

Central Africans  
and Cultural  
Transformations  
in the American  
Diaspora



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*Who Is the King of Congo?**A New Look at African and Afro-Brazilian Kings in Brazil*

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## INTRODUCTION

Throughout the Americas, *Reis Congos*, or Kings of Congo, have appeared in religious festivals and ritual dramas. Wherever Africans and their descendants suffered enslavement, the election of kings and queens went with them, and in many cases these elections have continued to the present day. In Brazil, Kings of Congo play an important role in festivals with names as diverse as *congados*, *congadas*, *congos*, *cucumbis*, *maracatus*, *mozambiques*, and *quilombos* that occur from the North to the South of the country. Early folklorists often called the kings of these festivals "kings of smoke" or "fictive kings" and claimed they had no actual power. Their pervasiveness, however, and local importance belies that assumption. Kings of Congo and the rituals in which they participate continue to work for the populations that they represent. The symbolic work ties an Afro-Brazilian community to their African past. The Kings of Congo symbolically link Afro-Brazilians to African political structures and to their African ancestors and *pretos velhos* (old black spirits).<sup>1</sup> The ties to a remembered past forge a shared identity for community members, defining, deepening, and strengthening their bonds with one another and to their pasts. The link that the Kings of Congo represent, however, is mythic in the sense that Afro-Brazilian communities have created a ritual memory tied to an African past, but one that is distinctly and uniquely Brazilian. The current-day Kings of Congo evolved from a tradition of black kings in Brazil that goes back at least to the seventeenth century, and that can only be understood through the examination of their cultural and historical roots.

African and Afro-Brazilian kings appeared in Brazil in many roles. Predecessors to the present-day festive Kings of Congo appear in the

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth W. Kiddy, "The Brotherhoods of the Rosary of the Blacks, Community and Devotion in Minas Gerais, Brazil" (Ph.D. diss., The University of New Mexico, 1998), pp. 395-397.



documentation as elected leaders in lay religious brotherhoods and as participants of dynastic and other public festivals. In other cases, African and Afro-Brazilian kings appeared as community leaders who oversaw guilds of black craftspeople and different ethnic groups. Black kings also played important roles as leaders of *mocambos* and *quilombos* (runaway slave communities) and as leaders of uprisings. In short, Afro-Brazilian kings have served a variety of roles, from leaders of violent revolution to celebratory festival kings.<sup>2</sup> The largest problem in discussions of these kings has been the tendency to pinpoint some African "survivals" as being pure or more African than others. This has led many scholars to portray West Africans and their descendants as the true repositories of African culture in Brazil. Sidney Mintz pointed out many years ago "the 'obviously African' may eventually turn out to demonstrate less about the retention of tradition than the more modified and less immediately identifiable aspects of culture."<sup>3</sup> John K. Thornton and Linda M. Heywood point out in their essays in this volume that by the seventeenth century the Central African experience already included significant mixing with European culture. When Central Africans arrived in Brazil as slaves, the process of mixing continued. Cultural mixing itself, in the Central African communities of Brazil, points to the retention of tradition, the tradition of adaptation. Slaves and freed blacks in Brazilian society formed political cultures headed by a king and arranged hierarchically around a variety of cultural and religious elements.<sup>4</sup> The adaptation did not destroy African culture. On the contrary, adaptation enabled Central African culture to thrive – it indicated a vital, dynamic culture, not the remnants of a rapidly disappearing culture.

The history of Afro-Brazilian kings has suffered from a lack of clarity both in regard to the origins of the practice of naming royalty and the context in which the practice occurred. Scholars have conflated Kings of Congo with *reis negros*, or black kings, a more general term for kings from any number of African "nations" or ethnicities.<sup>5</sup> By extension, the literature fails to disentangle black kings of one or another ethnicity, including the Brazilian

2 Silvia Hunold Lara, "Significados Cruzados: As embaixadas de Congos no Brasil Colonial," paper presented at the XX annual conference of the Latin American Studies Association, April 1997; Marina de Mello e Souza, "Reis negros no Brasil escravista, história, mito e identidade na festa de Coroação de Rei Congo" (Ph.D. diss., Universidade Federal Fluminense, Niterói, RJ, 1999).

3 Sidney W. Mintz, "Africa of Latin America: an unguarded reflection," in *Africa in Latin America, Essays on History, Culture, and Socialization*, ed. Manuel Moreno Fraginals, trans. Leonor Blum (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1984), p. 287.

4 See also Linda M. Heywood, "The Angolan-Afro-Brazilian cultural connections," *Slavery and Abolition* 20:1 (1999): 20.

5 See Elizabeth W. Kiddy, "Ethnic and racial identity in the Brotherhoods of the Rosary of Minas Gerais, 1700-1830," *The Americas* 56:2 (October 1999): 221-252.

ethnic designation of Congo, from kings with the *title* King of Congo. This lack of specificity has led scholars to call any black king a King of Congo, even applying the term to situations a 100 years prior to its appearance in the documentation.<sup>6</sup> The recognition of the differences between kings of various African groups makes possible an inquiry into the connection between the ethnicity Congo with the Kings of Congo, and their possible link to the historic Kingdom of Kongo and its leader, the King of Kongo.

One consequence of the conflation of all Brazilian kings of African descent with the King of Congo, especially within the context of the lay religious brotherhoods, was the presumption that the King of Congo was a form of social control imposed from above. This interpretation went hand in hand with the notion that kings had no power – they were fictive kings.<sup>7</sup> This argument borrowed the idea that the conversion of the King of Kongo in the fifteenth century symbolized the victory of Christianity over heathenism – the triumph of European values over African. The coronation of Brazilian Kings of Congo, then, reenacted the victory of Christianity and European domination over traditional African values and implied the acquiescence of Africans to their enslavement and acceptance of European culture. The essays in the first part of this volume refute this whitening out of Central African culture. An understanding of the processes of culture change and continuity in Central Africa since the arrival of the Europeans enables historians of Brazil to better understand the dynamic relationship between African and Portuguese culture, and how that relationship manifested on Brazilian soil. Far from symbolizing the triumph of European over African culture, the emergence of Brazilian Kings of Congo symbolizes a process of cultural translation and transformation that represents a continuation of Central African culture among Afro-Brazilians.

Black kingship and Kings of Congo in Brazil gradually moved away from distinctions based on ethnic identities to a Central African derived Afro-Brazilian identity. The presence of kings and queens helped these Central Africans to reconstruct and recreate an African derived political and religious culture. The slow development from kings with ethnic titles in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to Kings of Congo in the late eighteenth

6 See, for example, José Ramos Tinhorão, *Os negros em Portugal, uma Presença Silenciosa* (Lisboa: Ed. Caminho, 1988), pp. 144-146; Patricia A. Mulvey, "The black lay brotherhoods of Colonial Brazil: a history" (Ph.D. diss., The City University of New York, 1976), pp. 87-88; John K. Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1680* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 203.

7 See Mário de Andrade, "Danças Dramáticas do Brasil" in *Obras Completas*, Vol. 2 (São Paulo: Livraria Martins Editora, 1960), p. 17; and Alceu Maynard Araújo, *Folclore Nacional*, Vol. 1 (São Paulo: Edições Melhoramentos, 1964), pp. 216-217.



and nineteenth centuries documents the emergence of an Afro-Brazilian culture, deeply rooted in Central Africa but distinctly Brazilian.

#### ANTECEDENTS

The presence of black kings in almost every Euro-American colony highlights the important role that kingship played in Africans' understanding of the world. African leaders, whether chiefs of small polities or kings of large states, held important ritual positions that mediated several levels of social, religious, and political relationships. Central African leaders were on the top of a very well understood hierarchy that defined a person's position in the society of the living and also included an unseen world that extended to the ancestors and/or spirits and to the unborn as well as animals, plants, and inanimate objects. Leaders mediated, by means of ritual action, between society and the natural environment and between the living and the dead.<sup>8</sup> African kings united people with each other and linked them with all that existed. Kings connected what Westerners define as the sacred and profane, but what African culture portrays as inseparable elements.

Central African kings played important political and economic roles, both within Africa and between Africa and Europeans hungry for African gold, copper, and slaves. In the late fifteenth century in this political capacity the Portuguese first sought to build relations with the King of Kongo. The Portuguese placed representatives and factors in Mbanza Kongo, just as the Kongo royalty sent many noblemen, including a royal factor, to Lisbon. This political and economic exchange was possible because, as John K. Thornton pointed out, "Kongo and Portugal were of the same world."<sup>9</sup> One important aspect of the sameness of the Portuguese and Kongo worlds was the overlapping of the sacred and profane. In the lingering crusade atmosphere of early modern Europe, the ritual, sacred nature of explorations and discoveries played an enormous role in the justification and propulsion of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Portuguese explorations of Africa. The Catholic Church sanctioned the Portuguese explorations, the explorers themselves were deeply religious men, and missionaries arrived very early on in recently opened Central Africa. The Portuguese related to the King of Kongo on this ritual level, winning a great victory for Christianity by

<sup>8</sup> See Wyatt MacGaffey, *Kongo Political Culture: The Conceptual Challenge of the Particular* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), p. 216.

<sup>9</sup> John K. Thornton, "Early Kongo-Portuguese relations: a new interpretation," *History in Africa*, 8 (1981): 188.

means of his conversion. The King of Kongo became, for the Europeans, the quintessential symbol of African conversion to Christianity.

Concurrently, Kings of Kongo understood Christianity as a natural extension of their own ritual power; they used it to consolidate and strengthen their political position in the region. Christianity spread in Kongo from the nobility down to the commoners. By the late sixteenth century, missionaries boasted that there were Christian churches in all the "kingdoms, lordships and provinces" of Kongo.<sup>10</sup> But the Kings and the people of Kongo viewed Christianity as but a new means and a new set of symbols to express traditional Central African beliefs. Just as the kings interpreted Christianity as an extension of their traditional ritual and temporal power, the Kongo people often understood Christian rites and Christian talismans as new protections against witchcraft.<sup>11</sup> This held true in the Kingdom of Kongo and in the Portuguese-held regions of Luanda and Benguela, and throughout large regions of the Central African hinterland.<sup>12</sup> This African Christianity, however, was as much African as Christian. In this manner the relationship between Portugal and Kongo rested on mutual misunderstanding – a "dialogue of the deaf" grew up between European missionaries and their African flock. African Christianity was just that: a profoundly African interpretation of Christianity.<sup>13</sup> Despite this miscommunication, many, and perhaps a majority, of Central Africans became Christians, adopting Christian symbols, rituals, and organizations that included lay religious brotherhoods.<sup>14</sup>

Lay religious brotherhoods served as burial societies, mutual aid organizations, and centers of devotional life throughout the Iberian world. They are also the most cited locations of African and African-descended kings and queens in the Americas. Lay brotherhoods sponsored many of the festivals that continue today. Brotherhoods in early modern Iberian culture held annual feast day celebrations that were often boisterous and included both drinking and dancing. Sometimes they included the election of a leader with a moniker of royalty. The feast day celebrations of the Divine Holy

<sup>10</sup> Anne Hilton, *The Kingdom of Kongo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 50–65. See also John K. Thornton's contribution to this collection.

<sup>11</sup> Hilton, *The Kingdom*, 98.

<sup>12</sup> On the interpenetration of European and African cultural elements, see Linda M. Heywood's contribution in this collection.

<sup>13</sup> See Wyatt MacGaffey, "Dialogues of the deaf: Europeans on the Atlantic coast of Africa," in *Implicit Understandings, Observing, Reporting, and Reflecting on the Encounters Between Europeans and Other Peoples in the Early Modern Era*, ed. Stuart B. Schwartz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 249–267; and John K. Thornton, *Africa and Africans*, pp. 237–250; and John K. Thornton's contribution to this collection.

<sup>14</sup> See Heywood, "The Angolan-Afro-Brazilian," pp. 13–15.

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Spirit, for example, have annually elected an emperor since the thirteenth century.<sup>15</sup> When Africans and their descendents chose kings and queens in their brotherhoods in Brazil, Iberian precedents existed that made the practice acceptable to Portuguese authorities who might otherwise have seen them as subversive organizations.

The most frequent and the earliest brotherhoods for Portuguese and Brazilian blacks were the brotherhoods of Our Lady of the Rosary. The earliest rosary brotherhood was founded in the Dominican monastery of Lisbon in the late fifteenth century. The incorporating statutes of that organization allowed that "any brother who wishes, by their devotion, to be majordomo, Prince, Kings, Duke, Count, Marquis, Cardinal, or any other dignitaries" could do so.<sup>16</sup> After this early record, however, the documents fall silent about any royalty among their leadership until the third decade of the eighteenth century, and there is no documentation of a King of Congo until the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>17</sup> The earliest persistent documentation of the coronation of African kings in a Portuguese context, in fact, began to appear in seventeenth century Brazil in runaway slave communities and brotherhoods.

Africans also formed religious brotherhoods in São Tomé, the Kingdom of Kongo, and Angola, demonstrating that the impulse for brotherhoods for blacks in Brazil may have also come from enslaved Africans themselves, not merely from religious orders anxious to catechize the slave population.<sup>18</sup> The familiarity of Central Africans with Catholic symbols, rituals, and organizations, combined with a belief in the hierarchical ordering of society and the ritual role of kings, made the lay religious brotherhoods an ideal place in which to recreate an African community in Brazil. African kings or chiefs also served as leaders of warrior groups, giving some ritual and political leaders military roles, roles which some Africans in Brazil also assumed.<sup>19</sup> Where Africans and their descendents banded together to form communities in lay religious brotherhoods, in runaway slave communities, or when they

15 Mari Lyn Salvador, "Food for the Holy Ghost: ritual exchange in Azorean festivals," in *Time Out of Time, Essays on the Festival*, ed. Alessandro Falassi (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), p. 246; and Martha Abreu, *O Imperio do Divino, Festas Religiosas e Cultura Popular no Rio de Janeiro, 1830-1900* (Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 1999), pp. 38-47.

16 "Compromisso of the Brotherhood of Our Lady of the Rosary of Black Men," Capítulo 26, published in Mulvey, "Black Lay Brotherhoods," 262.

17 António Brásio, S. Sp., *Os pretos em Portugal* (Lisboa: República Portuguesa Ministério das Colónias, 1944), pp. 96-98; Mulvey, "The Black Lay Brotherhoods," pp. 273-282; Tinhorão, *Os negros em Portugal*, 144-146, 191-192.

18 See Kiddy, "Brotherhoods of Our Lady," pp. 75-82; and Heywood, "The Angolan-Afro-Brazilian," pp. 14-17.

19 Stuart B. Schwartz, *Slaves, Peasants, and Rebels, Reconsidering Brazilian Slavery* (Urbana and Chicago: The University of Illinois Press, 1996), pp. 122-128.

revolted against the slave system, they named a king to serve in a ritual, political, and military capacity. These kings reaffirmed African, and more specifically Central African, notions of power, identity, and community, in Brazil.

#### BLACK KINGS IN BRAZIL

The first record of a ritual performance in Brazil that included an African king occurred during the visit of the ambassador of the King of Kongo to Dutch Recife in 1642. According to the description written by the Dutch eyewitness, Gaspar Barlaeus, the Kongolese ambassador and his retinue gave a performance that included "original dances, leaps, formidable swordplay, [and] the dazzle of eyes simulating anger against an enemy."<sup>20</sup> In a ritual drama, the Kongolese ambassador represented the King of Kongo and received different embassies from various nations who paid homage to him, "according to the ceremonies used among their nations, in their deportment, courtesies, and reverential behavior."<sup>21</sup> The description of the ritual enacted by the emissaries of the King of Kongo closely resembled the rituals that would later be enacted by the brotherhoods of the rosary. The similarities suggest that the performance of these embassies in the brotherhoods echoed African practices, linking them to similar ritual coronations in European feast day celebrations.<sup>22</sup>

While Dutch officials entertained the emissary of the King of Kongo in one region of Pernambuco, the famous Quilombo dos Palmares had grown into a kingdom of runaway slaves in the backlands. In Palmares, a king, with the title of Ganga Zumba, ruled over several villages in the interior of what is today the state of Alagoas. After the Portuguese expelled the Dutch in 1654, they attacked the quilombo in futile attempts to overthrow it. In 1678, after an especially brutal attack by the Portuguese, Ganga Zumba went to the new governor of Pernambuco to unsuccessfully sue for peace. Finally, in 1694, the Europeans wiped out Palmares in a 2-year battle with the help of indigenous troops.<sup>23</sup>

The battles with the Quilombo dos Palmares remained, for centuries, a feared reminder of what slaves could accomplish if they banded together.

20 Gaspar Barlaeus, *Historia dos feitos recentemente praticados durante oito anos no Brasil*, trans. Cláudio Brandão (Rio de Janeiro: Ministério de Educação, 1940), p. 272. All translations from Portuguese to English are mine unless otherwise noted.

21 Ibid.

22 See Salvador, "Food for the Holy," p. 246.

23 See Robert Edgar Conrad, *Children of God's Fire, A Documentary History of Black Slavery in Brazil* (University Park, PA: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), pp. 369-377; Schwartz, *Slaves, Peasants*, pp. 122-128.



este... 160 africanos... Central Africans in Brazil... fisco e caráter barroco da instituição.

When Africans named kings in rebellious or tumultuous situations, or in mocambos or quilombos, such action caused great alarm. Even so, in the same decade that Ganga Zumba sued for peace, the first records of the coronations of kings and queens in rosary brotherhoods in Brazil appeared in Recife. From the founding of the rosary brotherhood in 1654 to the middle of the eighteenth century, the brotherhood restricted membership to Angolans and crioulos, or Brazilian-born blacks.<sup>24</sup> Each of these groups elected members of their groups to be kings, queens, and male and female judges, and the positions were held by both slaves and free men and women. Every year the brotherhood paid the local vicar to celebrate a mass on the day of the coronations.<sup>25</sup>

Jesuit André João Antonil, who traveled throughout Brazil in the late seventeenth century, also wrote of how the slaves named their own kings, in this case on a plantation in Bahia. On the afternoon after celebrating the feast days of Our Lady of the Rosary, Saint Benedict, and the patron saint of the plantation chapel, the slaves danced and sang for hours.<sup>26</sup> Antonil offers evidence of a rural occurrence of the coronation of kings and queens that may have been present throughout the sugar growing regions. Jesuits had actively helped to create brotherhoods of the rosary for slaves throughout the backlands of Brazil throughout the seventeenth century, many of which probably elected kings and queens. By the eighteenth century the presence of kings as office holders in lay religious brotherhoods and in quilombos had become common place throughout the captaincies of Brazil.

In the early eighteenth century, because of the discovery of gold, Minas Gerais joined Bahia and Pernambuco as a major slave-importing captaincy. As Minas Gerais grew in importance, so did Rio de Janeiro, which served as the main port for the importation of slaves for the mines and became capital of the colony in 1763.<sup>27</sup> All of these regions became hubs of the slave populations, as well as centers of large numbers free and freed blacks. All of the urban centers of the four captaincies contained lay religious brotherhoods of blacks, especially in their urban centers. As the population of slaves and free blacks grew, government authorities began to feel the threat of possible slave rebellion. These authorities chafed at the apparent independence of blacks in the brotherhoods that elected kings and queens. Fearing that the naming of leaders would lead to rebellions, local

governments tried to outlaw the crowning of kings and queens. In the capital of Bahia, Salvador, a 1728 proclamation outlawed the coronations of kings and queens during the rosary festivals. The proclamation accused the blacks of "robbing their own altars" to decorate the festival with the usual pomp, and of "violently entering houses of many citizens and taking slaves who were being punished," supposedly so that the latter could participate in the rosary festival. The proclamation prohibited the brotherhoods of Our Lady of the Rosary from electing kings and queens, but it allowed the selection of male and female judges like the brotherhoods of whites. Finally, it warned that any slave participating in the coronations would be punished - the men by serving 1 year in the galleys and the women with a prison sentence.<sup>28</sup>

In 1720, the governor of the captaincy of Minas Gerais and São Paulo, the Conde de Assumar, also banned the coronation of black kings and queens. He posted a proclamation condemning the crowning of kings and queens in religious festivals, a problem, he wrote, that had been eliminated in most of Minas Gerais except in the northern district (comarca) Serro do Frio. There, the blacks "at their feast days acclaim and crown black Kings and Queens in a solemn act," which, to the Count was "a repugnant act considering the humble condition of the slaves, which must be preserved."<sup>29</sup> He threatened to withhold the pay of any priest who agreed to crown kings and queens.<sup>30</sup>

The Conde de Assumar's reaction could have been prompted by the parallel institution of black rebels choosing royalty to lead uprisings. Assumar had heard rumors of a slave revolt in which the rebels had already "named among themselves King, Prince, and military officials." Although the Governor thought this rumor was some "ridiculousness" of the blacks, he also had heard a similar warning from a nearby town.<sup>31</sup> He suggested that all of the blacks from Mina (a general term for West Africans who had embarked on the Slave Coast) and Angola who called themselves kings be captured and thrown out of town.<sup>32</sup> In the same letter he remarked that these rebellious blacks possessed the ability to begin "operations" against the whites "like those of Palmares of Pernambuco."<sup>33</sup> In 1725, the next governor

28 "Copia do Bando que se publicou sobre não haver reynados nas festas do Rosario dos Pretos," reprinted in Mulvey, "The black lay brotherhoods," pp. 115-116.

29 Letter from the Conde de Assumar to the King, Dom João V, 20 May 1720. Arquivo Público Mineiro (hereafter APM) SC11, 288v.

30 Ibid.

31 Letter from the Conde de Assumar to the King, Dom João V, 20 April 1719, Revista do Arquivo Público Mineiro (hereafter RAPM) 3 (1898): 263-264.

32 Ibid., 264.

33 Ibid.

24 Mulvey, "The Black Lay Brotherhoods," p. 289.

25 "Manuscritos da Igreja de Nossa Senhora do Rosario dos Homens Pretos do Recife," Arquivos, ed. Diretoria de Documentação e Cultura, Prefeitura Municipal, Recife, no. 1-2 (1945-1951): 53-89.

26 André João Antonil (pseud.), Cultura e opulência do Brasil (São Paulo: Melhoramentos, 1976), p. 92.

27 Before 1763, Salvador, Bahia was the capital of Brazil.

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of the captaincy, Dom Lourenço de Almeida, wrote to the Portuguese King complaining that an uprising had been avoided only because "the blacks from Angola wished that one of their compatriots would be King of all of them, and those from Mina wished the same thing."<sup>34</sup>

Despite the fears and preventative measures of successive governors, slaves continued to flee and form quilombos throughout Minas Gerais in the eighteenth century. Almost all of the official documents written between 1730 and 1777 describing the threat of quilombos included a description of kings and/or queens leading the communities.<sup>35</sup> In 1738, for example, the governor Gomes Freire de Andrada wrote that he had captured two women from a quilombo, one of which was the queen of the community. The largest quilombo of Minas Gerais, that of Ambrósio, which at its peak had a population of well over 1,000 men, women, and children, also elected a king.<sup>36</sup> The documentation on these quilombos remains scarce, but the repeated references to kings and queens leading runaway slave communities throughout much of the eighteenth century demonstrates that the groups elected, or selected in some way, leaders with titles of royalty to lead them.

Members of the Mineiran brotherhoods also continued to elect kings and queens to lead their organizations, despite the 1720 prohibition. A proviso written into the *compromisso*, or incorporating statutes, of the rosary brotherhood in the village of Cachoeira do Campo by the ecclesiastic visitor in 1723 affirmed that the coronations of kings and queens among the black membership had become an integral part of that brotherhood.<sup>37</sup> The accounting books from Cachoeira do Campo revealed that the *reinado* (the crowning of kings and queens) remained important in the feast day celebration at least through the middle of the nineteenth century.<sup>38</sup> Even Serro do Frio, where the Conde de Assumar had specifically targeted his ban, ignored the prohibition. The 1728 *compromisso* of the rosary brotherhood of Vila do Príncipe (Serro), the capital of the Serro do Frio district, included a king and queen.<sup>39</sup>

34 Letter from Dom Lourenço de Almeida to King Dom João V, 18 June 1725, *RAPM* 30 (1979): 201.

35 Carlos Magno Guimarães, "Mineração, quilombos e Palmares, Minas Gerais no Século XVIII," in *Liberdade por um fio, História dos Quilombos no Brasil*, ed. João José Reis and Flávio dos Santos Gomes (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1996), pp. 147–149.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 148.

37 *Compromisso da Irmandade de Nossa Senhora do Rosário novamente Erecta na Igreja Matris de Nossa Senhora da Nazareth do lugar da Caxueira no distrito das Minas . . . o anno de 1713*, Arquivo Eclesiástico da Arquidiocese de Mariana (hereafter AEAM) AA22, 8.

38 *Receita e Despesa da Irmandade de Nossa Senhora do Rosário, Cachoeira do Campo, 1783–1840*, AEAM AA24.

39 *Compromisso da Irmandade de Nossa Senhora do Rosário na Freguezia da Conceição da Villa do Príncipe do Serro do Frio no Anno de 1.728* (Serro, MG: Irmandade de Nossa Senhora do Rosário, 1979), p. 1.

The second half of the eighteenth century brought new restrictions on the naming of kings and queens in brotherhoods – this time coming from the metropolis. The Marquis de Pombal (Sebastião José de Carvalho e Melo) attempted to centralize the power of their far-flung empire.<sup>40</sup> The Pombaline reforms had their largest impact on the economic structure in Brazil, but Pombal's zeal to centralize power in Lisbon also affected the relationship between Church and state. Most notably, he removed power from local Church authorities and lay organizations and placed it with the state in Lisbon.<sup>41</sup> He ordered that all *compromissos* (incorporating statutes), which often included the clauses calling for kings and queens, should be sent to Lisbon to be approved by the *Mesa de Consciência e Ordens* (the branch of government that oversaw Church activities). Among other reforms, his law prohibited the "coronation of kings and queens in the brotherhoods of blacks."<sup>42</sup>

Coronations of black kings and queens, however, continued in Minas Gerais and elsewhere in Brazil and Portugal. The 1762 *compromisso* of the brotherhood in the town of São Caetano, after listing the officers, declared that "in order not to break the inveterate custom of this town, and this America, there will be in this Brotherhood also a king and queen."<sup>43</sup> The brotherhood in the village of Santa Rita in the district of Sabará wrote in their 1784 *compromisso* that brotherhoods of blacks customarily nominated a king and queen to increase the devotion of their members.<sup>44</sup> In some places, such as the town of São João del Rei in the southern mining district of Rio das Mortes, the *compromisso* of the rosary brotherhood did not mention kings and queens. Nevertheless, the accounting books and the election lists from that brotherhood consistently listed a king and queen as having paid their dues.<sup>45</sup> These records suggest that the practice of crowning kings and queens had indeed become "inveterate custom" throughout Brazil.

Rio de Janeiro, as it grew steadily in importance as a slave port in the eighteenth century, concurrently grew as a center of black religious

40 See Kenneth R. Maxwell, "Pombal and the nationalization of the Luso-Brazilian economy," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 48 (November 1968): 608–631.

41 Thomas C. Bruneau, *The Political Transformation of the Brazilian Catholic Church* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 20.

42 Caio César Boschi, *Os leigos e o poder: Irmandades leigas e política colonizadora em Minas Gerais* (São Paulo: Editora Ática, 1986), pp. 121–122.

43 *Livro do Compromisso da Irmandade de Nossa Senhora do Rosário dos pretos da freguesia de São Caetano* (Monsenhor Horta), 1762. AEAM Livros das Irmandades 22.

44 *Compromisso pelo qual se deve regular a Irmandade de N. Senhora do Rosário dos Pretos erecta no arraial de Santa Rita da Freguezia de Santo Antonio do Rio Assima, 1784*, ABGS, Capítulo 3.

45 *Compromisso da Irmandade de Nossa Senhora do Rosário dos Pretos, São João del Rei, 1787*, Archive of the Museu de Arte Sacra de São João del Rei (hereafter MASSJR) 4.01; *Livro de Receitas e Despesas, Irmandade de Nossa Senhora do Rosário dos Pretos, São João del Rei, 1803–1825*, Arquivo de Irmandade de Nossa Senhora do Rosário (hereafter AINSR).



RJ<sup>1</sup> brotherhoods. The earliest of those brotherhoods, that of Our Lady of the Rosary founded before 1669, did not crown kings and queens until 1759. That year, the *compromisso* was reformed and the brotherhood officially elected their first king and queen.<sup>46</sup> The rosary brotherhood, however, was not the only one to elect kings and queens in Rio de Janeiro. Nineteenth century folklorist Alexandre José de Mello Moraes Filho described a black king and queen in the brotherhood of King Balthasar in the Lampadosa Church. Titled his account "The coronation of a black king in 1748," Moraes Filho used a petition written in 1748 by the "Emperor, the king and queen and other adepts of the nation of the holy King Balthasar" as the basis of his text. The petition requested that the brotherhood be allowed to collect alms so that on the Day of Kings they would have the funds to crown a king of the Rebolo nation and go out and dance and sing in the streets.<sup>47</sup> Africans and their descendents came into the city from plantations to celebrate the occasion with slaves and free blacks living in the city. Moraes Filho described the coronation ceremonies and the ensuing festival, calling them "traditional festivals and genuinely African, celebrated in Rio in the last [18<sup>th</sup>] century."<sup>48</sup> During the religious ceremony of the coronation, the chaplain of the brotherhood crowned the new royalty, and then the king and queen made their mark on the official document of their coronation. After the religious ceremony, members sang and danced the *batuques* (songs and dances) of different African nations. The African instruments announced the "triumphal entrance of the *Congos* in the profane festivities of the coronation of the black King."<sup>49</sup> Moraes Filho included a description of the 1811 celebration that described the coronation of a king and queen of the Cabundá nation, demonstrating that the nation of the elected royalty changed from year to year.<sup>50</sup>

At the end of the eighteenth century, a captain of the royal army, Carlos Julião, painted watercolors of sites in Rio de Janeiro, including the coronation of a black king in Rio de Janeiro on the Day of Kings. The image depicted a similar scene to that which Moraes Filho described in his text, with a king carrying a long staff and being shaded by a large umbrella (Figure 5.1).<sup>51</sup> Yet, in the early part of the nineteenth century, travelers to

46 Joaquim José da Costa, *Breve noticia da Irmandade de Nossa Senhora do Rosario e S. Benedicto dos Homens Pretos da Cidade do Rio Capital do Imperio do Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Typ. Economica de Jacintho J. Fonte, 1863), pp. 75-78.

47 Alexandre José de Mello Moraes Filho, *Festas e tradições populares do Brasil*, rev. and ed. Luís da Câmara Cascudo (Rio de Janeiro: Tecnoprint Gráfica S. A., 1967), p. 396.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 398.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 400.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 399.

51 Carlos Julião, "Coronation of a black king," Fundação Biblioteca Nacional, Rio de Janeiro, Dept. of Iconography.



Figure 5.1. Detail from a coronation of a black king (courtesy of Fundação Biblioteca Nacional).



the city already noted the demise of this African celebration. Jean Baptiste Debret, a traveler to Rio de Janeiro in the early nineteenth century, drew a picture of the king and queen of the rosary brotherhood collecting alms for the maintenance of their church. The king and queen, dressed in European finery, were seated against a wall. Musicians played horns off to their left while on the right a small black girl put money on the collection plate, urged on by a group of black women (Figure 5.2).<sup>52</sup> Debret commented that the "loud costumed festivals" of the black brotherhoods were no longer allowed in Rio de Janeiro – to see them you had to travel to other parts of Brazil.<sup>53</sup> The picture, he added, represented a black brotherhood in the far southern state of Rio Grande do Sul.<sup>54</sup>

Prior to the second half of the eighteenth century, no document mentioned the election of a discreet and ongoing election of a King of Congo, even though Moraes Filho described a group of dancers called Congos. All of the official documentation stressed the election of black kings and queens, that is, *reis negros* of one or another ethnicity, even in brotherhoods that divided along ethnic lines. Brotherhoods, however, did not always divide along ethnic lines. Patricia Mulvey found that of 165 compromissos of black brotherhoods throughout Brazil, only nine divided along ethnic lines. The three ethnically divided brotherhoods founded in the seventeenth century were rosary brotherhoods, one in Recife and two in Bahia, and all were for Angolan and crioulo slaves and free blacks. In the eighteenth century, Africans of the Gege nation opened two brotherhoods of Good Jesus (Bom Jesus) in Bahia (one in Salvador and one in Cachoeira). During the same century, Angolans opened another rosary brotherhood, and the "Nago-Yoruba of the Ketu nation" opened a brotherhood of Our Lady of the Good Death.<sup>55</sup>

In Rio, too, only some of the brotherhoods divided along ethnic lines. Of 23 black brotherhoods listed by Mary Karasch in her work on slave life in Rio de Janeiro in the early nineteenth century, nine included restrictions on membership. Four of the brotherhoods were restricted to *pardos* (people of mixed African and European descent) and another put limits on pardo control of the ruling board (*mesa*). Crioulos and pardos together formed another. Only three restricted their membership to particular ethnicities. The "black brotherhood of the apostles St. Philip and St. James," originally

52 Jean Baptiste Debret, "Collection for the maintenance of the church of the Rosary," Fundação Biblioteca Nacional, Dept. of Iconography.

53 Jean Baptiste Debret, *Viagem Pitoresca e Histórica ao Brasil*, Vol. 2, trans. and ed. Sérgio Milliet (São Paulo: Livraria Martins Editora, 1954), p. 225.

54 Ibid.

55 Mulvey, "The black lay brotherhoods," pp. 289–303.



Figure 5.2. Collection for the maintenance of the Church of the Rosary (courtesy of Fundação Biblioteca Nacional).

Ethnicidade  
de e  
irmãos  
da casa (?)



housed in the Lampadosa Church, had been "given" to the Congos. Angolans founded the brotherhood of Our Lady of Belem in 1765, and Mina blacks from West Africa the brotherhood of St. Efigenia and St. Elesbão.<sup>56</sup>

The records of black kings in some of these brotherhoods show that the most common single ethnically restricted brotherhoods to crown kings and queens were of Angolans. For example, the seventeenth-century record of the rosary brotherhood in Pernambuco, which restricted its membership to blacks from Angola and Brazil, elected two kings, one from each of those groups. In Bahia, Angolans had formed the rosary brotherhood, and it restricted membership to people from that nation. Similarly, in Rio de Janeiro, the brotherhood of St. Balthasar, who himself would come to be called the King of Congo, elected kings and queens from various nations, but the two recorded were from the Rebolo and Cabundá nations, both regions of Central Africa.

In Minas Gerais, the black brotherhoods did not divide along ethnic lines. The brotherhoods of the rosary, by far the most ubiquitous of the black brotherhoods, all had heterogeneous populations. In my study of four different brotherhoods, I found over 62 different ethnicities to be participating, both as members and as elected and voluntary officials.<sup>57</sup> The general trend in the populations in these brotherhoods shifted over time, like the change in the general slave population, from a large number of West Africans to an overwhelming preponderance of Central Africans by the second half of the eighteenth century. In conjunction with the changing ethnicities, the crioulo population in the brotherhoods steadily increased in the course of the late eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century. Brotherhood election lists reflected this general trend. Members of various nations became kings and queens, with the majority of identified ethnicities being Central African.<sup>58</sup> The sharing of the titles of kings and queens within a heterogeneous Central African community demonstrated the commitment of that population to work together for the community, rather than exposing a population fractured by ethnic rivalries.

The frequent passing of the title of king and queen in the brotherhoods has led many scholars to conclude that the role of the kings and queens in the brotherhoods was politically insignificant. In the eighteenth century the black kings of Minas Gerais held enough power to prompt the vicar of a

<sup>56</sup> Mary C. Karasch, *Slave Life in Rio de Janeiro, 1808-1850* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 84.

<sup>57</sup> Kiddy, "The brotherhoods of the Rosary," p. 423.

<sup>58</sup> Livro de Termos de Meza, Irmandade de Nossa Senhora do Rosário, Arraial de Bacalhau, Freguesia de Nossa Senhora da Conceição de Guarapiranga, 1758-1893, AEAM Y12.

small town near the city of Mariana, Padre Leonardo de Azevedo Castro, to write a petition in 1771 to the governor of Minas Gerais complaining about the abuses of kings in the rosary brotherhoods. Like the Conde de Assumar 50 years earlier, Padre Leonardo complained that the titles of king and queen were "indecent, abominable, and incompatible" with slavery. He attached a series of documents to the complaint that, in his view, proved the bad character of the blacks. In one example, the king went to the jail to order the freedom of some prisoners. When the jailer asked for the order of the judge, the king responded that he did not care what the judge ordered, that he was the king and he who gave the orders. In another, the king and his retinue passed by two shoemakers who did not remove their hats nor stand up when the group passed. In response, the blacks started a brawl that the chief of police had to break up. Clearly, the kings of the brotherhoods had an understanding of their temporal, local power as the leader of the black population. Kings also played a part in the religious and magical complex present in the brotherhoods. Padre Leonardo complained that in his city the blacks knew that the reelected king was their true king because an oracle had foretold it. Members of the brotherhood respected the king as a fortune-teller, and people came from all over seeking his advice.<sup>59</sup>

The combination of the temporal and ritual power of the kings that Padre Leonardo pointed out in his complaints indicate how the election and leadership of black kings helped to reconstruct an African worldview in the brotherhoods. The black kings enjoyed a political presence at the local level, and an understanding of their own right to receive respect and to wield power within their own communities. The kings also exercised ritual powers that remained obscured in the hidden transcript of the brotherhoods.<sup>60</sup> It is likely, despite the absence of documentation, that kings wielded similar power in the quilombos and slave rebel groups. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, black kings came to be called Kings of Congo. The title came to be used in an extraethnic sense for the leader in a community of slaves and freedpeople that combined the political power and ritual skills from their African predecessors.

#### KINGS OF CONGO IN BRAZIL

The earliest mention of Kings of Congo in Brazil, Francisco Calmon's 1760 account, described the celebration for the marriage of the Princess of Brazil

<sup>59</sup> Cited in Gilberto Freyre, *Sobrados e mucambos, decadência do patriarcado rural e desenvolvimento do urbano*, Vol. 2, 5th ed. (Rio de Janeiro: Livraria José Olympio Editora, 1977), pp. 412-415.

<sup>60</sup> See James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).



to her uncle, Dom Pedro, in Santo Amaro, a sugar-growing port in the Bahian recôncavo. The festivities included the "Coronation of the Congos," which consisted of 80 masked dancers who led the King and Queen of the Congo in a procession through the town.<sup>61</sup> The Congos danced on the fourteenth of December along with the ambassador to the King of Congo. On the sixteenth, the Congo dancers appeared again with over 80 masked participants in African costumes adorned with diamonds and gold, leading the richly ornamented King and Queen. Once seated in their velvet-lined chairs, the royalty watched the dances of *talheiras* and *quicumbis*, which were accompanied by African instruments.<sup>62</sup> On the eighteenth, the groups and the royalty paraded and performed again, and then again on the twentieth, the penultimate day of the festival. Calmon stressed that in each case, even though the ritual remained the same, the general public adored the richly ornamented king and queen and the lively dances and theater in which their "subjects" reveled.<sup>63</sup>

Africans and their descendents had apparently become an important part of the community to such a degree that they enjoyed a major role in a townwide dynastic festival. According to Calmon, all of the townspeople enjoyed watching the African court, fully accepted their existence, and felt no threat from their participation. Despite the richly descriptive account, however, the event does not specify if the King and Queen of Congo were from the Kingdom of Kongo, nor even if they were part of the secondary ethnicity of Congo. Nevertheless, the names of the dances, as well as the titles of the royalty, indicate cultural elements that clearly point to a Central African community that celebrated its rituals within the European social structure.

In Rio de Janeiro, the title King of Congo also came into usage in the late eighteenth century. An account of the celebration held in honor of the birth of the Prince of Beira stated that "all of the pardos in the city made royal court (*estado*) imitating that of the King of Congo, and it consisted of: a king, a prince, two ambassadors, seven chiefs, nine captains of the guard, three *mocambos*, one of them naked pretending to be in Africa, armed with a bow

61 Francisco Calmon, *Relação das Faustíssimas Festas, Reprodução fac-similar da edição de 1762* (Rio de Janeiro: Ed. FUNARTE/INF, 1982).

62 The quicumbi that Calmon described became the cucumbi of Bahia and Rio de Janeiro, described in detail by Moraes Filho in *Festas*, pp. 190–198. On the derivation of the word see Karasch, *Slave Life*, p. 247; Heywood, "The Angolan-Afro-Brazilian," p. 12. The *Talheiras* became the *Taieira*, a dance of the type described by Beatriz Góis Dantas in the terreiro of Nagô in which the *mãe-de-santo* takes responsibility to put on this traditional festival on the feast day of Saint Benedict. See Beatriz Góis Dantas, *Vovó Nagô e Papai Branco, Usos e abusos da África no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Edições Graal, 1988), pp. 220–225. Both of these remain coronation dances today.

63 Calmon, *Relação*, pp. 22–25.

and arrow."<sup>64</sup> The description of pardos who imitated the King of Congo demonstrates the close association between Africans and their descendents and the coronation of a King of Congo in a festival. When people of mixed descent engaged in the same practice, they were imitating the African ritual practice – and also the practice of Afro-Brazilians in Rio de Janeiro.

In the city of Recife, the title King of Congo appeared in a much different setting than those who participated in dynastic festivals. A series of government military commissions (*patentes*), issued between 1776 and 1802, nominated blacks of different nations to be governors of Africans of those nations, or blacks of different professions to the position of governor of members of that profession. In both cases, the commission papers ordered the King of Congo to recognize and honor the black governors. In 1776, for example, the Governor of Pernambuco recognized Simião da Rocha of the nation Dagome to be the Governor of other Africans of that nation. The commission stated that "Through this I [the governor of Pernambuco] order the respective King of the Congo that by this he will recognize, honor, and esteem him [Simião da Rocha]."<sup>65</sup> In 1792, another commission named "the black Domingos da Fonseca to the position of Governor of the Black Canoe Drivers in this Town of Recife," also to be recognized by the King of Congo.<sup>66</sup> These government commissions were linked to the social structure within the rosary brotherhood through the position of king of Congo – the same brotherhood that had previously limited the position of King and queen to Angolas and crioulos in their seventeenth century *compromisso*. The 1782 *compromisso*, however, called for a King and Queen of Congo to be elected from among the members from the Kingdom of Angola (*Reino de Angola*). The King of Congo would have the responsibility to "name a Governor of each Nation."<sup>67</sup> This example from late-eighteenth-century Recife demonstrates that the representative of the Central Africans would be the King of Congo, who would rule over the "other," West African nations.

The acceptance of a kind of parallel government depended on the sympathies of the Governor of Pernambuco. In 1815 the Governor, Caetano Pinto de Miranda Montenegro, wrote that he had tried to stop the commissions

64 Quoted in Lara, "Significados cruzados," p. 10.

65 Simião da Rocha, Governador da nação Dagome, 3 February 1776. Arquivo Público do Estado de Pernambuco (hereafter APEPE), Pp 02, folha 114v.

66 O Preto Domingos da Fonseca, Governador dos pretos canoeiros desta vila, 5 December 1792. APEPE, Pp 07, folha 116.

67 *Compromisso da Irmandade de Nossa Senhora do Rozario dos homens pretos erigida nesta Villa de Santo Antonio do Recife, 1782, Capítulo 28*. Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, Códice 1293, found in the Divisão de Pesquisas do Departamento de História da Universidade Federal de Pernambuco.



that caused "the insubordination and lack of respect of the blacks of Recife and Olinda."<sup>68</sup> He linked the nature of the government of the blacks to their ethnicity, by pointing out that the blacks of Bahia, because they came from warrior societies, did not have their kings and governors, nor the entire administration that went with them, but that all of this existed in Pernambuco. The different ethnicities to which he referred must have been slaves brought from the war-torn region of West Africa to Bahia. This implied that he understood the Pernambuco slaves to be more predominantly from Central Africa, and that these slaves were known to organize themselves in extended, hierarchical, royal courts.<sup>69</sup>

Henry Koster's account from early-nineteenth-century Pernambuco offers a particularly rich descriptive look at the election of a King and Queen of Congo. Koster explained that in May, during the festival of the rosary, the blacks of each district elected a King and a Queen of Congo only if the previous king or queen had died or been dethroned in the previous year.<sup>70</sup> He added his own commentary on the presence of Kings of Congos in the feast day celebrations of the blacks at the end of the colonial period:

The election of a King of Congo by the individuals who come from that part of Africa, seems indeed as if it would give them a bias towards the customs of their native soil; but the Brazilian Kings of Congo worship Our Lady of the Rosary, and are dressed in the dress of white men; they and their subjects dance, it is true, after the manner of their country; but to these festivals are admitted African negroes of other nations, creole blacks, and mulattos, all of whom dance after the same manner; and these dances are now as much the national dances of Brazil as they are of Africa.<sup>71</sup>

More than any other account, Koster adds some nuance to the presence of Kings of Congo. The statement that slaves from "that part of Africa" elected the King of Congo demonstrates an awareness of ethnic divisions. When Koster calls the king the Brazilian King of Congo, however, and explains that the groups who participated in the celebration derived from many nations and racial mixtures, he expressed that a shift to an Afro-Brazilian understanding of the King of Congo had been emerging. In other words, the King of Congo became the term of the leader of African descent who represented and received the loyalty of blacks of many nations and people of mixed descent, like the black kings of the brotherhoods of Minas Gerais and Rio de Janeiro. The black kings became the Kings of Congo.

<sup>68</sup> Caetano Pinto de Miranda Montenegro, 24 December 1815. APEPE, OG 15, folhas 160-161.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. In the frequent slave uprisings in Bahia and the Bahian recôncavo, however, leaders were called "Kings" and "dukes." See João José Reis, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil, The Muslim Uprising of 1835 in Bahia*, trans. Arthur Brakel (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp. 45-69.

<sup>70</sup> Henry Koster, *Travels in Brazil* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1816), p. 274.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 411.

In the second quarter of the nineteenth century, a German artist, João Maurício Rugendas, traveled through Brazil as part of a Russian-sponsored expedition to the interior of Brazil. Rugendas drew a scene that he titled "The feast day of Our Lady of the Rosary, patroness of the blacks," perhaps based on Koster's description, which Rugendas quoted at great length in his accompanying text (see Figure 5.3).<sup>72</sup> Rugendas' drawing, however, provided visual details to the textual account. The drawing shows a king and queen standing in the midst of a large group of Africans and people of African descent celebrating the coronation. They appear to be leading a procession, because dust and faint figures seem to be descending from the town in the background. The king and queen both use European clothes, except that the king wears a skirt over his pants and a crown encircled with feathers. Musicians in the foreground play a European-style drum and flutes, but one black in the front plays a thumb piano, an instrument of African origin. Two supplicants bow on their knees before the queen, one reaching up with his hands open, asking for something. On the other side of the kings a black raises his hat to the king, while another reaches out his hand as if to touch the king. On the far left, a white man and a white priest, both mounted, look down on the scene below. In his text, Rugendas explains that the crowning of the Kings and Queens of Congo served as proof that the middle passage caused a "real death" that destroyed all of their previous customs, and that they easily became true Christians.<sup>73</sup> Rugendas, who had never been to Africa, saw only the European antecedent to the celebration, unaware of the Central African antecedents that had already combined African and European customs.

Other early nineteenth century travelers also downplayed the significance of black kings and queens. The German scientist, Karl Friedrich Philipp von Martius, wrote an account of a dynastic festival, the ascension of D. João VI to the throne (6 February 1818), which he witnessed in Tejuco (present day Diamantina, Minas Gerais). Von Martius wrote that it was the custom throughout Brazil for the blacks to elect every year a king and his court, observing that this king had no power whatsoever, citing the lack of power as the reason why the Portuguese did not oppose the elections. Von Martius described the visit of the newly crowned King of Congo, a freed black shoemaker, to the house of the superintendent of the diamond-mining

<sup>72</sup> João Maurício Rugendas, "Festa de N. Sra do Rosário, Padroeira dos Negros," Fundação Biblioteca Nacional, Dept. of Iconography.

<sup>73</sup> João Maurício Rugendas, "Festa de N. Sra do Rosário, Padroeira dos Negros," *Viagem Pitoresca através do Brasil*, trans. Sérgio Milliet (São Paulo: Livraria Martins Editora, 1954), p. 200.





Figure 5.3. Feast Day of our Lady of the Rosary, patroness of the blacks (courtesy of Fundação Biblioteca Nacional).

district. The superintendent greeted the black court in his nightgown and cap and invited them into his house. When the superintendent invited the king to sit on the sofa, he was so shocked that he let his scepter fall on the ground. The superintendent picked it up saying, "Your Majesty dropped your scepter!"<sup>74</sup> As in the Bahian town of Santo Amaro, the white population played along with the coronations of the blacks, but the appearance of the superintendent in his pajamas, despite his politeness to his visitors, also demonstrates the condescending attitude of the whites toward the ruler of the blacks.

Von Martius recorded the election, coronation, and visits not only of a King of Congo, but also of a Queen Xinga – the first such documentary record of a Queen Xinga in Brazil. The famous Queen Njinga ruled the Central African kingdom of Matamba in the mid-seventeenth century.<sup>75</sup> She had accepted Christianity and allowed priests to come to her kingdom after consulting three mediums possessed with her ancestors, who urged her that she should. The two priests who witnessed and recorded the event considered it a miracle.<sup>76</sup> In the minds of Europeans, Queen Njinga may have served as a mythic heroine – an African Queen who accepted Christianity. Her presence in the festivals of the blacks, especially standing side by side with the King of Congo, to Europeans represented the triumph of Christianity over heathenism. For the Africans and their descendents, Queen Xinga very likely represented the triumph of African traditions in the face of almost overwhelming attempts at European cultural domination, very much what the politically astute Queen Njinga had accomplished during her reign in Matamba. Few accounts of Queen Xinga in the festivals of the rosary mention her again until the twentieth century, when she appeared with the King of Congo in some festivals of congo in northern Brazil and congadas in the southern regions.<sup>77</sup>

Although Queen Xinga did not appear frequently in Afro-Brazilian festivals, the King of Congo did. Elsewhere in Minas Gerais, especially in the

74 Karl von Martius quoted in Luís da Câmara Cascudo, *Antologia do Folclore Brasileiro* (São Paulo: Livraria Martins Editora, 1965), p. 93.

75 Her name is also spelled Zinga, Ginga, and Jinga in the Portuguese, and Njinga or Anna Njinga in African works, and she herself spelled the name "Ginga" in her extant letters. See John K. Thornton, "Legitimacy and political power: Queen Njinga, 1624–1663," *Journal of African History*, 32:1 (1991): 25–40.

76 John K. Thornton, *Africa and Africans*, pp. 258–259. Queen Njinga's story probably was known by intellectuals in Europe in the eighteenth century through several published seventeenth-century accounts, most notably that of Pe. António Cavazzi de Montecúcolo.

77 Andrade, *Danças dramáticas*, pp. 40–105; Araújo, *Folclore nacional*, pp. 263–265, Linda M. Heywood, "The Angolan–Afro–Brazilian," pp. 20–21.



colonial period, it is difficult to find references to Kings of Congo, yet occasionally the title King of Congo appears buried in several colonial rosary brotherhood records. The entrance books for São João del Rei identified the slave Brizida as the "Queen of the Congos" in 1773.<sup>78</sup> Twenty years later, the same book listed Thereza de Sobral e Souza, a freed black, as the "wife of the King of Congo."<sup>79</sup> The name King of Congo did not appear again in the extant books of the brotherhood. In the brotherhood in the hamlet of Bacalhau in 1830, a list of elected officers identified the slave José Congo as the King of Congo in the same year that they listed a black king and queen who were both *crioulos*.<sup>80</sup> In 1830, the title King of Congo appeared on the list, the last year of the extant list of elections. The records point to a position called the King of Congo in the brotherhoods that may have differed from the position of the black king and queen, who were elected every year. The documentation does not give enough information to draw any firm conclusions, but it does point out that a King of Congo existed slightly beneath the surface of the official documentation of the brotherhoods in Minas Gerais, mostly hidden from the eyes of the authorities.

At Brazilian independence in 1822, African kings continued to lead uprisings as well as brotherhoods, and they too began to be called Kings of Congo.<sup>81</sup> In 1822 Minas Gerais, for example, Antonio Paulino Limpo de Abreu, a local judge, wrote a letter to the President of the provisional government of the province of Minas Gerais justifying his decisions about a black "who is, or who calls himself, the King of the Congos."<sup>82</sup> Limpo de Abreu explained that the blacks interpreted discussions about liberty in the constitutional congress to signify that on Christmas, or shortly afterward on the Day of Kings, they would receive their letters of freedom. Although Limpo de Abreu concluded that the notice of the uprising was only the whisperings of the wishes of the blacks rather than a plan, he prohibited "all gatherings of blacks, to take away their weapons, and to severely punish those who deserved to be punished."<sup>83</sup>

Despite Limpo de Abreu's fears, gatherings of blacks in Minas Gerais continued to crown their kings and queens and gather together in corporate

78 Entradas dos Irmãos, Irmandade de Nossa Senhora do Rosário dos Pretos, São João del Rei 1747-1806, AINSR, 6 January 1773.

79 Entradas dos Irmãos, Irmandade de Nossa Senhora do Rosário dos Pretos, São João del Rei 1747-1806, AINSR, 6 January 1793.

80 Livro de Termos de Meza, Irmandade de Nossa Senhora do Rosário, Arraial de Bacalhau, Freguesia de Nossa Senhora da Conceição de Guarapiranga, 1758-1893, AEAM Y12.

81 See, for instance, Reis, *Slave Rebellion*, pp. 44-53.

82 Letter from Antonio Paulino Limpo de Abreu to the President and Deputies of the provisional government, 14 February 1822. APM SP JGP 1/6, Caixa 01, doc. 28.

83 Ibid.

organizations. The custom had become so much a part of Mineiran society that the *Conselho Geral* (state assembly) allowed for them in the *Postura das Câmaras Municipais da Província de Minas Gerais* in 1830. The guidelines for the municipal laws allowed "the *quinbites*, or *reinados*, that the slaves are accustomed to have on certain days of the year, as long as they are not held at night."<sup>84</sup> The legal allowance did not show a general laxness in regard to the activities of blacks in Minas Gerais, for the same laws banned the *batuque* (a dance of African origin that authorities had long considered dangerous) even in private homes during the day or night.<sup>85</sup>

Count Francis de la Porte de Castelneau attested to the continuation of the coronations when he witnessed the election of the King of Congo in 1843 in Sabará, Minas Gerais. Castelneau focused on the exotic nature of the celebration, describing the King of the Congo and his court sitting on their chairs, with a great umbrella over them "to guarantee the influence of the moon, which was rising."<sup>86</sup> He called the festival an "extravagant carnival" that seemed to be a combination of practices brought from the coast of Africa with Brazilian traditions and religious ceremonies. His account bears repeating at length, for it is one of the most complete that exists for a coronation of a king in mid-nineteenth-century Brazil:

A thing worthy of note, the king had a black mask, as if he had a dread that staying in this country would fade his natural color. The court, whose costumes mixed all colors with extravagant decorations, was seated on either side of the king and queen; then came an infinity of other characters, the most considerable of which were without a doubt great captains, famous warriors or ambassadors of distant authorities, all dressed up in the style of the Brazilian Indians, with great headdresses of feathers, cavalry sabers at their sides, and shields on their arms. In this tumult, they mixed national dances, of dialogues between people, between these people and the king, or between the king and the queen, simulated battles and all types of somersaults worthy of very excited monkeys.<sup>87</sup>

The description offers unusual insights into the festival Castelneau witnessed, presenting many African and many Brazilian elements. The national dances probably referred to dances of the different African nations, one of which was likely Congo.

84 "Postura das Câmaras Municipais da Província de Minas Gerais confirmadas pelo Conselho Geral da mesma Província, 1830," AEAM - 0158 Dom Frei José da Santíssima Trindade, 1823 02-2-034, Capítulo 2, Artigo 137. After 1834 the Conselho Geral (literally General Council) came to be called the *Assembléia*.

85 Ibid.

86 Luís da Câmara Cascudo, *Antologia do Folclore Brasileiro* (São Paulo: Livraria Martins Editora, 1956), p. 108.

87 Ibid.



In Minas Gerais, the elite had come to see the coronations of black kings and queens as harmless pastimes of their slaves and the free blacks of their communities. Nevertheless, each province adopted its own guideline for regulating slave behavior. In other newly formed provinces and towns, the coronation of black kings and queens did not seem so innocuous. In the town of Desterro, Santa Catarina, for instance, the law moved against the coronations: "From this time on assemblies of slaves or freed persons intended to form batuques are forbidden, as well as those which have as their purpose the supposed African royal ceremonies [*reinado africanos*], which they are accustomed to performing during their ceremonies."<sup>88</sup> Throughout the new empire of Brazil, in fact, except for Minas Gerais, authorities began to show less tolerance for the public coronations and celebrations in the black brotherhoods.

Authorities had suppressed the coronations in Rio de Janeiro since the early part of the nineteenth century, as both Debret and Moraes Filho pointed out in their texts. The brotherhood of the rosary had excluded the clause on the position of kings and queens and in fact had not even mentioned a festival in their 1831 *compromisso*, and the documents of the brotherhood of King Balthasar give no evidence of a king and queen.<sup>89</sup> Nevertheless, the nineteenth-century photographer Christiano Jr. (José Christiano de Freitas Henriques Junior) captured an image of a king and queen during the feast day celebration of the brotherhood of the rosary (Figure 5.4). The photo, taken in Rio de Janeiro sometime between 1864 and 1866, showed a king and queen standing in the middle of a semicircle of other celebrants. The queen was dressed in European clothes; the king, like the *Rugendas* and the *Carlos Julião* images, wore a skirt over his pants. Three drummers played African drums and wore festive headdresses with feathers. Although Christiano Jr. did not caption the photo, the image clearly depicts a king and queen of African descent – making it the first photographic image of an Afro-Brazilian king and queen and their retinue.<sup>90</sup>

In Rio de Janeiro, the title King of Congo had been clearly associated with King Balthasar, the patron saint of the brotherhood housed in the Lampadosa Church that Moraes Filho wrote about. Thomas Ewbank, an American visitor to Rio de Janeiro, made that association clear when he commented



Figure 5.4. Black kings and queens in Rio de Janeiro.

upon a statue of Saint Balthasar, King of Congo, in the Lampadosa Church.<sup>91</sup> King Balthasar had long been considered to be one of the three kings who were present for the nativity of Christ.<sup>92</sup> Because of this association, many important events in Brazil's black brotherhoods of the rosary took place on the Day of Kings, January 6, just as Moraes Filho had noted in his passage about the Kings in the 1748 celebration, and as Carlos Julião had

<sup>88</sup> City of Desterro, Santa Catarina, Law of May 10, 1845, quoted in Conrad, *Children of God's Fire*, p. 260.

<sup>89</sup> *Compromisso da Irmandade de NSR e São Benedito dos Homens Pretos Erecta na Sua Mesma Igreja Nesta Corte de Rio de Janeiro* (Rio de Janeiro: A. Guimarães & C., 1883).

<sup>90</sup> Paulo Cesar de Azevedo, Mauricio Lissovsky, eds., *Escravos Brasileiros do século XIX na fotografia de Christiano Jr.* (São Paulo: Ex Libris, 1988), plate 73.

<sup>91</sup> Thomas Ewbank, *Life in Brazil; or A Journal of a Visit to the Land of the Cocoa and the Palm* (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1856), p. 398.

<sup>92</sup> See the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 9 (New York: McGraw Hill, 1967), p. 63.



captured in his watercolors. This association with King Balthasar clearly was strong in Rio de Janeiro, but evidence of it does not exist elsewhere in Brazil.

Although Rio de Janeiro experienced a tightening on the prohibitions on the coronations of kings and queens in the nineteenth century, the King of Congo remained a presence in the capital. Moraes Filho described and transcribed the script of a ritual drama called the cucumbi, which included the presence of a King of Congo. In the opening lines of the drama, the king sang, "I am the King of Congo/I want to play/I just arrived/From Portugal."<sup>93</sup> After this declamation, the drama unfolded in three parts: the arrival of the King along with the dances and call and responses of the different groups, the killing of the queen's son (*Mamêto*) by the *caboclos*,<sup>94</sup> and finally the witchdoctor's (*feiticeiro*) success at reviving the son from death with his incantations.<sup>95</sup> When the prince revived, the participants sang praises to Saint Benedict and Our Lady, and the witchdoctor destroyed the *caboclos* with a look (*o olhar*).

Unlike the coronation ceremonies of the brotherhoods, the drama used a script and set choreography, like the religious autos used in the conversion of non-Christians and the folk ritual battles between the Christians and the Moors. The drama, however, remained significantly African. Moraes Filho wrote that the cucumbis had recently reappeared in Rio de Janeiro, because "the direct descendents of the Africans had conserved their inheritance in Brazil."<sup>96</sup> The drama was rich in themes with complex meanings, most notably the struggle between Africans and *caboclos* (Brazilians) and the death and resurrection of the prince by means of African incantations and charms.<sup>97</sup> The language and references of the drama all evoked a Central African past; even the *feiticeiro's* reference to Saint Benedict, usually present in the rosary brotherhoods, calls up a Central African connection.

The cucumbi, with the important presence of the King of Congo, however, removed from the lay religious brotherhood setting had taken on a profane tone. Moraes Filho even included it in the section of his book on popular festivals. He pointed out that the groups that performed these

93 Moraes Filho, *Festas*, p. 196.

94 Caboclo was originally a term for Brazilians of mixed Indian descent. The term has come to mean hick or hillbilly.

95 Moraes Filho, *Festas*, pp. 191-202.

96 *Ibid.*, 194.

97 See Mary C. Karasch, "Central African religious tradition in Rio de Janeiro," *Journal of Latin American Lore* 5:2 (1979): 237. See also her excellent description of Moraes Filho's account in Karasch, *Slave Life*, pp. 247-249.

dramas were carnival societies, groups that performed for entertainment. As Mary Karasch points out, however, the drama gave a strong message of the triumph of Central African traditions over those of the *caboclos*, or Brazilians.<sup>98</sup> That the victory included incorporating European elements simply displayed a continuing reaffirmation of Central African traditions. The King of Congo had become the symbolic center of that affirmation, and Moraes Filho's account the evidence of culmination of a century of a move toward a collective Afro-Brazilian identity.

By the middle of the twentieth century, Kings of Congo had become prominent figures in many Brazilian ritual dramas, in coronations that occurred on feast days in Afro-Brazilian black brotherhoods, and during carnival celebrations. In every case, kings from different ethnic groups disappeared, replaced by the King of Congo. These Kings of Congo as leaders in brotherhoods, players in ritual dramas, and as leaders of uprisings, first appeared in the documentary record in the late eighteenth century, replacing black ethnic kings. At first, Kings of Congo may well have been associated with slaves of the Afro-Brazilian ethnicity known as Congo, and with the Kingdom of Kongo. The practice emerged as a natural outgrowth from the black kings of many different nations present in Brazil since the seventeenth century. By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Kings of Congo had become the representatives of Central Africans of any number of ethnicities. In the twentieth century, Kings of Congo came to serve still as representatives and leaders of whole communities Afro-Brazilians.

Through the positions of King and Queen of Congo, a Central African past is remembered in Afro-Brazilian communities throughout Brazil. Far from being "invented," however, the tradition of kings and queens in Afro-Brazilian represents the continuation of process dating from the earliest days of slavery in Brazil, and even before. The trajectory of the change serves as an example of a move from ethnic understandings of Africans and children of Africans in Brazil to an Afro-Brazilian consciousness. This communal consciousness did not reject African in favor of European traditions, nor did it reject European practices that could be used to serve and maintain the community. Central Africans continued in Brazil a process of culture synthesis that had begun creatively combining cultural elements that worked for them in their new home. They chose transcultural symbols that mediated between their traditional and their new worlds. The kings and queens in the brotherhoods and in other contexts served as mediators. They also served

98 Mary C. Karasch, *Slave Life*, p. 249.

Ideia estranha? O Brasil era coisa muito diversa em sua relação com a África, e suas histórias particulares.

Mudanças no nome dos reis e suas razões

Não inventado



as mediators in an African sense, between the world of the living and the world of the dead. The title King of Congo came to be used because of the legendary political and ritual power of the King of Kongo, well known both among Central African slaves and among Europeans. Far from representing the triumph of European religion and customs, the King of Congo represents the triumph of a continuing strategy to preserve a link to Africa.<sup>99</sup> Afro-Brazilian communities with Kings and Queens of Congo maintain living ties to Africa. The rituals link their ancient homeland to their Brazilian and African ancestors, and to the world of spirits. These links foster unity and African identity that continues to respond and adapt old traditions to new circumstances.<sup>100</sup>

<sup>99</sup> Marina de Mello e Souza comes to a different conclusion in her dissertation. Marina de Mello e Souza, "Reis negros no Brasil escravista, história, mito e identidade na festa de coroação de Rei Congo" (Ph.D. diss., Universidade Federal Fluminense, Niterói, RJ, 1999).

<sup>100</sup> I would like to thank J. Lorand Matory, Linda M. Heywood, and William Scott for their invaluable comments and suggestions on this paper. I would also like to thank Linda M. Heywood for organizing the Bantu into Black conference at Howard University, and for the participants' helpful feedback.

*The Great Porpoise-Skull Strike:  
Central African Water Spirits and Slave Identity  
in Early-Nineteenth-Century Rio de Janeiro*

ROBERT W. SLENES

In late December 1816, the English merchant and amateur naturalist John Luccock left the city of Rio de Janeiro for a boat "excursion to the upper [part of Guanabara] Bay" (the water on which the city fronted) and to "the rivers falling into it." After several days of travel on a launch captained by a Portuguese sailor and manned by "four stout negroes," he put in to a harbor on one of the bay's many small islands. En route, his interest in geology had made him especially sensitive to the spectacular meeting of mountain and water that characterizes the environs of Rio. His account of the experience abounds in descriptions of tall waterfalls, wide and deep rivers, and extraordinary rock formations, the latter seemingly becoming all the more fantastic as the launch approached the island.<sup>1</sup>

Once on land in the small harbor, Luccock witnessed – indeed, precipitated – a small insurrection. The boat's crew suddenly refused to work, for reasons which the merchant-naturalist simply could not comprehend. "Within the pier, about two months before," he writes, "I had seen a dead porpoise, then in a very offensive state. The skeleton being now dry and clean, I took up the skull and threw it into the boat, intending to examine it at leisure." Shortly thereafter, when the participants in the excursion were about to reboard the launch, "it appeared that the skull was an object of superstitious dread to our negroes, who thought it a human one, and imagined that it had belonged to a person of their own colour: – the resemblance certainly gave some ground for the suspicion." Luccock then used *his* reason with the men, directly or through the captain, but to no avail:

It was in vain that the fact was presented to them; they persisted in their entreaties that the bone might be thrown overboard. Instead of complying with their wish, the

<sup>1</sup> John Luccock, *Notes on Rio de Janeiro and the Southern Parts of Brazil; taken during a Residence of Ten Years in that Country, from 1808 to 1818* (London: Samuel Leigh, 1820), ch. 11.