

Bakongo Afterlife and Cosmological Direction: Translation of African Culture into North Florida Cemeteries

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Cemeteries are a rich example of cultural and ethnic diversity. Burial practices tend to be vivid manifestations of cultural homeostasis. Since such customs are slow to change, one can witness today, in the remnants of the grave, factors of an ethnic group's ancient material culture.¹ Remnants of an African belief in an afterlife can be deciphered through late nineteenth and early twentieth-century African-American cemeteries. African customs and religions, introduced to the Americas through the transatlantic slave trade, underwent a cultural synthesis, emerging in a contemporary African-American manifestation of a Christianized cult of the dead. This rich and diverse trend is readily apparent in the cemeteries of the north Florida panhandle.

Of specific interest here is the religion and history of the Bakongo people.² Traditional Kongo geography includes parts of the contemporary countries of Bas-Zaïre, Cabinda, Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon and northern Angola. Many groups in this region "share key cultural and religious concepts with the Bakongo and also suffered, with them, the ordeals of the transatlantic slave trade."³ Large numbers of Bakongo people entered Georgia and north Florida in the nineteenth century.

Anthropologists have long acknowledged the impact of the Kongo people on the African-American population of the southeast United States especially in the influence on Black English, visual traditions and burial customs.⁴ These funerary practices can be witnessed in the bordering of individual graves; the scraping of graves so that the soil above the deceased remains grassless; the application of cookware, glass and other domestic objects, particularly white ones, to the grave; the ornamentation of graves with shells; and the specific placement of trees and vegetation. I propose that this influence can be further identified in the cemeteries of Black Americans in north Florida through "T" shaped headstones particular to Black cemeteries in the 1920s through the 1950s.

I suggest that, while thoroughly regarded today as decorative and Christian motifs, these elements were directly inspired by the Kongo cosmogram of the *Four Moments of the Sun*, an extraordinarily powerful and prevalent symbol in Bakongo cosmological theory and mortuary ritual.

All of these customs, just briefly mentioned, have a particular purpose and reflect directly their African predecessors. If the deceased is displeased with the interment, or is disturbed, the spirit can return to the land of the living with the capacity to do good or evil. Thus the spirit must be pacified and directed into the world of the dead. African-American burial traditions reflect the acknowledgment that the ancestral spirit is present at the grave. This illusive presence has been coined the "Flash of the Spirit" by scholar Robert Farris Thompson who, along with John Michael Vlach, is thoroughly published on these subjects.

The importance placed on delineating the boundary or border of a grave may be explained by Kongo ritual beliefs surrounding sacred herbal medicines. Healers, or perhaps more exactly "ritual experts," employed charms, divination, powerful spirits or herbal recipes to affect the world. One of the most powerful ingredients used by the *banganga mbuki*, or herbal healers, was grave dirt known as *goofer* or *goofer-dust*. The practices of African herbalists and their ingredients, including *goofer*, were transferred to African-American culture.⁵ The mortuary practices of the Bakongo people, even today, specifically suggest a "general and unconscious idea of a sacred space as bounded and oriented."⁶ Hence the Bakongo today, like African Americans, face their deceased toward the east. They are literally oriented and bounded by the grave borders.

The emphasis given to borders and grave soil is evidenced in the consistent use of cement slabs, fencing and vegetation. The Kongo and early African-American graves were often

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¹ Sharyn Thompson, *Florida's Historic Cemeteries: A Preservation Handbook* (Tallahassee: Historic Tallahassee Preservation Board and Florida Department of State, 1987) 5.

² Anthropologists refer to this broad group by spelling the title with a "K" so as to differentiate the ethnic population from the contemporary political entities designated as Congo with a "C."

³ Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984) 103.

⁴ Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* 104. See also Mary A. Twining and Keith E. Baird, eds., *Sea Island Roots: African Presence in the Carolinas and Georgia* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1991).

⁵ Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983) 105-7.

⁶ Wyatt MacGaffey, *Custom and Government in the Lower Congo* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1970) 151.

created as scraped graves; grass was not allowed to cover the area of earth directly above the body. This practice created a delineation around the grave. Today the cement slab is a unique and consistent part of African-American cemeteries harkening back to the tradition of the grassless, scraped grave. Anthropologists have witnessed contemporary rituals in lower Congo where children were required to go into a cemetery before the burial and clear the area of grass.⁷ Mr. Chester Hayes of Tallahassee, Florida, remembers as a child having to clear the grass from his grandmother's grave and keep the dirt mounded until his family could afford to have a cement slab placed there.⁸

Much like votive offerings, various household goods were left for the deceased person's spirit at the grave. Thompson suggests that the grave, with its *goofer-dust*, and grave goods are a "charm for the persistence of the spirit."⁹ African-American funerary traditions are constant reminders of Thompson's concept the "Flash of the Spirit." He explains that while the grave is the container, the spirit itself is a spark. The grave goods left on top of the burial were actually believed to contain a bit of this spark as is expressed in the point of view of a Bakongo woman.

Plates and cups and drinking-glasses are frequently selected for placement on the surface of a tomb. It is believed that the last strength of a dead person is still present within that sort of object.... My own mother died while I was away. When I return to my village, and visit her grave, I shall touch her plate and cup. After I touch them, later I will dream. . . according to the way my mother wanted. By touching these objects automatically I comprehend the Mambu (affaires, matters) my mother was willing to transmit to me.¹⁰

The perception of the grave as a contact point with the spark of the spirit world is thus heightened.

Leaving the last objects the dead ever touched in life was believed to complete the spirit in Africa and to pacify the spirit in African America. A Black couple interviewed in Georgia noted:

I don't guess you be bothered much by the spirits if you give 'em a good funeral and put the things what belong to 'em on top of the grave... You puts all the things what they use last like the dishes and the medicine bottle. The spirits need theses same as the

man. Then the spirit rest and don't wander about.¹¹

Containers of varying types are the most popular grave good placed on African-American plots. Usually these containers are purposefully broken so that they retain their shape but are no longer useable. A woman in Georgia suggested that this was done in order to break the chain of death. If the offerings are not broken then other family members will quickly follow the deceased into the spirit world.¹² In north Florida today one can find a variety of cook ware, ceramic cups, mason jars, enameled-metal bowls, glasses, depression glass, and milk glass wares scattered about African-American cemeteries (Figure 1).

The prevalence of glass ware, especially of white ware, is again indicative of the "Flash of the Spirit." Thompson explains that the realm of the spirits is believed by some Kongo to be "the white realm." In order to release or honor spirit powers a white chicken was often sacrificed on the grave. Small white or glass chickens are placed on Kongo inspired graves in both Africa and the Americas. The closest visual similarity I have found to this practice is the prevalence of statues of white swans as planters; of course, one must also take into consideration the commercial designs available. There may be no connection other than the coincidence of design in floral equipment. Nevertheless, the gleaming whiteness of milk glass, the sparkle of broken edges of clear glass in the sun, the bleached presence of bright white shells, white washed markers, and very popular white landscaping gravel marking the scraped grave certainly remind the visitor of the spark of the ever-present spirit. African-American cemeteries are also often marked by the use of foil that catches the sun creating the sharp glimmer of shining white light. Some communities in Kongo and Haiti have replaced the use of white shells with white tile that is highly reflective of light, also associated with water.¹³ In order to analyze the persistent placement of sea shells and the use of bathroom tile, both associated with water, the Kongo-African perception of the world must be considered.

Bakongo cosmological philosophy goes far in explaining their spiritual beliefs as they relate to these local cemeteries.

The N'Kongo [i.e. an inhabitant of the capital of Kongo] thought of the earth as a mountain over a body of water which is the land of the dead, called Mpemba. In Mpemba the sun rises and sets just as it does in the land of the living . . . the water is both a passage and a great barrier. The world, in Kongo

⁷ MacGaffey, *Custom and Government in the Lower Congo* 148-172.

⁸ Chester Hayes, Oral Communication, Wednesday, April 7, 1999.

⁹ Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* 132.

¹⁰ Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* 134.

¹¹ Georgia Writers' Project, *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among Georgia Coastal Negroes* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1940) 136. Cited in John Michael Vlach, *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts* (Cleveland: The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1978) 139-140.

¹² Vlach, *The Afro-American Tradition in the Decorative Arts* 141.

¹³ Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* 137-138.

thought, is like two mountains opposed at their bases and separated by the ocean.

At the rising and setting of the sun the living and the dead exchange day and night. The setting of the sun signifies man's death and its rising, his rebirth, or the continuity of his life. Bakongo believe and hold it true that man's life has no end, that it constitutes a cycle, and death is merely a transition in the process of change.¹⁴

The coiled shape of the conch shell, seen over and over again in north Florida cemeteries (Figure 2), symbolized to the Kongo people the daily passage the sun makes from the world of the living into the world of the dead.¹⁵ But, similarly, the shell represents the circular passage the spirit makes as it is reborn into the corporeal world crossing into the next via death, mysteriously passing through the primordial ocean, only to be reborn again. Placed on the grave the spiraled shell can viewed as a cosmic map giving directions to the deceased.¹⁶ The shell was "believed to enclose the soul's immortal presence."¹⁷ There are many examples of the spiraled conch shell resting on African-American graves in the Tallahassee area today. The basic association of the shell with water, the barrier between this world and the next, suggests a sacred association with many shells indigenous to North Florida. I have found examples of oyster, scallop and muscle shells on graves in this area. There is archaeological evidence that such plentiful shells were used to outline the graves of African-Americans creating a very important boundary or barrier between the grave and the corporeal world.

In addition to the shell and cement slabs one can witness in Black cemeteries today there were other ways of emphasizing the borders of the grave. Burials are enclosed by modern fences of pig wire, landscape fencing, cement block walls, ornamental stone and vegetation. Plants are often used to delineate the sacred grave with its powerful goofer-dust from the outside corporeal world. However, plants not only separate the sacred from the temporal but also help to keep the ancestor at rest in the spirit world. Sweet smells entice the spirit to stay in the ground where it belongs.¹⁸ There are countless examples of daffodils, paper whites, gardenias, azaleas and a variety of evergreens planted around African-American graves (Figure 3). Trees at the grave site are also important

indicators of the spirit. They join the corporeal world with the spirit world below with their roots. Kongo elders have explained in reference to planting trees on burial sites, "This tree is a sign of spirit, on its way to the other world."¹⁹ Like the spiral shell the tree in its entirety is a map for the spirit in attaining its final destination. Thus one can see that the grave in African-American culture is not merely the final resting place for the earthly remains but a place where the corporeal world meets and interacts with the spiritual world. Great harm or good can emerge from the interaction at this crossroads. The geographic location of the grave is akin more to an altar than a simple hole in the ground.

The Bakongo cosmological theory has a powerful and prevalent visual manifestation known as the Kongo cosmogram or *The Four Moments of the Sun*, as is explained by Robert Farris Thompson and Joseph Cornet in their book by this title. In Kongo-Africa the cosmogram, in its many forms, is directly associated with mortuary rites and ritual. Depictions there of the cosmogram are often found on funerary sculpture, urns, pottery, tombs or other monuments associated with death.²⁰ In its most basic form the cosmogram is a Greek cross. It represents the division of the earthly realm from the spiritual realm at a sacred point, "on the ground of the dead and under all-seeing God."²¹ This cross is known as the Kongo *yowa*. Not to be confused with the cross of Jesus, the Kongo *yowa* is a map of a circular cosmology that suggests the motion of souls within the universe, much like the conch shell. The horizontal line marks the water boundary between *ntoto* (earth) and *mpemba* (which translates as white clay or the mountain of the dead). Often the arms of this equal armed cross are capped with circles symbolizing the sun and drawn with arrows indicating rotation of both and of souls circulating from the corporeal realm, into the underworld only to return again (Figure 4). This Kongo poem explains:

Man turns in the path,
He merely turns in the path;
The priests, the same.²²

According to Thompson, "a fork in the road (or even a forked branch) can allude to this crucial important symbol of passage and communication between worlds. The 'turn in the path,' i.e., the crossroads, remains an indelible concept in the Kongo-Atlantic world, as the point of intersection between the ancestors and the living."²³ The northern stage or earthly

¹⁴ John M. Janzen and Wyatt MacGaffey, *An Anthology of Kongo Religion: Primary Texts from Lower Zaire* (Lawrence: U of Kansas P, 1974) 34. Cited Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* 106.

¹⁵ Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* 106. Thompson also notes the pipe, associated with water, is considered a crossroads that unites the two worlds when placed in the ground in a cemetery. Notice the prominent white pipe in Figure 1.

¹⁶ Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* 132.

¹⁷ Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* 135.

¹⁸ Lecture of Dr. John Rafor at The African American Conference, February 1999, Tallahassee, Florida.

¹⁹ Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* 139.

²⁰ Robert Farris Thompson and Joseph Cornet, *The Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1981) 28.

²¹ Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* 108.

²² Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* 109.

²³ Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* 109.

high noon, the top half of the cosmogram, indicates this world and maleness. The southern section or high noon in the spirit world, the bottom part of the cosmogram (that is by itself “T” shaped), indicates femaleness and “the highest point of a person’s otherworldly strength.”²⁴ Indeed in a metaphorical sense a person has four corners, the soul being a metaphorical sun.²⁵ The bottom half of the cosmogram is an important and *complete* enough entity in Kongo culture to merit its own name, *kalunga*, “referring, literally, to the world of the dead as complete (*lunga*) within itself and to the wholeness that comes to a person who understands the ways and powers of both worlds.”²⁶ Thus it is not altogether surprising that the bottom half of the cosmogram—as represented as the “T”—is a complete symbol in and of itself (Figure 5).

This “T” shape, or the bottom half of the cosmogram can be seen marking graves in local African-American cemeteries in the Tallahassee area in the form of cement headstones and bathroom tile inset in headstones (Figures 6-7). While this image is most probably the result of cross-culturalization and is now recognized as a Christian cross, I suspect that originally this image was a product of Bakongo culture. While a few of the markers are engraved with information of the deceased, others no longer have a strong indication of writing. There is no suggestion of the typical incised inscription. Many show evidence that they were white washed so that names and dates may simply have worn away. I have located eleven in all.

When I asked the cemetery patrons and caretakers what the “T” symbolized their answers were consistently an acknowledgment that that was just a “plain old cross,” “just shaped like a ‘T’.” All of these individuals went on to explain that before African Americans had access to commercial headstones all of the markers were homemade. The fact that the images were not commercially made was given as an explanation for their difference in appearance from a Latin cross. Thus there is an acknowledgment that images and customs changed when people began purchasing headstones. When I explained my hypothesis, as follows, these individuals were very receptive and interested but still did not recognize the African cosmogram in conjunction with their cemeteries.²⁷

Nevertheless, when looking to actual Kongo burial practice the “T” symbol surfaces as a grave marker. A drawing of a Kongo chieftain’s grave after E.J. Glave who traveled through Zaire in 1884 not only indicates the similarities in general burial ritual, as discussed above, between Africa and the Americas (notice the cook ware, glassware, scraped grave and prominent border) but he also shows the “T” at the head of the grave

(Figure 8).²⁸ The “T” shape can also be seen on the left side of a Kongo *niombo* of 1926, a tremendous mannequin of red cloths that wrapped the corpse for procession and burial (Figure 9). The size and elaborateness of the display corresponded to the wealth and power of the deceased. I suggest that the north Florida “T” may be an adaptation of the Kongo cosmogram as it was used in Africa in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

The Bakongo believe that the drawing of this sign creates a point at which divine power is directed.²⁹ The words *yimbila ye sona* translate as “singing and drawing” a point. Thus while a point was indicated on the ground, voices called through song for God’s power to act on that point. Song and music remain a powerful part of African-American Protestant church celebrations and mortuary services. Mrs. Linn Ann J. Griffin of Strong and Jones Funeral Home explained that African-Americans are particularly emotional at mortuary services and community involvement at funerals and viewings is an expected part of the ritual. When I asked why, she responded that it was a matter of tradition.³⁰ Perhaps this is an Africanism that survives from the times when Bakongo voices called to God to direct the spirit. The “T” headstone marks the desired point for God’s power to descend and act, while the voices of mourners call for divine action. This notion is a powerful concept within Christian doctrine. The grave, in hallowed ground, is the locale where Christ in the Second Coming will resurrect the faithful. The stones do not just mark the final resting place of a loved one but also serve as a compass for the divine power of the Savior.

The emphasis placed on direction can be seen in other headstones in the Tallahassee area. Headstones fashioned like arrows direct the Christian soul to the heavenly other world (Figure 10),³¹ functioning as images that relate to the emphasis placed on directional aspects of death and the afterlife by African rites in a Christianized context.

The use of bathroom tile on headstones in conjunction with this cosmological directional motif in the Tallahassee area does not stop with the basic directional “T” shape. One headstone in particular emphasizes the desired point of divine focus with a very pale blue triangle or arrow with a hole purposely chipped out of its center (Figure 11). Two smaller arrows are placed beneath the larger, indicating a circular motion or reinforcing the downward drive, as indicated in the Bakongo cosmogram. They emphasize the progression of the moments of the sun in the underworld. A particularly monumental and elaborately tiled “T” stone only a few feet from the previous marker replicates the practice (Figure 12).

²⁴ Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* 109.

²⁵ MacGaffey, *Custom and Government in the Lower Congo* 151.

²⁶ MacGaffey, *Custom and Government in the Lower Congo* 109.

²⁷ Chester Hayes, Mary Ethel Thomas of St. Phillip A.M.E. Church, Bradfordville, Florida and Leroy Lester at Greenwood Cemetery, Tallahassee, Florida, Oral Communications throughout Spring 1999.

²⁸ E.J. Glave, “Fetishism in Congo Land,” *The Century Magazine*, XLI (1891): 825-36. See also Vlach 142.

²⁹ These images were particularly used in Cuba as points on which oaths were taken. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* 110-111.

³⁰ Linn Ann J. Griffin, Licensed Funeral Director, Strong and Jones Funeral Home, Inc., Oral Communication, April 1999.

³¹ This headstone is in the immediate vicinity of several “T” stones.

The tile work appearing on these headstones seems to relate well to the cosmogram as it is seen on African *maboondo* (Figure 13). *Maboondo*, or singular *diboondo*, are hollow cylinders that were placed as markers on the graves of wealthy and socially prestigious Bakongo persons. In this case the four stages of the sun are connected with lines forming a lozenge shape that becomes negative space in the urn design. When this shape is drawn, very often the interior space of the lozenge is patterned with mesh-like lines, a dot appearing in each square (Figure 14). Each indicates separate worlds which are inhabited by a single dot or person.³² In the headstone tilework on the two stones from Greenwood Cemetery the centers were deliberately hollowed out holes or dots in the middle of the inset tile, perhaps symbolic of the single soul buried in each grave (Figure 11-12).

There is an enigmatic shape that appears in the center of a “T” cross headstone in the Ox Bottom Road family plot (Figure 15). The shape is a rectangle that was either impressed or inscribed in the wet cement. The interior of the rectangle is filled with a consistent pattern of vertical lines. The design is too prominent to be dismissed as fortuitous decoration. It may be explained by the comparable patterned designs on the upper tiers of the African *maboondo*. One single blanket interpretation for these complex and varying patterns in Kongo culture is a virtual impossibility. Nevertheless some scholars suggest that such designs refer to woven baskets that were used to contain tribal souls or medicines.³³ Such an interpretation would supply an adequately appropriate meaning for a design on an African-American headstone.

The element of direction that is echoed so powerfully in the concept of the cosmogram, can still be witnessed in contemporary Lower Congo funerals. At the wake, as family and friends gather around the litter, the group is led in what Wyatt MacGaffey calls the “forefinger ceremony” wherein “everybody, kneeling, raises his forefinger to the sky, then points it to the sky, then points it downward, then claps his hands; the handclap is repeated, on command, five times, this number being mentioned aloud.”³⁴ Unfortunately, this anthropologist’s interviewers could not explain what the ritual meant or exactly why it was done, but the *forefinger ceremony* was repeated throughout the following funerary rites.

A kind of mystic ground drawing or calligraphy was developed in the New World (specifically Trinidad) around this cosmological system of signs and direction. One such letter is the “T” which stands for travel. This symbol may stand importantly for the travel of the spirit at death or birth. The use of and integration of the Kongo cosmogram into Christianity was especially prevalent in Cuba, Trinidad, and Rio de Janeiro

where importation of African Kongo slaves was particularly prevalent. Nevertheless, Kongo influence is felt throughout the Americas. Historians acknowledge that one third of the Black population of the United States is of Kongo and Angola descent.³⁵

It should be noted at the point of European interference in Kongo culture that the Portuguese landed in this region in 1482 and brought with them Christianity and the highly symbolic cross of Christ. Spanish and Portuguese cross imagery does include “T” or tau crosses. I do not feel that this undermines the influence of the cosmogram as discussed above. Rather I argue that this adds another layer to the already multivalent meaning of the “T” cross and perhaps gives religious license to contemporary Christian converts in Kongo to continue the use of the cosmogram in all its rich and varied forms.

In order to further substantiate the presence of Kongo traditions in the cemeteries of Tallahassee I turn my attention to the demographics of north Florida African Americans and the Transatlantic slave trade. While European slavers had worked along the Angola and Congo coast line for centuries, abducting hundreds of thousands of people, the purposes of this discussion are best served by focusing on slave trade in the nineteenth century. The formal abolition of the slave trade in the United States occurred in 1808. This act only attempted to stop the purchase of African and foreign-born persons. Commerce in American-born individuals was still legal.

In North America an excess of births over deaths was achieved within the slave populations. Labor was constantly shifted within the United States as demand dictated although this was not the case in tropical America. Due to the importation of more males than females, and high rates of mortality and morbidity, the African workforce of tropical America had to be constantly replenished.³⁶ Thus the Portuguese and Spanish slave trade endured much longer than that of the United States or Great Britain even with increased political and diplomatic pressure.

The extreme southeastern fringe of the United States, such as New Orleans, often faced the same shortage of slave labor as the Caribbean. Since the “slave breeding states” such as Virginia were so far north and the demand for slaves in the Texas region greatly accelerated, prices rose enormously along with demand in the early nineteenth-century deep south.³⁷ Between 1840 and 1850 in Florida an ideal male field hand averaged \$500. By 1855 the same slave cost \$1000 and the price continued to accelerate, tripling and even quadrupling, until the war. All the while cotton prices remained fairly consistent.³⁸ Nevertheless, the slave population increased in the area from 7,587 in 1830 to 26,526 in 1840, 39,310 in 1850 and

³² Thompson, *The Four Moments of the Sun* 30.

³³ Thompson, *The Four Moments of the Sun* 78.

³⁴ MacGaffey, *Custom and Government in the Lower Congo* 150, 157.

³⁵ Thompson, *Four Moments of the Sun* 32.

³⁶ Philip D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison, Wisconsin: U of Wisconsin P, 1969) 73.

³⁷ Julia H. Smith, “The Plantation Belt in Middle Florida, 1850-60,” diss., Florida State University, 1964, 113.

³⁸ Julia H. Smith 104-105.

finally 61,750 by 1860.³⁹ In 1860 a Floridian remarked in *Floridian and Journal* “everywhere in the slave holding States, an extraordinary advance in price of slaves has taken place. In some instances, prices realized would have been deemed fabulous a short time ago and as insuring ruin of purchaser.”⁴⁰

People began suggesting that the transatlantic slave trade be reopened and financially advantageous prospects were discussed openly. For example, one Florida man noted in a local news journal that “advocates for the reopening of the trade in ‘wool’ were increasing . . . [and] investing in a shipload to be landed off the coast of Florida would be profitable.”⁴¹ Scholars note that in several deep southern cities, including New Orleans and Savannah, resolutions were made to reopen the transatlantic trade. However “slave breeding states,” Virginia in particular, defeated these notions.⁴² The new legislation that was meant to prevent the importation of African slaves from Africa or any foreign shore was badly enforced. Estimates suggest that 250,000 slaves entered the United States illegally between 1808 and 1859.⁴³

The European, colonial powers most tenaciously following the transatlantic tradition were Spain and Portugal who, with few exceptions, ruled much of South America, Central America, Mexico and the Caribbean. English slavers had exported over 468,000 people from the Angolan region between the years of 1690 and 1807.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, now England was patrolling the western coasts of the Northern half of Africa to discourage slaving, forcing Spanish and Portuguese slavers to center their attentions on the southern regions particularly Congo and Angola. Of the total number of slaves known by the British Foreign Office to have been exported from Africa from 1817 to 1843, 22.6% were removed from northern Congo and 36.2% from Angola. Thus almost 60% of the Africans entering the colonies in this 26-year span in the nineteenth century are believed to have been of Kongo cultures. In just the Brazilian slave trade alone scholars suggest that around 500,000 North Congo and Angolan people entered the New World, especially Rio de Janiero, in these 26 years.⁴⁵ With sky rocketing demand and prices for slaves in the Florida area, common sense suggests that some slaves were sold in this

area.

I did not have to look far to find evidence of illegal slaving in the Florida panhandle. Local papers consistently reported slave ships intercepted by the U.S. Navy. One ship was taken possession of as far away as Rio de Janiero itself.⁴⁶ An American slave ship named the *Mazepa* was discovered in Cuba, which was still under Spanish rule, with 1,500 slaves still in her custody.⁴⁷ Also captured off of Cuba was a French ship carrying 422 African-born slaves from the Congo River area.⁴⁸ The Apalachicola *Commercial Advertiser* reported on March 8, 1849 that two were arrested in that city because they were suspected of buying and selling slaves illegally.⁴⁹ Some slavers who were caught selling African-born slaves on the U.S. Gulf Coast classified the people as indentured “voluntary laborers” in order to escape prosecution.⁵⁰ Also reported locally, a slaver ship was intercepted in St. Joseph Bay after discharging its cargo of some “six or seven hundred Africans somewhere on the coast of Florida...”⁵¹

Because of the covert, illegal nature of the nineteenth-century slave trade in the United States, specific and exact documentation concerning the origin and numbers of African slaves introduced at that time are lacking. Nevertheless, statistics and evidence strongly suggest that many more than a few Bakongo people were introduced into the Tallahassee area in the nineteenth century rendering it possible, even probable, that their burial customs were echoed in the graves of the early twentieth century.

In conclusion, the prominence and prevalence of the Kongo cosmogram in Kongo and Angola, coupled with the powerful continuity of African to African-American funerary practices suggests that the “T” cross is an enduring underlying symbol of cyclical immortality in the Americas. This sign, so prevalent in African-American cemeteries of North Florida, allows modern viewers a glimpse of African burial customs and cosmological systems. These headstones survive as a form of cultural memory now merged into a thoroughly Christianized system of ritual and aesthetic expectations.

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³⁹ Julia H. Smith 106.

⁴⁰ Julia H. Smith 114. Citing the Tallahassee *Floridian and Journal*, February 11, 1860.

⁴¹ Julia H. Smith 114. Citing Tallahassee *Floridian and Journal*, February 19, 1859.

⁴² Julia H. Smith 115. Citing Louis C. Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860* (Washington: Carnegie Institute, 1933) 669.

⁴³ Julia H. Smith 115. Citing *Southern Cultivator*, SVII (1859), 68-70, 133, 134; Tallahassee *Floridian and Journal*, August 6, 1859, November 10, 1860.

⁴⁴ Curtin 150.

⁴⁵ Curtin 337-38.

⁴⁶ Julia H. Smith 116. Citing Apalachicola *Commercial Advertiser*, February 15, 1849.

⁴⁷ Julia H. Smith 116. Citing Tallahassee *Floridian and Journal*, October 17, 1847.

⁴⁸ Julia H. Smith 116. Citing Tallahassee *Floridian and Journal*, June 2, 1860.

⁴⁹ Julia H. Smith 116. Citing Tallahassee *Floridian and Journal*, October 17, 1847.

⁵⁰ Julia H. Smith 116. Citing Tallahassee *Floridian and Journal*, March 13, 1854.

⁵¹ Julia H. Smith 116. Citing Tallahassee *Floridian and Journal*, March 26, 1859.



Figure 1. Grave with white enameled pitcher at headstone and grave with white pipe in Bethlehem A.M.E. Church Cemetery, Tallahassee, Florida.



Figure 2. Conch shell decorating a grave in Ox Bottom Road Cemetery, Tallahassee, Florida.



Figure 3. Grave with whitewashed cement slab and conch shell, framed by gardenia and paper whites in Isle Rest Cemetery, Carrabelle, Florida.

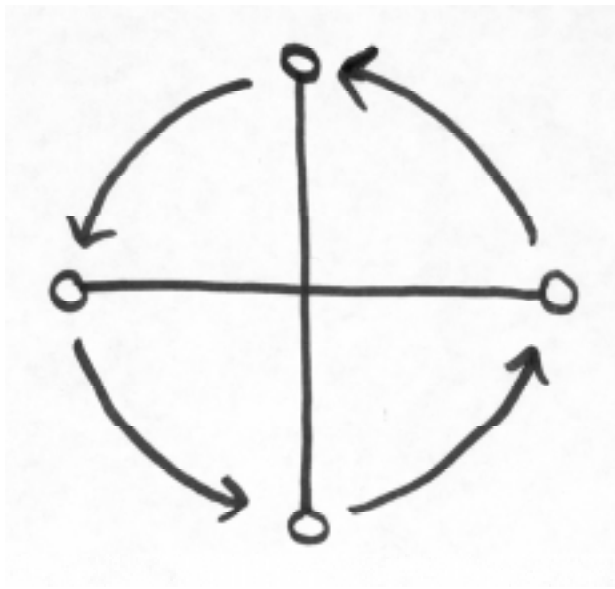


Figure 4. The Kongo Cosmogram of the Four Moments of the Sun as indicated by Robert Farris Thompson.

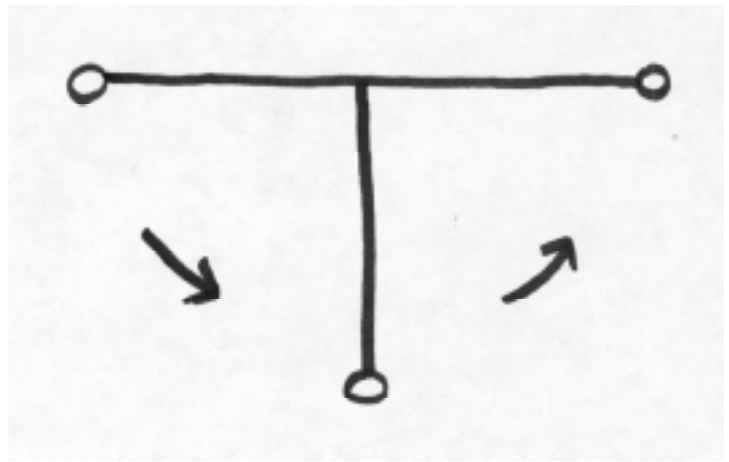


Figure 5. The bottom half of the cosmogram or *kalunga* indicating spiritual power as indicated by Robert Farris Thompson.



Figure 6. One of several "T" shaped headstones in St. Phillip A.M.E. Church Cemetery, Tallahassee, Florida.



Figure 7. One of several headstones with the tile “T” set into the cement in the Smith Family Plot, Tallahassee, Florida.



Figure 8. Congo chieftain's grave as indicated by E.J. Glave, c. 1884.



Figure 9. Kongo *niombo* burial, July 1926. Image reprinted from *Four Moments of the Sun*, courtesy of Robert Farris Thompson.



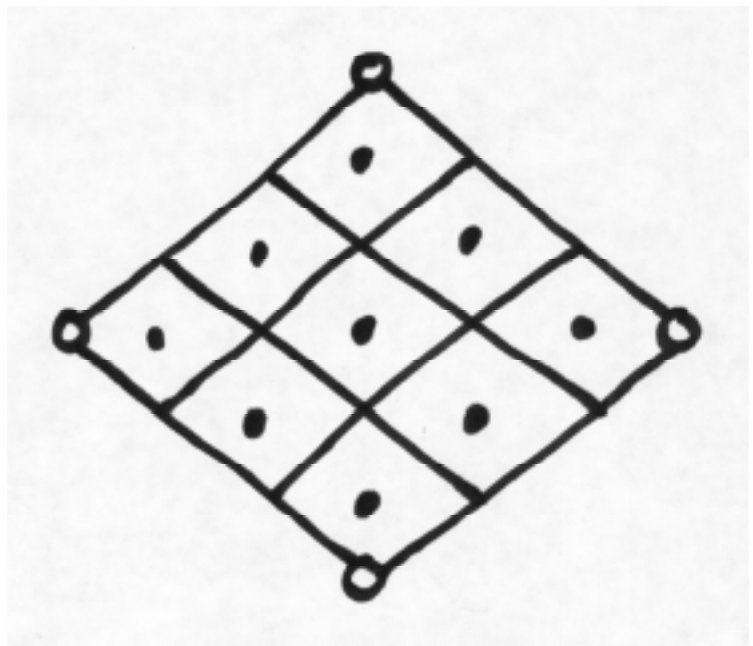
Figure 10. Headstone shaped like an upward pointing arrow, Bethlehem A.M.E. Church Cemetery, Tallahassee, Florida.



Figure 11. Headstone detail of the tiles set into the cement in Greenwood Cemetery, Tallahassee, Florida.



Figure 12. Elaborately tiled "T" headstone in Greenwood Cemetery, Tallahassee, Florida.



[left] Figure 13. Kongo *diboondo* depicting the cosmogram with negative space. Image reprinted from *Four Moments of the Sun*, courtesy of Robert Farris Thompson.

[right] Figure 14. The cosmogram with grid and dot pattern suggesting souls in separate graves or a cemetery as indicated by Robert Farris Thompson.

[bottom] Figure 15. "T" shaped headstone with rectangular imprint in Ox Bottom Road Cemetery, Tallahassee, Florida.

