Across the Waters: Kongo Presence in Contemporary Art of the Americas

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The Fall 2013 international exhibition *Kongo across the Waters* at the Harn Museum of Art will celebrate the 500th anniversary of the beginning of African presence in the state of Florida by featuring art associated with the Kongo people of Central Africa and the later African Diaspora, including the work of several contemporary artists. These contemporary artists incorporate Kongo and Kongo-influenced spiritual and cultural concepts into their work, but they do so in different ways based on the individual relationships that they cultivate with these traditional ideas. This study will explore and analyze the distinctively Kongo aspects of pieces by specific contemporary artists featured in the exhibition. Ultimately, the presence of fundamental Kongo concepts in their art emphasizes the enduring impact of Kongo ideas on contemporary culture.

The Atlantic slave trade brought about the forced migration of Africans, mostly from West and Central Africa, to the Americas. As they physically moved across the waters, Africans inevitably brought their cultural, spiritual, and artistic ideas with them, many of which originate among the Kongo peoples. These ideas and practices transformed, merged, and adapted over time, but some still endure to the present day, although they may exist in different forms. The lasting impact of African, and specifically Kongo, cultural and spiritual beliefs is readily felt in the work of a number of contemporary artists. Today, many contemporary African artists, such as Steve Bandoma, Paulo Kapela, Antonio Ole, and Kendell Geers, and other artists working in the Caribbean, South America, and North America allude to Kongo in their art. This study will focus on artists currently working in the United States, specifically José Bedia, Edouard Duval-Carrié, and Radcliffe Bailey. Their diverse backgrounds situate the artists in very different relationships with Kongo spiritual traditions. Bedia’s understanding of Kongo is through the African-derived Cuban religion of Palo Monte, Duval-Carrié’s viewpoint comes from the syncretic African religion of Haitian Vodou, and Bailey’s conception as an African-American artist is both personal and academic. An analysis of the Kongo and Kongo-inspired aspects of their distinct works reveals the many forms that Kongo spiritual traditions take in the Americas and ultimately speaks to the significant role that Kongo culture continues to play in the contemporary world.

**THE KONGO SPIRIT WORLD**

Before analyzing how these ideas manifest in contemporary art, it is first necessary to understand the complex spiritual traditions found among the Kongo people. The spirit world played a central role in traditional Kongo beliefs. The very origins of the Kongo people began when Ne Kongo came down from heaven bearing the first healing medicine, called an *nkisi*, that was held in an earthenware vessel. Beneath this supreme creator god was a pantheon of ancestors and immortal sprits called *bisimbi* that also contributed to Kongo religious practice.

**Minkisi**

The notion of a healer and his charm that began with Ne Kongo melded with this ancestor and spirit world in the making of *minkisi* (*s. nkisi*). The word *nkisi* actually refers to a container that was filled with sacred medicines called *bilongo*. Without these medicines, made of leaves, roots, and other elements, the container was powerless. But, when properly prepared, the *nkisi* was believed to possess inner life, the captured soul of an ancestor or an immortal *simbi* spirit. The owner and operator of the *nkisi* charm, called the *nganga*, could direct the spirit.

*Nkondi* (Figure 1) is a particular form of *nkisi* that is recognized by its figurated container. *Nkondi* served as an oath-taking image, with the protruding nails and blades symbolizing the resolution of lawsuits and

![Figure 1. Nkisi nkondi figures.](image-url)
arguments. When directed by the *nganga, nkondi* also served as a hunter who would seek out witches in the community.⁵

**Dikenga**

The centrality of the spirit world to Kongo life is also seen in the *dikenga* (Figure 2).⁶ Perpendicularly-bisecting lines are surrounded by a circle in a form that signifies the lifecycle of a person using the metaphor of the rising and setting of the sun. The horizontal line, called *kalunga*, also distinguishes between the human and spirit world, or the heaven and the sea. The crossroads, the point where the two lines intersect, is the site of human communication with the world of the spirits.⁷

![Figure 2. Kongo dikenga.](image)

**JOSÉ BEDIA**

Traditional Kongo spiritual ideas echo throughout the religion of Palo Monte, the belief system that plays an important role in the life and work of Cuban artist José Bedia. Bedia was born in 1959 in Havana, and, as a young artist, he was fascinated by the aesthetic and religious culture of Africa and the Americas. In 1983, he was initiated into Palo Monte, a religion that derives from spiritual practices in Central Africa that were brought to Cuba by enslaved Africans during the sixteenth century.⁸ The Palo belief system rests on the veneration of spirits of the ancestors as well as the belief in natural powers. The name *palo monte* refers to “spirits embodied in the sticks in the forest”.⁹ Like in traditional Kongo religion, Palo Monte practitioners believe in the presence of a supreme creator god, called Nsambi, as well as in a pantheon of lesser ancestral and natural spirits called *mpungus*.

Also central to Palo Monte is the *nganga*, sometimes called *nkisi* or *prenda*, which is a cauldron or pot that serves as an important religious receptacle. *Nganga* most often takes the form of an iron pot resting on a tripod stand, a mode that is associated with Sarabanda, the *mpungu* of iron.¹⁰ Sarabanda echoes the Kongo concept of the *nkisi nkondi* that was hammered with nails but also incorporates the spirit of the Afro-Cubans who constructed Cuba’s first rail system.¹¹ The owner and operator of *nganga* develops power by depositing objects in the pot. In the traditional Kongo system, the term *nganga* referred to a healer, while *nkisi* implied the actual container. In Cuba, as a result of changes brought about by the slave trade, these two ideas were melded together so that *nganga* may refer to the pot itself, the power of the pot, or the owner of the pot. Filled with roots, bones, tools, and other objects, the *nganga* represents the deceased, the assistance from ancestors, and the human relationship to the earth.

**Abre nkuto Nuevo**

These concepts that are rooted in Kongo tradition yet manifest themselves in Palo Monte practice are central to the work of Jose Bedia. The *nganga* plays an important role in his installation piece *Abre nkuto Nuevo* (Listen Up Kid) from 1989/2007, seen in Figure 3. The head of an elder and a youngster are painted on adjacent walls. A bridge links the mouth of the elder to the ear of the ‘kid’, with an *nganga* (filled with a railway spike, knife, and iron chain) resting on the center of the span.⁰

![Figure 3. Bedia, Abre nkuto Nuevo (Listen Up Kid), 1984/2007.](image)
**Mama quiere menga, menga de su nkombo**

The *nganga* also becomes a central motif in his work *Mama quiere menga, menga de su nkombo* (Mama Wants Blood, Blood of His Bull) from 1988, seen in Figure 4. Here Bedia, who is figured as a large, red male torso, is seen holding an empty *nganga* ready to be filled with ingredients as part of the Palo initiation process.

![Figure 4. Bedia, Mama quiere menga, menga de su nkombo, 1988.](image)

The iron pot again refers to Sarabanda, Bedia’s personal guiding spirit. The title suggests the importance of animal sacrifice during these ceremonies. The cross markings on the figure’s shoulders recall the Kongo *dikenga* that represented the human life cycle as the ‘four moments of the sun’. In Palo Monte, these symbols are called *firmas* and are drawn on the backs and chests of initiates. The crossroads serve as a map to the *mpungus*, so that they may be present at the ceremony. The *firmas* are also a reference to the Kongo *kalunga* line, which traditionally separated the heavens and the earth but distinguished between the Palo spirit and human worlds as well.

Kongo iconography and themes play a reoccurring role in the art of José Bedia given his relationship with the religion of Palo Monte. The recognizable presence of these spiritual beliefs and practices, in the form of the *nganga*, Sarabanda, and the *firmas*, is possible due to the transmission of ideas from traditional Kongo religion to Palo Monte. Ultimately, Bedia’s decision to use these ideas in his art demonstrates the significant role of Palo Monte, and consequently Kongo-based ideas and iconography, in his life.

**EDOUARD DUVAL-CARRIÉ**

Kongo spiritual ideas take on a more syncretic form in the work of Haitian artist Edouard Duval-Carrié and in the religion of Vodou. Duval-Carrié was born in Port-au-Prince in 1954 but was educated in Montreal and at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris. After living in France for many years, he settled in Miami, where he currently lives and works.

Duval-Carrié’s art reflects the culture and history of Haiti with specific references to the country’s national Vodou religion. Unlike Palo Monte, Vodou is a distinct blending of ideas from multiple African cultures, especially the Fon people of contemporary Benin, the Yoruba of present-day Nigeria, and the Kongo people of the Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola. Vodou originated in the French slave colony of Saint-Domingue, present-day Haiti, in the eighteenth century where most of the enslaved came from West and Central Africa, bringing with them their distinctive cultural traditions. The French suppression of African religion, though, resulted in the fragmentation and pooling of cultural ideas that later became unified in the form of Vodou.

Vodou practice is centered on the worship of spirits called *lwa*, of which there are two families: *Petwo* and *Rada*. The fiery *Petwo* spirits are Kongo-derived and are thought to control money matters and social issues, while the laid-back *Rada* deities of West African cultures are associated with the family and the spiritual. The *lwa* are responsible for particular aspects of everyday life that operate within the *veve*, the Vodou graphic configuration of the world that stems from the Kongo *dikenga*. *Veve* usually take the form of a Cartesian grid with two mutually bisecting lines. They are considered a connection to Ginen, or Africa. Ginen may refer physically to the continent across the Atlantic Ocean, but it also may imply the parallel world of the Vodou spirits and the dead located beneath the waters that surround Haiti.

**Le depart**

Edouard Duval-Carrié’s art addresses both the spiritual and historical complexities of his nation. The *lwa* are an important part of his visual vocabulary where they become more than just religious icons but manifestations of the Haitian people that chronicle the nation’s history. His series *Milocan ou La migration des esprits* shows the *lwa* in various stages of migration – from Africa to Haiti, and then from Haiti to the United States. The first scene in the series, *Le depart* (Figure 5), is surrounded by a border filled with images of the Vodou *veve*, the symbolic crossroads where *lwa* are summoned from the spirit world. In the scene itself, the *lwa* become chained slaves who march in a line to be taken to Saint-Domingue. The red bodies of the hot *Petwo* spirits are distinguished from the blue bodies of the *Rada* just as the bodies of the enslaved Fon, Yoruba, and Kongo slaves inevitably differed as well. The *Petwo* deity of death, Gede, is represented as a skeleton figure and symbolizes the inevitable tragedy of the slave trade. Bringing up the rear is the Gran Bwa, or Great Tree, a *Petwo* deity that guards and protects the ancestors but also represents the preservation of African religious ideas in the syncretic form of Vodou.
The next scene in the series, shown in Figure 6, is *La traversée* (The Crossing) which shows the *lwa* sailing towards Saint-Domingue. Gran Bwa sits in the rear of the boat with his branch arms pointing down towards the water, recalling the Kongo *kalunga* line and referring simultaneously to both the Vodou world of the spirits and to the grave of the enslaved African who perished during the Middle Passage. Furthering this idea, Duval-Carrié also depicts Baron Samedi, the Petwo deity who controls the spirits of the dead, wearing a top hat and staring passively out to sea. In the front of the boat, Simbi, who is derived from Kongo *bisimbi* spirits, is shown with a question mark for an ear, suggesting uncertainty for both the divine *lwa* and their human counterparts after their voyage across the sea.

The success of Duval-Carrié’s *Milocan ou La Migration des esprits* come from his ability to convey complex ideas of Vodou mythology as a manifestation of the historical journey of the Haitian people. Ultimately, this dual nature of his art parallels the syncretic elements—Fon, Yoruba, and Kongo—of the Vodou religion.

Traditional Kongo spiritual concepts are also present in the art of Radcliffe Bailey through his academic and personal conception of African and Black Atlantic ideas and imagery. Unlike Jose Bedia and Edouard Duval-Carrié whose connections to Kongo spiritual ideas are through the religions of Palo Monte and Haitian Vodou, Radcliffe Bailey’s association with these ideas comes from his distinct African-American heritage and his knowledge of African and African-American cultures. Consequently, the specifically Kongo aspects of his work are not always readily distinguishable. Instead, he draws more broadly from a diverse variety of sources, including Kongo, Yoruba, Akan, Mende, Chokwe, Luba, Caribbean cultures, and African American culture. He also recalls his personal ancestry, for Bailey’s own relatives traveled on the Underground Railroad.

Bailey was born in New Jersey in 1968 and grew up in Atlanta. His mother, a schoolteacher, and his aunt, an artist, first introduced him to museums at a young age. His mother also enrolled him in Saturday art classes at the Woodruff Arts Center in Atlanta. He experienced aspects of his African heritage at a young age, as seen through a
tiny family photo in the collection of his great aunt from 1973 that shows a Baga D’mba headdress from Guinea and a Boulsa-style Mossi mask from Burkina Faso. He also claims that he has always been fascinated with the “Africanisms” that exist in the southern United States “that do not necessarily go named” but influence African-American culture. This highly personal and academic understanding impacted his later works of art.

**Ode**

Bailey pairs family members with references to Africa and African art in the work *Ode* from 1997 (Figure 8). This piece prominently features a photograph of his grandfather in the top-center. Beneath his portrait is a colorful banner inspired by the cloth panels that decorate the costumes of *egungun* masquerades that are performed in Yoruba communities as a sign of respect for the ancestors. A further reference to the Yoruba culture is seen in a photograph of a Yoruba divination board, used to communicate with the spirit world, in the bottom left corner of the work.31

![Figure 8](image)

Figure 8. Bailey, *Ode*, 1997.

There is also a photograph of a conch shell whose swirling form recalls the Kongo *dikenga* but also speaks to the African-American practice of using shells as gravesite decorations with their placement “believed to enclose the soul’s immortal presence”. Bailey further emphasizes the broader influence of African and African-American cultures through painted inscriptions such as “Guinea”, “Angola”, “Madagascar”, and “The West Indies”. This piece positions his own ancestry within the broader scope of African and African-American history.

**A-bil**

In 2003, Bailey began to create a series of medicine cabinet sculptures, including *A-bil*, seen in Figure 9. Within this box are a three-dimensional white ship and strips of white paper that recreate the ocean. In the center is an old photograph of a woman. The ship evokes memories of the slave ships that traveled across the Atlantic, and its white color gives it spiritual significance, relating to the Kongo association with white as the presence of a spiritual being. Further reference to the spirit world is seen just to the left of the woman where an image of the *dikenga* is traced in white. Just above this symbol is an inscription that reads ‘Long Live UNIA’ surrounding the image of a star. This logo is associated with Marcus Garvey’s Black Star Line that was part of the Back-to-Africa movement, promoting the return of the African Diaspora to their ancestral lands. For Radcliffe Bailey, this medicine cabinet, with its’ collection of images and materials, becomes a modern-day nkisi figure. The many references to both the African and the Black Atlantic experience echo the sacred medicines that filled traditional Kongo containers. While still relying on reoccurring Kongo motifs, this piece demonstrates Bailey’s ability to layer diverse cultural images in order to look more generally at Africa and at his own African-American heritage.

![Figure 9](image)

Figure 9: Bailey, *A-bil*, 2006.

Radcliffe Bailey’s art differs from that of Jose Bedia and that of Edouard Duval-Carré because the artist is not connected spiritually to Kongo through Palo Monte or even the more syncretic religion of Vodou. Rather, his relationship to Kongo comes from his intellectual understanding of African and African-American cultures.
and his personal ancestry, in which Kongo and Kongo-based ideas play a significant role. This unique viewpoint explains his reference to a diverse array of African cultures in his art but also further emphasizes the enduring impact of Kongo spiritual and cultural beliefs on America.

CONCLUSION

The works of José Bedia, Edouard Duval-Carrié, and Radcliffe Bailey emphasize the many forms that Kongo spiritual and cultural ideas take in the contemporary world. The religion of Palo Monte, a prominent theme in the art of José Bedia, maintains specific Kongo terminology and iconography. Kongo ideas take on a more syncretic form in the art of Edouard Duval-Carrié through his use of distinct concepts, like the Petwo spirits, from Haitian Vodou. Finally, Kongo spiritual traditions become layered with other cultural references in the work of Radcliffe Bailey that is inspired by his personal and academic knowledge of a variety of African and African-American sources, including Kongo and Kongo-based cultures. In the end, each chooses to place Kongo themes in his art because these ideas have shaped their unique cultures and belief systems, whether through Palo Monte, Haitian Vodou, or personally and academically. Ultimately, the endurance of Kongo ideas in the work of these contemporary artists reveals the lasting impact of Kongo culture in America.

REFERENCES

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6 Thompson, The Four Moments of the Sun, 43.
7 Thompson, The Four Moments of the Sun, 43–44.
9 Bettelheim, “Palo Monte Mayombe,” 36.
12 Fig. 3. Jose Bedia, Abre nkuto muchacho Nuevo (Listen Up Kid). 1989/2007, Mixed media, 396.2 x 609.6 cm. Collection Miami Art Museum.
14 Fig. 4. Jose Bedia, Mama quiere menga, menga de su nkombo (Mama Wants Blood, Blood of His Bull). 1988, Acrylic on canvas, 139.7 x 200 cm. Collection of Diane and Robert Moss, Miami, Florida. From Judith Bettelheim. Los Angeles: Fowler Museum at UCLA, 2011. 2.5.
20 Cosentino, Divine Revolution, 40–55.
21 Cosentino, Divine Revolution, 40.
23 Fig. 5. Edouard Duval-Carrié, Le départ. 1996. Oil on canvas in artist’s frame, 241.5 x 165 cm. Bass Museum of Art, Gift of Dr. Jean Claude Compass. From Donald Cosentino. Los Angeles: Fowler Museum at UCLA, 2004. Cat. no. 6.
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