Kimbanguism

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The Kimbanguist movement was launched by Simon Kimbangu, a Baptist catechist. Belonging to the Cingombe ethnic group, part of the Kongo group, he was born in the village of Nkamba, near Matadi in the southwestern part of the Belgian Congo (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo) around 1889, according to many researchers. The Kimbanguists believe he was born on Wednesday, September 12, 1887—a date that was discovered by the church by means of a revelation. The only child of his parents, Kuyela and Luezi, he was called Kimbangu, which means in Kikongo “the one who reveals the hidden meaning of things.”

Kimbangu was educated at the Baptist mission of Ngombe Lutete. After marrying Marie Muilu and fathering three sons—Charles Kisolokele (February 12, 1914), Paul Salomon Dialungana (May 25, 1916), and Joseph Diangienda (March 22, 1918)—he became a catechist there in 1918. Many historians contend that he failed the exams that would have given him pastoral status. But not all of them share the same analysis of this failure. Georges Balandier, for instance, tied it to Kimbangu’s prophetic vocation: for Balandier, this failure triggered the shock that made separation from the mission easier (or even caused it), by arousing the need to act in parallel with the official church and, to a certain extent, against it.1

Father Van Wing, a contemporary of Kimbangu and a well-known anti-Kimbanguist, nevertheless pleaded in favor of Kimbangu by stressing his Protestant background: “Although he was very intelligent and endowed
with a remarkable oratory talent, he never accessed the rank of pastor. He evangelized several villages under the title of catechist."

In 1918, Kimbangu heard the voice of Christ ordering him to convert his compatriots, but he felt unequal to the task. He resisted the call, but everything he undertook to make a living systematically failed. He went to Léopoldville (now Kinshasa) to labor as a factory worker in the Belgian Congo’s oil works, but when payday came, the European man in charge of handing him his due (which never exceeded twenty francs) refused to give him anything, arguing that he had already been paid, as his signature on the payroll sheet proved. This occurred three times in a row, and then Kimbangu heard Christ’s voice again, explaining that what he was experiencing was linked to his resisting the call. Kimbangu made the decision to leave this job and go back to his family in Nkamba; his colleagues took pity on him and gave him financial help to compensate for his three months without salary. So he tried to stay a while longer in Léopoldville by selling chikwangs (loaves made of manioc), but again he failed, for no customer was interested in his merchandise. Eventually, a desperate Kimbangu went back to Nkamba on foot; with what little money he had left, he bought eels for his family’s supper on his way home, but an officer from the colonial police seized them before letting him resume his trip.

When he arrived in Thysville, a city located forty-six miles from Nkamba, Kimbangu was hired to work on the roads by the Office of Colonial Transportation, but that same evening, he was told he was not needed. He finally returned to Nkamba to farm his land, but the calling was persistent.

Kimbangu’s resistance to the calling lasted until 1921, when he initiated his spiritual revival movement among the Congolese people. According to Kimbanguist oral tradition, his wife, Marie Muilu—who was aware of what was going to occur on Wednesday, April 6, 1921—rang a bell at 6 A.M. at the request of her husband. After the morning worship, Kimbangu and many other villagers took the road to Naona, a village where a market was taking place. On the road to the market, facing Nkamba and on top of a hill, was the village of Ngombe-Kinsuka; there, a young woman called Nkiantondo had been dying for several days, her family expecting her to breathe her last any minute. The Kimbanguist oral tradition, as shaped by his son and successor, Diangienda, portrays Kimbangu as yielding to the urge of Christ as he stepped into the young woman’s cabin and ordered everyone save her husband and relatives to leave the room. On his knees, he made a short prayer and, taking the sick woman by the hand, said, “Nkiantondo, in the
As the news of the healing of Nkiantondo spread, villagers began consulting Kimbangu for all sorts of illnesses and handicaps. The blind recovered sight, the paralyzed could walk, the deaf heard, and the mutes spoke. The first successful resurrection, which is very famous in Kimbanguist historiography, was that of Dina, a fifteen-year-old girl whose corpse had already begun to decompose; she had been dead for three days. This was how long it had taken her funeral procession to march from her birthplace, the village of Ntumba, to Nkamba. When Kimbangu asked her parents what they wanted, the father answered: “If we didn’t want our daughter to be resurrected, we would not be here.” The Kimbanguist narrative relates the miracle in these terms: “Realizing that these people clearly possessed a high degree of faith, name of Jesus of Nazareth, be healed and rise.” It is said that Nkiantondo rose at once, completely recovered.³
KIMBANGUISM AS A SOCIAL MOVEMENT

[Kimbangu] begged the Lord to resurrect the young woman. Then, holding the hand of the dead woman, he cried out, ‘Dina, in the name of Jesus Christ, resurrect.’ Dina opened her eyes and rose at once. Then there was an outburst of joy.” As I discuss below, an identity reconstruction process eventually associated the memory of this young woman with an African American woman called Dinah, who came to visit Nkamba in 2002.

After Dina’s resurrection, crowds of people, not all of them Christian, came from the southern portion of the Belgian Congo, the northern parts of Angola, and the southern parts of the French Congo to Nkamba, both to get healed and to hear Kimbangu preach. But Kimbangu, who at the time had no intention of creating a new church, asked them not to leave their home churches. To help him in his new mission, Kimbangu chose priestly collaborators, among whom were two women; the more famous was Michaëlle (Mikala) Mandombe, who was only thirteen when she was first selected. Like him, these aides healed sick people and people with all kinds of handicaps in the name of Jesus.

For Pierre Bourdieu, revisiting Max Weber’s theories on religion, a prophet is a figure who is characteristic of times of crisis and dissensus among the believers, the established clergy, and the official religion, and whose role is to offer the people an understanding of the world that meets their needs, giving new meaning to the present and future life. Simon Kimbangu, just like his predecessors Kimpa Vita/Dona Beatriz and William Wadé Harris, found all the conditions required to mobilize his compatriots into a prophetic movement. The Congolese were chafing under the colonial yokes of the Belgians, French, and Portuguese. Illiteracy made it impossible for them to read the Bible or fully access the Christian message. Finally, at the time, a flu epidemic was taking a heavy toll on the local population.

Kimbangu’s prophetic activities kindled the faith of the Kongo people on both banks of the Congo River and in Angola, who flocked to Kimbangu. This drew the attention of the missionaries and colonial administrators in the Belgian Congo. Contemporary observers of Kimbangu insisted on denying the reality of what he was doing. For instance, although he was not on the premises, Father Jodogne, a Redemptorist, described the healings as fake miracles. However, these criticisms were contradicted by a medical report written by a Dr. Osstram, a missionary from the American Baptist Foreign Missionary Society, who indicated that “Nsona [a girl he knew] was a cripple, who could not straighten out her arms and hands or feet. She was taken to the prophet-healer and walked back home from the mountain of healing along with her mother.”
A member of the Baptist Church, Kimbangu rose to the position of catechist, teaching the Bible to his fellow Congolese. But he entered history through a more personal experience pertaining to Christian mysticism, which led Efraim Andersson to describe him as a “natural mystic.” His position gave him the opportunity to live permanently in contact with both his fellow Congolese and European colonists who belonged to the same church as he did. Contemporary Protestant observers of Kimbangu’s activities described him as “a decent, orderly man who read his Bible and did his work conscientiously.”

His preaching focused on two major themes. First, at a moral level, he recommended that all people should read the Bible, abide by the Ten Commandments, and bestow love on their neighbors, and he preached against witchcraft. Based on his religious preaching, his moral recommendations have been memorized and kept by his followers, such as the commandments not to dance or watch people dancing, not to bathe or sleep naked, to destroy fetishes and drums, and not to be polygamous. Second, he preached Christ as the source of his power to heal, stressing that Jesus should no longer be seen as an imported deity, but as the God of Black people also. “The Christ that missionaries revealed to us is the one from whom I receive my mission and my power,” he would say. “You must believe in Him and put His teachings into practice. You must no longer continue considering Him as the White man’s God, but really as the son of the Eternal.”

In his apostolic circuits, Kimbangu did not just heal people, but he also preached against the colonial order. From his teachings against colonial domination, only one sentence has been retained and become famous, however—his prophecy that “the White man shall become black and the Black man shall become white.” The Bible was not only meant to be read, but served as a foundation for commitment to the cause of racial liberation. Passages from the book of Exodus narrating the liberation of the children of Israel from their bondage in Egypt offered parallels with Africans’ own oppression, which made them popular among Congolese audiences.

Contemporary observers mentioned that the biblical story of David and Goliath was also a recurrent theme. The Belgian colonial administrator Léon Morel indicated in a report that when he went to control a Kimbanguist worship service, which had gathered a crowd of followers, Kimbangu did not so much as turn around to look at him. But the prophet’s youngest apostle, Mikala Mandombe, held up her Bible for all to see the image of David and Goliath, using the biblical episode as an analogy to celebrate Kimbangu as a new David and to challenge Morel as the representative
of Goliath—that is, colonial oppression. This analogy was recurrent in Kimbangu’s preaching. The Swiss theologian Marie-Louise Martin later observed that the Kimbanguist Church often compared its own history to that of the children of Israel, particularly in Exodus, so that “the Church’s own experience makes the notion of salvation history possible.”

It did not take much time for the people’s hopes to be expressed in terms of the salvation of the Black race. Kimbangu focused his discourse on the deteriorated Black identity: he preached Black liberation from the colonial yoke and prophesied that a temple would be built in Nkamba as a sign of Black spiritual liberation. Unsurprisingly, although Simon Kimbangu refused to be labeled a savior, he was considered as such by his fellow Congolese. Among the Kimbanguist speeches of the time, the following was related by the administrative authorities of the Belgian Congo: “God has promised us to pour His Holy Spirit over our land. We have implored Him and He has sent us a savior for the Black race—Simon Kimbangou [sic]. He is the chief and savior of all the Blacks, just like the Saviors of the other races—Moses, Jesus Christ, Mohammad and Buddha. . . . God did not want us to hear His Word without giving us any proof. . . . So He gave us Simon Kimbangou, who is for us like the Moses of the Jews, the Christ of the foreigners, and the Mohammad of the Arabs.”

In addition to his knowledge of the Bible, Kimbangu’s appeal was reinforced by his staff—a rod known as mvuala in the Kikongo language. The sacred staff among Kongo chiefs, as mentioned earlier, played an important role in the process of initiation and in the granting of temporal and spiritual powers to the chief. According to Kimbanguist tradition, this staff had supernatural powers; when ordered by Simon Kimbangu, it could spring out of its owner’s hands and float upright or horizontally. People even say that once, after Simon Kimbangu had pointed to the four cardinal directions with this rod, all the sick and dead people whom relatives were carrying to Nkamba in hopes of their healing or resurrection had been given satisfaction before they even arrived.

In analyzing the lyrics of Kimbanguist songs from the colonial period, Balandier wrote that Kimbangu’s rod was not only an allusion to Moses’s famous staff, but also a very significant object in Congolese tradition: “The staff, or walking-stick, usually carved, was one of the insignia of royalty, and was for a long time the symbol of authority of the ‘old-style chiefs.’ The ‘Kingdom of Christ,’ later to become that of the Black Messiah, is conceived of as being real, but adapted to a society in which an independent Congolese Church and State would coexist. In a more or less
complementary sense, the ‘staff’ indicates that Simon Kimbangou [sic] was both King and Prophet.”

These descriptions show clearly that Kimbangu was seen as a savior and liberator of the Blacks, but not as an instrument of God’s wrath against the Whites for colonizing the Congolese. Despite this, one common point among all the movements that stemmed from Simon Kimbangu’s ministry is that they often cultivate a rejection of Whites, even though Kimbangu himself never preached anti-White sentiment. Contrary to the movement of the Antonians, which grew out of feelings of rejection and hatred of the White colonizers, Kimbangu’s initiative displayed a benevolent position toward Whites, which may be explained by his family history.

A motherless child, Simon was raised by his paternal aunt Kinzembo, who had recently converted to Christianity and joined the Baptist Missionary Society at Ngombe Lutete, headed by Rev. Thomas Comber. The story of her first encounter with Comber has been preserved in the Kimbanguist collective memory. The starting point was when Comber, while on his missionary circuit around the villages located within walking distance of the Ngombe Lutete Baptist mission, arrived in the village of Nkamba on a market day. Kinzembo was at the market when he appeared. On seeing Comber, all the Blacks fled, except Kinzembo. The Baptist pastor walked up to her and asked why all the others had fled since he had only come to preach the gospel and meant no harm to the Africans. Comber told her, “You did not run away, so God shall bless you.”

Rev. Comber returned to Europe and was replaced by Pastor Ronald Cameron. The latter was probably informed by his predecessor, and he contacted Kinzembo. During their first meeting, he tried to take Kimbangu away with him to give him religious instruction, but since the boy was only seven, he could not be left with the missionaries. Still, Kinzembo developed a friendly relationship with Cameron, who gave her as tokens of his friendship a necklace for herself and a knife to be given to Kimbangu when he grew up. The most outstanding event in their friendship was the following: one day, while Pastor Cameron was being chased and running away from villagers who were threatening to kill him, he found refuge and a hiding place in Kinzembo’s house. Later, Cameron made a prayer, asking God to bless Kinzembo and the child Kimbangu. Below, I explain how the influence of Kinzembo has shaped to this day the Kimbanguist perception of Whites, but for now, I simply note that Kinzembo seems to have been one of the Congolese natives who were favorable to the implantation of Christian missions in the region of Nkamba.
It seems clear that these events, particularly the episode when he saw his aunt hiding the fugitive pastor, affected Simon Kimbangu’s relation to Whites. This influence may explain why his movement, though protesting the colonial order, did not reject or condemn all Whites. Indeed, his daily prayer, as transcribed by his son Diangienda, exemplified his nonviolent stance and racial and gender inclusiveness: “I give Thee thanks, O God Almighty, who created the heaven and the earth. Heaven is Thy throne, and the earth is Thy footstool. Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. May Thou bless all races on the earth—mighty ones and little ones, women and men, Whites and Blacks. May the blessings from above pour on the whole world, so that we may all enter Heaven. We ask all this in hopes of obtaining it in the name of Jesus Christ, our savior. Amen.”

Regardless of the persecutions and punishments, the movement initiated by Simon Kimbangu evolved into a church that developed outside of White control, but with a certain form of inclusiveness of Whites. Indeed, he did not call for a rejection of Whites, but he recommended in a proph-ecy that his followers never lose sight of Jesus’s final promise that they would one day welcome people from all colors and nations. Of course, Kimbangu’s preaching life did not last long enough to offer a complete revisiting of the Bible, or the White image in his mind. But his church, once established, built its own interpretation of scriptures, which helps us gain a better understanding of Kimbanguist beliefs and representations in space and time.

Kimbangu’s prophetic activities rapidly took on new meanings and new directions. There were three groups that reacted to him: first, other Black people; second, the European missionaries and religious authorities; and finally, the Belgian colonial authorities. In the eyes of his compatriots, Kimbangu was a man who awakened moral consciences. His experience, which was first and foremost a personal one, aroused the faith of his people; they listened to him, renounced witchcraft, and discarded their fetishes. Although Father Van Wing opposed the movement, he acknowledged its success: “When Simon Kimbangu, who was recognized as the savior of his people, imposed the destruction of the nkisi, he was obeyed not only by his conscious followers, but by entire populations who had no direct contact with him or his group.” This triggered an actual social movement in the Belgian Congo, which had a big impact on the social lives of the Black people there. The Belgian lawyer Jules Chomé observed that “had the administration or the missions wanted to impose [these reforms], they would have met with a lot of resistance. But Simon Kimbangu was
obeyed by his followers. In the villages he conquered, the wives of polygamous husbands—save one—were all sent back to their families. The feast drums—absolutely necessary for the forbidden feasts—were destroyed."\(^{20}\)

At a more political level, Kimbangu’s teaching made the Congolese aware of the real problems and rekindled their dissatisfaction with their social situation, including oppression, dire poverty, and a lack of inventions by Black people in the White-dominated field of science. Kimbangu was regarded as a liberator whose mission was to bring peace, prosperity, and happiness, but also a new science that would be more powerful than that of the colonizers.

Kimbangu’s activities, being both political and religious, did cause a reaction from colonial authorities and religious leaders. The reaction from religious authorities was twofold. Simon Kimbangu’s work was initially received favorably by the Protestants from the Baptist mission of Ngombe Lutete, because he had been trained by them. At first, Father Chery (first name unknown) and Pastor Peter Frederickson raised their voices to suggest that Kimbangu’s ministry could indeed be God-given. The director of the regional mission, after seeing for himself the work of the Black prophet, made this remark: “It is the first time I have seen such plain evidence of the presence of Christ in Congo; but the sheep must not lead their shepherd. It is possible that you hold this power from God, but all the merit must go to our deacons.”\(^{21}\)

But this positive reaction from the Protestants was short-lived, for Kimbangu, as a native, was not entitled to such freedom of speech and action. Pastor Robert Lanyon Jennings was one of the Protestants most opposed to Kimbangu, and as such, he holds a prominent place in the Kimbanguist narrative. Not only did he deny Kimbangu’s miracles, but he challenged him at a foundational moment for the nascent church. Having noticed that the choir surrounding Kimbangu exclusively sang Baptist hymns, Jennings went to Kimbangu to ask, “How is it that Jesus, who gave you the power to resurrect dead people, has so deprived you of hymns that you must resort to ours?”\(^{22}\) In response, Kimbangu left the crowd for a short moment and discreetly prayed. A little while later, he came back and taught the choir an entirely new song; it was the first Kimbanguist hymn. Since then, Kimbanguists have had a body of hymns exclusively their own, which are discussed in depth in chapter 4.

According to the Catholic Van Wing, both an observer and a participant, Kimbangu’s prophetic activities were received rather positively by Protestant missionaries, who considered him to be an envoy from above and a
fruit of their missionary work. In 1958, Van Wing noted, “To [Protestant missionaries] Kibangu [sic] was an inspired man who kindled and pointedly exalted their followers’ faith in Protestant-style revivals.” The initial passivity of the colonial administration allowed Van Wing to take initiative according to his faith. By June 1921, he had set up a counterpropaganda scheme, which consisted in making Catholic natives understand that adhering to Kimbangu’s doctrine meant renouncing the Catholic faith and therefore committing the sin of apostasy.

The Belgian authorities were the last to react, prompted by traders and news agencies that persuaded administrator Morel—who was in charge of the region of Nkamba—that the movement was dangerous. The Kimbanguist narrative written by Diangienda, the prophet’s son and successor, relates that Morel went to Nkamba with his staff to see for himself what was going on. He selected five sick people, including two paralytics, who were brought to Simon Kimbangu. The prophet healed them without even touching them. The paralyzed people rose and walked away, leaving their crutches behind them. Morel, his soldiers, and his interpreter watched in utter dismay. In his report of May 17, 1921, Morel commented on the “religious fanaticism” and “blind faith” that he saw, comparing the “mass spirituality” he witnessed in Nkamba to that of Lourdes, but complained that it was “marred with fetishism” due to the more “primitive character of the natives.” He concluded that Kimbangu’s “goal is to create a religion that fits the natives’ mind-set. . . . Everybody can see that our European religions, fraught with abstract notions, do not answer the needs of the African, who demands protection and solid facts.”

But as the zeal of Kimbangu’s followers impelled them to leave the hospitals, the railways, construction sites in Matadi, and other workplaces, the colonial authorities felt compelled to take action. Catholic missionaries were not the only ones bringing their complaints to the administration: clerks and factory laborers were deserting their work, and boys serving in European homes were leaving the linen unwashed and sneaking away to go to Kimbangu’s meetings. Jules Chomé ironically concluded, “As a result, from the officials of Trade and Industry in Matadi and Thysville to the European ladies who suddenly had to do the cooking themselves, everyone agreed with the missionaries that it was time to put an end to a movement which caused such trouble.” In June 1921, with permission from his superiors and the help of troops, Morel made a first attempt to arrest Simon Kimbangu, but he failed. Kimbangu had managed to escape. This failed arrest is still commemorated today by the Kimbanguists, who
understand it as God’s refusal to hand Kimbangu over at the onset of his mission. The narrative of Kimbangu’s eventual arrest insists that he turned himself in to the Belgian authorities on the day he had chosen—September 12, 1921, after five months of preaching and healing—and called on his followers to remain nonviolent, saying, “It is now time for me to turn myself in to the authorities; let impatient men prone to anger be gone.”

Simon Kimbangu was charged with, among other things, troublemaking and advertising false miracles. He first appeared before the War Council in Thysville on Thursday, September 29, 1921, and the trial continued into October. Commander De Rossi was the presiding judge.

De Rossi. Kimbangu, do you confess to having organized an uprising against the colonial government and having dubbed the Whites, your benefactors, as abominable enemies?

Kimbangu. I have not started any uprising, neither against the Whites nor against the Belgian colonial government. I have restricted myself to preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

De Rossi. Why have you encouraged the people to leave work and no longer pay taxes?

Kimbangu. This is untrue. The people who came to Nkamba came of their own free will, either to hear the Word of God, or to seek healing or get a benediction. Never have I asked the people to stop paying taxes.

De Rossi. Are you the mvuluzi [“savior” in Kikongo]?

Kimbangu. No, Jesus Christ is the Savior. I have received from him the mission of proclaiming the news of eternal salvation to my people.

De Rossi. Have you resurrected the dead?

Kimbangu. Yes.
De Rossi. How did you do [that]?

Kimbangu. By the divine power Jesus gave me.

De Rossi. During the incidents of June 6 in Nkamba, the crowd you had frenzied injured two soldiers. Why did you flee?

Kimbangu. The soldiers of the Administrator [Morel] had manhandled me, and this had exasperated those who were on the spot. The soldiers started firing and pillaged the village. I do not know who injured the two soldiers, because of the chaos this had caused. I fled because I had to, since I had to pursue my mission to its end as Christ had ordered me to.

De Rossi. You are denying that you encouraged the people to rebel against authority. But the printed songs sung by the people you have turned into fanatics, copies of which have been seized in Nkamba, call the people to arms. What is your response?

Kimbangu. There is no song calling people to rebel against the government. The [Baptist] church also has hymns in which Christians are called “Christian soldiers,” but the government did not put under arrest the Whites who teach us these hymns.

De Rossi. Where were you hiding during the period from June 6, 1921, until the day you were arrested?

Kimbangu. I kept doing God’s work in several villages.

De Rossi. You were aware that the authorities were actively searching for you, so why didn’t you give yourself up then?

Kimbangu. I had to keep pursuing the work of Jesus Christ in several places, but I myself decided to give myself up to the White man who arrested me [Snoeck] when the time had come.

De Rossi. Do you have any consciousness of the danger of epidemics you exposed the people to by having corpses brought to you in Nkamba?

Kimbangu. There was not a single case of an epidemic, and I did bring back to life a great number of deceased persons by the power of Jesus Christ. I have not requested that the people bring me corpses, but I could not turn away those who came to me everywhere I went.

De Rossi. The massive desertions of workplaces and encouragements to strike—were these not part of your strategy to disrupt law and order and eventually topple the government?
Kimbangu. I did not order the people to leave work, nor did I call to strike.

De Rossi. People heard you say that ‘the Whites shall become the Blacks and the Blacks shall become the Whites.’ Isn’t this proof of your intention of driving all Whites away from the colony?

Kimbangu. This sentence is not meant to be understood in a literal sense.

De Rossi. What does it mean, then?

Kimbangu. God will reveal its meaning later, when the time has come.

De Rossi. According to my information, during the time you spent at the oil works of the Belgian Congo, you were in contact with Black American subversive groups, including [Marcus] Garvey. What is your response to this?

Kimbangu. This is untrue.

De Rossi. We know that the contributions you collected yielded a great amount of money. What is the destination of those funds, if they are not meant to be spent on weapons you intend to use to topple the government and drive all Whites away from the Congo?

Kimbangu. I have not organized any contributions. I have not accepted any payment from the people I have healed or resurrected. Funds were collected on a voluntary basis by some people with a view to meeting the needs of the masses of people who arrived in Nkamba every day, including the purchasing of food for these people. Christ’s teachings condemn violence. I do not condone violence.

When Simon Kimbangu was arrested, the time of persecution began; many of his followers were also arrested, and 37,000 families, that is, 150,000 people, were deported. The trial ended with very harsh sentences: because of his statement that “the White man shall become black and the Black man shall become white,” Kimbangu received the death penalty; his disciples received long jail terms. But not everyone agreed about the fairness of the trial of Kimbangu and his companions. While Father Van Wing—who attended the proceedings—described it as a “trial where his cause was inquired into with all due process of law,”30 the Belgian lawyer Chomé was disgusted with what he deemed to be a hasty trial (it lasted eighteen days), with no official or unofficial lawyers or other defenders for the accused.31
Kimbangu was sent to Elisabethville (now Lubumbashi), where he remained in jail for thirty years, until he died. However, the growth of his movement was not stymied. As Balandier explained, the leader’s imprisonment made him the icon of opposition to colonial authority: “Removed from direct contact with his followers, there was nothing to hinder the process of idealization, and his example served to encourage intense devotion.” As in other decolonization and civil rights struggles, the authorities unwittingly turned the rebel into a martyr.

What must be noted concerning this early phase of development is that Kimbangu seemed to be physically present in several places, even while being in jail in Elisabethville. The Kimbanguist narrative contends that the prisoner Kimbangu actually enjoyed great freedom of action thanks to his gift of ubiquity. Diangienda testified that in October 1921, his jailed father miraculously came to cure Marie Muilu (Kimbangu’s wife and Diangienda’s mother), who was suffering from a very high fever due to a huge boil. A White physician had allegedly refused to give her any treatment and scoffed, “Simon Kimbangu’s own wife can’t be healed by the prophet!” As soon as the doctor had left, Muilu started praying, and Kimbangu appeared. He touched the boil with his hand, and his wife’s armpit went back to normal. The boil instantly disappeared, and the fever dropped. The doctor was subsequently informed; on seeing the mysterious disappearance of Muilu’s boil, he is said to have wondered aloud, “Can we possibly be mistaken about Kimbangu?” In addition to this episode narrated by Diangienda, there are many others evoking Kimbangu’s gift of ubiquity and reinforcing his spiritual dimension.

Another well-known and often-preached story among Kimbanguists is that Kimbangu, while in jail, was simultaneously arrested in several different places. For example, on April 24, 1942, Kimbangu, while imprisoned in Lubumbashi, was arrested and jailed in Boma. He left the latter place on the following morning by breaking open the metal door, leaving behind three men’s shirts. These were given to the Kimbanguist Church forty years later, in 1982, by the Zairian government, which handed them over to the spiritual leader Diangienda.

Nowadays, still, Kimbangu is said to make appearances. One of the most recent was reported by a seventeen-year-old Roman Catholic Congolese man, Abali Matuni (aka Mbuta), who testified on the Kimbanguist TV show Émission ya bazoba (The Idiots’ Show) broadcast in April 2009. Mbuta began seeing Kimbangu when he was but three months old, his mother said on the show. She explained that she had found him more than
once covered with blood and had it analyzed. As the lab analyses gave no insights, she had to wait for the boy to be old enough to describe what he was seeing, and his descriptions helped her identify Kimbangu.34 Such apparitions have been understood as being intrinsically part of Simon Kimbangu’s prophetic activities, and as such, they inevitably triggered reactions among both the Congolese people and colonial authorities. Studying the teachings of Simon Kimbangu’s successors sheds new light on this point, as I discuss below.

Kimbangu did not live to see his movement officially recognized: he died in October 1951 after thirty years in jail. Yet his passing itself was controversial, for Father Van Wing, who visited him in jail shortly before his death, claimed that Kimbangu repented and eventually asked for a Roman Catholic baptism.35 Whether or not this testimony is trustworthy, the very contention of Kimbangu’s conversion to Catholicism bears witness to his persistent influence as a public person, even if only as a troublemaker in the competition between missionaries. Van Wing’s insistence on having the last word is also somewhat pathetic, as Chomé expressed: “And even if, impossible though it may seem, the . . . hypothesis were confirmed, how much would weigh such a renouncing, wrung out of an old man broken down by thirty years in jail?”36

Deportations and banishments (or “relegations,” as they were called by Belgian colonial authorities) increased dramatically after Kimbangu’s arrest. Still, the movement kept expanding underground from 1921, under the aegis of Marie Muilu, until 1959, when Kimbanguism became an African independent church, officially recognized by the Belgian government and admitted into the fold of the World Council of Churches.

In spite of his imprisonment, then, Kimbangu’s movement rapidly gained momentum. This is because his discourse was that of a nationalist, but also a Black man aware of the differences and the gap between Blacks and Whites in terms of progress. His message suited the expectations of his compatriots, reassuring them that at the time chosen by the Lord, “the White man will become black and the Black man will become white,” the prophecy that cost him lifelong imprisonment and that has been interpreted by Diangienda as announcing the coming of independence for African nations.37 Awareness of the colonial situation thus aroused a nationalist and anticolonial sentiment among the people from the Belgian Congo, the French Congo, and Angola. Many an observer, including Balandier and a man identified only as Jaffré, saw in Kimbangu’s movement the first expression of twentieth-century Congolese nationalism, framed in terms of both
race and nation. Balandier asserted, “There can be no question but that this new religious movement was the starting point of a ‘national’ awareness, of a conscious striving to transcend the restricted limits of the clan or tribe.” Jaffré’s analysis betrayed more anxiety about the racial tension he believed was underlying this new nationalist consciousness in the French Congo: “The idea that blacks and whites are opposed and that Africa should belong
to the Africans has taken root so deeply in the natives’ souls that it seems to be here to stay forever.”

Simon Kimbangu’s prophetic and political activities effectively triggered national awareness among the Congolese and served as a blueprint for many movements, which took him as a reference point. Among the best known are Mpadism (the Blacks’ Mission), led by Simon Mpadi in the Belgian Congo; Matsouanism, led by André Grenard Matsoua in Congo-Brazzaville; and Tokoism, led by Simão Toko in Angola. These three groups still exist, and each claims to have stemmed from Kimbangu’s mission. Mpadi considers himself, and is considered by his followers, to be Kimbangu’s legitimate successor, while André Matsoua—although his organization, Amicalism, was a political rather than a religious movement—was given by his followers a place in the Holy Trinity along with Simon Kimbangu and God the Father. Toko is viewed by the members of his church as the incarnation of Jesus Christ, while Kimbangu is identified by them as a sort of John the Baptist, who only came to prophesy Toko’s advent.

Simon Kimbangu’s prophetic vision was pursued covertly thanks to the leadership of his wife, Marie Muilu, until, like William Wadé Harris’s movement, it gave birth to an officially recognized African independent church. Unity (kintwadi in Kikongo) among Kimbanguists was built on the experience of colonization; Kimbanguists adopted the term, and Kintwadi is used as another name for the church itself. During the early years of the church, its members were persecuted, mistreated, arrested, and often deported. Among the strategies they adopted, kintwadi was particularly significant. In 1957, acting on the firm belief that “united we stand,” a number of Kimbanguists signed a petition addressed to the Belgian Crown, in which they challenged the colonial authorities by declaring they would all gather in the Baudouin Stadium in Léopoldville (Kinshasa) to become martyrs there. Diangienda Kuntima stated that a Kimbanguist delegation of about six hundred signatories took it to the governor-general. This strategy is clearly reminiscent of Gandhi’s nonviolent resistance to British colonial rule in 1940s India and of Martin Luther King Jr.’s civil rights movement in the United States in the 1950s. But Kimbanguists only attribute it to their leader, Simon Kimbangu, who opted for nonviolence as early as 1921 in his protest against the Belgian colonial rule; in spite of his fervent following, he never called for civil disobedience. The outcome of the demonstration at the Baudouin Stadium was not long in coming: the governor decreed the end of the persecutions the same year. First, the church was tolerated, and then, two years later, in 1959, it was granted official recognition.
The doctrines of the fledgling church were rooted both in the scriptures and in the teachings of Simon Kimbangu, while his three sons became his successors and the heirs of the sacred staff known as mvuala. In 1963, the catechism of the Kimbanguist Church was articulated by the founder’s youngest son, who was the church’s first spiritual leader. But at this juncture, the key problem of the relation between Africans and the written word resurfaced. Indeed, although stemming from oral tradition, the Kimbanguist religion has to conform to the expectations of the modern era and hence refers to written texts, founding principles, and a catechism. Yet the way in which the Kimbanguist faith is experienced in daily life displays a very different reality from what may be inferred from the reading of this catechism. Some crucial theological issues, such as the role of Simon Kimbangu in the Kimbanguist faith, Christology, and the Holy Trinity, are only addressed in the oral tradition, particularly in the three sources of Kimbanguist theology (see chapter 4). This split between written texts and the oral tradition gives the Kimbanguist Church its dual face.