Kimbanguism

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PART I

GENERAL BACKGROUND
To understand Kimbanguism, it is necessary to situate it not only in the history of the territory where it was born, which used to be known as the kingdom of Kongo, but also against the backdrop of traditional African religions, which reflect a coherent worldview.

Although it is difficult to reconstitute this history completely, let me try with the existing documents to give an account of the political, ethnic, and religious elements that are the background of the Kimbanguist religion. More often than not, when evoking the kingdom of Kongo, scholars tend to refer to the linguistic area corresponding to the Kongo ethnic group. But whenever they try to depict the different groups making up this kingdom, it becomes clear that there were several kingdoms—including those of the Kongo, Angola, Loango, Anzico, and Teke. The research by the Jesuit father Joseph Van Wing in his Études ba-Kongo; by Georges Balandier on daily life in the kingdom of Kongo from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries; by Cuvelier and Jadin; and by Kabolo Iko Kabwita help build fuller knowledge of the ethnic, political, and religious background of the kingdom of Kongo.¹

The origin of this kingdom has been lost in the oral traditions. But, unlike other African political systems, the kingdom of Kongo has benefited from several written accounts left by European missionaries and other Western explorers.

According to a myth that became famous thanks to the writings of the Italian explorer Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi (published in 1687), a man
called Ntinu Wene, or Nimi Lukeni, the youngest son of the king of Bundu (or Vundu, near the present-day city of Boma in the Democratic Republic of the Congo), resented having to live under the authority of his elder brothers; he left his kinsmen to emigrate with a group of followers to a region south of the Congo River. There, he mustered his men into an armed band, which exacted a toll from anyone wanting to cross the river. Then, Cavazzi wrote, “one day, he argued with his paternal aunt, who refused to pay the demanded sum. He ripped her belly open, though she was pregnant. Out of fear of his father’s wrath, Lukeni then settled down on the southern bank of the river, where he founded the kingdom of Kongo after defeating a local chief called Mambombolo.”

This murder was the starting point of the gradual conquest of the territory that came to be known as the kingdom of Kongo. But the authority of a king is not legitimate until he earns the support of both his subjects and their (dead) ancestors, who rule the territory. The lands that Ntinu Wene had conquered did not hold the remains of his ancestors. In the Kongo system, the property of land is exclusively held by ancestors, and it can be neither divided nor ceded; the living only benefit from the use of it. Consequently, Ntinu Wene’s conquest of the territory represented a violation of the sacred, vital link among the ancestors, the living, and the land. It was outside of the initial society that he built a new kingdom and subjugated it to his law. He imposed his authority by filling his subjects with awe.

Balandier wrote that three elements marked the nature of this newborn kingdom. The first was sacred violence, which is the privilege of a double-faceted monarch—a brutal and domineering person, yet also a righter of wrongs and a peacemaker. Second, Ntinu Wene was considered to be the inventor of the art of forging metals, thereby endowing his people with weapons for waging wars and tools for agriculture. Third, he instituted a court of justice that was both respected and feared.

Beyond the brutal power exerted by Ntinu Wene lay another power based on ancestor worship. If the observers of the early kingdom of Kongo are to be believed, Lukeni, while conquering the Congo plateau territories located around his city of Mbanza Kongo, was regarded as a foreign invader until he had obtained the blessing of the ancestors guarding his new possessions. He thus became interested in legitimizing his reign through a matrimonial alliance with a woman from the lineage of the conquered Nsaku clan.

The early history of the kingdom of Kongo, as described by most observers, gives the picture of relentless ethnic warfare between populations from
regions now situated in Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Congo-Brazzaville. The boundaries that enclosed the ancient kingdom of Kongo are blurred due to its coexistence with other kingdoms and because those kings often exaggerated their territories, but it was mainly located in present-day Angola. The kingdom bordered the Atlantic Ocean on its western boundary and spanned the Zaire River toward the Bateke Plateaux to the east. Its northern boundary extended toward present-day Gabon and its southern boundary beyond the Kwango River, totaling more than 115,000 square miles. The kingdom never had one common government, but it shared a common civilization. As time went by, the invaders merged with the natives, and together they formed a vast kingdom whose splendor amazed the Europeans who arrived by the late fifteenth century.
The kingdom of the Kongo is commonly divided into six provinces or main territories: Mbamba, Soyo, Mpemba, Mbata, Mpangu, and Nsundi.

Other authors claim that the territory was once inhabited by the Batswa ethnic group—that is, the Pygmies, who now live in the forest regions of the areas mentioned above—and that the Bakongo, coming in successive migratory waves, took hold of the territory and enslaved them to build the kingdom of Kongo and its capital city, Mbanza Kongo.\(^8\)

The general trend nowadays is to describe the kingdom of Kongo as having been composed of the three present-day countries of Congo-Brazzaville, the DRC, and Angola. Actually, it was the king of the Bateke people, known as the Makoko Teke, who gave the land of what is now Congo-Brazzaville to the explorer Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza, who was acting on behalf of France in 1880. This allows us to infer that the land belonged to the Bateke kingdom.\(^9\)

Oral tradition does not give a specific date of birth for the kingdom of Kongo; the only existing written sources date to the year the kingdom became known to the Portuguese, who settled there from the 1490s. Further, the kingdom of Kongo left no tangible traces apart from remnants of the Christianization period, such as the ruins of the old cathedral of Mbanza Kongo, which remain to this day and hold a particular significance for Kimbanguists, as I discuss below. Around the new kingdom, a number of elements typical of oral traditions congregated, shaping a distinctive political and religious worldview.

It is also difficult to get a clear picture of the political nature of the kingdom of Kongo, particularly as regards the relations between the king and his subjects and their perception of him. How did the succession of the monarch take place? Was it a dynastic or a democratic process? Only through the remnants of sociopolitical structures observable in present-day Congo and Angola can we infer what the kingdom of Kongo may have been as a political entity. Historians have reached a consensus about the duality of the kingdom’s political power, which seems to have been both temporal and spiritual. The Kongo social universe, as the Congolese historian Kabolo Iko Kabwita explained, is a tripartite community, consisting of God, the ancestors, and the members living on their own soil. In Kongo tradition, the king, who is mainly considered to be the head of a clan, is the repository of traditional religion. That is to say, he is the priest of ancestor worship.\(^10\) The American anthropologist Wyatt MacGaffey clearly analyzed the nature of such worship:
In Kongo the important distinction lies between ordinary persons, of any age, and those who exercise occult power (*kindoki*), including both the dead and powerful living elders. In many instances such elders, especially those initiated as “chiefs” were regarded as spirits (*binzambinzambi*, “little gods”) and treated as cult objects, as containing some extraordinary soul that could be constrained to produce extraordinary effects, good or bad. Chiefs (sing., *mfumu*) were persons initiated to the cult of a particular spirit on behalf of the groups they represented. . . . Like other initiates, they incorporated attributes of the spirit whose powers they mediated. . . . The dualism of chief and priest, the latter clearly dedicated to local spirits responsible for weather and fertility, is evident in accounts of the former Kingdom of Kongo.\(^\text{11}\)

It may then be inferred that temporal power was also a matter of spiritual power, which was given by the “gods” or “ancestors.” In this sense, a chief, and especially a king, was entrusted not only with the temporal care of his subjects, but also with their protection by acting as a go-between with Nzambi a Mpungu (literally, God Almighty). It was impossible for a person not born into the clan or ethnic group to rise to the throne. To become the ruler, the king or king-to-be must have been born in the Kongo ethnic group.

In traditional Kongo society, social organization is based on a minimal unit, which is not the nuclear family but the lineage, that is, the whole group of descendants of an ancestor, who is often known to them all, but also has a mythical dimension. Lineage in Kongo society includes those who live on the surface of the earth (the living), those who are below the surface of the earth (the dead), and those who are not yet born. The line of descent is the governing principle of the transmission of kinship. It determines a more or less exclusive degree of affiliation within and between groups of individuals sharing the same ancestor. In the Kongo cultural system, the line of descent is usually traced from a single parent, the mother: a child is her or his mother’s and only belongs to her kin. The line of descent is therefore matrilineal, and kinship ties are transmitted by females only. Hence a male, unlike his sister, cannot transmit his kinship to his children—the latter are no kin to him, because they belong to their mother’s kinship group. Yet all his nephews and nieces (the children of his sister) are members of his kinship group.

Since individuals belong to their mother’s kinship group, female children represent a real source of wealth, for they are the ones who perpetuate
the clan. A man is considered to be the husband of the children’s mother, but his physiological fatherhood is ignored, while the “social” father, the children’s legal tutor, is actually his brother-in-law. The matrilineal system is not a matriarchy, giving the mother exclusive authority over her children. In this system, women are just progenitors, while actual power inside the family is in the hands of maternal uncles. The matrilineal system, which is still recognized in modern Kongo society, determines who is entitled to inherit from whom property rights, titles, and duties, and who transmits to whom social identity and status.

This does not mean that the head of a family or kinship group is necessarily a king or the head of the whole ethnic group—even though a king may be the head of his family or kinship group or be a local chief for a region or village. This is probably the way the king of Kongo identified, since he ranked above the heads of all families and the heads of all kinship, tribal, and ethnic groups and just under Nzambi a Mpungu. The order of succession may have been systematically dynastic, as was the case for King Nzinga Nkuvu, a descendant of the first Kongo king, Ntinu Wene/Lukeni. In some cases, it was the council of elders that made decisions about the succession or the nomination of a new sovereign, granting him legitimacy by transmitting to him the relics of different sorts of ancestors, such as albinos (believed to be reincarnations of the dead) or previous incumbents of the office. The French anthropologist Albert Doutreloux’s discussion of the “rod chief” (from the Kongo mvuala, “rod”) allows a better understanding of one aspect of the authority of Kongo chiefs—and, by extension, kings—over their people:

1. When the chief travels and the mvuala is brought out, the members of his clan must remain in their houses until the Children and Grandchildren have passed.
2. No member of the clan may touch the mvuala, for to do so would mean he presumed to be chief.
3. If the chief plants his mvuala in the market, everybody must sit down and hear what he has to say.
4. If the chief comes to confer a title, his mvuala will be planted in the middle of the village until the investiture is over.
5. Mvwala is to be kept next to the house post at all times.

Below, I discuss the ways the kinship system and the mvuala, as defined in the kingdom of Kongo, remain alive in, but are at the same time disrupted
by, the ideology of succession at work in the Kimbanguist Church. But first, it is important to stress that, as the explorers Filippo Pigafetta and Duarte Lopez remarked in 1591, “In the whole kingdom of Congo, absolutely no one can claim to possess anything that he may freely dispose of or bequeath to his heirs. Everything belongs to the king, who divides charges, valuables, and lands as he deems fit. The king’s sons are themselves subject to this law. For this reason, if anyone fails to pay him the annual tribute, the king strips him of his power and gives it to another man.”

This passage is particularly illustrative of the absolute nature of the power wielded by the king over his subjects, collaborators, and sons. It is also useful to note that the socially established values described by Western observers constructed a common law that regulated the principle of primogeniture by requiring the submission of both younger brothers and women, thereby delineating an essentially male hierarchy. The aim of this subordination and dependency in social and family life was—and still is—to have women fulfill the roles of wives and mothers; depend on men for their material, affective, and social security; and perpetuate the clan’s lineage by giving birth.

Matrimonial alliances are also regulated by the common law, which requires the payment of a dowry. This, as Balandier explained, establishes the distinction between the legitimate wife, on the one hand, and the concubine or the (purchased) female slave, on the other. The dowry payment involves a ceremony that reveals the role of the young bride’s brother through the “option” he takes on his sister’s future children, who will have judicial and sentimental ties to him.

The kingdom of Kongo is a foundation for the Kimbanguist religion, which builds its work of identity reconstruction on that kingdom and its civilization, with its distinctive religious and cultural worldview. While differing from the moral code of European missionaries, the Kongo moral code and respect for hierarchy included two types of sanctions. A negative sanction might have been meted out to offenders, based on the condemnation of certain actions regarded as vices—namely, adultery, theft, homosexuality, and pedophilia.

Positive sanctions were like a good neighbor policy with the ancestors, since infringement on a taboo could cause their wrath. Here, morality was essentially social and knew neither of a Judgment Day nor of any notion of retribution; a purgatory was totally absent from Kongo representations of the hereafter. The Kongo conception of death and the hereafter derived
from a spiritual domain that is usually designated as animism: “Animism, strictly speaking, attributes a vital force or soul (anima in Latin, hence its name) to all elements in the world; it therefore involves worshiping the spirits and all the invisible beings endowed with personalities, wills, and powers, and also ancestor worship, which implies a belief in the notion that souls are independent from bodies and liberated by death.”

A number of elements delineate the content of traditional Congolese beliefs, which never aimed to be universal, since only tribe members are allowed to worship. The first structural feature is the belief in a maker, known as God Almighty in each vernacular language (here, Nzambi a Mpungu). This belief is found in many traditional African religions, and God’s action is understood to coexist with the interventions of intermediary, more approachable deities and tribal ancestors. For the French Africanist Jean-Claude Froelich, the fact that archaic peoples had the concept of a single maker is an indicator that the belief is extremely ancient. Today, Kimbanguists still pray to the God of the Bible under the name Nzambi a Mpungu.

The second element that characterizes Congolese animism is the belief in invisible, more or less anthropomorphic spirits, which haunt springs, rivers, rocks, and forests. Froelich classified them into two categories: half-mythological, half-divine beings inhabiting trees and caves in human or animal guise, and local spirits, who serve God and inhabit the earth like human beings, but who are invisible and much more powerful than the former and are in direct contact with human beings. This aspect of animism is recognized in the Kimbanguist Church, but it is combated as evil, as I discuss below.

The third essential feature of Congolese tribal religions is ancestor worship, which is linked to beliefs about life in the hereafter. According to these beliefs, every human being is endowed with a soul, which either leaves the body after death to continue living in the invisible world of the ancestors or is reincarnated in his or her own family—especially if the deceased was a young person. Old people who die after a virtuous life become ancestors, whom their descendants worship with sacrifices and offerings of alcoholic beverages. The bankulu (plural of nkulu, “elder”) are the dead members of a clan. The land is their realm; they inhabit the woods and rivers, where they live in perfect harmony in villages similar to those of the living.

Ancestors sometimes morph into deities—when they have become more remote through the succession of generations of their descendants. Paradoxical though it may seem, an ancestor may at the same time be considered as reincarnated and still be worshiped at his or her grave, as Froelich
pointed out: “an impalpable part of his being, the consciousness of his self, survives somewhere in the realm of the dead.”

Today, the Congolese still worship ancestors by paying tribute to the dead members of their families: it is a common sight in Congo on the feast of All Saints Day (November 1) to see people in cemeteries talking to their dead, settling old scores with them, or thanking them for their protection. As I discuss below, the Kongo belief in reincarnation is clearly recognizable in the Kimbanguist dogmas on the incarnation of the Holy Spirit and the Second Coming of Christ.

While, as Froelich pointed out, the notions of chastisement and reward seem absent from a moral system essentially based on social values, Balandier showed that the end of the trip is the realm of the ancestors and the goal is to obtain a “lasting life.” The dead are the “living par excellence”; they are outside of time and wealthy; they have power that allows them to control nature and human beings. From their villages underneath riverbeds or the floors of lakes, they can go out to mingle with the living (without being seen) and tamper with the order of things.

Witchcraft and anti-witchcraft are also important components of animism. These twin but antagonistic forces are revealed through the witch and the anti-witch, who inspire, respectively, distrust and trust. According to the social beliefs held by tribal people and by Congolese people, the witch is the person who spreads fear because his or her supernatural powers allow him or her to cause death or madness, attract thunder and unleash thunderbolts, make women barren, or spread epidemics. Anything out of the ordinary can be blamed on witchcraft. Based on anthropological observation in the region, the witch (ndoki) is purported to shape-shift and can live “in the guise of a human being or animal, and dissolve the boundaries of nature.”

On the contrary, the anti-witch (nganga) is able to control the actions of the former: identifying the source of disease or misfortune, repairing what has become paralyzed, and healing the witch’s victims and those made sick by him or her. The anti-witch enjoys social recognition as the counselor, the protector, the healer who provides fetishes, and, most important, the fighter of witches. The nganga’s influence on individual destinies cannot be overestimated.

One might assume that this logic of antagonistic forces ruling the lives of Congolese people has totally disappeared nowadays, but nothing is further from the truth. The opposition between the witch and the anti-witch is still at work in Congolese social representations, and it does not seem to have been substantially modified by modernity. As the Congolese historian Martial Sinda pointed out, “Witchcraft has ramifications even in the cities
that are home to Africans with a European education. To this day, witchcraft, which causes actual panic in this milieu, remains far more formidable than any other misfortune.”

Even before Christianization, witches were already identified as the devil’s minions, known in the Kikongo language as *kadiapempa*. This notion was further reinforced by exposure to the Manichaean opposition of God and evil. However, the role of the anti-witch today seems to be yielding ground to both European rationalism and the tremendous success of preachers-cum-exorcists trained in American-style holiness churches, which have mushroomed since the 1990s in Brazzaville and Kinshasa. Still, among Kimbanguist believers, it is forbidden to resort to either witches or anti-witches.

Another feature of traditional Congolese beliefs was the system of initiation, which was a form of socialization of young men and women, helping them to internalize the norms and beliefs specific to the Kongo group. By keeping the members of a given age group secluded from the rest of the community for the period of time dedicated to their initiation, this system functioned as a school where rights and duties were made clear and obligations were explained. It may also be compared to a church, in which young men and women were inculcated with core beliefs about their relations to the universe and particularly to supernatural beings. In the kingdom of Kongo, a well-known rite of passage was *kimpassi*, which was recorded by many chroniclers and observers. The local masters of *kimpassi*—led by a woman, the *ngudi nganga*—were in charge of conducting the rituals: teaching the novices in an outdoor shed far from the village and making sure the young men and women complied with their new rules of conduct.

The initiation ritual took place in three phases. First, the novices went through a symbolic death: stripped of their clothes, lined up like corpses, bound by a pact, they were carried into the shed to be rebirthed by Ma Ndundu (Mother Albino). Then, each of the “newborns” took part in the specific *kimpassi* dance, recited the pledges of allegiance, and chose his or her initiation name. Their training in civic values and ritual practices, as well as the learning of secret languages, could then begin. Finally, after months or years of ordeals, the initiates could return home, where they were greeted with demonstrative celebrations and presents. *Kimpassi* most probably played a part in the struggle against Portuguese colonization, for the missionaries perceived it as a major obstacle.

Beyond *kimpassi*, the education of community members was based on narratives, proverbs, and songs explaining the meanings of names and
mottoes. In addition to this oral literature, which buttressed religious and political authorities, there were “revealed texts” (transmitted by the spirits, the ancestors, or the dead), formulas and prayers, and songs facilitating communication with Nzambi a Mpungu and the ancestors. It seems that the Kimbanguist Church’s spiritual retreats and renaming processes may be traced back to the tradition of kimpassi, since the inspired hymns of Kimbanguism reflect the supernatural relation between human beings and the angels or the departed, sending them spiritual messages.

Human beings’ relation to time was part of what may be called the traditional calendar. Indeed, in the kingdom of Kongo, there were not seven days, but four: Nkandu, Konzo, Nkenge, and Nsoma. Each of these four days was associated with social and religious rituals: Nkenge and Nsoma were the days of the ancestors and of resurrection, while Nkandu and Konzo were associated with the transmigration of souls.26

It is clear that the Congolese system of beliefs and values starkly differed from those of Europe, although some Western explorers were capable of appreciation and enthusiasm about its level of “civilization.”27 But eventually, after centuries of colonization, the traditional Congolese system was destroyed by Christianization, schooling, and urbanization, which profoundly disrupted the social and religious organization of Kongo society.28

Christianity aims to be a universal religion, and European missionaries assumed it was their calling to convert all non-Westerners, without questioning the nature of their “heathen” beliefs. But from the outset, missionaries were confronted with an epistemological issue. Were non-Europeans able to become Christians? The question was first raised after the beginning of the colonization of the New World, where the indigenous peoples of the Americas were seen as devoid of souls and therefore impossible to Christianize. From the mid-1510s to his death in 1566, the Dominican friar Bartolomé de Las Casas argued Aquinas’s theological assertion that society is part of nature and hence all societies, whether Christian or pagan, are equally endowed with dignity and legitimacy. His priority was to spare the natives from further cruelty and slaughter on the part of the Spaniards.29

Las Casas’s insistence earned him the title of “defender of the Indians,” awarded to him by Cardinal Cisneros as early as 1516. Paradoxically, his acute concern with human dignity faltered when it came to the Africans’ fate. Indeed, Las Casas suggested that the tragic depletion of the indigenous West Indian population be compensated for by importing slaves from Africa. From then on, sub-Saharan Africa and particularly the
kingdom of Kongo became a reservoir for an enslaved human workforce. Later, Las Casas recanted this position; his apologetic history of the Indies testified that the ability to progress and to receive the message of Christ belonged to all of humanity, for “all the races of the world are men.” Still, it remained doubtful whether Africans could—or should—be evangelized, for the Christianization of sub-Saharan Africa and particularly the kingdom of Kongo was irretrievably tainted by practices of oppression inseparable from it.

Indeed, the Congolese territory officially entered history only after it was “discovered” by the dominant Other. In 1482, the Portuguese navigator Diogo Cão reached the mouth of the Congo River, on the coast of what was to become Luanda, Angola. As early as 1484, the Portuguese created trading posts along the Atlantic coast of the Congo and Angola. In 1575 they founded São Paulo da Luanda, which became their main trading and military post. The conquest of Africa was seen as guaranteeing both salvation and earthly bliss to those going there—soldiers, merchants, priests, all of them colonizers. Today, because of a lack of primary sources, it is impossible to relate precisely how the Congo was Christianized. It seems to have been an uneven process with varying degrees of success from one region to another and from one ethnic group to another.

Still, it appears that sub-Saharan Africa, particularly the kingdom of Kongo, was Christianized in two phases. The first occurred in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and concerned mostly Portuguese colonies, such as the kingdom of Kongo, and islands in the Atlantic Ocean, such as Cape Verde, Principe, and São Tomé. The Portuguese were the first Europeans who settled there after the existence of natives was publicized by the “discoverers.” Subsequently, the Christianization process involved many different religious orders. Georges Balandier’s research shows how it was launched over and over again, involving one Catholic monastic order after another with little consistency. But ultimately, “the two centuries of Christianization had very poor results, with a heavy toll in terms of sufferings and human losses, due to either the climate or the journeys.”

Hence, the complex history of the Christianization of Congo and Angola shows the long-standing presence and influence of the Portuguese, until the kingdom of Kongo was officially divided up among three European powers at the Berlin Conference of 1884–85. This conference resulted in what is commonly known as the General Act of Berlin, or the sharing of Africa. The ancient kingdom of Kongo was partitioned by colonial powers, which split its population among the so-called Belgian Congo (now the
Democratic Republic of the Congo), the French Congo (Congo-Brazzaville), and Angola.

Territorial limits being set, there were now further encounters between Christianity and traditional Kongo religion; the penetration of the three Congos by Europeans went hand in hand with a modernizing mission, which introduced not only market economics but also Roman Catholicism. The Berlin Treaty of 1885 was amended by the Convention of Saint-Germain-en-Laye,\textsuperscript{34} which guaranteed freedom of religion and worship and reaffirmed the right of all missionaries to enter, travel, and reside on the African continent. While Christianization had often predated colonial penetration and occupation in many African countries, it was significant that this act put all Christian churches on an equal footing, inviting them to further compete for new converts.

Colonial archives also show another form of religious orders dividing up Africa. The key actor in this process was Cardinal Charles Lavigerie, who founded the Society of Missionaries of Africa (aka the White Fathers) in 1868 and the order of the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Africa in 1869. The Holy See put him in charge of the apostolic delegation to Sahara and Sudan, granting him the title of primate of Africa. In 1889–1890, in a context of competition with Protestant missionary societies, which had begun gaining substantial ground in Central Africa, Lavigerie obtained permission from King Leopold II of Belgium for an international conference in Brussels on the abolition of slavery. An international treaty was signed both to put an end to the slave trade and to protect all missionary communities fighting against human trafficking. Lavigerie thus secured protection for Catholic missions in Central Africa while associating the penetration of the Catholic Church with the cause of civilization.\textsuperscript{35}

The Berlin Conference thus ushered in the second phase of Christianization, marked by the free circulation of missionaries and the settlement of missionary posts and institutions in all the countries delineated by the Association internationale africaine. This new modus operandi for Christianization further strengthened the ties between the missionary societies and their home governments.

Following the long-standing and unchanging policy of the Roman church, any process of Christianization potentially entailed the construction of a state, that is, a temporal structure. The Catholic Church had an interest in politics and did not just send missionaries to Africa: the Holy See dictated the carving of states out of Africa as it was gradually being Christianized. The church, whose mission is to preach the gospel, remained
closely associated with the colonial venture, but this was done on the condition that the church’s political action would not clash with the interests of the imperial states of Europe. Christianization was not supposed to lead to political empowerment of the natives. Evidence of this can be seen in the following declaration by Pope Benedict XV, who reiterated in 1920 the doctrine of separation between the Christianization of natives and their politicization, which had been inaugurated in 1880: “When dealing with the populations they are in charge of, the missions shall carefully banish any idea of paving the way to a political awareness of their nationhood. Hence they shall never meddle in any kind of political or temporal interests of their own nation, or any other nation.”

How did the Christianization of Africans effectively take place after the Berlin Conference? How did Christian missionizing deal with questions pertaining to ethnicity and African values and belief systems?

From the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, the missionary movement gained momentum with the founding of the Séminaire des missions étrangères (Seminary of Foreign Missions) and missionary orders. Among the leaders of this movement was Father François Libermann, who initiated the first mass journey of missionaries to sub-Saharan Africa and founded the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary, which eventually merged with the Congregation of the Holy Spirit (or Spiritan congregation); he is often considered to be one of the cofounders of the latter. Frequently named by historians of Cameroon are the German Pallottine father Herman Nekes and the Spiritan father Alexandre Leroy, while scholars of Congo-Brazzaville and Gabon regularly mention Msgr. Prosper-Philippe Augouard, and scholars of Rwanda and Burundi discuss Msgr. Jean-Joseph Hirth.

Famous Protestants include the explorers of the inland territories, such as Dr. David Livingstone, a Scottish missionary and physician who was instrumental in the promotion and expansion of the British commercial empire, the Christianization of the southern countries of Africa, and the fight against the slave trade. Rev. George Grenfell was a British Baptist missionary and explorer who spent thirty-two years of his life surveying sub-Saharan Africa and founding missionary settlements, particularly in Cameroon and Congo.

Joseph Merrick, a Baptist pastor hailing from Jamaica, is considered to be the first Black missionary; in 1843 he tried to found the first Christian Baptist mission among the Duala people of Cameroon. In spite of his failure in this attempt, “the ideology of negritude, which was then in the making in the British West Indies, may take pride in the fact Blacks were
Christianized by other Blacks. Yet, these mixed-race Jamaican literati were considered to be ‘Whites’ and were called by this name among the people of the coast of Cameroon.” 38 This hampered their initiative, which was later stopped by the standards defined by the Berlin Conference. Pastors William Holman Bentley and Thomas Comber, both members of the Baptist Missionary Society, settled in the Belgian Congo. Their accomplishments included the *Dictionary and Grammar of the Kongo Language*, published in 1887. When Comber passed away that year, Bentley settled in Ngombe Lutete in Lower Congo, where he “devoted his linguistic expertise to the translation of the New Testament into Kikongo, which was completed in 1893. He also translated Genesis, Proverbs, and part of the Psalms.” 39

Thus, in the southern part of the Belgian Congo—the future birthplace of Kimbanguism—the Baptist Missionary Society had already put down roots before the Catholic missions arrived, and this was a source of tension. As a result of this competition, Christian missions moved inland, far from urban areas, which proved to be a key factor in their methods of Christianization.

The two main methods implemented by Western missionary societies to penetrate Africa and found settlements were, first, gaining the trust of local chiefs and kings, and second, creating schools for the education of the natives. Western missionaries actually invented the figure of the local chief, an authority they established in parallel with preexisting traditional chiefs. Sporting their medals, the local chiefs were often in conflict with the traditional chiefs, whose voices conveyed a sense of continuity with the precolonial system of values and beliefs, independent from the colonial power structure that had bestowed honors on their rivals. Under such circumstances, the medal-bearing chiefs and their conversions to Christianity were essential in the process of development of missions in sub-Saharan Africa, and these chiefs were the most commonly mentioned by colonial ethnographers. 40 In Cameroon, for instance, the princes had a vested interest in relying on the White man and his God, which were of great import in a world centered around a keen sense of antagonistic forces, social prestige, and awe toward invisible powers. 41

This is how a new elite, composed of catechists, bilingual assistant teachers (known as *moniteurs*), and medal-bearing chiefs emerged as an intermediary category between White missionaries and the majority of natives. This native elite was complicit with the Christianization process, the expansion of missions, and the wider colonial order. The intrusion of
Christianity thus entailed profound transformations of the social and political systems, both of which were closely linked to religion.42

In this context, Christianization went hand in hand with the preservation of the political order. King Nzinga Nkuvu, a descendant of the first Kongo king, Ntinu Wene/Lukeni, converted to Roman Catholicism and was baptized as Afonso I (aka Joaõ I). This baptism was not a simple individual conversion, but a political act. According to the historian Luc Croegaert, personal baptism also entailed political calculations on the part of African heads of state. Indeed, they saw it as a way to build alliances with European powers and to thwart the plots of rival family members and their allies.43 During the twenty years of his reign, King Afonso corresponded regularly with the king of Portugal and requested the help of missionaries to Christianize his kingdom.

Starting in 1491, the year the Capuchins arrived in Kongo, the nation’s religious landscape was transformed. At first, the North was scarcely affected by Christianity, while other people were gradually Christianized. In 1492 the church of Angola was born, and in 1518 Don Henrique, the son of King Afonso, was consecrated as the first native bishop of sub-Saharan Africa by Pope Leo X.

Still, the king of Kongo did not outwit the colonizers; although converting to Catholicism with his subjects meant placing his kingdom on the international scene, it did not establish an independent Congolese church outside of the grip of the Vatican and Europe. Although the king’s son was a bishop, this never paved the way for other nominations of Congolese men to the bishopric; Henrique remained the first and only Black bishop in the kingdom of Kongo. After Henrique passed away in 1521, King Afonso wanted two of his nephews to be granted the same title, but his efforts were to no avail. The king of Kongo’s wish to appoint his own clergy was rejected by the king of Spain, who appointed all members of the regular clergy in São Salvador (the capital) and paid them. Even attempts by the Jesuits to found seminaries in Congo at the time proved unsuccessful.44 And “in 1596, when King Álvaro II had won Vatican approval for Kongo to have its own bishops at a cathedral in São Salvador, the crown of Portugal had managed to squeeze the right to nominate bishops in the See of Kongo and Angola from the Vatican.”45

Meanwhile, the Christianization process went on, relying on, besides the conversions of chiefs and their subjects, schools and churches, which were two inseparable institutions insofar as the moniteurs were usually catechists as well. Regarding education, Croegaert stressed that “the priests
immediately acknowledged its importance and always considered it as the
to the bedrock of their missionizing work.” Indeed, through the school sys-
tem, children were disciplined and (re)educated away from the traditional
value system, which the missionaries perceived as inherently pagan. Con-
sequently, an actual social change was implemented in the confrontation
between the biblical values conveyed by Christian missionaries and the tra-
ditional Congolese values. A Christian society emerged from the Congolese
people’s perception of the need to embrace European values and thus be
defined as “civilized” beings.

While new values were being shaped out of the first contacts between
the dominant Whites and the subjugated Africans, the book as an object of
learning had a considerable impact on the subjectivities of Africans, as the
American theologian Vincent Wimbush pointed out in his analysis of the
narratives of enslaved Africans, particularly the famous Olaudah Equiano.
The introduction of books, and in particular the Bible, elicited curiosity
among Africans, who, like Equiano, were used to oral traditions. Books
soon represented a locus of the secrets or magic of White men.

Yet in the eyes of the dominant Other—the White man—was a Black
person really seen as a full-fledged Christian once baptized? How did West-
ern missionaries perceive Black identity when reading and teaching the
scriptures?

The Catholic and Protestant missionaries no doubt believed in their mis-
sionizing work; they were primarily concerned with bringing salvation to
Africans by spreading the gospel among them. But what exactly did they
want to save them from? Colonial archives hold materials written by mis-
sionaries that give clear indications of their perception of Black people.
In effect, the image that colonial missionaries had of Africans coincided
with the definition of pagans in Christian theology; it was based on a Man-
ichaean opposition between good and evil, light and darkness, God and the
devil. This is reflected in the first catechism published in Kikongo in 1624
for the Kongo catechumens’ preparation for baptism:

M[aster]. Why do you say, “By the grace of God”?
D[isciple]. Because it is neither thanks to my own merits, nor those of
my father and mother or any other mortal creature that I have become
a Christian, but thanks to the goodness and forgiveness of God and
the merits of Christ.
M. What dignity does man receive when he is made a Christian?
D. He becomes the adopted child of God and an heir to Heaven.
M. And he who is not a Christian?
D. He remains a cursed son, a slave to the Devil; he is cast out of Heaven.48

In this theological worldview, human beings were either children of God, once they had received a Christian baptism, or children of the devil, if they had not been christened. They were children of the devil because of original sin, which was said to bind all human beings as descendants of Adam and Eve, until they were christened.49 When people got baptized in the church, they went from darkness to light. When European missionaries landed in Africa, of course, none of the natives had been baptized, so every African was supposed to be under the influence of the devil. The socially codified values of the kingdom of Kongo, described by early European observers and condemned by White missionaries, became subsumed under three significant social practices: polygamy, dancing, and the use of fetishes. The first two were closely associated in the judgmental perceptions of Kongo culture conveyed by missionaries.50 Consequently, Africans had to be freed from sin through conversion to Christianity. But until then, they were considered by their instructors to be children of the devil, pagan, polygamous, fetish believing, animist, savage, and barbaric.

But once baptized, were Africans—in this case, Congolese people—regarded as full Christians? This question was addressed by Kabwita, who explained that Christian missionaries’ interest in the African continent, particularly the kingdom of Kongo, was primarily spurred by economic priorities. At a time when the triangular slave trade was by far the most lucrative form of trade, the Catholic Church also possessed its own slaves to ensure its financial self-sufficiency.51 The enslaved captives, bound for the Americas, had to be christened, but they received no religious education prior to their baptism. Priests merely gave the future slaves a “simulacrum of baptism,” that is, a collective baptism, for which the celebrant was paid with a per capita tax.

In reality, such christenings had no other function than increasing the zone of influence of the Catholic Church and its secular allies in their competition with Protestant kingdoms, then defined as heretical. This is why first the government in Lisbon and then the Spanish administration insisted that all captives be baptized.52

Therefore, although baptized, the Congolese who remained on the continent were clearly perceived as incomplete Christians by a number of missionaries. “In 1603, a missionary declared that Congo was totally ruined
where good morals were concerned and was Christian only in name.” Bishop Manuel Baptista Soares, who was known for his numerous excommunications, wrote the following remarks about the Congolese in his 1619 report: “Christianity is so imperfect among them that the king himself has official concubines. Among this numerous people, only very few regard the vices of the senses as sins. Many among them take the title of defender of the faith and send ambassadors to the courts of Rome and the Catholic king. They do so out of vanity rather than a sentiment of zeal for religion.”

However, a different assessment was given by other missionaries, such as Father Liévin-Bonaventure Proyart, who, in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, insisted that the Congolese people publicly professed a genuine attachment to the Catholic faith, though they lacked competent clergy to exhort them and give them the sacraments. In 1906, Msgr. Henri Vieter was eloquent when challenging his European audience’s assumptions about African Christians: “See for yourselves. . . . There are many black Christians who put some white people to shame. Many whites have not done for Christ in their whole lifetime one-tenth of what blacks must offer to be given baptism.”

This brief historical overview of the religious experience of African Christians shows to what extent Black people, even when baptized, were considered to be second-class Christians who were members of the church only as slaves or as statistics for competing missionary societies. From the standpoint of European missionaries, Africans were christened either without their consent or in order to benefit from the charity work of the church, which provided them with clothing, food, and medical care. Hence, for Europeans, Africans remained “savages and barbarians, who were happier under the yoke of Europeans than in the dire poverty and cruelty of their despicable milieu.” The link between Christianization and ethnicity was unbreakable in a worldview that assigned Africans to the lowest rung in the hierarchy of human beings.

Given this context, how did Africans perceive the religious messages that were preached to them, particularly the Bible? What place did they assign to the dominant Other, that is, the White man, in their own worldview?