

5-1-2013

# The Effects of Chistianization on Identity among the Indigenous Communities of Kongo and Lower Canada

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THE EFFECTS OF CHISTIANIZATION ON IDENTITY AMONG THE  
INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES OF KONGO AND LOWER CANADA

An Honors Thesis Presented to  
the Department of History of the University of New Orleans  
In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts, with Honors in History

by

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May 2013

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## Abstract

Historians have written extensively about the process of Christianization within the Kongo nation, as well as among the Native Americans of Lower Canada. Scholars agree that this process was disparate across the Atlantic World. This paper explores the process within each region through the analysis of two dominant missionary accounts representing each region during the late seventeenth century. These missionary accounts are joined with the stories of Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita and Catherine Tegahkouita, two notable indigenous Christians from each region. A comparative analysis of Kongo and Lower Canada reveals that the process of Christianization is highly dependent upon the social and political location of its indigenous converts. This paper argues that the experience of Christianization among indigenous people was neither homogenous across nations nor within them.

Christianization, Identity, Iroquois, Algonquian, Kongo

## Introduction

In August 1704, a Kongolesse woman named Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita fell gravely ill. Upon her recovery, she claimed to have been possessed by the spirit of the Catholic Saint Anthony. She used this new spiritual identity in order to begin a movement that was religious in nature, yet political in intent. Kongo had been a Christian kingdom for two centuries, converting soon after the Portuguese arrived in the late sixteenth century. Despite religious ties, Kongo maintained political autonomy from its European visitors. However, by the seventeenth century, a series of Portuguese aggressions sent the kingdom into a state of civil war. What became known as Beatriz's Antonian Movement sought to reinterpret the Kongo-Christian identity in a way that would provide a new source of strength and unity for the future of the Kongo kingdom.

Beatriz traveled across the kingdom, making radical assertions about Catholic history and tradition. Among these, she recast major Catholic events and figures within a Kongo context, and also rewrote prayers. Her assertions invoked religious ideas that defined Kongo cosmology prior to Christianity in a way that common Kongo people would recognize and relate to. At the same time, she challenged the elitist structure of Catholicism in Kongo, and questioned the necessity of European presence in the region. Her movement became so popular, and her ideas so threatening to the hierarchy of both Kongo and the Catholic Church, that she was publicly executed as a heretic on July 2, 1706.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For an extensive analysis of Dona Beatriz, see John Thornton, *The Kongolesse Saint Anthony; Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Antonian Movement, 1684-1706* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

On the other side of the Atlantic World, a Mohawk woman named Catherine Tegahkouita from the region of Lower Canada had begun a Catholic movement of her own only a few decades before Beatriz. Various Europeans had settled in the region by the late seventeenth century, causing conflict and suffering among the Native Americans in the area. Disease brought by Europeans was responsible for the death of Catherine's parents, and left Catherine with scarring and impaired vision. She reacted by isolating herself from her community, which was interpreted as strange and selfish. However, once Catherine escaped the confines of her Mohawk village in October 1677 to pursue a life on a nearby Catholic mission, she found that her isolated tendencies were now interpreted as piety rather than contempt.

Although Catherine only lived to be twenty-four, and spent less than a year of that on the mission, she left a lasting impression in the region. Catherine embodied the qualities of Catholic virtue, and vowed to remain chaste to achieve a meaningful relationship with Jesus. Many women followed her example while she was alive, and together they created an informal convent for indigenous women. After Catherine's death, her gravesite became a site of pilgrimage for other indigenous Catholics in the region. Many miraculous healings have since been associated with her tomb, causing her biographer P.F.X. de Charlevoix to call her the "protectress of Canada."<sup>2</sup> In October

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<sup>2</sup> For a biography of Catherine Tegahkouita, see P.F.X. de Charlevoix, *History and General Description of New France* (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1900), 4: 283-96, in Allan Greer's *The Jesuit Relations*, 172-185. Catherine is also mentioned in Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries of New France, 1610-1791* (Cleveland: Burrows Brothers, 1896-1901), Relation 62; 171-8. Also, Allen Greer has more recently published a book on Catherine's life entitled *Mohawk Saint: Catherine Tekakwitha and the Jesuits* that was not consulted for this paper, but is valuable part of the historiography of this topic.

2012, Pope Benedict XVI honored Catherine's memory by canonizing her as the first indigenous North American saint.

The process of Christianization was part of a larger series of exchange across the Atlantic World. There is a rich historiography regarding the process and outcomes of Christianity in both Kongo and North America. John Thornton writes extensively on Kongo and its development into a Catholic nation.<sup>3</sup> James Sweet also explores this theme, but extends his analysis into the movement of Kongo Christianity to other places in the Atlantic World.<sup>4</sup> In the North American context, both Neal Salisbury and Daniel K. Richter provide works that explore the relationship between Northeastern Native Americans and the French Jesuits.<sup>5</sup> Allan Greer also contributes to this conversation an analysis of *The Jesuit Relations*.<sup>6</sup> The historiography clearly differentiates between the process of Christianization as it occurred in Kongo and as it occurred in North America. However, this paper argues that there are nuances in Kongo society and Native American societies that make the process of Christianization varied within both of these

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<sup>3</sup> Among his extensive body of work, this study primarily used four of Thornton's sources, including his book, *The Kongoese Saint Anthony*, mentioned previously. His other works include, "Afro-Christian Syncretism in the Kingdom of Kongo," "Religious and Ceremonial Life in the Kongo and Mbundu Areas, 1500-1700," and "The Development of an African Catholic Church in the Kingdom of Kongo, 1491-1750."

<sup>4</sup> James Sweet's book *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441-1770* should be consulted when considering cultural migration throughout the Atlantic world.

<sup>5</sup> Neal Salisbury's articles "The Indians' Old World: Native Americans and the Coming of Europeans," and "Religious Encounters in a Colonial Context: New England and New France in the Seventeenth Century" were vital to this analysis. Daniel K. Richter's work includes two books of interest to this study, *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America*, and *The Ordeal of the Longhouse: The Peoples of the Iroquois League in the era of European Colonization*.

<sup>6</sup> Allan Greer's book *The Jesuit Relations: Natives and Missionaries in Seventeenth Century America*, offers excerpts from the massive collection of *Jesuit Relations* and also provides a useful overview of the time period and the nations involved in North American colonization.

regions. In each case, the spatial and social location of indigenous people within their regions affects the overall experience with conversion.

This study uses two dominant primary sources to uncover the complexities of Christianity in each region. A source called “A Curious and Exact Account of a Voyage to Congo, from the years 1666 and 1667” is used to understand the Kongo context. The account was recorded by an Italian priest named Father Carli who traveled to the Kongo as a missionary for the Capuchin order.<sup>7</sup> *The Jesuit Relations* are a series of documents that chronicled the experience of Jesuit missionaries in the region of Lower Canada that runs along the St. Lawrence River, stretching as far north as Quebec and as far south as New England, and bordered on the East by the Atlantic Ocean. This paper uses “Relation 62,” which reports on various missions in this area throughout the years 1681-1683.<sup>8</sup> Both sources were written by European missionaries in order to report back to a European audience that expected to hear stories of success. Keeping Beatriz and Catherine’s stories in mind while examining each of these sources helps to widen the range of experience beyond that of a Catholic missionary.

This paper provides a balanced analysis of two very different Christianizing techniques used in two very different areas during the period of Atlantic exploration. By the seventeenth century, the political identity of the kingdom of Kongo and the Native American nations of Lower Canada had been reinvented by European presence. In turn, the personal identities of indigenous people became blurred between the lingering

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<sup>7</sup> Carli, Dionigi and R.R.F.F. Michael Angelo. “A Curious and Exact Account of A Voyage to Congo.

<sup>8</sup> Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries of New France, 1610-1791* (Cleveland: Burrows Brothers, 1896-1901).



remnants of pre-Contact lifeways and the turmoil that resulted post-Contact. Within the comparative analysis, this paper also uncovers the diverse experiences of indigenous people within each region, and calls for further investigation into these buried voices of the Atlantic world.

### *Pre-Christian Society and Religion*

The process of Christianization within Kongo and Lower Canada was subject to the political and religious structures in place prior to contact. Kongo was a politically centralized nation led by a king. The king ruled from the capital city of São Salvador, and appointed elites to maintain order throughout the kingdom. This political structure allowed for the establishment of urban centers throughout the region from which the elites would serve the king. However, many Kongo people lived on the periphery of these urban centers. These communities were relatively rural and devoid of the opulence that was present within the urban centers. This led to a significant divide between the experiences of urban Kongo people and those who lived in rural areas.

The region of Lower Canada was home to two major groups of Native Americans, the Iroquois and the Algonquian. These large groups were comprised of several nations that shared similar languages and lifeways. Although each nation had a distinct language, Iroquoian language structures resembled one another, just as Algonquian language structures did.<sup>9</sup> The Iroquoian nations were characterized as aggressive people, and were also more sedentary due to agricultural success. Algonquians

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<sup>9</sup> Allan Greer, *The Jesuit Relations: Natives and Missionaries in Seventeenth-Century North America* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000), 7.

remained more nomadic and relied on hunting and gathering.<sup>10</sup> The politics between nations were characterized by a complex series of exchange and alliance. As Salisbury notes, these exchanges could be either material or nonmaterial, but both kinds were equally responsible for dictating the status of each nation in relation to its neighbor.<sup>11</sup> This unstable political structure created a volatile net of relationships that often resulted in conflict.

Despite dissimilar political structures, pre-Christian cosmologies in both regions shared basic characteristics. Each religious system relied on the worship of a host of ancestral deities. These deities were highly localized and were thought to be responsible for “natural events, public morality, and political order.”<sup>12</sup> This ever-changing host of deities thus necessitated the fundamental aspects of pre-Christian religion Thornton defines as “continuous revelation and a precarious priesthood.”<sup>13</sup>

Religion was not indoctrinated, but was rather subject to the interpretation of individual revelations within the community. In the Kongo, stories of revelation through spirit possession were commonplace.<sup>14</sup> Beatriz would evoke this pre-Christian characteristic by publicly announcing her possession by Saint Anthony as a source of strength. In the Native American context, revelation was often experienced through dreams. Dreaming was believed to be a medium through which the soul could visit and be visited by the spiritual realm. Dreams were interpreted literally, and the entire

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<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, 7.

<sup>11</sup> Neal Salisbury, “Religious Encounters in a Colonial Context: New England and New France in the Seventeenth Century.” *American Indian Quarterly* 16 (Autumn 1992), 447.

<sup>12</sup> John K. Thornton, “Religious and Ceremonial Life in the Kongo and Mbundu Areas, 1500-1700,” in *Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora*, ed. Linda M. Heywood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 74.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, 73.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, 77.

community often made sure that the dreamer would have his or her revelation fulfilled.<sup>15</sup>

An informal priesthood guided the community through the interpretation of revelations. These leaders were not formally trained, but rather trusted to have a heightened understanding of the other realm. Beatriz was one these spiritual leaders in her community, called “nganags” in the Kongo language.<sup>16</sup> In North America, shamans, who were repeatedly referred to in *The Jesuit Relations* as “jugglers,” were also trusted in matters of illness, which would become a point of dissent when Christian missionaries arrived.<sup>17</sup> Because there was no orthodoxy to uphold within pre-Christian religions, religious leaders not only guided, but were also a part of, the evolving spirituality in their communities.

### Early Contact and the Development of Christian Regions

The political and religious structures of the Kongo and Lower Canada region were well developed by the time Europeans arrived. Therefore, Western powers were not superimposing their own culture onto a blank slate, but rather were faced with an opposing culture that was certainly not seeking to be replaced or dominated. The Portuguese reached Kongo much earlier than Europeans would discover the Native Americans of Lower Canada. Each European state had a different agenda in these

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<sup>15</sup> Robert Moss, “Missionaries and Magicians : the Jesuit Encounter with Native American Shamans on New England's Colonial Frontier” in *Wonders of the Invisible World, 1600-1900*, edited by Peter Benes, Jane Montague Benes, Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife (Boston: Boston University, 1999), 19-21.

<sup>16</sup> John Thornton, *The Kongolese Saint Anthony; Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Antonian Movement, 1684-1706* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 53.

<sup>17</sup> Moss, “Missionaries and Magicians,” 17-8.

newfound areas, which resulted in different types of relationships with indigenous people. However, from the earliest moments of contact, the process of Christianization began.

The first significant and lasting European presence in Kongo began with the arrival of the Portuguese in the late fifteenth century. This interaction was not one of colonization, but rather a series of material and nonmaterial exchanges during which Kongo retained its autonomy. Among these exchanges was the adoption of Christianity in the region. By 1491, King João I had converted to Christianity and Kongo began its transition into a Christian kingdom. Because the kingdom retained its political autonomy, the process of Kongo Christianization was both controlled and spread by the king and his elites. What resulted was an oligarchy of religion, in which the religious hierarchy supported the existing hierarchy of the kingdom.

By the beginning of the sixteenth century, King Afonso, son of João, began to incorporate Christian ideas for the political benefit of the kingdom. Afonso had to battle against his brother in order to maintain the newly Christian throne. According to local lore, an image of Saint James appeared in the sky as Afonso and his soldiers rode in to meet his brother's army. This vision gave strength to the Christianized Kongo forces, and inspired fear in their opponents. Due to his perceived role in the victory of the Christian throne, St. James became a significant figure in the kingdom thereafter, even being depicted on the nation's coat of arms.<sup>18</sup> This fusion of religious and political icons was not new to Kongo. The deities worshipped in pre-Christian religion were believed to control the success of the kingdom. Therefore, Christian saints simply acted as

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<sup>18</sup>Thornton, "Religious and Ceremonial Life in the Kongo and Mbundu Areas," 84.

supplements to a pre-existing community of deities whose intercession the kingdom relied upon.

Catholic tradition was an entirely new way of conceptualizing religious experience from the process of continuous revelation in pre-Christian cosmology. However, the Kongo elite soon undertook the spread of Catholicism. The king and his elite assumed the responsibility of providing a Christian education in Kongo due to its status as an autonomous state and the shortage of European missionaries in the area. Beginning with Afonso in the early fifteenth century, these elites were sent to Europe to be classically educated in Portuguese and Latin, and were then tasked with spreading Christianity throughout the Kongo kingdom.<sup>19</sup>

Because they were originally Kongolese, the power of evangelizing became a uniquely Kongo-Christian process. The new sense of autonomy over religion was two-fold. First, it introduced a top-down religious experience that was guided by a small sector of the elite, instead of relying on the community's involvement. Furthermore, autonomy was taken away from European clergy and put in the hands of African elites who were free to shape Christianity into an experience that lent itself to pre-existing Kongolese ideas and rituals. Thus, the urban centers of the Kongo kingdom also became sites of a clear Kongo-Portuguese fusion.

When Carli reached São Salvador, he noted the presence of Christian structures in the region. The city boasted a cathedral built of stone, along with many smaller

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<sup>19</sup> John Thornton, "Afro-Christian Syncretism in the Kingdom of Kongo." *Journal of African History*: 6-7.

chapels.<sup>20</sup> The cathedral served the dual function of both a site of religious devotion, as well as a burial ground for the Kings of Kongo.<sup>21</sup> This dual function demonstrates the link between Catholicism and the Kongo elite. Carli also recognized that there were “many Blacks who understood Portuguese” when they reached urban centers, demonstrating the cultural importance of Portuguese in Kongo.<sup>22</sup> Another indicator mentioned in the account was the use of church bells at a Capuchin convent in Bamba. The bells would ring each time the priest was preparing to say mass, calling those nearby to come and participate in the sacrament.<sup>23</sup> It changed the auditory landscape of the area and forced the indigenous converts to schedule their lives around Christian worship. Thus, the urban centers, although still inhabited and controlled by Kongolese, were clearly sites of great European influence.

Communities outside of these urban areas did not share in this cultural exchange. Aside from inclusion into the greater kingdom, structures and lifestyles in these rural areas were relatively unaffected by European influence. When Carli entered these towns, which he noted were called “libattes” in the Kikongo language, he needed a translator to communicate with the local people.<sup>24</sup> He met one woman who requested the sacrament of baptism and apologized for not receiving the sacrament previously. However, she explained that she lived so far from a major city that she had only just heard of missionaries in her region.<sup>25</sup> Carli also recounted that the local people had to

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<sup>20</sup> Carli, Dionigi and R.R.F.F. Michael Angelo. “A Curious and Exact Account of A Voyage to Congo, 158.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem, 158.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, 166.

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem, 166; 169.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, 160; 166.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem, 165.

construct chapels upon his arrival in their “libatte,” because no adequate structure existed in which he could perform mass.<sup>26</sup> Carli’s account shows that the lifeways of Kongolese on the periphery of urban areas remained relatively unchanged. There were no church bells to call them from their work to worship, nor were there any churches for them to worship in. Although they did seek inclusion into the Catholic faith through baptism once the missionaries traveled on, life in these “libattes” remained relatively unchanged.

In Kongo, identifying as a member of the Kongo kingdom became synonymous with identifying as a member of the Catholic church because of its acceptance as the national religion. The control over religion on behalf of Kongo elite also meant that consistent worship and ritual were concentrated in urban centers. Therefore, although claiming the identity of a Kongolese Catholic was commonplace, it was only in urban centers that people’s lifeways were affected by these newfound religions. Those who lived in smaller Kongolese “libattes” were baptized Catholic, but most of their lives were unaffected by this identifier.

The Native American nations of Lower Canada established contact with Europeans in the early seventeenth century. Many different settlers arrived, and were able to control and influence parts of the region. The Spanish, Portuguese, and English were generally hostile in this area. In their desire for land, these invaders are recorded to have enslaved or exterminated indigenous people who opposed them.<sup>27</sup> The fractured alliance structure between Iroquoian and Algonquian nations allowed for this

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<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, 160.

<sup>27</sup> Allan Greer, *The Jesuit Relations*, 10; Neal Salisbury, “The Indians' Old World: Native Americans and the Coming of Europeans,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 53 (July 1996), 452.

European takeover. The French began to successfully settle the area during the same time and were equally interested in exploiting the area's abundance of land and natural resources. However, the French's method of achieving their goals was more coercive than aggressive. French settlers formed trade agreements with certain nations in the region.<sup>28</sup> This system of alliances would come to define the relationship between French settlers and indigenous people in New France. Salisbury views the French's willingness to trade with Native Americans as the reason they were accepted in the region, due to the pre-existing tradition of exchange among indigenous nations.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the French's relatively non-aggressive attitude towards indigenous people, their presence in the region produced many indirect consequences. European diseases devastated indigenous communities, because they lacked appropriate immunities. The French fur trade also had major implications for the people of Lower Canada. The furs introduced another form of currency into the already complex system of exchange in the region, creating economic instability.<sup>30</sup> These abrupt changes to the lifeways of Native Americans resulted in increased conflict between nations that eventually erupted into warfare. Also, the introduction of European alcohol to the region would create devastating dependencies among Native Americans and further devastate communities by the time of the Jesuit Relations.

The Jesuits traveled to Lower Canada with French settlers beginning in the early seventeenth century. Greer notes that the Jesuit's arrival with other French settlers incorporated them into a larger process of French colonization, and so the Jesuits were

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<sup>28</sup> Salisbury, "The Indians' Old World," 452.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, 447.

<sup>30</sup> Greer, *The Jesuit Relations*, 11.



subject to the ebb and flow of that colonization process.<sup>31</sup> The consequences of European presence in the region made life difficult and dangerous for many Native Americans, as aggressions mounted, especially from the Iroquoian people. The conflicted relationship that the Jesuits were associated with inhibited the possibilities of their success in the region. However, Jesuit missions eventually became centers of physical and spiritual salvation from the turmoil in the region.

The location of missions outside of Native American settlements is what made them so attractive for indigenous people seeking refuge from the growing conflict around them. However, this also created a divide between Native American communities and those who chose to convert to Catholicism. Only in mission areas would you find Christian structures or hear church bells. The emphasis on sacraments and structured worship in the Catholic religion relies on the presence of Catholic influence. Because the Jesuits maintained control over the spread of Catholicism, Native Americans who chose to convert were coerced to leave their communities behind and build a new home on the nearest Jesuit mission. Indigenous Catholics lived under the authority and guidance of French Jesuits, and therefore took on many of their practices, both religious and secular. Therefore, unlike Kongo, the Catholic identity was not closely tied to any Native American identity.

### *Roles of Missionaries in the Seventeenth Century*

The ways in which each region accepted Catholicism during the period of early contact determined the role of European missionaries in that area. Although this paper

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<sup>31</sup> Greer, *The Jesuit Relations*, 9.

examines the Italian Capuchins in Kongo and the French Jesuits in Lower Canada, there were many nations and missionary orders represented in each region. For instance, Jesuits established missions in Kongo in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, but due to the elite African control over Christian education, they did not have as much influence as the Capuchins.<sup>32</sup> In Lower Canada, Jesuits were the most prominent Catholic influence in the region. However, the settlement of the Dutch meant that there was a Protestant presence in the region as well. The Jesuit Relations mention the attempts of the Dutch to sway the Native Americans away from the Jesuits through gifts or religious debates.<sup>33</sup> Despite these other influences, the Capuchins and Jesuits were certainly the most influential Catholic presence in their respective regions by the late seventeenth century.

The Capuchins began their mission work in Kongo in 1645, beginning what Thornton sees as a new wave of Christianity after the religion had lost steam throughout the sixteenth century.<sup>34</sup> The Capuchins were able to gain power in the area because of their affiliation with the national religion. Christianity had existed in the Kongo for about a century and a half by this time, and so the Kongo-Christian identity was well-developed. They also were able to gain influence because they did not try to fight the Kongo king for power over Christian education. Instead, they recognized that

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<sup>32</sup> Thornton, *The Kongolese St. Anthony*, 71; John Thornton, "The Development of an African Catholic Church in the Kingdom of Kongo," *Journal of African History* 25 (1984), 149.

<sup>33</sup> Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries of New France, 1610-1791* (Cleveland: Burrows Brothers, 1896-1901), 183; 246.

<sup>34</sup> Thornton, "The Development of an African Catholic Church," 147.

within the African context their role was a sacramental one and left the spread of religious ideas to the Kongo elite.

The Jesuits in Lower Canada did not have the same endorsement from local leaders to inspire respect from indigenous people. As Greer notes, their association with the larger process of French colonization made Catholicism seem like just another cultural exchange.<sup>35</sup> However, this was certainly not enough to convince entire groups of people to abandon their communities and beliefs in favor of a foreign cosmology. Jesuits were able to impress, and even scare, Native Americans towards conversion. In the Relation, Father Beschefer, the Superior of the Canadian Jesuit missions, asserts that the “predictions of eclipses has always been one of the things that have most astonished our savages; and it has given them a higher opinion of their missionaries.”<sup>36</sup> The missionaries also found ways to attribute any success or disaster to the Christian god. For example, one of the Jesuit priests recalled warning Native Americans not to anger the Christian god by performing an indigenous ritual, which resulted in the death of most participants.<sup>37</sup> Inspiring awe in Native Americans was a useful tactic for Jesuits to assume religious power in the region.

While the arrival of Europeans brought harmful repercussions to the area such disease and alcohol, Jesuits not excluded, the missions began to offer a sort of retreat from these social ills. Jesuits began to replace the healing function of indigenous “jugglers” through the use of Western medicine. One priest in Iroquois territory noticed

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<sup>35</sup> Greer, *The Jesuit Relations*, 11.

<sup>36</sup> Thwaites, *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, 198.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, 199.

that people were “losing much of the esteem which they had for the jugglers.”<sup>38</sup> Once the missionaries assumed power over their health, the power to convert native peoples followed. As one priest plainly put it, “the medicines serve as an introduction to the faith.”<sup>39</sup>

Greer attributes the success of the missions in the latter half of the seventeenth century to “epidemic diseases, Iroquois attacks, and growing economic dependency,” alcohol abuse among native communities grew throughout the seventeenth century.<sup>40</sup> Father Lamberville regarded alcohol as a problem, saying, “We have no other demon to contend against than liquor and drunkenness.”<sup>41</sup> In order to live on a Jesuit mission, however, Native Americans had to vow to abstain from alcohol.<sup>42</sup> Father Bigot of the Algonquian mission had his “savages” say a prayer against all evils, namely drunkenness.<sup>43</sup> Father Lamberville noted how, “in order to strip the savages to their very shirts [the French] follow them everywhere, to make them drink and become intoxicated,” suggesting that the French used alcohol as a strategy to dismantle tribal bonds.<sup>44</sup> It is not suggested in the account that the Jesuits sought to demonize other French settlers for their coercive action. However, Jesuits did offer sites of retreat from the chaos wrought by their fellow countrymen.

Once the missionaries gained respect from the native people, they were able to fulfill their missionary roles in the area. As Thornton notes, Capuchins were sent to

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<sup>38</sup> Thwaites, *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, 231.

<sup>39</sup> Ibidem, 94-5.

<sup>40</sup> Greer, *The Jesuit Relations*, 13.

<sup>41</sup> Thwaites, *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, 181.

<sup>42</sup> Ibidem, 34.

<sup>43</sup> Ibidem, 42.

<sup>44</sup> Ibidem, 181.

“minister sacraments and to improve the habits of a Christian community.”<sup>45</sup> Carli makes this clear at the beginning of his account as he makes a list of the goals of the Capuchin order in Kongo. Among these goals were “to dispense with marriages within the second and third degrees, and for Pagans converted to keep one of their wives.”<sup>46</sup> Also, they were instructed to “bless church-stuff, churches, chalices.”<sup>47</sup> There were many other patents on the list, but none sought to encroach on the Kongo King’s autonomy over the spread of religious education.

It is clear throughout Carli’s account, however, that the primary function of Capuchin missionaries was to perform sacraments. As the introductory sacrament to the faith, baptism was most important. Because of the few missionaries in the region and their typically nomadic journeys, Capuchins would typically perform mass baptisms of Kongolese children.<sup>48</sup> Carli also explains that all the missionaries carried a chest with them that contained the items necessary to perform sacraments, which reinforces the lack of Christian structures in peripheral regions.<sup>49</sup>

Jesuits in Lower Canada performed not only a sacramental function, but also retained authority over the spread of Christian education. Historically, the Jesuits are an order of missionaries who are known for their interest in moral and secular education.<sup>50</sup> This made their mission less about sacraments and more about forming relationships and cultivating knowledge of the faith in their converts, which can prove

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<sup>45</sup> Thornton, “The Development of an African Catholic Church,” 151. For instances of mass baptisms see Carli, “A Curious and Exact Account of A Voyage to Congo,” 160-1, 66-8, 70, 72.

<sup>46</sup> Carli, “A Curious and Exact Account of A Voyage to Congo,” 149.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*, 149.

<sup>48</sup> John Thornton, “Religious and Ceremonial Life,” 84.

<sup>49</sup> Carli, “A Curious and Exact Account of a Voyage to Congo,” 160.

<sup>50</sup> Greer *The Jesuit Relations*, 4.

to be a difficult task when there is such a huge cultural divide. However, adults who sought baptism had to undergo a “two years’ trial” of Christian education and their reception of the sacrament was at the discretion of their local priest.<sup>51</sup> Father Beschefer recalls that over 2000 people were baptized during the time this Relation was written.<sup>52</sup> However, this number also includes children who naturally did not have the same educational requirements, and also the often-secret baptisms of prisoners the Iroquois had taken captive.<sup>53</sup> Baptism clearly held equal importance in Lower Canada as it did in Kongo, although it was not the missionaries’ only goal.

In order to meet the “two years’ trial” required for baptism, the missionaries had to find ways to communicate with the native people. Interpreters were employed throughout some of the matters in the Relation.<sup>54</sup> However, what is more notable is their development of catechisms for the native people. Father Chauchetiere of an Iroquoian mission reported having one catechism that was written in the indigenous language as well as one that taught through illustration.<sup>55</sup> Translating Christian catechisms into native languages was a strategy used by the Jesuits throughout the world, specifically in Kongo.<sup>56</sup> However, Thornton provides extensive work demonstrating the incongruities of trying to translate Western Christian ideas into

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<sup>51</sup> Thwaites, *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, 61.

<sup>52</sup> Ibidem, 190.

<sup>53</sup> Instances of the baptism of captives can be found in Thwaites, *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, 58, 69, 74, 78, 83.

<sup>54</sup> Thwaites, *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, 75; 83.

<sup>55</sup> Ibidem, 172.

<sup>56</sup> Thornton, “The Development of an African Church,” 10.

languages that do not have the same conceptual frameworks, which will be addressed again later in this discussion.<sup>57</sup>

The Jesuit priests in Lower Canada seemed to have relied more heavily on their illustrated catechisms. The pictures in these catechisms displayed different aspects of the Catholic faith. In one of Father Bigot's letters, he requests more pictures of "the judgment, of hell, of purgatory, and of paradise" in order to instruct the "savages."<sup>58</sup> However, the use of educating through pictures is a questionable tactic, which can be misconstrued when considered in the context of an interaction between a Jesuit priest and one of his converts. When he showed the Native American a picture of Paris, the man asked Father Lamberville if the eyes in the pictures also close when the photographed people die.<sup>59</sup> This suggests a misunderstanding on the part of Native Americans about the nature of a photograph. Another priest also explained hell to some of the Algonquian converts by comparing the flames to those of their Iroquoian aggressors.<sup>60</sup> Considering the misunderstanding about the photo in Paris, and the comparison of hell to a very real situation on earth, it is questionable if the Native Americans gained any clearer of an understanding of Catholicism through illustrated catechisms.

Once they had attracted a considerable amount of indigenous converts, the Jesuits would also employ outstanding Native Americans to act as teachers on their behalf. Catherine would have been one of these exemplary outcomes of Christianization. Identifying and employing especially pious members of the native community

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<sup>57</sup> Thornton, *The Kongolese Saint Anthony*, 85.

<sup>58</sup> Carli, "A Curious and Exact Account of a Voyage to Congo, 132-3.

<sup>59</sup> Ibidem, 57.

<sup>60</sup> Ibidem, 133.

benefitted the priests and the mission community, especially as they began to grow. These were the only instances that the Jesuits did not retain full control over the education of local people. However, the situation was quite unlike Kongo due to the close supervision and consistent presence of missionaries in Lower Canada, and should not be seen as a formula for syncretization.

In the Kongo, both the assumption of power by the elite and the relative lack of European presence allowed for a Christianity to grow that was distinctly Kongo in practice. Through learning Portuguese and Latin, elites then attempted to convert Christian ideas into the Kongo language in order to spread the religion throughout the kingdom. However, this proved to be a more difficult task than expected with great potential for misunderstanding, as addressed by Wyatt MacGaffey in his article "Dialogues of the Deaf."<sup>61</sup> The differences of culture and religion between Kongo and Portugal were vast, and these differences were reflected through their respective languages. As MacGaffey asserts, when trying to understand Christianity in a Kongo context, the inability to accurately translate ideas from one language to the other cannot be understated.<sup>62</sup>

John Thornton provides a complex analysis of the ways in which Christian ideas were misinterpreted in Kongo language. For example, he notes that the way the Kongo word "nkisi" was used in the translation of the Christian terms "church" and "bible"

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<sup>61</sup> 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*, edited by Stuart B. Schwartz (New York: Cambridge University Press), 1994.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibidem*, 263.



essentially distorted the meanings as “shrine” and “charm” respectively.<sup>63</sup> Thornton and James Sweet debate over what this meant for the sincerity of Christianity in the Kongo setting. Sweet asserts that both he and Thornton agree that Christian ideas were simply used to rename concepts that already existed in African cosmology, not replace them. He argues that Catholicism ran parallel to African cosmologies, but the African beliefs remained dominant among people in the kingdom.<sup>64</sup> Conversely, Thornton argues that Christianity and African religions did fuse into one syncretized religion. He calls this process “embracing syncretism” because of the selective use of Catholic ideas where they naturally fit in the pre-existing African cosmology.<sup>65</sup> This is the position taken within this analysis, and the idea of “embracing syncretism” can also be found in the Native American context.

One avenue for syncretism was through ritual. Baptism ritual in Kongo took on a distinct identity. In addition to the water and oil used in Catholic baptisms, people in the Kongo would also provide salt to be placed on the tongue of the person being baptized.<sup>66</sup> It is suggested that salt is part of a local superstition in the region to ward off evil spirits.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, the introductory sacrament into the Catholic faith was itself a fusion with local beliefs. Religious celebrations also became a fusion of pre- and post-Christian cosmology. Due to the reverence for ancestors in pre-Christian Kongo, All

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<sup>63</sup> Thornton, “Religious and Ceremonial Life,” 85.

<sup>64</sup> James H. Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441-1770* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 113-4.

<sup>65</sup> John Thornton, “Afro-Christian Syncretism in the Kingdom of Kongo,” 6.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*, 17.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibidem*, 19.

Saints Day became one of the most popular feast days in the kingdom.<sup>68</sup> In Lower Canada, one priest recalled that his converts had replaced one of their local deities for the Christian god in a ritual for the dead.<sup>69</sup> In many instances, these rituals were a way for indigenous Catholics to express both belief systems.

Many Catholic feast days and prayers were also adopted among converted indigenous communities. One Friday during Lent, while Father Carli was staying in Bamba, a group of Kongo Christians approached the church seeking to pray and do penance, in line with Catholic Lenten tradition. They recited the “Salve Regina” in their own language, and they engaged in an hour of silent prayer and penance led by Father Carli.<sup>70</sup> In Native American context, *The Jesuit Relations* recount instances in which the Native Americans were found singing Catholic hymns that had been translated into their language.<sup>71</sup> Also, the missionaries reported a strict adherence to the Church calendar that, much like the bells in mission towns, superimposed a new sense of time on the communities.<sup>72</sup> However, the problems of translation that Thornton discusses are not to be overlooked in the adoption of these prayers and feast days. Beatriz addressed this discrepancy forthright in the context of the “Salve Regina,” which she asserts is a meaningless prayer because of the lack of a proper Kongolese translation of “salve.”

The different political and social landscapes of each region created situations in which European missionaries had to assume and concede certain aspects of power.

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<sup>68</sup> Thornton, *The Kongolese Saint Anthony*, 30.

<sup>69</sup> Thwaites, *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, 200-1.

<sup>70</sup> Carli, “A Curious and Exact Account of a Voyage to Congo,” 169.

<sup>71</sup> Thwaites, *The Jesuit Relations*, 32; 122.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibidem*, 94; 180.

Because Catholicism was concentrated in Kongo's urban centers and spread by Kongo elite, Capuchin missionaries came to the region in small numbers and sought to perform acts and sacraments that required a member of the clergy. The location of Jesuit missions on the periphery of Native American communities allowed the missionaries to control both the education and spread of Christianity in the region from a sedentary site. For Native Americans, this meant that they had to abandon their indigenous communities as well as their pre-Christian lifeways before being accepted into the Catholic church. Conversely, after receiving baptism, rural Kongo people were able to identify as members of the Catholic church without having to significantly alter their location or their lifestyle. Although the identities of local people were affected by European visitors, this process was not homogenous, and depended on an indigenous Kongo person's location in an urban or rural setting, or a Native Americans' location in their indigenous community or on a Jesuit mission.

#### *Christian Identity as a Remedy for Political Turmoil*

There was significant political turmoil in both Kongo and Lower Canada during the seventeenth century that exceeded the previous decades of petty conflict and disease. Both areas, because of the strains of adapting to European influence, had broken into warfare. For the last few decades, the Portuguese had heightened their aggressions towards the Kongo people, leading to a series of battles that put a great strain on Kongo. By the late seventeenth century, the kingdom was in the midst of Civil War, its capital São Salvador was abandoned, and succession rights were in question. Within this political climate, Beatriz began to preach reunification through Christianity.

In North America, the conflicts that resulted from European presence eventually erupted during the 1640s and 50s into what are now referred to as the Beaver Wars. In order to maximize the profits of the fur trade, the French allied with nations who opposed the Iroquois. The Iroquois reacted by staging what began as raids and developed into all-out attacks on nations allied with the French in order to steal furs and take prisoners. The Dutch then aligned themselves with the Iroquois by providing them with weapons, while the French supplied their allies with weapons. European arms amplified the conflicts that occurred between nations and also added to the decimation of communities. Salisbury points out that the Iroquois quickly began to capture prisoners in their raids in an attempt to repopulate their communities.<sup>73</sup> This period created even more factionalism among the different nations in the region, and empowered the Jesuit's message of spiritual salvation from secular turmoil.

Although their intentions and actions were very different, both Beatriz and Catherine sought to reinvent their region's Christian identity as a remedy for the ills of contact. Beatriz's Antonian movement was something of a political endeavor, although, as Thornton notes, the movement was "profoundly Christian."<sup>74</sup> She was not the first to take advantage of the already existent political benefits of Christianity, as the crown had done centuries ago, and as other Kongolese had done in the last few years. She was, however, the most prolific. Her movement was framed around redefining Kongo Christianity as something that exists for and because of the Kongo nation. Through this

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<sup>73</sup> Neal Salisbury, "Religious Encounters in a Colonial Context: New England and New France in the Seventeenth Century." *American Indian Quarterly* 16 (Autumn 1992): 505.

<sup>74</sup> Thornton, *The Kongolese Saint Anthony*, 109.

redefinition, Beatriz hoped people would embrace their identity as a source of strength, and that the crown would follow.

Under the possession of Saint Anthony, Beatriz used her voice to unite the Kongo people with their fate. Through the use of possession, Beatriz claimed her relevance as a religious leader within her community. Her motive to use religion for political gain also reinforced the traditional link between politics and religion that existed before and after Christianization. Through her preaching, she claimed that Jesus and Mary were actually Kongolese, and that Jesus was born in São Salvador, Kongo's capital city. She also insisted that Saint Francis was Kongolese. This threatened the authority of Capuchin priests in the region because Saint Anthony was part of the Franciscan order, as were the Capuchins. Her attempt to rewrite Catholic history in a Kongo context not only threatened the supremacy of European missionaries in Kongo, but also recalled the importance of locality to Kongolese worship.

Beatriz also addressed the disconnect that Kongo laypeople had with Christianity by rewriting the "Salve Regina." Her version of the prayer was called the "Salve Antonia" and addressed the incompatibilities that occur between pre-Christian and Christian religion. The first section addresses the issue of translation by calling out the Kongo people did not know what they were praying when they said "salve." She called for people to demand prayers that fully meant something to them. The second section of her prayer emphasizes faith over sacraments. This refocusing undermines the only position Capuchin missionaries had within Kongo Christianity. Because of her aggressive political agenda, while undermining the necessity of European Catholic

presence in her region, Beatriz was threatening to the politico-religious connection of Christianity in Kongo.<sup>75</sup>

Catherine neither had a political agenda, nor did she criticize the teachers or teachings of the Catholic faith. Catherine was a religious product of the devastation that her region experienced throughout the last century. European disease had taken both of her parents' lives and had scarred and left her vision impaired. If Catherine challenged anything, it was her gender and social location within her Native American community. As a woman of noble birth, she was expected to participate in the affairs of the community and to have a husband and children of her own. However, her isolation and vow of chastity undermined these expectations. When Catherine arrived on the Jesuit mission she discovered that her qualities could be interpreted as piety rather than defiance against tradition, and she began to increase her penance by walking across the snowy ground until her feet were numb, spreading thorns on her bed, or burning her feet. Her steadfast example inspired many Native Americans to claim a Christian identity both during her lifetime and after her death.

### Conclusion

The process of Christianization throughout the Atlantic World was a dynamic and complex process. As shown by the divide between urban and rural communities in Kongo and the divide between indigenous communities and Christian missions in Lower Canada, the social location of indigenous people should not be underestimated when considering the process of Christianization. Although dominant accounts from

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<sup>75</sup> For a thorough analysis of Beatriz's claims during the Antonian Movement see Thornton, *The Kongolesse Saint Anthony*, 113-8.

this period represent the European perspective, indigenous experiences are equally important to understanding the ways that European contact affected the development of these newfound regions across the Atlantic.

Both Beatriz and Catherine's time ended in death at a young age while they were at the peak of their religious experiences. Beatriz's execution was a result of her threatening agenda for the relationship of European Christianity to the Kongo kingdom, while Catherine died due to the indirect effects of European presence. Beatriz and Catherine are both products of one of the most volatile periods in their respective areas after the arrival of Europeans. In reaction, they attempted to redefine their experience through a Catholic identity.

There are other markers of identity beyond the scope of this paper that warrant further investigation. For instance, Beatriz blurred the lines of gender by identifying as a male saint throughout her preaching, while Catherine challenged her role as a woman in her indigenous community. Also, the effects of a religion that emphasizes monogamy in areas that historically practiced polygamy raise interesting questions on the development of family relationships throughout the process of Christianization. The complex experiences of indigenous people throughout the Atlantic World are often hard to pinpoint.

When considering the outcomes of Atlantic contact, Catherine and Beatriz should not be used as emblems for the indigenous experience. However, with so many indigenous voices unrepresented in historical records, their stories can provide a sense of how the process of Christianization both converged and diverged with the identity of indigenous people throughout the Atlantic World. Continuing to search for and uncover

these undersung voices will enrich our understanding of the role of indigenous participants in the process of exchange and migration across the Atlantic World.



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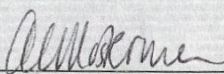
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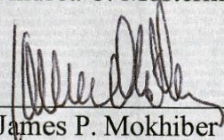
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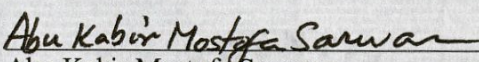
APPROVAL SHEET

This is to certify that Jessica Anne Dauterive has successfully completed her Senior Honors Thesis, entitled:

*The Effects of Christianization on Identity  
Among the Indigenous Communities of Kongo and Lower Canada*

  
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May 2, 2013  
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