

Robert PIĘTEK\* (Siedlce University, Poland)

# **The Dethronement of Bernardo II in 1615. The Role of a Violence and Christianity in Ideology of Power in Kongo in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century**

<https://doi.org/10.34739/his.2021.10.10>

**Abstract:** *The article presents a spectacular occurrence of violence in Kongo during the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century related to power struggles, shown mainly on the example of Bernardo II being dethroned by Álvaro III. Executing rivals in such a striking fashion was both meant as a warning to potential rebels against taking similar actions, and as a way to emphasize the monarch's power. Christianity played also important role in Kongolese ideology of royal power, which obviously did not exclude referring to pre-Christian customs. Despite such actions, the Kongolese monarchs did not manage to gain full control of the territory during the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century or to counteract the revolts.*

**Key words:** Kingdom of Kongo; Dethronement; Violence; Christianity; Ideology of Power; Bernardo II

## **Introduction**

The Kingdom of Kongo represents an interesting example study of an African state whose political elites openly accepted Christianity as far back as the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, just after the arrival of the Portuguese to the Kongolese coast. Christianity became important element of Kongolese political culture. The use of violence was an important of manner of gaining power by Kongolese rulers. The violence was also mode of governing. Ideology of royal power connected Christianity with use of violence. Many times military successes were explained in royal propaganda through Heavenly Intervention which helped in fighting against rebels and contenders to the royal throne. The article focus on these topics. The dethronement of Bernardo II is an interesting example of internal conflict between rivals to the Kongolese throne, when spectacular use of cruel violence played important role. The struggle between Bernardo II and Álvaro III displayed features of internal tensions in Kongo political elite, especially in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The article describes events connected with Bernardo II deposition. The dethronement of Bernardo II was a consequence of power struggle after a death

---

\* ORCID iD 0000-0003-4323-0239. robert.pietek@uph.edu.pl

of Álvaro II. Lack of strict rules of succession in Kongo generated conflicts after death of a ruler. Some of the power struggles in Kongo were quite spectacular. The public character of these conflicts aimed to display the power of those who were victorious, thus acting as a deterrent to potential competitors. Attaining power through the use of violence, as in other African countries, served to confirm the strength of the contender and his ability to rule.<sup>1</sup>

Internal conflicts in Kongo had also ideological dimension. Christianity was an important element of ideology of power. Opponents were discredited as bad Christian or even heathens. Victories over them were explained as an effect of Heavenly intervention supporting pious Christians. But often the defeated rivals were treated in a way contrary to Christian ethics what could lead sometimes to tensions with clergy.

After the long reign of Álvaro II (1587-1614), the country entered a turbulent period of struggle for the Kongolese throne. There were no strict rules in place for a conflict-free transfer of power in Kongo. However, there was a traditional attachment to the ruling family, from which monarchs were consequently elected. Although certain rulers attempted designate their successors, but their plans were usually contested by others contenders. Rivalry involved the promotion of candidates to the throne by mighty chiefs, who could then potentially be manipulated in the future.<sup>2</sup>

At the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, some provincial governors gained great independence. This was due to the loss of importance of trade routes that ran through the Kongolese capital city of São Salvador. As a result, according to A. Hilton, the economic and political position of the rulers was undermined.<sup>3</sup> Such independent governors included the duke of Mbamba, a province bordering with Portuguese estates in Angola.

António da Silva, governor of Mbamba belonged to a family which had ruled in Soyo. The Mbamba province was awarded to him in early 1590s after the revolt which took place in 1590. Alvaro II granted António da Silva the title duke of Mbamba in perpetuity in 1598. On other hand at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Soyo's independence was limited. In 1612 or 1613, the province was ruled by Dom Fernando, appointed by Álvaro II. New governor of Soyo did not belong to da Silva family, what would indicate that the king of Kongo had regained closer control over Soyo. Daniel da Silva, son of the former governor Miguel, took refuge in the province of Mbamba, ruled by his relative António da Silva. Da Silvas considered themselves part of electoral body choosing Kongolese rulers. That pretension arised from the fact that governors of Soyo, members of da Silva family, played a role of kingmakers.<sup>4</sup> The position of António da Silva was based also on other grounds. He disposed adequate power to retain certain independence. He could protect Daniel da Silva against Álvaro II when he took refuge in Mbamba after death of his father. António

---

<sup>1</sup> TYMOWSKI, 2009: 74.

<sup>2</sup> CAVAZZI, 1965: II, § 77, 222-223; BONTINCK, 1972: 89; THORNTON, 1987: 414-418; TYMOWSKI, 2009: 69-75.

<sup>3</sup> HILTON, 1985: 104-109, 117-119, 129-130.

<sup>4</sup> THORNTON, 2018: 110-113; THORNTON, 2020: 90-91, 110, 124.

da Silva was able to play crucial role in Kongo politics. Álvaro II had to acknowledge the role of António da Silva, and made him an executor of his will.

### **The murder of Bernardo II**

On 9<sup>th</sup> August 1614, Álvaro II passed away, resulting in the real power in the capital being transferred for three days to António da Silva, governing in Mbamba, who soon after installed Bernardo II, the brother of the late monarch, on the throne. Shortly after he was sworn in, the new ruler took action against the governor of the Mbamba province. This resulted in an armed clash. As a result of these events, the injured Bernardo II was forced to step down from the throne. A monarch being stripped of his power by a provincial duke was presumably the first such occurrence in the history of Kongo.<sup>5</sup> The duke of Mbamba was to have given his word to the overthrown ruler that he would not kill him. Bernardo II was also promised that he would retain the status he had held before he ascended the throne. However, the dethroned monarch did not fully trust these promises and, in order to guarantee his own safety, he took refuge in St. Anthony's Church with six or seven of his faithful companions.<sup>6</sup>

After Bernardo II had been stripped of his power, António da Silva placed Álvaro III, son of Álvaro II, on the Kongolesé throne. Once he was sworn in, the new king – wanting to avoid what the Bishop Manuel Bautista Soares described as “an accomplice to the sceptre and crown” (*por não ter companheiro no setro, e c[o]roa*) – entered the temple armed, killed Bernardo II and his companions, and then cut off their heads. The headless remains were dragged into the town square and then tied to a pillory. The bodies remained there for almost three days. After some pious clergymen secretly buried the bodies, Álvaro III and the duke of the Mbamba province deemed the clergy's deed an act of hostility, not mercy. This also supposedly culminated in the killing of many of Bernardo II's supporters scattered across the country, although they had previously been promised safety and forgiveness. Bishop Manuel Bautista Soares linked these killings to the priests organising the funeral of Bernardo II and his companions.<sup>7</sup>

It is very probable that Bernardo II, after undertaking the enthronement ritual, decided that his foothold on power was strong enough for him to drop António da Silva's guardianship. He was also not completely reliant on the Mbamba duke, contrary to the information found in the bishop's account, as some other dignitaries supported him. This is supported by the fact that after Bernardo II's assassination, his allies were executed all across the country. This indicates a stark rivalry between the Kongolesé chiefs trying to gain control or at least influence over the monarch, thus naturally standing in opposition to António da Silva. It is likely that they had also previously had a notable influence on Bernardo II's coronation, despite this information being omitted in the account written by Bishop Manuel Bautista Soares. The bloody repression of the overthrown monarch's allies was intended to eliminate this threat, as well as to intimidate other potential opponents.

---

<sup>5</sup> VANSINA, 1965:107.

<sup>6</sup> BRASIO, 1955: 379.

<sup>7</sup> BRASIO, 1955: 379; SACCARDO, 1982: 140-141; SETAS, 2011: 160-161; THORNTON, 2020: 124.

From the perspective of António da Silva and Álvaro III, the dethronement of Bernardo II was not a simple act. The overthrown monarch was promised that his life would be spared. Thus, there were, at least for some time, significant reasons for the rebellious faction to not kill him. They perhaps feared the reaction of the clergy in the capital. It is also possible that the Mbamba duke's military forces were not strong enough and the reaction of Bernardo II's supporters had to be taken into account. When the latter ruler surrendered, it probably had a negative impact on the mobilization of his allies. He turned out to be someone not favoured by luck, thus was no longer a guarantor of prosperity and safety.

Leaving an overthrown ruler alive in itself poses a serious threat. He could have become a leader of a rebellion at any given time, or – alternately – dignitaries dissatisfied with António da Silva's position may have attempted to return him to power. Nonetheless, the elimination of Bernardo II was not an easy task. It required a violation of the right of asylum afforded to him by the church in which he took refuge. At that time, Catholic churches had already become places of worship in Kongo, with rulers and members of the elite buried in or around them. These structures were often located on the sites of pre-Christian cemeteries.<sup>8</sup> Breaking into a church therefore meant overcoming the fear of the wrath of God, of the Catholic saints, as well as that of the ancestral spirits buried there. Churches also housed objects of worship, attributed with the power to protect the people staying there. Furthermore, armed incursions into a church could initiate a conflict with the clergy, of which they must have been well aware.

Nonetheless, Álvaro III decided to enter the temple to kill Bernardo II and his companions. In this regard, the account of Bishop Manuel Bautista Soares contains some simplifications. It is doubtful that Álvaro III himself, even if armed, would have killed Bernardo II and his companions. It seems that he entered there with an armed escort. Somewhat confounding is the lack of information regarding the participation of the Mbamba duke. Álvaro III might perhaps have wanted to personally be involved in the execution of his predecessor, without the aid of his protector, in order to show everyone that it was he personally who had disposed of the previous ruler.<sup>9</sup> This allowed him to publicly present himself as a strong leader capable of destroying his opponents and ruling the state.

Strength was an important element of legitimizing a ruler's reign. This proved that he was capable of coming out victorious, as evidenced by the headless bodies he displayed to the public. It is not out of the question that a *sangamento*,<sup>10</sup> as proof of the new monarch's strength, was performed in front of the pillory. This would have

---

<sup>8</sup> HILTON, 1985: 95-96; SANTOS, 2016: 9.

<sup>9</sup> However, it cannot be excluded that the bishop's account omitted mentioning the Mbamba duke's participation in the events. According to J. K.Thornton António da Silva stayed in Mbamba when Bernardo II and his companions were killed. THORNTON personal communication.

<sup>10</sup> A dance, constituting a demonstration of the warriors' skills. It was performed before the initiation of warfare, and its performance was also an act of declaring war. *Sangamento* was part of the setting of such events as the enthronement of a new ruler or the greeting of envoys. The dance was also performed during church ceremonies or to greet clergy, which was to emphasize their exceptional status. During the *sangamento*, the deeds of the rulers and their ancestors were recalled. It functioned as complementary to expressions of oral tradition. CAVAZZI, 1965: I § 314, 151-153; FROMONT, 2014: 21-23; PIĘTEK, 2019: 126.

been a warning to potential rivals and rebels. Álvaro III's unpunished encroachment into the temple and the murder of his rival could have been seen as a sign that he was supported by supernatural forces, the same ones that had not provided Bernardo II with protection.

The refusal to bury Bernardo II was probably supposed to aid in creating a narrative according to which he had never truly been the ruler. Since the times of Afonso I, all Kongolese rulers had been buried in temples. Their memory was also preserved by holding special commemorative services in these churches. The lack of a proper burial also prevented any forms of pre-Christian ancestral worship, which in Kongo came to function together with Christian cult practices. All Saints' Day became one of the most important Kongolese holy days, one in which the dead were worshipped.<sup>11</sup> Such a stance was taken in order to eliminate Bernardo II from collective memory, as well as to deprive any followers of the possibility of performing rituals related to the cult of the dead. Bernardo name was not included in the list Kongolese rulers.<sup>12</sup> In Kongolese beliefs soul of person who dies through witchcraft or war also dies.<sup>13</sup> Execution and refusal of burial could be perceived as a way of total destruction. Death through war was similar to death through execution, especially when Álvaro III entered church and killed Bernardo II and his companions. It looked like a battle or a skirmish. Presumably the aim of spectacular execution was not only frighten potential contenders and rebels, but also destruct Bernardo with his soul.

However, the murder also posed a threat to one important source of power legitimisation for Kongolese monarchs. The violation of the right of asylum in a church, as well as the desecration of the corpse, probably caused indignation not only among the clergy but also at least among some of the ordinary subjects. Unfortunately, European sources do not present the local inhabitants' reaction to Álvaro III's conduct, limiting themselves to stating that it was a source of tension between the monarch and the clergy. Christian burial was supposed to have been met with the discontent of both Álvaro III and the Mbamba duke.<sup>14</sup>

The account written by Bishop Manuel Bautista Soares mentions the persecution of the overthrown monarch's allies throughout the country. The burial conducted against the monarch's will was most likely carried out not solely with the involvement of clergy. This may have raised suspicions that the supporters of the toppled ruler would not be loyal to the new monarch. The countrywide persecution of Bernardo's followers meant that there was fear of another rebellion, not only in the

---

<sup>11</sup> BONTINCK, 1964: 46; HILTON, 1985: 96-98; THORNTON, 2013: 76.

<sup>12</sup> THORNTON, 2020: 124.

<sup>13</sup> THORNTON, 2020: 46.

<sup>14</sup> According to Thornton, the rulers exercised control over the clergy residing in Kongo, and had a significant influence on the shape of religious teaching, while priests were primarily engaged in administering the sacraments. THORNTON, 1981; THORNTON, 1984; THORNTON, 2013. Without denying the influence the rulers and the local elite had on the shape of Christianity, some of the monarchs' drastic deeds may have caused resistance at least among the clergy, which – for opportunistic reasons - did not always have to mean open defiance of the ruler. The administration of the sacraments and giving services, which often also had a political dimension, ensured the priests an important position. Clerics were also an important intermediary in contacts with Europe. As a result, their opinion had to be reckoned with. They also acted as mediators in internal conflicts, which proved that some people must have developed an independent position in the country. FRANCO, 1726: 272; THORNTON, 2018: 119-120; THORNTON, 2020: 125.

capital, but also in other regions of the country.<sup>15</sup> It was peculiar feature of Kongolese internal politics, rulers were forced to fight with rebels and contenders. It is worth noting that António da Silva also tried unsuccessfully to overthrow Álvaro III, whom he himself had previously helped enthrone. The conflict between the duke of the Mbamba province and the monarch continued until the death of the former in 1620. It was then that the ruler managed to take control of the province, killing the deceased chieftain's son, who was attempting to take over his father's seat of power. Álvaro III in fact had to fight during his reign several times rebels.<sup>16</sup>

Álvaro III was well aware that the desecration of the church could threaten his position both internally and externally with regards to his relationship with the Europeans. In a letter dated to 25<sup>th</sup> October 1617, addressed to the Pope, he emphasized his close bond with Christianity and the Holy See. He also underlined his unwavering aim to expand and strengthen Christianity and to weaken the barbaric pagans.<sup>17</sup> In the latter case, he was referring to the lands neighbouring Kongo. Thus, he presented himself as a good Christian, no different than European Catholic kings, dedicated to strengthening and expanding the faith. Álvaro's appeal to Christianity was a tool of foreign policy towards European states. It was a continuation of the approach taken by his predecessors.<sup>18</sup>

In his letter to the Pope, Álvaro III omitted any mention of his involvement in the murder of Bernardo II. According to Álvaro III, Bernardo's reign had worsened the situation in the country, as well as causing disorder due to little concern for the development of Christianity. This had led Dom António da Silva to initiate an armed reaction, in order to relieve Bernardo II of his power and consequently to recognize Álvaro III as the ruler. Simultaneously, the letter emphasized that Bernardo II had assumed power after Álvaro II's death only thanks to the support of some dignitaries. Bernardo II was supposedly a bastard, the half-brother of the late monarch.<sup>19</sup> This may suggest that the overthrown ruler had no true rights to the throne. Especially under European logic. Nonetheless, in Kongo, there was hardly any difference between bastards and "legal" offspring.<sup>20</sup> Kongolese rulers, even those considered pious, had many other wives, apart from the "legal" one,<sup>21</sup> and their children had the exact same rights. Álvaro III, in mentioning his "legitimate" origin, had attempted to present himself externally as a person with rights to the throne because of his origin, unlike his predecessor; thus, he even stated that in fact he had been restored to the throne (*io fui restituito*). However, it cannot be ruled out that some of the members of the Kongolese elites, under the influence of the clergy, also began to attach importance to origin. The Kongolese monarch pointed out that his father had entrusted him to the care of the warden of the Mbamba province, who was to be the executor of Álvaro II's will. He did not mention that António da Silva himself had

---

<sup>15</sup> BRASIO, 1955: 296; HILTON, 1985: 128-130; THORNTON, 2020: 125-126.

<sup>16</sup> BRASIO, 1955: 379-380; 487; SACCARDO, 1982: I, 143; HILTON, 1985: 126; HEYWOOD THORNTON, 2007: 136; THORNTON, 2018: 115; THORNTON, 2020: 126.

<sup>17</sup> BRASIO, 1955: 289.

<sup>18</sup> BRASIO, 1955: 288-289.

<sup>19</sup> BRASIO, 1955: 289-290.

<sup>20</sup> CAVAZZI, 1965: II, §77, 222.

<sup>21</sup> The wife with whom one had entered into a sacramental relationship.

previously installed Bernardo II on the throne, only stating that his predecessor's enthronement had been possible due to the support of certain Kongolese dignitaries.

Álvaro III, in addition to emphasizing his dynastic heritage and his legal origins, also invoked the fact that his subjects gladly recognized him as a ruler. He therefore admitted that, apart from one's origins, the will of the subjects (above all, those with influence) played an important role in his ascension to power. Thus, he wanted to stress the cohesion of the Kongolese state, in which his power was undeniable, a claim that was not entirely true. The Kongolese monarch perceived any potential support expressed by the Holy See as strengthening his position as a ruler not only in relation to the Portuguese Luanda, but also to the dignitaries who opposed his authority. Álvaro III's letter also verifies that at the Kongolese court there were clerics sympathetic towards his cause, and who, on the one hand, defended Kongolese interests in Europe and, on the other, tried to strengthen church structures within Kongo itself, thus making the country somewhat independent of Portuguese patronage. These actions were not hindered by Álvaro III's conduct that was inconsistent with Christian ethics, such as violating the church's right of asylum or trying to prevent a Christian burial.

Letters to the Holy See indicate the importance of the institution of the Church, as well as that of religion itself in the internal politics of Álvaro III. Naturally, this does not exclude the significance of old beliefs and customs, as they also played an important role. During Álvaro III's reign, the Kongolese expected or example good weather to be delivered from both priests and "sorcerers" and complained if this was not forthcoming (*Pedem sol, e chuua aos prelados, aos saçerdotes, como a pedem aos seus feitiçeiros, e que[i]xaõsse de lha naõ darem, como se fora em sua maõ*).<sup>22</sup> Therefore, at that time, the institution of the Church was extremely important in Kongo for internal peace and protection against natural disasters. As a result, condemnation by clergymen could have been seen as dangerous acts.

### **The conspiracy of Pedro I**

The cruel treatment of Bernardo II was undoubtedly influenced by the case of Pedro I, who took power in 1543 and was overthrown by Diogo I (1545-1561), after which he took refuge in a church. The dethroned monarch tried to organize a rebellion through his allies.<sup>23</sup> In 1550, a conspiracy was uncovered that was being organised by the church-bound Pedro I. Relatives and supporters of the former ruler were not sure of their social status, as the new monarch did not trust them, and often rewarded his own

---

<sup>22</sup> BRASIO, 1955: 383.

<sup>23</sup> Some researchers, such as J. Vansina, A. Hilton, I. Amaral, have attributed an important role to the Portuguese in the placement of Pedro I on the throne, later overthrown by the Kongolese. Without denying their role in domestic politics, it must be said that there were also strong divisions and no uniform policy among the Portuguese, as also stressed by the same authors. Portuguese influence in this case overlapped with the divisions within the Kongolese elite itself, as can be deduced from the fact that Pedro I, who sought out safety by hiding in a church, had numerous supporters among the chiefs throughout the country. What is puzzling is the ease with which Pedro, who was in asylum in the temple, contacted his subjects. It is likely that even in the capital city itself, he must have had many allies who Diogo could not fully control. This would not have been possible if he had been supported only by the Portuguese. VANSINA, 1965: 45-47; RANGLES, 1968: 104; HILTON, 1985: 67; AMARAL, 1996: 146-147.

relatives and supporters with the positions held by the followers of the previous one.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, many of them were willing to take part in the conspiracy. In Kongo, the rivalry for the throne was not only a struggle between contenders, but also a conflict between families or branches of families and their supporters. Those victorious obtained profitable and prestigious positions. The defeated party faced the threats of death, imprisonment or poverty. As L. Heywood and J.K. Thornton rightly noted, it took Diogo I a long time to gain full control over the state. Five years after he came to power, Pedro I's followers still possessed considerable power and could have threatened Diogo I's position.<sup>25</sup> However, the fear of violating asylum was so great that even after discovering the conspiracy, no radical action was taken against Pedro I, who probably died in 1556.<sup>26</sup> This indicates a limited capacity for enacting rapid change, as well as pointing to the unique role played by temples, which is exactly the reason why the dethroned monarch took refuge in one.

Both Pedro I and Diogo I attempted to reaffirm their power by receiving backing from the Pope as well as the support of the King of Portugal. Pedro I believed that obtaining a papal bull that confirmed his return to power would help him to regain the throne.<sup>27</sup> Even at that time, Christianity was acknowledged by at least most representatives of the political elite as an important element of the ideology of power, and the Holy See as a centre that could confirm and strengthen the rule of a monarch, thus meaning it would be recognised as such by many Kongolese. Catholic churches were regarded as places endowed with power. For this reason, Pedro I sought refuge there, and his competitor did not dare to break the law of asylum, thus allowing a conspiracy to be organized.

Knowledge of Pedro I's conspiracy influenced both Bernardo II and Álvaro III. The overthrown monarch was probably hoping that he could guarantee his own safety by seeking refuge in the church. He had probably also hoped that he could try to regain power. However, Álvaro III, fearing this, took drastic steps.

### **The chastisement of the rebel Gregorio**

Similar public killings of rivals in Kongo were also noted later in history. One example is the case of Dom Gregorio. In 1637, during the reign of Álvaro VI (1636-1641), Dom Gregorio, duke of the Mbata province, rebelled against Álvaro VI and marched for São Salvador.<sup>28</sup> The Jesuit Father Miguel Afonso tried to prevent this battle. He went to Gregorio's camp. Although the rebel received him with respect, the mission ended in failure.<sup>29</sup> The ruler of Kongo, having decided that there was no

---

<sup>24</sup> SACCARDO, 1982: I, 46; THORNTON HEYWOOD, 2009: 2-7; THORNTON, 2020: 58-62.

<sup>25</sup> THORNTON HEYWOOD, 2009: 5

<sup>26</sup> SACCARDO, 1982: I, 46.

<sup>27</sup> SACCARDO, 1982: I, 46; AMARAL, 1996: 146-147; THORNTON HEYWOOD, 2009: 6, 8, 28-29.

<sup>28</sup> Gregorio, just like António da Silva before him, tried to place rulers dependent on him on the throne. Supposedly, this included Álvaro V, overthrown and killed by Álvaro VI on 14<sup>th</sup> August 1636. FRANCO, 1726: 268; THORNTON, 2018: 119-120.

<sup>29</sup> The conflict between Álvaro VI and Gregorio shows the role of the European clergy, in this case the Jesuits, in attempts to maintain internal peace in Kongo. Although in the case described in Antonio Franco's text, he is sympathetic to Álvaro VI's case, who was portrayed as a pious figure, Gregorio – his opponent – is shown as a figure who also respects the clergy. Otherwise, Father Miguel Afonso would not



chance Gregorio would surrender voluntarily, headed out to meet the enemy. The rebel leader and his troops supposedly panicked and took flight, thus leading to Gregorio being captured. In the presence of the ruler, the rebel leader was flogged, his arms and legs were cut off, as was his head. The dismembered body was roasted on a fire and then scattered for the dogs to eat.<sup>30</sup>

Accounts depict Álvaro VI as a Christian monarch marching towards his enemy under unfurled banners, accompanied by the sound of trumpets.<sup>31</sup> Before the battle, the ruler made a confession to the Jesuit Father Miguel, and after the victory he entered the capital and headed for the Jesuit college. From there, the canons escorted him under a canopy to the largest church in the city and then to the palace. Álvaro VI ordered the image of the Virgin Mary to be carried under the canopy, the same one he had taken with him to the military camp. The monarch himself, with a thurible in his hand and wearing a surplice (*superpelliceo sumpto*), proceeded before the image of the Virgin Mary, thanking her thus for overcoming his enemies.<sup>32</sup>

The victorious ruler thus presented himself as someone who had the support of supernatural forces. His role in the procession was privileged. Álvaro VI's surplice was presumably the white garb that catechists wore in Kongo, and whose images were immortalized in a later period in illustrations found in the manuscripts of Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi and Bernardino d'Asti.<sup>33</sup> This emphasis on the special role of the monarch was probably intended to indicate his unique relationship with God, thanks to whom he had achieved victory. It was also supposed to convince his subjects that the rule of Álvaro VI was supported by God. The ceremonial procession after the victory over the rebel was to indicate further guardianship and to convince his subjects as to this fact.

Franco emphasises Álvaro VI's piety, and it is therefore not improbable that the description omitted gestures and objects related to indigenous beliefs used and applied by Álvaro VI. The monarch's rival, as instructed by a sorcerer, ordered each of his warriors to fasten a poisoned antelope horn to their belts. This was done in order to ensure his victory. When Álvaro VI found out about it, he in turn ordered his warriors to hang crosses from their belts.<sup>34</sup>

The story of Álvaro VI's victory, in Franco's intention, was to show that God supports the pious and punishes those who return to pagan practices. According to Franco, even at the very beginning of the battle, the rebels were taken over by fear and took flight.<sup>35</sup> Thus, the author suggests that any return to native practices was met with

---

have undertaken a peace mission. The Jesuit was received with respect by Gregorio, and the failure of his mission was due to the lack of the chieftain's trust in the Kongolese ruler. FRANCO, 1726: 272.

<sup>30</sup> FRANCO, 1726: 272-273; THORNTON, 2018: 119-120.

<sup>31</sup> FRANCO, 1726: 273.

<sup>32</sup> FRANCO, 1726: 273.

<sup>33</sup> CARLI, GUATTINI, 2006: 230-247; CAVAZZI, 2014: 60-64.

<sup>34</sup> FRANCO, 1726: 273.

<sup>35</sup> The author of the account depicts Álvaro VI following the same pattern as in the case of Afonso I, who owed his victory over his pagan brother to the Heavens. On St. James Day, Afonso I achieved victory over his pagan brother through a miraculous intervention. This became a holiday in Kongo, during which not only this victory was commemorated, but also the monarch was paid homage and presented with tributes, while the ruler distributed gifts. It was also then that the ruler appointed and dismissed the chiefs. All major Kongolese heads of state came to the capital at that time with their entourage. BRASIO, 1955:

heavenly retribution, filling the rebels with fear. The pious Álvaro VI, on the other hand, who was respectful of the Jesuits, won.

However, Franco's essentially didactic description distorts the course of events. Gregorio, whose warriors had adorned themselves with magical objects (which were in addition poisoned) before the battle, was also respectful of the Jesuits. It is not inconceivable that his warriors wore Christian relics alongside local amulets. Similarly, native objects of cult could have been prevalent among Álvaro VI's forces, but could have been omitted in Franco's account. The warriors would have attempted to ensure their own safety and victory by all means, both based on domestic and European beliefs.

By publicly tormenting and executing a rebel, Álvaro VI displayed his strength and ability to punish his opponents, which was to be a warning to those who stood against him, while by participating in religious ceremonies, he aimed to cement his bond with God and to underline the heavenly support that he had received. Both events may well have occurred in succession within a short period of time. Celebrations to honour a victory included references to Christianity and to acts of violence.

Franco's account of the massacre of Dom Gregorio highlights Álvaro VI's piety, but does not offer any explanation as to the refusal to bury the executed Christian rebel and or the reason why his remains were thrown to the dogs to be eaten. It can be assumed that in the opinion of the account's author, the excuse for such treatment of Dom Gregorio was his use of the assistance offered by sorcerers to ensure victory, while Álvaro VI ordered his warriors to wear crosses in order to defeat the enemy.

Álvaro VI was not chosen by electors, but declared himself the King, although he was confirmed as a ruler by all (*omnes Ordines Regni*) who were assembled in São Salvador.<sup>36</sup> Presence of Álvaro's warriors had essential impact on his election by acclamation. In such circumstances victories over rebels were explained by heavenly intervention. It confirmed right to rule in this way justifying use of violence and public cruel acts towards contenders. Supernatural interventions and miraculous supports became more important elements legitimising rights to rule than decision of electors.

## Conclusion

During the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Kongolese rulers had to counter several revolts, sometimes losing their power and lives in the process, as was the case with Bernardo II. Taking the lives of their rivals in spectacular ways both served as a warning to potential rebels not to undertake similar actions and as a way of emphasizing the monarch's might, while referring to Christian elements, which at the same time obviously did not exclude the use of pre-Christian customs. Probably one of the important goals of spectacular execution was also destruction of rebels' and contenders' souls. Thus dangers from their part, also from Other World would be eliminated. Despite such actions, the Kongolese monarchs did not manage to gain full control of the territory in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and quell these revolts.

---

418; BRASIO, 1960: 17; BAL, 1963: 90-95; CAVAZZI, 1965: II, § 101, 240; BONTINCK 1972: 111; FROMONT 2014: 34-35.

<sup>36</sup> FRANCO, 1726: 269; THORNTON, 2020: 160.

Conflicts linked to the throne also derived from the fact that Kongolese society, even after the adoption of Christianity, remained polygamous, and no rules for a conflict-free inheritance of the throne were developed in the state, although some rulers tried to designate successors, usually their sons. As a result, similarly as in many pre-colonial African states, there was a power struggle after each monarch's death, or at other times any reign was contested by others who believed they had stronger claims to power. The ambitions of the contenders were supported by various dignitaries who hoped to gain privileged positions and greater influence on how the state was governed.<sup>37</sup>

Certain rulers attempted to designate their successors before death, usually sons. In this way they tried to prevent struggles between pretenders, and secure the throne for successor selected by them. Such attempts could create tensions and struggles between designated successors and other pretenders after the death of ruler. It was one of characteristic feature of Kongolese internal politics. Álvaro I designated his son Álvaro, reigning as Álvaro II, as his successor. Despite of it the authority of new ruler was not secure. During his reign he had to fight with contenders, members of royal dynasty: half brother and also descendants of earlier kings. Wherefore Álvaro II nominated António da Silva as a executor of his will, when he designated one of his sons as a successor. But he had tried to find more important assurance that good will of his dignitaries. Earlier Álvaro II had negotiated with the Pope to insure succession of the heir of his choice, but unfortunately for him the designated successor died in 1610.<sup>38</sup>

The support from Holy See was perceived as important factor which could ensure stability of rule. Earlier Diogo I and Pedro I had endeavoured to reaffirm their power by receiving backing from the Pope. Christianity was acknowledged by at least most of representatives of the political elite as an important element of the ideology of power, and a factor strengthening position of the ruler. Wherefore Kongolese kings tried to obtain control over Catholic clergy. Álvaro II, and Álvaro III attempted to establish independent See in which they would have a right to nominate Church dignitaries. Álvaro III tried to make use of Jesuits to form ecclesiastical structure more depended on him. In 1619 Álvaro III had requested Holy See for sending Capuchins missionaries. Álvaro III planned thanks to missionaries create church structures independent from a bishop residing in Luanda, but they arrived only in 1645 during the reign of Garcia II.<sup>39</sup>

Victories, including those over rebels and rivals to the throne, were an important part of Kongolese tradition. They were not only commemorated in stories and performances such as the *sangamento*, but were also perpetuated by the erection of churches and placement of crosses. Thus, successes were associated with Christian worship both through cult objects and the services commemorating these events. This custom was an important and lasting influence on shaping the ideology of power. It referred to the victory of Afonso I (1509-1542) over his brother, a "heathen", commemorated by the erection of a cross and churches, thus maintaining the memory

---

<sup>37</sup> CAVAZZI, 1965, II, §77, 222-223; TYMOWSKI, 2009: 69-75; FROMONT, 2014: 25.

<sup>38</sup> THORNTON, 2020: 90, 98, 110, 124.

<sup>39</sup> BONTINCK, 1972: XI-XIII; THORNTON, 2020: 166-167.

of this event for future generations.<sup>40</sup> Álvaro II also founded a church in memory of the victory over his brother.<sup>41</sup> In turn, Álvaro VI (1636-1641), after defeating the rebels, ordered the construction of a church called Our Lady of Victory.<sup>42</sup> These churches not only reminded of victories, but played an important role as places which were visual marks of Heavenly support for victors. They were also probably regarded as a supernatural assistance for the rulers who were protected by them against enemies.

Álvaro III's conduct referred to the founding myth that legitimized the reign of the descendants of Afonso I, the second Christian ruler of Kongo, who took power after defeating and killing his brother. The victory was attributed to the intervention of supernatural forces, which caused panic among the army forces of his opponent, Afonso I.<sup>43</sup> Originating from Afonso I became necessary condition for one ascending to the throne. All future rulers also added the name Afonso to theirs.<sup>44</sup> The support of supernatural forces (the Christian God) justified Afonso I and his successors' right to rule, who also sometimes invoked miraculous interventions to ensure their victory. This was the case with Álvaro VI, who defeated Dom Gregorio. Álvaro III, in order to dethrone Bernardo II, most likely also invoked Christian practices, while at the same time violating the principles of the Church's teachings, such as the right of asylum. Álvaro III, by killing Bernardo II in the temple, also justified his actions by the fact that his opponent was not a good Christian. The description of Álvaro III's seizure of power is very laconic. However, it can be assumed with a high degree of probability that the ruler violated the right of asylum of the church by desecrating the corpses of Bernardo II and his companions, while at the same time referring to Christian symbols. His warriors also most likely performed *sangamento*, during which they used Christian symbols. Refusal to burial and desecrating corpses of rebels and rivals were means of discouraging potential contenders. They became tools of governing. They were also practised later by Álvaro VI and also António I (1660-1665) who killed his brother Afonso during the reign of Garcia II. Afonso had been designated by Garcia II as his successor but in 1659 or 1660 fell ill and accused Afonso of poisoning. The king ordered António to kill his brother, and choose him as his successor.<sup>45</sup>

Álvaro III, similarly to other rulers, attempted to use the Church and Christianity in order to strengthen his position and counteract centrifugal tendencies. However, this was not sufficient to maintain internal peace in the country. The ascension to the throne or maintaining of power was sometimes inconsistent with the teachings of the Church, thus leading to tensions between rulers and certain clergymen. Consequently, it was necessary to resort to a spectacular use of force and cruelty, as was the case in other non-Christianized African countries.

However, victories over rebels were explained by Heavenly intervention. It confirmed right to rule and justified using violence and public cruel acts towards contenders. Supernatural interventions and miraculous supports became more important elements legitimising rights to rule than decision of electors, and these

---

<sup>40</sup> BALL, 1963: 92-98; THORNTON, 1981:62-63; GRAY, 1999: 140.

<sup>41</sup> THORNTON, 2020: 90.

<sup>42</sup> BRASIO, 1960: 443; BONTINCK, 1964: 46.

<sup>43</sup> BALL, 1963: 90-95; CAVAZZI, 1965, II, § 101, 240; BONTINCK, 1972: 111; FROMONT, 2014: 34-35

<sup>44</sup> CAVAZZI, 1965: II, § 77, 222; BONTINCK, 1972: 120.

<sup>45</sup> CAVAZZI, 1965: II, § 121-123, 247-248; SACCARDO, 1982: I, 538-539; THORNTON, 2020: 176.

interventions justified using violence. In some cases cruel acts were not totally condemned by clergy. Despite such actions, the Kongolese monarchs did not manage to gain full control of the territory during the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century or to counteract the revolts.

## Bibliography

### Sources

- BAL, W. ed. (1963) *Description du royaume de Congo et des contrées environantes par Filippo Pigafetta et Duarte Lopez (1591)*, Louvain and Paris: Éditions Nauwelaerts.
- BRÁSIO, A. ed. (1955) *Monumenta missionaria africana: África ocidental. Vol. 6, (1611-1621)*, coligida e anotada pelo António Brásio. Lisboa: República Portuguesa Ministério do Ultramar.
- BRÁSIO, A. ed. (1960) *Monumenta missionaria africana: África ocidental. Vol. 8, (1631-1642)* coligida e anotada pelo António Brásio. Lisboa: República Portuguesa Ministério do Ultramar.
- BONTINCK, F. ed. (1964) *Brève relation de la fondation de la mission des frères mineurs capucins du séraphique père Saint François au royaume de Congo, et des particularités, coutumes et façons de vivre des habitants de ce royaume écrite et dédiée aux éminentissimes seigneurs cardinaux de la Sacrée Congrégation de la Propagation de la foi par le père Jean-François de Rome (1648)*. Louvain and Paris: Éditions Nauwelaerts.
- BONTINCK, F. ed. (1972) *Histoire du royaume du Congo (c.1624). Traduction annotée du Ms. 8080 de la Bibliothèque nationale de Lisbonne par François Bontinck, c.i.c.m. en collaboration avec J. Castro Segovia*, in *Etudes d'histoire africaine*”, 4, Louvain and Paris: Éditions Nauwelaerts.
- CARLI, D., GUATTINI, M. (2006) *La mission au Kongo des pères Michelangelo et Dionigi Carli (1668)*. Paris: Chandeigne.
- CAVAZZI, J. A. (1965) *Descrição histórica dos três reinos do Congo, Matamba e Angola*. Tradução, notas e índices pelo P.Graciano Maria de Leguzzano, O.M.Cap. Lisboa: Junta de Investigações do Ultramar.
- CAVAZZI, A. (2014) *Njinga, reine d'Angola 1582-1663. La relation d'Antonio Cavazzi (1687)*. Paris: Chandeigne.
- FRANCO, A. (1726) *Synopsis annalium Societatis Jesu in Lusitania ab anno 1540. usque ad annum 1725. Authore R. P. Antonio Franco Societatis ejusdem sacerdote*. Augsburg: Augustae Vindelicorum: Sumptibus P.M. et J. Veith.
- JADIN, L. ed. (1968) *Relation sur le Congo et l'Angola tirées des archives de la Compagnie de Jésus, 1621-1631*, in *Bulletin de l'Institut Historique Belge de Rome*, XXXIX, Bruxelles and Rome, 333-440.

### Literature

- AMARAL, I. DO. (1996) *O reino do Congo, os Mbundu (ou Ambundos), o reino dos „Ngola” (ou de Angola) e a presença portuguesa, de finais do século XV a meados do século XVI*. Lisboa: Ministério da Ciência e da Tecnologia, Instituto de Investigação Tropical.
- FROMONT, C. (2014) *The Art of Conversion. Christian Visual Culture in the Kingdom of Kongo*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- GRAY, R. (1999) ‘A Kongo Princess, the Kongo Ambassadors and the Papacy’, *Journal of Religion in Africa* 29.2: 140-154. doi.org/10.2307/1581869
- HEYWOOD, L M., THORNTON, J. K. (2007) *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585-1660*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- HILTON, A. (1985) *The Kingdom of Kongo*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- PIĘTEK, R. (2019) 'Christianity and the formation of the ideology of power in Soyo in the 17th century', *Studies in African Languages and Cultures* 53: 117-133. doi.org/10.32690/SALC53.6
- RANDLES, W.G.L. (1968) *L'ancien royaume du Congo des origines à la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*. Paris: Mouton.
- SACCARDO, G. (1982) *Congo e Angola con la storia dell'antica missione dei cappuccini*, Venezia: Curia Provinciale dei Cappuccini Venezia-Mestre.
- SANTOS, V. S. (2016) 'Uma política de ossos: as relíquias católicas na África e o culto aos mortos (1564-1665)', *Revista Latino-Americana de Estudos Avançados* 1(1): 138-157.
- SETAS, A. (2011) *História do reino do Kongo*, Luanda: Mayamba.
- THORNTON, J. K. (1981) 'Early Kongo – Portuguese Relations: A New Interpretation'. *History in Africa* 8: 183-204. doi.org/10.2307/3171515
- THORNTON, J. K. (1984) 'The Development of an African Catholic Church in the Kingdom of Kongo, 1491-1750', *Journal of African History* 25: 147-167. doi.org/10.1017/S0021853700022830
- THORNTON, J. K. (1987) 'The Correspondence of the Kongo Kings, 1614-35. Problems of Internal Written Evidence on a Central African Kingdom', *Paideuma* 33: 407-421.
- THORNTON, J. K. (2013) 'Afro-Christian Syncretism in the Kingdom of Kongo', *Journal of African History* 54(1): 53-77. doi.org/10.1017/S0021853713000224
- THORNTON, J. K., HEYWOOD, L. M. (2009) 'The treason of Dom Pedro Nkanga a Mvemba against Dom Diogo, King of Kongo, 1550', in *Afro-Latino voices: narratives from the early modern Ibero-Atlantic world, 1550-1812*. eds. K. J. MCKNIGHT, L. GAROFALO, Indianapolis: Hackett, 2-29.
- THORNTON, J. K. (2018) 'Soyo and Kongo: The Undoing of the Kingdom's Centralization', in *The Kingdom of Kongo. The Origins, Dynamics and Cosmopolitan Culture of an African Polity*, eds. K. BOSTOEN, I. BRINKMAN. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 103-122.
- THORNTON, J. K. (2020) *A History of West Central Africa to 1850*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- TYMOWSKI, M. (2009) *The Origins and Structures of Political Institutions in Pre-colonial Black Africa: Dynastic Monarchy, Taxes and Tributes, War and Slavery, Kinship and Territory*. New York: Edwin Mellen Press.
- VANSINA, J. (1965) *Les anciens royaumes de la savane*, Léopoldville: Institut de recherches économiques et sociales.

**To cite this article:** Piętek, R. (2021). The Dethronement of Bernardo II in 1615. The Role of a Violence and Christianity in Ideology of Power in Kongo in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. *Historia i Świat* 10, 239-252, DOI: 10.34739/his.2021.10.10



© 2021 The Author(s). This open access article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) 4.0 license.