Kimbanguism

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Three elements help in understanding Africans’ reactions to the missionary enterprise in their midst. The first is the Bible, which was translated by missionaries into local languages, allowing Africans to approach and, eventually, appropriate the Christian message.\footnote{By translating the Bible into African languages, European missionaries gave the natives the possibility of not only becoming familiar with the scriptures, but also, in the context of Protestant missions, interpreting and understanding the gospel in an autonomous manner. This obviously facilitated the emergence of independent African religious initiatives, such as the independent Baptist church, which was founded and led by Black missionaries and pastors with the support of the Baptist Missionary Society based in Cameroon. African versions of the Bible sometimes led readers to diverge from the message given by the missionaries. The African audiences who read these texts were often more preoccupied with identifying familiar notions than exotic ones in the Bible, which led them to appropriate the scriptures through the prism of their preexisting worldviews, shaped by their own traditions (see parts II and III).}

Second, the Christianization process entailed forms of syncretism, incorporating African values and belief systems. Indeed, the complexity and difficulty of the missionary venture may perhaps be explained by the natives’ desire to protect their culture from invasion: the Congolese did not want a foreign god to be imposed on them. They covertly resisted this...
deity by keeping up the worship of trees, springs, natural forces, and ancestors; many testimonies give evidence of this in fifteenth-century Congo. Consequently, a misunderstanding appeared in this syncretism, since Africans, including the Bakongo, adhered to Christianity on the sole basis of their needs and the rules of their own logic, twisting Christian symbols and images to fit their traditional religious worldview.

The third element to be taken into account to grasp the natives’ reactions to the missionary enterprise is their perception of White men and their God, since the rising influence of the latter significantly transformed Africans’ traditional worldview and representations. How did the Congolese understand their first encounter with Whites and their subsequent exposure to European belief systems?

To understand the image Africans had of Europeans, it is necessary to investigate the accounts of the first encounters between the two groups. As mentioned in chapter 1, the “discovery” of the mouth of the Congo River by the Portuguese navigator Diogo Cão resulted in the massive arrival of European missionaries and settlers, who penetrated the region from the Atlantic seaboard. According to some chroniclers, when the Congolese discovered White people, they considered them to be ancestors, because in their collective psyche, the departed were represented as white-complexioned beings. It may be assumed that this first perception of Whites was a positive one, since ancestors have the status of benefactors, protectors, messengers of good news, and soothsayers (when they appear in dreams). This positive image seems to have persisted for a rather long period of time—long enough for the Christianization process to have been facilitated, in spite of the cross-cultural misunderstanding that had led the natives to believe that these white-colored beings had come to bring them riches.  

This need for the early Congolese to understand and rationalize the abnormality of White presence was made even more explicit by MacGaffey: “The Kongo understanding of what sort of people the Europeans were and what their arrival meant was very different from what the Europeans themselves thought. In Kongo thought to this day, the universe is divided into the two worlds of the living and the dead, separated by water. Africans who die travel to the land of the dead, where they change their skins and become white.” A prayer dedicated to the British sailor Andrew Battel, who was temporarily detained by the Angolans in 1608–1610, says, “Baliani ampembe muenyeye ke zina,” which means, “my white-faced companion has come out from under the surface of the earth, and he shall not stay with
This misunderstanding led the Congolese to integrate the Europeans as nonhuman beings who would not stay permanently. However, the behavior of the Portuguese was such that they soon lost their characterization as spirits to become threatening, possibly dangerous men. Once the myth that Whites were ancestors had been debunked, Africans were in a position to judge them by their deeds, and consequently ranked them among the evil and dangerous people. Still, the paradoxes of colonization and its ideological representations resulted in the natives’ ambivalent acceptance of White men as embodiments of both God and the devil, as benefactors and malefactors, liberators and oppressors. As the French ethnologist Pierre Erny observed, “Skin color, maybe more than any other element, is conducive to a surprisingly persistent imagery, which often upsets communication when men from different races come into contact.”

The representation of Whites as messengers from the next world first facilitated the missionizing project, but that image was gradually deconstructed, particularly when missionaries began spreading the biblical myth of the curse of Ham as an instrument of and a justification of the domination of Whites over Blacks. In the person of his son Canaan, supposedly standing for all of his descendants, Ham was cursed by Noah in favor of his brothers, Shem and Japheth (Genesis 9:25–27). The scriptures remain silent on the racial origins of Ham and his descendants. Indeed, the concept of race and the racist ideologies of domination attached to it did not appear until 1555. The sociologist Jan Nederveen Pieterse observed, “In the early Church of Augustine the curse of Ham or Canaan was regarded as an explanation of slavery, but not of blacks, simply because slavery at the time was ‘colourless.’ The association of the curse of Canaan with blackness arose only much later in medieval Talmudic texts. In the sixteenth century it became a Christian theme and by the seventeenth it was widely accepted as an explanation of black skin colour. From here it was but a small step to the interpretation of the curse of Canaan as an explanation of and justification for the slavery of black Africans.”

The circulation of ideas from one culture to another is a timeless phenomenon that affects in various ways every facet of culture. In the realm of religions, the transfers usually happen in only one direction, since the dominant religion usually conveys an ostensibly universal message with an ethnocentric discourse. European Christianity, essentially rooted in Mediterranean cultures, gave Africans the Bible as the only history book for humankind, in which Blacks also were supposed to find meaning.
Racial ideologies thus built a racial classification of human beings on the basis of this chapter from Genesis. The episode of the curse of Ham/Canaan fueled Christian ideologies of the role of Providence as well, since it led a number of missionaries and Western defenders of imperialism to believe that theirs was God’s chosen race and that they had been entrusted by him with the mission of civilizing the other, necessarily benighted, races. This myth of the curse of Blacks has been a major underpinning of Christian European ethnocentrism throughout world history. An Essay on the Inequality Among Human Races, the infamous book written by the French writer and diplomat Arthur de Gobineau in 1853, rapidly became one of the cornerstones of racist and xenophobic ideologies. Gobineau’s racist speculations on the Bible contributed to the emergence of Christian eurocentrism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He contended that Black identity was altered forever as a consequence of the curse of Ham, which had already been used to justify the transatlantic slave trade in the Americas and the enslavement of Africans by Europeans in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. These theories are recognizable in several schoolbooks used in Christian missions in Africa, which taught children about the origin of races by tracing them, as Gobineau did, to the three sons of Noah. Other schoolbooks added a geographical partition of these races: “The children of Shem went to Asia; the children of Ham went to Africa; the children of Japheth went to Europe.”

In the French Congo, the religious order Fathers of the Holy Spirit began missionizing quite early. One of them, Augouard, left his mission in Gabon to set out for the Congo as soon as Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza had conquered the region, in 1880. An explorer and a builder, known as “the bishop of the cannibals,” Augouard made regular trips along the river, in the swampland, and through the rain forest. He was convinced that Africans were still under the curse of God as descendants of Ham: “The black race is indeed Ham’s accursed race, God’s accursed race. There is nothing in particular that indicates it, but it can be felt and seen everywhere, and one can’t help but feel compassion and terror at the sight of the poor wretches. Pagan blacks are lazy, gluttonous, given to stealing and lying, and indulging in every vice. This is no flattering portrayal, and yet it is less ugly than the truth.”

In one of the many letters sent to his mother, Augouard wrote “that he was really certain now that he was living among blacks, that they actually were the descendants of Ham—a descent of which the prelate seemed to lament the existence.” Finally, one of his dialogues with Pope Leo XIII illustrates the distance he kept from his fold:
“Is it true,” Leo XIII asked him, “that your diocesans eat human flesh?”

“Yes, Holiness, every day.”

“How strange, not one of our holy martyrs was ever eaten!”

“Well, Holiness, I will try to be the first.”

“Don’t you do such a thing,” the pope replied, “we would have no relics!”

This exchange shows how Africans were seen as alien human beings, to be approached and Christianized on the basis of specific criteria. Even the schooling of African children integrated this notion, since they were taught about the curse on their ancestors to encourage them to internalize the myth and accept their inferior status vis-à-vis White people. For instance, a songbook used in missionary schools, which was published in 1911 in the Belgian Congo by the Order of the Missionary Sisters of the Precious Blood, includes three songs in Lingala written by Sister Arnoldine Falter that explicitly mention the curse of the Blacks, with one song entirely dedicated to the theme. The title of this song is “Esisezelo ea Kam” (Punishment of Ham):

O Father Ham, what did you do?
We are suffering so much
By God we are punished
Harshly without pity
The punishment that He inflicted on you,
is inherited by us all.
And Noah, as a punishment for you
humiliated you
And thus Ham always works for his brothers.
And now, we your descendants,
[we are] slaves on earth.

Another song, “Nkongo Salangana” (Congo Delight), celebrates the liberation of the Congolese from Arab slavery. The true reason for this enslavement, however, is related again to the curse of Ham:

Cursed by our Father Noah,
Look at us, all the Blacks of this country,
Oppressed because of his terrible insult.
The psychological impact on Black children of such a form of schooling was assessed in the United States by the famous “doll test” invented and used by Kenneth and Mamie Clark in the 1940s. The American scholar Joe Feagin related a more recent incident, which took place at a private Christian elementary school. A nine-year-old Black girl was told in class by her White teacher, “Black people were born of sin, let’s pray for the black people.” The girl returned home wishing she were White. Feagin related this typical example of racial insensitivity to the story of Noah’s curse of Ham’s descendants, which was used as an ideological justification for the teacher to inflict psychological harm on a child. The teacher did not even think about the repercussions of such an ideological reading of scripture, let alone equip her Black pupil with any means of fighting back systemic racism and “the pain of white oppression.”

In a similar process, schools in sub-Saharan Africa were used in parallel with missions to inculcate the beliefs that colonial domination by Europeans was justified by Ham’s being cursed by God and that Blacks should be maintained on the bottom rung of humanity as a result. The Christianization of Africans was implemented both in churches and in schools, and the children were thus prepared to collaborate in their own domination, internalizing the myth of their stigmatization and the notion that their only salvation must be brought by the White masters’ gospel.

Although ancestor worship was a source of blessings in traditional African belief systems, it became blurred and was turned into a source of oppression by these teachings. Indeed, not only did the myth of the curse of Ham upset the place of ancestors in traditional African cosmogonies by replacing them with an entirely new set of White forebears, but it also ingrained in Africans’ minds the acceptance of submission to Whites as preordained by God. Liberation from this fate could not be achieved without help from the White conqueror, as shown in the following excerpts from the same songbook. The instrument of the liberating divine intervention is a “strong King sent by God to this country.” King Leopold II, who is alluded to here, acts as the intermediary of the Belgians:

A Country elected by God
   to release your brothers and sisters!
O Belgium, may Heaven make you prosperous!

A third song (number 43) teaches the children that they actually belong to a cursed race:
Look at Ham, the son of Noah,
He made fun of his own father
He was cursed by his father
So are the Blacks, his children.

The affliction of being of the same stock as Ham and necessarily miserable
is strongly emphasized in the texts of most Christian songs taught to Afri-
cans; these are only some examples. A second booklet of hymns, Njembo
y’Eklesia (Joy of the Church), published in Bamanya by the same religious
order, had the children sing (number 52):

O mother of Jesus, mother of the Congo,
Look with benevolence on your country.
Protect your black children
Who are in pains and misfortune!
We were the slaves of the devil,
we were in death and in darkness.\(^{19}\)

An excerpt from a schoolbook published in 1951 by the Dominican
fathers taught African children their history in the following terms:

Long ago . . . the Arabs used to mistreat the Blacks very much; they
captured women and children and sold them. . . . The great chief
of Europe, called Leopold II, sent soldiers . . . and the war against
Arabs came to an end. . . . Not long ago, our fathers were pagans;
they did not know God, they had superstitious beliefs; they were lazy,
distrustful, and envious of one another. Diseases came from the East.
When Leopold II learned of this great misery, he asked the Fathers
and Sisters to come here and help us. Now we see churches, schools,
hospitals, and maternity wards everywhere. . . . The natives are gradu-
ally becoming Christians. . . . The ignorant are liberated and cured of
their diseases thanks to the doctors and Sisters. Nowadays, animosity
and jealousy no longer exist among blacks, for the Kingdom of God
has already come to the Congo. Glory to the King.\(^{20}\)

Surprisingly, the king who is glorified here is not Jesus Christ but the Belgian
king Leopold II, and God’s elect are not presented as Christians or even Jews,
but Belgians. This shows that there was a deliberate intention to impose on
Africans an ideology of domination allegedly blessed by Providence.
The criteria chosen to consolidate the myth may be tied to the perception of Africans by colonial missionaries. The passages above show that being a pagan, holding “superstitious” beliefs, or being lazy, jealous, distrustful, sick, poor, or derelict are read as so many signs of the curse on Africans, and their salvation is thanks to the Belgians—made visible in Catholic social work and charities. These qualities also correlated with missionaries’ racialist perceptions of phenotypical features, such as skin color, which buttressed their theological representations of Africans and elicited emotional responses to articles of faith or beliefs. This observation is valid for nations throughout Africa, as is shown in Wimbush’s analysis of the narratives of enslaved Africans. Skin color was an “easy and obvious point of difference, that was made to signify the dominance” of Whiteness around a “rather dramatic focal point . . . [which] turned out to be something mysterious (of course), variously referred to as beauty, sentiment or sensibility, imagination or reason. In all categories and all respects that [were] said to matter, blacks [were] found wanting.” Indeed, a schoolbook entitled *Practical Lingala Lessons* (Lingala is the national language spoken in both Congos) asserted, “Men around the world are divided into four categories—White, Black, Yellow, and Red. Whites inhabit Europe; they are scattered around the world, in Asia, Africa, and America. They surpass all others in intelligence.”

The Protestant missionary J. E. Carpenter, from the Congo Balolo Mission, evidenced his own belief in deterministic theories of geography and climate when he asserted, “Arabs in the north and Europeans in the south of Africa surpass Africans in knowledge.” He further explained, “The first reason is that they do not live in hot regions; as a result, they work hard for food and clothing. Another reason is that in Europe and Asia, people knew how to read and write for hundreds of years, and they brought their knowledge together. Africans do not know about writing.” All differences between Blacks and Whites were fraught with moral implications and value judgments. Black people were assumed to be less intelligent because of their lack of written language (despite their rich oral traditions) and thus incapable of recording their knowledge and transmitting it from one generation to the next. Such racialist ideologies necessarily had an impact on many Africans, triggering among them reactions of either submission or revolt when they became aware of their subaltern position.

Black intellectuals in Africa reacted to the racist content of the myth of Ham in the same way as James Baldwin when he wrote, “I realized that the Bible had been written by white men. I knew that, according to many
Christians, I was a descendant of Ham, who had been cursed, and that I was therefore predestined to be a slave. This had nothing to do with anything I was, or contained, or could become; my fate had been sealed forever, from the beginning of time.” Denouncing the superiority complex of Europeans and their descendants, Baldwin concluded, “It is not too much to say that whoever wishes to become a truly moral human being (and let us not ask whether or not this is possible; I think we must believe that it is possible) must first divorce himself from all the prohibitions, crimes, and hypocrisies of the Christian church.”

In the late 1950s, Afrocentric theories became attractive to many African intellectuals and elites. Among them, the thesis of Cheikh Anta Diop—a Senegalese scholar who studied Egypt, who remains as contested by Westerners as he is revered by Africans—was that Ham was Black, contrary to his brothers, Shem and Japheth. Diop wrote: “In fact, we know that the Egyptians called their country Kemit, which means ‘black’ in their language. The interpretation according to which Kemit designates the black soil of Egypt, rather than the black man and, by extension, the black race of the country of the blacks, stems from a gratuitous distortion by minds aware of what an exact interpretation of this word would imply. Hence, it is natural to find Kam in Hebrew, meaning heat, black, burned.”

Diop’s contention is that the biblical ancestors were therefore Black and that White men appeared only recently, from the stock of Shem (ancestor of the Semites), whose name designates “a white man who bears the more or less weakened traits of a very old race-mixing with the black element.” Consequently, Afrocentric theorists who agree with Diop that Ham was Black do not embrace the myth of the curse of Ham but consider Blacks to be of older human stock than Whites. This leads many to consider the biblical forebears to be Blacks.

On the political plane, African elites also reacted to the process of inferiorization of Blacks. The movement known as negritude has varying definitions. Aimé Césaire said, “Négritude is the consciousness of being a Black person, the simple acknowledgment of a fact that implies the acceptance and assumption of one’s destiny as a Black person, as well as one’s history and culture,” while Léopold Sédar Senghor popularized the concept by defining it as “constituted by the body of values of Black civilization.”

But negritude was not simply imposed as a concept; it was used as a tool of response to White discourse. This conception of Blackness was challenged, however, by many authors. For instance, Thomas Melone saw it as a process of recuperation by members of an elite speaking on
behalf of all Africans without their consent: “The African people feel by no means concerned in this case; they are not in a position to participate in the sacred meal to which they are invited by . . . négritude.”

In his book *Orphée noir*, Jean-Paul Sartre, seeing in négritude an “anti-racist form of racism,” warned that it was thereby contributing to perpetuating the myth of White superiority. It must be admitted that the movement was trapped in the stereotypes of colonial ethnology and that it remained focused on the idea of a Black race while turning into positive traits the aspects depicted as negative in colonial discourse. “[It] is still the same language about race that *Négritude* took up to overturn it and exalt black beauty, black originality, and intuitiveness. The ‘haven of race’ thus sustained politics, poetic creativity, and the fight for and construction of pan-Africanism. *Négritude* is a racialism that could not do away with the assumptions of colonial ethnology.”

Nevertheless, despite fierce debates over its legitimacy, negritude did have great literary and political importance in French-speaking Africa up to the 1970s, and it favored the emergence of the theories of Diop, Théophile Obenga, and Joseph Ki-Zerbo, all of whom searched for an African past—no matter how mythical or real it might be—to herald a positive Black identity in the face of White colonizers. All of these scholars claimed that because Egypt, the cradle of science and civilization, was peopled by Blacks, Whites come from Blacks, and civilization originated from Africa to then reach the rest of the world.

Several Black leaders built on negritude to redeem and extol Black identity. Joseph Mobutu, the president of the Republic of Zaire, addressed the United Nations in 1973: “Pseudo-scientific arguments were not lacking to justify the dehumanization process while treating the black man as an inferior being, for, they said, the white colonist was different from the black colonized, so the white man was superior to the black one.”

On the religious plane, reactions came both from White missionaries sympathetic to the Black cause and from Africans themselves. From the same Bible also emerged salvation myths, and several protests were framed as religious arguments rooted in the Bible. The Cameroonian theologian Jean-Marc Ela related that “in 1870, a group of missionary bishops circulated a document begging the popes to release the black race from the curse of Ham, which weighed them down.” The awareness of the ethnocentric nature of the Christian message as a tool of domination also triggered reactions among African leaders and, understandably, led to the emergence of African independent churches. In the early eighteenth century, a young
Congolese prophet initiated the oldest African independent movement derived from Christianity. Her name was Kimpa Vita.

The movement she inspired is known as the Antonians. It was one of the first instances of African appropriation of the Christian message and the Bible, combining political and religious aims into what would become a long ethno-messianic history. Kimpa Vita, who would become known as Dona Beatriz, was born around 1684 to parents who were members of the highest group of the Kongo aristocracy. Because her father served as a commander in the king’s army, he was often on the battlefield, warring for King Ávaro X. The army was composed of men, but it also included female members who followed their husbands, brothers, or sons to cook their food and take care of them. Consequently, it may be inferred that Kimpa Vita was raised in a military-inspired culture, steeped in patriotic values.

Her hometown was on Mount Kibangu, a few miles away from the capital, Mbanza Kongo (São Salvador in Portuguese), in the province of Sundi. Chroniclers of the kingdom of Kongo had already noted the importance of this province in the monarchical system; indeed, it was always ruled by the firstborn sons of kings and heirs to the throne. It was on Mount Kibangu that the mani vunda (king), Pedro IV, had found refuge with his followers during the war and chaos that followed the death of King Antonio I of Kongo. Though legitimately presenting himself as the rightful heir to the crown and as a Catholic sovereign based in São Salvador, Pedro IV had been unable to secure the backing of the Capuchin father Bernardo da Gallo in his attempt to reconquer his subjects. He dared not return to the capital, fearing assassination attempts from his rivals; yet the Congolese people felt an ardent desire to see the kingdom restored under one sovereign, who would live in the repeopled capital. He was prompted to act in response to this popular aspiration by the politico-religious movement initiated by the twenty-two-year-old Kimpa Vita.

From historical accounts of her life, it appears that Kimpa Vita had a dual relationship to Christianity. First, her religious experience included the Kongo mystical tradition of kimpassi (described above), into which she is said to have been not just initiated, but inducted as a priestess. In the accounts of her contemporaries, she was an “anti-sorceress” who practiced healing, and this status necessarily enhanced her prestige among her fellow Congolese, for the nganga, the anti-witch or medicine (wo)man, was rather well perceived in the Kongo society of the time. Before Kimpa Vita launched her movement, another woman, Mafuta, who was also a nganga,
had attempted to organize a struggle against the foreign presence in Kongo. She was considered to be a harmless mystic by the colonial authorities, and they made no moves to stop her.\textsuperscript{36}

Second, because Kimpa Vita had been baptized in the Catholic Church, her knowledge of the Bible was restricted to the catechism, which had been translated into her native Kikongo in 1624. Because the Catholic Church discouraged free access to the Bible, she grew up in an environment steeped in devotion to the Virgin Mary, the saints, the sacraments, and liturgical objects, such as the crucifix and the rosary. The catechism focused on prayers, such as the Lord’s Prayer and Hail Mary; the Articles of Faith; the Ten Commandments; the sacraments; and discussions of sin and the Christian life.\textsuperscript{37} Kimpa Vita had no exposure to the Bible, but she seems to have received the standard type of education in the Catholic tradition that was available at the time. This is what she used as a lens to interpret the oppression of the Congolese in particular and Black people in general. For Georges Balandier, the Bible, “which presents the Africans with a society comparable to their own, provides a possibility of transcending the inferiority they have suffered, of denying their state of ‘savagery.’ By identifying with the people in the Book, they can re-establish an equality which in their eyes is the condition of all future progress.”\textsuperscript{38}

Thanks to its missions in the kingdom of Kongo, the Catholic Church offered the Congolese—whose ethnic belongingness was and remains very strong—a communal and spiritual framework that fit with ancestor worship and Kongo cultural norms. Black people could hardly find a satisfactory message in the Bible, and it was overshadowed by the rituals and saints of the Catholic Church (particularly Saint Anthony of Padua, Saint James, Saint Francis, and Saint Alexis). Africans could only inscribe themselves into humankind’s history by embracing and appropriating the Catholic history and traditions surrounding them. As mentioned previously, the Christianization of the kingdom of Kongo took place in two stages. The first stage, from the fifteenth century into the sixteenth, was led by the Portuguese under the spiritual patronage of Saint James and involved coercion, as did the struggle against Islam in Iberia. The second stage occurred in the mid-seventeenth century under the patronage of Saint Anthony and was characterized by the more pedagogical approach chosen by the Capuchins, typically hailing from Spain or Italy. Saint Anthony was presented as an intercessor, whom the Congolese could look to for salvation from hardship. This can be seen in the following prayer:
Si quaeris miracula,
If you are seeking for miracles [see for yourself:]
Death, error, and calamity
The Devil and leprosy are disappearing
Sick people are healed and rise again
The sea recedes, and shackles are broken;
As for lost things and limbs,
The young and elderly ask for and retrieve them.
Dangers are warded off and poverty ends.
Let those who know tell all about it,
All that Paduans say.\textsuperscript{39}

Saint Anthony is also invoked by women seeking marriage:

\begin{quote}
My dear Saint Anthony,
I pray you very fervently
To give me my first husband;
The next one I’ll find on my own.
My dear Saint Anthony,
My Saint Anthony of flesh and bone,
If you give me no husband,
I will leave you in the well.\textsuperscript{40}
\end{quote}

It is quite understandable that Congolese resistance was organized on the basis of the identity parameters the people had been given, involving a form of identification with biblical characters as well as Catholic saints and traditions. When Kimpa Vita became convinced that she had received a mission from Saint Anthony to restore the kingdom of Kongo, she began a process of identity reconstruction.

Kimpa Vita’s prophetic mission came at an important point: the kingdom was filled with hopelessness and disappointment with the political leaders’ subservience to the Catholic missionaries. Quite significantly, the founding moment of the Antonian movement was the attempt by Kimpa Vita to fell a cross that stood right next to the king’s court.\textsuperscript{41} The Capuchin chronicler Father Bernardo da Gallo wrote that this happened after a first encounter with the king, whom Dona Beatriz had asked to meet to tell him about her mission.

Although she came from the aristocracy, Kimpa Vita successfully drew villagers’ attention and won their support. Her message met their expectations
in the socioreligious field as well as the political and economic ones. Indeed, being a nganga, she was able to fight a phenomenon that all dreaded—witchcraft—but also bring a message of hope based on eschatological promises. She claimed to have visions of Saint Anthony, who took possession of her body. The oldest testimony from the period is that of da Gallo: “The event occurred thus, she said: while she was sick and on the verge of dying, in her throes, a friar dressed like a Capuchin appeared to her. He told her he was Saint Anthony, sent by God into her head to preach [to] the people and announce the restoration of the kingdom.”

Because the intrusion of the Christian religion had upset the traditional system of Congolese religions, which was centered on ancestor worship, challenging the new religious order implied an appropriation of the Bible. This is why, having no direct access to scripture, Kimpa Vita appropriated aspects of Catholic identity, particularly the figures of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, Saint Francis, Saint Alexis, and Saint Anthony of Padua, by turning them into Kongo ancestors. The young prophet deliberately opted for a Congolization of the Christian religion, as da Gallo explained: “She used to say that Jesus was born in São Salvador, which was Bethlehem . . . baptized in Nsundi, which was Nazareth, and that Jesus Christ as well as the Madonna and Saint Francis were originally from the Congo, from the Black race . . . that Saint Francis was born in the clan of the Marquis of Vunda and that the Madonna, the mother of Jesus, was the descendant of a female slave or a servant of the Marquis Nzimba Npanghi (Mpangu).”

Because this was happening in the early eighteenth century, nation-states were not yet the norm around the world, particularly in Africa. Thus, identity rhetoric rooted in ethnic belonging was extremely common; following this logic, people could have no access to history save by thinking in terms of ethnicity. This is why the kingdom of Kongo was sacralized, since Jesus, his mother, Mary, and the saints, Beatriz claimed, had been part of its history.

In this identity reconstruction, Kongo names were subjected to a mimetic process, with the Portuguese titles Dom and Dona, normally reserved for the nobility, being appropriated by all men and women. Meanwhile, Portuguese Christian names “were rapidly ‘kongolized’ and adapted to the phonetic exigencies of the Kikongo language. . . . Certain names received an indigenous justification: they were explained by means of analogies. . . . This usage of foreign names has continued from the sixteenth century to the present, and has led to the formation of veritable ‘fraternities’ of homonyms.”
Christianity also offered the Congolese people an avenue for ancestor worship through expressions of reverence for the dead, particularly through the Feast of All Saints, allowing them to reconnect with their ancestors in the spirit of traditional religions. Hence, Catholic prayers and sacraments were revisited. The Salve Antonia, as Dona Beatriz’s new prayer was called, was more like a critique: “God wants an intention, it is the intention that God grasps. Baptism serves nothing, it is the intention that God takes. Confession serves no purpose, it is the intention that God wants. Good works serve no purpose: intention is what God wants.” Obviously, this state of mind was closer to the Protestant ethics of free interpretation and universal priesthood than to the confession of sins, which is one of the core sacraments in the Catholic Church.

Kongo culture gives crucial importance to intention, specifically in the elaboration of harmful or curative fetishes (*nkisi*). Hence, it is not surprising that Kimpa Vita should have considered intention to be key to understanding sin and being cleansed from it. The emphasis she placed on intercession was also characteristic of both traditional Kongo representations of Nzambi a Mpungu’s intermediaries and the syncretic effects of Christianization on Kongo conceptions of God, as John K. Thornton pointed out: “In the final portion of the prayer, the Salve Antonia shifts from denying the validity of the sacraments to reasserting the concept of advocacy of the Virgin and the saints before God which characterizes the original prayer and, indeed, Catholic theology, but with one exception. The new prayer takes the virtues of Mary from the Salve Regina and substitutes Saint Anthony, progressively increasing his power and significance until he becomes a figure equal to God Himself, starting with the popular images of Mary holding the baby Jesus.”

Bernardo da Gallo’s account of the facts helps illuminate the nationalistic dimension of the project, by quoting one of the hymns taught by Kimpa Vita: “Saint Anthony is the merciful one. Saint Anthony is our remedy. Saint Anthony is the one who will restore the kingdom of Kongo. Saint Anthony is the comforter from the kingdom of heaven. Saint Anthony is the gate to heaven. Saint Anthony holds the keys to heaven. Saint Anthony is above the Angels and the Virgin Mary.”

It is useful to remember that the doctrine Kimpa Vita was building on was that of the Portuguese Catholic Church and that allusions to Saint Anthony abounded in the prayers of Portuguese sailors. But the act of appropriating Saint Anthony and having him intervene in Congolese politics with other attributes than those of Christ and the Holy Spirit (see John 14:15–17) was entirely novel.
The importance of kinship has already been noted as crucial both in the succession of chiefs and in ancestor worship. Hence, it comes as no surprise that Jesus and his mother were perceived as being Africans and were included in the lineages of ethnic or kinship groups. Indeed, it is only by being part of the ethnic/kinship group that ancestors may be worshiped and answer the prayers of their children. Likewise, whenever Whites needed to gain acceptance from the Congolese, they allowed themselves to be assimilated as if they were ancestors returning from the next world. This image remained embedded in the Congolese psyche for hundreds of years until the colonial rule imposed by Europeans became intolerable, leading the Congolese to dispel the confusion.

Kimpa Vita did precisely the work of deconstruction of the representations that conflated Europeans with the ancestors, first by stressing that the former’s Whiteness should not be mistaken for that of the African spirits. As her contemporary Father da Gallo wrote, “She taught that white men originated from a certain soft stone called ‘fama.’ This is why they are white. Blacks come from a tree called ‘musanda’ (nsanda). It is from this tree’s bark or envelope that they make ropes and loincloths, which they use to cover their nakedness; this makes them black, or the color of this bark.”

Kimpa Vita’s choice of stone as the matter Whites were made of was quite significant to her rejection of them; to this day, Congolese people still say of callous people that they have a heart of stone. Her comparing Whites to a stone was thus symptomatic of her resentment of colonial oppression and her efforts to disconnect self-esteem from Euro-centeredness among her followers. Conversely, the bark from the tree she defined as the origin of Blacks was given a positive connotation, since this dark-colored bark possesses therapeutic virtues. In providing her followers with a new, positive self-identification, she was effectively helping them free themselves from negative stigma. This also explains why Kimpa Vita appropriated Christian beliefs. As William Randles explained, “This nationalization of the Christian religion with a geographical transposition of the Christian tragedy seems to have occurred in parallel with the praise of blacks over whites.”

In Kimpa Vita’s eyes, the kingdom of Kongo was the real holy land, and the forefathers and foremothers of Christianity belonged to the Black race. Thus, as Sinda pointed out, “Dona Beatrice was trying to found a Congolese church by imitating the Catholic Church she was vigorously fighting because of the latter’s influence on the kingdom’s political staff. A Christian herself,
Dona Beatrice intended to create a national church that would be freed from all the antagonisms that divided the kingdom’s political society.\textsuperscript{52}

Along with this transformation of the Portuguese Saint Anthony (the patron saint of preachers), Kimpa Vita’s extolling Blackness went hand in hand with a rejection of Whiteness, which was connected to evil. Bernardo da Gallo voiced his indignation over this matter quite explicitly:

\begin{quote}
More than anything else, what those Antonians achieved was to make us missionaries the targets of hatred. They prevented parents from presenting their children for baptism and adults from getting married in church. They made us an object of popular odium, to such a point that upon seeing us, people call their false Saint Anthony to the rescue, crying, \textit{sadi, sadi, sadi, Jesus Mary} (here comes the Nkadiam-pemba [devil], find protection!). In each village we crossed, we heard them crying this to ask their false Saint Anthony to rescue them from us, whom they considered to be devils.\textsuperscript{51}
\end{quote}

The phenomenon of appropriation of the devil—a character from the Christian pantheon—to serve as an explanation for the disruption and evil wreaked by Whites is similar to the more recent appropriation, in the cosmogony of the Nation of Islam, of the figure of Jacob as the “evil scientist” who created a race of white-skinned, blue-eyed devils.

Just as significantly, in Kimpa Vita’s discourse Whites also appeared as the ones who held the secret of divine revelation and economic development. Indeed, she accused foreign priests of “having monopolized the secret of divine revelation and the riches associated with it for the sole benefit of White people and of opposing the effort of salvation led by ‘Black saints.’”\textsuperscript{54}

The simple fact of reproaching Whites for not sharing the secret of divine revelation and wealth was revealing of her awareness of the gap between Blacks and Whites and the resulting underdevelopment of African societies. In response to these concerns, the Antonian movement focused on the hope of bringing about the reunification of the kingdom of Kongo and its liberation from White oppressors for a future of peace and prosperity.

The movement created by Kimpa Vita was not anchored in any specific location. Historians’ accounts indicate that it was made up of several thousand followers who roamed in a sort of pilgrimage, praying and singing on the roads and in public places. Although her increasing influence earned her popular support in many villages, Kimpa Vita was negatively perceived by the Kongo aristocracy and the official church.
The prophet publicly proclaimed that she held the *santíssimo sacramento* (holy sacrament) that would help restore the kingdom; this eventually drew the attention of King Pedro IV, who lived on Mount Kibangu. He sent emissaries to verify her assertions, but Kimpa Vita turned them away, arguing that the king should come and see for himself. Reluctant at first, the king eventually chose to take advantage of the young woman’s impressive popularity for his own political benefit.

Meanwhile, the official branch of the Catholic Church in the kingdom of Kongo was beginning to fret about Kimpa Vita’s rise and making plans to bring about the demise of the Antonian movement. Da Gallo, a Capuchin missionary, showed his determination in his dealings with the Congolese people, but he also maintained good relations with political powers. He had perceived the prophet Mafuta to be harmless to the Catholic mission, but his reaction to Kimpa Vita’s movement was unequivocal condemnation, because she preached a form of heresy that attacked the Catholic faith. Not only did Kimpa Vita work miracles, but she also preached the restoration of the kingdom of Kongo, denouncing missionaries, the Holy See, and the sacraments of the Catholic Church, and burned the crosses as so many other fetishes. Finally, her giving birth to a child (Antonio), even as she advocated chastity and claimed to be a virgin and a moral example, was used against her by the missionaries.

The Capuchins quickly put pressure on King Pedro IV after he had prevailed over his two rivals under the banner of Catholic orthodoxy. He eventually ordered Kimpa Vita to be arrested. On July 2, 1706, the Congolese prophet was sentenced to death by an ecclesiastical tribunal; she was burned at the stake with her lover.

Even after her death, the movement she had initiated did not lose all momentum; instead, it kept alive the nationalist consciousness of the Congolese people, thanks to the eschatological promises of the prophet, who had proclaimed the impending judgment of God. According to the Swiss Africanist and theologian Marie-Louise Martin, it was Kimpa Vita who launched for the first time the idea of a Black Christ who would come to free oppressed peoples from bondage. Kimpa Vita also predicted the upcoming restoration of the kingdom of Kongo, which would coincide with the return of prosperity.\(^{55}\)

The execution of Kimpa Vita did not bring about the atonement of the Antonians. On the contrary, according to some historians, her movement turned her into a mythical figure. Another missionary, Father Lucques, observed:
After their [Beatriz’s and her lover’s] deaths, the Antonians, instead of asking for forgiveness and reintegration, became more obstinate than ever. They proclaimed that the woman they revered as a saint had appeared on top of the tallest trees in São Salvador. Soon after, another woman began preaching that she was the mother of the false Saint Anthony [i.e., Kimpa Vita]. She encouraged people to have no fear, telling them that while the daughter was dead, the mother remained. She insisted on being called “the mother of all virtues.” May God assist us with His grace so that the holy faith may not be lost in this country.56

The final comment of the missionary is revealing of the long-term impact left by Kimpa Vita in the minds of her fellow Congolese. Indeed, while the Antonian movement did not endure for long after the death of its founder, the kingdom, although weakened by civil war, was able to remake itself in a new shape after the death of King Pedro IV in 1718. Father Cherubino de Savonna, a Capuchin who lived in Kongo from 1760 to 1767, described the new political structure as “a cluster of independent local chiefs, who were allied between themselves through a system of matrimonial alliances—a sort of empire gathering separate kingdoms.”57 As Georges Balandier retrospectively analyzed, Kimpa Vita’s dream of an “ideal kingdom of liberty and fullness of life” reemerged when her “mystical heirs . . . without even knowing her name” took the same path.58 These spiritual heirs are undeniably Simon Kimbangu and his followers, who were clearly inspired by the same hope to nationalize Christianity and rebuild the kingdom of Kongo both mystically and spiritually. Yet, before Kimbangu appeared on the scene, another African-initiated movement of spiritual revival was launched by a prophet named William Wadé Harris, although he was far away from the former kingdom of Kongo, on the border between Liberia and Ivory Coast.

Westerners’ preoccupation with Christianizing Africans had not remained restricted to Congo and Central Africa; it took them everywhere on the continent, particularly to Ivory Coast and Liberia on the so-called Gold Coast of western Africa. The Capuchins, the Dominicans, and the Society of African Missions of Lyons, France, undertook this mission in 1895. However, theirs was a difficult task, since the population was either already converted to Islam or still attached to animist beliefs. By the early twentieth century, fewer than 2,000 of the tribal residents of the coast had been baptized.59
It was not until Harris launched a prophetic movement that the region was won over to Christianity. In 1914, the First World War caused the French settlers and missionaries present in western Africa to return home. Yet the missionizing work was not disrupted, for the impact of Harris’s preaching led to a remarkable breakthrough of the Christian churches in Ivory Coast. His activities led to more than 100,000 Africans being baptized in the span of eighteen months—most of them in Protestant denominations (which French colonial authorities tended to consider more loyal to the British Empire), but a sizable number in the Catholic Church.

William Wadé Harris was born in Liberia circa 1860 in the Grebo ethnic group. The Grebos belong to the Kru people, who are found on both banks of the Cavalla River, in the center and southeastern portion of Liberia and in the western part of Ivory Coast, in a forest area. Liberia had been founded twenty years before, in part by African American freed people who had decided to leave the United States and go to Africa. When they landed on African soil, they were greeted by the Grebo people, who gave them part of their lands. As a member of this welcoming group, Harris, a native of the town of Sinoe, was constantly in contact with the African Americans who had settled there.

By 1910, tension had risen between the American-born Black people and the native Liberians as a result of cultural clashes and diverging political interests. The former were perceived as new colonizers by the latter, who called them “White Negroes,” for they had concentrated into their own hands the management of all public affairs. This situation of domination and subordination triggered conflicts, which were exacerbated by the British and French colonists who were also present in the country; they were trying to curry favor with certain native groups in boundary disputes with the other groups of settlers.60

This was the context in which William Wadé Harris was jailed in 1910 for taking part in protest movements, which the Liberian government considered to be a coup. In his prison cell, he claimed, he was visited by the Archangel Gabriel, who entrusted him with the special mission of converting the pagans and spreading the gospel and set him on his prophetic path: “‘You are not in prison,’ the Angel said. ‘God is coming to anoint you. You will be a prophet. . . . You are like Daniel.’”61 Mrs. Neal, Harris’s daughter (whose full name has not survived in the historical record), provided the following details in an interview she gave to the missionary Pierre Benoit: “He saw the Lord in a great wave of light and was, he said, anointed by him. He felt the water pour on his head. God told him to burn the fetishes,
beginning with his own, and to preach everywhere Christian baptism; he must, by divine command, leave off all the European clothing he was then wearing and his patent leather shoes, to reclothe himself in a kind of toga [toga] made with a single piece of stuff [material]. . . . He seemed so exalted and talked so incoherently that all the world thought him mad.”

Once out of jail, Harris chose two female collaborators to help him in what was to become a mass religious movement, spreading over Liberia, Ivory Coast, and the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana).

William Wadé Harris’s career was relatively long compared with other founders of prophetic churches. He was born a Methodist; his mother was part of the first generation of Christians in a coastal village of the Grebo country, which was often visited by Episcopalian and Methodist missionaries. At age twenty-one, he joined the American Methodist Episcopal Mission of Harper, Cape Palmas, where he had been baptized and had learned to read and write both in English and in his native Grebo. He then became an active lay preacher in the tradition of the American Methodist mission. Around 1885–1886, he married in the Episcopal Church a woman named Rose Farr, who was the daughter of a renowned catechist and schoolteacher from the Episcopalian mission of Spring Hill. Harris was still a young man when he found work as part of the crew of a British merchant ship, which traded along the coast of West Africa, and later as a brickmason. These experiences exposed him to other African civilizations. After the birth of their first child, Harris left the Methodist Church to join his wife’s church, and he became a lay preacher in the Episcopal Church and an assistant schoolteacher at the American Protestant Episcopal mission of Half Graway in 1892. This job not only put him in charge of many native students, but eventually earned him an influential position in the government as an interpreter and cultural intermediary. His proficiency in English caused the Catholic fathers Hartz and Harrington to praise his abilities, the former writing in 1914 that Harris “speaks the pure and flawless brand of English which is Britain’s pride” and the latter, in 1917, that Harris “spoke in perfect English, a very remarkable acquisition for a Kruman whose pigeon [sic] English is usually unintelligible except to the initiated.”

Thus, William Wadé Harris’s religious and educational background was strong enough to allow him to read the Bible without an intermediary and to gain a personal understanding of the scriptures on the basis of his own spiritual quest and rootedness in African cultural values. His work as a preacher consisted of translating into local languages and offering interpretations of chosen biblical passages for his people. His accurate knowledge
of scriptures and the depth of his Christian beliefs were remarkable to many of his European contemporaries; yet, he had been educated not by foreign missionaries, but by African converts, with whom Harris shared a similar worldview.64

His preaching focused on three main points. First, he attacked witchcraft and fetishes, a stance that was all the more significant and convincing because he was said to have inherited from his mother the status of a conjure man—like most other African spiritual leaders. Second, he published ten commandments that espoused African cultural practices, condoning polygamy but banning adultery. Finally, the prophet used the scriptures to deliver a message of hope to his fellow Africans on the basis of eschatological promises, telling them that “the time is fulfilled, the devil is defeated” and baptizing them “in the name of the Father, and his Son who died for your sins on the cross, and of the Holy Spirit who will change your hearts.”65

As mentioned earlier, his success was largely due to his linking the scriptures to issues pertaining to Blackness. Prophet Harris’s attachment to the Bible is perceptible in one of the messages he sent to his followers: “Read the Bible, it is the word of God. I am sending you one in which I have marked the verses that you should read. Seek the light in the Bible. It will be your guide.”66 Yet, although he taught the Bible and christened thousands of people with the blessing of Catholic and Protestant missionaries and colonists, Harris did not condone the subjugation of his fellow Africans. The human losses of the First World War led the French authorities to recruit soldiers among the natives of their colonies, including the Ivorians; along with other leaders, William Wadé Harris expressed his reluctance to comply in a letter sent to one of his followers, in which he wrote: “France is making war on the king of Ethiopia and on his subjects. Let no Black man go to Europe.”67 From then on, his relationship with the French colonial authorities changed.

In addition, his belonging to a Protestant church had led more converts to join British missions than Catholic missions, which were supported by the French settlers. Hence, he was eventually arrested in Ivory Coast and deported to Liberia, since he was not a French subject. There are two versions of this arrest, the first of which stresses the brutality of the colonial forces, who allegedly manhandled him and one of his Liberian singers, Helen Valentine, to such a point that Valentine died of her wounds. The other version emphasizes that the officer in charge of deporting him waited until Harris was done preaching and baptizing converts on the beach of
Port Bouët before he notified Harris that he was to leave French territory and take a boat to Liberia.68

Following Harris’s deportation, three types of reaction were observed. First, the Catholics, whom the Ivorian natives saw as connected with the French colonial administration, lost the respect they had gained from Harris’s activities. Second, in order to better cash in on his success, and perhaps appropriate it, the Protestant churches appointed two emissaries: Rev. Benoît in September 1926 and John Ahui in 1928. Both had secured certified letters from the prophet, in which Harris expressed his wish to see his followers join a Protestant church, particularly the Methodist Church. Finally, the natives themselves were inspired by his example, and a number of leaders emerged who all claimed to be following in the wake of Harris. But they were loyal neither to the French colonial authorities nor to the mother churches.

A number of studies claim that Harris did not create a church, but collaborated with the established Protestant and Catholic churches. Still, the nationalist awareness he triggered eventually led to the founding of the Harrist Church.69

Using race as a tool for the interpretation of the scriptures through the prism of African values, Harris’s preaching addressed Blackness with a problem-solving approach. According to Harris, it was the animist background underlying ancestor worship, witchcraft, and fetishes that was to blame for the lack of development of Africans compared to Europeans. Witchcraft had already been shown to be a key cultural aspect of African cultures and societies; it is still embedded in their worldviews. In trying to find rational causes for the technological gap separating Africans from Europeans, Harris assumed that Africans had been conquered by Europeans because they had caused God’s anger by choosing to put their trust in fetishes and by preying on each other through witchcraft.70 Harris was effective in his preaching because he was convinced that if Africans would only renounce witchcraft and convert to Christianity, there would no longer be a “Black problem,” and Africa would close the technological gap that plagued it. By appropriating the Bible as a form of therapy for the predicament of colonized Africans, he tied his own prophetic actions to his understanding of Blackness and Whiteness.

While the teachings of the prophet appropriated the Bible, he did not dissociate the scriptures from the figure of the White missionary who came to Christianize the Africans, contrary to what Kimpa Vita did in the kingdom of Kongo. Harris never urged his fellow Africans to leave European
churches or rebel against the colonists. The French ethnologist René Bureau emphasized this characteristic of Harris’s activities in the following passage: “People asked him, ‘When you are gone, who will show us the way?’ ‘The White man will—this is why I am handing the work over to the clerics. Wait for the man of the Bible; if a White man comes and does not show you the Bible, then you’ll know he’s a liar.’”

Taking the White man as a model, Harris gave a reformulation of Christianity buttressed by three representations of Whites: as men of the Bible, as men of the school system, and as men of science.

Harris believed that Whites knew the secrets of the Bible because they had mastered the art of reading and writing—the White men’s magic. Only by becoming initiated into the mysteries of scripture could Africans also share in these secrets; hence, the prophet insisted that his followers send their children to the White schools, so that they would learn how to read and eventually empower themselves to own the secrets of the Bible and of development. This prophetic logic was apparent in Harris’s preaching and was conveyed in the words of an apostle from the Harrist Church whom I interviewed in 2002: “When Prophet Harris came, there wasn’t much teaching done. The whole teaching revolved around his prophecy, which is known as the trilogy of prophecy and recommendation of Prophet William Wadé Harris. He told them, ‘Send your children to school! When they are endowed with the White man’s knowledge, they will read the contents of the Bible for you. You will not be misled. And you’ll be seated at the same table as the Whites and share the same meal.’” School thus appeared in Harris’s preaching as the place where Africans could learn how to read and write with the goal of understanding the holy scriptures, which he believed contain the key to development. Today, most Harrists follow this prophetic logic, and many are literate.

The third representation conveyed by Harris’s message was Whites as prosperous men of science; he announced that a golden age had come with the arrival of White missionaries and schools. The racial equality he was envisioning was unthinkable in colonial times, however, since Blacks and Whites could not even be seated at the same table sharing either a conversation or a meal. This vision of Blackness and Whiteness could only exist in the future, but Whiteness appeared here as a mirror, which the prophet used to increase awareness of the gap between Blacks and Whites and find a solution to it.

As in the case of Simon Kimbangu, the prophetic movement that Harris initiated elicited two kinds of reception: from the colonial authorities and
from those Catholic and Protestant churches and those African independent churches that were spawned from his own.

Several types of officials reacted to the preaching of this Africanized Christian message by William Wadé Harris. First, the Catholic and Protestant missionaries gave him free rein to preach and baptize in their mainstream churches. Some missionaries actually considered him to be a messenger sent by God to achieve the conversion of his fellow Africans. The French colonial authorities initially also had a favorable view of his prophetic movement, because Harris was careful to preach an attitude of total submission to their power, the value of a strong work ethic, and morality.74

Nationwide, among the native population, William Wadé Harris’s mission was wildly successful, since his fellow Grebos and other Ivorians massively embraced a message that promised protection from evil, immediate prosperity, and certain punishment to those who would not heed the prophet’s words and acts of power.75 This is why the people followed his sermons and applied his recommendations scrupulously. Fetishes were burned and the Sabbath respected, with shopkeepers closing their stores. The British governor of the Gold Coast eventually acknowledged that Harris had a powerful impact on the masses and had succeeded where White missionaries had failed. The deportation of Harris caused the rise of several new leaders who claimed to be his spiritual heirs, and his succession became a bone of contention. Several African-initiated churches claim to have their origins in Harris’s mission.

Prophet William Wadé Harris’s activities gradually spawned an independent church rooted in his teachings. In August 1955, the Harrist Church held its first congress, which ended in the appointment as its head of the Ivorian John Ahui, who inherited the prophet’s staff and Bible on the occasion. With the help of assistants, Ahui successfully spread Harris’s prophetic message among villages near the Liberian border. The years leading up to Ivorian independence offered a favorable context for the development of the Harrist Church, and it was quickly granted recognition by the Ivorian state. On March 4, 1961, it was officially registered with the new state authorities under the name of Église du Christ/Mission Harris. It became a major African-initiated church, ranking fourth among the churches of Ivory Coast. In 1998, it joined the World Council of Churches, based in Geneva, Switzerland; it was then 2 million strong, according to the Harrist officials I interviewed in the greater Paris area.

In spite of the vicissitudes and splits entailed by the succession crisis,76 the Harrist Church has survived to this day, drawing its tenets from the
Bible and the teachings of the prophet. It is interesting, from a comparative perspective, to investigate its formulation of the question of Blackness. Harrist theology offers three analyses of Blackness, distinguishing an African identity predating colonization, an Africanness linked to William Wadé Harris’s prophetic activities, and a modern Black identity in the making.

Harris considered himself to be a messenger sent by God to convert and christen Africans in order to save them from the spiritual predicament that their attachment to fetishes and witchcraft had put them in. He described his mission in the following terms: “God has sent me to proclaim that the time has come when he wants to deliver you from the power of the devil who ruins you, makes you foolish and kills you. The time is fulfilled, the devil is conquered here also, therefore burn all your fetishes, all your gree-grees and your amulets, and I will baptize you in the name of this God who is your Father, of his son Jesus Christ who has died for your sins, and of the Holy Spirit who changes your hearts.”

By baptizing Africans and separating them from the psychological hold of fetish worship and witchcraft, Harris believed that he would lead them to prosperity and happiness. The main goal of his mission was met, for he was successful in converting massive numbers of Ivorians to Christianity, while before he came, many had asked for baptism and joined Christian churches only halfheartedly, out of fear rather than faith, with their belief in fetishes and witchcraft still intact. Harris’s prophetic approach was revolutionary: he knew exactly how they felt, and he had an insider’s familiarity with Ivorian society and its cultural references, since he came from a family of conjure men and women. He succeeded where European missionaries had failed, because he, like the people he preached to, was African. Yet, though nationalistic and geared to Africans’ needs, his message was not hostile to Europeans and Whites in general. On the contrary, Harris had a positive image of Whites and conveyed it in his preaching.

Harris recommended submission to colonial authorities for the time necessary for Africans to learn Western technology in order to carry out African projects of development. As Sheila Walker has explained, he encouraged Ivorians to work hard while keeping them focused: if they learned White men’s techniques and prayed for seven years, they would empower themselves and make possible their own liberation from colonialism.

His prophetic message created short-term millenarian hope, since, following the seven years of prayer, asceticism, schooling, and learning the Bible, the time would come when his prophecies would be put to the test. But after seven years, Harris’s contemporaries did not witness the fulfillment
of his prophecies: Africans were still chafing under the various colonial yokes in the 1920s and would remain so in the following decades. But the Harrists I interviewed explained that the prophet’s pronouncements were realized in the creation of the United Nations, where Blacks and Whites are seated at the same negotiation table, and in other organizations where African voices are heard. In the realm of politics, Harris’s prophecies are also considered to have been fulfilled by the independence of Ivory Coast, including his statement that a “son of Africa” would lead.  

Harris’s activities led to the emergence of two forms of Ivorian nationalism. On the one hand, the new political awareness gave rise to political parties, including that of Félix Houphouët-Boigny, who was to become the first president of Ivory Coast and who emulated Harris’s talent in bringing together various ethnic groups. Hence, William Wadé Harris’s prophecy about sons of Africa reaching the highest positions in Ivory Coast as a result of the recommendations seemed to be fulfilled, since Houphouët-Boigny had been educated in European schools prior to being elected.

But on the other hand, although the prophet himself never called for a rejection of Whites or even for the creation of an independent church, his followers’ actions, particularly those of his Ivorian successor, John Ahui, showed a separatist tendency, which led to the launching of the Harrist Church in 1955, apparently with Harris’s approval. This shows that Harris, like other African prophets, may have been unable to entirely control the desire for political liberation that they had fostered among their compatriots. This was also the case with an earlier splinter of Harris’s movement, a sect called Sons of God, which announced the “apocalyptic” end of the colonial order, promising that “the whites would leave the land before long and taxes would be reduced.” This had caused concern in the French colonial government and eventually led to the prophet’s deportation from the territory of Ivory Coast.

It seems clear that William Wadé Harris’s prophetic activities gradually led his followers to consider his mission and identity from a different angle than the missionary perspective, so that they finally began to attribute to him some of the same importance that Jesus Christ had for White people. “God sent each of his sons to a different group of people to save them. Jesus went to Europe to save the whites, but he did not come to Africa. It was the prophet Harris, an African like us, whom God sent to bring us into the light.”

It is striking to observe how the Harrist Church, like other African-initiated churches, offers a pattern of dissociation between the White
missionaries’ “magic,” as embodied in the scriptures, and the believers’ explicit need to see a fellow African preach a message of salvation, holding out the promise of immediately palpable evidence of empowerment. This pattern can only be effective in these churches through a more or less deliberate process of appropriation and transformation of the Bible under the guidance of the prophetic leader and his successors. Perhaps the movement that best exemplifies such a process is the Kimbanguist Church, which was born in the early 1920s through the political and religious activities of another prophet in the Belgian Congo: Simon Kimbangu.