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How to Evangelise: Capuchin Missionary Manuals for Early Modern Kongo

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How to Evangelise: Capuchin Missionary Manuals for Early Modern Kongo

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Ad Antonella, lei sa il perchè.

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Abstract: This thesis examines the missionary manuals authored by Giovanni Bellotti da Romano and Bernardino Ignazio d'Asti, two Capuchin friars whose writings provide a window into the religious, cultural, and practical dimensions of the early modern Capuchin evangelisation mission in the Kingdom of Kongo and the surrounding regions. Written between the late 17th and early 18th centuries, these works offer valuable insight into the Capuchin mission in Western Central Africa, where Catholicism had been established in the independent, though increasingly imperilled, Kingdom of Kongo for over a century and a half, giving this mission a distinct context and approach. This thesis argues that this unique context spurred the Capuchins to write context-specific manuals designed to guide and advise future missionaries in navigating Kongo's intricate socio-political and religious landscape, defined by the presence of powerful local agents. Through a close and critical reading of these manuals, conjugated by a reading 'against the grain'¹, this study aims to deconstruct Bellotti and Bernardino's celebratory narrative, uncovering how they were compelled to respond to the significant agency of local actors. Thanks to the practical nature of their pieces of advice, this thesis details their strategies of resistance against the missionary impositions, providing a glimpse into the realities of evangelisation in early modern Kongo.

¹ Stoler, *Along the archival grain*.

Introduction

When the Capuchins arrived in Kongo, the region had met Christianity approximately a century and a half before. The autonomous development of this religion in the country not only allowed the fusion of its elements with the Kongolese traditional spirituality, giving life to a syncretic African Christianity, but also determined the rise of agents that embedded this religion into the local cultural and political fabric.² These conditions of evangelisation required the Capuchins to balance their adherence to the universalistic narrative structures of the extra-European missionary reports, such as linear portrayals of conversion from paganism to salvation, with the necessity of adapting to local customs, languages, and political frameworks. This dual task created a tension within their writings, between idealized notions of evangelisation and the practical realities on the ground.

These texts oscillate between missionary tropes of the *Missio* genre, and the specific, experience-based advice tailored to the African context, revealing the strain between constructing a teleological linear narrative of conversion and acknowledging the complexities of the evangelisation process and their dependence on local political and religious figures. This strain, I argue, is fruitful because it reveals the role of the missionaries' African intermediaries, whose cultural, linguistic, and social expertise was indispensable to the Capuchin's success. By deconstructing their missionary discourse that portrayed the Africans as passive to their evangelisation, and, in contrast, revealing local agency, this thesis aims to challenge images of a static and essentialised Africa.

² Thornton, 'Afro-Christian Syncretism in the Kingdom of Kongo', 53–4.

Global Catholic Missions and the Kongo

Throughout the early modern period, the Christian missions spanned around the globe. Missionaries traversed several extra-European regions, from America to Japan, and from Persia to Africa to bring the ‘word of the Lord’ to unexplored lands. The cultural diversity and divide between the geographical regions in which Christian evangelisation took place shows that conversion was quite an adaptable category: from Matteo Ricci’s attempt to convert Chinese élites through European science, Nobili’s Malabari rites, to the Jesuit *vilas* or *aldeias* in Brazil, conversion was highly dependent on the political context and cultural features of the populations the missionaries were sent to convert.³

The context and conditions of evangelisation make the Catholic missions to Kongo a particularly fascinating case study. In the course of their expansion on Africa’s western coast, Portuguese explorers came into contact with subjects of the kingdom of Kongo. Located on Central Africa’s Atlantic coast, bordering the Congo River to the north and the Bengo and Dande Rivers to the south, Kongo emerged as powerful and centralized around the end of the thirteenth century.⁴ During his exploration of the Gulf of Guinea, Captain Diogo Cão landed in 1483 in the coastal province of Kongo, Soyo. The exchanges of gifts and hostages occurred during his several expeditions prepared both sides for an official meeting to formally strike an alliance between the two kingdoms.⁵ The meeting, celebrated on May 3, 1491, with the ruler King Nzinga a Nkuwu (1440-1509) led to his conversion to Christianity, taking the name of João I. His successor Afonso I (1456-1542) strengthened ties with the Portuguese and integrated Christianity further into the kingdom’s social and political fabric. The king’s conversion drew missionaries to Kongo, eager to evangelise a newly

³ Marcocci et al., ‘Introduction: Space, Conversion, and Global History’, 6–7.

⁴ Thornton, *A History of West Central Africa to 1850*, 25.

⁵ Thornton, *A History of West Central Africa to 1850*, 37–8.

encountered region that appeared to have so readily embraced the 'True Faith'. Kongo soon became a contested ground between the Society of Jesus and the mendicant orders, including the Franciscans, Dominicans, Discalced Carmelites, and lastly, the Capuchins.

With the notable exception of the Italian Capuchins, missionaries in Kongo were required to be of Portuguese origin, as dictated by the privileges granted to the Portuguese Crown under the *Padroado* rights.⁶ Due to the link between missionaries and the Portuguese, whose colonial ambitions in Africa would become increasingly destructive, the historians of the 1960s began to argue that Christian missions were a 'fourth column' that prepared through the erasure of local culture, later colonial subjugation.⁷ For James Duffy in 1959 and Basil Davidson in 1961, Portugal, thanks to the slave trade and superior technological development, subverted the Kongolesse kingdom, breaking down local power.⁸ When the Portuguese then left the region for the more profitable Angola, Kongo remained in complete anarchy.⁹ In 1966 Jan Vansina and David Birmingham were the first to challenge this analysis, focusing on the resistance of the Kongolesse and limiting the Portuguese predominance, not completely overthrowing, however, this perspective.¹⁰ So much so that this historiographical narrative continued, as John Thornton pointed out, through later scholars such as Balandier and Randles, who, in their works, portrayed central Africa as incapable of agency, and merely reliant on the external European impulses.¹¹ Thanks to Thornton's groundbreaking work, the scholarship has moved from the 80s towards a revaluation of the paradigm of Kongo's early modern submission to the Portuguese colonial power.

⁶ Malekandathil, 'Cross, Sword and Conflicts', 252–3.

⁷ Thornton, 'Early Kongo-Portuguese Relations: A New Interpretation', 183–4.

⁸ Duffy, *Portuguese Africa*. Davidson, *The African slave trade* Thornton, 'Early Kongo-Portuguese Relations: A New Interpretation', 183–4.

⁹ Thornton, 'Early Kongo-Portuguese Relations: A New Interpretation', 185

¹⁰ Vansina, *Kingdoms of the Savanna*; Birmingham, *The Mbundu and Neighbouring Peoples of Central Angola Under the Influence of Portuguese Trade and Conquest 1483-1790*.

¹¹ Thornton, 'Early Kongo-Portuguese Relations: A New Interpretation', 184; Balandier, *Daily Life in the Kingdom of the Kongo, From the 16th to the 18th Centuries*; Randles, *L'ancien royaume du Congo des origines à la fin du XIXe siècle*.

The ‘revisionist school’ in which Thornton belongs together with other seminal scholars like Alan Strathern and Adrian Hastings, brought a critical approach to the evaluation of Kongo’s history and adoption of Christianity.¹² John Thornton revised the history of the Kongolese-Portuguese relationships, emerging with a critical view of the scholarship tradition that places Early Modern Kongo in colonial subjugation to Portugal. What he calls “one of the most durable myths of the history of Central Africa” is seeing the interaction between Kongo and Portugal in terms of economic, and subsequently political, domination.¹³ Instead, he argues that this is not, in fact, founded on the historical reality of the development of the Portuguese operations, but rather on European colonial expansion which engulfed Africa in colonial during the nineteenth century.¹⁴ When scrutinizing the Christianisation of Kongo, historians of Africa have criticized the unquestioned adoption of concepts borrowed from different contexts of evangelisation, which led to this serious anachronism, that forged an image of an Africa paralyzed and reliant on the Europeans, essentially immobile and ahistorical.¹⁵

The tendency is to overemphasize and eternize the disparities between African and European societies. Instead of seeing the two societies as radically different, reinforcing, in turn, European exceptionalism, he highlights that in the early modern period, a series of analogies made them more similar than the scholarship previously suggested. Thornton highlighted how the two societies shared similarities in a series of fields, especially in political, economic and commercial power, and religious practices.¹⁶

¹² See especially Thornton and Monsterman, ‘A Re-Interpretation of the Kongo-Portuguese War of 1622 According to New Documentary Evidence’; Thornton, *A History of West Central Africa to 1850*; Thornton, ‘The Kingdom of Kongo and the Thirty Years’ War’; Thornton, ‘Afro-Christian Syncretism in the Kingdom of Kongo’; Strathern, ‘Catholic Missions and Local Rulers in Sub-Saharan Africa’; Strathern, *Unearthly powers : religious and political change in world history*; Hastings, *The Church in Africa, 1450-1950*.

¹³ Thornton, ‘Early Kongo-Portuguese Relations: A New Interpretation’. 183.

¹⁴ Thornton, ‘Early Kongo-Portuguese Relations: A New Interpretation’, 185–6.

¹⁵ Thornton, ‘Early Kongo-Portuguese Relations: A New Interpretation’, 185–6.

¹⁶ Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800*, 43.

Adrian Hastings, a Roman Catholic priest and historian, builds on the work of scholars like Thorton in challenging the rigid narrative that posits a stark difference between African and European religious traditions.¹⁷ Concentrating on the Kongo's religious history, the scholar argued that the Spanish or Portuguese Catholicism of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries shared with the Kongolese religion more than expected. He defined their religious sensibility as pre-enlightenment, a worldview that fostered common characteristics between the two. In both contexts, the spiritual and material realms were not seen as separate but rather as interwoven; events and phenomena were often attributed to the intervention of spirits, whether in the form of miracles or divine prodigies.¹⁸ Both the Kongolese and Iberian religious systems exhibited a deep fear of supernatural forces and believed in their active participation in everyday life.¹⁹ In much the same way the villages of Portugal or Spain relied on the veneration of relics and local saints for protection, Kongo's communities turned to sacred objects and localized spiritual guardians to ensure their well-being and shield themselves from harm.²⁰

If we do not essentialise the difference between Christianity and the religious spirit prevalent in Kongo we open a path toward a nuanced perspective about Kongo's adoption of Christianity. Catholic scholars such as Filesi, Saccardo and partly Hastings himself believed that Christianity, a religion very much foreign to Central-Western Africa, relied on the continuous stream of missionaries from Europe to maintain its vitality.²¹ The works of the revisionists, such as the Africanist Alan Strathern, pioneered an approach that tried to move beyond this view that sees the missionaries' evangelisation as a solely imposed phenomenon.²² Instead of viewing the missionaries as introducing alien beliefs

¹⁷ Hastings, *The Church in Africa, 1450-1950*, 73.

¹⁸ Hastings, *The Church in Africa, 1450-1950*, 74

¹⁹ Hastings, *The Church in Africa, 1450-1950*, 74.

²⁰ Hastings, *The Church in Africa, 1450-1950*, 76.

²¹ Filesi and de Villapadiena Isidoro, *La 'Missio Antiqua' dei Cappuccini nel Congo (1645-1835)*, 6; Saccardo, *Congo e Angola: con la storia dell'antica missione dei Cappuccini*.

²² Strathern, 'Catholic Missions and Local Rulers in Sub-Saharan Africa', 162.

to the detriment of the local ones, they acknowledge the significance of examining spaces of negotiation and syncretism.

Strathern suggests that both local agents and cultural practices incurred in making Kongo's conversion to Christianity a much more multifaceted process.²³ Firstly, he argues that viewing missionary evangelisation as the struggle of a small group of missionaries might be misleading. Even though the Catholic missionaries were present in Kongo in low numbers, and weakened by illnesses for which their bodies were not accustomed, they could count on the help of a large number of local teachers and proselytizers. Only thanks to this crucial support an unstable presence of missionaries could proselytize such a large number of people. Secondly, the role of Portuguese-African players, such as descendants of traders who settled in Kongo and mestizos, should not be downplayed. These social groups could have formed an initial bridge between local and Christian beliefs.²⁴

Attributing an increasingly influential role to local lay proselytizers and Portuguese-Africans challenges the traditional narrative of a one-sided imposition of Catholic beliefs in Kongo that would render Africa solely a passive recipient of Western culture. This perspective highlights the agency of local actors in shaping the religious landscape, suggesting that the spread of Catholicism was not merely a top-down process enforced by European missionaries. Ironically, as Strathern points out, the outcomes of the Capuchins' evangelisation efforts cannot be attributed solely to their work.²⁵ Instead, the local population, including African intermediaries and mixed-race Luso-Africans, played a crucial role in interpreting, adapting, and disseminating Catholic beliefs, thus contributing to a more complex and reciprocal process of religious transformation. They allowed for the blending of elements of the African traditional spirituality with the Christian teachings of the Capuchin, paving

²³ Strathern, 'Catholic Missions and Local Rulers in Sub-Saharan Africa'. 152.

²⁴ Strathern, 'Catholic Missions and Local Rulers in Sub-Saharan Africa', 152.

²⁵ Hsia, *A companion to early modern Catholic global missions*.

the way to syncretism. This thesis argues together with Strathern that a more nuanced approach that considers local agency is essential to attain a deeper comprehension of the dynamics of Kongo's evangelisation. These features of Kongo make its conversion to Catholicism a multifaceted experience and ultimately demonstrate how the process was largely in the indigenous' hands as much as in the Europeans',²⁶

The Capuchin in Central Africa and their Evangelisation Manuals

Founded in Italy in 1525 and approved in 1528 through the Papal bull *Religionis zelus*, the Capuchin Order established itself as a separate branch from the larger Observant Franciscan family.²⁷ They did so in the belief that the rest of the Franciscans had ventured away from the absolute poverty and humility Saint Francis had professed.²⁸ Only possessing a pair of sandals, hooded robes and an unwavering faith were all steps towards renouncing all forms of material ownership, necessary to follow the 'following of Christ' or *sequele Christi*, a religious ideal which dated back to the twelve century.²⁹ In 1622, Propaganda Fide, amidst the tension with the Portuguese crown for the *Padroado* rights, commenced its effort as the centralized Vatican entity to coordinate and surveil the extra-European missions, offering the Capuchins the possibility to prove their values on the ground. The central African *Missio* offered the perfect opportunity for the retrieval of these ideals, and poverty, humility and spiritual asceticism which quickly became narrative devices to be used to exalt their Order.

²⁶ Hastings, *The Church in Africa, 1450-1950*.

²⁷ DeMolen, *Religious Orders of the Catholic Reformation*.

²⁸ Walden, 'Capuchins, Missionaries, and Slave Trading in Precolonial Kongo-Angola, West Central Africa (17th Century)', 43.

²⁹ Walden, 'Capuchins, Missionaries, and Slave Trading in Precolonial Kongo-Angola, West Central Africa (17th Century)', 43.

These values circulated through a series of reports written by missionaries in Africa. Scholars have traced within the Capuchin central African literature a variety of elements, traditions, and genres. Spanning diverse typologies, they are generally divided between sources for internal circulation inside the Order and sources meant to be published for a wider audience.³⁰ Vincenzo Lavenia noted that many missionary reports intended for wider distribution frequently featured kings and queens.³¹ Their conversion stories were crafted to serve as paradigmatic examples for the ruler's subjects, demonstrating the transformative power of Christianity.³² These narratives were often embellished with extraordinary episodes, miracles, divine interventions, or profound changes of heart, to inspire and encourage the broader population to embrace the faith.³³ The Capuchin report, named *Breve racconto della nuova conversione della regina Ginga*, written around 1659 by Giacinto Brugiotti da Vetralla (1601-1659), is an example of these celebratory reports.³⁴ This friar wrote a report to *Propaganda Fide* narrating the second conversion of Queen Njinga of Ndongo (1583-1663) archived by Frà Antonio da Gaeta (baptized as Emilio Laudati), who obtained it during a mission wanted by Rome and started in 1640.³⁵ This tale would be narrated a second time in 1669, by the Capuchin Francesco Maria Gioia in a report named *La maravigliosa conversione alla santa fede di Cristo della Regina Singa*.³⁶ Her reconversion, quickly rendered a miraculous episode, knew this diffusion not only because it raised hopes for the conversion of Kongo's entire population, but also because the

³⁰ Lavenia, 'Introduzione', XXXVI-VII.

³¹ Lavenia, 'Principesse e principi'.

³² Lavenia, 'Introduzione', XL.

³³ Lavenia, 'Introduzione', XL.

³⁴ Da Vetralla, Giacinto. *Breve racconto della nuova conversione della regina Ginga operata da Dio per mezzo del padre frat'Antonio Romano missionario cappuccino, che fu spedito l'anno 1653 dalla Sacra Congregazione di Propaganda Fide, e destinato alle sue terre o stati, e vi giunse l'anno 1655. Descritta dal padre Giacinto di Vetralla del medesimo ordine e prefetto della missione del Congo et altri regni convicini*, 26 novembre 1658. See the text and comment in Lavenia, 'Principesse e principi', 55–9.

³⁵ Lavenia, 'Principesse e principi', 55–9.

³⁶ Gioia, Francesco Maria. *La maravigliosa conversione alla santa fede di Cristo della Regina Singa e del suo regno di Matamba nell'Africa meridionale [...] cavata da una relatione di là mandata dal P.F. Antonio da Gaeta*, Napoli, per Giacinto Passaro, 1669.

Capuchins portrayed it as a manifestation of the success of their missions and of their way of proselytization.³⁷

In contrast, the manuals of evangelisation were destined for internal, limited circulation. They did, however, form a genre of their own within the Capuchin literary production, meant to instruct the yet-to-come or newly arrived missionaries to both the potential problems and riches of the Kongolese mission. Shortly after their arrival in the African continent, the friars of the mendicant order began collecting in these manuals their experiences to aid the ones who were meant to follow them, thus creating a genre of literature meant to improve their efforts in traversing the challenges of its evangelisation. The first of these Capuchin manuals, named *Manuale per la buona directione di quella gente*, was written in 1650, shortly after the effective start of the Capuchin mission, by Friar Antonio de Teruel (died 1665) and was written to instruct the Capuchins who would follow him to impart the sacraments.³⁸ Beyond Teruel, three Capuchin manuals aimed at facilitating Kongo's evangelisation have survived, scattered around the libraries and archives of Italy and Europe. They are, in chronological order, the *Avvertimenti Salutevoli Alli Apostolici* of Giovanni Bellotti da Romano (1681), *Viaggi in Congo* of Giuseppe Monari da Modena (1723), and lastly *Missione in Pratica* di Bernardino Ignazio d'Asti (1747). For their originality and insightfulness, Bellotti's and Bernardino's represent the core of my primary sources.

The first manual, *Avvertimenti Salutevoli* of Giovanni Bellotti da Romano is preserved in the Biblioteca del Clero of San Alessandro in Bergamo, Italy. The Capuchin mission in Kongo started in 1671 when the friar departed from Italy, arriving in Kongo the following year. The unpublished manuscript bears the date "scritto Bergamo 23 Nouembre 1680", which, as Filesi suggested, marks a

³⁷ Lavenia, 'Introduzione', XL.

³⁸ Filesi, 'Cappuccini Italiani nel Congo (Missio Antiqua)', 554.

period when the friar came back to Italy to rest.³⁹ During this same Italian break, he recollected his experiences of the Kongo in his 1679 *Le Giornate Apostoliche*. However, the advice in his *Avvertimenti Salutevoli*, a collection of fifty-nine ‘healthy advice’, is of particular interest to this thesis. In 1681 Bellotti obtained from Propaganda Fide the license to publish his works, although, for unknown reasons, both books were never printed.⁴⁰ In 1683, the friar departed to Lisbon, where he met Pedro II, defending the Capuchin mission against the *Padroado* privileges of Portugal.⁴¹ The king sent him on a mission back to Kongo; Bellotti, however, would never reach his destination and died of illness in 1685, passing away during the sea journey on board the vessel that was taking him back to Africa.⁴² However, according to the letter sent in 1685 by fellow missionary Giuseppe Maria Busseto, the friar died in Luanda on November 29, 1684.⁴³

The unsigned manuscripts of *Missione in Prattica. Padri cappuccini nè Regni di Congo, Angola, et adiacenti* are attributed almost certainly to Giuseppe Rabagliati, who donned the friar's habit as Bernardino Ignazio da Vezza d'Asti (now Vezza d'Alba).⁴⁴ Rabagliati lived between 1702 and 1757 and embarked on a mission to the Kongo. Of the book he wrote around 1747, at the mission's conclusion, there are three surviving versions, now preserved in Turin, Rome, and Lisbon. The first is preserved in Turin's Biblioteca Civica Centrale.⁴⁵ Amongst the other versions, it is the richest with watercolours, for a total of nineteenth, which form the core of the work, followed by eight densely written folios of text. The Roman version belongs to the collection of the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana and is primarily text, except for the frontpiece and a few vignettes scattered in the text. It presents itself as a more formally written and longer version of the Turin version, which was

³⁹ Filesi, ‘Contributi dei Cappuccini italiani alla conoscenza dell'antico regno del Congo (Secoli XVII e XVIII)’, 217.

⁴⁰ Filesi, ‘Contributi dei Cappuccini italiani alla conoscenza dell'antico regno del Congo (Secoli XVII e XVIII)’, 217.

⁴¹ ‘Giovanni da Romano di Lombardia’.

⁴² Filesi, ‘Contributi dei Cappuccini italiani alla conoscenza dell'antico regno del Congo (Secoli XVII e XVIII)’, 217.

⁴³ ‘Giovanni da Romano di Lombardia’.

⁴⁴ d'Asti, *Missione in Prattica*.

⁴⁵ This version was published entirely on the Turin's Civic library's website ‘Missione in Prattica’ in <https://bct.comune.torino.it/manoscritti-e-rari/missione-prattica>.

supposedly publication-ready.⁴⁶ The last version, present in the Biblioteca Nacional in Lisbon, is the exact copy of the Roman version, except for its images which pages were left blank.⁴⁷ This version, as Céline Fromont argues, came from the library of the Capuchin house in Lisbon, and was possibly consulted by missionaries before their departure to Central Africa.⁴⁸

The two Capuchin manuscripts were mentioned and grouped together in Teobaldo Filesì and Isidoro de Villapadiena's 1978 *La 'Missio Antiqua' dei Cappuccini nel Congo (1645-1835)*.⁴⁹ In this book, Filesì draws upon its many predecessors and presents an overview of the Capuchin sources on Central Africa that have been crucial for the studies of the region. While it still remains a good starting point, his description of the manuals remains brief, reflecting the broader aim of the book, which was to provide a general bibliographical overview of the topic, rather than an in-depth examination. The conciseness of his analysis offers the readers a surface-level understanding of the manuals without delving into their intricate details or nuances. Moreover, since then, there has not been specific work done on the book's contents, an absence particularly evident in the area of exploring the narratives, the tropes and their limits within the texts, crucial aspects that remain largely unexplored.

Cécile Fromont conducted an exhaustive study on the corpus of images produced by the Capuchins, meticulously analyzing their visual and aesthetic elements, which created a visual tradition that maintained remarkable coherence for over a century.⁵⁰ Fromont made a significant discovery by uncovering a collection of 67 watercolour vignettes, which she named the 'Parma Watercolors'.⁵¹ Likely created between the 1650s and 1670s, these illustrations drew heavily from the Capuchin tradition of image-making.⁵² The origin of this visual corpus can be traced back to Filippo Pigafetta's

⁴⁶ Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola* 51.

⁴⁷ Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 51.

⁴⁸ Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 52.

⁴⁹ Filesì and de Villapadiena Isidoro, *La 'Missio Antiqua' dei Cappuccini nel Congo (1645-1835)*, 6.

⁵⁰ Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 8.

⁵¹ Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 6–7.

⁵² Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 8.

1591 *Relatione del reame del Congo*, a work born from the encounter between the Kongolese ambassador Duarte Lopes and the Vicentine explorer.⁵³ This volume was instrumental in shaping subsequent imagery, notably inspiring the seven illustrations in Cavazzi's 1687 *Istorica Descrizione*, which, in turn, served as a major influence for many of the images in the *Missione in Prattica* as well as the Parma Watercolors.⁵⁴

The watercolours showcase a range of topics, from the African natural landscapes to scenes of evangelisation and catechisation of Kongolese people. As Fromont explained, these images from Africa partly belong to the genre of travel literature, for their representation of exotic plants, fantastical fauna, and the dances and rituals of the local peoples. However, the images found inside the evangelisation manuals carried their own peculiar didactic purpose. As Fromont pointed out, these images belonging to Turin and Roman manuscripts and the Parma watercolours form a coherent corpus of visual cues intended as practical guides for preparing new missionaries to Central Africa.⁵⁵ She argues they are in fact artefacts derived from the interaction between the Capuchin spirituality and the Kongolese mixture of Christian and traditionally African elements.⁵⁶ While Céline Fromont's book is a milestone in the study of Capuchin's visual production, it leaves beyond its scope an accurate textual analysis of the narrative trope and cues of the manuals in themselves. To bridge the connection between visual and written discourse in Capuchin's evangelisation efforts, my thesis sets to explore this discursive layer, aiming to fill this historiographical gap.

This thesis builds on the current historiography arguing that the manuals of advice written by Bellotti and Bernardino d'Asti represent an invaluable window to analyse the missionary discourse. They

⁵³ Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 51. On Duarte Lopes, see also Filesi, 'Duarte López ambasciatore del re del Congo presso Sisto V nel 1588'.

⁵⁴ Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 6.

⁵⁵ Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 8.

⁵⁶ Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 11.

belong to the genre of the missionary narrative, characterized by celebratory and propagandistic elements designed to glorify not only the individual missionary's life and work but also their religious Order, amidst the enduring rivalries between different orders. For these reasons, they tried to downplay, and obscure, amidst this narrative, the role of local actors. In tailoring their advice to address the influence and power of local agents, the authors inadvertently exposed the critical role these figures played. What might otherwise have been concealed within the celebratory framework is revealed through the pragmatic guidance offered, making the presence of local actors an undeniable aspect of the evangelisation process.

This thesis aims to shed light on the intricacies of the evangelisation process in Early Modern Kongo through the prism of two Capuchin didactic manuals, written between the late seventeenth century and the first half of the eighteenth century. In the first chapter of this thesis, I reconstruct the historical events that preceded and concurred the writing of these manuals, and I lay the groundwork by exploring early missionary efforts in Central Africa, focusing my attention on the arrival of the Capuchin missionaries. It details the establishment of Propaganda Fide and the creation of the Capuchin Central African mission amidst the complex tensions between the Portuguese Crown and the Papacy for the *Padroado* rights. The second chapter introduces the manuals, with an analysis of their contents, inter-relations and common concerns.

The third chapter tries to challenge the Capuchin missionary narratives, highlighting how, contrary to what they affirm, the Kongolese Catholicism expressed its own independent vitality. This chapter seeks to underscore and detail the strategies of resistance of local agents: interpreters, the *maestri* (teachers) and enslaved people. It also delves into the advice the missionaries provide to counter their agency, arguing that the manuals are characterized by a tension between the need to advise future missionaries on the power of these actors and the need to respect the providential narrative that characterizes missionary reports. In the fourth and last chapter, I aim to scrutinize the narratives penned by Capuchin missionaries in their manuals. It does so by examining the tropes and rhetorical

elements within the manuals, considering how missionary tales were constructed to justify and reinforce the Church's mission of conversion. By adopting a critical approach 'against the grain'⁵⁷, this chapter unpacks the layers of storytelling that the missionaries used to frame the evangelisation process, revealing how missionaries sought to position themselves as providential saviours of souls.

This thesis aims to deconstruct, through an approach 'against the grain', the predominant missionary narrative. It does so by exploiting the tension that characterises the Capuchin manuals of Bellotti and Bernardino, which sheds light on the dynamic interplay between the missionaries and the local population they were sent to convert. Instead of seeing Kongo's evangelisation as a unilateral imposition of European beliefs, this thesis ultimately aims to provide a nuanced understanding of this region's encounter with Christianity that contrasts images of ahistorical, passive, Africa.

Chapter 1- The Early Modern History of Kongo and the Missionary Orders

Before delving into a close reading of the three Capuchin manuals, it is essential to first trace the historical coordinates of Kongo's early modern history and its evolving relationship with Portugal, a discussion that will take place in the first part of this chapter. The second part will introduce Kongolese religious, political, and economic systems and their similarities with those in the Portuguese world, while the third part is dedicated to the development of Kongolese Christianity, leading up to the establishment of the Propaganda Fide and the arrival of the Capuchin missionaries. Upon their arrival, the Capuchins encountered not a political vacuum but a highly centralized

⁵⁷ Stoler, *Along the archival grain*.

kingdom with a vibrant economy and complex, refined manufacturing. Religion was intrinsically linked with political power, and part of this chapter will delve into the king as a sacred figure as much as a political one. This exploration of the Mani Kongo's religious role is necessary to understand what the missionaries faced in the attempt to propagate Catholic doctrines and to convert Kongo's rulers. The arrival of the Capuchins, satisfying the Vatican's universalistic ambitions, served to reinforce the Kongolese king's prestige and religious authority.

The Portuguese Explorations in Western-Central Africa and the Kingdom of Kongo

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, Africa found itself invaded by expanding empires. While in contraposition with each other, both the Portuguese, by ship, and Ottomans, by land, began their respective advance in the continent. To rival the Ottomans, the Portuguese, fomented by a series of Papal bulls that sanctioned the anti-Islamic *cruzada*, began their expansion on the Western coast of Morocco, on the African continent, occupying Ceuta (1415) under João I.⁵⁸ The spiritual justification for this Portuguese expansion was further formalized in 1452 with the Bull *Dum Diversas*, granted by Pope Nicholas V (1397–1455, r.1447–55).⁵⁹ Later bulls such as the 1514 Leo X's *Praecelsae Devotionis* and the *Dum Fidei constantiam* confirmed and expanded such privileges, establishing the *Padroado Real*.⁶⁰ These rights, emanated in favour of Portugal, granted its crown the exclusive rights to control the nomination of bishops and collect ecclesiastical fiscal revenues both in its metropole and the overseas colonies. This privilege additionally allowed the crown control over the missionaries

⁵⁸ For a list of the almost seventy Papal Bulls emanated in this period to aid the Portuguese crusade, see Filesi, 'A distanza di cinque secoli.'

⁵⁹ Filesi, 'A distanza di cinque secoli.', 63.

⁶⁰ Filesi, 'A distanza di cinque secoli.', 74–5.

evangelizing in its empire, ensuring that only loyal Portuguese clergymen could carry out religious work in these newly acquired territories.⁶¹

However, the Portuguese expansion on the Western coasts of Africa was not the product of long-range crusading projects.⁶² For the crown the Anti-Ottoman crusade, as the search for the mythical preacher John, and opening a direct trade route with India, remained key legitimizing ideological components. However, as the crown granted private subjects intercontinental trading privileges, the Portuguese expansion along the Atlantic coasts of Africa became greatly influenced by the impulses of private agents.⁶³ Portuguese traders and plunderers began moving south, sailing along the African coast, seeking to exploit the new trading opportunities granted by the renewed contact with the African trading routes. This allowed them to exchange easily manufacturable European goods in exchange for African gold, spices, enslaved people and ivory.⁶⁴ Through these private enterprises, their ships passed Cape Bojador in 1434 and reinforced their foothold in Western Africa with the state-sponsored fort in São Jorge da Mina (1481).⁶⁵

Elmina became the supply point for further Portuguese expansion in Western Central Africa. Two expeditions were formed two years after its establishment: one settled in São Tomé, and the other, under Diogo Cão (1450-1486), discovered the mouth of a large river, which he named Rio Poderoso.⁶⁶ Cão renamed the river 'Congo' shortly after making contact with people belonging to a vast kingdom governed by a ruler titled Mani Congo.⁶⁷ From 1485 to 1487 the explorer made four expeditions to Kongo, exchanging gifts and hostages brought to Lisbon, where they were taught the

⁶¹ Mkenda, *Jesuits in Africa*, 2.

⁶² Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800*, 35.

⁶³ Bethencourt, 'Dutch and Portuguese Rivalry in the South Atlantic: Exchange and Refusal', 18.

⁶⁴ Antunes, 'Before, during and after Conquest: The Brazilians, the Dutch, and the Portuguese in the South Atlantic and Brazil, c.1620–1660', 2.

⁶⁵ Bethencourt, 'Dutch and Portuguese Rivalry in the South Atlantic: Exchange and Refusal', 18.

⁶⁶ Hastings, *The Church in Africa, 1450-1950*, 73–5.

⁶⁷ Hastings, *The Church in Africa, 1450-1950*, 73–5.

Portuguese language and educated in the principles of the Catholic faith.⁶⁸ With their return to Kongo, these first converts, acting as intermediaries and translators, began to spread Christianity and introduced it in the royal court.⁶⁹ During Cão's fourth Portuguese expedition, in 1491, both the Mani Soyo, a powerful coastal chief, and the king of Kongo Nzinga Nkuvu, were baptized, the former as Manuel I, the latter as João I, thus honouring the homonym Portuguese king.⁷⁰

Before delving further into early modern Kongo's political and religious structure, it is helpful to specify the regions it encompassed. The kingdom spanned approximately 33'000 square miles (more than 85'000km²), limited eastwards by the Kwango River and westwards by the province of Soyo on the Atlantic Ocean, while in the north it bordered the Kongo River and in the south with the Bengo and Dande Rivers.⁷¹ In the early modern period, the boundaries of Kongo corresponded more with the nowadays northern regions of Angola and portions of the southern regions of the Democratic Republic of Congo.⁷² I use in this thesis, the term 'Kongo' rather than 'Congo' to distinguish the historical kingdom from the modern-day Democratic Republic of Congo.

In the late fifteenth century, Kongo was a highly centralized and bureaucratic state, a vital player in Western-Central Africa.⁷³ By some estimates, it had approximately a population of 350.000 people.⁷⁴ It was an elective kingdom, where the ruler was elected amongst several royal descendants who controlled their own regions and held political and spiritual powers akin to those of the king.⁷⁵ The king, however, directly controlled the capital Mbanza Kongo (later known as São Salvador) and it

⁶⁸ Thornton, 'Afro-Christian Syncretism in the Kingdom of Kongo', 57.

⁶⁹ Thornton, 'Afro-Christian Syncretism in the Kingdom of Kongo', 57.

⁷⁰ Thornton, *A History of West Central Africa to 1850*, 39.

⁷¹ Heywood, *Njinga of Angola: Africa's Warrior Queen*.

⁷² Heywood, *Njinga of Angola: Africa's Warrior Queen*, 3–4.

⁷³ Heywood, *Njinga of Angola: Africa's Warrior Queen*, 8.

⁷⁴ Heywood, *Njinga of Angola: Africa's Warrior Queen* See also the different and higher estimates of 500'000 people precedently made in Thornton, 'Demography and History in the Kingdom of Kongo, 1550-1750' And in Thornton, *A History of West Central Africa to 1850* .

⁷⁵ Heywood, *Njinga of Angola: Africa's Warrior Queen*, 3–4.

was central for exercising its rule, as the well-protected urban centre was the heart of its court.⁷⁶ More than just an administrative centre, the kings amassed their armies close to the capital to suppress any possible regional rulers' rebellions.⁷⁷ Displaying a high degree of centralisation, the rulers collected taxes in the domains, called *rendas*, through appointed royal officials.⁷⁸

Beginning from the fifteenth century to its south, its neighbours, Ndongo and Matamba, began to rise in power.⁷⁹ The former was ruled by a leader bearing the title of *Ngola*, a name that would come to define nowadays Angola.⁸⁰ The Ngolas, who initially paid formal tribute to the kings of Kongo, became increasingly independent, and in the late sixteenth century, Kiluanji kia Ndambi (1561–1575) conquered the Luanda Plateau near Lukala and the Atlantic coast which forms Angola's core region.⁸¹ The king resided in Kabasa, the capital city, surrounded by his wives, courtiers, and advisors.⁸² He traditionally held fiscal privileges over a number of (but not all) the territorial divisions named *murindas* governed by noblemen, the *markotas*.⁸³ Detaining similar fiscal, political, spiritual, and economic prerogatives to the Ngola, they could be quite independent of their ruler; they could claim the noblest blood and their power could be passed down through the generations.⁸⁴

Thornton analyzed the reciprocal exchange of goods between Portugal and Western-Central Africa, challenging the notion that European trade was inherently disruptive to the region.⁸⁵ He argued that Kongo and Portugal shared comparable levels of economic and political development, suggesting a more balanced interaction between the two regions.⁸⁶ Moreover, Central African societies had a

⁷⁶ Heywood, *Njinga of Angola: Africa's Warrior Queen*, 4.

⁷⁷ Heywood, *Njinga of Angola: Africa's Warrior Queen*, 4.

⁷⁸ Thornton, *A History of West Central Africa to 1850*, 33.

⁷⁹ Heywood, *Njinga of Angola: Africa's Warrior Queen*, 5.

⁸⁰ Heywood, *Njinga of Angola: Africa's Warrior Queen*, 4.

⁸¹ Thornton, 'Early Kongo-Portuguese Relations: A New Interpretation', 193.

⁸² Heywood, *Njinga of Angola: Africa's Warrior Queen*, 9–11.

⁸³ Heywood, *Njinga of Angola: Africa's Warrior Queen*, 10–1.

⁸⁴ Heywood, *Njinga of Angola: Africa's Warrior Queen*, 11.

⁸⁵ Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800*, 50–3.

⁸⁶ Thornton, 'Early Kongo-Portuguese Relations: A New Interpretation', 189.

structure similar to those of Europe. It was stratified similarly to the Portuguese fashion, with the aristocrats that, for the Portuguese sources, corresponded to their *fidalgos*. Upon the king's death, those of royal lineage participated in the election of a new ruler, chosen from among several competing lineages, a practice reflecting the importance of bloodlines and marriage ties in determining status, much like in Portugal. Another similarity between Kongo and Portuguese nobles was the patron-client relations, in which *fidalgos* surrounded themselves with trusted *clientes* in exchange for political and economic privileges.⁸⁷ Francisco Bethencourt highlights another layer of interaction between the Kongolese and the Portuguese, noting that the Kongolese nobility was granted the ability to bestow upon themselves titles such as duke, marquis, and count in European fashion.⁸⁸ However, this recognition of nobility was part of a broader political project by the Portuguese, which was aimed at facilitating alliances with local elites and preparing for future military operations.⁸⁹

Then, villagers were divided between those who were free (which the Italian Capuchins simply called *gente*) and the enslaved people (*escravos*, in Ndongo *mubikas*) acquired by the élite during war campaigns.⁹⁰ In Ndongo, the religious life was guided by the *ngangas*, which guided spiritual and communal life, serving as healers, and diviners, and performing rituals together with ritual objects such as ancestor's bones. They dispensed their religious services travelling extensively through the country.⁹¹ This itinerant aspect of their roles closely mirrored the practices of European missionaries, such as the Capuchins, whose 'missione volante' relied on mobility to reach dispersed populations.

The kings of Western Central Africa held extensive political, administrative, and fiscal powers. They were not, however, secular rulers: reflecting medieval notions of sacred kingship, upon ascending to

⁸⁷ Thornton, 'Early Kongo-Portuguese Relations: A New Interpretation', 194.

⁸⁸ Bethencourt, *Racisms : From the Crusades to the Twentieth Century*, 85.

⁸⁹ Bethencourt, *Racisms : From the Crusades to the Twentieth Century*, 85.

⁹⁰ Heywood, *Njinga of Angola: Africa's Warrior Queen*, 7.

⁹¹ Heywood, *Njinga of Angola: Africa's Warrior Queen*, 14–5.

the position of king, an individual's body was believed to be imbued with extraordinary spiritual powers.⁹² They wielded influence on both earthly and metaphysical realms, as they held great reverence by the populace for possessing supernatural abilities, like controlling weather patterns, ensuring soil fertility, ordering sacrifices, and determining matters of life and death, while exhibiting an almost all-knowing insight.⁹³ From these powers derived others, such as their role as the kingdom's chief judge was rooted in their spiritual mandate.⁹⁴ This fusion of spiritual and political power was central to their rule, as it legitimized their governance and reinforced their supremacy over their subjects. Not only their spiritual authority was inseparable from their political power; as Strathern noted, but it “was actually held to *create* his power and the flourishing of his subjects”.⁹⁵ In this context, the arrival of Christianity enhanced their spiritual prestige and reinforced their legitimacy as divinely ordained rulers, who acted as intermediaries between their people, the Kongolese, and Christian spiritual worlds.⁹⁶ Ultimately, as the case of Afonso I shows, Christianity facilitated the concentration of power in the hands of the ruler, accelerating the processes of state-building.

First Contacts with the Missionaries and the Development of the Kongolese Church

Nzinga Nkuvu's (c.1440-1509) death in 1509 opened the contentions for the throne. His son Mvemba a Nzinga, baptized as Afonso I (1456-1542 or 1543) entered in competition with his non-Catholic brother, Mpanzu a Kitima.⁹⁷ Afonso's support of Catholicism would reveal decisive. In 1509, with the help of Portuguese arms and the support of the Christian nobility, he defeated his rival in battle, which

⁹² Strathern, 'Catholic Missions and Local Rulers in Sub-Saharan Africa', 154; Strathern, *Unearthly powers : religious and political change in world history*; Strathern, *Converting rulers*.

⁹³ Heywood, *Njinga of Angola: Africa's Warrior Queen*, 11–3.

⁹⁴ Heywood, *Njinga of Angola: Africa's Warrior Queen*, 11–3.

⁹⁵ Strathern, 'Catholic Missions and Local Rulers in Sub-Saharan Africa', 154 Emphasis belongs to the original text.

⁹⁶ Strathern, 'Catholic Missions and Local Rulers in Sub-Saharan Africa', 155.

⁹⁷ Thornton, *A History of West Central Africa to 1850*, 40–1; Bethencourt, *Racisms : From the Crusades to the Twentieth Century*, 86.

had, in turn, the support of the majority of the population, which was non-Christianized.⁹⁸ Killing Kitima allowed him to ascend to the Kongolese throne. During the battle, a prodigious vision of St. James assisted the Christian army's victory, creating one of the founding myths of Christianity in Kongo.⁹⁹

During his long rule (1509-1540), Afonso produced a rich corpus of letters, exchanged between himself and Portuguese high officials and rulers, that is fundamental to our understanding of the Kongolese and Portuguese relations in Central Africa.¹⁰⁰ They demonstrate how the kingdom was informed of Portuguese society and was increasingly involved in their affairs.¹⁰¹ The opposite was also true, as many Portuguese figures rose in prominence in Kongo, obtaining relevant roles in African society, and even becoming *clientes* of the Kongolese kings, thus gaining more status and authority than they could have archived in their homeland.¹⁰²

Afonso I succeeded in making the Kongolese Catholic church tied to royal authority. Like many of the high-born Kongolese, he had received his spiritual, literary, and linguistic education in Lisbon, and, before rising to the throne, promoted the spread of Christianity during his mandate as provincial governor.¹⁰³ His support of Christianity, born during the war of succession, was continued throughout his reign and strategically used for political gains. His faith allowed his son to be recognized as the rightful heir to his throne, and to further secure the alliance with the Portuguese, enabling him to maintain a royal bodyguard equipped with European muskets.¹⁰⁴ He also obtained to have one of his

⁹⁸ Bethencourt, *Racisms : From the Crusades to the Twentieth Century*, 86.

⁹⁹ Strathern, 'Catholic Missions and Local Rulers in Sub-Saharan Africa', 157.

¹⁰⁰ Thornton, 'Early Kongo-Portuguese Relations: A New Interpretation', 190–1.

¹⁰¹ Thornton, 'Early Kongo-Portuguese Relations: A New Interpretation', 192.

¹⁰² Thornton, 'Early Kongo-Portuguese Relations: A New Interpretation', 195.

¹⁰³ Thornton, 'Early Kongo-Portuguese Relations: A New Interpretation', 191; Strathern, 'Catholic Missions and Local Rulers in Sub-Saharan Africa'.157.

¹⁰⁴ Disney, *The Portuguese Empire*, 2, 66–7.

sons, Henrique, elected in 1518 as bishop for the Kongo with the nominal title of Bishop of Utica *in partibus infidelium*, exercising his seat from Mbanza Kongo.¹⁰⁵

After Henrique died in 1531, the Portuguese reclaimed their right to nominate the bishops on the basis of the authority granted by the Padroado.¹⁰⁶ His vacant seat was replaced three years later by the formation of a diocese in São Tomé, in the Gulf of Guinee, firmly under Portuguese control.¹⁰⁷ The Portuguese appointed a bishop, putting Kongo under his jurisdiction.¹⁰⁸ This put a firm halt to the development of local ordained clergy, even though the schools kept forming laic teachers, the *maestri*, and *chapel boys*, who diffused the Christian doctrines giving life to a much syncretic church.¹⁰⁹ These local actors became central to Kongo's Christianity, allowing the religion to ensure its continuity despite a limited number of foreign missionaries.¹¹⁰

Through Afonso's rule, the institution of the Kongolese Church remained both theologically and organizationally under local hands.¹¹¹ Dependence on Kongolese royal economic contributions prevented the Church from being used as an instrument of domination.¹¹² Afonso I contributed decisively during his reign to Kongo's Christianization, starting a large-scale education program. He patronized the construction of churches and royal schools for the local élite which imparted catechism, classes of literacy, and the Portuguese language.¹¹³ Afonso's heritage would then be continued by his successor, Diogo I (1545–61), who promoted the foundation of a large Jesuit school in the capital.¹¹⁴ Throughout his reign, the schools under his patronage formed '*mestres de escola*',

¹⁰⁵ Filesi, 'Le Relazioni tra il Regno del Congo e la Sede Apostolica nel XVI Secolo', 436–8.

¹⁰⁶ Strathern, 'Catholic Missions and Local Rulers in Sub-Saharan Africa', 159.

¹⁰⁷ Thornton, 'Afro-Christian Syncretism in the Kingdom of Kongo', 63.

¹⁰⁸ Thornton, 'Early Kongo-Portuguese Relations: A New Interpretation', 194.

¹⁰⁹ Strathern, 'Catholic Missions and Local Rulers in Sub-Saharan Africa', 152.

¹¹⁰ Strathern, 'Catholic Missions and Local Rulers in Sub-Saharan Africa', 159.

¹¹¹ Thornton, 'Afro-Christian Syncretism in the Kingdom of Kongo', 61.

¹¹² Thornton, 'The Development of an African Catholic Church in the Kingdom of Kongo, 1491–1750', 166–7.

¹¹³ Thornton, 'Afro-Christian Syncretism in the Kingdom of Kongo', 61.

¹¹⁴ Strathern, 'Catholic Missions and Local Rulers in Sub-Saharan Africa', 158–9.

teachers, and ‘chapel boys’ (*moços de capela*).¹¹⁵ The teachers had been often instructed in Portugal during their youth, and thus also assumed the role of translators when communicating with foreign clergymen was needed¹¹⁶. The kings employed both teachers and schoolboys as their agents, by sending them to neighboring regions to spread Christianity.¹¹⁷ This role, as John Thornton and Célin Fromont observed, and as I will have occasion to detail through the Capuchin manuals, would grant them a peculiar agency.¹¹⁸

The foreign missionaries played a relatively small role thanks to these local actors and intermediaries, schools, and teachers. This reverses the paradigm, supported by the early works of scholars like John Thornton and Adrian Hastings, that Christianity in the Kongo was strictly an alien religion, forcefully maintained by foreign missionaries.¹¹⁹ On the contrary, it was the high degree of organization the Kongoles Church had archived that provoked Portuguese resistance towards a local Kongoles church.¹²⁰ When the Capuchins arrived in the late seventeenth century, the Kongoles church had almost two hundred years of semi-autonomous development.¹²¹

Establishment of Propaganda Fide, and the Capuchin Mission in Kongo

With their affirmance of the *Padroado* rights and transfer of the diocese to the more easily controllable São Tomé, the Portuguese tried to suppress Afonso's project of making the Kongoles

¹¹⁵ Strathern, ‘Catholic Missions and Local Rulers in Sub-Saharan Africa’, 159.

¹¹⁶ Thornton, ‘Afro-Christian Syncretism in the Kingdom of Kongo’, 62–3.

¹¹⁷ Thornton, ‘Afro-Christian Syncretism in the Kingdom of Kongo’, 63.

¹¹⁸ Thornton, ‘Afro-Christian Syncretism in the Kingdom of Kongo’, 64.

¹¹⁹ Thornton, ‘Afro-Christian Syncretism in the Kingdom of Kongo’, 55–6.

¹²⁰ Thornton, ‘Afro-Christian Syncretism in the Kingdom of Kongo’, 55–6.

¹²¹ Thornton, *A History of West Central Africa to 1850*, 49.

Church independent from external support. The Kongolese, then, looked directly at Rome as a way to be freed from the *Padroado* system and develop local clergy. The Vatican, in turn, sought to exploit Kongolese discontent to erode Lisbon's *Padroado* and regain control of the nomination of the bishops in the Portuguese overseas territories. This would eventually lead to the establishment of the 1622 *Propaganda Fide*, evading the kings' privilege to nominate the clergy.¹²² During the Portuguese revolt of 1640, the Pope sought to exploit Portugal's weakened position by initiating the Kongolese Capuchin mission. In this turbulent context, the Kongolese attempted to pit these opposing powers against one another to maintain a balance of power in their favour.¹²³

Attracted by its conversion, the European missionary orders began arriving in Kongo. The Jesuits were the first to arrive, in 1548, followed by the mendicant orders: the Franciscans arrived in 1557–8, the Dominicans in 1570 and 1610, and the Discalced Carmelites in 1584–9 and 1610–15.¹²⁴ In 1540, the Portuguese king João III welcomed the first members of the Society of Jesus in Lisbon.¹²⁵ The order assumed for the crown a central role, as the Jesuits facilitated the exchange of information in the vast Portuguese empire, even contributing to fabricating its unitary image.¹²⁶ Strong of their powerful ties with the Portuguese crown, which privileged them at the detriment of the mendicant orders, the Company was invited in 1546 by the king of Kongo Diogo I (reign 1545–61).¹²⁷ The king, possibly looking to exploit them for his own advantage, had requested their arrival through his ambassador, Diogo Gomes, and the Jesuits joined the mission to bring the 'Good Word' to Kongo.¹²⁸

¹²² Hastings, *The Church in Africa, 1450-1950*, 72.

¹²³ Thornton and Monsterman, 'A Re-Interpretation of the Kongo-Portuguese War of 1622 According to New Documentary Evidence'.

¹²⁴ Thornton, *A History of West Central Africa to 1850*, 39.

¹²⁵ Marcocci, *Pentirsi ai Tropici*, 1–3.

¹²⁶ Marcocci, *Pentirsi ai Tropici*, 1–3.

¹²⁷ Heywood, *Njinga of Angola: Africa's Warrior Queen*, 60–1.

¹²⁸ Thornton, 'Afro-Christian Syncretism in the Kingdom of Kongo', 65.

Departing in 1548, the Society of Jesus soon left its mark in Kongo. Its capital Mbanza Kongo was renominated São Salvador from the name of one of the three churches built by order of the Jesuits.¹²⁹ Through the support of Diogo Gomes (c.1520-1560), a Jesuit of probable mixed Portuguese origin, they promoted a catechism in the Kikongo language, published in 1556.¹³⁰ While it did not survive in the documental record, the catechism probably served to translate concepts central to the doctrines of their faith into terms belonging to the religious universe of the Kongolese, continuing the syncretic tradition of Kongo's Christianity.¹³¹ Several years of experience in Western-Central Africa led to the production of another catechism, this one specifically directed at the Kimbundu-speaking Mbundu communities near the northwestern border of Ndongo.¹³² Produced in 1642 by António do Couto, a Jesuit native of Kongo, it was another movement towards the *accomodatio* of the local conception of Christianity.¹³³

By the early seventeenth century, the relations between the Kongolese crown and the episcopal authority of the bishop of São Tomé became increasingly tense, as both parties aimed to assert their control over the Kongolese church.¹³⁴ This discontent would be capitalized on by the Vatican, which was seeking to erode the *Padroado*. The political pressures in the Vatican of the cardinal and Popal representative in Lisbon Fabio Biondi led to the establishment in 1596 of a new, separate diocese from São Tomé, with a bishop appointed to serve in São Salvador.¹³⁵ The tensions persisted, however, as Lisbon continued to nominate the episcopal seat, and tensions with the Portuguese-appointed bishop continued during the reign of Álvaro III (ruled 1614-22).¹³⁶ The Portuguese refused the

¹²⁹ Filesi, 'Cappuccini Italiani nell'antico Congo (1645-1835) e recenti apporti Italiani alla conoscenza del loro patrimonio storico-missilogico', 455–7.

¹³⁰ Mkenda, *Jesuits in Africa*, 5.

¹³¹ Thornton, 'Conquest and Theology', 248.

¹³² Thornton, 'Conquest and Theology', 252.

¹³³ Thornton, 'Conquest and Theology', 252–3.

¹³⁴ Disney, *The Portuguese Empire*, 2, 67.

¹³⁵ Lavenia, 'Legazioni e Soldati', 209.

¹³⁶ Thornton, 'The Development of an African Catholic Church in the Kingdom of Kongo, 1491–1750'.

formation of local clergy, and in 1575 began settling in Luanda, a new Portuguese colony on Ngolan territory, which was increasingly important as a trading centre for slaves, thus attracting many Luso-African merchants, at great detriment of the Kongolese affairs.¹³⁷

The death of Alvaro III in the summer of 1622 brought a crisis that irreparably damaged the Portuguese-Kongolese relations.¹³⁸ The Portuguese tried to exploit the weakness of the crown during the succession and launched a major attack against Kongo, which was ultimately stopped in the same year with the two battles at Mbumbi.¹³⁹ After the battle and the breaking down of the relations with the Portuguese, the Jesuit missionaries were seen as their agents and were looked at with increasing suspicion.¹⁴⁰ They concentrated their efforts on the city of Luanda, under direct Portuguese control, leaving Kongo without their strong missionary presence.¹⁴¹ Here, they were ensured more protection than in São Salvador, where, on the contrary, they were dependent on Mani Kongo support.¹⁴² Linking the Portuguese *Conquista* with spiritual conquest, they took part in the Portuguese military campaigns.¹⁴³ In Angola, the Order was acting in colonial conditions and could exercise their proselytisation more rigidly and uncompromisingly than they ever could achieve in Kongo.¹⁴⁴

Their unwillingness to accommodate their dogmas in the colonial environment of Angola is confirmed by comparative studies of the Society's African catechisms. John Thornton, through the analysis of two Jesuit-produced catechisms, highlighted how, if in independent Kongo the Jesuits showed a more permissive inclination towards traditional religion, in the Portuguese-controlled

¹³⁷ Strathern, 'Catholic Missions and Local Rulers in Sub-Saharan Africa'.

¹³⁸ Thornton, 'Conquest and Theology', 250.

¹³⁹ Thornton and Monsterman, 'A Re-Interpretation of the Kongo-Portuguese War of 1622 According to New Documentary Evidence', 235.

¹⁴⁰ Mkenda, *Jesuits in Africa*, 4–6.

¹⁴¹ Thornton and Monsterman, 'A Re-Interpretation of the Kongo-Portuguese War of 1622 According to New Documentary Evidence', 238–9.

¹⁴² Mkenda, *Jesuits in Africa*, 35.

¹⁴³ Mkenda, *Jesuits in Africa*, 36–8.

¹⁴⁴ Mkenda, *Jesuits in Africa*, 34–7.

Luanda they produced a far more orthodox catechism.¹⁴⁵ The Jesuit-sponsored Ngolan catechism was more precise in suppressing the traditional religion as idolatry than the Kongolese, the differences between the two indicate how Ngola's evangelisation was carried out in a far more oppressive colonial context than in the independent Kongo.¹⁴⁶ More than anywhere else, the Society's mission in Angola "epitomized the link between Jesuit missions and Portugal's imperial adventures".¹⁴⁷

As the hostility with the Portuguese increased, the kings of Kongo began seeking direct contact with the Holy See, commencing direct contact with the Vatican. In 1583, Álvaro I had already sent the Portuguese merchant Duarte Lopes, as ambassador to Sisto V, asking for more missionaries to undermine the *Padroado*, to no avail.¹⁴⁸ A following mission, issued between 1604 and 1608, saw as protagonist António Manuel Neaku Ne Vunda, cousin of the King of Kongo Álvaro III.¹⁴⁹ The man departed on a sea journey to the Vatican, and welcomed by Paul V, pleaded with the Pope to grant the diocese of São Salvador independence from the Portuguese, requested more missionaries, the persecution of the New Christians, and protection from Luanda's merchants.¹⁵⁰ The long journey, however, proved too much for the ambassador, who died on the day of Epiphany, January 6, 1608.¹⁵¹

While Spain refused to recognize the 1640 Portuguese secession guided by the Bragança dynasty, two contenders of the Iberian powers took advantage of the situation to gain territory. The seventeenth century saw a shift away from the Portuguese monopoly on European trade, as the Dutch established their own trading posts in the region.¹⁵² They took the fight to the Habsburgs, conceiving the *Groot*

¹⁴⁵ Thornton, 'Conquest and Theology'.

¹⁴⁶ Thornton, 'Conquest and Theology', 256–8.

¹⁴⁷ Mkenda, *Jesuits in Africa*, 35.

¹⁴⁸ Lavenia, 'Legazioni e Soldati', 207–9.

¹⁴⁹ Lavenia, 'Legazioni e Soldati', 210.

¹⁵⁰ Lavenia, 'Legazioni e Soldati', 206–8.

¹⁵¹ Lavenia, 'Legazioni e Soldati', 210–1 The meeting between the Kongolese ambassador and the Holy Father and the black ambassador was registered by different Vatican sources, Vincenzo Lavenia has entirely transcribed in his book the version authored by Giovanni Battista Confalonieri (1561-1648), secretary of the Vatican ambassador in Portugal Fabio Biondi.

¹⁵² Strathern, 'Catholic Missions and Local Rulers in Sub-Saharan Africa', 154.

Desseyn, a plan aimed to strangle their predominance by striking their overseas territories, and, although briefly (1641-1648), they succeeded in occupying the Angolan capital Luanda to sabotage its slave trade.¹⁵³ The Holy See sought to take advantage of the weakness of Portugal to fight back the *Padroado* to reclaim their primate on the overseas apostolic endeavour.

In 1622, the *Propaganda Fide* was founded in Rome by Pope Gregory V.¹⁵⁴ The Roman Curia established this congregation to oversee and coordinate the global missionary efforts.¹⁵⁵ This institution largely contributed to the extraordinary explosion of missionary reports that emerged in the course of the seventeenth century, mainly from extra-European territories, and which were preserved inside its archives.¹⁵⁶ Well before its establishment, forces within the Church began to move towards the erosion of the *Padroado* rights. In a period between 1618-1620 Giovanni Battista Vives, permanent ambassador of the Holy See in the Kongo, together with the Spanish cardinal Gabriel Trejo, official protector of the Kongolese kingdom, and the cardinal Scipione Borghese, nephew of Paolo V, challenged the *Padroado* privilege by attempting to send non-Portuguese missionaries to the Kongo.¹⁵⁷ In response to Kongo's increased hostility towards Portugal, in 1624 the bishop of São Salvador moved to Luanda, even though formally the episcopal see remained in São Salvador.¹⁵⁸ To fill this gap, which threatened to leave Kongo without an ordained clergy, the kings of Kongo tried to acquire new clergy directly from the Vatican and welcomed the establishment of *Propaganda Fide*.¹⁵⁹ This would lead to negotiations for the establishment of a *missio* for the Kongo.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵³ Thornton, 'The Kingdom of Kongo and the Thirty Years' War', 196–208.

¹⁵⁴ Pizzorusso, 'Cardinals and the Congregation of the Propaganda Fide', 419.

¹⁵⁵ Pizzorusso, 'Cardinals and the Congregation of the Propaganda Fide', 419.

¹⁵⁶ Lavenia, 'Introduzione', XXIX.

¹⁵⁷ Filesi, 'Cappuccini Italiani nel Congo (Missio Antiqua)', 534.

¹⁵⁸ Thornton, 'The Development of an African Catholic Church in the Kingdom of Kongo, 1491–1750'.

¹⁵⁹ Thornton, 'The Development of an African Catholic Church in the Kingdom of Kongo, 1491–1750'.

¹⁶⁰ Filesi, 'Le Relazioni tra il Regno del Congo e la Sede Apostolica nel XVI Secolo', 434–8.

On June 25, 1640, *Propaganda Fide* established for the Kongo an apostolic prefecture, an institution purposely intended to circumvent the *Padroado*.¹⁶¹ Existing effectively only from 1645, this prefecture would survive roughly for two centuries, until 1835.¹⁶² In the same year, the Congregation imparts a first mission to the Kongo. Friar Bonaventura d'Alessano, nominated prefect by the cardinals of the Congregation, and other eleven capuchins of mixed origin, five Italians, three Aragonians, one Sardinian, and one Navarrese, embarked on a journey to Central Africa.¹⁶³ However, the apostolic twelve were troubled by not only the bureaucratic obstacles put in action by the Portuguese crown, that momentarily prevented their departure from Lisbon, but also by the Dutch occupation of Luanda.¹⁶⁴ They had been called there by the Kongolese, who pressed the Dutch to attack to weaken their Portuguese opponents.¹⁶⁵ The Dutch fleets launched a series of attacks on their overseas territories and attempted to capture Luanda twice, the first time in 1624, and then successfully in 1641.¹⁶⁶

Prevented from entry into Luanda, the Catholic friars had to find an alternative route. They found it through Spain, where Filipe IV (1621-1647) granted them access to Kongo, territory he still held as his by virtue of the Iberian union, the end of which the Spanish crown refused to acknowledge until the Treaty of Lisbon in 1668.¹⁶⁷ The group of Capuchins were able to reach the port of Mpinda in Soyo, on May 25, 1644. After the Capuchins visited the coastal province of Soyo, they reached the capital São Salvador on September 2, the day which marked the effective start of the Capuchin mission in Central Africa.¹⁶⁸ There, they met Garcia II (1641-1661), the king previously allied with

¹⁶¹ Filesi, 'Cappuccini Italiani nel Congo (Missio Antiqua)', 534.

¹⁶² Filesi, 'I Cappuccini nel Congo nei Secoli XVII e XVIII: Relazioni Edite e Relazioni Inedite', 462.

¹⁶³ Filesi, 'Cappuccini Italiani nell'antico Congo (1645-1835) e recenti apporti Italiani alla conoscenza del loro patrimonio storico-missilogico', 458.

¹⁶⁴ Filesi, 'Cappuccini Italiani nel Congo (Missio Antiqua)', 535.

¹⁶⁵ Thornton, 'The Kingdom of Kongo and the Thirty Years' War', 189–90.

¹⁶⁶ Thornton, 'The Kingdom of Kongo and the Thirty Years' War', 189–90.

¹⁶⁷ Filesi, 'Cappuccini Italiani nel Congo (Missio Antiqua)', 535.

¹⁶⁸ Filesi, 'I Cappuccini nel Congo nei Secoli XVII e XVIII: Relazioni Edite e Relazioni Inedite', 462.

the Dutch at the detriment of its Portuguese enemies and who now welcomed the presence of missionaries who were not affiliated with their colonial interests.¹⁶⁹

Chapter Two. The Capuchin Evangelisation Manuals.

Emergence, Contents and Purposes

This chapter focuses on the Capuchin manuals of evangelisation themselves, analysing their content and purpose. These works were realized by the Capuchins to respond to the challenges of the evangelisation of early modern Kongo. Each of them carried a specific agenda, based on the friar's own experience in Western-Central Africa, their role, and even personality are all factors that influenced their works' purpose. Beyond these individual perspectives, the Capuchins shared the common mission of spreading Christianity in the region. This chapter firstly traces the development of the manual of evangelisation as a genre that emerges from the larger Capuchin African literature and then moves to the inquiry of the contents and purpose of each of these texts. I will underscore how these two Capuchin manuals of Giovanni Bellotti da Romano and Bernardino d'Asti are central to this tradition. The chapter will conclude with reflections on the shared purpose of these proselytization guides. Firstly, I will highlight how they were designed to advise new missionaries destined to evangelize the kingdoms of Kongo and Angola. Secondly, they offered to guide their apostolic endeavours on how to approach local customs and beliefs. By showcasing the contents and purpose of the three manuals, this chapter highlights their role as both religious and didascalical tools, reflecting the missionaries' accumulated knowledge and their strategies for propagating their faith.

¹⁶⁹ Filesi, 'Cappuccini Italiani nel Congo (Missio Antiqua)', 535.

From Observation to Guidance: The Evolution of Early Evangelisation Manuals as a Genre

The first Capuchin expedition was instated by *Propaganda Fide* in 1640, but the Dutch occupation of Luanda prevented the friars' first landing attempt. In addition, on September 2, 1645, when the group of twelve led by Bonaventura d'Alessano arrived at the Kongolese royal court in São Salvador, quickly discovered that Christianity had survived for a century and a half without much external influence, firmly embedded in the local fabric of power.¹⁷⁰ Giovanni Francesco da Romano, part of the first twelve, authored what is considered the first Capuchin report on the mission. Destined for the cardinals of *Propaganda Fide*, *Breve relazione del successo della Missione* is a small (88 pages) but dense book.¹⁷¹ Published by the Propaganda in 1648 describes, as its name suggests ("short relation of the success of the mission"), to the cardinals of the Congregation the successes of the Capuchin mission, from its foundation to their journeys across Western-Central Africa. Furthermore, it dedicates a section to describing Kongo's geographic, ethnic, and traditional aspects.¹⁷² The book enjoyed quite a fame and was reprinted in the course of the seventeenth century in numerous Italian cities and even translated into French, Spanish, and, although partially, German.¹⁷³ Its success can be the result of the book's second part, due to the friar's exotic description of the African lands, however, the presence in this first capuchin report of a part reserved for elements of 'ethnography' hints that in

¹⁷⁰ Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 4.

¹⁷¹ Filesi, 'I Cappuccini nel Congo nei Secoli XVII e XVIII: Relazioni Edite e Relazioni Inedite', 463 *Breve relatione del successo della Missione de Frati Min. Cappuccini del Serafico P.S. Francesco al regno del Congo e delle qualità, costumi e maniere di vivere di quel Regno, e dei suoi Habitatori, descritta e dedicata agli Eminentiss. e Reverendiss. Signori Cardinali della Sacra Congregazione de Propaganda Fide, dal P. Fra Giovanni Francesco Romano, predicatore del medesimo Ordine della Provincia di Roma, e Missionario Apostolico in detto Regno*. Original manuscript can be found inside the Biblioteca Angelica di Roma.

¹⁷² Filesi, 'Cappuccini Italiani nel Congo (Missio Antiqua)', 537.

¹⁷³ Filesi, 'Cappuccini Italiani nell'antico Congo (1645-1835) e recenti apporti Italiani alla conoscenza del loro patrimonio storico-missilogico', 462 See also Filesi, 'Contributi dei Cappuccini italiani alla conoscenza dell'antico regno del Congo (Secoli XVII e XVIII)', 205.

addition to this exotism, there was an early implicit intention of describing the local culture aimed at aiding future proselytization in the region.¹⁷⁴

As the Capuchin mission proceeded, this ethnographic corpus began to be enriched by successive works. Giovanni Antonio da Montecuccolo (1621-1678), born near Modena as Galeotto Cavazzi, spent various years in Kongo on two different missions.¹⁷⁵ The first was conducted from 1654 to 1667, and, after a brief period of rest in Italy, he was appointed prefect and departed again, staying in Africa between 1672 and 1677, the year when due to tensions with his fellow friars he was removed from his role and sent back home.¹⁷⁶ Despite being considered by his superiors a ‘man of good Will’ but of ‘low intelligence’¹⁷⁷, Cavazzi became a remarkably prolific author.¹⁷⁸ His extensive recollections of his time in Central Africa were compiled into several books and drafts to be used for later publications. Some of these survived, the most notable being the three-volume codex of *Missione Evangelica al Regno del Congo*, also named Araldi manuscript from the name of the Modenese family who currently owns it.¹⁷⁹ It is a voluminous manuscript whose contents were later synthesized by Cavazzi and converged into the *Istorica Descrizione* (Bologna, 1667).¹⁸⁰ Both Cavazzi’s works house numerous descriptions of the central African spiritual life, such as the *kimpasi* initiation, dances, sacrifices, and natural wonders such as the Maopongo Rocks, and are enriched by a series of images picturing African landscapes, plants, and animals.¹⁸¹

Successive Capuchins continued to describe, in their reports to *Propaganda Fide*, the kingdoms of Western-Central Africa and the habits and ways of life of the Western-Central Africans. These

¹⁷⁴ Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 107.

¹⁷⁵ Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 107.

¹⁷⁶ Busolini, ‘Cavazzi, Giovanni Antonio’, 56.

¹⁷⁷ Busolini, ‘Cavazzi, Giovanni Antonio’, 56.

¹⁷⁸ Busolini, ‘Cavazzi, Giovanni Antonio’, 56.

¹⁷⁹ Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 49.

¹⁸⁰ Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 49.

¹⁸¹ Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 32–40.

descriptive sections are dedicated to presenting to the European readers elements of central African spirituality. The Africans are generally represented as profoundly superstitious, although with a natural attraction towards Christian symbols such as crosses.¹⁸² Albeit far from genuine and complete, these ethnographic sections represent the intention of the Order's proselytizers to understand the context of their mission and improve their chances of success.¹⁸³ This approach established a tradition inside the Capuchin literature carried on by numerous subsequent works. However, the implicit didactic purpose of these initial ethnographic descriptions soon became inadequate to match the complex environment of the Kongo. To truly improve the chances of success of their mission, the missionaries felt the need to produce works that more effectively aligned the specific conditions of Kongo with the Capuchin proselytization effort. They began to compile the knowledge they accumulated on the region in a set of advice precisely directed at the purpose of Kongo's evangelisation. The first of these guides began to emerge in 1650's, when Antonio da Teruel wrote his *Manuale per la buona directione di quella gente* and a *Libro delli catechismi e modo d'aministrare i sacramenti*, which he tried to get published by *Propaganda Fide*, without success.¹⁸⁴ The manuals, thus, remained and circulated solely in manuscript copies. Unfortunately, while some scholars noted the existence of Turuel's early manuals, none of these have survived.¹⁸⁵ However, the *Manuale* likely represents an early attempt to advise new missionaries on the challenges of Kongo's religious mission.

¹⁸² Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 32–40.

¹⁸³ Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 107.

¹⁸⁴ Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 56. The titles respectively translate from Italian: *Manual of the Good Direction of those People* and *Book of Catechisms and the Method of Administering the Sacraments*.

¹⁸⁵ Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 202.

Avvertimenti Salutevoli. Precedents, contents and aims

Giovanni Bellotti da Romano *Avvertimenti Salutevoli* became the first surviving guide to the evangelisation of Kongo.¹⁸⁶ He was born in Italy, at Romano di Lombardia, under the Capuchin Provincial administration of Brescia and the diocese of Bergamo.¹⁸⁷ During a rest period in Italy between 1679 and 1683, and after completing his general opus 1680 *Giornate Apostoliche*¹⁸⁸, he wrote his *Avvertimenti Salutevoli*.¹⁸⁹ The manuscript was conserved in Bergamo's Capuchin convent until its suppression on May 10, 1810¹⁹⁰, when the book was bought by Angelo Leoni, who then donated it to Bergamo's ecclesiastical library. The lengthy list of forty-nine *Avvertimenti*, or warnings, advice, takes most of the text, leaving space only for a brief starting dedication to the Capuchins readers and the cardinals of *Propaganda Fide*. "Their purple robes", writes Bellotti, "reflect the live fire of faith on the missionary working on the expansion of Christendom, the Lord's vineyard, in every part of the world".¹⁹¹ After seven years spent in central Africa in a missionary role that Bellotti continually praises throughout his book, he decided to compose a small volume of "necessary *avvertimenti*" for the friars who would follow him, "to practice well an office of such high regard".¹⁹²

The celebration of the role of the missionary carries on in the following dedication to the readers, fellow brothers preparing for their mission. Such an office carries with it many responsibilities, thus, it needs to be accompanied by instructions to not commit mistakes, since the evangelisation of Kongo,

¹⁸⁶ Sometimes called simply Giovanni Romano.

¹⁸⁷ 'Giovanni da Romano di Lombardia'.

¹⁸⁸ Giovanni Bellotti da Romano, *Le Giornate Apostoliche Con varij, nuoui e diletteuoli Successi, descritte dal P. F. Giovanni Belotti da Romano, predicatore capuccino della Provincia di Brescia, già missionario apostolico ne Regni del Congo, Angola e circonvicini: Opera dis tinta in tre parti; Con un copioso Indice delle case piu memorabili; Dedicata all'Ill.mo Sig.re Conte Carlo Vincenzo Giouanelli*. 1680. Capuchin General Archives, Rome. Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 57.

¹⁸⁹ Filesi, 'Contributi dei Cappuccini italiani alla conoscenza dell'antico regno del Congo (Secoli XVII e XVIII)'.

¹⁹⁰ Da Bergamo, *I Cappuccini Bergamaschi*, 10.

¹⁹¹ Da Belotti Romano, *Avvertimenti Salutevoli*, Dedic.

¹⁹² "perchè servano loro per ben pratticar' un'ufficio di sì rilevante considerazione". Da Belotti Romano, *Avvertimenti Salutevoli*, Dedic. All of the translation from Italian in this thesis are from its author.

says Bellotti, carries with it “the numerous particularities diametrically related to the success of the apostolic missions”.¹⁹³ Bellotti, drawing from his own experiences, aimed to offer guidance on how to navigate the complexities of their mission in Africa, both spiritually and practically. *Avvertimenti* III and IV deal with the spiritual fortification the missionaries need to acquire before leaving for Africa. The preparations are also physical and practical, as he lists a series of useful objects and tools the departing missionaries need to carry, alongside a prescribed regiment of fasting, to ensure the mission’s success. In the following parts (V to VII) Bellotti guides the newly departed friar on his journey across the Mediterranean to Lisbon, providing advice for the navigation in the sea and his stay in the city. After explaining how the missionaries should conduct themselves in Luanda (VIII to X), Bellotti turns to list a series of practical advice on how to administer the sacraments to the Africans. While the friar covers issues with the Holy Mass (XVII), and catechism (XVIII), baptism (XIX, XX), he concentrates preponderant attention on marriage (XXI to XXV). Additionally, similar attention is devoted to *Avvertimento* X, XLVI, LVI, and LVIII to discuss issues with the confession.

As Filesi pointed out, Bellotti dedicates a large part of his advice (seventeen out of fifty-nine) to denouncing the idolatry he perceives present in Kongo.¹⁹⁴ From *avvertimento* XXVII to XLIII, the Bellotti prepares the missionary on how to identify the idols (XXVII to XXXI) and recognize local medicinal practices associated with witchcraft (XXXII-XXXIII). XXXIV to XLIII, ten *avvertimenti*, are dedicated to local’s superstitions, and how to spot them. Importantly, similarly to his predecessors Cavazzi’s and Serafino da Cortona’s descriptions of idolatry and idols, much of Bellotti’s advice is dedicated to strategies for spotting idolatry and discerning it amongst local traditions perceived as more innocent and benevolent, hinting at the fact that it was not immediately

¹⁹³ “Apprender cognizione di non poche particolarità, attinenti diametralmente al profitto dell’Apostoliche Missioni” Da Bellotti Romano, *Avvertimenti Salutevoli*, Dedicata ai benigni lettori missionari.

¹⁹⁴ Filesi, ‘Contributi dei Cappuccini italiani alla conoscenza dell’antico regno del Congo (Secoli XVII e XVIII)’, 216.

clear to the missionaries whether or not local traditions were superstitious.¹⁹⁵ Only *avvertimento* XLVIII is left to discuss “di quanto devono operar i Missionari doppo la ritrovata dell’Idoli, fattucchiere, superstizioni, e simili; come anco dell’Autori loro”, or what the missionary ought to practically do when he finds and positively recognizes idolatry, superstitions, and witchcraft during his mission.¹⁹⁶

In his last set of advice, from XLVII to LVIII, Bellotti provides a framework for interrogating the local population. From XLVII to LIV, Bellotti discusses methods for questioning their adherence to the Ten Commandments (ignoring Commandments Fourth and Fifth). In LV to LVIII, the friar teaches how to interrogate the locals on the Church’s doctrine, the commandments, and capital vices, before concluding his list of advice with a heartfelt exhortation to the future apostolic missionaries (XLVIII). With this work, Bellotti created a model within Capuchin literature. Intended for *Propaganda Fide* and future missionaries, thus for internal circulation, it will be used almost half a century later by the colleague Giuseppe da Modena, who would copy Bellotti’s *Avvertimenti* in the fifth chapter of his larger *Viaggi al Congo*.

Viaggi al Congo. Precendents, Contents, and Aims.

Filippo Maria Munari (o Monari) was born probably at the end of 1676 in Modena.¹⁹⁷ Taking in 1697 the Capuchin vows, and, feeling devoted to the mission, he joined 1711 a group of missionaries departing to Kongo and Angola.¹⁹⁸ The temporal arch of his mission is between 1711, the year of

¹⁹⁵ More on Cavazzi and Serafino da Cortona in Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 109–20.

¹⁹⁶ Da Belotti Romano, *Avvertimenti Salutevoli*, 202.

¹⁹⁷ Piazza, ‘La Relazione Inedita di Fra’ Giuseppe da Modena OFM Cap. ‘Viaggio al Congo’ (1723)’, 253.

¹⁹⁸ Piazza, ‘La Relazione Inedita di Fra’ Giuseppe da Modena OFM Cap. ‘Viaggio al Congo’ (1723)’, 253–4.

Monari's departure, and 1721, when the friar left Angola for Brazil on his way back to Lisbon, and finally Italy. Notable is the Capuchin's stay in a monastery in Soyo, from 1713 to 1716, the year when the political situation resulted in the abandonment of the monastery and forced him to flee to Massangano.¹⁹⁹ The fort, built in 1582 to ensure control and surveillance of the Kwanza and Lukala Rivers, was considered the main Portuguese stronghold in interior Angola.²⁰⁰ There, the friar was employed to evangelise further inside the country.²⁰¹ He planned and executed various expeditions, using the rivers to navigate rough terrain and reach remote monasteries and isolated communities.²⁰² In 1720 he concluded his apostolate in Angola and embarked on a ship directed to São Salvaro de Bahia, Brazil, from which he departed the year after to return to Lisbon. Here, the friar was nominated prefect for Kongo and Angola and returned back to Africa, where he would occupy this role from 1722 to 1725. On this same year, on June 17, the vice-prefect communicated to *Propaganda Fide* the death of Giuseppe Monari, in the village of Golungo, located in modern-day northern Angola.²⁰³

The *Viaggi* constitutes a lengthy account of the Capuchin Giuseppe da Modena's travels in Kongo collected in 610 folios, organized in four books and twenty-eight chapters. If the first book extensively treats the capuchin's sea journey from Modena to Kongo, passing through the ports of Livorno and Lisbon, the remaining four focus on his missionary endeavours in Soyo, Kongo, and Angola. As Piazza noted, sections of the book adopt a style that, with their scrupulously detailed descriptions and simple language, reflect that it probably was a re-elaboration of a diary kept by the missionary during his apostolate in central Africa.²⁰⁴

¹⁹⁹ Piazza, 'La Relazione Inedita di Fra' Giuseppe da Modena OFM Cap. 'Viaggio al Congo' (1723)', 257.

²⁰⁰ Thornton, *A History of West Central Africa to 1850*, 86.

²⁰¹ Piazza, 'La Relazione Inedita di Fra' Giuseppe da Modena OFM Cap. 'Viaggio al Congo' (1723)', 261.

²⁰² Piazza, 'La Relazione Inedita di Fra' Giuseppe da Modena OFM Cap. 'Viaggio al Congo' (1723)', 262.

²⁰³ Piazza, 'La Relazione Inedita di Fra' Giuseppe da Modena OFM Cap. 'Viaggio al Congo' (1723)', 264. The locality of death is posthumously indicated in a memory at the back of the manuscript.

²⁰⁴ Piazza, 'La Relazione Inedita di Fra' Giuseppe da Modena OFM Cap. 'Viaggio al Congo' (1723)', 250.

The history and the influences of Monari's manuscript itself is a complex one, and one that is still in need of further studies.²⁰⁵ The manuscript was discovered in 1886 by Ercole Sola in the Biblioteca Estense di Modena.²⁰⁶ Sola stated that it had originated from a monastery in Sassuolo, suppressed in 1867/1868, where Monari spent a few years and likely conserved his work.²⁰⁷ After the suppression of the monastery, the manuscript ended up in Estense's collection.²⁰⁸ This is, however, only Sola's hypothesis, as there is no conclusive reconstruction of the manuscript's provenience due to the loss of access registries and inventory lists.²⁰⁹ In 1973 Calogero Piazza accomplished to transcribe extensive parts of the second and third book, concentrating especially on the parts dedicated to the mission in Soyo, published with the title *Giuseppe da Modena, missionario cappuccino in Soyo (1713-1716)*.²¹⁰ Although valuable for its precision, as Filesi pointed out Piazza's work is not an integral transcription, and, limited to Monari's experience in Soyo, is somehow lacking an extensive critical commentary.²¹¹

Many previous works informed Monari's book, which, beyond Bellotti's *Avvertimenti*, drew from a range of sources. Similarly to other Capuchin accounts, he heavily relied on the accounts of his contemporaries, nearly copying their works. This happened, as Ann Hilton pointed out, with Giacinto da Vetralla's account, which Giuseppe da Modena extrapolated and carelessly inserted into his own while forgetting to exit from Vetralla's narrative point of view.²¹² Moreover, Piazza noted that the descriptions of Soyo, its inhabitants, and its religious practices are integrally copied from Lorenzo da

²⁰⁵ Modena, *Viaggi al Congo* Piazza, 'La Relazione Inedita di Fra' Giuseppe da Modena OFM Cap. 'Viaggio al Congo' (1723)'.

²⁰⁶ Piazza, 'La Relazione Inedita di Fra' Giuseppe da Modena OFM Cap. 'Viaggio al Congo' (1723)', 248.

²⁰⁷ Piazza, 'La Relazione Inedita di Fra' Giuseppe da Modena OFM Cap. 'Viaggio al Congo' (1723)', 248.

²⁰⁸ Piazza, 'La Relazione Inedita di Fra' Giuseppe da Modena OFM Cap. 'Viaggio al Congo' (1723)', 248.

²⁰⁹ Piazza, 'La Relazione Inedita di Fra' Giuseppe da Modena OFM Cap. 'Viaggio al Congo' (1723)', 248–9.

²¹⁰ Piazza, 'La Relazione Inedita di Fra' Giuseppe da Modena OFM Cap. 'Viaggio al Congo' (1723)' See Filesi, 'Cappuccini Italiani nell'antico Congo (1645-1835) e recenti apporti Italiani alla conoscenza del loro patrimonio storico-missilogico', 468.

²¹¹ Filesi, 'Cappuccini Italiani nell'antico Congo (1645-1835) e recenti apporti Italiani alla conoscenza del loro patrimonio storico-missilogico', 468.

²¹² Hilton, 'European Sources for the Study of the Religious Change in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Kongo', 306–7.

Lucca, apostolic prefect of Kongo, who had written between 1702 and 1708 an account of his mission in Kongo.²¹³ Although Giuseppe da Modena was under Lorenzo's leadership, he did not refer in any way to his superior.²¹⁴

The title of Monari's book also possibly hints at its other inspiration, Girolamo da Montesarchio's *Viaggio al Gongho* (probably realized between November 1668 and February 1669).²¹⁵ The Campanian friar took part in the second mission to the Kongo, departing from Italy in 1646 and arriving in Kongo two years after, in 1648, when he began its mission.²¹⁶ His book, despite having an unrefined style, is primarily narrative, filled with information on Kongo's natural environment, the local fauna, and geographical notions.²¹⁷ Moreover, he discusses the local traditions, from the local idols, the *kimpasi* initiation rites, and magic stones in ample parts of his work.²¹⁸ Girolamo later returned to the Peninsula in 1668, sharing the return trip with his fellow friar Cavazzi, who would later celebrate him as an apostle and prodigious thaumaturge and extensively comment on *Viaggio al Gongho* in his *Istorica Descrittione*.²¹⁹

The fifth chapter of the second book of *Viaggi al Congo* hosts Monari's forty-one pieces of advice, destined for future missionaries in Central Africa. The main inspiration of this section of the text is clearly Bellotti's *Avvertimenti Salutevoli*. Monari closely followed the model that Bellotti created about forty years prior, the reason why the *avvertimenti* in his text closely resemble each other.²²⁰ By

²¹³ The account was written for Lorenzo da Lucca by his fellow Capuchin Fra' Filippo da Firenze, *Relazioni d'alcuni Missionari Cappuccini Toscani singolarmente del P. Lorenzo da Lucca che due volte fu Missionario Apostolico al Congo*, ms. Conserved in the Monastery of Montughi.

²¹⁴ Piazza, 'La Relazione Inedita di Fra' Giuseppe da Modena OFM Cap. 'Viaggio al Congo' (1723)', 251.

²¹⁵ Da Montesarchio, Girolamo. *II Viaggio del Gongho cioè è Relatione scritta da un nostro Mesionario Cappuccino*. [ca. 1668] Fondo Missioni Estere, Archivio Provinciale dei Cappuccini, Florence. Filesi, 'Contributi dei Cappuccini italiani alla conoscenza dell'antico regno del Congo (Secoli XVII e XVIII)', 212.

²¹⁶ Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 54.

²¹⁷ Filesi, 'Contributi dei Cappuccini italiani alla conoscenza dell'antico regno del Congo (Secoli XVII e XVIII)', 212–3.

²¹⁸ Filesi, 'Contributi dei Cappuccini italiani alla conoscenza dell'antico regno del Congo (Secoli XVII e XVIII)', 213.

²¹⁹ Filesi, 'I Cappuccini nel Congo nei Secoli XVII e XVIII: Relazioni Edite e Relazioni Inedite', 466.

²²⁰ Filesi, 'Contributi dei Cappuccini italiani alla conoscenza dell'antico regno del Congo (Secoli XVII e XVIII)'.

essentially copying Bellotti, he hints at the fact that he had indeed read his work. Despite the 1681 *Avvertimenti Salutevoli* was never published, it was read at least by Giuseppe Monari, and we can suppose the same was done by other departing missionaries. Monari's reliance on Bellotti's guidance hints at the fact that he agreed with his advice, and highlights the continuity of missionary strategies and the transmission of practical knowledge across the Capuchin missions in Kongo. Monari's work then seems a complex collage of previous works of Capuchin literature, namely Girolamo da Montesarchio, Giovanni da Romano, and Filippo da Firenze, enriched by details extrapolated from his own diary.

Missione in Prattica. Precedents, Contents and Purpose

Chronologically the last Capuchin manual taken under scrutiny in this thesis, Bernardino d'Asti stands out for unique contributions. Native of Northern Italy, and born in 1702 as Giuseppe Rabagliati, he took the Capuchin habit changing his name to one of the founding fathers of the order.²²¹ He arrived in Luanda in 1741, spending 7 years in Western-Central Africa, returning to Europe in 1748 on a boat directed through Brazil, and then Lisbon.²²² Though much of his life remains obscure, he narrates that he held the role of Prefect of the African mission until at least 1747, when illness forced his departure.²²³

The attribution of the unnamed manuscripts of *Missione in Prattica de PP. Cappuccini Italiani ne Regni di Congo, Angola, et adiacenti, brevemente esposta per lume, e guida de Missionarj a quelle*

²²¹ Perini, 'Bernardino d'Asti', 9.

²²² Perini, 'Bernardino d'Asti', 9.

²²³ d'Asti, *Missione in Prattica*, 3.

Sante Missioni destinati was clarified through a textual comparison.²²⁴ On 12 December 1749, he wrote a short relation to *Propaganda Fide* with the title *Rappresentanza che si fa del Stato delle Missioni de Padri Cappuccini ne Regni di Congo, Angola et adiacenti*.²²⁵ This relation played a key role in allowing the definitive attribution of the anonymous manuscripts of *Missione in pratica* to Bernardino d'Asti, thanks to the comparative phrasing analysis developed by various scholars, namely the Belgian missionary Jean Cuvelier (1882-1962), Teobaldo Filesi, and recently reconfirmed by Cécile Fromont.²²⁶

As I mentioned, there are three existing versions of the manuscript, preserved in Rome, Lisbon, and Turin. Cécile Fromont has dedicated a lengthy analysis of watercolour tables that enrich his two versions of *Missione in pratica*, paying special attention to the Turin one, which is particularly abundant in such elements. The large watercolour vignettes depict episodes of the missions, from scenes of evangelisation, including the distribution of sacraments such as catechism, Mass, and confession, to the travels of the 'missione volante'. Tables with a more ethnographic concern examine the construction of houses, religious idols, dances, and local leaders. Additionally, a set of naturalistic tables showcase African flora and fauna, such as palms, local fruits, the ostrich, flamingos, whales, and even fantastical animals such as the unicorn.²²⁷

Each vignette is paired with a descriptive commentary, providing context and explanation for the events or natural elements portrayed. Thus, focusing on the visual elements, the textual portion of this version of *Missione in pratica* is quite limited. The Vatican version still retains a visual

²²⁴ d'Asti, *Missione in Pratica* The version preserved in the Vatican Apostolic Library has been digitalized and it is available online on the library's website https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Borg.lat.316?ling=it. The Turin version is also available online through the Turin Civic Library's own website: <https://bct.comune.torino.it/manoscritti-e-rari/missione-prattica>. I am unaware if the Lisbon version is available digitally.

²²⁵ Filesi, 'L'Antico Regno del Congo nella documentazione dell'archivio della S.C. De Propaganda Fide', 110.

²²⁶ Cuvelier, Jean. 'Note sur la Documentation de l'Histoire du Congo', in *Bulletin des Séances de l'I.R.C.B.*, t. XXIV, fasc. 2, Bruxelles (1953), pp. 443-470. Filesi, 'Contributi dei Cappuccini italiani alla conoscenza dell'antico regno del Congo (Secoli XVII e XVIII)', 216; Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 51.

²²⁷ Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 85-95.

component, like the four tables between pages 48-49 and the one on page 101. They showcase only tables where the missionary is involved in his apostolic work imparting the sacraments: the plates hosted between pages 48 and 49 represent respectively the Mass and matrimony, and the confession and communion, while the one on page 101 depicts the friar travelling during the ‘missione volante’ and the baptism.²²⁸ In the Vatican version, the textual component is more thoroughly developed, expanding on the practical advice and missionary strategies that are only hinted at in the watercolour’s descriptions of the Turin version. For these reasons, as anticipated in the introduction, and not without some notable exceptions, the manuscript housed in the Vatican Apostolic Library is going to be the version of *Missione in pratica* under analysis and comparison in this thesis.

The chapters of Bernardino’s *Missione in Pratica* embrace a wide range of topics. He commences his work by stating the need for the missionaries to carefully evaluate their spiritual vocation, arguing that only the Capuchins with true divine inspiration should depart for the African mission (chapter I). Once decided to leave, the friars needed to reach Lisbon, the mandatory departure point to reach Central Africa. Here, they will need to procure some objects useful for the mission (chapter II). The arrival in Luanda is marked by the meeting with the Prefect of the Order, a figure that the newly arrived Capuchin should always listen to and follow his orders closely (chapter III). He dedicates the following chapter (IV) to the missionary life both in the convent and in the ‘missione volante’. Bernardino then proceeds to explain how the friar should behave with the locals (chapter V), and how to look after his own health (VI). The suggestions on how to successfully conduct the ‘missione volante’, including how to treat the enslaved people forced to follow the missionary, where to camp at night and precautions needed to meet the locals entirely occupy Chapter VIII.

²²⁸ For an elaborated comment and visual analysis of the tables present in the Vatican Library, see Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*.

Bernardino dedicates an entire chapter to the key task of preaching and administering sacraments. He stresses the importance of mastering both Portuguese and local languages like the Kikongo and relying on interpreters for communication. Discussing the sacraments individually in separate paragraphs, he offers specific guidance for administering baptism (involving the use of salt), penance (with emphasis on selecting trustworthy interpreters), Holy Communion, and Marriage, addressing local marital customs, abuses, and dispensations.

Another similarly large section is devoted to the illustration of local costumes, which the missionary distinguishes into positive and negative. He finds that certain practices, such as laws against adultery and theft, and the locals 'natural' devotion to Mary, align with Christian values and can aid the Capuchins' efforts (chapter X), while other customs, he deems idolatrous and superstitious, thus works of the devil and a threat to evangelisation (chapter IX). Bernardino another series of traditions that are neither beneficial nor detrimental to the mission, and, indifferent to the apostolic goals of the Order, and "must be tolerated" (chapter XI).²²⁹ He concludes the last chapter by listing the qualities that the missionaries need to have, warning against those, such as indiscretion, 'indiscreet' zeal, and inclination for solitude, which can be dangerous for the mission and even for the missionary himself (chapter XII). After the closing with a prayer, Bernardino leaves two notable supplemental resources at the end of the manuscript. A small set of rules useful for the Italian speaker to navigate the Portuguese language and a catechism with Portuguese and Italian parallel texts.

In the first pages of the manuscript, during the dedication to Mary, Bernardino d'Asti declares the goals of his *Missione in prattica*. Strong of the knowledge he accumulated during his African apostolic mission on the ways of evangelising in Kongo and Angola, he now puts this knowledge in service of the Order's newcomers "so they can more easily, and with more efficacy, instruct and guide

²²⁹"qualità loro che si devono tollerare" d'Asti, *Missione in Prattica*, 76.

those barbarian people, that are almost completely ignorant of their eternal salvation”.²³⁰ With his manual, as Bernardino declares, he hopes to “regulate, direction” the apostolic work of future Missionaries.²³¹ Bernardino aimed to instruct and guide, both spiritually and practically, missionaries departing for Africa, providing them with advice pivotal for the mission’s success.

Bernardino’s work is, however, not just a guide for the missionaries’ practical and spiritual endeavours. As Bernardino argues, the book serves a second purpose, its goal also being to ‘disillusion and caution’ those who wish to join the African mission, as well as to instruct those who are unfamiliar with the challenges of evangelising in that region.²³² Using an agricultural metaphor, the African evangelisation is compared to an arid field, that needs constant work from its apostolic farmers, the missionaries. They will need to closely follow the steps of their predecessors, and evaluate the conditions of the apostolic field; if they try to bring reforms without these conditions, they risk getting no harvest at all.²³³

The plea for a close consideration of the conditions, which Bernardino is determined to explain, means that he positions his work as a guide to the African-specific methods of evangelising. In the Turin version of the same book, the friar states even more directly that the main reason that inspired him to write the book was observing new missionaries, who arrived in Africa and planning to introduce reforms, instead cause notable damage to the mission.²³⁴ The zeal of the newcomers had to respect their Capuchin predecessors, who, aware of the fragile nature of the Kongolese and Angolan

²³⁰“acciochè con maggior facilità, e profitto ponino amaestrare e dirigere que Popoli Barbari, e quasi affatto incolti nella Via dell’eterna loro Salute” d’Asti, *Missione in Prattica*, 3.

²³¹ d’Asti, *Missione in Prattica*, 4.

²³² d’Asti, *Missione in Prattica*, 5.

²³³ d’Asti, *Missione in Prattica*, 4.

²³⁴ d’Asti, *Missione in Prattica*, Lettore.

mission, exercised caution in their approach. This plea appears comparably in all three manuals of evangelisation taken under scrutiny of this thesis, as the next chapter will highlight.

The Role of the Portuguese Language Instruction in the Capuchin Manuscripts

The Capuchins adorned their manuals with a rich corpus of drawings and watercolours with a didactic perspective. However, images are not the only extra-textual elements employed by the friars. Alongside the primary advice contained in the text, Bernardino leaves at the end of the Vatican manuscript some supplemental resources he deems useful for missionaries departing or arriving in Western-Central Africa. He provides a parallel text of Christian doctrine both in Italian and Portuguese, used to teach “not only the kids but also to the old and pagan people who convert”.²³⁵ A comparative study between this Christian doctrine and those previously written by Jesuit and Capuchin friars is still absent from current scholarship and would be an interesting topic to address. Moreover, he leaves at the end of the Vatican version of the manuscript a concise set of rules of the Portuguese language, useful for missionaries travelling through and inside their domains to learn the basics of the language. Bernardino aims to prepare the new missionaries to Africa not only spiritually and practically, but also linguistically, with the Portuguese language being a fundamental instrument in the missionary toolbox.

Instruction in the Portuguese language was instrumental to the good progress of the mission, a point reiterated by all the manuals taken under examination in this thesis. Bernardino reiterates that the language was useful to practice the Christian doctrine in the Portuguese ships, in Luanda, and in other Portuguese-controlled territories. However, he specifies that the language was also fundamental in

²³⁵ “non solo ai fanciulli, ma a Vechij, a Gentili che si convertono”. d'Asti, *Missione in Pratica*, 103 .

Kongo and Angola where it was learned by the *maestri*, or ‘teachers’ in Italian, and interpreters who then used it as an intermediary language to translate the Kikongo and other central African languages.²³⁶ Missionaries’ necessity to learn the language of an empire such as Portugal did not correspond directly to the pervasiveness of their colonial domination. In fact, the language did not align strictly with the extent of Portuguese colonial control and spread well beyond the borders of the cities, forts, and trading outposts they controlled. By the time the authors of the manuals wrote their works, the language certainly became a sort of *lingua franca* in Kongo and Angola, where it was taught at schools and known by the local interpreters and *maestri* who so frequently interacted with the Capuchins and, by the friar’s own admission, were vital to their success.²³⁷ Thanks to the knowledge of the language, the friars could approach the communities they were sent to evangelise.

Key Aspects of the Capuchin Manuals for Evangelisation.

This chapter analysed the emergence of evangelisation guides as a niche inside the larger Capuchin literature on Africa. Starting as early as 1648, this tradition initially commenced as concise reports to *Propaganda Fide*, however, they already incorporated observations on the Western-central African natural landscapes and religious and political scenarios. These elements distanced themselves from the accounts of armchair travellers, as Fromont underscored by analyzing the differences between the African watercolours in Cavazzi’s *Giornate Apostoliche* and the engravings of his Italy-based editor Alamandini, who curated his *Istorica Descrizione*.²³⁸ These ‘ethnographic’ observations of the results of the first accounts of the Capuchin fathers, and had been realized in Africa, during the long missions they conducted. The guides of evangelisation gradually emerged from this larger Capuchin tradition.

²³⁶ d’Asti, *Missione in Prattica*, 38.

²³⁷ Da Belotti Romano, *Avvertimenti Salutevoli*, 95 d’Asti, *Missione in Prattica*, 38.

²³⁸ Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 39.

Despite heavy reciprocal contamination, as influences in Giuseppe da Modena's manuscript show, and the striking similarities in the contents of the chapters prove, the missionaries also recollected their own first-hand experiences. This is a point that Bellotti and Bernardino all reiterate, it was their own experiences in Africa that pushed them to write their guides.

Their manuals of evangelisation retain a special place inside the Capuchin literature for two key aspects. The lists of advice absolved both the function of a spiritual and practical didascallic text and a correction to future missionaries' preconceptions of Central Africa.²³⁹ Firstly, the nature of these pieces of advice was, as the title of *Missione in Prattica* suggests, practical, and likely emerged from the challenges they faced on the ground. These practical sets of advice were aimed at the Order's newcomers, to offer them the guidance necessary to improve the chances of success of the Capuchin Central African apostolate. To do so, the guides had to go beyond the exotic descriptions of Africa, common throughout early modern Europe, that picture the African land as full of dangers and inhabited by barbarous savages.²⁴⁰ To facilitate their success of further expeditions, and to help the evangelisation efforts, the friars had to pursue the goal of making Africa more familiar. As Fromont pointed out in her commentary of Cavazzi's *Istorica Descrizione* this created a 'formative tension at the heart of the Capuchin Central-African corpus'.²⁴¹ Africa went from an imagined land, somewhat immobile in its *gentilità*, its heathenness, to a land where change needed to happen in order to fulfil the Vatican's universalistic ambitions. This shift from observation to the creation of a guide for effective missionary work marked the Capuchin's partial defiance of the traditional templates of representation of Africa.²⁴²

²³⁹ Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 16.

²⁴⁰ Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 202.

²⁴¹ Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 14.

²⁴² Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 9–10.

The Capuchins, for the sake of their spreading their faith, had to look past stereotypical views that not only constructed Africa as an alien place, thus rendering it more difficult to approach by future missionaries, but also threatened the success of the evangelisation. Bernardino is explicit on this: if a zealous missionary wants to bring reforms in Kongo, he can endanger the whole mission, in a context where they relied on the support of local rulers as well as *maestri* and interpreters, a point that will be further emphasized in the following chapter. They designed their guides to bridge cultural divides and prepare new missionaries for the complex task of integrating Christianity within a socio-political landscape where local actors held significant influence. In a way, these guides are an instrument the Capuchins provide to its members departing from Africa to come to terms with the syncretic concept of Christianity, which, before the start of the Capuchin mission, had developed autonomously for over a century and a half.

These practical guides, however, hide another purpose, more implicit. In order to encourage future missionaries to embark on the African mission, they had to represent the region as a place of profound spiritual significance, resonating with the authentic Franciscan ideals that Capuchins aspired to embody. While unique and challenging, they depicted the African lands as a place of genuine spiritual engagement, one that could be approached with Franciscan humility. The next chapter will delve into how the Capuchins framed their apostolic role in Africa as a path toward spiritual ascension, counterbalancing their apparent resistance to Western depictions of Africa. They were interested in replacing the vision of Africa as a radically foreign place, populated by savage barbarians, only to replace it with the myth of the ‘good savage’, crafting a vision of a place where a missionary could strive to imitate the example of the apostles.

Chapter Three. The Role of Local Agents. *Maestri*, Interpreters, and the ‘Church Slaves’

Upon their arrival in Africa, the Italian Capuchins began their apostolic duty, spreading the ‘true faith’ among Central Africans. This effort primarily involved administering sacraments such as baptism and marriage, which were particularly significant to the friars. Baptism symbolised their official incorporation into the Catholic Church, while marriage was intended to mark the abandonment of polygamy, a practice the Capuchins considered highly sinful. As Rabagliati observes, the Capuchins measured their success by the number of sacraments they administered, which they were required to document in annual reports to their Apostolic Prefect in Luanda.²⁴³ These records registered remarkably high numbers of conversions.²⁴⁴ According to Rabagliati, a single Capuchin could administer over fifteen thousand baptisms a year, along with an unprecise “proportionate number of marriages”, and in Soyo alone, more than four hundred marriages. Hearing confessions was a near-constant activity, particularly during the *missione volante* (the Capuchin’s itinerant missions).²⁴⁵

The practice of reporting extraordinarily high numbers of conversions through mass baptisms was a common trope in missionary narratives and had been well-established by other orders, such as the Franciscans.²⁴⁶ While the Capuchins celebrated such figures, these accounts, raise questions about how the friars could administer so many sacraments while operating with limited resources in unfamiliar and challenging environments. In reality, Central African missionaries were far from

²⁴³ d'Asti, *Missione in Prattica*, 2–3.

²⁴⁴ For the uses of baptismal records to estimate Kongo’s and Angola’s population, see Thornton, ‘Demography and History in the Kingdom of Kongo, 1550-1750’.

²⁴⁵ d'Asti, *Missione in Prattica*, 13.

²⁴⁶ Prosperi, *Missionari*, 93.

isolated. Instead, they were embedded in networks of local actors who played essential roles in supporting and enabling their work. Despite the missionary accounts that sought to portray their endeavours as solitary and heroic, akin to the Apostles, the involvement of local actors emerges clearly in the Capuchin manuals. The role of figures such as the *Maestri* (scholars and teachers), the interpreters, and the ‘Church slaves’, enslaved Africans exploited by the members, both Secular and Regulars of the clergy, challenges the narrative façade of apostolic sanctity and self-reliance.

The study of early modern Central Africa relies on sources produced in the West, which carry specific agendas. Missionary accounts, in particular, present their role as central and almost providential, legitimising their universalistic mission. These narratives often depict the Italian missionaries as the sole remedy to what they considered the ‘plague of *gentilità*’ (paganism) of African communities, positioning the friars as the only conduit through which Africans could access the Catholic promise of eternal life. The friars portrayed themselves as the spiritual centre of the communities they visited during their extensive travels across the region. In the African context, which they described as steeped in superstition and idolatry, the Capuchins framed themselves as bearers of unquestioned orthodoxy. This portrayal solidified their authority and justified their efforts. However, reliance on these perspectives limits our ability to reconstruct the spiritual life prior to the arrival of the missionaries. Nevertheless, a critical reading ‘against the grain’ of these accounts reveals glimpses into the pre-existing complex spiritual landscape. As I argue, these insights are particularly evident in the Capuchin evangelisation manuals, which, rich in practical advice for future missionaries, provide an invaluable point of view for scholars.

The manuals examined in this thesis collect a series of *Avvertimenti* (warnings and practical suggestions), to guide newcomers and correct potential missteps when faced with the unique conditions of African Christianity. While these texts, follow the Western paradigm of exalting the Capuchins’ salvific role and downplaying the contributions of local actors, their pragmatic nature necessitated the inclusion of references to local support due to its undeniable importance for the

mission's success. Capuchins such as Bellotti and Rabagliati, who experienced the challenges of the mission firsthand, recognized the necessity of offering guidance on interacting with and fostering relationships with local figures to ensure success. A central purpose of these Capuchin manuals was to instruct newcomers on the particular conditions of evangelisation in Central Africa. Thus important sections are dedicated to navigating the relationship with these local actors. This renders these manuals a useful lens for a nuanced understanding of the religious life of early modern Western-Central Africa. They highlight the indispensable contributions of these figures, who facilitated communication, bridged cultural differences, and addressed logistical challenges, thereby ensuring the viability of the Capuchin mission in Central Africa.

The *Maestri*. Educators, Catechists and Spiritual Leaders in Central Africa

Referred to by the Italian Capuchins *maestri* and known by the Portuguese as *mestres da Igreja*, 'church masters', they represented a key social figure in central African education and literary production, and in the celebration of religious rituals. The *maestri* began to emerge in Kongo between the first half of the sixteenth century from the country's élite and learned Portuguese, Latin, and Catholic doctrine.²⁴⁷ In the corpus of Capuchin images, they are recurring characters, always represented wearing a white cloth and wielding a staff bearing at its top a cross while lively discussing with the missionary.²⁴⁸ As Fromont highlighted, this depiction partially defies the image of the naked bow-armed savage firmly established in Western iconography.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁷ Fromont, 'Penned by Encounter', 1233.

²⁴⁸ Fromont, 'Penned by Encounter', 1233–4.

²⁴⁹ Fromont, 'Penned by Encounter', 1234.

In their African convents, the Capuchins established schools for the local children. According to Rabagliati, teaching must be a “dutiful occupation of the missionary”, and classes included reading, writing, and the Catholic doctrine.²⁵⁰ As pupils grow up, Bernardino explains that they begin teaching each other, with some becoming interpreters and even *maestri*.²⁵¹ In fact, despite Bernardino’s affirmations, the education of the Central African youth rested firmly in the local’s hands. King Afonso I (1509-1542) established during his reign an educational system autonomous from European powers. He sponsored a network of schools which independently formed its own teachers, managing to provide his subjects with a catechization and basic education.²⁵² While the missionary underscores that he personally formed and directed the education of these local teachers, to insist on the orthodoxy of their formation, it is implied that the *maestri* also held classes.

Beyond school teaching, as Rabagliati says, the *maestri* imparted Catholic instructions on several occasions.²⁵³ Bellotti mentions that the departing missionary must carry books of catechism in Portuguese to be gifted to the interpreters and *maestri*, which “are beneficial to the instruction of the young”, hinting at their role as religious teachers.²⁵⁴ The catechism was given not only to the young but also to adults, as the *maestri* were responsible for imparting fundamentals of the Doctrine in front of the whole community before the Mass on Sundays and festive days.²⁵⁵ Their role as catechists was renowned, with sources recognizing the erudition of these figures, impressing even the Carmelites with their knowledge.²⁵⁶ In Thornton’s words, “it was they who determined the theology of Kongo’s

²⁵⁰ “giovano per l’istruzione della gioventù”. d’Asti, *Missione in Prattica*, 21.

²⁵¹ d’Asti, *Missione in Prattica*, 21.

²⁵² Thornton, ‘Afro-Christian Syncretism in the Kingdom of Kongo’, 62–3.

²⁵³ d’Asti, *Missione in Prattica*, 24.

²⁵⁴ Da Belotti Romano, *Avvertimenti Salutevoli*, 38.

²⁵⁵ d’Asti, *Missione in Prattica*, 22.

²⁵⁶ Thornton, ‘Afro-Christian Syncretism in the Kingdom of Kongo’, 63.

Christianity, not the missionaries”, who, as he specifies “were few and devoted to performing sacraments rather than providing education”.²⁵⁷

The *mestres* did not only receive and then teach the catholic doctrine but, importantly, they participated in shaping it. They did so by assisting the missionaries in the linguistic translations and cultural adaptations required for creating dictionaries and catechisms patrocinated by the Society of Jesus and Capuchin Order.²⁵⁸ Their reliance on the work of the *maestri* is explicitly acknowledged in some of these didactic works, an example being the *Doutrina christiãa* written in 1624 by the Jesuit Matheus Cardoso (1584-1625). In the dedication of the vocabulary, Cardoso declares taking advantage of the *mestres* present in the court of the King of Kongo.²⁵⁹ Fromont interestingly observed how this same declaration is absent in the printings dedicated to the archbishop of Lisbon, suggesting an intentional omission with the purpose of obscuring the collaborative nature of these texts.²⁶⁰ Manuel Roboredo (d.1665), a half-Portuguese and half-Kongolese *mestre*, was victim of similar obscuragements for 1648 *Vocabularium latinum, Hispanicum, e Congense*.²⁶¹ This Latin-Spanish-Kikongo dictionary was commissioned by the prefect Bonaventura da Alessano, and was longly attributed to the Flemish Capuchin Joris van Gheel (d.1652), who had participated only partly to its realization.²⁶² As I have mentioned in the past chapter, the appendix of the Vatican’s *Missione in pratica* includes a small catholic catechism, meant to be distributed by the newcomers using the manual to teachers and *mestres*. It remains unknown if it was made in collaboration with these local agents, as Bernardino does not reveal any details on its production process. Similarly to Cardoso’s,

²⁵⁷ Thornton, ‘Afro-Christian Syncretism in the Kingdom of Kongo’, 64–5.

²⁵⁸ Fromont, ‘Penned by Encounter’, 1239.

²⁵⁹ Fromont, ‘Penned by Encounter’, 1239.

²⁶⁰ Fromont, ‘Penned by Encounter’, 1239.

²⁶¹ Boston University, ‘Roboredo, Kikongo Sermon | African American & Black Diaspora Studies’.

²⁶² Fromont, ‘Penned by Encounter’, 1239 Boston University, ‘Roboredo, Kikongo Sermon | African American & Black Diaspora Studies’.

Bernardino's work was directed to a European audience, thus, this raises the possibility of a similar lack of acknowledgement of local agents' contributions.

The *maestri* were native to central Africa and typically learned Portuguese at a young age. As such, they were key figures in facilitating dialogue between the missionaries and the local population. However, despite the missionaries' attempts to portray them only as interpreters, their responsibilities extended far beyond simple linguistic mediation. Their 'translating' involved not just the missionary's words or the Catholic doctrines in schools, but granted them a relevant role during the celebration of the sacraments. During Mass, they translated the sermons pronounced by the friars, a role reserved to them for their combined linguistical and doctrinal knowledge. The missionaries importantly mention the *maestri* guiding the local population's religious ceremonies such as chanting, prayers, rosaries, and other orations in the local language.²⁶³

The *mestres da igreja* are an extremely common apparition in the image corpus of both Bernardino's Roman and Turinise versions of *Missione in prattica*, where they are easily recognizable standing behind a Capuchin friar (maybe Bernardino himself) while he performs the sacraments and discussing with him on the trail.²⁶⁴ Multiple images reveal their leadership status. As the travelling missionaries approached a new village, they were welcomed either by the chief of the community or the *maestri* and their group of followers.²⁶⁵ If they travelled together with the missionary, they were excluded from transporting heavy loads and were depicted leading the caravan, wearing the *mpu*, all signs that marked their prestigious status amongst the region élite.²⁶⁶

²⁶³ d'Asti, *Missione in Prattica*, 48–9.

²⁶⁴ Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 156–9.

²⁶⁵ d'Asti, *Missione in prattica*, f. 10.

²⁶⁶ Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 156.

They had the duty to force the population to respect the Catholic festivities, attaining to the calendars provided by the missionary.²⁶⁷ They attended the celebration of matrimony, as these important figures also played a role in ‘componing and arranging’ them, and assisted the missionary during the baptisms, particularly, as Bernardino vividly describes, in holding still the children terrified of the baptismal water.²⁶⁸ And, although their role in the ceremony remains somewhat obscure, he specifically advises against entrusting the baptismal tools, especially the flask of holy water, to anyone else.²⁶⁹

When the Capuchins arrived in central Africa, their role was firmly established in the region’s religious, political and educational structure. Their guiding role in Catholic teachings and Christian rituals performed in front of the whole community, such as Mass, matrimones and confessions indicates the prominence of *maestri* in the community as social and spiritual leaders. While it assumed and often closely resembled the one of the missionary, it did not enter into conflict with it. Rather, it was parallel to it, as the *mestres* could not perform sacraments (or at least our Eurocentric sources fail to mention it). In turn, likely oversaw the overwhelming majority of the education and catechization of the African youth.

Interpreters. Linguistical and Cultural Mediators and their (Mis)Translations

The manual advises the missionary not to undertake his ‘missione volante’, as Bernardino calls the itinerant missions the missionaries used to undertake in Kongo’s and Angola’s countrysides, without

²⁶⁷ d'Asti, *Missione in Prattica*, 22.

²⁶⁸ d'Asti, *Missione in Prattica*, 41 d'Asti, *Missione in Prattica*, 23–5 d'Asti, *Missione in Prattica*, 48–9 For a more elaborated comment on the Capuchin visual corpus and an important comparison with the tables of the Turinese version of the manuscript, refer to Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 155–7.

²⁶⁹ d'Asti, *Missione in prattica*, f. 9.

the accompaniment of one or more interpreters.²⁷⁰ They were fundamental in interacting with non-Portuguese speakers, and, thus, always accompanied the missionary in his travels. Beyond translating, Bernardino d'Asti admits that the interpreters were “almost lawyers and testimonies in their defence (...) and he is helpful in a variety of situation in which the Missionary (...) could not have a timely cognition”.²⁷¹ Helping the missionaries navigate the cultural nuances of the African context hints at the interpreter's role as a cultural bridge between the Capuchins and the local communities encountered in their journey. While following the missionaries, their role as interpreters and mediators could grant them opportunities for resistance.

Their role as cultural intermediaries is explicit, as they were deeply involved in the celebration of the sacraments. The first and most important sacrament in which they aided the Capuchins was the confession, or penitence, as their linguistic support proved central when administering this sacrament to central Africans. As a noticeable amendment to the Roman Catholic standard doctrine of the sacrament of penitence, they were granted to sit next to the penitent person as he was telling his sins to the Capuchin father. The manuals needed to instruct the newcomers on this nuance of central African Catholic practice. So much so that they included the depiction of the scene where the interpreter sits next to the confessing friar in the didactic drawings that decorate the manuals.²⁷² The reason behind this peculiar approach to the rite is, once more, both linguistical and cultural. Firstly, through the interpreters the locals could communicate their sins to the friar in their local language, and, vice versa, the friar communicated to the repented sinners the appropriate prayers and amendments.²⁷³ Secondly, the interpreters, in a deeper conception of translation, could translate

²⁷⁰ d'Asti, *Missione in Prattica*, 34.

²⁷¹ “è quasi testimonio et avvocato in loro difesa (...) e giova in molte altre particolarità di cui il Missionario (...) spazio di tempo poutria haver cognitione” Da Belotti Romano, *Avvertimenti Salutevoli*, 73.

²⁷² d'Asti, *Missione in Prattica*, 48–9.

²⁷³ See the tables at d'Asti, *Missione in Prattica*, 48–9 In the digital version, the images are black and white, whereas the original at the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana has vibrant colours.

religious terms aligning with how they were conceptualized within Central African cultural and spiritual frameworks. This is recognized by the missionary, who suggests to newcomers to use their services despite the lack of a language barrier:

It is extremely difficult, and a rare occurrence, for a missionary to obtain a sincere and complete confession from those people without the assistance of an interpreter (...) if questioned directly, they would either tremble and remain silent or deny everything; but when I used the interpreter, they would immediately and freely confess their sins.²⁷⁴

The second sacrament in which local interpreters played a significant role was during the Mass and the associated sacrament of Communion. Due to its great holiness, this sacrament was traditionally reserved for individuals who had undergone thorough spiritual preparation. However, the exclusivity of Communion, according to Bernardino, attracted the interest of wealthy Kongolese, who would corrupt interpreters to vouch for their readiness to receive the sacrament.²⁷⁵ The interpreters leveraged their role during the Mass to both their economic advantage and the enhancement of élite prestige, who bolstered their social standing through access to an exclusive and revered religious ritual.

Translation played a role in the Matrimony, the third sacrament in which the interpreters helped the missionary. During the traditional announcements of marriages, when the couple is publicly presented, Bernardino advises that the missionary should not place full trust in such declarations. If the husband was an influential person, he explains, the interpreters and the enslaved people at the missionary's service could have been corrupted or threatened.²⁷⁶ This was done to hide a possible 'Canonical impediment' that would otherwise prevent the marriage from taking place.²⁷⁷ Bernardino

²⁷⁴ "essere difficultosissimo et un a caso, che posso il Missionario ottener da quella Gente una sincera, ed intiera Confessione senza l'assistenza dell'Interprete. (...) Se interrogati direttamente: tremando o non rispondevano, o negavano ogni cosa e valendomi dell'Interprete, manifestavano subito liberamente li suoi peccati" d'Asti, *Missione in Prattica*, 44.

²⁷⁵ d'Asti, *Missione in Prattica*, 48.

²⁷⁶ d'Asti, *Missione in Prattica*, 53.

²⁷⁷ d'Asti, *Missione in Prattica*, 53.

recalls an episode when the Prince of Soyo, aiming to marry a cousin, tried to employ a similar strategy in collusion with the missionary's interpreters.²⁷⁸

The missionary sources cue us to the fact that their role as linguistic and cultural mediators was a site of resistance and agency. From this role as the interpreters to the Capuchin missionaries, locals could receive material benefits, not solely from the missionary. When Bellotti narrates the desired qualities of the interpreters, he suggests that he should not be overly greedy for the presents gifted to him.²⁷⁹ This points to the fact that local people exchanged goods to secure specific favours from interpreters, who leveraged their role as the 'voice' of the missionary. Besides the local people, the missionary granted him gifts to the interpreters who followed him in his apostolic travels, to repay him for his service, and to keep him loyal to himself.²⁸⁰ His role as a cultural and linguistic bridge made the interpreter a figure contended between the missionary and the local communities. This ambiguous relationship affected their translating work, which they exploited for their own advantage:

(...) not infrequently, these interpreters, either for their own personal convenience or having been persuaded, maliciously omit certain expressions of the missionary or deliver altered or fabricated translations that contradict the missionary's intent. The unfaithfulness of such actions sometimes leads to significant consequences, especially in the administration of the sacraments (...).²⁸¹

Bernardino does not hide his reliance on the interpreters during the confession. The interpreters could gather material benefits from their mediatory role during the administration of the sacrament. When

²⁷⁸ d'Asti, *Missione in Pratica*, 54–6.

²⁷⁹ “che non siano sovverchiati da regali dell'altri, perché come la cupidiggia di temporali cose è d'ogni male, vera radice” Da Belotti Romano, *Avvertimenti Salutevoli*, 74.

²⁸⁰ Da Belotti Romano, *Avvertimenti Salutevoli*, 76.

²⁸¹ “non rare volte tali Interpreti, per loro speciali convenienze o sedotti, passano maliziosamente in silenzio alcune espressioni del Missionario, o espongono, o fingono ripetizioni alterate che saranno contra l'Intenzione del medemo: Causando l'Infedeltà di questi tali disordini tallhora di non lieve conseguenza, massime nell'aministrazion de sacramenti” d'Asti, *Missione in Pratica*, 39.

hearing confessions, previously corrupted by local people, they repeated back to the friar not the true words pronounced by the penitent, but “a fake confession, fabricated according to their whim”.²⁸²

As a solution to these interferences, Bernardino suggests the missionary learn some notions and phrases of the local language:

(...) to uncover the deceptions that some malicious interpreters tend to practice, knowing that the Father cannot understand them when he is preaching or teaching Christian doctrine in Portuguese. Although the Kongo language initially seems extremely difficult, in practice it is not so at all (...) so much so that many missionaries have learned it.²⁸³

The fact that confession was not private was scandalous for the European audience, who understood not only the doctrinal problems that this practice posed but also the shift of power dynamics. Diogo I (1545-1561), provided an example of such issues when in 1550 did not hesitate to use confessions to persecute political opponents planning to overthrow his throne.²⁸⁴ These episodes I have here reported clue us that the linguistic mediation was the site of a dynamic interplay of power when interpreters acted not merely as passive conduits of the missionaries' message but as active participants who could influence its delivery. Even though the Eurocentricity of the sources here reported does not allow us to fully discern the contents of these mistranslations, we can interpret them as instances of resistance. The interpreters' silence in response to a word spoken by missionaries, or their re-translations, cue us to moments when local agencies subtly challenged or reshaped the missionary narrative. These (mis)translations, and the associated exchanges of gifts from both sides

²⁸² “una confessione finta e composta a loro Capriccio” d'Asti, *Missione in Prattica*, 43.

²⁸³ “(...) per scouprir gli inganni, che alcuni maliziosi interpreti costumano praticare, sapendo di non essere intesi dal Padre, qual predicando, o insegnando la dottrina Christiana in Lingua Portuguese. Che sebben la Lingua Conghese a primo incontro sembra difficoltosissima, in prattica però non è già tale (...) cosicche molti missionari l'hanno imparata” d'Asti, *Missione in Prattica*, 39.

²⁸⁴ Thornton, ‘Afro-Christian Syncretism in the Kingdom of Kongo’, 63–4.

towards the interpreters, reveal tensions and negotiations within an evangelisation process that would be otherwise framed as entirely one-sided.

The ‘Church Slaves’

Besides the interpreters, the Capuchins were served by numerous parties of “Church slaves”. Enslaved people became by the mid-seventeenth century a primary economic activity throughout coastal Africa, driven by the demand of European powers such as Portugal, England, the Netherlands, France, and Denmark, who purchased enslaved people to supply forced labour for the Americas²⁸⁵. Despite their diverse and often contradictory discourses on enslavement, the Capuchins concurred with it.²⁸⁶ “Possessing slaves subject to the missionary”, says Bernardino, “may seem at first sight inappropriate, and inopportune for our Capuchin state. It is not certainly so (...) we Capuchins cannot sell or make from them any profit”.²⁸⁷ Bernardino attempts to minimise the moral conflict inherent in enslavement by framing it as merely an ‘apparent’ contradiction with the Capuchin vow of poverty. At the same time, attempting to distance the Capuchins from the profit-driven slave trade, emphasizing that their ownership of enslaved individuals is not for financial gain but for the practical necessities of their mission. In this context, Bernardino’s justification aligns with a broader pattern observed by Walden, who notes that much of the Capuchins’ anti-enslavement discourse was not directed at the institution of slavery itself but at the exorbitant profits derived from it, which were

²⁸⁵ Walden, ‘Capuchins, Missionaries, and Slave Trading in Precolonial Kongo-Angola, West Central Africa (17th Century)’, 48.

²⁸⁶ Walden, ‘Capuchins, Missionaries, and Slave Trading in Precolonial Kongo-Angola, West Central Africa (17th Century)’, 49–50.

²⁸⁷ “La manutenzione di schiavi soggetti al missionario, che a prima vista tal’uno potrà giudicarla a prima vista impropria et inconveniente al nostro stato cappuccino; non è certamente tale. Poiché sapendo essi che noi Capuccini non possiamo venderli né costumiamo ricavarne alcun lucro temporale” d’Asti, *Missione in Pratica*, 33.

perceived as monstrous and morally reprehensible.²⁸⁸ Bellotti's *Avvertimenti Salutevoli* obscures the moral dilemma, and employs, instead, a much more racialised discourse. Enslaved individuals were acquired, in Bellotti's words, because of their innate predisposition "for the necessary servitude of the Church, and convents", a justification rooted in the well-diffused concept of the African 'natural slavery'.²⁸⁹

These enslaved people resided both in the Order's convents and, after the rainy season, were charged with following the missionary in his travels in the countryside.²⁹⁰ On the 'missione volante', they were forced to carry the essential tools needed for the journey and the instruments essential for the Capuchin and his apostolic endeavour. A portable altar, to celebrate the Mass in the open, a net to protect the friar from the insects and mosquitoes, and a large umbrella to protect him from the sun.²⁹¹ The didactic nature of the manual's images does not miss to show these instruments and their practical use. They depict valuable details of life on the trail, showing, for instance, scenes of the Capuchin caravan marching in the countryside and resting.²⁹² At night, they set up the caravan camp, sleeping on mats placed circularly around the missionary net where the friar lay, and lighting fires to protect him from wild animals.²⁹³ Their practical importance is once again the reason for their appearance in the Capuchin manuals; their lives and their existence would otherwise be relegated to the margins of the missionary texts. The undoubtedly Eurocentric works of Bellotti and Bernardino d'Asti make the agency from the forced labour enforced by the Capuchin friars highly debatable. However, these

²⁸⁸ Walden, 'Capuchins, Missionaries, and Slave Trading in Precolonial Kongo-Angola, West Central Africa (17th Century)', 56.

²⁸⁹ "per necessario servaggio della Chiesa, et Hospitii" Da Belotti Romano, *Avvertimenti Salutevoli*, 76.

²⁹⁰ d'Asti, *Missione in Prattica*, 26–7 Da Belotti Romano, *Avvertimenti Salutevoli*, 91.

²⁹¹ d'Asti, *Missione in Prattica*, 35 The Mass in the open was decorated with drapes and textiles to ensure the dignity of the ritual and enhance its visual impact in an attempt to impress the locals. It should also be surrounded by aromatic herbs.

²⁹² d'Asti, *Missione in prattica*.

²⁹³ d'Asti, *Missione in prattica*.

works, by warning the departing friars of the dangers that such people posed to the mission, let us have a glimpse of what those instances of resistance could be.

The power relations between the enslaved people and their missionary masters were subject to shifts. During the journey, the ‘church slaves’ had the duty of physically transporting the friar himself in a mobile litter. There, the friar could avoid the fatigue and dangers of the travel, remaining protected from the insects by a net. A scene of such a mode of transportation is depicted in the watercolours of the Turinese version of *Missione in pratica*²⁹⁴ and here described by Rabagliati:

As the missionary is carried in a litter, accompanied by African servants and an interpreter, they often travel quickly to reach their designated destination. However, it sometimes happens that, upon spotting people approaching from a distance in search of the missionary, they divert their path to avoid encountering them and having to stop. Therefore, the missionary (...) must remain vigilant and carefully observe the surroundings. If they see anyone in the fields, they must stop the litter. (...) It is not uncommon for disputes to arise among locals, each striving to ensure that the missionary passes through their region rather than another, fearing that their area might miss out on a visit from the mission that year.²⁹⁵

The enslaved people at the missionary service exploited the fact that the missionary, enclosed in the net, could not see where they were travelling. This opened an opportunity for them to diverge their path in order to avoid a specific village, location or people without the friar knowing. This could have granted these ‘church slaves’ a degree of resistance and evasion to the missionary’s orders, and perhaps, we can infer that they could leverage his guidance to obtain, not dissimilarly to the

²⁹⁴ d’Asti, *Missione in pratica* A picture of the watercolour present also at Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 162.

²⁹⁵ “Siccome il Missionario portato in rete, accompagnato da negri di suo servizio, e da qualche interprete; tutti che corrono velocemente per presto giungere al Luogo determinato quando tall’hora scuoprano gente da lontano, che viene a procurar il Missionario; Succede alcune volte, per sfugirne l’incontro, divertono il Camino per non haver occasione di fermarsi! Pertanto il Padre (...) dovrà vigilare e costantemente osservare, se vede in Campagna alcuna Persona, e vedendone farà fermare la Rete. (...) succedendo non rare volte, contese per impegno di far passar il Missionario piuttosto in una parte, che nell’altra parte del Paese, ciaschedun temendo di non poter haver in quell’Anno Missione nella sua Terra”. d’Asti, *Missione in Pratica*, 41–2.

interpreters, some economic advantage. Their knowledge of the roads and paths to follow was likely fundamental to the success of the ‘missione volante’; this reliance could even potentially put the travelling missionaries in danger: while travelling,

Bellotti specifies that the friars should grant them plenty of gifts so they are not abandoned on the trail, with great danger to the friar’s lives.²⁹⁶ While describing a dangerous river crossing, Bernardino declares that “In these instances, the Missionary must allow himself to be guided by the Africans, [missing], as through divine providence, they consider it a great dishonour should any harm come to the Missionary due to their fault”.²⁹⁷ To avoid dangerous deviations or mutinies, the missionaries advise to follow two strategies. On one hand, they have dispensed ‘gifts’ as a form of payment for their guidance through the central African territories.²⁹⁸ On the other, they manumitted the enslaved individuals which showed unruliness and lack of discipline. Their liberation, according to Bernardino, was perceived, paradoxically, as a punishment that exposed them to much harsher enslavement.²⁹⁹ In this reasoning, Bernardino seeks to paternalistically justify the ownership of enslaved individuals by the Capuchins, however, their protection likely shielded them from slave hunters, warring parties, and merchants, and the brutal conditions of the transatlantic slave trade.

A remarkable difference occurs in the manuals in how their treatment is mandated. This difference marks the missionary's vulnerability to the groups of enslaved people they employed. While in the convents, the missionaries suggest treating them harshly, keeping their food rations low, and mandating punishments for every mistake they make.³⁰⁰ The treatment improved during the

²⁹⁶ Da Belotti Romano, *Avvertimenti Salutevoli*, 76.

²⁹⁷ “in questi passaggi, il Missionario si ha da lasciar governar da Negri [missing], per divina providenza hanno per grande affronto, che per loro colpa succeda male al Missionario” d’Asti, *Missione in pratica*, f. 10v.

²⁹⁸ Da Belotti Romano, *Avvertimenti Salutevoli*, 77.

²⁹⁹ d’Asti, *Missione in Pratica*, 34.

³⁰⁰ Their enslavement is racially determined: “di poca capacità e discorso intellettuale (...) gente aspra, capatosta e molto villana nei suoi tratti, per innata condizione (...) sono schiavi delle nostre chiese, stando in casa si devono tenere a freno, né lasciargli tante libertà: anzi, quando commettono un qualche notabil errore siano castigati” Da Belotti Romano,

missionary's long journeys, because of the precarious condition of the missionaries, who relied on them for multiple practical reasons. These instances reveal moments where the missionaries let us grasp their position as 'saviours' was subject to many limitations, given by their almost total dependence on the local's knowledge of the region's geography and their physical labour.

Central African Agency in the Capuchin Evangelisation Manuals

The manuals highlight how the friars had to operate within the central African society.³⁰¹ They demonstrate how the missionaries had to calibrate their religious zeal according to its special conditions of evangelisation, incarnated in the presence of agents, such as the powerful *maestri*, interpreters and 'church slaves'. The manuals had the objective of warning departing friars about their potential to influence, control and even harm their apostolic endeavours. This necessity crashed, however, with the Capuchins' need to assume a central position in the narrative of central African proselytization.

An ambiguous relationship existed between the Capuchins and the local agents, a dynamic reflected in their manuals. These texts reveal a strain between the necessity of warning future missionaries of the local agents' importance and the Capuchin apostolic fervour which sought to obscure their agency. Within their narrative framework, the Capuchins depict everything African as synonymous with superstitious and potentially idolatrous while trying to elevate themselves as the sole harbingers of the Catholic Faith. This lack of acknowledgement reflects broader patterns within missionary literature, where the essential role of local intermediaries was often understated or erased to align

Avvertimenti Salutevoli, 76 For more on the connection between slavery and racism in Kongo, see Bethencourt, *Racisms : From the Crusades to the Twentieth Century*, Chapter 6.

³⁰¹ Fromont, 'Penned by Encounter', 1233.

with Eurocentric narratives of religious and cultural authority. Even the Italian word itself *maestri*, as the Portuguese *mestres*, used by Western sources to refer to these local agents, operates within this same ethnocentric bias that desires to diminish this African social figure as mere teachers.

Despite this rhetorical effort, the Capuchin failed in their attempts to hide and undermine these figures' importance. The empirical nature of the manuals erodes the perception of missionary dominance and unilateral authorship in the evangelisation process, and the missionary reliance on these figures is evident in the practical advice they left for incoming friars. Bellotti and Bernardino could not ignore transmitting their advice to guide them on how to interact and manage these regional key actors. As the manuals instruct them in the local agents' role as mediators and translators, they also warn them on instances when the translation was not loyal to the original, revealing moments of defiance of the Capuchin proselytization. Their silences and word alterations shed light on evangelisation efforts that were shaped by negotiations that extended beyond mere linguistic translation. Such interactions uncover a more complex and reciprocal dynamic within the missionary context, challenging the traditional portrayal of evangelisation as a purely hierarchical and unilateral endeavour.

Chapter Four. Capuchin Narrative Frameworks and the Transformation of *Missio* into *Missione*

In the preceding chapter, I highlighted how the manuals authored by Rabagliati and Bellotti utilised redactional techniques to frame their evangelisation efforts in a providential light to hide the agency of local actors. This chapter first devotes its attention to a more detailed examination of these frameworks and narrative *topoi*, which, although pioneered by the Society of Jesus during their global missionary endeavours, became a reference point for all religious Orders engaging in extra-European

missionary work. Building on their sophisticated narrative tropes, this chapter secondly explores how the Capuchins imbued their manuals with a distinct Franciscan spirit, partially shaped in the Americas. These manuals express their *esprit de corps*, rooted in asceticism and humility, and suffused with millenarian mystical currents. Finally, the conclusion of this chapter seeks to move beyond these Capuchin narrative tropes, revealing how, in Adriano Prosperi's terms, the idealized concept of *Missio* was transformed into the practical *Missione*.³⁰²

Miracles and Prodigious Conversions as Missionary *Topoi*

This section aims to highlight the alignment of the Capuchin manuals by Bellotti and Rabagliati with a broader missionary tradition that idealized the concept of *Missio*. This was archived in missionary reports, which constituted a specific genre of literature adhering to defined *topoi*. One key strategy employed to exalt the extraordinariness of the Mission was the frequent reporting of miracles by friars working outside of Europe. For example, in the Capuchin Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi's *Istorica Descrizione de tre regni Congo, Matamba ed Angola*, miracles are a reoccurring feature of the narration.³⁰³ However, Cavazzi's overly-zealous emphasis on these occurrences, including the sanctification of a missionary colleague, led the Cardinals of *Propaganda Fide* to discipline him, authorizing the publication of his work in 1678 only after these instances were expunged.³⁰⁴ While the manuals of Bellotti and Bernardino are more restrained than Cavazzi's, they nevertheless align with this broader missionary tradition of including numerous references to

³⁰² Prosperi, *Missionari*, 74.

³⁰³ Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi da Montecuccolo, *Istorica descrizione de' tre regni Congo, Matamba, et Angola situati nell'Etiopia inferiore occidentale e delle missioni apo stoliche esercitatevi da religiosi Capuccini [...], nel presente stile ridotta dal P. Fortunato Alamandini*, Bologna, Monti, 1687.

³⁰⁴ Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 14–5.

miraculous events. One notable example is the portrayal of pagans' 'natural' and 'spontaneous' veneration of Christian symbols such as the cross and images of the Virgin Mary.³⁰⁵

Reports of miraculous occurrences frequently appear to proliferate in missionary accounts during the baptisms, which were celebrated as the symbolic entry of neophytes into the Christian community. Scholars have noted the common association of such miracles with baptism, underlining the sacrament's ability, as affirmed by the Council of Trent, to confer salvation.³⁰⁶ Vincenzo Lavenia has recently described this phenomenon as 'sacred metamorphoses', encapsulating the profound, yet miraculous, transformative effects of conversion as depicted in the missionary reports narratives.³⁰⁷ Through these accounts, the process of conversion is framed as a *bildungsroman*, while baptism serves as the narrative climax of the neophyte's spiritual journey.³⁰⁸ Following closely the Jesuit model, this narrative strategy was particularly employed by the Capuchins in the conversion of rulers, who held significant roles as community leaders. Lavenia has demonstrated the use of this strategy in the Capuchin reports on Kongo, specifically in accounts of the prodigious conversion of Queen Njinga.³⁰⁹

Miracles served as a narrative trope that created visible proof of the legitimacy of the Church's endeavours in lands beyond Europe, acting as tangible signs of divine favour and approval. As a narrative trope, miracles elevated the missionary role by framing them as divine intermediaries, directly aligned with the apostolic tradition. Just as the apostles were depicted as performing countless miracles during their evangelisation, missionaries were portrayed as continuing this sacred legacy, thus reinforcing their spiritual authority and imbuing them with an aura of sanctity. This association

³⁰⁵ d'Asti, *Missione in Pratica*, IV, 3 Da Belotti Romano, *Avvertimenti Salutevoli*, 20.

³⁰⁶ Baldovin, 'Sacraments in General, Baptism and Confirmation', 122–5.

³⁰⁷ Petrolini, Lavenia and Pavone, *Sacre metamorfosi*.

³⁰⁸ Lavenia, 'Introduzione', XLVI.

³⁰⁹ Lavenia, 'Principesse e principi', 50–60 See also the report Francesco Maria Gioia *La Maravigliosa Conversione alia Santa Fede di Cristo della Regina Singa*. And chapter V of Cavazzi, *Istorica descrizione*, 1687. For more on the conversion of rulers with a global scope, see the recent monography Strathern, *Converting rulers*.

between miraculous occurrences and missionary work not only legitimized the Church's expansionist efforts but also provided a powerful rhetorical tool to inspire faith among the Order's members. Simultaneously, these accounts demonstrated the Order's achievements to rival religious Orders, showcasing their effectiveness in spreading Christianity to rival religious Orders.³¹⁰

La Capuchin *Santa Povertà* and the Capuchin Manuals

The 'Indies', depicted as a cornucopia of miracles and conversions, began to hold a prominent place in the missionary imagination.³¹¹ The Capuchins, while drawing on the narrative tropes developed by other missionary orders, did more than simply adopt them. The missions allowed the Capuchins to reiterate the values that distinguished them from the rest of the Franciscan family. The order, even during Francis's life, was torn by internal tension revolving around balancing the friars' physical necessities with the deprivations mandated by their vows.³¹² As Gleason observed, the Capuchin order established itself with the sole purpose of strict obedience to the rule of poverty.³¹³ When Paul V's bull *Alias felicitis recordationis* allowed the capuchins full independence from the broader Franciscan family, the extra-European offered an invaluable testing ground for their virtues of poverty, humility and penitence engrained in the *imitatio Christi*.

Their manuals, though firmly rooted in the conventions of the missionary report genre, were distinctly infused with Capuchin-specific *topoi*. Similarly, the Kingdom of Kongo and its neighbouring regions came to occupy a central place in the Capuchin imaginary, shaped by their identity as the most radical branch of the Franciscan family. Here, too, the mission was portrayed as a testing ground for spiritual

³¹⁰ Lavenia, 'Introduzione', XXXVI.

³¹¹ Prosperi, *Missionari*, 88–9.

³¹² Gleason, 'The Capuchin Order in the Sixteenth Century', 31.

³¹³ Gleason, 'The Capuchin Order in the Sixteenth Century', 32.

fortitude, a land where friars could engage in an apostolic struggle to bring salvation to those characterized as living in the darkness of paganism. While other religious Orders like the Jesuit often emphasized intellectual engagement, institutional dominance, and strategies for integrating Christianity into local governance, or *accomodatio*, the Capuchins leaned on their Franciscan ethos which found humility, a deep commitment to poverty, mystical inclination toward nature at its core. These tropes emerge when Bernardino triumphantly motivates their success in central Africa with the exemplarity of these Capuchin ideals, which find there their perfect testing ground. To Africa's impureness corresponds proportionally ample spiritual gains:

The observance of our Holy Poverty is professed in the simplicity of having little, purity and chastity at its core, and obedience in what is gentle and measured (...). But observing Holy Poverty is put to the test in the choice of much.

Purity is tested in the face of impurity, and obedience in what is harsh and challenging.³¹⁴

According to Giovanni Bellotti, "Great hardships are inseparably conjoined to the Apostolic Mission".³¹⁵ For him and his fellow fathers, the missionaries needed to experience suffering and deprivations during the mission akin to those of Christ. Accordingly, each of the manuals (chapters III, IV and VIII of Bellotti, and I and II in Bernardino) emphasizes thorough pre-mission preparation for both the body and the soul, consisting of prayers and severe fasting regimes.

Because of its dangers, Bernardino reiterates the importance of Vocation, and the possession of these Franciscan virtues for the success of the Mission, threatening great dangers to the missionaries who venture in Africa without them. He, however, immediately reassures his readers, stating that those who possess true Vocation should not fear these hardships:

³¹⁴ "l'osservanza la nostra Santa Povertà professata nel ristretto del poco. la purità e castità del suo centro; l'obbedienza nel soave, e discreto (...) Ma l'osservar la Santa Povertà nelli Arbitri tallhora del Molto. La purità è a fronte dell'impuro, i. L'Obbedienza nell'Aspro, e difficoltoso" d'Asti, *Missione in Pratica*, 9.

³¹⁵ "Grandi disagi all'Apostolica Missione vanno inevitabilmente congiunti" Da Bellotti Romano, *Avvertimenti Salutevoli*, 296.

Poverty will be delightful, and at times, even amidst abundance, they will not cease to be poor. Walking through fire will bring no pain; the difficult will become easy. What seems impossible will become possible, and what is burdensome and harsh will be transformed into sweetness for both the soul and the body.³¹⁶

This emphasis on the transformative power of divine assistance, on spiritual elevation through poverty, suffering and simplicity of the Mission added a distinct Franciscan dimension to their portrayal of evangelisation in Africa.

The Capuchin New Pentecost

Emphasizing the Mission as a journey to find divine grace through humility and the embrace of trials, the manuals promised the incoming friars a mysticism that was as spiritual as physical. Unlike the mystic visions of St. Bernard, the Franciscans considered them as profoundly physical experiences. Arnold Davidson argued how Francis' obtainment of the *stimate* exemplifies this great bodily turn that Saint Francis brought to Medieval mysticism.³¹⁷ This 'bodily turn' introduced by Francis reverberated through Franciscan spirituality and found new expression in the Capuchins' extra-European missions, which promised both spiritual and physical renewal. The retrieval of the idea of Mission as a spiritual pilgrimage assumed a special place in the missionary imagination, in which the friars will be able to concretely rely on the help of God and the Holy Spirit, who speaks and inspires them to carry out their exalted ministry in His name:

A special grace of the Holy Spirit (...) of this truth, I experienced firsthand, so much so that (...) when I went to perform my duties, especially to destroy idols, prevent diabolical sacrifices, or disrupt other acts offensive to God, I felt

³¹⁶ d'Asti, *Missione in Prattica*, 11.

³¹⁷ Davidson, 'Miracles of Bodily Transformation, or How St. Francis Received the Stigmata', 451–3.

inwardly strengthened in such a way within my heart that not only did I persist in my efforts, but I almost knew no fear.

Indeed, the fierce and armed Ethiopians fled in terror upon seeing me raise the holy crucifix before their eyes.³¹⁸

After describing his firsthand experience, in which he seemingly touched God's Holy Spirit with his own hands, the friar goes on to specify that this spirit will empower all missionaries willing to voluntarily embark for Africa. God, he assures, will infuse them with "spirit, knowledge, and strength for their most important office", resembling a new 'missionary' Pentecost.³¹⁹

Another passage, this time taken from the *Missione in pratica*, highlights the transformative power of divine inspiration and apostolic zeal, as narrated by the missionaries:

The spirit of some, who in Italy are faint-hearted enough to flee from an ant, is transformed when they commit to going to Ethiopia among lions. The love of God can transmute the soul of the timid into one that is intrepid and steadfast (...) so that the zeal to save souls in the apostolic ministry may reform even the most timid temperament, making it strong and resolute in the face of any hardship.³²⁰

In this extract, Bernardino reflects a broader narrative common in missionary literature, which often emphasizes the spiritual elevation achieved through self-sacrifice and the struggle to overcome fear. This rhetorical device serves to inspire potential recruits by framing missionary work as a transformative and sanctifying journey, where personal weaknesses ('ants') and dangers ('lions') are overcome through divine assistance and devotion to saving souls. The infusion of the friars of missionary zeal, perceived on a physical level, is framed as a new Pentecost, that can triumph over natural human limitations, gifting the missionary the ability to "walk through fire".³²¹ This

³¹⁸ Da Belotti Romano, *Avvertimenti Salutevoli*, 21.

³¹⁹ Da Belotti Romano, *Avvertimenti Salutevoli*, 21.

³²⁰ "L'animo di alcuni che in italia sono pusillanimi che fuggirebbero da una formica, e si impegnano ad andar in ethiopia tra i leoni.. l'amor di dio puol trasmutar l'animo del timido in intrepido e costante (...) che lo zelo di salvar anime nel ministero apostolico valga a riformar ogni più timido temperamento, col renderlo forzoso e risoluto di fronte a qualsiasi travaglio" d'Asti, *Missione in Pratica*, 33.

³²¹ d'Asti, *Missione in Pratica*, 11.

contributed to aligning the missionary's efforts with divine will and framing them as part of a larger, providential plan.

This missionary zeal is not found only in Africa. In 1523, just two years after the completion of Cortés conquests, Francisco de los Ángeles de Quiñones, general of the Franciscan Order, sent a group of friars to Mexico intending to convert the local population. Prosperi observed how the document carrying Quiñones' orders creates many of the *topoi* of the *Missio* genre; these are imbued with Franciscan fervour, millenarism and its apocalyptic promises. Even the number of friars, twelve, with its symbolic significance attempts to link the friars to the Apostles, reinforcing their identity as heralds of its divine message. The same number of missionaries, this time Capuchins, landed on the coasts of Soyo in 1645, during the first Capuchin expedition in central Africa, narrated by Giovanni Francesco Romano. The repetition of this motif indicates a prosecution of Franciscan spiritualism in Kongo and Angola. The extracts above suggest the Capuchins adapted the *topoi* of the *Missio* genre to central Africa, creating continuity between earlier Franciscan missions in the Americas and their efforts in Kongo and Angola.

The African context granted the Capuchins a unique and stimulating field to apply the Franciscan *topoi* of the *Missio* genre. The Capuchins' inability to establish numerous stable friaries in the African countryside, coupled with the challenges of doing so in areas (like the independent Kingdom of Kongo) not under Portuguese military control, led to the enduring reliance on an itinerant form of evangelisation, what Bernardino calls 'missione volante'. This itinerant model allowed them to extend their proselytism over vast regions, embodying the Apostolic ideal, and allowing the retrieval of the mission as eremitic *peregrinatio*.³²² In this sense, the African mission became an experimental field for conjugating the Franciscan ethos and their mystical and millenarian aspirations together with

³²² For more on the mission as pilgrimage see Prosperi, *Missionari*, 74.

the pragmatic demands of a challenging mission landscape. As we will immediately see, Nature was part of this equation.

African Natural Environment and Franciscan Ascetism

I will now highlight how through the Central African mission, the Capuchins crafted the image of a place where they could retrieve the original poverty which characterizes their Order's most highly considered value. This idealization of the African environment accorded with the Franciscan appreciation of Nature. Saint Francis deliberately chose against theologies, like the ones of the Cathars and Albigenses, that condemned the empirical world as a form of diabolical creation. Nature, understood as God's creation, was for the Franciscans a site of spiritual elevation. It characterized key moments of the life of St. Francis himself, as the cliff of La Verna in Tuscany was traditionally considered the theatre for his mystic ecstasy and successive stigmatization.³²³

We can deduct the particular interest of the Capuchins for the African nature from the number of publications that touch on the subject. Cavazzi's *Istorica Descrizione* covers climate, soil fertility and even fish and snakes between its fifth and ninth chapters.³²⁴ Some standalone works have survived, such as the brief but significant report of Serafino da Cortona.³²⁵ What is clear is that African flora and fauna assumed a peculiar relevance in the Capuchin's mendicant spirituality. Not without a certain vein of exotism, the Capuchins narrated miraculous specimens that confirmed the presence of God in Nature and its pervasiveness and needed to inspire devotion in their readers. Fruits in the

³²³ Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 65–6.

³²⁴ Filesì, 'Contributi dei Cappuccini italiani alla conoscenza dell'antico regno del Congo (Secoli XVII e XVIII)', 209.

³²⁵ Serafino da Cortona, *Animali quadrupedi, volatili, aquatili, che ne Regni del Congo, Angola, Dongo, Matamba, Ghanghella, Chignaca, Ongò, OmbaeZanza, io frit Francesco da Pavia Cappuccino Missionario Apostolico per piii anni ne sudetti Regni vidi vivi, e morti, al- cuni de quali hebbi anche in mio potere*, 1680-1688. Firenze, Ms. filza 6381, Archivio Mediceo del Principato. See Filesì, 'Contributi dei Cappuccini italiani alla conoscenza dell'antico regno del Congo (Secoli XVII e XVIII)', 219.

Parma watercolours are marked by crosses³²⁶, and birds shout the name of Christ in Monari's *Viaggi al Congo*.³²⁷ The Capuchins represented Congo as an intrinsically Christian landscape to come to terms with the European-crafted image alienness of the continent; thus the presence of these sacred signs served to reassure the future missionaries that God does not abandon them even in those remote lands, confirming their salvific mandate.³²⁸ Bernardino d'Asti, for instance, when representing an enormous venomous snake, resembling the scene of the snake's temptation on the Tree of Eden, said to inhabit Kongo, makes sure to remind his readers that thanks to God's providence no friar was ever murdered by these dangerous animals.³²⁹

This episode suggests how the most revealing examples of the Franciscan representation of Nature were conveyed visually. In her monography on the Capuchin African image corpus, Fromont revealed the series of Franciscan-specific mechanics of vision, techniques of optical realism and somatic effects that surrounded their depictions of African nature.³³⁰ Far from being just reassurance for incoming friars, this complex array of visual strategies was employed to portray the contemplation of nature as a religious experience.³³¹ The Capuchins did not hide their awe in front of such natural marvels, and some became recurring elements found in multiple reports. Maybe the most relevant of these *topoi* surrounded the *Pedras Negras* at Pungu a Ndongo, a group of monolithic rocks situated in today's Angola. These were portrayed by Cavazzi, who followed Bellotti's *Missione Evangelica* and his description of Rock's prodigious presence.³³² In Fromont's words, the Capuchins aimed at "archiving the sublime and bringing to viewers visions of both the transcendent grandeur of the world

³²⁶ Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 86.

³²⁷ See especially Chapter II in Modena, *Viaggi al Congo* and Filesi, 'Contributi dei Cappuccini italiani alla conoscenza dell'antico regno del Congo (Secoli XVII e XVIII)', 215.

³²⁸ Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 65–9.

³²⁹ d'Asti, *Missione in pratica*.

³³⁰ Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 65.

³³¹ Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 69.

³³² Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 67–8 Da Belotti Romano, *Giornate Apostoliche*, 173–74.

and the immanence of God”.³³³ Fromont associated the well-honed representation of Francesco’s ecstasy on La Verna with these Capuchin representations of the *Pedras Negras*, pointing out the transfer of these iconographic *topoi* from Italy to the Kongolese missionary context.³³⁴ In Africa, the friars were promised a space to live according to the steps of their Order’s main Sant figure, according to the Post-Tridentine Franciscan ideal of the *conformitas* (likeness), as embodiment, and imitation of Christ.³³⁵ As the opening page of Belotti exemplifies, spiritual ascesis, or as he calls it, ‘the desire to sanctify himself’³³⁶, was rendered a fruitful currency to be spent to bolster the Order’s numbers in Africa, which was pictured as perfectly aligned with their Franciscan ethos.

³³³ Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 69.

³³⁴ Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 74–9 For more images of Francesco on La Verna see Davidson, ‘Miracles of Bodily Transformation, or How St. Francis Received the Stigmata’.

³³⁵ Fromont, *Images on a mission in early modern Kongo and Angola*, 75.

³³⁶ ‘desiri di santificar se stessi’ Da Belotti Romano, *Avvertimenti Salutevoli*, 56.



Illustration 1, above: Giovanni Belotti da Romano, frontispiece to *Avvertimenti Salutevoli agli Apostolici Missionari, specialmente nei regni del Congo, Angola e circonvicini*, 1680. **Source:** the Biblioteca Monsignor Giacomo Maria Radini Tedeschi, Bergamo, Italy. Ms 45. Photograph of the author, kindly authorized by the Biblioteca Monsignor Giacomo Maria Radini Tedeschi.

From the Abstract *Missio* to the Practical *Missione*

Across the missionary literature, the ‘Indies’, as a synonym for a remote land, assumed an almost mythical role in the missionary imaginary. As Adriano Prosperi observed, these regions were depicted as lands teeming with pagan souls in desperate need of salvation, where conversions were plentiful and seemingly effortless to achieve.³³⁷ This portrayal was deeply influenced by the mystical and millenarian currents that pervaded the missionaries who embarked on the Spanish and Portuguese overseas territories. These currents were not only pervasive but were purposely cultivated and exploited to serve as powerful tools for missionary recruitment. Through relations crafted for internal circulation that exalted extra-European missionarism.³³⁸ They did so by portraying the ‘Indies’ as an unparalleled path of spiritual elevation, as the ideal land for a friar seeking to follow the path of the apostles, and in the case of the Capuchins, also the steps of their main Saint of reference, Francis, during his spiritual ascesis and *conformitas* with Christ.

These rhetorical devices employed to emphasize (extra)European missionary endeavours had multiple purposes. They sought to strengthen the unity and sense of belonging of their Order, while increasing recruiting for the missions while, on an individual level, it allowed the missionary to portray their life as spent ‘on the field’, as tireless labourers for the Faith.³³⁹ These were drawn from Franciscan values, which became propaganda tools employed to attract to central Africa the most mystically inclined Capuchins. Ideals of poverty, ascetic connection towards nature and a retrieval of the *Missio* as a form of pilgrimage were all central elements present in the Capuchin African reports. While they aimed at the edification of their audience, through the narration of constructive Christian examples, they aimed to foster the recruitment of new members for their Orders and exalting

³³⁷ Prosperi, *Missionari*, 88.

³³⁸ Prosperi, *Missionari*, 89.

³³⁹ Hilton, ‘European Sources for the Study of the Religious Change in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Kongo’, 303.

internal readers and propaganda for the external.³⁴⁰ The manuals, while aiming to provide concrete support to departing missionaries, also intended to imbue them in these narratives.

This chapter described the adherence of the Capuchin central African corpus, and in particular, of Bernardino and Bellotti's manuals, to established *topoi* of missionary narrative structure. Moreover, the Capuchins, heirs of the Franciscan tradition, followed closely their mystic zeal, including their topos surrounding their Order's ethos and spiritual ascesis through Nature. Although miracles and other narrative devices portrayed the region's conversion as part of an ineluctable providential plan, in reality, the miraculous change of heart of the convert remained a phantasy, a missionary myth, rather than a lived reality. As Prosperi underscored, these reports were obligated to obscure the difficulties of the mission, as the abstract idea of *missio* fell against the concrete reality of the *missione*.³⁴¹ The Society of Jesus had to overcome this gap between doctrine and the practical needs of the evangelisation context. In their Brazilian *vilas* (or *aldeias*) the Jesuits assumed pastoral duties despite formal prohibition that was established by one of the Jesuits' funding doctrinal books, the *Costituzioni* (1550).³⁴²

The Capuchins in Africa faced similar contradictions. As evidenced by the manuals' didactic function, evangelisation required substantial 'accommodation' to the local political and religious landscape, local actors *in primis*. In Bellotti's words, the reality of conversion was much closer to: "wage war against hearts, against desires, where the greatest resistance lies (...) From hearts of stone, dominated by vices, to hearts of flesh, filled with the heavenly spirit".³⁴³ Interestingly employing the imagery of war, the friar resuscitates the unquenched crusading spirit that still pervaded the extra-

³⁴⁰ Prosperi, *Missionari*, 90.

³⁴¹ Prosperi, *Missionari*, 82.

³⁴² Prosperi, *Missionari*, 82.

³⁴³ "guerreggiare contro de' cuori, contro le volutà, in cui maggior resistenza concorre (...) Da cuori di pietra, dominati dai vizi, a cuori di carne, pieni di spirito celeste" Da Bellotti Romano, *Avvertimenti Salutevoli*, 19.

European Missions³⁴⁴, revealing how close the entanglement between colonization and conversion really was, and as Lavenia stated, the decisive predominance of the first over the second.³⁴⁵

Conclusion

This thesis has examined the Capuchin missionary manuals of Giovanni Bellotti da Romano and Bernardino d'Asti, revealing their significant contribution to understanding the evangelisation of central western Africa. Through a close reading of these texts, I have argued that, despite being relatively underexplored, the Capuchin mission represents, with its abundance of documental sources, a fundamental chapter of European missionarism in Africa. In this region, Catholicism had already taken root more than a century and a half prior to their arrival, and the Capuchin friars, latecomer proselytizers of this region, had to come to terms with its complex interplay between local religious and political figures, European military conflicts, and political tensions.

The manuals condensate a peculiar historical conjuncture, characterized by the tensions between the Holy See and the Portuguese crown over the *Padroado* rights, and both contenders were weakened by the events unfolding in Europe. While the papacy attempted to regain control over the religious matters in European and extra-European territories after the division of Christianity brought by the Reformation, the Bragança acquired the Portuguese crown after sixty years of Asburgic domination. Exploiting the weakness of this newly established royal dynasty, the Papacy established *Propaganda Fide*, with the ambition to directly control the conversion of the newly colonized territories. As the fires of the Thirty Years War wrapped Europe, the Dutch capitalized on the Portuguese weakness,

³⁴⁴ Runciman, 'The Decline of the Crusading Ideal'.

³⁴⁵ Lavenia, 'Introduzione', XLII.

and the Christian kingdom of Kongo, strategically played them against its main enemy, the Portuguese, whose colonial ambition gradually became more aggressive.

The manuals condense in themselves all the tensions of this historical conjuncture. The manuals' extensive concerns over the celebration and administration of sacraments, particularly devoting their attention to baptism and matrimony reflect Post-Tridentine concerns over the sacramental causality of Grace and its disciplining against 'illegal' marriages.³⁴⁶ The Tridentine crusade against 'ignorance'³⁴⁷ is mirrored in Bellotti's and Bernardino's writings through their concerns over the religious education of adults and children. This Post-Tridentine spirit is a shared characteristic of missionary literature directed to extra-European territories as much as Europe itself, whose countryside needed as much religious education as the ones in Kongo and Angola, to crush hetero-orthodoxies and possible sources of heresies that would further divide Christianity.³⁴⁸

Among the vast corpus of Capuchin African reports, the manuals written by Giovanni Bellotti da Romano and Bernardino d'Asti stand out for their aim to advise fellow friars who meditated to leave their friaries in Italy to embrace the African mission. As such, they inevitably adhered to the narrative topoi of a genre born from the missionary reports from the extra-European colonial contexts. As in the related missionary reports, the mission needs to follow forced steps, such as the departure from Italy, the arrival in Lisbon, the landing in Luanda, the friary and the 'missione volante'. According to the narrative structure of the *Missio* genre, the locals' conversion is portrayed in a teleological, linear path, beginning with baptism and ending with their salvation from the damnation of paganism. The manuals draw from this widely adopted narrative strategy to legitimize the newly founded Capuchin mission, as well as augment their own and their orders' prestige.

³⁴⁶ Baldovin, 'Sacraments in General, Baptism and Confirmation'.

³⁴⁷ Prosperi, *Missionari*, 102–3.

³⁴⁸ Prosperi, *Missionari*, 102–3.

This thesis argues how the Capuchin Central African manuals adopt their peculiar Franciscan spirit while falling inside the larger narrative genre of the missionary report. While manuals, similarly to other reports, underscored the mission as a privileged path to follow the steps of the apostles, they particularly insisted on this choice as a commitment to their mendicant ideals of poverty and humility. The African mission, with its privations, and the necessity of an itinerant evangelisation, transformed the African mission into a spiritual pilgrimage, where the hardships of the journey were seen as opportunities for both personal and communal sanctification. This interpretation of the mission as a path to spiritual and physical renewal reinforced the Franciscan ideal of *conformitas*, the desire to imitate Christ through suffering and sacrifice. Moreover, God's immanence in the environment served to reiterate the Franciscan's attitude towards Nature, which, as the most beautiful of His creations, was aimed at inspiring devotion in the manuals' readers. During the mission, the miraculous transformations of pagans to Christians were mirrored by the Capuchin's own transformation, following the archetype of Saint Francis, which pervaded them with the strength of 'walking through fire'.

These manuals' heart is a tension between the universal and the specific. They were strained between the broader, universalistic, missionary literature narrative and the specific, context-driven guidance required for the African mission to improve the chances of this new *Propaganda Fide* endeavour. On the one hand, the manuals adhered to the traditional *Missio* narrative, adopting its narrative devices, or, in Lavenia's words, 'narrative algorithms', such as prodigies, and a providential teleology, portraying conversion as a linear process beginning with baptism and culminating in salvation.³⁴⁹ On the other hand, they had to confront the practical realities of missionary work in Africa, which required a deeper understanding of local customs, languages, and socio-political structures and pushed the friars to provide sets of *avvertimenti* to reduce the African context in a somewhat familiar

³⁴⁹ Lavenia, 'Introduzione', LI.

environment where, despite its alienness, conversion was possible. This duality, between the idealized and propagandistic narrative of conversion and the pragmatic need for adaptation, characterizes the manuals.

This tension is productive because it reveals insights into the reality of the impact of Capuchin evangelisation in the religious landscapes of Kongo and Ndongo. Whereas the narrative tropes of the *Missio* naturally tend to level any difference between the various contexts of conversion, reducing them to mere instances of a greater, universal, conversion of the peoples to Christianity the Capuchin manuals are forced to provide advice on the mission's 'particolarità'. The manual's context-related *avvertimenti* constitutes an original diversion from the general missionary literature, mainly owed to the presence of local agents. The Kongolese, with their early and seemingly spontaneous conversion to Catholicism, seem to provide the manuals with the perfect example of the Western stereotype of 'good savage'. However, the passages of chapter three reveal not just the local agency, but their predominance towards the Capuchins, which relied socially, culturally and linguistically on their presence.

In this thesis, I argued how the local agents were the manual central reason for existence, as the missionaries crucially relied on their role as linguistic translators and cultural mediators, and their practical guidance. They appear as the productive result of the aforementioned tension, they are able to appear through the layers of missionary storytelling, not as passive recipients of European evangelisation, but as protagonists. Their presence and influence forced the Capuchins to adapt their strategies and teachings, moving beyond the simplistic archetypes to acknowledge the complexity of African societies. The Capuchins, despite their efforts to impose a universal narrative of conversion, were ultimately shaped by the local context, creating a dynamic and syncretic process of evangelisation. The Western sources constructed a sophisticated ethnocentric narrative structure to construct an image of an immobile, static Africa, that would later find much, horrific, fortune to legitimize the colonization of Kongo, and the African continent *tout court*. This thesis, hopefully,

moved the needle of this discourse, towards a re-positioning of Africans at the centre of their own story.

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