



The African courtier Tati-Desponte, on the Angolan coast, in the late 18th century

Guy Saupin

The portrait of this courtier from Malimbe (extreme north of present-day Angola), a maritime gateway to the Kingdom of Kakongo, north of the Zaire River, has been handed down to us from an engraving inserted by the captain of a Saint-Malo ship, Louis Ohier de Grandpré, in his account of the trading expedition conducted in 1785-1786, and published in Paris in 1801.

Malimbe, a trading site on the Angolan coast

The drawing depicts Tati-Desponte as he is transported from his “petite terre”—(literally “little land”), the name given to his village and surrounding lands where he had his house, enslaved persons, and dependents—to the Bay of Malimbe, where he entered into communication with ships involved in the transatlantic trade of enslaved African peoples. The Europeans had no fort in this area and made do with quibanga, transitory trading posts, built in the African style. For sanitary reasons, the seamen-traders slept on their ships, leaving the surveillance of their cargo under African guard, controlled by the royal administration. At this time, Malimbe was experiencing the last phase of a century of intense commercial activity, in second place behind the nearby Cabinde. The Comte de Capellis wrote in 1784 that: “[African] courtiers almost all [spoke] French, English, and Dutch [hierarchy of European presence] with a truly astonishing natural ease, not knowing how to read or write even in their own language.”

Portrait of Tati-Desponte

Here, we see a young man, dressed in a simple loincloth—unlike his counterpart Pangon from Loango, captured in a ceremonial position—yet abundantly adorned with imported coloured glass beads, chains and rings, undoubtedly made from copper, of regional or external origin. He wears a cap (mpu) and carries a stick, signs of belonging to the elite, as his father, named Vabu, occupied the office of mafouc, defined by Ohier de Grandpré as: “the steward general of trade, forced to live in



the place where trading occurred [...]. He fixes the prices of foodstuffs and presides over all the markets and has the last word when it comes to negotiations.” Even if this royal office remained under the control of a superior known as the mambouc, a position reserved for a born prince, presumed to be heir to the throne, it provided opportunities for lower officers, made responsible for control of the coast, but especially for courtiers or brokers who served as intermediaries between the merchant suppliers from the interior and the ships’ captains.

The role of mafoucs in transactions

An analysis of the accounts from the Zeeland Middelburgsche Commercie Company (MCC) for the period 1749-1776 shows that mafoucs, who represented 5% of African sellers, accounted for 10% of transactions and the enslaved individuals on board ships. Other officers made up these numbers. Untitled merchants, who represented half of the operators, initiated only 34% of transactions for 31% of captives. According to the MCC accounts, the ten most important courtiers supplied between 110 and 391 captives over variable periods, a productivity to be compared with that of Tati Desponts who provided thirty-four to the Bordeaux ship *La Manette* (250 tons) in 1790, which loaded 60% of its cargo in Malimbe and 40% in the mouth of the Congo.

Transactions were conducted according to the principle of barter in an equivalence system based on units of account. Grandpré calculated an average value of fourteen “commodities” or units, broken down into “64 piezas” for one captive or pieza de Indias. In the 18th century, prices increased dramatically, even tripled, after the Seven Years’ War (1756-1763). On the Angolan Coast, the demand was remarkable in terms of the importance given to Indian and European textiles. In the accounts of the MCC (1720-1796), these represent 63.8% against 57% on the whole of the African coast, ahead of weapons (21.4% against 23%), alcohol (7.1% against 10%), and miscellaneous items (7.7% against 9%). The embellished dimension to Grandpré’s illustration echoes this importance accorded to fabrics. The loincloths were most often made from imported fabrics, of European origin for the striped, dotted, or checkered designs, or of Indian origin for textiles with floral decorations.

Tati’s economic and social ascension, formalized by the marriage of his father with a sister of the king of Cabinde, which made him a brother of the new king in the matrilineal succession, aroused deep rivalries. The young Tati was kidnapped by the men of his “suzerain” (head of lineage) and exported to Saint-Domingue, where a trading captain named Desponts recognized him, bought him, and brought him back to his home country, in order to restore the climate of trust in business. The



association of the two names acts as an indicator of the existence of a transcultural commercial and moral community.



About the author

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Bibliography:

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<https://histoire-image.org/etudes/traite-cote-angole>

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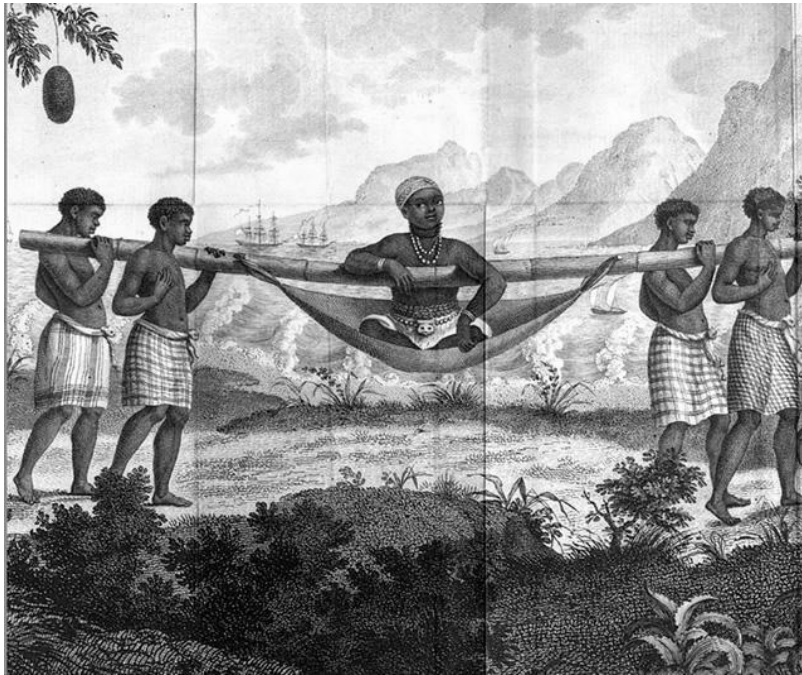
Further information:

Video "Le courtier Tati-Despôts sur le site de Malembe, royaume de Kakongo (1786 - 1787)" by Guy Saupin, as part of "L'histoire en images: l'esclavage", May 2022. Can be consulted online:
<https://www.anneauxdelamemoire.org/videos?wix-vod-comp-id=comp-l4xwtw45>

Illustrations



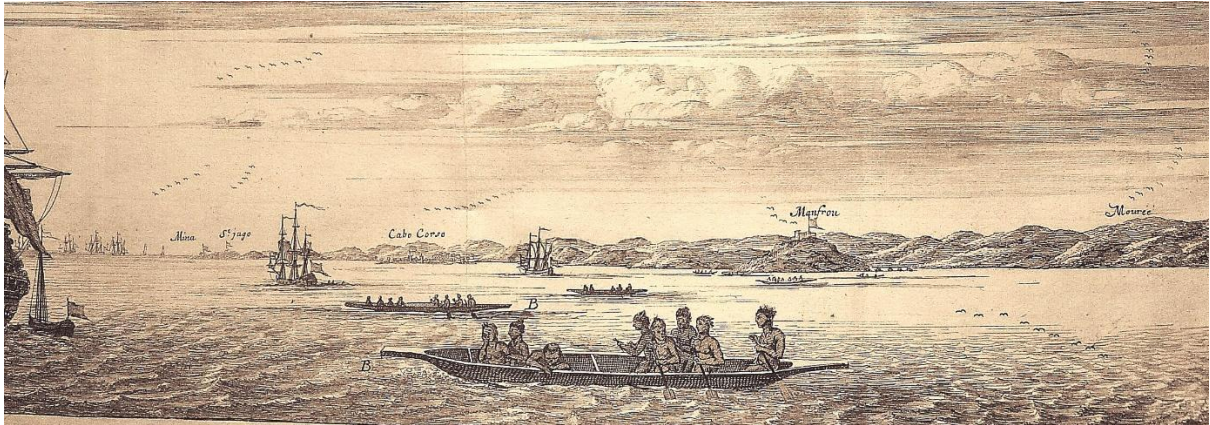
Carte Afrique centrale atlantique avec mention du royaume du Kakongo, Jean Lattre, extrait de *Atlas Moderne ou Collection de Cartes sur Toutes les Parties du Globe Terrestre*, 1775, domaine public.



Tati, surnommé Desponts, courtier de Malembe, venant de sa petite terre en hamac, Louis de Grandpre, Voyage a la cote occidentale d'Afrique, fait dans les années 1786 et 1787 (Paris, 1801), © Slavery Images



Quibangua et intérieur d'un comptoir européen sur la côte d'Angola en Afrique, Dessin de Louis Ohier de Grandpré, gravé par Nicolas Courbe, 1801, © Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer



Piroguiers transportant des esclaves, extrait de Description des côtes du nord et sud Guinée, Jean Barbot, 1732, © Princeton university library



Scène de traite sur la côte d'Afrique, Edouard Ducan (1803-1882), © Château des ducs de Bretagne, musée d'histoire de Nantes.