought from Africa to South Carolina between 1680 and 1740 came from West Central Africa. Although West Central African slaves were drawn from various regions including Kongo, Luanda and Angola, Thornton effectively demonstrates that the majority came from the Kongo kingdom. He asserts that while the Royal African Company conducting the English trade in this period limited its operation to the Kabinda port in the Northern part of the region, it relied on the bordering southern territories for slaves. Thornton suggests that this arrangement made it more probable that many West Central Africans slaves would be Kongolese. Consequently, it makes sense to examine Kongolese cultural influence on South Carolina specifically, as opposed to general West Central African cultural contributions. This chapter explores how the slaves’ cultural background as Kongolese peasant Christians shaped and influenced resistance in the New World in the early eighteenth century.

The first attempt to occupy South Carolina in 1526 was undertaken by a Spanish expedition that consisted of at least 500 people. Nonetheless, this attempt failed due to food shortages. The British would not successfully settle in South Carolina until the 1670s. Many of those who eventually settled in South Carolina originally came from Barbados, where sugar production had intensified. Land had become scarce, and many

\[87\text{Eltis, Behrendt, Richardson, Klein, eds., }\textit{The Trans- Atlantic Slave Trade}, \text{ 1999.}\]

had been forced to migrate to other regions to find more land. One of these regions was South Carolina. The English monarchy encouraged people to settle in this region by offering cheap land.

At the beginning of the occupation, the colonists in South Carolina engaged in different economic activities such as cattle keeping and meat exportation, but not rice cultivation. By the end of the 1720s, however, rice and indigo had become staple crops which required much labor. Earlier on during the settlement of the colony, migrant farmers brought their slaves with them from Barbados, but soon realized that this labor was insufficient. This need for more labor led to an increase of direct importation of slaves from Africa in the early eighteenth century. 89

The increased need of slaves in early eighteenth-century South Carolina coincided with significant events in the Kongo Kingdom. In 1709, two years after Donna Beatriz’s death, King Pedro IV attacked Sao Salvador, the main stronghold of the Antonian movement in the Kongo Kingdom. He won the battle and reoccupied the city. This war, along with many other disputes, not only led to further instability within the kingdom, but also led to the capture of innumerable people who were eventually sold to European slave traders. Many of those captured and sold were peasants who belonged to the Antonian movement. With the continuous strife and civil wars rampant in the Kongo Kingdom, there was a consistent supply of slaves to the New World from this region. 90

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90 Thornton, The Kongoese Saint Anthony, 199.
Kongolese influence in South Carolina did not, by any means, go unnoticed by white slave owners, visitors or even priests. Written accounts by these observers reveal how Kongolese influence was perceived within the colony. Using these sources, this section focuses on how Kongolese Africans continued to draw upon their cultural backgrounds, and specifically Kongolese peasant Christianity, in coping with enslavement during the early eighteenth century. First, though, it is necessary to examine how Kongolese peasant Christianity was evident in South Carolina.

Kongolese Peasant Christianity in South Carolina

Kongolese peasant Christianity in the Kingdom of Kongo developed quite distinctively from the elite form of Christianity. This was due to the low numbers of priests and lack of formal Portuguese schooling. As a result, peasant Christianity was under constant criticism from the European clergy. In effect, some of these missionaries regarded Kongolese peasant Christianity as absolutely unacceptable. The general missionary disapproval of Kongolese peasant Christianity echoes Spanish Catholic priests’ comments concerning Africans who ran away from South Carolina to Florida. These priests “remarked in horror that some presumably Catholic refugees could not understand Catholic doctrine…and still prayed in their native tongue.” Therefore the parish priests required them to be instructed and baptized anew. Thornton argues that

91 Young, Rituals of Resistance, 57.
92 Hastings, “Christianity of Pedro IV,” 147.
the elite in the Kongo Kingdom were literate, multi-lingual and in close contact with priests on whom they relied for their religious instruction.\textsuperscript{94} Thus, it is more likely that the group of people that missionaries in Florida were referring to belonged to the peasant class.

The adoption and practice of Christianity among peasants in Kongo rarely involved a departure from their old religious worldview. Instead, this process was more inclusive in nature, allowing them to incorporate Christian doctrines and practices into their cosmology. Young elaborates, “Being baptized, especially in village sectors did not preclude one from engaging in indigenous rituals, observing prior practices, or holding fast to other beliefs.”\textsuperscript{95} This means that Kongolese peasant Christianity included other ritual aspects of the Kongo spiritual worldview such as the use of icons, involvement in burial rites and interactions with the spirit world by means of baptism and conjure.

Young, in \textit{Rituals of Resistance}, demonstrates how these aspects of Kongolese culture were manifest among slaves in South Carolina. Baptism was one such area in which the Kongolese peasant worldview was evident. This does not mean that the elite in Kongo did not participate in baptism, but rather that the perceptions that accompanied the baptism were different for peasant Christians. To illustrate, in seventeenth-century Kongo, Catholic baptism involved a priest placing a small amount of salt on the tongue,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{93}Ibid, 69.
  \item \textsuperscript{94}Thornton, “African Dimensions of the Stono Rebellion,”1106, 1107.
  \item \textsuperscript{95}Young, \textit{Rituals of Resistance}, 59.
\end{itemize}
followed by holy water. For the rural Kongolese, the most important aspect of that ritual was the salt which they believed protected them from evil spirits. Thus, when missionaries in the same period attempted to administer baptism without salt they failed. The situation led da Gallo, a Capuchin missionary, to state that these peasants rarely left their “pagan” customs even after baptism. Da Gallo’s reaction to peasant Christianity was in stark contrast to his reaction towards elite Christianity. He had faith in it, so much so that he counted on his friend the King, Pedro IV, and his court to advance what he considered true Christianity in Kongo by fighting against the peasants and their Antonian movement.

Young acknowledges that not every enslaved African in South Carolina who was baptized understood the conjunction between Christian baptism and Kongolese rituals. However, he notes that in baptism one found all the signs that connected it with Christian sacrament and Kongo notions of collective spiritual worldview. He further argues that the baptismal ritual in the slave south operated as a complex and variously marked ritual. He opines that even where rituals of baptism involved immersion, as opposed to the Catholic practice of sprinkling, baptism presented an opportunity in which these enslaved people could call upon their cosmological and symbolic notions first developed in Atlantic Africa. Young further proposes that water immersion baptism still held great

\[96^{\text{Ibid, 52.}}\]
\[97^{\text{Ibid., 53.}}\]
\[98^{\text{Hastings, “The Christianity of Pedro IV,” 152.}}\]
\[99^{\text{Young, Rituals of Resistance, 92.}}\]
appeal to the enslaved in South Carolina, since in their worldview baptismal waters were the boundary between this world and the next. Thus, even though there was an absence of formal similarities between African water rituals and Christian baptism in South Carolina, certain “theoretical and symbolic connections persisted.”

Kongolese peasant Christianity was an African religion, and just like most African religions it was change-oriented and inclusive, allowing for the insertion and multiple readings of various rituals present within their cosmology. To illustrate, Young complicates the use of the cross among the Kongolese slaves. He states that the presence of the cross in South Carolina could act as both an invocation of Christianity and a marker that symbolized the junction of this world and the next. Moreover, he suggests that the use of the cross among the enslaved Africans “carried simultaneous also alternate meanings for the black faithful whether inside or outside the text of Christian worship.”

Multiple interpretations of religious icons were nothing new to Kongolese slaves. Young posits that even in the Kongo Kingdom the cross had different meanings for different groups. He writes, “The cross likely stood as a symbol of dual significance from which participants could draw a variety of meanings, both Christian and non-Christian…if members of the Kongo elite adopted Christianity and the cross as a politico-religious tool…Donna Beatriz saw the same icon as another idol for eradication.”

100 Ibid, 80-81.

101 Ibid, 88, 185.

102 Ibid, 88.
adds that even those Kongolese slaves who were not Christians probably remembered the various uses, both Christian and non-Christian, of the cross in the Kingdom of Kongo.\footnote{Ibid.}

Kongolese peasant Christianity and the adoption of Anglicanism in South Carolina

Thornton demonstrates that the adoption of Christianity in the Kingdom of Kongo was inclusive as opposed to exclusive. This means that the Kongolese adapted Christianity or its various tenets to suit their worldview. Therefore, if Kongolese peasant Christianity was built on the premise of inclusiveness it is likely that inclusiveness was one of its inherent characteristics.\footnote{Thornton, “The Development of an African Catholic Church,” 153, 154.} This is well-illustrated by the pattern of adoption of Anglicanism in South Carolina. Annette Laing convincingly argues that the low numbers recorded of Africans who adopted Anglicanism in South Carolina in the early eighteenth century is not indicative of their general perception towards this religion. She asserts that as the majority of enslaved Africans in South Carolina had prior encounters with Christianity in their homelands and had adapted it to suit their worldview, the adoption of Anglicanism in this region would thus follow the same pattern.\footnote{Annette Laing, “Heathens and Infidels? African Christianization and Anglicanism in the South Carolina Low Country, 1700-1750,” Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation 12, no. 2, (2002): 209.}

Laing advances the thought that scholars who explore the failure of the Anglican Church to convert African people lay emphasis on the points of divergence between
African and Anglican religious forms. She suggests that it is more helpful to focus on the convergent points between African spirituality and Anglican Christianity. Laing proposes that for Kongolese Christians, Anglicanism would have been more similar to than different from their own religion, in that it would offer familiar rituals in the form of baptism and communion.\footnote{Ibid, 210.}

Young asserts that because of the heavy Protestant presence in South Carolina, it is doubtful that a significant black Catholic community would have developed. While his argument is true, the inclusive nature and flexibility of Kongolese peasant Christianity enabled it to continue in South Carolina across different historical periods. In the earlier part of the eighteenth century, many South Carolina slaves, especially those from the Kongo Kingdom, chose to join the Anglican Church, which they found familiar to them.\footnote{Young, Rituals of Resistance, 70.} Anglican missionaries seem to have recognized this phenomenon.

In early 1710, a small group of parishioners in South Carolina approached Francis Le Jau, an Anglican missionary for St. James Parish. They asked him if he could admit them to Holy Communion. He hesitated because they were “born and baptized among the Portuguese.” He wanted them to renounce the errors of the Popish Church before he could allow them into the sacrament. Le Jau further recognized that although these people were Catholic by background, their religion was not the same Catholicism practiced by a
European Catholic. Because of these factors, Le Jau, “found himself seeking a balance between welcoming people, white or black, into his church and yet remaining wary of those who might alter it from within.”

Kongolese peasant Christianity and resistance in eighteenth-century South Carolina

Peter H. Wood in *Black Majority*, discusses the various instances in which enslaved Africans expressed discontent at their enslavement. He maintains that enslaved Africans reacted in diverse ways given their different backgrounds and experiences. For example, one way in which slaves resisted was by use of poison. Wood notes that slaves from West Africa had the experience and expertise in the use of herbs either to cure or poison. He notes that where there was a large concentration of slaves from West Africa, incidents of poisoning against white slave owners were rampant.

Taking flight proved to be one the most popular methods of resistance. From the 1720s the Spaniards in the colony of Florida were known to harbor runaway slaves from South Carolina. Clearly, this resulted in strained relationships between the two colonies. The situation was made worse by an act passed by the Spanish crown in 1733, guaranteeing freedom to any slave that made it to Spanish territory. Spanish Florida was Catholic, and it is worth mentioning that the majority of the slaves reported to have

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108 Francis Le Jau to the Secretary, February 1, 1710, February 19, 1710, September 18, 1711, quoted in, Laing, “Heathens and Infidels,” 204.


arrived at St. Augustine’s castle were from Kongo. Jane Landers notes that throughout the eighteenth century, consistent waves of West Central Africans continued to flow into Florida through Charleston and Savannah.\footnote{Jane Landers, \textit{Black Society in Spanish Florida} (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 26, 131.}

Young suggests that one of the reasons that this offer of freedom was so appealing to the Kongo slaves was because it also entailed a chance for them to practice their religion.\footnote{Young, \textit{Rituals of Resistance}, 69, 70.} This would have been especially appealing to them given that South Carolina was mainly a Protestant region. One of the descendants of the Stono rebellion leaders, George Cato, on being interviewed concerning the rebellion reported what his great grandfather had declared, “we don’t lak slavery. We start to jine de Spanish in Florida. We surrender but we not whipped yet and we ‘is not converted.’” Mark Smith, in “Remembering Mary, Shaping a Revolt,” interprets the phrase ‘we is not converted’ to mean that they had resisted converting to Protestantism in favor of Catholicism in Spanish Florida.\footnote{Smith, “Remembering Mary, Shaping Revolt,” 526.}

Taking flight went hand-in-hand with another form of resistance; insurrections. No doubt individual acts of violence had been reported throughout South Carolina during the early eighteenth century. None of those acts caused as much anxiety as the Stono rebellion of 1739. As noted earlier, different slaves of different origins responded to
enslavement in different ways. For the participants of the Stono rebellion, their religion was central to their resistance.\textsuperscript{114}

**Kongolese peasant Christianity and the 1739 Stono Rebellion**

In the early hours of Sunday, the ninth day of September, 1739, a group of twenty or so slaves met at the Stono River about twenty miles from Charleston. They met after breaking into a local store, stealing guns, killing five white people, and then burning a house. This was the start of what came to be known as the Stono rebellion. This group of slaves continued to grow as the day progressed. They were intent on killing anyone that attempted to prevent them from getting to St. Augustine in Florida.\textsuperscript{115}

Nevertheless, the rebels would not realize their goal. At around eleven in the morning, by pure coincidence, William Bull, the then acting governor of South Carolina and four other men were returning from Granville County when they encountered the rebelling slaves. The slaves started pursuing Bull and his companions, who were fortunate enough to escape with their lives. After they had fled to safety, the governor and his men then raised an alarm and alerted the colony militia.

By the time the militia arrived at the scene, the group of rebelling Africans had swollen to between sixty and 100 slaves. They had camped at a particular field and, “set to dancing, singing and beating drums to call other Negros to them.” Fighting ensued

\textsuperscript{114}Thornton, *The Kongolese Saint Anthony*, 211.

\textsuperscript{115}“An Account of the Negroe Insurrection in South Carolina,” in *Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt*, ed. Mark M. Smith (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 2005), 15.
between the militia and the rebelling Africans. The Africans fought bravely but were no match for the armed forces. Many Africans were shot to death on the field while others were executed later. At the end of it all about seventy people were dead.

The Stono rebellion sparked varied reactions from the white slave-owning community in and out of South Carolina. The reactions ranged from letters to editors of newspapers, to passing of severe laws against slaves, to public debates about South Carolina slavery in general. It is from these responses that we get a glimpse of who participated in the revolt. In one account, the narrator states that among the Stono rebels there were slaves from “Angola where the Portugueze have settlement and the Jesuits have a Mission and School in that kingdom and many Thousands of the Negroes there profess the Roman Catholic religion.” This is important because looking at their backgrounds makes it evident how religion might have influenced their decision to rebel against enslavement and to seek refuge in Spanish Florida.

Scholars have been grappling with the question of why the slaves rebelled on that particular day and what factors shaped the revolt. Peter Wood’s *Black Majority* gave the first detailed account of the Stono rebellion. Wood suggests that the timing of this rebellion was determined by a number of factors. The first was that the colony had been weakened immensely because of the smallpox epidemic that killed more than six people a day. Second was the newspaper publication of the Security Act in mid-August, which stipulated that all white men were to carry weapons to church on Sundays. This law was

\[116\text{Ibid, 14.}\]
to be enforced on September 29th 1739. Wood adds that another factor might have been news of simmering hostilities between England and Spain, which had reached South Carolina by the time of the rebellion.\textsuperscript{117}

Thornton’s “The African dimension of the Stono Rebellion” provides a new approach to the interpretation of that rebellion. He highlights the African background of these rebels. Thornton contends that while the immediate causes of the revolt lay in the horrible conditions of enslavement, several elements in the accounts of the Stono rebellion point to an African background, which shaped the nature of the revolt. He cites several features of the rebellion to make his point. Thornton reiterates that contemporary sources clearly identified Stono rebels as being from Kongo. He identifies their use of dance and drums as indications of their Kongoese background. Thornton suggests that the slave’s ability to use guns and to effectively engage the militia may have been due to their employment as soldiers back in Kongo. He further suggests that the rebels engaged in dance as a reflection of the African military culture that utilized dance as a war drill.\textsuperscript{118}

Nevertheless, Thornton lays emphasis on the rebels’ Christian backgrounds as the main catalyst of their revolt. Citing contemporary sources on the rebellion, he states that the Stono rebels were especially susceptible to Spanish propaganda because they could speak “its Iberian sister language,” Portuguese. He thus suggests that Spanish agents were

\textsuperscript{117}Wood, \textit{Black Majority}, 308-312.

\textsuperscript{118}Thornton, “African dimensions of the Stono rebellion,” 1103, 1108.
quite likely able to communicate with at least some Kongoese slaves, who, in turn, communicated with others who did not speak Portuguese.\footnote{Ibid, 1107, 1108.}

Thornton makes significant points about the Kongoese origins of the Stono rebels. However, his suggestion that because they spoke Portuguese they were more likely to understand Spanish propaganda slightly weakens his otherwise brilliant discussion. This is in view of the fact that Portuguese and Spanish are not always mutually intelligible. Additionally, if the majority of Stono rebels were actually made up of peasants it is highly unlikely that they spoke Portuguese, let alone understood Spanish. Besides, the Spaniards would have had no means of knowing who among the slaves understood Spanish, especially since they did not have the luxury of being able to ask without raising suspicion.

In an attempt to prove that the core of Stono rebels was Kongoese and knew how to use guns, Thornton makes an important observation regarding the class composition of this group. He states that the instability that engulfed the Kongo Kingdom called for a widespread enlistment of people as soldiers, and many were recruited from the peasant ranks. He notes:

Significant changes in the organization and training of armies that were occurring at the same time had increased the number of soldiers trained in the use of firearms, thus increasing the likelihood that such soldiers would be enslaved. These ex-soldiers might contrast with the untrained villagers often netted by slave raids, judicial enslavement, or other means by which slaves ended up being sold to the Americas.\footnote{Ibid, 1103.}
Thus, it makes sense to assert that the majority of Stono rebels were mostly peasants, and thus less likely to speak and understand Spanish. However, since these slaves lived among the British, it is more likely that they learned how to speak English. As an example, Le Jau, an Anglican missionary in South Carolina, wrote, “I have in this parish a few negro slaves and (sic) were born and baptized among the Portuguese but speak very good English.”\textsuperscript{121} This would seem to indicate that the Spanish agents could probably speak English too.

When the royal edict of 1733 giving freedom to all English slaves who reached St Augustine was proclaimed, Carolina planters complained that it had been proclaimed publicly. They protested that the Spaniards made the declaration by “Beat of Drum round the Town of St Augustine (where many Negroes belonging to English vessels that carried thither Supplies of provisions had the Opportunity of hearing it.)”\textsuperscript{122} Since the proclamation was aimed towards English slaves, it likely that it was made in English, giving rise to the planters’ concern.

Smith, in “Remembering Mary, Shaping a Revolt,” also revisits the Stono rebellion, giving it further religious interpretation. He examines the timing of the Stono rebellion in order to reevaluate the reasons that led slaves to rebel on that Sunday. Smith, relying on secondary works on Kongo, demonstrates the Virgin Mary was central to Kongolesse Christianity and that Saturdays in Kongo were considered holy days dedicated

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\textsuperscript{122}Landers, \textit{Black Society in Spanish Florida}, 33.
to the Madonna. He thus proposes that if the Virgin was important to the Kongolese back home, then it is likely that she continued to play a central role among Kongolese Christians in the New World. Consequently, Smith suggests that enslaved Africans revolted on that particular day because of the “specific veneration of the virgin Mary, their general commitment to and understanding of that calendar developed in Kongo.”

Moreover, Smith contends that while scholars have focused on the iconography of the revolt, no one has considered the use of drums and white cloth in relation to their close identification with Mary. He argues that the color white was closely associated with the Virgin Mary in Kongo. First he points out she had a cathedral made of mud which was whitened inside and outside dedicated to her. He also refers to the Duarte Lopez rendition of Dom Afonso’s fifteenth-century victory over his brother, which attributes Afonso’s victory to the appearance of a lady in white.

Smith disagrees with Thornton, who views the use of drums by Stono rebels from a purely military point of view. He contends that even more so than war, drums in the Kingdom of Kongo were associated with Holy Saturdays, “the day of the Madonna.” Smith further adds that more generally, the Kongolese beat their drums following mass and catechism. He thus claims that by arming themselves with cloth on the day of the Virgin’s nativity, the insurgents invoked broad memories of Mary.


124Ibid, 525.

125Ibid, 524, 525, 530.
While Smith’s argument is definitely thought provoking, like Thornton’s it seems to hinge on the literacy of Stono rebels. Smith contends that the leader of the Stono rebellion was literate and was thus able to determine the date that coincided with the English calendar. Smith anticipates this criticism by arguing that even if the Stono rebels were non-literate they would still have been able to keep dates. To prove his point, he cites the case of Native Indians who kept dates despite being non-literate. This, however, is not a fitting example, as he does not demonstrate that the Kongolese had developed a non-literate manner to remind them of their liturgical dates. Since his argument hinges on the Kongolese continuing to practice what they did in Kongo, he does not satisfactorily prove how non-literate Kongolese kept track of liturgical dates in Kongo without the help of lay catechists.

Conversely, as peasants and non-literate people made up the majority of slaves from Kongo, they most likely formed bulk of the Stono rebels. Additionally, since this group of people still had in their memories events that had taken place less than three decades before in the Kongo Kingdom, it is likely that they remembered how they had used their religion to respond to crisis back then.\(^{126}\) This religion had provided hope in the face of an unforgiving and greedy elite back in Kongo, and in the New World these slaves would use it again to cope with enslavement. Thus Spanish Florida’s offer of both physical and religious freedom was more than welcome, and it did not matter if their leaders were literate or not – their faith was what mattered.

Admittedly, not every slave from Kongo managed to take flight to Spanish Florida. To the contrary, the majority remained in Low Country South Carolina. How did they cope in a colony that was primarily Protestant? Did their religion simply die out?

The following chapter examines how the flexible and inclusive nature of Kongolese peasant Christianity allowed it to form the basis of African Protestant religions that emerged in South Carolina in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Further, it will examine how the interplay between Kongolese peasant Christianity and black churches shaped slave resistance in South Carolina during the same period.
Chapter 3: The Denmark Vesey Conspiracy: Retracing Kongoese Peasant Christianity Influence on Resistance in Antebellum South Carolina

“One more Valiant soldier here,
One more Valiant soldier here
To help me bear de cross,
    O hail, Mary, hail!
    Hail, Mary, Hail!
To help me bear de cross”

—— A Negro Spiritual

On May 30, 1822 an infamous slave plot, which came to be known as the Denmark Vesey conspiracy, was uncovered. The plot was discovered when one house slave could not conceal from his master the information he had received about the planned revolt. Peter Prioleau testified that he had been approached by another slave,

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William Paul, who asked him to join in the plot. Peter reported, “he (William) remarked, why, we are determined to shake off our bondage… many have joined and that if you go with me, I will show you the man, who has the list of names who will take your name down.” The information provided by this slave led to the opening of an investigation that revealed an intricate plot meant to destroy Charleston.

The investigation revealed that Denmark Vesey, a free man, was at the head of the conspiracy. He had enlisted the help of Rolla and Ned, Governor Thomas Bennett’s slaves, Mrs. Purcell’s Jack, Mr. Poyas’ Peter, Mr. Pritchard’s Gullah Jack and, finally, Mr. Gell’s Monday. These principal officers were to help Vesey to recruit more people for the insurrection. After a few changes in the dates of the revolt, they had settled on Sunday night, June 16, 1822. However, the insurrection never materialized, as the plot was leaked to the authorities. While the conspirators had meant to go on with the rebellion on June 16 as planned, it was not possible because there was heavy patrol out on the streets that prevented any assemblage.

Peter’s confession led to the arrest of Peter Poyas and Mingo Harth. However, because of their calm demeanor, they were released. It was not until two other informers came forward that colonial authorities launched a massive investigation. At the end of the investigation, 135 people had been arrested. Out of those arrested, thirty-five were found


129 Ibid, 34.

130 Killens, ed., The Trial Records, 13; Starobin, ed., Denmark Vesey, 17, 60, 63.
guilty and executed, thirty-one were banished from the United States, thirty-eight were arrested but released after questioning, while twenty-seven more were tried and acquitted.\footnote{Starobin, ed., Denmark Vesey, 60.}

**African Methodist Episcopal Church in South Carolina and the Vesey Conspiracy**

Denmark Vesey was incredibly cautious in the selection of his main officers. This caution did not escape the notice of the presiding magistrates, Lionel H. Kennedy and Thomas Parker. They noted, “The attention of the leader to the most minute particulars is worthy of observation.” They commented that in the selection of his leaders, Vesey showed great perception and sound judgment. They wrote:

> Rolla was plausible, and possessed uncommon self-possession; bold and ardent, he was not to be deterred from his purpose by danger. Ned’s appearance indicated that he was a man of firm nerves, and desperate courage. Peter was intrepid and resolute, true to his engagements, and cautious in observing secrecy where it was necessary; …Gullah Jack was regarded as a sorcerer, and as such he was feared by natives of Africa, who believe in witchcraft. Monday was firm, resolute, discreet, and intelligent.\footnote{Ibid, 27, 16, 17.}

From the above description, it is obvious that the magistrates thought that Vesey chose his officials on the basis of their outstanding qualities. However, the ethnic backgrounds of Vesey’s principal conspirators seem to have escaped the magistrates’ attention. Stuckey convincingly argues that Vesey’s selection was based on the ethnicities of the
rebels, and that it was designed to maximize cooperation among these ethnic groups. Vesey recognized the importance of drawing the support of the major ethnic groups in South Carolina to succeed.

Their ethnicity notwithstanding, a common feature among these leaders was their membership in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church, also known as the African Church, in South Carolina. Bishop Morris Brown formed the AME church in South Carolina in 1818. The decision came after black Methodist leaders felt humiliated by a decision made by the church to revoke their authority in handling financial matters on behalf of fellow black worshipers. Leading over a thousand black people, Brown seceded from the Methodist church and formed the African church in South Carolina. Membership in the African Church, however, was not restricted to the main conspirators. Testimonies in the trials revealed that the majority of conspiracy participants were members of the African Church, and that much of the conspiratorial activity took place in and around the church. In fact, in his testimony against Mingo Harth, a slave, William testified that Mingo had said, “all those belonging to the African Church are engaged in the insurrection from the country to the town.” Thus, the church emerged as a key player in the Vesey conspiracy.

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133 Stuckey, Slave Culture, 52.


135 Killens, ed., The Trial Record, 14, xvii.

136 Starobin, ed., Denmark Vesey, 26.
While historians of the Vesey conspiracy generally agree that the African Church and Christianity in general were central to its conception, they often categorize Christianity as a European religion. Accordingly, they equate the adoption of Christianity among enslaved people to evidence of acculturation. One such scholar, Mullin, insists that it was not until the age of the “assimilates” that enslaved Africans succeeded in carrying out effective resistance efforts.\textsuperscript{137} Others, such as Stuckey, have argued that Christianity “provided a protective exterior beneath which more complex, less familiar (to outsiders) religious principles and practices were operative.”\textsuperscript{138} This is despite evidence that there were Africans, especially from Kongo, who considered themselves Christians prior to coming to the New World.\textsuperscript{139} Therefore, their embrace of Christianity did not necessarily mean that they were acculturated in the sense of wholly adopting European culture.

Moreover, Stuckey suggests that Vesey was effective in planning the revolt because he blended Christianity with African religious customs. He further claims that Vesey represented the Christian element, while Gullah Jack, a famous conjurer, stood for the African element.\textsuperscript{140} This chapter contends that this dichotomy does not capture the complexity of the situation, especially in the case of Gullah Jack. It argues that Gullah Jack embodied the continued influence that Kongoese peasant Christianity had on the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{137}Mullin,\textit{Africa in America}, 267.
  \item \textsuperscript{138}Stuckey,\textit{Slave Culture}, 35.
  \item \textsuperscript{139}Thornton, “The Development of an African Catholic Church,” 153.
  \item \textsuperscript{140}Stuckey,\textit{Slave Culture}, 49.
\end{itemize}
lives of enslaved people in South Carolina even as slavery was waning. Further, it
examines how the operating principles of Kongolese peasant Christianity, such as the
ring shout, the Kongo cosmogram, baptism, conjure through minkisi and black spirituals,
manifested themselves in the African Church.

Gullah Jack the Christian

One fact that scholars have downplayed in their descriptions of Gullah Jack is that
he belonged to the African Church in Charleston. This would partly explain why Gullah
Jack and his associates exerted a considerable amount of influence on the members of the
African Church and the other slaves in Charleston. Jack was not just a nominal member
of the Church; he was an active and prominent associate. In a testimony against Robert
Robertson, a slave named Billy reported that the accused had told him that Gullah Jack
had gone to Bishop Brown to ask him whether he would sanction the insurrection. Billy
stated that Brown agreed to the insurrection only if Jack could get men. Furthermore,
other witnesses in this trial testified that Jack frequently held meetings on church
premises.\footnote{Killens, ed., The Trial Record, 131, 14, 15.} Jack could only have accessed the bishop and Church resources if he were
one of its respected members.

Gullah Jack was imported by Zephaniah Kingsley from the East African coastal
town of Zanzibar. While recent scholarship has disputed his Angolan or West Central
African origin, Walter Rucker contends that “it is entirely likely that Jack came from a
West-Central African kingdom and sold to East African merchants. Whether his origins were East or West-Central Africa, he would still belong to one of many Bantu-speaking peoples populating both regions.\textsuperscript{142} His familiarity with a Bantu language, along with his skills as a conjurer, made it easier for him to lead other enslaved people, who had descended from either from Sierra Leone or Kongo-Angola, in the formation of the Gullah society.

While Gullah did not exist as an ethnic group on the African continent, in the New World it was made up of cultural infusions from “Congolese-Angolan (Bantu) and/or Gola (Sierra Leonian) members of the slave community in the Charleston area and their descendants.\textsuperscript{143} Rucker suggests that as the earliest population groups in South Carolina, Angolans /Kongolese greatly influenced the nature of Gullah culture.\textsuperscript{144} One of the cultural contributions that the Kongolese would have brought into the formation of Gullah culture would have been their religious heritage, in this case, Kongolese peasant Christianity. In as much as Kongolese peasant Christianity changed over time, its identifying markers were evident in how lay people worshipped within the AME church and other black churches in South Carolina.


\textsuperscript{143}Gomez, \textit{Exchanging Our Country}, 3,100-2.

\textsuperscript{144}Rucker, “I Will Gather All Nations,” 137.
Kongolese peasant Christianity and its influence on black churches in South Carolina

A number of scholars contend that black churches, including those in South Carolina, emerged as a result of the failure of white missionaries to appeal to enslaved people. They argue that black people found the detached style of preaching used by white ministers unsatisfactory. They claim that, subsequently, the enslaved people felt the need to create a space within which they could practice their own form of Christianity mixed with African indigenous religions.145 On the contrary, because the majority of South Carolinian slaves came from the Kongo kingdom and had prior contact with Christianity, slave religion in South Carolina was based on Kongolese peasant Christianity.

Thornton makes a similar argument for Vodoo in Haiti. He argues that it is inaccurate to view the emergence of Afro-Christian practices in the New World as the failure of Europeans to fully Christianize slaves or as a “defiant resistance on the part of slaves to a forced conversion to the religion of their masters.” Thornton maintains that the development of these religious systems in the New World was not a novel occurrence but an outcome of the prior conversion of a portion of Africa and the development of an African variant of Christianity. He posits that much of the philosophy that underlies the "syncretic" or "mixed" religions of the New World can “be traced to African Christianity, and even much of the action taken by American clergy to suppress some types of religious practice among slaves came from African Christianity.” Applying this argument

to the South Carolina case, Afro-Christianity in South Carolina was most likely shaped by Kongolesse peasant Christianity rather than by white people’s brand of Christianity. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that the version of Christianity that evolved among enslaved people was quite distinct from that preached by white missionaries. Additionally, this Christianity had embedded in it principles that can be attributed to Kongolesse cosmology.  

Young concurs, asserting that “while familiarity with Christian dogma would not, in itself, constitute conversion, the prior experience that some Low Country slaves had with Christianity shaped the manner in which they responded to Protestant missionaries.” He insists that enslaved Africans from the Kongo Kingdom carried with them this tradition of religious mediation and adaptation as they were dispersed all over the New World, providing their “contemporaries and progeny with the tools to negotiate the mandate of Christian conversion in the plantation life.” This would mean that they would continue to view and eventually adopt protestant Christianity through the lens of their Kongolesse peasant Christian backgrounds.

A close examination of how enslaved Africans worshiped in black churches reveals that their form of worship leaned more towards Kongolesse peasant Christianity than it did towards the white Protestant religion. Young rightly cautions against assuming that Kongolesse slaves automatically shifted from a Catholic background toward a


147 Young, Rituals of Resistance, 76.
Protestant one. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that as an African religion, Kongolese peasant Christianity would easily adapt to various demands of the New World by restructuring itself to suit prevailing circumstances.\textsuperscript{148} That would include adopting other forms of worship, including Protestantism, from other ethnic groups. Therefore, rather than assume Africans continued to practice their indigenous religions beneath the veneer of Protestantism, this research maintains that they formed a new religious system with Kongolese peasant Christianity as its basis. This religious system had distinctive characteristics that were evident within black churches in South Carolina.

It is noteworthy that the practice of Christianity within black churches generally varied according to class status. Consequently, the educated black church leaders were more likely to adhere to a form of Christianity closer to white people’s version of Christianity. Thus, even when black leadership, which consisted of the elite, seceded from the Methodist Church in Charleston, it was more because of administrative than doctrinal reasons.\textsuperscript{149} This disjuncture between elite and lay Christianity is well illustrated by the sentiments of Bishop Alexander Payne of the AME Church, who, upon visiting some churches in Philadelphia, severely criticized the widespread practice of the ring shout, which he did not consider Christian.\textsuperscript{150}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{148}Ibid, 185.
\textsuperscript{149}Richardson, \textit{Dark Salvation}, 89.
\end{flushleft}
Several factors made the Christianity of the enslaved people distinct from both the white people’s and the black elite’s version of Christianity. One of these factors was that in black churches, the ring shout was quite popular. The ring shout was a counterclockwise dance based on a Kongo ritual. This ritual drew on the Kongo cosmogram, *Tendwa nzia Kongo*, which was “a sacred ‘point’ on which a person stood to make an oath, on the ground of the dead and under the all-seeing God.” The cosmogram, which looks similar to the Christian cross, signified the Kongo belief in the circular motion and continuity of life.  

In addition, the Kongo believed that the only effective way to invoke God and their ancestors was by singing and drawing the “point.” It is thus remarkable to read of a young preacher’s response to Bishop Payne’s request to stop the ring shout performance in his church. The preacher, whose church Dr. Payne was visiting in Philadelphia, retorted that “Sinners won’t get converted unless there is a ring. Quite clearly, in the Africans’ minds, God would only hear their request for salvation if they “drew the point.” According to the young man in question, the ring-shout was a central element of his Christianity.

Further, it appears that the ring shout was so widespread that Bishop Payne felt overwhelmed by the task of restraining this practice. He lamented:

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152 Ibid, 110.
I have remonstrated with a number of pastors for permitting these practices, which vary somewhat in different localities, but have been invariably met with the response that he could not succeed in restraining them, and an attempt to compel them to cease would simply drive them away from our church.\(^{153}\)

Just like in the Kingdom of Kongo, the elite’s proximity to Capuchin missionaries significantly made their form of Christianity different from the form practiced by Congolese peasants. This was due to lack of sufficient priests and formal Portuguese schooling. The Christianity of the elites similarly elicited less criticism from the clergy than did the Christianity of the rest of the Kingdom.\(^{154}\) In reality, some of these priests regarded the Christianity of some Congolese peasants as utterly objectionable. Accordingly, it is easy to understand Payne, as educated black elite, finding peasant Christianity objectionable.

**Black spirituals as carriers of the memories of Congolese peasant Christianity in South Carolina**

Another aspect of Afro-Christianity closely related to the ring-shout is black spirituals. Raboteau ascertains that spirituals were an integral part of Afro-Christianity. He suggests that they emerged as “communal songs, heard, felt, sung and often danced with hand-clapping, foot-stamping, head-shaking excitement.” He further opines that to fully appreciate these spirituals the reader must imagine them as performed. Raboteau


\(^{154}\)Hastings, “Christianity of Pedro IV,” 147.
states that this is important because some verses of the spirituals take on a different
meaning when one realizes that “they were shouted— that is, danced in the ring shout—
.”
Hence, if these spirituals were closely associated with the ring shout, a dance clearly
rooted in the Kongolese worldview, it is likely that their content, too, would be steeped in
the Kongolese peasant Christian milieu.

Rucker, in *The River Flows On*, indicates that even decades after the close of the
slave trade, enslaved people continued to demonstrate a shared consciousness. He
proposes that this consciousness was transmitted across region and time primarily
through folklore, which “is the principal means by which one can understand slave ethos
or value system.”
In an attempt to trace the influence of Kongolese peasant Christianity
on Afro-Christianity in South Carolina, this inquiry treats black spirituals as part of slave
folklore. It posits that these spirituals can give valuable insight into the religious psyche
of black South Carolinians.

Subsequently, I utilize a compilation of spirituals gathered by Thomas W.
Higginson, a militant New England abolitionist, in 1862, from the first group of freed
slaves from South Carolina. Higginson noted that these songs seemed to coincide with
those from Georgia and Florida. This is not surprising, as these areas, too, had a large
concentration of Kongolese slaves during the period under discussion.

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155 Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 244, 245.
A close assessment of these spirituals reveals fundamental themes analogous to the core principles of Kongolese peasant Christianity. These principles include the belief in the immortality of the soul, the idea that once one was baptized by immersion they underwent death and rebirth, the belief that water is the boundary between the physical and the spiritual realm of existence, and direct invocation of the Virgin Mary.

Remarkably, out of the thirty-five songs Higginson collected, ten are about water and its connection to the other world, and twelve depict the concept of the immortality of the soul. The following excerpts demonstrate these divisions:

Come along, come along
And let us go home
Sis de old ship o’ Zion
…She has landed many a thousand,
She can land as many more…
“Do you tink she will be able
For to take us all home? 158

The above spiritual depicts water as the boundary between this world and the next. Additionally, it expresses a longing to go to the next world, where conditions are presumably better than in the present world. This is parallel to the Kongolese belief that water was the boundary between the land of the living and the parallel world of the dead, the Kalunga, represented by the bottom half of the cosmogram.159

The belief in the immortality of the soul is effectively captured in the spiritual transcribed below. The Kongolese held that the soul was immortal and that death was just

158Ibid, 128.
159Thompson, Flash of the Spirit, 109.
a passage to another realm of existence. The circular motion of life is denoted by the four points of the Kongo cosmogram.\(^{160}\)

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I known moon-rise, I know star-rise} \\
&\quad \text{Lay dis body down} \\
\text{I walk in de moonlight, I walk in de starlight,} \\
&\quad \text{To lay dis body down.} \\
\text{I’ll walk in de graveyard, I’ll walk through de graveyard,} \\
&\quad \text{To lay dis body down.} \\
\text{I’ll lie in da grave, and stretch out my arms;} \\
&\quad \text{When I lay dis body down;} \\
\text{I go to de judgment in de evening of de day} \\
&\quad \text{When I lay dis body down;} \\
\text{And my soul and your soul will meet in de day} \\
&\quad \text{When I lay dis body down}\(^{161}\)
\end{align*}
\]

Especially remarkable are the lines “I known moon-rise, I know star-rise…I walk in de moonlight, I walk in de starlight, to lay dis body down.” It strikingly reflects the Kongo world view that “the rising and setting of the sun the living and the dead exchange day and night. The setting of the sun signifies man’s death, and its rising, his rebirth, or continuity of life.”\(^{162}\)

**Black spirituals and resistance in South Carolina**

While many of these songs served to comfort enslaved Africans as they coped with plantation life, some also carried direct messages of resistance. In this manner too,


\(^{161}\)Higginson, “Negro Spirituals,”127.

\(^{162}\)Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 106.
Kongolese peasant Christianity continued to influence the mode in which enslaved Africans in South Carolina responded to enslavement. A good example of this influence is the following spiritual, which is a direct call to bear arms that invokes the Virgin Mary.

One more Valiant soldier here,
One more Valiant soldier here
To help me bear de cross,
O hail, Mary, hail!
Hail, Mary, Hail!
To help me bear de cross.\(^{163}\)

Higginson further remarks that the authorities in South Carolina saw some of these songs as a dangerous incitement to revolt. He states that some enslaved people had been sent to jail for singing them at an outbreak of rebellion. The following is an example of such songs:

We’ll soon be free
We’ll soon be free
We’ll soon be free
   When the Lord will call us home
My brudder, how long,
My brudder how Long,
My brudder, how long,
    ‘Fore we done sufferin’ here
It won’t be long (Thrice)
    ‘Fore de Lord will call us home.
We’ll walk de miry road (Thrice)
   Where pleasure never dies.
We’ll walk de golden street (Thrice.)
   Where pleasure never dies.
My brudder, how long (Thrice.)
    ‘Fore we done sufferin’ here?
We’ll soon be free (Thrice.)

\(^{163}\)Ibid, 115.
When Jesus sets me free.
We’ll fight for liberty (Thrice.)
When the Lord will call us home.

Kongolese Peasant Christianity and baptism

Another important facet of Afro-Christianity was baptism. Raboteau notes that baptism was a significant event in the slaves’ lives, as it marked spiritual death, rebirth and initiation. However, he points out that baptism performed by Presbyterians, Methodists and Episcopalians did not entail full-body immersion. Moreover, Raboteau demonstrates that the cross was inseparable from baptismal rituals.\(^{164}\) Scholars such as Stuckey and Young propose that there is an important connection between the use of the cross in the baptism of enslaved Africans and the Kongo cosmogram, which was deeply embedded in the Kongolese worldview.\(^{165}\)

Baptism for enslaved Africans in South Carolina was heavily influenced by Kongolese peasants’ view of water and the ritual of baptism itself. In the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century the Kongo Kingdom, baptism, although done differently, was the most ubiquitous ritual. In baptism, the Kongolese peasant Christians sought ritual protection from “evil witches, neglected deceased, vengeful neighbors …also powerful nobles and slave traders.”\(^{166}\) While not necessarily an indication of a direct connection

\(^{164}\)Raboteau, *Slave religion*, 227, 228.


\(^{166}\)Young, *Rituals of Resistance*, 56.
between the Kingdom of Kongo and South Carolina, the popularity of baptism in the New World is not surprising. This was because it offered protection against the ills encountered by New World African slaves. The following black spiritual captures this sentiment:

Chilly water, Chilly water  
Hallelujah to the Lamb.  
I know that water is chilly and cold,  
Hallelujah to the Lamb.  
But I have Jesus in my soul,  
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.  

This spiritual reiterates the slaves’ belief in the ritual protection of baptism. In this case, Satan, who in Afro-Christianity embodied evil, could not ‘bite’ or harm them after they had been baptized. The greatest evil that enslaved people were subjected to was enslavement itself. Baptism could thus be seen as a means by which these people sought protection from the evils of plantation life. Additionally, water in the Kongo worldview stood for the realm of the dead, with the horizontal line in the Kongo cosmogram denoting the watery boundary between the realm of the dead and the land of the living. It thus makes sense that the ritual of baptism in most black churches involved total immersion to signify death and re-birth.  

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167 Ibid, 91.  
168 Stuckey, Slave Culture, 36.
Kongolese peasant Christianity, Conjure and Afro-Christianity

Belief in the power of conjure was another characteristic of Afro-Christianity in South Carolina. Even with their adoption of Christianity, Kongolese peasants continued to rely on *minkisi* (plural for *nkisi*) for protection, and no doubt brought them into the New World when the peasants became enslaved. Scholars generally agree that the *Minkisi* complex continued to flourish in the New World. Robert Thompson writes of *minkisi* in the New World, “Versions of some of the rituals authorities responsible for Kongo herbalistic healing and divination appeared in the Americas and served as avatars of Kongo and Angola lore in the New World… Those in the United States were known largely as “conjurors” and “root-persons.”¹⁶⁹ Kongolese slaves certainly continued to believe in the power of *minkisi* and conjure even as members of the church in the New World. Thus, it is not surprising that the lay members of the African church saw no contradiction in having Gullah Jack, a well known conjurer, and his cohorts as fellow worshipers.

Conjure, the ability to harness otherworldly powers and knowledge of root medicine, played an important role in the lives of enslaved people in South Carolina.¹⁷⁰ This is demonstrated by the influence that Gullah Jack had on slaves in Charleston. During the Vesey conspiracy trial it emerged that Gullah Jack, who was well known as a

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conjuror, was a feared and respected person. He had the reputation of being invincible. He was often described as “the little man who can’t be killed, shot or taken.” Another participant in the conspiracy, Harry Haig, said that Gullah Jack “charmed Julius Forrest and myself at last, and we then consented to join.” Another witness was so scared of the consequences of testifying against Gullah Jack that he begged the court to transfer him to a place where Jack could not find him. 171 Even though the people in question belonged to the African Church it is evident that conjure was very much an accepted part of their lives.

Consequently, Gullah Jack emerged as an important symbol in the Vesey conspiracy: he represented a continuum of the Kongoese peasant Christianity that had been used in Atlantic Africa as an avenue of resistance. Moreover, his ability to harness otherworldly powers did not contradict his Christianity because, as noted above, those who embraced Christianity in the Kongo Kingdom accepted conjure as part of their cosmology.

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171 Killens, ed., The Trial Record, 52, 79.
Conclusion

The preceding chapters have dealt with how Kongolesi peasant Christianity developed in the Kingdom of Kongo and how Kongolesi slaves subsequently used it as an avenue of resistance in the New World. These chapters have consistently treated the Kongo Kingdom as the source of religious traditions that gave South Carolinian slave resistance its distinctive character. In chapter one I dwelled on the unique manner in which Christianity was adopted in the Kongo Kingdom and the way this difference shaped the political landscape within that region. I proposed that the adoption and practice of Christianity along class lines in Kongo allowed for the respective groups to adapt it to suit their needs. I suggested that for the peasant class in Kongo, Christianity provided a means by which to cope with their chaotic existence.

In chapter two I focused on how the enslaved Kongolesi adapted their religion once again to cope with the vagaries of enslavement. I contended that the outstanding malleability of this religion allowed it to persist across different historical times even when conditions were not conducive. In chapter three I examined the manner in which Kongolesi peasant Christianity continued to affect lives and resistance in South Carolina. I proposed that Gullah Jack, more than a conjuror, was a Christian whose Christianity was based on Kongolesi peasant Christianity. I maintained that through conjure and his
adherence to the African Church, Jack embodied the manner in which Kongo-lesse peasant Christianity continued to affect South Carolina slaves, demonstrating its extraordinary flexibility and hardiness.

This research adds to a relatively large body of research on slave resistance in South Carolina. Nevertheless, it presents a relatively new perspective on the role of Christianity in South Carolinian black resistance. Rather than portraying those who embraced Christianity as acculturated, I concur with Stuckey that these individuals continued to be African in their worldview. Nevertheless, I suggest that their Christianity, which was based on Afro-Christianity developed in Atlantic Africa, continued to be the driving force behind resistance in South Carolina. By placing Kongo-lesse peasant Christianity at the center of South Carolinian slave resistance, I hoped to demonstrate the persistence and striking flexibility of black Atlantic cultures.

Epilogue

When I started this project I hoped to understand why black people all over the world seemed to be plagued by illiteracy, poverty and diseases more than any other group. I thought that if I understood why, perhaps it would be easier to deal with the reality. I encountered different scholarly opinions on who was responsible for the plight of Africa. Some contended that Africa was a hapless victim of the machinations of Europeans, while others opined that Africa was an active agent in its own fate. While arguments on both ends of the spectrum were compelling, I was still left with more questions than answers.

In the end, I concluded that it did not really matter how Africa found itself in this dire situation; the important thing was to draw lessons from the experience. I opted to focus on how resilient and strong Africa and its descendants have been in the face of adversities. What better way to appreciate the spirit of African cultures than to examine their influence on the Diaspora? Like Hartman, quoted in the introduction, I came to understand that Africa and the Diaspora were not only connected through their painful

historical pasts, but also through the fight against “the power of others to determine whether you lived or died.”\textsuperscript{174} Africa and its descendants do well to recall the spirit of Kongoles peasents Christians who, even in the face of calamity, continued to rely on their religion and could confidently declare, “We don’t lak slavery…We surrender but not whipped yet and we ‘is not converted.”\textsuperscript{175}

\textsuperscript{174} Hartman, Lose Your Mother, 234.

\textsuperscript{175} George Cato, “As it Came Down to Me”: Black Memories of Stono in the 1930s,” in Stono, 56.
Bibliography


