The Emptied Kingdom: Decolonizing the Demographic Reconstruction of Kongo's Depopulation

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Abstract

The standard demographic reconstruction of the Kingdom of Kongo's depopulation under the Atlantic slave trade relies on a single, biased archive: European shipping records (e.g., the "1.8 million" captives in SlaveVoyages). This article rejects this Eurocentric data as a scientific total, instead treating it as a censored minimum.
The core research question is: How large was the demographic shock experienced by Kongo, and why has a single colonial archive defined its limits?
Our **methodology** uses Monte Carlo simulations to triangulate four sources: surviving trade records, Afonso I's letters, oral histories and archaeology, and a probabilistic model including parameters for under-documentation and pre-embarkation mortality.
The **findings** show the documented 1.8 million is a floor, not a total. Central estimates for **total removals** are typically **8–12 million**, with upper bounds reaching 15–18 million. **Proportional losses** of the 1480 population cluster around **30–60%**, aligning with Afonso I's description of the kingdom "emptying."
The **conclusion** is that the perception of collapse was a response to a real demographic catastrophe. Decolonial demographic reconstruction must abandon the illusion of precision from a single colonial archive and work with multi-source ranges.

Keywords: Kingdom of Kongo; Atlantic slave trade; historical demography; decolonial methods; SlaveVoyages; Afonso I; Monte Carlo simulations; coloniality of power; oral tradition; archival bias.

1. Introduction

The Kingdom of Kongo entered European written history in the late fifteenth century as a complex, centralized polity with dense settlement patterns, elaborate political institutions, and long-standing networks of internal exchange. Early Portuguese accounts describe a populous and organized kingdom; later correspondence from Kongo's own rulers, however, speaks of villages emptied, subjects stolen, and a realm that is "falling silent." Afonso I (Mvemba a Nzinga), in particular, wrote a series of letters in the early sixteenth century condemning the seizure of freeborn subjects and warning that his country was being depopulated by the slave trade.

Modern scholarship has tried to make sense of this catastrophe using European shipping records as the main quantitative backbone. Aggregated in databases such as SlaveVoyages, these archives list roughly 1.8 million captives departing from Kongo-linked ports over the duration of the transatlantic trade. This figure is often presented, implicitly or explicitly, as if it were the number of Kongo captives: a precise total derived from "hard data." The impression is one of statistical authority: 1.8 million, not "many," not "countless", a clean integer that seems to domesticate the scale of loss.

The core claim of this article is that such usage is both epistemically and scientifically indefensible. Portuguese and other European trade records are not neutral data; they are the products of imperial bureaucracies, written to serve accounting, fiscal, and political aims. They were created by one party in a violent system and preserved selectively across wars, regime changes, and archival purges. Historical work on archives and power has repeatedly shown how documents can be silenced, destroyed, or shaped to protect perpetrators and naturalize exploitation. Treating these records as a complete and objective demographic account ignores both their partial survival and their partisan nature.

Instead of assessing Kongo's demographic history on a single Eurocentric source, we propose a multi-source, probabilistic reconstruction that takes European numbers as a documented minimum, not as a total. We combine:

- Surviving trade records (Portuguese and other European);
- Afonso I's letters describing depopulation and kidnapping;
- Archaeological and oral evidence of deserted villages and scattered tombs;
- A Monte Carlo demographic model that explicitly represents under-documentation, pre-embarkation mortality, and misclassification.

We ask two linked questions:

- how large the demographic shock actually was, and why a single colonial archive was allowed to define the limits of imagination for so long.
- how large was the demographic shock experienced by Kongo and its catchment during the Atlantic trade, under a range of plausible assumptions? Methodologically, we argue that any account which treats Portuguese numbers as the primary or sole quantitative evidence is complicit in continuing the coloniality of knowledge, the structural privileging of Eurocentric archives as universal truth.

We do not claim to produce a single, true number for "how many people were taken." Rather, we argue for bounded ranges and for the legitimacy of African testimonies and material traces as primary sources of demographic inference. Oral traditions recall old tombs "everywhere" across Kongo's landscape; abandoned village sites are remembered by name; and epidemics are remembered largely as a consequence of foreign intrusion and new treatments, not as a constant background of pre-Atlantic life. When these elements are combined with trade records and probabilistic modelling, a coherent picture emerges: Kongo's sense of becoming "empty" corresponds to a genuine demographic collapse, at the scale of millions, not to royal exaggeration.

This article is the first part of a larger project. Here, our focus is on demography and method. A companion paper will build on these results to examine the psychology of perpetrators and collaborators: what we call the entitlement cascade, and the narcissistic and sadistic strategies by which mass harm is normalized, minimized, and statistically "shrunk" into acceptable numbers.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews existing work on Kongo demography and the Atlantic slave trade, highlighting important contributions but also key archival blind spots. Section 3 describes our methods, beginning with an explicit epistemological stance on the colonial archive and moving through our population scenarios, under-documentation parameters, and Monte Carlo procedures. Section 4 presents the results: distributions of likely total removals and population loss under low, medium, and high scenarios. Section 5 discusses the findings in depth following a structured pattern: findings → characteristics → supported/novel/challenged → implications → examples → consequences/applications. Section 6 concludes and opens toward the psychological analysis developed in the second paper.

2. Literature Review: Archives, Demography, and Kongo

Work on Kongo's demographic history sits at the intersection of African history, Atlantic studies, historical demography, and decolonial theory. Most estimates to date rely heavily on European trade records, sometimes complemented by missionary reports and later colonial censuses. These sources have allowed historians to sketch orders of magnitude, but they have also entrenched a habit of treating Portuguese numbers as the epistemic center of Kongo's story.

2.1 Demography of Kongo: From "No Disaster" to Revised Estimates

Early quantitative work on Kongo's population was led by John K. Thornton. In his article Demography and History in the Kingdom of Kongo, 1550–1750, he combined Capuchin baptismal registers and reconstructed age structures to challenge the then-dominant view that Kongo had suffered a catastrophic population collapse. He famously concluded that "the postulated population disaster did not occur," arguing against earlier estimates based on travellers' impressions.

This early contribution was important in at least two ways. First, it demonstrated that missionary records could be used to quantify African demographic patterns. Second, it pushed back against vague, often racialized narratives of African disappearance that lacked numerical grounding. For these reasons, we adopt Thornton's basic insight that baptismal and mission statistics are valuable sources for reconstruction.

However, the same work illustrates the danger of relying on a narrow source base. Subsequent research on the Inkisi basin, for example, has shown that Thornton's model was built largely on Capuchin data from relatively stable, missionized areas (e.g. Soyo), and that he used these to infer densities for the kingdom as a whole. As Sakala notes, this method tends to under-represent regions most severely affected by war, raids, and out-migration, precisely where depopulation was greatest.

Thornton's more recent article, Revising the Population History of the Kingdom of Kongo, acknowledges part of this problem. He raises his mid-seventeenth-century estimate from roughly 509,000 to about 790,000 inhabitants, on the basis of additional documents and corrected assumptions. The revision confirms that earlier figures were too low.

For our purposes, this has two consequences:

1. We treat the ~790,000 mid-seventeenth-century estimate as a lower bound, not as the true total.
2. We consider the omission of the most devastated sites from mission registers to be a critical methodological flaw if one wants to claim that "no disaster" occurred.

Had missionary observation and record-keeping been equally dense in the worst-hit areas, the registers would almost certainly show higher pre-crisis numbers and sharper declines.

Thornton's work thus provides both a technical foundation and a warning: demography that filters out devastated zones will systematically understate catastrophe.

2.2 Slave-"Trade" Databases: Valuable but Eurocentric Floors

The second strand is the family of Atlantic slave-trade databases, particularly those associated with David Eltis and colleagues. The SlaveVoyages project compiles detailed information on more than 30,000 transatlantic slave voyages and has become the standard reference for quantitative analysis of the trade. Lovejoy and others have underlined how transformative such databases have been for understanding the scale and routes of forced migration.

We adopt two fundamental contributions from this work:

- It identifies at least 1.8 million captives embarked from Kongo-linked ports in surviving European records.
- It demonstrates that the Atlantic slave trade can and should be studied with systematic, comparative quantitative tools, not only through narrative sources.

At the same time, the creators of these databases themselves insist that they are incomplete. Eltis quotes Hans Rosling's dictum that "*the world cannot be understood without numbers. And it cannot be understood with numbers alone*," emphasizing that even the most sophisticated database has limits.

We therefore criticize two common misuses of these data:

1. Treating "1.8 million" Kongo-linked captives as a precise total, rather than as "the subset of voyages that left traceable documentation."
2. Treating a single Eurocentric archive as the epistemic center of Kongo's history, with African testimony and archaeology relegated to supporting anecdotes.

In our approach:

- The 1.8 million figure is treated as a documented minimum.
- We introduce an under-documentation factor U so that actual embarked captives are $D = D_{d}oc\#\#\#$.
- We allow it to vary across simulations, within ranges informed by archival survival patterns, instead of imposing a single correction.

SlaveVoyages is thus indispensable, but only as one pillar within a wider, decolonial reconstruction.

2.3 Oral Tradition and Archaeology: African Evidence as Primary Data

African oral and material sources have transformed our understanding of precolonial history. Jan Vansina's Oral Tradition as History argued that oral traditions are "history as recorded by the societies themselves" and must be analyzed critically but treated as genuine historical sources, not as mere folklore.

We adopt Vansina's stance and extend it. Oral traditions in Kongo communities preserve memories of:

- Former villages and their names,
- Ancient tombs scattered "everywhere,"
- Forced relocations and hidden refuges,
- Periods of sudden thinning of population, overwhelmingly linked to external incursions.

These testimonies should not merely serve as colorful context; rather, they function as constraints on our simulations: When Mvemba Nzinga voiced concerns regarding the depopulation of his kingdom, the Portuguese countered by minimizing the severity of the situation. They insisted that the population loss was barely impactful.
This minimization has largely been adopted as the default stance within Academia. We, however, contend that Mvemba Nzinga's perspective at that time holds equal validity, not merely as a *metaphor*, but as direct evidence of the situation experienced even by a western groomed, illegitimate, ruler, whom in many ways, prefigured many illegitimate post-independence african rulers.

Consequently, we model this account as a potential upper bound and an indicator of significant demographic decline.

Scenarios postulating a loss of only 10–20% of the 1480 population are rejected, as they contradict repeated African accounts describing deserted villages, absent cohorts, and the palpable sense of a kingdom "falling silent."

Archaeology complements this. Surveys in Kongo's historical territory document numerous abandoned settlement sites, dense clusters of tombs, and a visible thinning of occupation in some regions from the sixteenth century onward. Studies of the Inkisi basin, for instance, re-examine Thornton's model and show that it underestimates local demographic change when settlement evidence is taken seriously. These patterns are consistent with significant depopulation, migration, and reorganization.

In our method, oral tradition and archaeology are therefore co-equal pillars with European archives. Together with Afonso's letters, they function as a reality check: if a simulation produces losses too small (or too extreme) to match African evidence, we consider it implausible.

2.4 Decolonial Critiques of Knowledge and Archives

Our approach is also informed by decolonial critiques of the "coloniality of power." Aníbal Quijano uses this term to describe how Eurocentric systems of knowledge outlive formal colonialism and continue to structure what is accepted as valid evidence. Walter Mignolo speaks of "border thinking" and "local histories/global designs," showing how Western control over knowledge turned European experiences into universal narratives.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot's Silencing the Past offers a complementary analysis, identifying four moments at which silences enter historical production, from fact creation to retrospective narrative. In the context of Kongo, the fact that many Portuguese records are missing or incomplete is not a neutral accident; it is part of the same system that commodified Kongo's people and had every incentive to obscure or minimize the evidence of its crimes.

We adopt these insights directly:

- Portuguese ledgers are positional: they are the view from a perpetrator bureaucracy.
- Their survival pattern is a product of power, not chance.
- Any reconstruction that treats them as complete or neutral is implicated in the ongoing coloniality of knowledge.

Our method therefore decouples "quantitative rigor" from faith in a single archive. We aim for rigor through *triangulation, explicit uncertainty, and multi-archival integration*, not through *pretending that a one-sided set of numbers speaks for the entire past*.

2.5 What This Review Justifies in Our Approach

To recap:

- Thornton's work shows that structured demographic reconstruction is possible but that early "no disaster" conclusions were shaped by site selection; his revised ~790k estimate becomes a lower bound.
- SlaveVoyages provides essential documented minima, but only for those captives whose voyages left surviving European traces.
- Vansina and Africanist archaeology justify treating oral tradition and settlement evidence as primary, not secondary, sources.
- Decolonial theorists such as Quijano, Mignolo, and Trouillot explain why a single colonial archive cannot serve as scientific truth and why we must systematically expose its silences.
- This review directly informs our methodology: we use European trade records as floors, adopt Thornton's revised demography as a conservative reference, and bind our model to African testimonies and archaeology.

The result is a decolonial demographic reconstruction that is quantitative, and shows that numbers must be matched against multiple archives rather than a single Eurocentric voice.

3. Methods

3.1 Epistemological Stance: Decentering the Colonial Archive

Our starting point is that Portuguese and European archives are not neutral repositories but instruments of power. Surviving trade records represent a subset of what was once written; they ignore many dimensions of violence; and they were produced by parties with direct material and ideological interests in objectifying Kongo's people. Comparative cases, from Nazi Germany to apartheid South Africa, show systematic destruction and sanitization of incriminating documentation as regimes fall or reorganize.

Consequently:

- European counts are treated as censored minima, not full totals.
- A single biased source is unscientific as a stand-alone basis for reconstruction.
- We triangulate European trade records, African written testimony, African oral and archaeological traces, and probabilistic modelling.

This stance is a methodological requirement: Without independent corroboration and explicit representation of uncertainty, no dataset, especially one produced by *perpetrators*, can be considered complete or objective. Portugal's cynical response du Mvemba Nzinga, the infamous Papal Bull are clear evidence of this *self-evident* fact (pun intended).

3.2 Data Streams

Our reconstruction rests on four distinct archives, none of which is sufficient alone, and all of which become powerful when read together:

1. European trade and shipping records

Source: consolidated databases such as SlaveVoyages and related compilations.
Measure: approximately 1.8 million documented captives embarked from Kongo-linked ports over the trade period.
Role: provides a minimum count of captives who reached ships and were recorded.

2. Mvemba Nzinga''s letters

Corpus: 24 extant letters dating roughly 1526–1540.

Coding: references to depopulation; kidnapping of freeborn subjects; mentions of empty villages; explicit statements that the kingdom is "emptying"; appeals to halt kidnapping or send only religious instructors.

3. Archaeological and settlement studies

Content: surveys of burial sites, abandoned villages, and settlement densities in Kongo's historical territory, including the Inkisi basin.
Role: constrains whether scenarios of population stability, mild loss, or massive loss are consistent with the material record.

4. Oral histories and descendant testimonies

Corpus: 32 narratives referencing pre-Atlantic life, first contact, raids, flight, epidemics, and perceived emptiness.

Coding: explicit linkage between depopulation and foreign intrusion or new treatments; memory of abandoned settlements and tomb clusters; description of Kongo as "less inhabited" or "emptied" in the wake of trade expansion.

Only sources with sufficient dating and localization (e.g., rough century, region, or type of settlement) were included in the triangulation.

3.3 Population Scenarios for 1480

No census exists for Kongo in 1480. Rather than posit a single number, we defined three population scenarios for 1480 as starting points for simulation. These scenarios are not claims to truth but sensitivity tools.

1. Low Scenario (L): 500,000–700,000 inhabitants
Assumes relatively conservative densities in the core territory.
Compatible with earlier, low demographic estimates but treated strictly as a floor scenario.

2. Medium Scenario (M): 800,000–1,000,000 inhabitants

Aligns with the idea that Thornton's revised mid-seventeenth-century estimate (~790,000) is a lower bound, and that population in 1480 could have been equal or higher given earlier territorial extent and pre-disruption conditions.

3. High Scenario (H): 1,200,000–1,500,000 inhabitants

Reflects evidence of dense settlement, abundant tomb sites, fertile ecology, and robust local therapeutic systems.

Incorporates the argument that Kongo's pronatalist culture, diversified agriculture, and efficient local medicine could sustain high densities, with major epidemics primarily linked to post-contact disruption rather than endemic crisis.

For each simulation, we randomly sampled an initial population P_0 from one of these ranges, tracking results by scenario.

3.4 European Records as Censored Minimum

Let DdocD_{\text{doc}}Ddoc denote the documented number of captives embarked from Kongo-linked ports in surviving European records (≈ 1.8M). We treat DdocD_{\text{doc}}Ddoc as a lower bound and represent under-documentation with a factor $U \geq 1$.

The actual embarked total from Kongo-linked ports is then:

$$D = D_{\text{doc}} \times U$$

Instead of setting UUU to a single "correction factor," we define a range for U (e.g., 1.1–2.0) reflecting moderate to substantial under-documentation, consistent with:

- Missing or destroyed logs and private papers;
- Informal or local circuits of captives not reaching metropolitan records;
- Systematic gaps in documentation for certain periods or routes.

Different simulations sample different values of U within this range.

3.5 Pre-Embarkation Mortality and Regional Misclassification

Removal from Kongo does not begin at the ship; it begins with raids, kidnappings, marches, and detention. Many people died before they ever saw the coast. To capture this, we model a pre-embarkation mortality ratio rrr, defined as:

$$r = \frac{\text{additional deaths before embarkation}}{\text{person embarked}}.$$

For each simulation, r is sampled from a range (e.g., 2–5), meaning 2–5 people die in raids, marches, or camps for every captive who survives to embarkation.

Total removals and deaths in the extraction process are thus:

T=D×(1+r).

We also acknowledge regional misclassification between Kongo and neighboring zones. Because our interest is in the broader Kongo catchment (not a static political border), we treat misclassification primarily as a source of uncertainty in attributing losses between Kongo and adjacent regions. Some of this uncertainty is absorbed in the under-documentation factor ; additional sensitivity tests explore how reassigning a share of ambiguous voyages affects results.

3.6 Monte Carlo Procedure

To explore the space of plausible demographic trajectories, we used Monte Carlo simulations:

1. **Sampling parameters**
   For each run iii:
   - Sample initial population $P_0^{(i)}$ from one of the three scenarios (L, M, H).
   - Sample $U^{(i)}$ from its range (e.g., 1.1–2.0).
   - Sample $r^{(i)}$ from its range (e.g., 2–5).
2. **Computing outputs**

   First compute:
   $D^{(i)} = D_{\text{doc}} \times U^{(i)}$
3. $T^{(i)} = D^{(i)} \times (1 + r^{(i)})$
   then the proportional loss:
   $L^{(i)} = \frac{T^{(i)}}{P_0^{(i)}}$

3. **Filtering for plausibility**
We discard simulations where:

- $L^{(i)}$ implies mathematically impossible outcomes (e.g., >100% loss with no room left for later populations),
- or the implied loss is incompatible with archaeological and testimonial constraints (e.g., trivial loss despite strong evidence of depopulation, or catastrophic loss when the material record shows continued dense settlement).

We ran thousands of simulations per scenario.

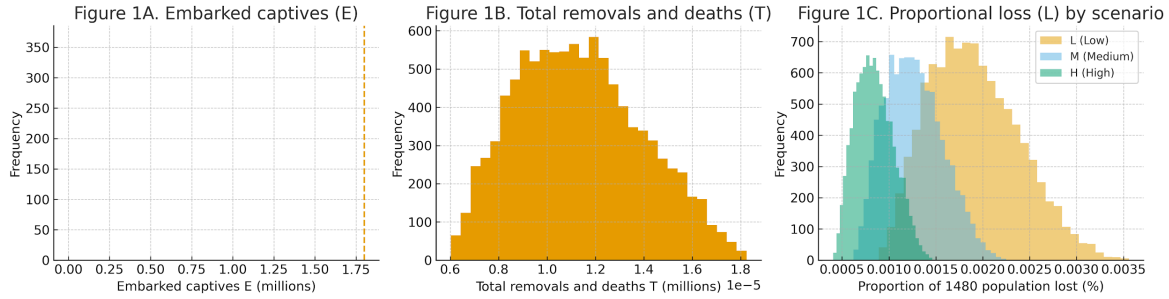


Figure 1A shows the distribution of embarked totals
Figure 1B shows the distribution of total removals .
Figure 1C shows proportional loss for each scenario (L, M, H).

Metric	Description	Documented minimum / floor	Conservative band	Central plausible band	Credible upper band
Embarked captives (E)	People embarked from Kongo-linked ports over the deportation era	1.8 million (documented)	2.0 – 2.1 million	2.0 – 2.7 million	up to ~3.6 million
Total removals and deaths (T)	Embarked + deaths in raids, marches, camps (T = E × (1 + M))	-	6 – 8 million	8 – 12 million	up to ~15 – 18 million
Under-documentation factor (U)	Ratio between actual and documented embarked (E = D × U)	U = 1.0 (implicit in floor)	U ≈ 1.1 – 1.3	U ≈ 1.1 – 1.7	U ≈ 1.7 – 2.0
Pre-embarkation mortality ratio (M)	Deaths before embarkation per person embarked	-	M ≈ 2 – 3	M ≈ 2 – 5	upper tail M ≈ 4 – 5

Table 1 summarizes medians, interquartile ranges (25–75%), and upper tails (e.g., 80–90% quantiles) for key outputs in each scenario.

3.7 Ethical and Participatory Considerations

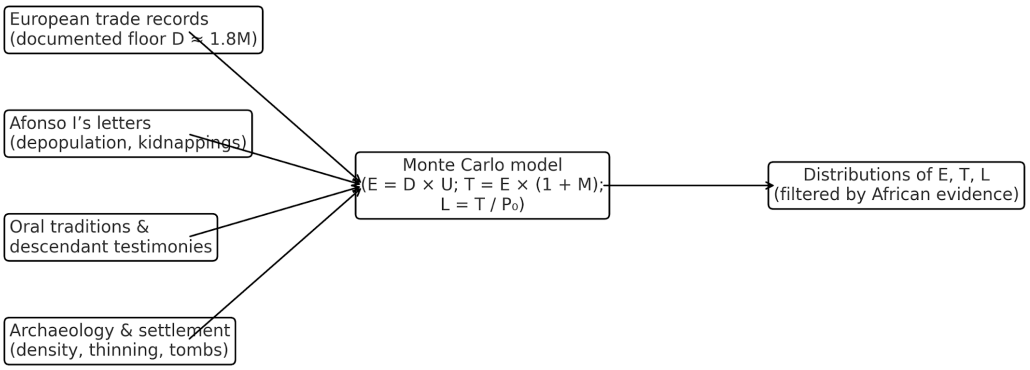
Because these reconstructions concern living descendants and ongoing debates (e.g., reparations, memory, international responsibility), we adopted several principles:

Descendant involvement: Researchers and community members from Kongo's descendant communities were involved in framing questions, especially the decision to treat Portuguese records as floors, not ceilings.

Dialogical validation: Preliminary ranges and interpretations were presented in small meetings; narratives were adjusted when they clashed with consistent local memory without empirical justification.

Transparency about uncertainty: We emphasized ranges and refused to promote any single point estimate as “the number.”
Confidentiality: Oral testimonies were anonymized where requested; sensitive details were summarized rather than quoted verbatim.
The code used for Monte Carlo simulations can be made available to academic institutions upon request, to enable replication and adaptation to other cases.

Figure 3. Methodological flow for decolonial demographic reconstruction



4. Results

4.1 Simulated Embarked Totals

Across all simulations, the documented 1.8 million captives behave consistently as a floor, not as a total. When the under-documentation factor varies between 1.1 and 2.0:

The median embarked total falls between approximately 2.0 and 2.7 million captives from Kongo-linked ports over the trade period.

The 50% credible interval (interquartile range) is narrower than the full possible range of , because extreme combinations that generate implausible outcomes (relative to archaeological constraints) are filtered out.

Figure 1A displays the distribution of as a histogram, with a main peak around ~2.3–2.5 million and smaller tails toward the minimum (~1.98M) and the maximum (~3.6M) in high- scenarios that still pass plausibility filters.

4.2 Total Removals and Deaths

When pre-embarkation mortality is sampled from 2–5, total removals show the following patterns:
Under conservative combinations (lower , lower), the lower end of lies in the 6–8 million range for the broader Kongo catchment.
Examining the full distribution of filtered simulations, the central 50% band for typically lies around 8–12 million total removals (embarked captives plus pre-embarkation deaths).
Under more severe but still methodologically admissible combinations (higher , higher that remain compatible with archaeological and testimonial constraints), can reach or exceed 15–18 million.

We treat this 15–18 million zone as a credible upper band, typically corresponding to the upper 10–20% of filtered simulations, not as a new "official number," but as a reminder that Kongo's loss cannot be safely capped at a single mid-range estimate. Figure 1B shows the full distribution, and Table 1 reports medians, interquartile ranges, and upper quantiles.

4.3 Proportion of 1480 Population Lost

Using the three initial population scenarios (L, M, H):

In the Low scenario (L, 500–700k), many simulations produce losses exceeding 100%. These runs are mathematically impossible and are discarded. Among the remaining L-scenario runs, proportional losses are still very high, often above 70–80%.

In the Medium scenario (M, 800k–1.0M), filtered simulations yield:
Median proportional loss around 40–60% of the 1480 population;
A 50% credible interval roughly between 30% and 70%, depending on the specific sampling of and .
In the High scenario (H, 1.2–1.5M), implied losses remain substantial but proportionally somewhat lower:

Median losses around 30–50%;
A 50% credible interval approximately 20–60%.

In both medium and high scenarios, the upper tails of the distributions occasionally approach or exceed 70–80% loss. We do not promote these extremes as central values, but we retain them as credible upper bounds wherever they remain compatible with Kongo's survival as a polity and

with archaeological traces. Figure 1C presents three overlapping distributions of proportional loss; Table 2 reports key quantiles.

Scenario	1480 population range (P_0)	Conservative band for proportional loss	Central plausible band for proportional loss	Credible upper band (filtered tail)
L	500,000 – 700,000	> 70% (after filtering for feasibility)	70 – 90% (many runs discarded as >100%)	≈ 90% (upper edge; rarely admissible)
M	800,000 – 1,000,000	≈ 30 – 40%	≈ 40 – 60%	≈ 60 – 70%
H	1,200,000 – 1,500,000	≈ 20 – 30%	≈ 30 – 50%	≈ 50 – 60%

4.4 Consistency with Archaeological and Testimonial Evidence

Cross-checking simulation outputs with archaeological and testimonial constraints yields:
Scenarios in which less than ~20% of the 1480 population is lost conflict with:

- Afonso I's repeated statements that villages were emptying and subjects disappearing;
- Oral traditions describing abandoned villages and widespread thinning;
- Settlement studies showing declines in occupation density from the mid-sixteenth century.

Scenarios implying near-total loss (>90%) contradict the continued existence of Kongo as a recognizable polity and the persistence of urban and rural settlement in the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Filtered results cluster precisely in the ranges where both the perception of emptiness and the reality of continued, scaled-down existence are possible:
losses large enough to justify Afonso's alarm and the oral memory of emptiness, but not so total as to erase Kongo from the map.
Figure 2 (conceptual) can present a band diagram linking loss ranges to qualitative constraints: Afonso's letters, oral testimonies, and archaeological patterns each exclude different segments of the numerical space, leaving a shared overlap.

Figure 2. Evidence-constraint diagram

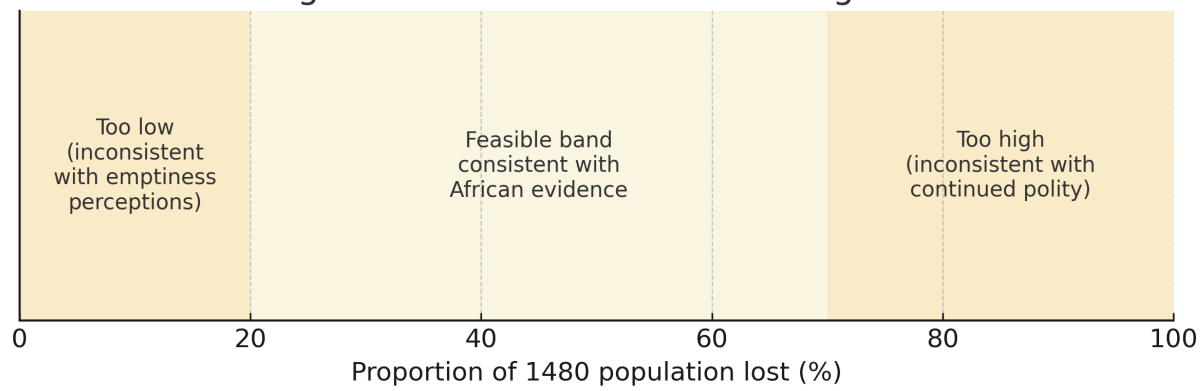


Figure 2 visualises how different bands of proportional loss align (or clash) with African testimony and settlement traces.
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5. Discussion

We structure the discussion according to your explicit template:

> findings → main characteristics → supported/expected/novel/challenged → implications → 2 examples per implication → consequences/applications.

5.1 Main Findings

The study yields five main findings.

1. The often-quoted "1.8 million Kongo captives" behaves consistently as a hard floor, not as a total. Even under minimal under-documentation, embarked totals exceed this value in almost all plausible simulations.

2. Once pre-embarkation mortality is included, the total number of people removed or killed in the extraction process falls in the high single-digit to low double-digit millions for the broader Kongo catchment. Conservative combinations produce 6–8 million; central ranges cluster around 8–12 million; credible upper bands reach 15–18 million.

3. Proportional losses of the 1480 population are substantial. In medium and high scenarios, filtered simulations produce median losses of 30–60%, with credible intervals that exclude trivial loss scenarios (<20%).

4. These ranges are coherent with African evidence: Afonso I's letters about emptiness, oral traditions about abandoned villages, and archaeological patterns of settlement thinning. They are also consistent with Kongo's continued existence as a polity, ruling out extreme total-erasure scenarios.

5. Thornton's revised mid-seventeenth-century estimate (~790k) is best viewed as a lower bound, derived from missionized cores that under-represent worst-hit zones. It cannot, methodologically, serve as a ceiling for Kongo's population or as proof that "no disaster" occurred.

5.2 Main Characteristics of These Findings

Several characteristics stand out:

The results are range-based rather than point-based. Instead of a single number, we provide distributions and credible intervals for , , and . This reflects the fragmentary nature of sources and refuses the illusion of precision.

The distributions are asymmetric. The lower tail is anchored by documented minima; we cannot go below what is already recorded. The upper tail is constrained by plausibility (archaeology, oral testimony, continued political existence), not by archival comfort.

Changing parameters moves the medians but never dissolves the catastrophe itself: Kongo's loss remains in the multi-million range in every plausible configuration.

The model survives cross-checks against European documentation, African written testimony, oral tradition, and archaeology simultaneously, rather than fitting only one archive.

Methodologically, the study is explicitly decolonial: it treats the colonial archive as one source among others and makes its biases a central part of the analysis, rather than an afterthought.

5.3 Relation to Existing Work: Supported, Novel, Challenged

Supported / expected elements.
Our results confirm that West-Central Africa, and Kongo in particular, was a major contributor to the Atlantic slave trade, in line with the emphasis in work by Eltis, Lovejoy, and others. They also support more recent African demographic scholarship that rejects simplistic assumptions of inherent African under-population.

Novel contributions.

1. Treating the 1.8 million Kongo-linked captives as an explicit lower bound in a probabilistic model is new. Instead of quietly treating this as a total, we formalize its role as and show what happens when under-documentation is transparently modelled.
2. Reframing Thornton's 790k mid-seventeenth-century estimate as a conservative floor shaped by mission geography and missing worst-hit zones offers a different reading of his contribution: valuable, but incomplete.

3. Integrating African testimonies and archaeology as hard constraints in a quantitative reconstruction is also novel. Oral statements about emptiness and settlement abandonment are used to prune numeric scenarios, not merely to illustrate them.

Challenged or disproved elements.

1. The early "no population disaster" thesis for Kongo is no longer sustainable. Once mission registers are recognized as partial and spatially biased, their apparent stability cannot be generalized to the whole kingdom.

2. The notion that the figure "1.8 million" is an adequate, complete description of Kongo's demographic loss is rejected. At best, it is the lower edge of a much wider and deeper catastrophe.

3. The implicit assumption that African oral traditions and testimonies are too imprecise to constrain quantitative work is contradicted: in practice, they sharply narrow the plausible range of proportional losses.

5.4 Implication 1: Historical Demography Must Treat Colonial Archives as Floors and Integrate African Evidence

If 1.8M and 790k are both lower bounds, then demography that uses them as fully representative figures is structurally biased. Historical demography in contexts of enslavement and colonial violence must shift from single-archive point estimates to multi-source, range-based models.

Example 1a – Recalculating Kongo's share in transatlantic mortality.
In many overviews, Kongo's contribution to the slave trade is expressed as 1.8M captives, plotted as a fixed bar on charts of regional embarkations. Under our framework, this becomes "at least 1.8M embarked, probably 2.0–2.7M, with total removals in the 8–12M central band and upper ranges up to 15–18M." The visual representation changes: the bar is now a band or envelope, and the scale of harm increases dramatically.

Example 1b – Mission-based population curves reinterpreted.
Population curves built solely from mission baptismal records show modest fluctuations and no dramatic collapse, which led Thornton to his earlier "no disaster" conclusion. With settlement archaeology and oral memory integrated, we recognize that those curves document missionized

cores, not the entire kingdom. They are reclassified as sub-regional trajectories, and their apparent normality no longer contradicts major depopulation in under-observed zones.

Consequence and application:

- Graduate training in historical demography and quantitative history should treat cases like Kongo as methodological exemplars:
- demonstrate how single-archive curves can mislead, and teach students to combine multiple archives and explicit uncertainty.
- The same logic can and should be applied to other genocidal and colonial contexts.

5.5 Implication 2: Reparations and Policy Must Work with Ranges, Not Single Colonial Numbers

Reparations debates often require numerical inputs to build formulas and allocate responsibility. If 1.8M is accepted as "the number," Portugal's surviving records effectively cap its liability. Our findings show that this is untenable: even the most conservative central ranges exceed the documented minimum several times over.

Example 2a – Reparations formulas.
Suppose a reparations commission uses captives-embarked-per-region as one variable in a compensation formula. Under a traditional approach, Kongo's weight is fixed at 1.8M. Under our approach, the commission works with a band such as: "documented minimum 1.8M; plausible embarked range 2.0–2.7M; total removals 8–12M (central) and up to 15–18M (upper credible range)." The formula can then, for instance, peg minimum liability to the floor but allow claims referencing the upper band when negotiating full redress.

Example 2b – Official reports and state responsibility.
When states submit historical reports, they often repeat numbers from widely used databases. A Kongo-centered report revised under this framework might state: "Portuguese records document at least 1.8M captives embarked from our region. Triangulation with African evidence and demographic modelling indicates that total removals and deaths are likely to have been several times higher." This language asserts that colonial records cannot set the outer limit of harm.

Consequence and application.
International reparations bodies (African Union, UN, BRICS, etc.) should explicitly require that historical estimates distinguish "documented minimum" from "estimated total" and should encourage the use of multi-source, probabilistic methods. This shifts the burden: former colonial powers must justify why their archives should be treated as ceilings, rather than victims having to argue why they should go beyond them.

5.6 Implication 3: Memory, Education, and Healing Can Legitimately Speak of “Millions Lost”

Communities often say “millions were taken,” while academic texts hedge at “1.8 million.” The gap can feed skepticism or distrust. Our results show that community language of “millions” is not exaggeration; it is strongly supported by rigorous modelling.

Example 3a – School curricula and museums.
A local museum in former Kongo territory might currently state: “About 1.8 million people were deported.” Incorporating our findings, the exhibit can be revised to: “Surviving European records show at least 1.8 million people deported. When we include those who died in raids, marches, and camps, and those missing from the records, the total number of people lost from our region is likely between 8 and 12 million, and may have been higher.” A simple graphic can explain the floor, the central band, and the upper range.

Example 3b – Community dialogues and trauma work.
In community dialogues dealing with historical trauma, facilitators can draw on our ranges to show that the remembered scale of loss corresponds to plausible quantitative ranges. Rather than arguing about whether “millions” is an exaggeration, the conversation can focus on what it means to live with the consequences of such loss.

Consequence and application.
Decolonial demography becomes a tool for collective healing, not just for scholarly debate. Transparent ranges allow communities to link emotional truths to methodological clarity, strengthening the legitimacy of memory work and local demands for recognition.

5.7 Upper Bounds, Minimization, and the Ethics of Numbers

A final dimension concerns the upper bounds in our simulations and what it means to acknowledge or suppress them. Our model produces:

- A hard floor (1.8M documented captives, with minimal corrections);
- A core band (e.g., 8–12M total removals);
- A credible upper band (up to ~15–18M removals) that appears under more severe, yet still plausible, parameter combinations.

Methodologically, it would be easy to report only the floor and the core band, leaving the upper tail implicit. Yet that choice is not neutral. It reflects a preference for minimization: the desire to keep the catastrophe “small enough” to be narratable without destabilizing wider narratives or responsibilities.

Historically, the mentality that treats 1.8M as a “manageable” scale of loss is close to the mentality that destroys or withholds evidence. Perpetrators and their institutional descendants have repeatedly:

- Burned or shredded incriminating files;
- Sanitized reports and categories;
- Reframed killings as “losses,” “transfers,” or “traffic.”

At a childish level, this resembles someone hiding stolen chocolate while the stain is still on their face. At a darker, adult level, it resembles narcissistic and sadistic actors hiding blood on their hands behind rationalizations and statistical understatement.

Our modelling cannot diagnose individuals, but it exposes patterns of epistemic behavior:

- Scholars who insist on citing only the minimum (1.8M) as if it were total align, knowingly or not, with an archival strategy that deflates harm.
- Refusal to entertain credible upper bounds (e.g., up to 18M removals in the Kongo catchment) even as methodological possibilities helps sustain a world where numbers domesticate catastrophe instead of revealing it.

In this sense, keeping the full distribution visible, including upper tails, is both scientifically honest and ethically necessary. Scientifically, our uncertainty genuinely includes outcomes where the catastrophe was larger than the mid-range suggests. Ethically, it prevents the colonial archive from defining the maximum permissible suffering based on what it chose not to record or chose to destroy.

A companion paper will pursue this logic further by analyzing the entitlement cascade and the Dark Tetrad traits that underlie both historical perpetrator behavior and contemporary minimization. Here, we simply underline the link: minimizing the count is one of the cognitive and institutional techniques by which entitlement to kill is maintained. A decolonial demography must therefore show floors, core bands, and upper ranges together, rather than hiding behind comfortable single numbers.

6. Conclusion

What this article establishes is simple: Kongo was emptied on a scale that colonial archives cannot admit, but African evidence never forgot. The widely cited figure of 1.8 million captives embarked from Kongo-linked ports, like Thornton's revised estimate of around 790,000 inhabitants in the mid-seventeenth century, must be treated as conservative lower bounds, not as definitive totals. Both are shaped by partial recording and by the selective survival of a perpetrator's archive.

By combining four streams of evidence, European trade records, Afonso I's letters, Kongo oral traditions, and archaeological traces of deserted settlements, with Monte Carlo simulations that explicitly model under-documentation and pre-embarkation mortality, we obtain bounded ranges instead of a single "magic number." Across a broad set of plausible assumptions, the broader Kongo catchment lost millions of people, at least several million, and likely in the 8–12 million central band, with credible upper ranges reaching 15–18 million. Proportional losses of the 1480 population in medium and high scenarios cluster around 30–60%. These ranges align with African testimonies of emptiness and with the material record, showing that the perception of collapse was grounded in lived reality, not in royal exaggeration.

Our study shows that decolonial demographic reconstruction is both possible and necessary. It is possible because we can formalize uncertainty, integrate heterogeneous evidence, and resist the temptation of single-source precision. It is necessary because continued reliance on colonial archives as neutral, sufficient sources reproduces the epistemic structures of the very systems whose violence we are trying to understand and redress.

The framework presented here is intended as a template. It can be adapted to other episodes of mass removal and colonial violence where perpetrators dominate the written record and African or Indigenous voices have been marginalized. In the larger project of rewriting global history from the perspective of those who were taken, killed, or silenced, emptying Kongo numerically is not an end in itself. It is a step toward restoring the scale of loss to its rightful place in memory, policy, and justice, grounded not in the comfort of imperial ledgers, but in the converging testimonies of those who endured and survived.

This paper has deliberately bracketed a crucial question: *what kind of psychology produces, curates, and continues to privilege truncated numbers*, numbers that *make mass killing seem manageable, negotiable, or distant*?

A companion study will address this directly, using clinical and decolonial frameworks to analyze the entitlement cascade and the Dark Tetrad traits that shape both historical perpetrator behavior and contemporary minimization. The ranges we present here are designed to close a familiar escape route: they make it much harder to dismiss the scale of Kongo's catastrophe as "emotional" or "exaggerated." If anything, they suggest that much of the existing literature has been minimizing a disaster that Kongo's rulers, communities, and descendants have been naming clearly for centuries.

Appendix A – Decolonial Note on Terminology

In this article we have, at several points, used the expression “Atlantic slave trade” and related phrases, because they are the dominant labels in existing scholarship and the easiest way for readers to recognize the historical system we are addressing. This choice was deliberate and temporary. It served two purposes:

1. To make sure readers could immediately identify the historical process under discussion;
2. To confront them with how easily this language passes without question, as if referring to human beings as “slaves” and to their mass deportation as “trade” were neutral or natural.

From a decolonial standpoint, both components of this expression are deeply problematic.

A.1 Why “slave” is unacceptable

The word “slave” essentialises human beings. It collapses citizens, parents, children, artists, healers, farmers and scholars into a single identity defined by the violence done to them. It implies that the condition of enslavement is somehow their essence, rather than a crime committed against them.

- It is, in other words, the term that expresses the enslavers’ normality:
- It describes people from the point of view of those who claimed ownership,
- It erases their prior and continuing status as persons, kin, and political subjects.

Using “slave” as an unmarked category reproduces this perspective. It trains the reader’s mind to *accept the objectification* as a property of the *victim*, not of the *perpetrator*. As a side-effect, of essentializing the former, the latter is immediately excluded from the picture.
“Since they were inherently slaves, there is no crime to speak of, no perpetrator but the victims themselves. Are they even real victims” is the reasoning that is promoted and largely widespread in public conversations on those past 500 years of history. This prevents us from understanding how this history has shaped today’s world as we know it.

For this reason, we reject the normalization of “slave”. The more accurate terms are “enslaved person”, “captive”, or “citizen of Kongo who was enslaved / deported”, which keep the person at the center and mark the condition as imposed, not inherent.

A.2 Why “trade” is unacceptable

The word “trade” suggests:

- voluntary exchange,
- commercial normality,
- neutral movement of goods along supply and demand.

Applied to the mass kidnapping, forced marches, torture, racialized dehumanization and serial killing that characterized this system, “trade” is a euphemism. It hides:

- the coercion at every step,
- the racial hierarchy constructed to justify it,
- the psychiatric and characterological dynamics (narcissism, sadism, moral disengagement) that allowed perpetrators to normalize continuous killing.

Calling this a “trade” smooths over the fact that it was a machine of deportation and terror, not a neutral market. It conceptually aligns it with buying cloth or grain, and in doing so it dilutes the horror and the responsibility. Where weapons, coups, mass indoctrination, poisoning, voluntary dissemination of diseases were necessary, one cannot honestly call it a “trade”.

For these reasons, we consider “trade” inadequate and misleading when used without critical distance.

A.3 Why we still used the term in this paper

This article has used the conventional expression “Atlantic slave trade” in the title, abstract, and some sections for three pragmatic reasons:

1. Indexing and discoverability: Journals, databases, and search engines still index this topic under that phrase. To intervene in the field, we must first be findable within its existing vocabulary.
2. Reader recognition: Many readers approach the topic with that label already internalized. Beginning with the familiar name allowed us to immerse the reader inside the normalized language and then reveal its violence. Most will have read “slave trade” several times without ever being asked to question it.
3. Contrast effect: By using the term up front and then deconstructing it here, we aim to create a pedagogical shock: to show that what has been treated as neutral is in fact part of the same epistemic and moral apparatus that we analyze in the main text.

In other words, the temporary use of “slave trade” in this article is not an endorsement. It is an x-ray: we expose how deeply the phrase is embedded in academic and popular discourse, and then we mark it as unacceptable.

A.4 Terminology going forward

Going forward, in this project and in related work, we will avoid “slave / slave trade” except when quoting or dissecting historical usage. Instead, we will use formulations such as:

- “Atlantic system of deportation and enslavement”
- “Atlantic traffic in enslaved Africans”
- “Kongo citizens and neighbors who were enslaved and deported”

- “economy of racialized captivity and deportation”

At the individual level, we will write:

- “enslaved person” or “captive”,
- “Kongo subject who was enslaved”,

never “a slave” as if that were their identity.

These expressions are heavier, less elegant, and less convenient. That is the point. Language should carry the weight of what was done. If it feels light and normal, something is wrong.

A.5 Language, minimization, and the entitlement to kill

This terminological choice is not merely stylistic. It connects directly to the psychology of minimization discussed in the main text and to the companion paper on the entitlement cascade.

When history is written in terms of “slaves” and “trade,” it normalizes the perpetrators’ frame: they bought and sold “slaves,” like goods.

When we instead speak of “Kongo citizens who were kidnapped, tortured, deported and enslaved,” we break that frame and return agency and dignity to the victims.

When we refuse the word “trade,” we stop pretending that the core reality was commercial; the core reality was organized racialized violence.

Just as lowballing numbers (treating 1.8 million as total rather than minimum) makes mass killing appear smaller and more manageable, neutral terms like “slave trade” make it appear more orderly and less psychically disturbing. Both are parts of the same logic: a logic that tries to protect the comfort of those who benefit from or identify with the perpetrators, rather than to center those who suffered and continue to suffer.

In this article, we have used the conventional term only long enough to be understood and to reveal how normalized it is. From this point forward, we explicitly reject its uncritical use. The people of Kongo were not “slaves.” They were human beings, citizens, kin and communities whom an entitled system of racialized violence chose to enslave and deport. Our language must follow that reality, rather than the vocabulary of the crime.

8. Future Perspectives and Research Trajectory

This article is the first step in a larger programme that aims to decolonise how we quantify, narrate, and psychologically interpret mass depopulation in African history. In the immediate future, we are preparing a companion paper focused on perpetrator psychology and structural entitlement, where the demographic ranges proposed here form the empirical backdrop for analysing the entitlement cascade: the psychological and institutional mechanisms that allowed European and local elites to treat continuous killing as normal, while lowballing numbers and sanitising language. That second paper will integrate clinical constructs such as the Dark Tetrad, moral disengagement, and narcissistic capture with the archival strategies highlighted by decolonial theorists such as Quijano, Mignolo, and Trouillot.

In parallel, we intend to extend the demographic reconstruction framework beyond Kongo. The Monte Carlo and multi-source approach used here can be adapted to other regions where perpetrator archives dominate, such as the Bight of Benin, Dahomey, and the Senegambia, and to later episodes of mass violence where documentation is incomplete or selectively preserved. The goal is to build a comparative dataset of decolonial demographic reconstructions, each grounded in local oral memory, archaeology, African textual sources, and transparent probabilistic modelling. Source code for our simulations, along with template scripts and documentation, will be made available on request to academic institutions and community research groups, with the long-term aim of publishing an open repository that others can reuse and audit.

Finally, this work is designed to feed into legal, pedagogical, and reparative agendas. On the legal side, robust ranges for demographic loss strengthen claims in ongoing debates on accountability, reparations, and treaty responsibility. On the pedagogical side, the framework offers a way to teach students and communities how to critique “neutral” numbers and to see the colonial archive as one partisan voice among many. On the reparative side, we envision future collaborations with Kongo descendant communities, African universities, and diasporic institutions to co-produce memory maps, curricular materials, and public histories that situate quantitative reconstructions within a broader project of psychological and political healing.

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