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## The Kongo Cosmogram in Historical Archaeology and the Moral Compass of Dave the Potter

*The dikenga. ... flags the vanishing point where ...  
the limitations of ordinary vision become acute.*

—Robert Farris Thompson (1993:49)

Many thanks to J. W. Joseph for the excellent paper that occasioned this forum. I begin with the Kongo cosmogram, then discuss some historical archaeologists' engagements with it, turn to Joseph's paper, and close by building on his analysis with suggestions based on my research and an aspect of Kongo/Bantu philosophy that warrants more attention from archaeologists. Like my fellow contributors, I depend on the works of specialists in BaKongo history and culture; these deserve closer reading.

### Finding Cosmograms

Although specialists use “emblem,” “symbol,” and related terms for Kongo cosmograms (*dikenga*), they stress that whether performed, found, or inscribed, all map complex, dynamic, relational systems of knowledge (Fu-Kiau 1969, 2001; MacGaffey 1986; Thompson 1993:49). The sign is thus the tip of a philosophical iceberg, and like these floating accretions, always emergent (*dingo-dingo*) (Fu-Kiau 2001:131) above and below the Kalunga waters. Multidimensional “*dikenga* ideology” (Thompson 1993:54) interconnects the perpetual solar round; course of a well-lived life; relationships of person to community, ancestors, and future generations; give-and-take of debate; political structure of local and larger polities; responsibilities of leaders and specialists; and relationship of humanity to other creatures and land—all with modes of transformation from one state of being to another.

Although “symbol” is a handy portmanteau term, the *dikenga* is not a unitary symbol analogous to

a Christian cross or national flag (MacGaffey 1986:119; Faik-Nzuji 2000:53–63). Nor are some renderings more “pure” than others; rather, variations attune to diverse contexts and purposes without which the *dikenga* could not exist or persist. Although variants like the diamond-shaped metopic spot representing the soul on the foreheads of *niombo* figures (Thompson and Cornet 1981:60–69), and the *yowa* do signal particular identities in appropriate contexts, their force in these contexts depends on not being reducible to the identities or any single trajectory of meaning. Rather, an ensemble of practices, meanings, and recombinant institutional forms comprise a nexus for personal and group identity (Ruiz 2004:10). Also, therefore, the *dikenga* is not tied to any given set of institutions like the ones Mintz and Price (1976) have argued could not cross the Atlantic intact. Indeed, a key premise of *dikenga* ideology is that nothing ever survives “intact” because nothing ever survives in a fixed form. Period. Ever. Anywhere. Change, mixture, and innovation are givens, not aberrations, however much “people without history” are supposedly locked in a timeless seasonal round, or historians' accounts fixed in writing create illusions to the contrary. (Since historical archaeologists strive to restore histories to the former and correct errors of the latter, this point may prove instructive.) Also, given extensive pre- and postcolonial Bantu migrations, wars, traumas in individual lifetimes, and the vast reach of related terms and concepts in Africa and the Americas, it stands to reason that people have used mnemonic signs to help them continually remake a recognizable world. An enduring moral compass, the *dikenga* offers guidance for peaceful and violent times alike. From an Africanist perspective, then, the cosmogram attests to the significance of Kongo and Bantu thought (Fu-Kiau 1991), often in terms cognate with other African cosmologies. From a diasporic perspective, it sums up a vast resource pool on which captives could draw to confront oppression in strange lands they worked to make their own.

Given all this, therefore, what might one ask of interpretations proposing that something partakes of *dikenga* ideology?

The answer is as simple and as difficult as this: first, knowing as much as possible—historically, culturally, locally—about the phenomena to which the rubric is applied; second, the same for the rubric itself; and third, using additional theories in ways that complement or critique *dikenga* ideology as peer theory, and not as an othered body of beliefs to be explained (away). To date, few anthropologists might agree with me on No. 3, but as academics diversify, so, I hope, will the criteria governing intellectual legitimacy. Certainly, historical archaeologists have been more diligent about the first goal than the last two. I have a long way to go myself.

I worry, however, that over the past 20 years the field's attitude has shifted from treating the cosmogram as an epistemology archaeologists must strive to understand (Myhre 2006a, 2006b), to invoking it as evidence for whatever theory an archaeologist favors: acculturation, creolization, resistance, agency and practice, ethnicity and identity, consumption, symbolic anthropology, etc. Though often mentioned, religion and ritual seem increasingly subsumed by these theories rather than spurring research on their own terms. This is especially problematic when failure to do so reinscribes a European-derived sacred vs. secular binary that *dikenga* ideology rejects outright, diasporans redraw in myriad ways, and that is porous at best in material culture (consider the use of consumer products like “toys” on altars, or cross marks on commercial goods to ward off theft, for example). When such presuppositions govern research, the graphic *dikenga* is divorced from the philosophy it maps, and alien theory continues to construct others by obscuring the achievements of the very “voiceless” subjects it purports to hear.

In the beginning things could have been otherwise. Leland Ferguson's foundational work, of course, alerted archaeologists to cosmograms. For him cross marks signaled resistance to the plantocracy and served as ethnic markers in creolization, conceived basically as an acculturative shift from old culture to new (Ferguson 1992, 1999). Despite just criticisms about focusing ethnic ascriptions too narrowly and change too linearly, such early work had the advantage of leaving the signs' multivalence relatively unconstrained: one took one's cross marks and cosmograms as they came and tried to understand them. Reciprocally, it became clear that deep

philosophical currents flowed through everyday practices. For example, Elaine Nichols's superb *The Last Miles of the Way: Homegoing Rituals in South Carolina* (1989) immersed museumgoers in ritual space and showed how community members incorporated cosmographic motion into burial rituals—like handing an infant across the casket and facing the deceased toward the sunrise—also reminding us that cosmograms are performed and that gestures are thresholds to understanding (Thompson 2002; Ruiz 2004). Specific archaeological materials gained texture from the project as a whole.

Since then, many more projects which Joseph reviews in his paper have found evidence that fits Kongo contours. Because of widespread material and philosophical similarities in west and central Africa (and elsewhere), it seems prudent to await future work on Africa's many diasporas (Lovejoy 1997) before committing too narrowly to one cultural/geographical line of influence for all these findings (Norman 2010). Nevertheless, the archaeological record is cheering: it even seems possible that someday a new material history of North America will emerge. Further, as each site “becomes a stratagem for comprehending things across the lines dividing the living from dead,” a key tenet of *dikenga* ideology continues to flourish (Thompson and Cornet 1981:146).

### Reducing Complexity

As the data have increased, interpretations seem to have become less grounded. Perhaps predictive models and quotable nomenclature foreground the archaeologist's contribution to the field, wielding greater academic currency than incremental knowledge built from long-term African and diasporan involvement. (Ironically, the predictive validity of abstract models can always be demonstrated, but grounded, modest hypotheses—based on local culture, context, assemblage content, spatial placement, and participant questions like “Are you nuts?!?”—are actually more “scientific” because they are falsifiable.) Emblematic of the shift is a permutation of acculturation that allows the BaKongo to retain their elaborate “core symbol,” finds new ones emerging in the Caribbean and Brazil, but sees North Americans mainly as users of “abbreviated,” “instrumental” cross marks for individual purposes (Fennell (2007:27–33). An overarching Saussurean premise

of such work is that the “purer” or more “core” a symbol is, the more remote it is from actual use, a position Myhre (2006a, 2006b) and Preucel (2006) critique thoroughly.

Certainly, cross marks serve as instruments in conjuration, past and present. But ignored to make the core-abbreviated argument are numerous elaborate cosmograms built into historical landscapes and built for living, public African American contexts, made by real people who articulate their intentions in terms that make little sense from a European American perspective and a great deal from that of *dikenga* ideology and its epistemological relatives. While most cultural anthropologists of the diaspora do gravitate to the Caribbean and Brazil, accounting for the copious literature on these areas, and while the claims of Mintz and Price, who have done virtually no fieldwork inside U.S. borders are nonetheless widely applied here, some *do* work in the U.S. and much useful material awaits attention (Szwed and Abrahams 1978). Herskovits’s mistake that there is “less” African-oriented material culture in North America remains just that: a mistake, and will remain so until cultural anthropology gets over its bias against work close to home and African diaspora studies insists on parity for North America. (Like many white Americans—like me 25 years ago—Herskovits apparently assumed he knew his own country.)

Nor do the ideas that symbolic reduction begins with the Middle Passage and that simpler appearances correlate with simpler ideas hold water. Writing about the BaKongo at home, Thompson and Cornet (1981:44) explain:

Extensions of the cosmogram into social space are even more abbreviated [than the minimal ritual space, the cross mark], as in the ... frequent usage of a cross-road, or a branch in a path as a site for communication with the other world. These ... can be miniaturized even further to a forked stick, cosmos-compacted.

The “simpler” cross-mark form of the *dikenga*, the *yowa*, figures in initiation and badges of membership in the Lemba therapeutic association (Fu-Kiau 1969:pl.5–8; Janzen 1982:3; Thompson 1993:49; Ruiz 2004:64). While much work must be done on *dikenga* variants and their histories in North America, the *yowa*’s neatly fits how North American healers use cross marks to assert therapeutic skill and trap negativity. Nothing about these uses rules out others, however,

like displaying the Lemba *yowa* and its North American cousins as economical reminders of omnidirectional mastery, a theme that will be discussed below.

While the core-abbreviated model promotes narrative clarity, supports claims of ethnogenesis (with “discovery” of same by the archaeologist), and provides ready-made interpretations for followers to apply to their own findings, its price is very high. Indeed, it involves jettisoning a large chunk of North America’s philosophical heritage and dismantling the bridge scholars have painstakingly built from ancestral practices to those of descendants like James Hampton, Henry Dorsey, Dilmus Hall, Edward Houston, Estelle Hamler, Olivia Humphrey, George Kornegay, Robert Montgomery, Gyp Packnett, and many others, known and unknown, who have used a massively documented repertoire of cosmographic iconography to commemorate the dead, instruct the living, assert rights in place, and proclaim stature in the community in the face of oppressors (Thompson and Cornet 1981, 1983, 1993; McWillie 1987; Gundaker 1994; Gundaker and McWillie 2006). “Ethnogenic” only to the degree that all participate in world-making and agree to assume Africa’s changelessness, such works display the combinatory mastery (often called “accretive” in the literature) that African-oriented peoples have cultivated for countless generations on both sides of the Atlantic, with systematic attention to abstract concepts organizing ordinary materials, selected for particular indexical features (Leiris 1960). The process that Janzen describes for Lemba remains integral to diasporic activities on many fronts:

[L]emba’s origin and ritual is often elaborated in terms of apparently mystifying creations such as rodents, earth colors, plants, and mythic heroes. Yet these seem to be interwoven with allusions to the familiar ground of daily experiences. ... The manner in which the two levels of reality are combined reveals a selectivity of choice of alternatives, a conspicuous manipulation of bits and pieces from the received lore of myth and cosmology to reinforce a particular set of alternatives. The moment this occurs in an institution’s or society’s culture, it has created itself an ideology (Janzen 1982:295).

If descendants keep doing this also, then they have kept or created—two ways of saying the same thing in *dikenga* terms—an ideology too.

The core-abbreviated model thus obscures the very dynamism that has made Kongo-inflected

and cognate philosophy relevant for enslaved and contemporary African diasporans and for all who encounter its legacies in globalizing American and African popular culture. While individuals deserve full credit for their innovations, does this divorce them from the shoulders they stand on? Can one break a mold without a mold to break? Would we say as much of John Coltrane? Toni Morrison? Michelangelo? Shakespeare?

### The Cross Mark as Emblem of African American Identity

J. W. Joseph homes in on one such outstanding individual. Joseph's paper and the opportunity to contribute to this forum have left me with the humbling certainty that, even as he thought he was paying tribute, he seriously underestimated Dave.

Joseph argues that Dave, the master potter of South Carolina, used cross marks as emblematic symbols of African American identity on pots he knew would be sold to whites and used by the African Americans they enslaved. To do so, Dave built on Kongo precedents, but transformed them to fit his own circumstances (a very *dikenga* thing to do). To make his case, Joseph rules out quantity, business, and maker's marks. He thoroughly establishes Kongo influences in the Edgefield region. He also reminds the reader that the cross mark was important to other Africans as well; thus the sign could be read as meaningful by enslaved people of many backgrounds.

Joseph stresses that the cross marks cannot be a sign for Dave himself because Dave was literate and signed his pots. Why would he need a second way to mark the pots, and why would he place such a mark adjacent to his signature?

Well, in Yoruba phrasing, more is more. In information theory, analogue and digital modes create complementary redundancies. Or as Zora Neale Hurston (1997) put it, decorate the decorations. My research also casts doubt on this logic, showing that African diasporans from the 18th century forward frequently combined the Roman alphabet and African-oriented signs in the same context or on the same object. These combinations include cross marks with "keep out" and "beware of dog" messages, elaborate cosmograms of mobile suns adjacent to personal information lettered on tombstones, overlaid cross marks beside the phrase "hazardous materials," and cross marks with circled extremities around

the word "Mojo" (Gundaker 1998:63–94). Like African and diasporic twinning, doubling graphic systems implies the existence of a third presence, an implicit "and" born from and reframing the two stated "boths," obviating their duality. More pragmatically, such doubling expands the communicative range of a message, ensures wider readership, capitalizes on how two systems never say quite the same thing, shows mastery of both schooled and ancestral codes, and foregrounds the inscriber's command of practical (alphabetic) and deep (*dikenga*/old-time) knowledge.

A minimalist interpretation based on this pattern is that Dave used cross marks to warn potential thieves that he and higher powers anticipated their desire to steal from a pot, and to remind them that they were seen and accountable, however carefully they hid their actions. This usage is consistent with the cross mark's most common function in North America and the Caribbean and applies with or without Dave's name. A host of descendants of the Mande, Temne, Vai, Akan, Beni, Mende, Ejagham, Igbo, Kongo, and other groups, can all read and communicate this cross-mark message—and do—for their own houses and belongings. Dave probably cared little about slaveholders' property, however. Further, Joseph has made a strong case for Dave's Kongo knowledge. So, it seems likely that Dave's name was relevant and that he was saying much more, for reasons explained below.

Again, Joseph makes a strong case for reading Dave's cross marks cosmographically. While Dave's marks do seem broadly political and assert identity (among other things), Joseph's conclusion that the signs proclaim a specifically African American identity is less convincing, however. This would require showing consolidated African American nationalism in antebellum Edgefield, Dave's involvement, and also explaining how for that time and place the *dikenga* shed meanings that remain vibrant today. Why would its concern with personal and community obligations, and guidelines for a well-lived life, disappear under slavery, in the very conditions where they would seem most compelling? Historian Sterling Stuckey's (1987) work on the ring shout pulls all these elements together, linking the circling shout with cosmographic practices and an emerging nationalist sensibility. Jason R. Young (2007:24–41) gives a more comprehensive picture than Stuckey. He argues that, far from

being isolated, the South Carolina low country and its African Atlantic Kongo religion during slavery have strong ties to African America in general—including other parts of South Carolina. If the cosmogram were a flaglike symbol instead of an encompassing ideology, these developments would have been impossible.

### Leadership and the Four Vs of Knowledge

Citing Thompson and MacGaffey, Stuckey (1987) aligns the shout with circling call-and-response Kongo formations in which the community supports—or withdraws support—from a leader. Inscribed and material enclosures also stand for the community. As a Kongo proverb puts it: “‘Nzâmbi mu kânda (kena)’ God (exists) in the community. The natural principle of change transmits itself perpetually in us through the community continuum” (Fu-Kiau 2001:99).

The community circle also manifests in the *luumbu* ring of tall staffs that encloses a leader’s house, and the palisade of vessels rising above and around his grave (Thompson and Cornet 1981:187,194–197), forms well documented in North America. In relation to the cross mark’s vertical axis, the enclosing circle thus maps both the leader’s sphere of influence and the upward channel of wisdom from the ancestors who guide him and who remain integral to the community (Fu-Kiau 2001:105). Bearing in mind Thompson’s phrase about “cosmogram-compacted” forked sticks, this circle is implicit, whether explicitly rendered or not, for any cross mark viewed with Kongo-informed vision. This works both ways. Another antitheft variant is a circle with no cross mark: if you fail at this crossroads of decision, you will go through this hole to the other world (Robert F. Thompson 1990, pers. comm.)

Fu-Kiau—the principal MuKongo consultant for Janzen, MacGaffey, Thompson, and others—emphasizes that leadership or specialist expertise was expected of all Kongo people. “[T]o become a specialist, was something required of all [society’s] members” (Fu-Kiau 2001:32). Like tributes in African American yards today, grave offerings were orchestrated to communicate the deceased’s expertise. Goods of the deceased were distributed so others would remember him by using his (or her—witness the pitchers on black women’s graves) possessions (Bockie 1993:125). Those who failed to become specialists or leaders

were stunted in life and potentially dangerous after death. Ancestors who aided the living continued to pursue knowledge even after they entered *mpembe*, the land of the dead (Fu-Kiau 1991:29–33). “To become an ancestor through death is to become like God, *again* [emphasis added]”; and further, “Jesus can be recognized in the role of *nganga*, and ancestor, and therefore fits readily into the system of Kongo cosmology” (Bockie 1993:136,139).

Leadership and specialist achievement were built into the structure of the cosmogram as its highest point, the sun at noon, *tukula*. Fu-Kiau learned in Lemba that the Vânga “V,” formed by lines from the center of the circle to an arc about “1½ hours” on either side of *tukula*, framed the knowledge leaders or specialists must acquire (Fu-Kiau 1991:139). See also the personal communication from Thompson cited in Fennell (2007:78) regarding a hand grasping the top of a ring as sign of personal power. Rotating counter clockwise, the V around the setting sun, *luvèmba*, mapped knowledge required for ancestor status; the V around the lowest point, *musoni*, that necessary for rebirth; and the quadrant spanning *kala*, sunrise, the lessons vital for humans to rise above the horizon of animal instinct. The eternal spiral of all this knowledge propels the eternal round of the cosmos (Fu-Kiau 2001:127–150). (If one gains nothing else from this summary, heed its warning not to project “Western” foreground/background visual conventions onto other systems. The spaces between, above, and below *dikenga* marks are never empty. Even when an “abbreviated” cross mark thwarts an intruder or seals a vow, it is the “knowledge between the lines” that does the work.)

These aspects of Kongo cosmology offer important insights into signs configured by men (in my fieldwork, only men) preoccupied with justice and renowned for knowledge, who built wind-driven wheels surrounded by signs of power and moral authority (weapons; tools; fierce animals, represented by toys; skulls; horned crowns; thrones; Masonic items; long-distance transportation and communication devices; and inscribed messages like “faster killing power”), displaying them openly, sometimes aggressively, in public places where they remained largely invisible to outsiders’ eyes (Gundaker 1994). Certainly, these signs assert “identity,” but also much more: not only the

maker's accomplishments, but also the "how" of right living for those lagging behind, and the promise of divine/ancestral justice to those who, as a spatialized spiritual put it, "fall off" because they do not "mind" how they "walk upon the cross" (Johnson and Johnson 1925:41; Gundaker 1998:76). Do not be misled by the "folk-art" term whirligig. These devices not only revolve, as all *dikenga* do, but also set in motion a lateral "Z," the "crossroads pose" of ancestral vigilance found in Kongo swords of justice, *mbele a lulendo*, with the upward right arm "hailing the law" it enforces, and the downward left "cooling" for peace (Thompson and Cornet 1981:62–65). In addition, many contain "found" bicycle and wagon wheels, a reminder that a commercial producer's intentions may have little to do with subsequent uses and perceptions; this holds true for the Landrum cross as well.

Could such specific statements exist today without a long history? Space does not permit a long review, but as Joseph points out (quoting a quote from Mary Twining [1977]), Sea Islanders did not regard cross marks as Christian. Practitioners living hundreds of miles apart used the same phrase, "[t]he old way that's not in the Bible," to explain a panoply of signs to Judith McWillie and me in separate interviews, but they also made clear that access to deep knowledge must be earned. Regarding wheeling cross marks (Thompson 1988:27–39, 1989) in antebellum Charleston, sailors of all races visited a famous black spiritual doctor to buy favorable winds contained in bags suspended from a whirling wheel mounted atop his house (Bennett 1946). In New Orleans, elegantly attired members of social clubs wheel ornate umbrellas as they march in funeral processions. In early-19th-century Georgia, Rev. Charles Colcott Jones (1845:9) reported that the leadership title "Watchman" appealed to black churchmen—not surprisingly, since Kongo watchmen were initiates of Lemba, which instilled the omnidirectional vision necessary to maintain balance in the community (Fu-Kiau 1985:28; Gundaker 1998:160–162). Spoken phrases echo material forms and vice versa: the spiritual doctor, Bill Jones, proclaimed, "I can keep every bit of ground I stand on because I've traveled the four corners of the world" (Hyatt 1970–1978:1,744). Bible-reading Sam Manigo, who took over as engineer on a rusting Santee steamer, translated the call to specialist excellence

into Christian terms when South Carolina planter Archibald Rutledge

asked him how ... he had managed to clean up the ... old engine. ... [He] said, "it is just this way: I got a glory." He meant that making that engine the best on the river was his glory in life; and, having a glory, he had everything. ... He did one thing better than anyone else in that whole region; and I take it that anyone who does anything better than anybody else finds his glory in that (Rutledge 1938:30).

African American proverbial utterances recapitulate this cosmographic formula for achievement: Every tub (pot) must stand on its own bottom. Follow your leading star. Keep your head to the sky. What goes around comes around. Shine but don't show off. Fu-Kiau explains that proverbs, recited at every significant event, incorporated the cosmogram's philosophy into the action. The proverb selected made clear which aspects of Kongo thought best suited the occasion, while pointing obliquely to the deep knowledge required of the event's leaders in order to choose appropriately. Is it mere coincidence, then, that Dave wrote pithy verses on his vessels, alluding to his and his community's situation? As Joseph points out, their subtlety is surely not accidental. When you must work against strong social forces, knot, tie, "code"—*kānda ya kolo*—your project (Fu-Kiau 2001:110). It is therefore also not surprising that Dave, working under scrutiny, encapsulated big truths in small marks.

Remembering all this, let me close with more questions that Joseph's meticulous analysis has made possible: Who mastered a specialty with more consummate expertise than Dave? What potter displayed greater *tukula* strength than the maker of the great jar? "Dave made this jar," he wrote. What better sign to sum up his accomplishment than the four Vs of knowledge, with or without an explicit circle? What better place to put these marks than on the *shoulders* of the pots, the location Joseph tells us Dave favored? For though this suggestion is more speculative than the others, it is worth considering that analogies between pots and the human body are widespread, and that the shoulders of ancestors—today implied by empty or clothed coat hangers, strategically placed—are on what we, the living, stand. *Simba simbi*: "Hold up that which holds you up" (Fu-Kiau 2006). Further, this location is favored for

*dikenga* variants and interlocking V motifs on Kongo *diboondo* funerary urns (Thompson and Cornet 1981), which seem absent from Edgefield discussions, but relevant for appreciating the importance of ceramic art for Dave, if he had any Kongo connection.

So, what better way for Dave to assert the stature of the ancestor he strove to become, admonish uncomprehending slaveholders who rejected even the lowest forms of *kala-V* learning, remind his fellow enslaved of their place in a cosmos greater than the circumscribed present, and affirm the promise of justice and a rebalancing of the skewed universe of slavery to all with eyes to see, than a doubled inscription, his name and a *dikenga*?

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