

Born again again: When Christians and missionaries meet

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [March 23, 2010](#) issue

In the 19th century, European and North American missionaries spanned the world, bringing the light of the gospel into what they thought were the dark corners of heathendom. In many regions, though, the natives did not react as the newcomers expected. Their response was not “Thank you for bringing us this startling new message” but rather “Welcome back.” What the missionaries had not realized was that Christianization need not be a definitive, once-and-for-all act, a one-way process. Religions come and go. White Christians were treading where African and Asian believers had been before and where they had left deep marks in local cultures. Their ghosts still walked.

Ghosts swarmed along the coasts of west and southwest Africa, in lands that Portuguese traders and empire-builders encountered during the 15th century. Of course, the Portuguese were primarily there for profit, to trade in whatever commodities they could find—and often that meant slaves. Unable to defeat or conquer all the local regimes, the Portuguese made treaties with them, and as part of these ugly commercial deals, African rulers accepted Catholic Christianity and welcomed (or tolerated) missionaries.

In these circumstances, we would have slender hopes for the effects of such a conversion. Surely native kings would tolerate churches, if only to keep the Europeans happy, while pursuing the familiar traditional faiths as publicly as they dared. But in some instances—particularly on the coasts of what we today call the Congo and Angola—something strange happened. In the lands of Kongo and Ndongo, native peoples not only adopted Christianity but poured their hearts into the new religion and made it an integral part of their culture. However the faith was introduced, it soon became wholly African.

By far the most important Christian state was the powerful realm of Kongo, which formally converted in 1491. The Kongolese royal family became faithful sons and

daughters of the Catholic Church, and one 16th-century king, Mvemba Nzinga (“King Afonso”), has been described as “one of the greatest lay Christians in African church history.” In 1516 a Portuguese priest wrote of Nzinga: “Better than we, he knows the prophets and the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, and all the lives of the saints, and all things regarding our Mother the Holy Church.” In 1596, the capital city São Salvador became a diocese in its own right. Through the next two centuries, Kongolesse artists and metalworkers created miracles of native Christian art, making crucifixes and images in wholly traditional African style. By 1700, Kongolesse Catholicism was already in its sixth generation.

By this point too, about 1,700 local churches were showing the classic signs of having thoroughly adopted and internalized the new faith, as they generated self-proclaimed prophets who wanted to throw off European tutelage. The most celebrated was Kimpa Vita, or Beatrice, one of the first of the many African Christian women who would claim a special message from God. (She is the subject of a fine book by Boston University’s John Thornton, who has done much to reclaim the memory of Kongo). Beatrice became a Joan of Arc figure who sought to remake Kongo as a Christian theocracy. In 1706 she met the fate of that earlier Joan, being burned at the stake, and her Antonian followers were sent as slaves to the New World, chiefly to Brazil and South Carolina.

During the 18th century, Kongolesse Christianity gradually faded from the picture. The kingdom was torn apart by civil strife and lost power to neighboring rivals, while the slave trade continued to devastate the region. Although the ruling dynasty survived into the 19th century, only a pallid remnant of Christianity survived to welcome the new waves of European missionaries, who barely recognized that they were reentering what had once been Christian land.

Ghosts walked elsewhere too. Most accounts of American history give special mention of the moment in 1619 when two ships arrived in English Virginia and sold “twenty and odd Negroes,” the first known victims of the Anglo-American slavery system. Only in the last decade or so have we discovered who these unfortunates were. Originally part of the cargo of a Portuguese slave ship en route to Mexico, these slaves suffered a new abduction at the hands of the English pirates who brought them to Virginia. When we reconstruct the full story, we find that these 20-odd slaves were natives of Ndongo or Kongo, and they must have been baptized Catholic Christians. How many African Americans today can trace some descent from this indigenous African Christianity, a faith that has all but vanished from the

historical narrative?