Résumé

J. K. Thornton. La résurrection des Jaga. Dans le numéro 43 des Cahiers, J. C. Miller défendait l'hypothèse que les «envahisseurs jaga» qui attaquèrent le royaume de Kongo à la fin du xvie siècle n'étaient pas un peuple étranger mais bien des rebelles bakongo, plus ou moins soutenus par les ethnies voisines. J. K. Thornton maintient, en sens inverse, qu'une analyse serrée des sources et une étude géographique du terrain n'excluent nullement l'hypothèse que les Jaga aient bel et bien été un peuple distinct, d'où descendraient les actuels Bayaka du Kwango et du Niari, dont les traditions orales pourraient éventuellement apporter de nouvelles lumières sur la question.

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A Resurrection for the Jaga

In an earlier issue of Cahiers d’Études africaines, Joseph C. Miller sounded a ‘Requiem for the “Jaga”’. While Miller’s work on separating fact from fancy in both the 16th-century and the 20th-century literature on a number of Central African population movements is a welcome addition to the historiography, there are some issues that remain unclear in a full understanding of the ‘Jaga’ phenomena in African history. In particular, it seems, Miller has gone a bit too far in removing the ‘Jaga’ from Kongo’s history, as he has replaced the ferocious cannibal warriors described by Pigafetta in 1591 with an internal rising of one or more Kongo provinces, aided, perhaps, by some ambitious external powers (Tyo and Matamba are suggested) in the defense of lucrative trade routes. Miller’s work is beneficial in that it clearly separates the Imbangala movement from that of the ‘Jaga’ in Kongo, and clears up a great deal of confusion about Imbangala and ‘Jaga’ in Angola, a region where Miller is clearly expert. On the other hand, Miller’s work opens up a number of questions about ‘Jaga’ in Kongo which need to be examined in the same light, and with the same critical approach he applied to Angola, even if we cannot accept his reconstruction of the 1568 invasion of Kongo.

Miller has suggested that the presence of ‘Jaga’ in Kongo is more a product of European mythology than of actual historical fact. He has suggested that they represent a species of punishing barbarian, common to the Old Testament and inserted by Filippo Pigafetta as an object lesson to Christian nations into the only near contemporary source that describes the ‘Jaga’ invasion. There cannot be any doubt that Pigafetta does not refrain from employing a moralistic object lesson idiom throughout his description of Kongo history. In several other instances, Pigafetta suggests that the sins of the Kongo, in turning from Christianity, were punished by various disasters, from civil wars to plagues. However, the fact that we may not necessarily accept the cause of these events as divine punishment does not mean that we should doubt the reality of the civil wars, plagues or invasions.

Surely no modern historian will accept that the ‘Jaga’ invaded Kongo as a divine punishment, but this does not permit us to doubt the essential reconstruction of the events of 1568 as follows: a group of rootless warriors, who ‘lived like shepherds’ without permanent abode invaded Kongo from the east, passing through Mbata province, then proceeding to Mbanza Kongo and sacking the city, forcing the king and his court to flee and seek Portuguese aid. The Portuguese came with a large body of soldiers under Francisco de Gouveia, and a combined Kongo-Portuguese military force eventually succeeded in driving the ‘Jaga’ out

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2. Ibid.: 136-142.
3. For example, see J.C. Miller, Kings and Kinsmen: The Imbangala Impact on the Mbandu of Angola (London, 1976).
after several years of fighting.* There is no evidence in this to suggest that Kongo nobles led this attack, or even aided it, and what is more, if such local assistance were employed, it seems unlikely that Pigafetta would have omitted such an essential fact. He describes provincial revolts elsewhere in his account, even if they are colored with his mythological approach to Kongo history.

Similarly, Miller seems to have erred in suggesting that these outsiders came from either Tyo or Matamba, for several reasons. First of all, Pigafetta clearly states that the invasion first entered Kongo through Mbata. If the invasion had come from Tyo, the first province to be struck would have been Nsundi, and had it come from Matamba the route would have crossed Wandu or Wembo, for neither of these outside areas border on Mbata.* Secondly, there seems to be no reason to doubt that the invasion came from the Yaka regions along the Kwango river east of Kongo. This has long been the assumption of historians of Kongo prior to the long historiographical digression that attempted to connect the ‘Jaga’ invasion to the Lunda expansion,* a digression which Miller successfully refutes. Not only is there a similarity in the names between Yaka and Jaga,10 but the present day location of the Yaka, along the Kwango river, a location which can be confirmed as early as 1657 (if one discounts Pigafetta’s account)11 fits well with Pigafetta’s account, for they would have to cross Mbata to reach Mbanza Kongo. As for their name, we can simply assert that this invasion being the first such invasion that was known to the Portuguese, they had the tendency to apply the name of the first invaders to all subsequent invasions which appeared the same, and ultimately to all such ethnic groups, even if they were unrelated to the original invaders.12

Non-Imbangala and possibly non-Yaka ‘Jaga’ continued to play part in Kongo history long after 1568, and these ‘Jaga’ are a source of confusion to Miller, and certainly a potential source of confusion to other scholars interested in Kongo history. In support of his contention that the ‘Jaga’ aided a local Kongo rising in 1568, Miller cites the existence of a ‘class of mercenary warriors’ called the majaka in 17th-century Nsundi, and suggests a similar body of warriors intervened at the request of dissident Kongo nobles to attack their king.13 There are a number

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10. Pigafetta spells the name ‘Giacca’ reflecting, perhaps the Portuguese form ‘Jaga’ which was normal usage in the early seventeenth century.
12. An excellent corollary to this is the Spanish use of ‘Carib’ to describe any group of seafaring, cannibal raiders in the early years of their activity in the Spanish Main. See Carl Sauer, The Early Spanish Main (Berkeley-Los Angeles, 1966): 5-6.
of references to ‘Jaga’ who lived north of the Zaire river in the 17th-century literature on Kongo, some of it has been cited by Miller to suggest the presence of the class of mercenary warriors. But this evidence all seems to refer to the Yaka of the Niari river valley, which some modern scholarship has suggested was a splinter group of the original, 1568 group of Yaka, due to alleged similarities in language and custom between them and the Yaka of the Kwango.

While the evidence for their connection with the Yaka of the Kwango seems a bit tenuous, and should not be accepted without more research, there seems to be little doubt that it was they who operated throughout the areas north of the Zaire river throughout the 17th-century, frequently invading Kongo and eventually even allying with some Kongo potentates during Kongo’s civil wars. But in all this they always appear to be a distinct, usually hostile and dangerous (from the Kongo point of view) nation, and not a class of mercenary nobles in the service of anyone in Kongo. In 1624, Matheus Cordoso told the Jesuit prefect in Luanda that the ‘Jaga’ had destroyed Vungu, said to be the original home of the Kongo just north of the Zaire river. Girolamo da Montesarchio, Capuchin priest who lived and worked in Nsundi and the lands just south of the Zaire in northeast Kongo from 1648 to 1668, noted that ‘Aiaca’ frequently invaded the region—during one trip he made along the south shore of the Zaire in 1650 he found the entire population armed against a Yaka attack. Around 1655 there was another extensive invasion of Nsundi, and in 1665, following the Kongo defeat by a Portuguese army at Mbwila, the Yaka took the opportunity to further Kongo’s disgrace by ravaging the northern part of the country.

The Niari valley group of Yaka became less consistently hostile to Kongo somewhat later, during the civil wars which raged in Kongo between the battle of Mbwila in 1665 and the restoration of the kingdom of Kongo by Pedro IV in 1709. King Pedro III Nzuzi a Ntamba, crowned in Sào Salvador (the later name for Mbanza Kongo) in 1668, was driven out of the city by one of his rivals and took refuge in Mbuila just south of the Zaire river. From his base there Pedro III allied with the Yaka of the Niari to support him in his wars to regain the throne of Kongo; in 1673 he attacked a rival king, Affonso III, with the help of ‘a nation called the Majacas, who are fierce like the Jaga’. The author of this quote, a resident of Angola, was so accustomed to using Jaga to describe the Imbangala, that these Jaga in Kongo were only ‘ferozes como os Jaga’ (emphasis mine) and not real Jaga. But to Italian Capuchins they were Jaga, and could be confused successfully with the Imbangala, as Giralamo Merolla da Sorrento did. Merolla describes the sacking of Sào Salvador in 1678 by Pedro III’s troops, again with the help of his Yaka allies, and it was they who ‘sold human flesh in the marketplace’ at Sào Salvador, which the Portuguese bought not to eat,

17. Archivio Provinciale dei Cappuccini di Toscana, Girolamo DA MONTESAR
but as slaves. Miller has confused Merolla’s description of the attack on São Salvador in 1678 with the attack of 1568, and uses it to illustrate the mythical character of Merolla’s thinking. However, Merolla is wrongly accused in this instance, for he got the story in 1688 from king João II of Mbula, Pedro III’s brother and successor, and although the story may be a bit melodramatic and exaggerated, it is essentially true.

Yaka from across the Zaire continued to assist the kings of Mbula in the wars for the Kongo throne: in 1691 another Capuchin resident in Sonyo, a Kongo coastal province, described the king ruling at Mbula as the ‘chief of the Jaga’, and in 1696 Luca da Caltanissetta passed through a country where some of these Yaka had settled down in Mbula when he travelled there in a vain attempt to reach a diplomatic settlement to the civil wars in Kongo. All of this cannot suggest anything about the 1568 attack of the ‘Jaga’, either that they were a class of mercenary warriors aiding rebel nobles, or that they were Imbangala, or indeed that the raiders of the 17th century had anything in common with the 1568 raiders save a name. But it does help us to put the 1568 invasion back into perspective, and to remove some of confusion about the 16th-as opposed to 17th-century ‘Jaga’ in Kongo history. We can see here two distinct, though possibly related, foreign enemies of Kongo who invaded the country from time to time from outside its borders and eventually allied themselves with some Kongo rulers.

Only the name ‘Jaga’ in its Portuguese, Italian or Kikongo form (Jaga, Giaca, Ayaka) is a certain connection between these disparate peoples, the Yaka of the Niari, those of the Kwango and the Imbangala of Kasanje. It is a name which describes more a way of life than any ethnic group in particular, and it is in this form that we encounter it in the most usual description of ‘Jaga’ in Kongo, those of Mbamba province who were depicted at length by Dionigio Carli da Piacenza as he saw them in 1667-68. These ‘Jaga’ were not particularly hostile or cannibalistic, but they were rootless and poor and wandered the country. Piacenza relates that they were descendants of the original ‘Jaga’ invaders of Kongo who had settled there (and from his description they seem to have been a separate ethnic group) and that they were originally known as ‘Ayacos’ (Ayakos), but in his time were known as ‘Giaghi’ (the usual Italian form of the Portuguese ‘Jagas’). Perhaps this is the most convincing evidence to locate the name and its ethnic connotations, for Piacenza’s ‘Jaga’ were quite unlike the usual ‘Jaga’ and they earned their name solely by their historical connection with the 1568 invasion. This at least suggests that the 1568 invasion was the work of a distinct ethnic group which bore the name Yaka as its ethnic name, a name which came in time to apply to a way of life, even if those who originally bore the name gradually changed their life.

The debate about the ‘Jaga’ in the history of Central Africa has done a great deal to elucidate the problems of so much of the source material for African history. It is only through careful critical approach to the documentation that we can make

22. Girolamo Merolla da Sorrento, Breve e Succinta Relazione del Viaggio nel Congo... (Napoli, 1692): 332-334.
26. Miller (1973) has attempted to work out an etymology for this word in one or another of the relevant languages, but it is not entirely convincing.
27. Dionigio Carli da Piacenza, Il Moro trasportato nell’incilita Città de Venetia... (Bassano, 1687): 46-53. This section is entirely omitted from Piacenza’s original account of his travels to Central Africa, the much better known Viaggio de P. Dionigio de’ Carli da Piacenza e Michel Angelo da Reggio... (Reggio, 1671).
valid hypotheses about so many aspects of history, especially those which were not central to European interest. We must also be very cautious to examine the documents in the ideological context and the world-views of their authors as well as for the information they present. It is only after we have undertaken this substantial critical effort that we can use the sources confidently to reconstruct the historical events in question.