

Kongo Graphic Writing and Other Narratives of the Sign
by Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz
Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013. 240 pp., 10 tables, 66 figures, 63 halftones. \$75.00, cloth

reviewed by Carlee S. Forbes

Providing a history of structured systems of visual expression in both Central Africa and Cuba, *Kongo Graphic Writing and Other Narratives of the Sign* nuances our understanding of graphic communication as a cultural illustration and demonstrates a link between Bakongo culture in Central Africa and an Afro-Cuban religion, Palo Monte. This in-depth analysis addresses the still too-commonly held assumption that, apart from Egyptian hieroglyphs and Coptic writings, Africa lacks graphic writing systems. This work is greatly enhanced by the plethora of figures, the documentation of the rupestrian art (art done on rock or cave walls) in Lower Congo, contemporary Kongo *bidimbu* (symbols) and *bisinsu* (codes) and Palo Monte's *firmas* (signatures). In addition, it has already been translated into Spanish (*El Colegio de Mexico Press*, 2012), which ensures its potential to reach a broader audience and begin to bridge some of the disparities between diaspora studies.

A Palo Monte practitioner himself, Martínez-Ruiz draws upon a lifetime of experience, which he combines with his service

in Angola with the Cuban army, to inform fieldwork. This closeness to Palo Monte, he recognizes, has shaped his interpretation of the material, but has also granted a degree of access. Martínez-Ruiz carefully balances his status as a practitioner and his position as a researcher. He uses his position to facilitate discussion with other Palo Monte priests, but he has not lost focus in his main goal of gathering information. The result of this well-researched work is a comprehensive analysis of the history of Kongo and Palo Monte systems of writing.

The scope of *Kongo Graphic Writing* alone is impressive, covering the Kongo Kingdom to the present-day. In the first three chapters, Martínez-Ruiz provides the necessary background and contextual information. He situates this work among its predecessors and establishes the need for a work on Kongo graphic systems and the necessity for connection between Africa-based studies and diaspora studies. Chapter 1 finishes with a discussion of methodology and situates the author, describing his own background and possible biases. The second chapter is an overview of historical information. It establishes the meaning and use of the descriptor “Kongo,” including the history of the Kongo Kingdom and its part in the Atlantic slave trade and enslaved communities in Cuba. The third chapter examines cosmology (study of life's origin), cosmogony (study of god and the human condition), and mythology (history of a people told through a collection of stories and characters that preserve collective memory) as they exist today in both Kongo and Cuba.

Chapters 4 and 5 address the written symbols, religious objects, oral traditions, and body language that comprise the graphic systems. Martínez-Ruiz's method largely builds upon Gerhard Kubic's (1986) definition of graphic systems as visual communication systems comprising graphemes (the smallest meaningful units) and illustrates the three aspects of Kongo graphic writing: ideograms, pictograms, and cosmograms (p. 47). Chapter 4, containing almost half of the text, gives an in-depth review of Kongo *bidimbu* and *bisinsu* and Palo Monte *firmas*. Several nicely illustrated tables enhance this chapter and address the origins and continued significance of Kongo graphic writing systems. Martínez-Ruiz begins by analyzing rupestrian art, including several previously unpublished examples. Similarities among various sites show continuity of expression across geographic and chronological variations. Here, he introduces the concepts he uses to interpret the symbols by discussing Kongo *dikenga* and Cuban *nkuyu* (both cosmograms imbedded with complex meaning), and the process by which *dikenga* traveled to become *nkuyu* in Cuba.

Martínez-Ruiz connects the meaning of the rupestrian designs to the idea of *dikenga*, and to contemporary proverbs, myths, and uses of the designs. The chapter then looks at contemporary uses of graphic writing systems in both Kongo secular and religious settings and in Palo Monte's *firmas*. *Firmas* are not separated between religious and secular uses. They can break down the various components; each element can then be read and used to build the final total meaning. Chapter 5 goes beyond interpreting two-dimensional forms of writing to discuss the meaning of three-dimensional Kongo *minkisi*, Palo Monte *prendas*, and *mambo* chants performed during Palo Monte practice. The exploration of these forms emphasizes the importance of not just writing, but in a whole vocabulary of visual expression.

Martínez-Ruiz uses a variety of material to illustrate his discussions—from documenting the rupestrian designs, to interviews with Mbanza Kongo residents, Mbanza Kongo priests, and several Palo Monte priests. Meticulous tables and figures help to cement an undeniable aesthetic connection over several hundred years of graphic writing. However, as stated in the introduction, this is more than just an aesthetic continuity: “These systems are used to organize daily life, enable interactions between humans and the natural and spiritual worlds, and preserve and transmit cosmological and cosmogonical belief systems” (p. 1). In arguing for the religious continuity, it is evident that Martínez-Ruiz is building upon the work of his mentor, Robert Farris Thompson.

Martínez-Ruiz uses a sizable portion of this book to discuss aspects of Kongo society, illustrating that this work is not just about how Kongo's realm reaches across an ocean, but it also expands the overall understanding of this complex culture. Through his field interviews and exploration of the symbols' meanings, Martínez-Ruiz builds upon previous discussions between Fu-Kiau kia Bunseki and Thompson about the visual expressions of Kongo cosmology, specifically the idea of *dikenga*. While Martínez-Ruiz devotes several pages to describe and interpret the *dikenga*'s visual and religious elements, the bulk of his discussion expands this notion. The *dikenga*, while a useful tool for interpreting elements of Kongo cosmology, is not the only way to visualize Bakongo beliefs. Kongo culture employs a large system of visual representations to express complicated ideas concerning interactions with the spirits, ancestors, and humans' space within the cosmological realm. This book, therefore, complicates the way that we read other Kongo visual representations. This is especially evident in his final chapter, which uses the analytical parameters presented in Chapter 4 to read various elements of *minkisi*, *prendas*, and *mambos*.

Martínez-Ruiz effectively organizes his dis-

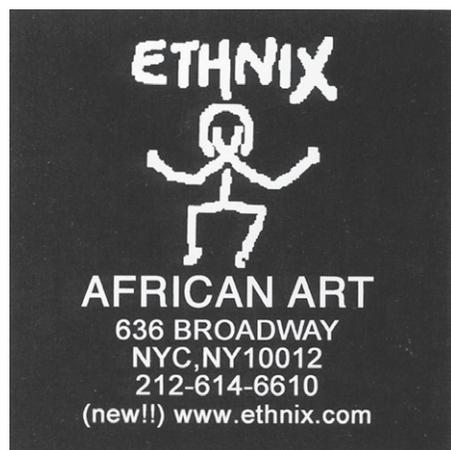
cussion around objects and performances with clear religious importance. His assertion that we can see the continuity of belief and expression over several hundreds of years is convincing because of the objects he chooses. However, in applying his methods to other Kongo and Kongo-diaspora objects, we must also take into account the possibility of cultural modification and change. While these new tools for reading objects may be extremely useful, scholars must also consider that artists may have created objects that have complicated meanings and express more than just cosmological worldviews.

Kongo Graphic Writing and Other Narratives of the Sign is well timed within the relative explosion of Kongo and Kongo-diaspora related scholarship. It is certainly an exciting time to be studying Kongo culture, with Cécile Fromont's *The Art of Conversion: Christian Visual Culture in the Kingdom of Kongo* (University of North Carolina Press, 2014), and Susan Cooksey et al.'s *Kongo across the Waters* publication and exhibition (University of Florida Press, 2013), and the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 2015 exhibition *Kongo: Power and Majesty*. Each of these projects contributes to expanding the complexity of how we understand Kongo culture. Martínez-Ruiz's argument expands our understating of Kongo and Kongo-diaspora visual culture. Emphasizing the importance of fully reading an object's cultural context ensures that these objects will continue to play an important role in the emerging dialogues.

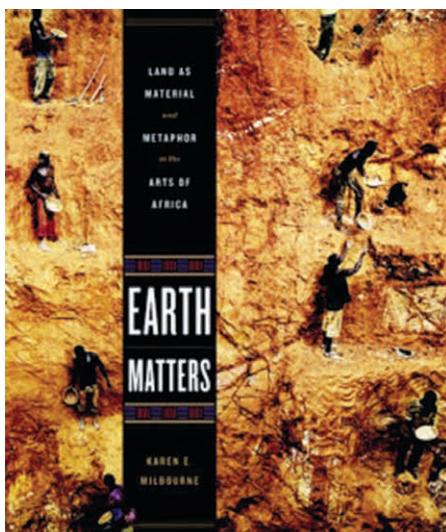
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book review



Earth Matters: Land as Material and Metaphor in the Arts of Africa

by Karen E. Milbourne, with Allan DeSouza, Clive van den Berg, Wangechi Muti, and George Osodi
New York: Monacelli Press and Washington, DC: National Museum of African Art and Smithsonian Institution Press, 2013. 320 pp., 257 ill., selected bibliography, index. \$50.00, cloth.

reviewed by Pamela Z. McClusky

Readers hit the ground running across Washington, DC, with the curator/author in the opening pages of *Earth Matters*. As she jogs through a dense city to a dirt trail, her footsteps lead the reader into a vast network of encounters with art and artists who are all compelled to look at the earth beneath us. There is no mistaking the enormous commitment that the curator and the National Museum of African Art made to harness the resources of the Smithsonian and expand the ways that museums are encouraging audiences of the twenty-first century to look at a complex subject with global ramifications.

Earth Matters completes a triad of thematic exhibitions and publications developed by the National Museum, which featured *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art* in 2007 and *African Cosmos: Stellar Arts* in 2012. Each of these endeavors have showcased the capacity of the museum

to identify broad themes that emerge from the collections, continue on in current artistic practices, and are pursued with rigorous thinking to deliver a compendium of complex ideas and images. While this galvanizing of the Smithsonian resources is impressive, it also responds to Mary Nooter Roberts's challenge issued in the Spring 2012 issue of this journal: "innovation depends upon well-defined relevance, both within local communities in which art forms have been used and for those who study and interpret them."

Breaking from the previous pattern of reliance on a multitude of authors, Karen Milbourne is the leading writer for the entire volume. She conceives of the six themes that organize the text for the exhibition and her prose provides the sweeping oversight that keeps the thematic framework consistent throughout. As she introduces each theme, she raises issues that traverse the globe and place African artists firmly in the middle of contemporary concerns. This requires a deft fluidity of associations, which are delivered in a rapid pace of cross-referencing that seems to carry a sense of the urgent need to recognize how crucial environmental issues are. From the first chapter to the final, the historic references slowly fade into the background as the degree of contemporary focus shifts and the sense of activism becomes more apparent.

Feet lead the way in Chapter 1 with "The Material Earth," as the running curator is followed by an artist, Berni Searle, walking barefoot across sand, salt, and stone. They set the stage for the sensory perception of the landscape as a place where human skin meets the earth's skin. Milbourne winds her way through many citations by authors like William Logan Bryant's comments about clay, mud, and soil in his book *Dirt: The Ecstatic Skin of the Earth* (1995); then follows with the actual materials of the earth and how they are reflected in art made in contrasting places by different artists. For mud, it is the architectural sculptures of Aboudramane and the mud coiffures of the Karamajong. For plants and the living earth, there is a look at Yoruba Orisha Oko practices and then a view of Andrew Putter's series called *Hottentots Holland: Flora Capensis* (2008)—photographs that imitate Dutch flower painting of the seventeenth century but substitute the flora and fauna of South Africa's Table Mountain. Along the way, earth's material baseline elements are called out and reviewed through artistic investigations: sand, water, chalk, salt, and ashes.

By Chapter 2, "The Power of the Earth," the tempo of this dynamic mix of references from older traditional arts with the contemporary becomes fully established. How perceptions of the Earth are expressed by Bamana or Punu objects are treated in summary statements that would not be new to informed scholars, but