PART II

KIMBANGUISM AND THE BIBLE
The post–Simon Kimbangu brand of Kimbanguism bases its doctrines on three theological sources: the Bible; the prophetic speeches of its spiritual leader, Diangienda (the founder’s youngest son); and the church’s inspired hymns. In this chapter I discuss each of these sources in an effort to identify the elements that may be traced to Congolese spiritual traditions and those pertaining to Christian theology as appropriated by the Kimbanguist Church.

The conflicts that historically pitted Protestants and Catholics against one another in Europe were also present in the process of the Christianization of Africans. Among the theological principles elaborated by Martin Luther, the Bible was redefined as the sole authority in matters of faith, so that its propagation entailed the free interpretation of the scriptures by believers. This principle, which antagonized Catholics in Europe, irritated them even more when applied to Africans, as is shown by the reaction of Father Alexandre Brou, who was scandalized to witness in Protestant congregations in the late nineteenth century an emerging African propheticism resulting from an exaltation of individual judgment, which he found unrestrained. Since the converts could access the Bible freely to interpret it under the Holy Spirit’s guidance, “the books of the Prophets, the Revelations, and even the Gospels become guides for anarchy. Worse, the corrupt form of Christianity which has been preached to them, devoid of any sacramental life, is finally powerless to destroy the seeds of paganism which all blacks carry, as it were, in their blood.”¹
Biased as it is, this analysis nevertheless raises the question of the level of understanding of the Bible by the Congolese people to whom it was preached. Father Brou saw the Protestant dogma of the free interpretation of the scriptures as a source of heresy. Kimbanguism is entirely in keeping with this Protestant tradition, all the more so because the Bible was placed quite early in the hands of Congolese converts. Father Van Wing stated that the Kongo people were Christianized from 1881 to 1921 exclusively by Protestant missions belonging to the “evangelical” category, which recognizes no final magisterium in matters of doctrine, for the Bible is the ultimate authority, which every believer interprets by the light received directly from the Holy Spirit. Such was the basis for the training of the pastors and catechists, who were sent by these missions into the villages to spread the gospel and preside over the worship services there.

In keeping with this Protestant tradition, in which Kimbangu was educated, the Bible is freely interpreted by believers and studied more or less in depth. Van Wing, noting that Kimbangu “constantly had a copy [of the Bible] in his hand,” asked rhetorical questions about Protestant missionaries’ reactions to Kimbangu’s preaching: “From what moral standpoint could they have blamed him for explaining the Word of God in his own way, since for them, personal interpretation is the only rule and basis of a person’s faith?” Likewise, Father Brou pointed out that Kimbangu distributed Bibles.

Significantly, Kimbangu recommended the daily reading of the Bible shortly before he was arrested: “The Spirit has revealed to me that the time has come now for me to surrender myself to the authorities. I will leave you nothing but the Bible. Read it at all times and in all places, and put God’s Commandments into practice unfailingly.” A legend about Kimbangu’s childhood mentions an undefined being, neither Black nor White, who appeared to him with a Bible in his hand and said, “This is a good book. You must read it and proclaim its contents.” This episode suggests that Kimbangu received the Bible not from White missionaries, but directly from a supernatural being removed from any situation of racial oppression. Consequently, in the Kimbanguist Church, the Bible is the essential holy book. Kimbanguists refer to it as mokanda ya bomoyi, a Lingala phrase that means “the book of life.” They recognize it as the product of divine revelation and as the definitive source of fundamental truths from the beginning to the end of time. The Bible is also the inspiration behind the church’s liturgy—for the blessing of infants, baptisms, weddings, and the Holy Supper. It is perceived as a sacred text, the expression of God’s word, and as the
history of God’s relation with the children of Israel, on the one hand, and with Black people, on the other.

Yet it may be observed that in the Kimbanguist religion, the Bible has been voided of its Middle Eastern and Western content and adjusted to the believers’ identity reconstruction process. As Balandier explained, “resorting to the Bible allows utopian constructions and the belief in the salvation of the Black race under the guidance of prophets who are also the founders of the churches.” Educated pastors and church members, however, see it as an imported text; in an exhortation, the spiritual leader Diangienda said: “We aren’t the ones who wrote the Bible. It was in response to Jesus’ recommendation ‘Go and turn all the pagan nations into Christian ones’ that Westerners came and brought us the Bible. But now, let us no longer perceive it as something imported, but embrace it as something which belongs to us.” It is clear that while he was aware of the significance of the Bible, that is not necessarily the case for a majority of his followers.

Kimbanguists do not simply consider the Bible to be a source of sermons. It involves them in a critical process of ethnic self-identification by redeeming them from the never-ending present in which Africans have been trapped by those who believe them to be outside of history. Instead, Kimbanguists carve a place for themselves in all the time periods and spaces of the Bible, from the garden of Eden to the desert of Sodom and Gomorrah to Mount Sinai. The Kimbanguist psyche is thus shaped within the spatial-temporal framework of the Bible insofar as biblical stories are perceived as actual rather than mythical. Kimbanguists are metaphorically immersed in the Bible, which ensures the continuity of their present and affects the interpretation of their future. This also leads Kimbanguist believers to consciously or unconsciously distort the history of Israel.

Since the Bible is the book where a single origin is given to humankind and since readers are encouraged to decipher signs and symbols, Kimbanguists feel called to give meaning to the words of the text and, in so doing, justify their social or religious activities and buttress their sense of ethnicity. Maurice Dorès pointed out that “Africans reading the Bible recognize in it a familiar world where each past generation is entitled to being named at length,” and Kimbanguists find in the Bible a space for dialogue, conducive to an exchange or a discussion whose subject is within reach of all believers, encouraging them to individually examine and interpret the word. This opens up a space for participation, which shapes the relation between preacher and audience as well as conferences and moral lectures. MacGaffey noted that the basic tenets of Kimbanguism are often taken for
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granted: “Kimbanguists appear to have no idea that any other interpretation of the Bible is possible than the one they put upon it.”

For Kimbanguists, the Bible offers a comparative opportunity, linking past events with present-day facts and informing their faith. It is used as a reference book or dictionary, which gives the interpretation and justification of particular beliefs or practices of the Kimbanguist Church. For instance, Exodus is read as a harbinger of Simon Kimbangu’s liberating the Congolese from the Belgian colonial yoke, while the episode of David and Goliath is noted by several authors as having been Kimbangu’s favorite biblical passage, for his community saw him as David and the colonial authorities as Goliath. In this way, the Bible as perceived by the Kimbanguists provides Black people with a history and a collective memory, and gives believers the ideological wherewithal for the reconstruction of their identity. Their individual and collective existences take place in the space and time of the Bible, as if Kimbanguism were part and parcel of biblical episodes as they happened in the past and—in believers’ eyes—as they continue happening.

Contrary to the colonizers’ opinion that Africans are inherently heathen, Kimbanguist believers do not acknowledge their background as pagan. They do not identify the God of the Bible as being solely the God of Israel, but their own as well—the one they have always called Nzambi a Mpungu (God Almighty). He is not simply the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob but is the God of Simon Kimbangu’s three sons. Hence, the mission of the chosen people becomes Kimbanguists’ own, and reading the Bible helps them connect biblical passages to the events informing Kimbanguist religious life and activities; believers use the scriptures while situating the teachings in their own cultural context and history.

The way Kimbanguists read the biblical message helps them construct their own racial identity, in keeping with the doctrine of Blackness as an affirmation of the self against White domination. They do not understand the Bible as a text from the past, but see it also from the present and the future. The historical and geographical landmarks of the Bible are symbolically erased, removing it from its Middle Eastern locales and temporalities and injecting its message into Kimbanguists’ history and daily life. It is assumed that the Bible always has something to tell them, or it has something that they should tell others. For instance, 1992 was a year of grief for all Kimbanguists: in the span of four months, they lost two of the sons of Simon Kimbangu. First, Kisolokele, the eldest, who had acted as the first deputy of the spiritual leader, passed away on March 17, and
then Diangienda, the youngest and the main spiritual leader, died on July 8. These deaths were interpreted through the lens of the passages from the book of Revelation (11:3–4 and 7–10) that mention two “witnesses” whose corpses lay exposed for three days and a half while the crowds rejoiced.

In 1990, before these actual deaths, a rumor had spread around Kinshasa announcing the death of Diangienda; the news had caused much rejoicing among the inhabitants of the capital. It is difficult to document the social climate of the times, since the civil war and pillaging destroyed many archives. Yet a press conference given by Diangienda in 1990 gives insight into the context. A Zairian journalist asked, “Eminence—for us Africans, death is synonymous with sadness and mourning. Why have people celebrated and danced on hearing you had passed away?” This question reveals the atmosphere of the times. When Diangienda actually died two years later, the people of Kinshasa celebrated again. One of Diangienda’s nephews later described it in the following terms: “I met a crowd of excited people, dancing, drinking, and yelling, ‘We did it!’ I asked a young man what was going on, and he told me, ‘Elder brother, rejoice! We are relieved, this man has died.’ . . . He was talking about Papa Diangienda. This is how I learned of my father’s death.”

The church’s press service covered the two spiritual leaders’ funerals; the film indeed shows the inhabitants of Kinshasa rejoicing, verbally abusing Diangienda’s memory, and throwing stones at his funeral procession. For some Kimbanguists, this was the fulfillment of the biblical prophecy. I heard sermons that stressed the passage from Revelation mentioned above. Indeed, the dead bodies of Kisolokele and Diangienda were actually exposed to the public in Kinshasa for three and a half days each before their burials in Nkamba. Were the funerals shaped by the biblical passage so that they would coincide with the prophecy? Undeniably, Revelation is often read through the prism of Kimbanguist reality. For example, one informant said that Dialungana, the last surviving son of Kimbangu and the successor of his dead brothers, had verse 14 of the same passage read aloud shortly after he took over leadership of the church: “The second woe is past; and, behold, the third woe cometh quickly.” This “third woe” occurred nine years after the first two, in August 2001, when Dialungana’s death ended the era of the three sons of Kimbangu and ushered in that of the twenty-six grandchildren.

Because two of the grandchildren were absent on the day of Dialungana’s funeral, there were twenty-four of them gathered to designate the next spiritual leader of the church. Simon Kimbangu Kiangani, Dialungana’s eldest
son, was chosen while the other grandchildren proclaimed themselves deputy spiritual leaders. In the believers’ theological analysis, this event was blended with that of Revelation 4:4: “And round about the throne were four and twenty seats; and upon the seats I saw four and twenty elders sitting.”

Below, I show how, through the Bible, the Kimbanguist Church searches its own memory—mythical though it may be—and finds the elements needed for its identity reconstruction. The Kimbanguist method of interpretation of the Bible was defined by Diangienda, whose preaching constitutes one of the sources—if not the essential source—of Kimbanguist theology.

In the Kimbanguist faith, scriptures must be supplemented by the spiritual messages delivered by Kimbangu’s three sons, particularly Diangienda, who was the supreme authority while he was alive. As Marie-Louise Martin explained, “Kimbangu’s sons have the highest rank in the hierarchy of the church, and all important decisions must be approved by them. The three are united and have been called princes héritiers (hereditary princes), or in Kikongo zimvwala, i.e., bearers of the prophetic and royal staff or scepter. The term can mean that prophetic and royal functions are theirs within the church. The highest position is accorded to Joseph Diangienda.”

Likewise, the French Africanist Jean-Claude Froelich observed: “Joseph Diangienda alone is responsible for the movement’s shift from an initially highly revolutionary and anti-white organization to a clearly and deeply religious one. He kept the basis of Baptist teachings and mingled them with his father’s revelations: it is thus a highly Africanized Protestant church, but with a modernist and even Western streak.”

Born on March 22, 1918, Diangienda was relegated after his father’s arrest in 1921 to the Catholic colony of Boma with his elder brother, Kisolokele (then seven years old), to be reeducated in the Catholic faith. There, he was baptized in the Catholic Church and became an altar boy. In 1937, he was hired as a civil servant in the office of the governor of the province of Kasai. Diangienda resigned in 1957 to help his mother, Marie Muilu, continue Kimbangu’s work. He succeeded her as the leader of the movement upon her death on April 27, 1959.

It is considered blasphemous in the Kimbanguist Church to speak of Kimbangu’s three sons as separate entities, for they are believed to represent the Holy Trinity. Yet Diangienda was undeniably the most charismatic and the dearest to the hearts of the church members. The three are collectively designated as “the papas,” though each has a specific title—Papa Kulutu (“elder father”) for Kisolokele; Papa Mfumu a Mbanza (“the father at the head of the city of Nkamba”) for Dialungana; and Papa Mfumu a Longo
(“the father who is the spiritual leader”) for Diangienda. People also use just “Papa” to refer to Diangienda,16 who called Simon Kimbangu “Papa.”

Since Diangienda was the custodian of the Kimbanguist faith and community order, his words delineate the symbolic boundaries whose maintenance and reproduction imply the power to forbid and curse, but also elucidate the master-disciple, teacher-student, and deity-believer relations. His preaching is not only listened to but also interpreted and analyzed through the prism of the congregants’ expectations and beliefs. This exchange may, depending on the circumstances, take place as a unilateral or dialogical transmission of knowledge within the space of a participative ritual or in a face-to-face meeting, but nonverbal communication is also taken into account because charisma is everywhere present in this movement of total interaction.

Fully aware of his own image in the eyes of the community, Diangienda tried to include himself in the Kimbanguist “we” in spite of his special status as Kimbangu’s son and his own spiritual power, including the miracles he worked. Indeed, it is not uncommon to hear people say, “Papa told me,” “I saw Papa making this miracle,” “I heard people say that Papa had done or said this in this place,” “I dreamed that Papa told me,” “I had a vision in which Papa showed me,” and so on. While the relation between scripture and tradition is considered to be one of the major points separating Catholics and Protestants—the former ranking scripture second to the tradition of the fathers of the church, while the latter consider scripture second to none—the Kimbanguist Church, although seen as a branch of Protestantism, subordinates scripture to the tradition embodied by the preaching of Diangienda. One often sees biblical passages attributed to him in the following way: “in chapter x, line y, Papa says.”

Although Kimbanguists hold the Bible to be sacred, it may be criticized; inspired hymns—the third source of Kimbanguist theology—may be doubted or even rejected; but Papa is deemed infallible by everyone in the Kimbanguist Church. Anyone who dares criticize him or doubt his words, or his brothers’, runs the risk of being labeled an anti-Kimbanguist sorcerer. Even the notion of a “third testament” is not ruled out. When asked whether the Kimbanguist Church was in the process of writing another testament, the pastor Lulendo Lua Nzambi, the national secretary of the church in Congo-Brazzaville, answered: “That’s exactly it. It is the third testament, that of the Holy Spirit, which doesn’t exist yet, whose entire story is still unknown to us and which is still being written, just as the testament of the Son was long combated and was only accepted after Jesus had to die for it.”17
Diangienda’s prophetic preaching still is the most important source of Kimbanguist theology. This vast body of oral sermons is considered to be a sacred legacy and is integrated with the interpretation of both the Bible and the inspired hymns, so that it has become the recognizable voice and collective memory of the community. These sermons, delivered in French, Kikongo, Kituba, or, most frequently, Lingala and taped during services help to reveal the past, interpret the present, and announce the future. Diangienda never relied on any written text, except when quoting from the Bible, and he spoke as a prophet. He would often stare at the sky as if deciphering messages, which led the audience to listen in awe and rapt silence. His joy would trigger the audience’s exultation, his laughter their own, his weeping theirs, and his anger the atonement of congregants, who often threw themselves at his feet, flat on their bellies. His preaching, which addressed both visible and invisible dimensions, reflected an identity that was itself a mystery to his community. His main source of inspiration was the Bible, but jointly, with an invisible person—his own father, Kimbangu—mirroring the way Jesus spoke of the Holy Spirit in John 16:13–14: “when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come. He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall shew it unto you.”

Hence, when Diangienda said, “Papa told me,” “I’ll ask permission from my father,” or “Papa showed me,” people inevitably inferred he was still in contact with his father, even after Kimbangu had been dead for several decades. In one prayer addressed to his father, Diangienda spoke the following words: “Concerning our country, you showed me something tonight which puzzled me. I don’t know what its meaning can be. Regarding the sovereign national conference [which was held in the DRC], you showed me the numbers 3, 5, and 15, and I was puzzled. I can’t see what they mean. So I beg you to reveal it to us—not just to me, but to all of your children here, you need to show them what lies behind these numbers 3, 5, and 15, for we are nothing but blind people.” As in this example, Diangienda’s preaching often tended to emphasize his mystical relation to his father. He proved capable of revealing the hidden meanings of facts, so that his words brought to light the essence of things and persons while deliberately concealing what did not need disclosure. In such cases, he usually resorted to enigmatic language: “These are secret things,” “It is not time yet for me to reveal these things to you,” “The son of man is instructed by means of parables,” or “Today I won’t speak, just follow my gestures.”

Several narratives also allude to extraterrestrial interventions by supernatural beings—identified as the soldiers of apocalypse, mentioned in the
book of Revelation, chapters 9 and 19. Kimbanguists believe them to have black faces and a small size, and they serve as Diangienda’s army. When the Kimbanguist theologian and DRC army colonel Rev. Adama Iyefa asked Diangienda about the “myth” of “little soldiers,” the spiritual leader gave him a late-night appointment at his house in the church’s welcome center in Kinshasa, at an hour when he was certain everyone else was asleep. Diangienda instructed Iyefa to kneel in prayer, and when they were finished a “little soldier” appeared. Iyefa testified, “While I was on my knees, the soldat ya mokusse was not as high as my shoulder, and his eyes were throwing flames and his body radiated cold like a cold room. When I shook hands with him after His Eminence, at the moment our hands came in contact, I felt something like the mass of electric power.”

Another eyewitness to such an encounter was one of Diangienda’s sons, Martorel, who spoke to me about it in an interview. In his teenage years, he often napped alongside his father. One day, he opened his eyes and saw a little man in a soldier’s uniform, who was barely taller than the bed. “I grabbed my father, saying, ‘Papa, wake up, I saw a little man,’ but he simply laughed it off and told me, ‘No worries, he’s on a mission.’”

Both of these testimonies tend to corroborate the beliefs of most Kimbanguists, some of whom contend that these soldiers of Armageddon are serving Kimbangu and Diangienda. This further enhances the supernatural aura of Diangienda, who also claimed to have the power to perceive and disrupt occult gatherings that simple mortals cannot see with the eyes of the flesh. Diangienda described in a sermon what happened in such “markets” and “restaurants”:

Papa told me, “Look at the big ‘restaurants’ they have opened; they have no way to do that . . . where you are, so they came here to hide their restaurant.” . . . Well, one of our pastors was participating in this market. I didn’t want to denounce him, but it made me ashamed, for these men said, “But this man is with you!” I saw people morphing into lions, tigers, panthers, leopards, and all sorts of dangerous animals. . . . I was moved to pity, so I went and rescued the pastor and asked him, “Why are you here?” He answered, “Because I have a debt to pay off. . . . I know you don’t like people doing this kind of thing.” . . . I don’t know what happened after I left, for Papa threw gas on them and burned them to the ground, and the place became a pond. On the following morning, I saw the same pastor, who had become sick. I called him and he was terrified, for he thought I was going to denounce him. . . . But no, God is merciful.
The representations of witchcraft are discussed in depth below, but this acknowledgment of the sorcerers’ power to metamorphose is not restricted to the Kimbanguist worldview. It is commonly found in Congolese culture as a whole and in Kongo culture in particular. Father Van Wing observed: “Just as the *ndoki* [witches] metamorphose into tiny animals, so one can find, according to Kongo beliefs, people who can morph into big animals, preferably leopards and crocodiles. These two beasts play a part in all the authentic tragedies that each village has witnessed and still witnesses.”

The obsession with witchcraft clearly has been superseded by the believers’ veneration for their spiritual leader. Diangienda’s words and acts, as
well as those of his two brothers and all of their children, are constantly commented on by church members and preachers. They are recorded and copied on audiotapes, videotapes, DVDs, and photographs, and they constitute the foundation for the identity reconstruction proclaimed and accomplished by the church. Well aware of the importance of his messages, Diangienda exhorted his congregants shortly before he passed away: “In the days to come, if we are no longer with you—for we are only sojourners—you will sometimes wonder, ‘What did Papa say before he passed away?’ Why don’t you just take what I tell you one day at a time? Yesterday I spoke, the day before I spoke too, on Sunday also I spoke; every day I speak to you. What I tell you is our common basis.”

Diangienda delivered his sermons on a variety of occasions, addressing religious, political, or economic themes, but above all the meaning of Blackness. While not university-educated, he used scholarly language in his analyses. He had an extraordinary gift for commanding the attention of his audience through parables or storytelling or proverbs. Even after his death, he still manifests through the dreams and visions of believers and through the hymns, so that he ultimately appears more like a deity than a man, promising his followers a bright future.

Hence, Diangienda’s words are extremely significant for the Kimbanguist community, especially since his successors (his brother and his nephew) said on taking the leadership of the church that they had nothing else to tell the church members, for Diangienda had already told them all they needed to hear. His insistence on the bolingo, mibeko, misala triad (love, commandments, and good works), as well as on Blackness, has given his preaching an importance that reaches beyond the Christian message. He was the embodiment of moral authority and spiritual power, which also sustained his healing power.

Some healing sessions were observed by the American sociologist Susan Asch in Kinshasa in the early 1980s: “Sick people are first given a blessing, and then a sip of the sacred water of Nkamba, which is renowned for its healing power. I have taken pictures of such a healing session in Matete, where a woman who was visibly in the throes of death got up after drinking some of the sacred water offered by the spiritual leader.” I can second her testimony. I have witnessed several similar instances of people who seemed dead who then rose to their feet after his intervention.

All these elements have contributed to the aura of a leader whom Kimbanguist believers expect to fulfill his promises concerning the improvement of Black people’s living conditions. These promises are
continuously repeated in the inspired hymns, which their church defines as a mystery.

In the Kimbanguist Church, sacred songs hold considerable importance, on a par with the Bible and the prophetic messages of the spiritual leader, which illuminate the meaning of the lyrics. As a body of oral tradition, these hymns are not just sung—they participate in a divine plan. Indeed, Kimbanguist hymns have a unique history, which began in 1921 when Simon Kimbangu was challenged by the Protestant reverend Jennings, who had observed that all his preaching, speeches, and healing
sessions were accompanied by Protestant hymns. Kimbangu withdrew for a moment to pray, and then returned with a new song in Kikongo. Subsequently, Kimbangu’s disciples began receiving songs by means of dreams or visions. One of the first Kimbanguist hymns includes this stanza in Kikongo:

Nuisa tambula makanda ma nza  You shall welcome all nations:
O Yesu kunu wonza kesa       This is Jesus’s ultimate promise,
E nkunga mia mbasi mubonga     Sing the songs of the angels!
Kenu vila kana ko              Never forget this.

This hymn, which sounds like a commandment, began a seemingly endless series of sacred songs owned by the church; there are several thousand of them today. In African traditions, songs are usually rhythmic poems informed by conventional wisdom. They may be composed by griots or popular singers, and they always reflect society’s values and tensions. In both Congolese republics, songs meet various needs—for entertainment, comforting, education, dance—and address a variety of themes, such as self-development, love, women’s issues, beauty, money, or even political awareness. Following the aesthetic rules of rumba or soukous, the composers of the lyrics are typically the singers themselves; otherwise, they remain anonymous.

It is also important to point out that in both republics of Congo, songs lie at the juncture between the profane and sacred worlds—the “profane” world being defined in the national psyche as the realm of mundane entertainment and sexual impurity, while the “sacred” world is the realm of piety, spirituality, and truth. Sacred singers and profane music singers are in competition for an audience of both believers and unbelievers, but it remains difficult to establish a clear separation between the two, since both are rooted in the same musical and rhythmic genre—usually, the rumba.

Within this context, though, Kimbanguist songs are unique. While rejected by other Christian churches that are also members of the World Council of Churches, though parodied by some people, and though occasionally plagiarized by bands from the Christian business sector, these hymns are defined by Kimbanguists as “inspired hymns” or “songs of the angels.” Due to their mystical character, they are distinguished from “profane” songs and even from the Christian music made by other Congolese churches. Because they are not the work of any composer, being attributed
to God, these songs are seen as revealing what escapes the awareness of social actors. Unlike profane songs, they develop the three tenets of the Kimbanguist Church in keeping with Diangienda’s preaching (the love of God and one’s neighbor, obedience to God’s commandments, and encouragement to work) and also insist on the theme of Blackness. Martin gave the following analysis of their role: “Kimbanguist songs became one of the main characteristics of the movement, and it is still the case today: people express their faith through art and music rather than theological formulations. . . . We [Westerners] must try to define the trends of their doctrine, which is impossible unless we spend a certain amount of time with them, talk with them at length after earning their trust, worship and go on retreats with them, and above all get to know their songs and images.”

Balandier, writing about the Kimbanguist “songs of heaven,” observed that these hymns, “despite their ‘Christian’ approach, constitute a literature of ‘resistance.’ The political authorities were quite right when they pointed out that the Christmas hymns to Gounza in 1923 were mainly allusions to the struggle against white domination, and are concerned with little else than the trials and suffering endured, and the struggles against the enemy.”

Yet, however accurate the above analyses may be, these early observers of Kimbanguism seem to have failed to grasp the mechanism at work behind this phenomenon, which is essential to the life of the church. Singing, here, is another way of understanding life, the world, the dominant Other, Blackness, and Kimbanguist identity, since hymns are not only sung but interpreted. The themes broached in the lyrics address notions in the Bible—atonement and God’s forgiveness, social or inner peace, the glory of God, the hereafter—and the identities of the spiritual leaders.

Kimbanguist hymns may be categorized on the basis of their inscription in one of the three time dimensions—past, present, and future. Hymns set in the past are especially focused on Genesis, the identity of Adam and Eve, the garden of Eden, and the origins of Black people. The present is sung in the mode of a commentary or interpretation of topical issues and stakes. Finally, the future is expressed along two lines—a renewed human-kind exalts the triumph of Blacks and their inventions or, a more pessimistic message, wars and conflicts are prophesied. Hymns seem to have three objectives: informing the people, glorifying and praising God, and lamenting and praying. Here is a song of prayer, originally in the Ngangulu language, as sung by the GTKI (Groupe théâtral kimbanguiste) Talangai church choir:
Oh, my God,
My suffering is such! Have mercy!
I violated the taboo imposed upon me
From my childhood; where shall I go?
Who will save me?
Whose is this world?
I don’t know where to go; come and save me!

Soprano: I have grown tired of running;
Where shall I end up?
I have grown tired
Of weeping every day.

Chorus: I had hoped to be saved
Thanks to my doings;
I was filled with love,
I would pray on my knees.

Soprano: My sins are tied
To my own body;
I have tainted the faith
Of no other soul.

Chorus: Oh, my God (repeated several times)
My God, come and save me! (4 times)

Bass: “But you had rejected My advice,
And you had rejected Me!”

This hymn of prayer, received by Julienne Bialonga, a female pastor and member of the church, stages a dialogue between the believer and an anonymous character identified by believers as God. The former complains of suffering from transgressing divine commandments, but repents by confessing the individual nature of his or her sins. The God character, who intervenes in the final solo part, stresses that the believer rejected his recommendations and disowned God. As I develop further below, in the Kimbanguist understanding, faith is essentially a question of love or rejection.

Hymns also serve the goal of preaching a new worldview. Contrary to the religious repertoire of other churches’ songs, which remains restricted to
biblical history and ends where the scriptures end, the source of Kimban-
guist hymns is defined as endless. These songs are not authored by anyone,
but transmitted to the inspired people by beings acting as intermediaries
between God and humans. These intermediaries may be angels, people
who have passed away, an anthropomorphic Nature, or the enigmatic fore-
fathers of the church—Simon Kimbangu and his three sons (the Holy Trin-
ity). Kimbanguist hymns seem to convey the biblical message with the aim
of putting within intellectual reach what seems inaccessible, and shedding
light on what was said in a symbolic way in the scriptures. For instance, the
following stanza reformulates Genesis:

You have created everything
Without touching any of them;
You created man another day
But You really shaped him,
You gave him the power to rule
Over everything in this world.
He is the really precious thing
Above anything else.
Why, Lord,
Did you let Satan ruin
Your precious thing?
You let Satan ruin it!

Listening to this hymn allows church members to learn biblical history
without having to read the scriptures. Certain hymns transport the listeners
back into biblical times and even fill in some of the ellipses left in the Bible
by its authors, as the following shows:

Believers, obey the Law
That I gave you
So as not to weep
As in the days of Noah!

Believers, keep the Love
That I recommend you to have,
So as not to weep
As in the days of Noah!
Believers, accomplish the Works
That I prescribe you to do,
So as not to weep
As in the days of Noah!

At the time when Noah
Was building the ark,
People were laughing at him:
They thought that
The rain could not fall
All over the world.

When the tempest
was raging all over the world,
People begged him,
“Noah, open the ark,
Our children are drowning!”

Chorus: Noah, Noah, Noah,
Noah, Father Noah,
Noah, open the ark,
The children are drowning!

Alto: “Impossible, impossible
My children, that’s impossible.
Impossible, impossible
Children, that’s impossible.
Look for another refuge.”

Mezzo: “In the world we used to live in,
I was the one who prophesied.
When I was building the ark,
You refused to listen to me!”

Tenor: Look at these herds, Noah!
Look at these works, Noah!
Open the ark,
Our children are drowning!
Tenor: Your wife, Noah,
Calls me “Father.”
What has gone so wrong today, Noah,
That you won’t listen to me anymore?

Tenor: You and I, Noah,
Would go on a walk together.
What has gone so wrong today,
That you won’t listen to me anymore?

Tenor: You and I, Noah,
Used to drink some wine together.
What has gone so wrong today,
That you won’t listen to me anymore?

This hymn is typical in its depiction of the characters of the episode of the flood, casting Noah as a real person in dialogue with his friends and the members of his community. Regardless of whether science validates or invalidates such episodes from the Bible, for the church members these songs, which come straight from heaven, work as confirmations of the holy scriptures, although in a different literary style.

Not all hymns repeat biblical episodes. The songs function in many different ways. For example, the purpose of certain hymns is to convey spiritual messages from the birds and other living beings (which are seen as part of creation and as messengers of God), or even messages from what is, presumably, the unspoken disarray of the “pagans,” or unbelievers:

We, pagans, are watching you;
We, pagans, will eventually follow you.
We have seen all the places prepared by God:
His Word and His Victory are in you,
You are our leaders,
You will show us the way.
Convert us!
You will enjoy heavenly bliss.
We, pagans—
Our souls are crying for you.
Where are you? We are waiting for you
To fight this battle,
Waiting for the bell to toll.
Who shall claim ownership of sin?
Who shall claim ownership of death?
Who shall claim ownership of tears?
All of this belongs to us—
To us, pagans.

This hymn gives a clear indication of the Kimbanguist definition of pagans. On the basis of the self-description offered here, pagans are people living in sin, who find themselves doomed to eternal mourning, helplessness, and death. Pagans seem to be aware of their fate and ask for help from the people who are supposed to be God’s elect.

Given the diversity of the entities speaking through these songs, it is of interest to ask whether the phenomenon of receiving inspired hymns should be defined as sacred inspiration or spirit possession. The notion of possession is quite difficult to define, due to the confusion it generates. The French ethnomusicologist Gilbert Rouget’s work is helpful in explaining the perspective of Kimbanguists on inspiration and possession. Rouget focused first on three examples: Mother Superior Jeanne des Anges (one of the famous demonic nuns of Loudun), who identified herself and was considered by all as possessed by demons; Jean Cavalier (the most famous military and prophetic leader of the seventeenth-century French Calvinists known as camisards), who said he was inspired by the Holy Spirit and was recognized as such due to his military genius; and an ecstatic Sufi, for whom it can only be said that he is in the state of “having found (wajd) God,” since the term “possessed” would “mean he is possessed either by God or by the devil, which would be absurd,” while the word “inspired” would “mean that his state is due to the presence of the Holy Spirit—a religious concept foreign to Islam.”

Hence the question revolves around the exact relation between the ecstatic person and the supernatural entity responsible for the person’s state.

Within the category he called “mystical trance,” Rouget distinguished three subcategories. In the first, the person appears “to have undergone a change of personality during the trance, as a result of a god, genius, or ancestor—for which the term ‘deity’ may be used—having taken possession of his or her body, substituted itself for him or her, and acted in his or her place.” The second subcategory depicts the entranced person as hosting the deity or a force emanating from it, which coexists with him or her but dominates the person’s will while letting him or her speak in the
deity’s name. The most frequent example of this relation is observed in trances attributed to the Holy Spirit. In this case, Rouget concluded, it is a case of inspiration, not possession. In the third subcategory, the relation between the deity and the entranced person is understood as an encounter, which may be experienced by the person as a communion, a revelation, or an epiphany. Contrary to the other two, this kind of trance does not involve any form of embodiment.

The explanations given by the inspired people I interviewed help determine which of the two concepts—inspiration or possession—is the more appropriate in order to grasp how Kimbanguist hymns are defined in their church. The term “inspired person,” which designates someone moved to act by divine or creative inspiration, is used here to refer, as Kimbanguists do, to people receiving hymns or supernatural messages. These people may be men or women, young or elderly, educated or illiterate, or children, and they seem to have been chosen regardless of their ethnic, national, or denominational identity. They have received hymns in a wide variety of African languages—Lingala, Kikongo, Swahili, Ngangulu, Mboshi, and others—and in other languages, such as French, English, Italian, Chinese, Korean, and Hebrew. Hymns have also been received in languages so far unknown, much like the phenomenon of glossolalia. The translations of the lyrics have depended either on foreign guests, who recognize their mother tongue at the moment when the hymn is sung, or on the degree of inspiration of the person receiving the song, who may also simultaneously receive its translation or its overall meaning.

While the inspired are assumed to be used by God as instruments to convey his message to the Kimbanguist Church and to humanity, there are several types of inspired people. Some have received this ministry as a sort of spiritual crutch, for they consider themselves too sinful to have deserved it. The mission is imposed on them so that they may on their own renounce their vices, convert, and get back on the right track, as is explained by an interviewee: “I used to be quite a sinner and a very skeptical man until I began receiving the hymns. I believe God has chosen me on purpose, to force me to calm down. Since then, as a result of the things I see, those who have known me before I began receiving the hymns can say that I have really changed” (D. N. P., 36, male, GTKI Nkamba).

These people have been forced by God to grow up, while others have been chosen in spite of their unbelief. Being given by God, the songs cannot be refused, and another interviewee complained: “I am sick and tired of receiving these hymns. I have done everything I could for this thing to
go, but it doesn’t! I did lots of stuff on purpose—fornication, taking my showers naked—but it’s just sticking to me. And sometimes, during the night, Papa comes and tells me, ‘See what you have done, my son? Don’t do that again in the future,’ and gives me yet another song” (B., 28, male, choir member, Chorale des enfants kimbanguistes Brazzaville).

Some inspired people began receiving songs before they became Kimbanguist. Unsurprisingly, they point to this gift as the reason for their conversion: “I used to be a Protestant. I kept receiving songs and giving them to the choir I was a member of, but people often told me that these weren’t Protestant hymns, so I couldn’t figure out what was going on. It’s only when I told my uncle about it—he’s a Kimbanguist—and he asked to see these texts, and he told me, ‘you have a suitcase full of clothes here, why go elsewhere to borrow something to wear?’ meaning these were Kimbanguist hymns. So I went and showed them to the church, and they were accepted as Kimbanguist hymns by decision of the spiritual leader” (J., 27, female, choir member, Brazzaville).

The anthropologist Mircea Eliade, when analyzing the case of the shaman, wrote that “one may become a medicine man or a shaman as a result of a personal decision to appropriate religious powers (a process called ‘quest’) but also as a result of a vocation (or ‘calling’) because one is forced to do so by supernatural beings.” From the Kimbanguist perspective, an inspired person is not just someone who thinks or declares they are, but someone who has been called by God to become the receptor of messages or songs. In this sense, Kimbanguist hymns may be said to result from divine inspiration. Still, some of the hymns sung with the authorization of the spiritual leaders suggest the possibility of possession. The following hymn is sung by the GTKI choir:

I, Satan, thought myself so powerful
That I had dominated this world
But the world belongs to God.
Ooh, my time has come!
I’m asking you, Mfumu a Longo,
To gather all your followers—
And if there is one who doesn’t accept you,
Leave that one to me—(s)he’s mine
(S)he’ll go with me
To hell over there.
Among themselves, they dance,
Among themselves, they love fetishes,
Among themselves, they commit adultery
And do all the things that you,
God, do not like.
Ooh, my time has come!

To understand this hymn, one needs to know that besides obeying the Mosaic Ten Commandments, members of the Kimbanguist Church are expected to abide by the moral prescriptions bequeathed by Kimbangu, which include abstaining from sleeping naked or in a state of anger; bathing or showering naked; using tobacco, drugs, or alcohol; eating pork; dancing or attending dance sessions; interfering with conflicts, lawsuits, or feuds; and resorting to witchcraft, fetishes, talismans, magic, or divination. Additionally, all Kimbanguists must take off their shoes in any holy place, and women must keep their heads covered and wear clothes that are not close fitting.

In the hymn above, Satan calls out the spiritual leader about the transgressive behavior of church members. In my investigation of this particular hymn, I spoke to Pastor Philippe Assumbe, who was in charge of the missions of the spiritual leader. He asserted, “It’s Satan’s angel who took the mission of confirming the existence of Satan. The Kimbanguist Church’s mission being one of revelation, it reveals all that is hidden. Through this type of hymn—for there are several others, similar to this one—Satan confirms his existence, for there are people who deny it. . . . The same inspired person may have two voices—that of God and that of the devil. When receiving a message from the devil, the inspired person may be said to have indeed been filled with the devil.” 32 Thus, according to Rev. Assumbe, this type of hymn is authorized by the spiritual leader. But the inspired person runs the risk of being Satan’s spokesperson, so it is necessary to arrange an appointment with the spiritual leader, who is the only one with the power to discern what comes from the devil or from God, so that he may silence the devil.

Can one therefore consider this type of hymn to be a case of possession? Rouget pointed out that possessed people are “afterward in a state of more or less complete amnesia, so that in general, most possessed people are absolutely unable to depict their condition.” 33 Yet the receptor of the song above, as well as others of the same type, kept the memory of what was experienced during the trance, since this person was able to explain how the hymn was transmitted. It is also important to stress, as Froelich did, that possession in African cultures “is neither play-acting nor a fit of
hysterics, but a mystical experience which is both sought for and triggered, and shows itself in a ritualized context.” Hence, it is worth asking how inspiration takes place in the lived experience of the people concerned. Does it come as the result of a ritualized context or an initiation?

While Kimbanguist hymns seem to have originated with Simon Kimbangu, they retain certain aspects reminiscent of initiation processes: “Initiation is self-reflexive, it is an action of the self on the self—there is no possibility of proxy, for one is the only one taking on something new, and transforming, or converting, oneself. But it is an action which is imposed by others—it is impossible to initiate oneself. Initiation is not given, but acquired.” Yet, among the Kimbanguists, inspiration is not acquired but given, since inspired people are allegedly chosen by God himself. All of my interviewees clearly asserted that they never chose to become inspired but, on the contrary, have been obliged to receive these songs and messages.

Kimbanguist collective memory is crystallized around Christian spiritual retreat—a practice whose inner mechanisms distinguish it from the pattern of initiation. The spiritual retreats began on Diangienda’s recommendation and took place on a seasonal basis from 1972 to 1989. Retreat usually occurred in the bush or on the hills, at a distance from people’s houses. During a retreat, which typically lasted for five or six days, women and men, from infancy to old age, were isolated in gendered groups and guided by pastors selected by the spiritual leader. The retreats usually would begin on a Tuesday evening after a sermon by the pastor, and the participants would set the number of days they would fast to atone for their sins—one to three days without eating or drinking (or even, in certain cases, swallowing their own saliva), spent in prayer and singing, and sleeping on the bare ground. These aspects of retreat may be compared with the three fundamental elements of kimpassi initiation mentioned above: the break from the circle of relatives, the ordeals, and the rebirth. The break is supposed to be accomplished between the “old man” and the “new man,” in the scriptural meaning of these phrases. Renouncing comfort was usually the main topic of several sermons; it was preached as a means of spiritual rebirth and a reminder of the aim the participants had set for themselves.

After washing early on Saturday morning, the participants attended a closing service and shared a meal together to end the retreat. These ordeals were meant to give birth to new men and women, with new daily habits as codified by Kimbanguist Christian morals. However, contrary to initiation rituals, at retreat all age categories were represented, and even mothers with babes in arms were allowed to participate; the genders, however,
remained strictly segregated. There was no secrecy, either, while secrecy is an essential component of initiation rituals. As a matter of fact, non-Kimbanguists and observers were welcomed at these retreats, and no doors were closed. In this way, these gatherings may not have been analogous to initiation processes.

However, as in the kimpassi initiation, during the spiritual retreats the participants were expected to have exceptional spiritual experiences, such as having visions or dreams and, especially, receiving songs. In a way, this was the period par excellence when inspired people discovered their gifts, as the two following testimonies show. One interviewee was skeptical about his friends’ and relatives’ excitement around the retreat of 1972: “I doubted all this. Since Papa Simon doesn’t exist anymore, how could people see him? So I’d tease them.” He decided to attend the next retreat, held in 1974 in Gamboma, Congo-Brazzaville, to see for himself, but he experienced nothing save a lack of hunger after the fast. However, three days later,

I had a dream. . . . In my sleep, I found myself back in Gamboma, the place was filled with sunshine. I heard a lot of cheering. . . . So I looked up towards the bush where we had spent the retreat, and I saw angels coming from there. From there, too, Adam came out, and the angels surrounded him; Eve came out, and the angels surrounded her; and Abraham came out, and the angels surrounded him. It was as if they were showing a genealogical tree: from Adam, who was black, to Abraham, to Isaac, to Jesus, whose features were like a Palestinian’s or an Arab’s. And here also stood the person I had mocked when I had said, “You have been on a retreat, and you haven’t seen a thing.” And that person was introducing them, “This is Adam, this is Eve, and over there is Isaac,” appearing and disappearing after each introduction, as in a movie. I woke up in the middle of the night, sweating all over.

[Three days later] I received my first song, in a dream. I was standing on a sandy place, and I saw an angel coming up to me—a beautiful woman, light-skinned like an Arab. She . . . spoke to me in Munukutuba, telling me, “I will teach you a hymn. Can you memorize it?” I said I could. . . . Then she said, “Sing the soprano part, and I’ll sing the alto.” . . . Then she sang the tenor part, and so on. She told me to review, so we did, and I woke up right afterwards. I had been at a summer camp with other kids who spoke Munukutuba, so I was able to understand the song, but normally I don’t speak that
language. It meant, “The path to Heaven is good, Mama, / The path to Heaven is good, Papa, / The path to Heaven is good. / Look for the path to Heaven and you shall find.” (M. A., 48, high school head supervisor, GTKI Talangai)

This testimony displays the mystique behind the receiving of the gift. This interviewee participated in the retreat because it had caused unusual excitement and speculation around Kimbanguist mystical experiences, particularly about the people receiving hymns. He attended with both a critical mind and open-mindedness: he expected to witness something, but nothing happened until after he returned home. A second interviewee described how she received her first hymn in 1972:

When I arrived at the venue of the retreat, on the first [two] day[s] nothing happened. . . . But on the third day . . . in the afternoon, our group of nine was praying, and we began hearing the grass rustling as if someone were walking up to us. We were scared, especially when we heard a noise right in the middle of our circle. We were wondering if we should stop the prayers, but we went on all the same. . . . At the end of our prayers, we looked up, and we saw a sheet of paper on the ground. One lady, who was the eldest of our group, tried to pick it up three times, but she couldn’t because she had cramps; her fingers had become stuck on top of one another. So we asked ourselves who was going to take it. We were all scared. Since I was the youngest of the group and the only one who was literate, the adults suggested that maybe that sheet had been given for someone who could write; it was a blank sheet of paper. So in spite of my very elementary level, I picked up the sheet and I gave it to the pastor, who gave it back to me, so that our group could report what we had experienced.

Now when the night came, I dreamed that I saw Arabs with cloths all around their heads, and they were singing a hymn in Kikongo. I thought it was just a dream, for I had no idea what it meant to receive a hymn. I woke up having memorized two hymns, and I described my dream to the pastor. . . . I don’t belong to the Kongo ethnic group, but I knew that the literal meaning of the song was “The Lord our Savior is coming into the world, coming to rescue us in all things down below. You are the one we are sending our tearful prayers to, for forgiveness of all the evil ingrained in our hearts.” (B. J., 44, female, pastor, GTKI Talangai)
These two examples illustrate how, in the Kimbanguist Church, spiritual retreats worked as a litmus test, which allowed inspired people to become aware of their chosenness. Out of eight such people I was able to interview, five emphasized that the catalyst for their inspiration had been a spiritual retreat. They all gave equally detailed accounts of the circumstances in which they began receiving songs—in their sleep by having a dream, or in a state of wakefulness by experiencing a vision or hearing voices singing. The spiritual retreats were reminiscent of ritualized events, which makes them comparable to possession rituals practiced in traditional Congolese religions. The Belgian priest Paul Raymaekers observed in the 1950s that the doctrinal and liturgical frameworks that could be traced back to former, purely African customs—such as the nighttime dances and the “shaking” at the sound of the ngoma (the drum used for dances)—had all but disappeared.

Today, spontaneous individual trances may still be observed among Kimbanguist believers, but they are discouraged and repressed. Is it thus acceptable to speak of spirit possession? In spirit possession, Rouget noted certain variables. First, possession cults are forms of religion characterized by a certain type of relation between the deity and devotees, whereby the latter are possessed by the former. Second, possession itself is a socialized individual behavior, whereby under certain circumstances the person undergoes a change resulting in his or her usual personality (which rules everyday behavior) being replaced by that of the deity, which dictates different behaviors; this substitution is accompanied by an alteration of the psyche, commonly designated as a trance. Finally, the identification thus accomplished constitutes an alliance (sometimes reduced to what may be described as a pact of coexistence) whose major function is to bring the deity either to use its power in favor of the person possessed or his or her group—for example, by increasing their strength, keeping them out of harm’s way, healing them from illnesses, or revealing the future—or to renounce the use of its power against them.

Unlike those aspects of spirit possession, when an inspired person from the Kimbanguist Church describes his or her experiences, the line is always clearly drawn between the supernatural entity inspiring the person and the latter’s own personality. There is a dialogue between the two, rather than an invasion of one by the other. Besides, very specific memories of the encounter are retained, as opposed to the state of amnesia that typically follows trances, as described by Rouget. While the Kimbanguist spiritual retreats triggered the song-receiving ability of many, for others the receiving of hymns was initiated by a dream or a vision entirely disconnected.
from the retreats. When I asked in what context they had become inspired, I received the following testimonies:

I was playing football with three young boys around 3:00 P.M. . . . I was running after the ball when I saw something like an image. I didn’t understand. Suddenly I saw a pigeon flying toward me. When it was in front of me, it landed and turned into an actual person, dressed like the Catholic nuns, wearing gloves and a white headscarf covering all her hair, and wings in the back. She was standing about a meter above the ground. I knelt down, and then I saw Papa Simon Kimbangu looking at me with a smile on his face. But I just kept kneeling; I was scared. . . . He spoke to me, singing these words, “Don’t be afraid, for you have your God! Even if Satan is persecuting you, he is not strong enough to defeat you.” Then he showed me the temple. I hadn’t been to Nkamba yet. . . . He sang a song saying that Papa Simon has triumphed and is going to rule over the whole world. Then he blessed me three times, laying his hand on my head, and a few days later, I began to receive songs. For five months, I couldn’t find any sleep. I lost weight. I could not bear to hear any noise and didn’t leave home. Everything I tried to set up failed. So I decided to go to Nkamba. I walked all the way from Mbanza Ngungu [forty-six miles], and there I met Papa [Diangienda] and explained it all to him. After receiving permission from him, I began teaching songs to the GTKI choir members. (D. N. P., 36, male, GTKI Nkamba)

When I was seven, Papa [Diangienda] showed me how he had made the world, how the Black man is, how things are happening in the world, whether good or evil. In just one second, he showed me how the five continents took shape, one for each ethnic group. After he had shown me all this, Papa asked me to come with him to show me what will happen in the future. . . . The songs started at that time. (O. R., 26, male, GTKI Talangai)

When I started high school is when I began receiving songs. The first song I received came during my sleep. I heard angels singing—it was as if I were inside the temple and people were singing. When I woke up in the morning, I was imitating a fragment of this song. Constantly, even in school while the rest were focused on their
lessons, that fragment of song kept recurring in my mind, so that I could no longer pay attention to what the teacher was saying. I told the deacon of my congregation about it, so they decided to take me to Papa Mfumu a Longo. That was back in 1991, so there was the rampage going on in Kinshasa, and I wasn’t able to get there. So they had to take my picture and my hymns to the spiritual leader, and then Papa gave his permission. (N. B. C., 29, teacher, GTKI Talangai)

By now I have received my 1,452nd hymn. I received my first song on November 8, 1979, during a beko [prayer vigil] that had been organized at the temple of the Plateaux des quinze ans in the presence of Papa Simon the grandson [now the spiritual leader of the church]. Around 1:00 A.M., I had a dream. I saw an old woman who caught my arm. There were nine of us in the group, and in my dream also there were nine of us. The old lady drew me aside, and she put me into a room where there was a white board, on which [the lyrics of] a song had been written. She taught me that song, but while singing, I was still dreaming my dream. The others told me when I woke up that I had been singing. During the same day, I was overwhelmed with hymns—thirty-five in that one day. (B., 38, male, choir member, GTKI Brazzaville)

Diangienda’s role is clearly dominant in these testimonies. As explained above, no important decision can be made unless the spiritual leader has given his approval; only he can, just by looking at a picture of someone, identify the person as well as their past, their mission, or their evolution in the church and the world. One cannot be recognized as an inspired person unless identified and confirmed as such by the spiritual leader after describing one’s dreams, visions, and hymns to him.

The messengers behind the hundreds of hymns I have analyzed have many different identities. They may be the God of the Old Testament, Jesus of Nazareth, or God the Holy Spirit. They may be the founders of the Kimbanguist Church—Simon Kimbangu; his wife, Marie Muilu; and their three sons, Kisolokele, Dialungana, and Diangienda—or Kimbangu’s grandson, the current spiritual leader, Simon Kimbangu Kiangani. They may also be angels, human beings who passed away, living beings belonging to the vegetable or animal kingdoms—trees, birds, water—or concepts,
such as death. Here is a hymn (received in Lingala) that presents death as a metaphysical character:

Death, Death, Death:
Nobody can know me
You, worldly people,
None of you can
Have a clear idea of me.
I am present all over the world,
Even in the water.
I walk with a whip,
I destroy men one by one,
Then I send them away
Where the Judgment takes place.
There,
You will experience the dread I cause!

Chorus: Death, Death, Death:
You, rich men,
You cannot bribe me;
You, intelligent men,
You cannot know me,
For I do the work
As it has to be done.

Death, Death, Death:
God the Father, our Lord Jesus,
And our father the Holy Spirit
Sent me down below
To send people
Every now and then
Every day to their world.

God left Heaven
And came to you down below;
You are not rejoicing,
But I am rejoicing,
For I do the work
As it has to be done.
Death, Death, Death!
Tenor: Be aware that if you have not obeyed
The commandments that were given,
In the place where you shall go
You shall see me,
Death, Death, Death.

Tenor: Be aware that if you have disobeyed
The three principles that were given you,
In the place where you’ll go
I will eat you.

Tenor: Whether you were endowed with beauty
Or a tall size,
Where you shall go,
you are nothing.
Death, Death, Death!
Whether you have money
Or you are intelligent,
When your time has come,
I will stop you in your tracks.
Death, Death, Death!

Solo: To those who obey,
I cannot hide the fact
That where they go,
I am not present,
Death, Death, Death.

This hymn was received by Julienne Bialonga (known as B. J.). Its contents cast a complex, ambiguous light on the identity of the sender of the message, placing any observer on the boundary between natural and supernatural phenomena. In this hymn, death appears to be a good servant, or a tool, of God. The song clearly shows how Kimbanguist believers imagine death through the image the latter gives of itself—a phenomenon that nobody can grasp or comprehend, an incorruptible agent of God’s will, which reaps every living soul in due time without concern for their wealth, intelligence, beauty, or social status. Death may be found everywhere, standing in the way of sinners even beyond their physical passing away, except for those who, being faithful servants of God, will not see death but will reap
eternal life instead. When I asked whether a vision had accompanied her receiving this hymn, Bialonga answered: “It was a big storm, through which I could make out a shape that looked irate. Arms were sticking out from that shape, and it was singing” (B. J., 44, female, pastor, GTKI Talangai).

Once a hymn has been made public, the knowledge of the context of its receiving gives an advantage to inspired people over the rest of the community, as the following testimonies show:

At times, I see people singing. At other times, we are the ones singing. For instance, one day in the bekoko [prayer vigil] I had just knelt down to pray when I saw Papa Dialungana in a vision, sitting in an armchair. Next to him was a kneeling woman who was giving him this message, and behind the woman people were singing in Kikongo a hymn that literally means, “Listen to us, God of Mercy, / You are our savior, and our salvation is in You: / You are our savior, You are Lord Jesus, / Don’t turn Your back on us, / For peace in the world will come from You / And the races of the world shall be saved through You.” Then, when we said “Amen,” the hymn also came to an end.

Sometimes, I see angels. They [songs] come in different forms—sometimes men, snippets, or images. The day before yesterday, I heard a bird singing about the war; it was saying that human beings have become like the beasts in the bush. Those who know me well are aware that, when they see me in a certain position, they mustn’t come close to me or touch me. For sometimes, when people touch me as I am receiving a hymn, the Spirit vanishes. Sometimes, I hear the voice [of the sender]; sometimes it happens through a vision. (D. K. P., male, 36, mechanic, GTKI Nkamba)

The angel is the one sending the hymns; but at times, it’s Papa himself who comes and gives it. Sometimes, it has to do with evil: Papa comes and shows me how evil things occur and then gives me the hymn. When an event is going to happen, he comes and shows in the hymn how he wants Africa to be or become. He shows the future first and then accompanies that with hymns. Sometimes, it’s the angel who sends the hymn; at other times, it’s Papa himself who speaks through the angels’ voices. (O. R., 26, male, GTKI Talangai Brazzaville)

I receive songs in visions, dreams, or while I’m awake. They come unexpectedly. Whatever the length of the song, I receive it in a couple
of seconds. (P. Ma., 47, male deputy intern at Brazzaville hospital, GTKI Plateaux des quinze ans)

Although my respondents did not seem particularly attracted to poetry, the hymns they convey have a distinctly poetic character, or they sometimes sound like scenes from a play, with a call-and-response structure involving both the sender(s) of the message and the Kimbanguist believers, or the Black person as embodied by the Kimbanguists, who then act as the receptors, singers, and interpreters of the messages. Because hymns hold a unique place in Kimbanguist thought, inspired people are considered to be uncommon personalities within the church. My interviews showed, however, that they share a number of characteristics. Many of them first went through a phase of what their relatives and friends saw as mental illness: “When it began, people thought it was a case of madness. They even took me to the cabano [a derisive term for the Brazzaville mental hospital], but I wasn’t crazy. At some point, it began to have more importance, so they took me to Papa Diangienda. Then he held my face close to his belly and spoke out, saying, ‘We want to hear these songs, go ahead and sing them’” (O. R., 26, male, GTKI Talangai Brazzaville).

In addition, all of them share the same discreet attitude. Although their existence is known to the community because each of them belongs to a choir, they prefer to go unnoticed; they are difficult to identify at first. It was challenging to find them and then to convince them to give interviews. Hence, I always contacted first the choirmasters to ask for the contact information of the people concerned; every choir includes at least one inspired member.

A third characteristic is their secretiveness. When asked certain questions, many refused to answer, saying they had an obligation to keep that information secret or were forbidden to speak. Others tried to respond cautiously, as the following examples indicate:

If we call someone “inspired,” then that person has necessarily met angels. These things really are secrets, but since this is about showing Kimbanguism to people who know nothing about it, I’ll try to speak. (O. R., 26, male, GTKI Talangai)

This point is a great secret for me, but I will speak to you about it because this secret is a heavy load to bear. This way, there will be two of us bearing it. (B. J., 44, female, pastor, GTKI Talangai)
A fourth criterion distinguishing these people appears in the words of Diangienda, who called them *mbinkundi*, which means “seers” or “visionaries.” As the interviews show, prophecy is part of the messages or hymns received.

I’ll give you an example. In May 1992, two months before the death of Papa Mfumu a Longo [Diangienda], I received a hymn which announced Papa’s death. But I was blamed by the community. People told me, “How can you wish for Papa’s death?” they said reproachfully. I was ashamed and miserable. I felt frustrated. This is the hymn I had received:

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Papa, we are asking you
To bring your peace down on us,
For we, your children,
Are left as orphans now
In the world where we are,
Satan has gotten ready!
Papa we are beseeching you
To give us solace.

Chorus: Papa, we are beseeching you
To give us solace!

Now you have gone to Heaven,
You have left us behind,
We are left to cry,
With our eyes brimming with tears!
Look, how scattered we have become,
See how scattered we have become!
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This hymn, received by N. B. (male), clearly shows to what extent inspired people may be said to be privileged over the rest of the community in knowing about the context of each song. They seem to all experience premonitory dreams, which sometimes translate into prophetic songs—messages about the future sung in the present tense. This makes their task a tricky one, possibly putting them at odds with the rest of the community. Indeed, while premonitory songs tend to encourage believers to have a mystical wait-and-see attitude, these songs may also run counter to community
expectations. In this case, the division announced in the hymn was not evident when it was received; the rift only occurred ten years later.

When Diangienda did pass away, this hymn—which is now very popular with all the choirs of the church and has been recorded on several CDs—earned a positive reputation and the right to be performed. This was ironic because the choir members knew nothing of the circumstances under which it was received, and believed instead that it had only recently been received, because it so accurately pictures the critical condition the church is currently in.

I have been amazed to see the fulfillment of some of the prophecies entrusted to me concerning the succession crisis. For example, Julienne Bialonga told me in confidence in November 2000, “Darkness will fall among the descendants of Simon Kimbangu concerning his succession.” Such a pronouncement, at that time, was unsettling enough to shake the faith of a number of believers in the lineage of Simon Kimbangu. But, thankfully for the believers, sacred hymns keep being received: even after passing away, Diangienda continues to make his voice heard. The following hymn, received in the Kikongo language at the time of Diangienda’s funeral, depicts his departure and his ongoing influence:

Listen, listen, listen!
I have left,
But you’ll stay in peace.
I am going unto the Father
I am going to muster
New forces,
For the time
Of my labor is accomplished (bis)

Chorus: All of you are
The flock that belongs to me
I am leaving you in my sacred fold
Stay in peace and keep
My recommendations
I have left no one in perdition

Listen, listen listen:
Love, commandments, labor,
Without tiring,
Listen, listen, listen!
Whoever won’t win
  can only blame his own stupidity.

This hymn fits perfectly with the timing of its reception: it conveys Dian-
gienda’s last wishes in keeping with the contents of his preaching.

Visions are a fifth feature of the experiences of the inspired respondents,
since every single one of them declared they had seen angels. Statements
were extraordinarily consistent among the people I interviewed, whether
they lived in Kinshasa, Brazzaville, or France. Here are some examples:

Each time angels come to me, they seem reluctant to touch me and
often stay about one meter above the ground. (D. N. P., 36, male,
GTKI Nkamba)

These beings can’t really taint themselves with the filth of our world;
they can come and meet you without having to touch the ground.
They stand in space. They appear as persons who avoid any stain or
impurity. (O. R., 26, male, GTKI Talangai)

A sixth characteristic of inspired people leads to a questioning of the
role of intellectuals in the Kimbanguist Church. Strikingly, the inspired
respondents all insisted that their mission had proved incompatible with
the pursuit of an education:

I attended school up to seventh grade. I had to go to a boarding school
from 1973 onward. But each time I had to go back, I had fits of madness
and had to stay at the cabano [mental institution] until the exam period
was over. . . . I kept insisting, because I loved school so much. . . . This
went on for three years, until I was delivered a certificate of suspension
of studies. Back then—it was 1975—Papa Mfumu a Longo [Diangienda]
was staying in Brazzaville. So my parents and I made an appointment
with him to show him my certificate, but he answered, “A person can-
not follow two paths at a time. I am the one who decided things would
happen in this way. You have already reached a certain level, so just stop
where you are.” (B. J., 44, female, pastor, GTKI Talangai)

Each time I turned in my paper at the end of a written exam, I got
yelled at by the teacher. . . . I was amazed to see that on my paper there
were lyrics, instead of the lessons I had learned! . . . I reached grade
eleven. Several times, I saw Papa Simon Kimbangu [in a vision] telling me that school wasn’t for me. But I kept insisting. . . . Once, when I was in school, I was walking in a corridor when I saw a man storming toward me. He threw me down on the ground, saying, “When will you understand that school is not for you?” Yet, when falling down, I wasn’t hurt. . . . Ever since, I haven’t set foot in a school. (O. R., 26, male, GTKI Talangai)

I was kept at the temple of the Plateaux des quinze ans, and I had no time to go to school and review for my [math] exam. On the day of the exam, I went to school. We had an hour and a half, . . . and the good Lord took up one hour of that. I was sitting in the back, copying my songs. After an hour, I was aware again of what was going on in the room. I told myself, “Oh my God, I still have my math to do!” I automatically looked at the blackboard, but there seemed to be a second one right next to it, . . . where the math was solved. . . . It was the first term in eighth grade, and my average grade was A+. In the second term, I had an average grade of A+. Can you believe it, just these two terms gave me enough points to reach the next stage and enter ninth grade. But when the third term came, the good Lord—well, my sender [the supernatural being that sent the hymns]—didn’t even let me go to school! I just kept working for him and dropped out. (B., 38, male, GTKI Plateaux des quinze ans)

The status of an inspired person seems to preclude the acquisition of knowledge in the conventional framework of school, even though Simon Kimbangu never preached against school. This metaphysical parameter seems to conceal spiritual secrets that the spiritual leaders are the only ones able to reveal. Even when the inspired people escape the calling and do get a higher education, their mission hounds them and often resurfaces in the form of a challenge that must be met. For instance, Pastor Iyefa, who earned two doctoral degrees—in divinity and in history of religions—at the Sorbonne in Paris and who is now the Kimbanguist chaplain in Kinshasa, discovered his calling as an inspired person during a spiritual retreat in France in 1989. He passed away in 2009, but in 1994 he had described his experience as a spiritual comeuppance:

As a result of the academic level I had attained, I had become Cartesian-minded with regard to Kimbanguism [his religion from
three sources of kimbanguist theology

birth] and particularly vis-à-vis Mama Kaku [the pastor supervising the retreat]. . . . On the third day, while I lay on the ground, I saw two of my friends from Zaire who had already passed away. They were beckoning me to follow them. Because I did not remember immediately that these were dead people, I followed them. They showed me a picture of myself where I found myself really handsome. I couldn’t even remember when that picture had been taken, but they pointed to it, saying, “See how handsome you were back in those days? Now you are too tainted. Go and confess your sins in order to recover your handsomeness.” At some point, I recovered my spirits and remembered they were actually dead, and I got so scared that I went ahead and confessed my sins. When I came out of confession, I was on my way to joining my group of nine people when I heard a choir singing. Their voices were very beautiful, so I asked myself if it was my group that sang so well! But no—when I had joined them, the singing was still going on, but it wasn’t my group. I asked them, “Can’t you hear these beautiful voices singing?” But apparently I was the only one who could hear them. So [my group] told me to imitate what I heard. It was a song in Kikongo . . . [Listen to us, listen to us, listen to us, our God]. So they told me it was a hymn that I was receiving. Ever since that time, I have been receiving hymns. (Dr. Iyefa, public testimony delivered at the temple of the Plateaux des quinze ans, Brazzaville)

The last feature of inspired people pertains to moral codes. It seems that the church’s moral precepts apply to them with particular insistence, whether they are married or single.

These are the same commandments, except that if an inspired person wants to commit a sin, God or Papa Mfumu a Longo will appear to tell them, “What you want to do is not right” or to thwart what might have happened. That’s the privilege of an inspired person. The purpose of all this is to safeguard God’s word. . . . Conversely, a non-inspired person has no means of being warned by Papa. I, personally, often feel like playing soccer, but there’s an impediment. Other young people dance, but there’s no way for me to dance, because for me that’s a ban which is, so to speak, written in red letters. (O. R., 26, male, GTKI Talangai)

While their status as inspired people compels the elect to abide by stringent moral precepts, it seems that noncompliance with certain rules of the game
leads to a breakup or a loss of the gift of receiving hymns. Among the inspired respondents, one had already lost his gift, and another had nearly done so:

One day I committed fornication, and I felt threads coming undone within me. Then, for a month, I did not receive any hymns. It cost me three days of sacrifice—fasting and praying—for it to come back. (A. N., 24, male, Chorale des dirigeants, Kinshasa)

In the span of two years, I received twenty-four hymns. At a certain point, I fell madly in love with a beautiful young woman, and it cost me a spiritual breakup. Since then, I haven’t received any more hymns. But right now it seems to be coming back. (M., 48, male, GTKI Talangai)

Kimbanguist hymns shape the beliefs of church members, while conforming with the criteria of Christian faith. The songs are the backbone of the Kimbanguist faith, containing the church’s entire theology and moral code; the hymns work as the production of knowledge that offers believers another worldview than the one provided by the scriptures. Considered by the faithful as a mystery, the hymns reflect inspiration rather than possession, even if there may exist some cases of possession among Kimbanguists.

Finally, the mystical phenomenon of hymn receiving in the Kimbanguist Church seems to depend on adherence to a moral code; believers who are determined to be, act, and reflect as Kimbanguists find their justification in a spirituality and a way of life that make them unique. Situated between the other two sources of Kimbanguist theology—the scriptures and Diangienda’s sermons—inspired hymns remain a dynamic source of doctrine, evolving with time and continuously offering believers new perspectives, reasons to keep faith, and the means to strengthen it within the framework of the church’s moral code.

This phenomenon of God-given inspired songs, which seems specific to the Kimbanguist faith, is worthy of comparison with the Shembe hymns in South Africa, analyzed by Gerhardus Cornelis Oosthuizen. The hymns of the Nazareth Baptist Church were composed by the founder himself (Isaiah Shembe) and by his son and successor, Johannes Galilee Shembe, between 1910 and 1940. These hymns address oppression, the suffering of Blacks, and Isaiah Shembe’s identity, and they include Zulu nationalistic elements and dance songs. But, unlike Kimbanguist hymns, Shembe
hymns seem to be devoid of any paranormal or mystical experiences, even if the composers sometimes mentioned dreams. Rather, they were written or composed by the founder and his son—and nobody else—a difference from the Kimbanguist case.

Other hymns that may be compared with Kimbanguist hymns are those of the Harrist Church. Analyzed in the work of James Krabill, these resulted from the prophet Harris’s recommendation to transform dógblóo music and avikam yeje music, two genres traditionally composed and performed primarily by women. Thus, in the Harrist Church, hymns were first an activity for women, who were called compositrices; then, men gave the hymns a new style altogether. Even though some of the composers interviewed by Krabill sometimes received songs in dreams, “hymn composition for Dida Harrists has always contained a strong element of conscious reflection, of drawing on personal experience, on events from ‘Holy History,’ on the crises and circumstances of everyday life, and then discovering a way of putting it all into a form which could be shared in song by the church community as a whole.”41 This type of conscious reflection would entirely discredit inspired hymns in the context of Kimbanguist theology.

The unique combination of metaphysical inspiration, biblical exegesis, and prophetic tradition in the Kimbanguist Church results in an ever-growing body of hymns. In this church, hymns operate as a “mode of expression of Blackness” par excellence, which helps believers to understand the identity and mission of Simon Kimbangu.42