The most specific teaching about the Holy Spirit in the Gospels is provided in the words of farewell Jesus said to his disciples: “If ye love me, keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you forever; Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him; but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you” (John 14:15–17).

For many Christians, Jesus’s promise concerning the sending of the Holy Spirit was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost, when his apostles began speaking in tongues. Effectively, the doctrine on the Holy Spirit is the theological cornerstone of the Kimbanguist faith. The Kimbanguists’ practice of the free interpretation of the Bible enables them to identify Simon Kimbangu as the accomplishment of the promise made by Jesus and recorded in John 14:15–17. For Kimbanguist believers, Kimbangu is none other than the incarnation of the Holy Spirit. Several testimonies on his personal life have been put forward to buttress this belief and demonstrate that he is the Holy Spirit. For instance, at the age of five, he allegedly said to his father, “Before you were born, I am.” In 1910, “he transformed a rotten palm nut into a fresh one.” Another legend relates that one day, as Kimbangu walked with his foster parents to a village, he fell into a wide ditch. His foster mother rushed to fetch some help, but when the rescuers arrived, they were astonished to discover the boy Kimbangu out of the ditch, surrounded
by angels. I will not try to parse out myth from truth in these stories about Kimbangu’s childhood, but it is worth pointing out how they serve as an ideological bedrock for the doctrine of the incarnation of the Holy Spirit in the person of Simon Kimbangu.

The promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit, designated in the Gospel according to John as “the Paraclete” (from the Greek paraklêtos, which means “defender” or “comforter”), triggered several interpretations that are similar to the Kimbanguists’. For Muslims, for example, “Jesus’ words concerning a Spirit of truth who would help the believers meant that after Christ another prophet would come, in the person of Muhammad himself.” This is indeed the interpretation given to the words of Jesus as transcribed in the Qur’an: “O children of Israel! I am the Apostle of Allah sent to you confirming the Torah, which came before me, and giving glad tidings of an Apostle to come after me whose name shall be ‘Ahmad’” (As-Saff 61:6).

The French press has shown interest in the rise of Black messianisms. On July 27, 1999, the conservative daily newspaper Le Figaro introduced Ben Ammi (aka Israel Carter), who claimed to be the incarnation of the Holy Spirit and ruled (until his death in December 2014) over a community of 1,600 followers hailing from the United States who settled in the Israeli colony of Dimona in the Negev Desert: “He claims to be a ‘divine connector,’ the present-day incarnation of a ‘superior degree of consciousness.’ Several books develop his theology—God is black, and so were Adam and Eve and the ancient Hebrews; the end of Western civilization is near, and everything which came after the Old Testament is null and void.”

Still, while aware of the existence of several religious leaders claiming to be the “Comforter” or an incarnation of the Holy Spirit, the Kimbanguists keep insisting on the specificity of Simon Kimbangu, based on his acts of power from April 1921, particularly the resurrections he accomplished. When asked for evidence that Kimbangu is the Holy Spirit (other than John 14:15–17), they typically name the case of Dina, the young woman mentioned above who had been dead for three days when she was brought back to life by Simon Kimbangu; and they emphasize that besides Jesus himself, who resurrected Lazarus, no one else in the history of humankind ever resurrected a person who had been dead for three days. There are scores of Kimbanguist hymns that testify to the identity of Kimbangu as the incarnation of the Holy Spirit. Here is one example (received in Lingala) sung by the GTKI choir:
Kimbangu was born
Kimbangu grew up
Kimbangu was raised
Following God’s true principles
But he was a Spirit indeed
He was clothed in a black skin, in order
To liberate us in this world

This stanza shows how much the belief in Kimbangu as a spirit who became human is established beyond all doubt among Kimbanguist believers. His identity as the Holy Spirit in a Black body is highlighted, as is his mission as the liberator of African(a) peoples. Yet the three sources of Kimbanguist theology prove that this theology is not frozen nor seen as given once and for all, but varies in response to the intentions of the supernatural beings sending the hymns. Today, it is clear that Kimbanguists hold Simon Kimbangu to be the incarnation of the Holy Spirit, which makes him a key in their understanding of the mystery of the Holy Trinity. Indeed, the Kimbanguist faith considers God to be on earth and no longer in heaven, as shown by the lyrics of the following inspired hymn, received in Lingala:

The first year, God came
In the person of His son,

Tenor: The Lord Jesus;
Heaven remained empty to the day
When he was crucified on the Cross (bis)

Bass: He had promised he
Would ask his father
To send us a savior

In the year 1921
In this world
God came down
In the person of the Holy Spirit
And this was Papa Kimbangu in Africa
Heaven remained empty
On dying, he resurrected
In the persons of the mvualas
Up to this day
Heaven has remained empty
For the Lord God is here in this world.

Since Kimbanguists identify Simon Kimbangu as the incarnation of the Holy Spirit, he reveals the meaning of the Holy Trinity through his three sons, particularly the charismatic figure of Diangienda, who represents the reincarnation of his father. Diangienda contributed to the building of this representation each time he repeated a popular anecdote about his father’s comforting and miraculous appearances to him and his older brother Dialungana during times of need as children. He exclaimed, “We’d be so overjoyed to see him that we’d run up to him to hug and kiss him. My mother and my brother would be hugging him, but I was just hugging the air. I mean that Simon Kimbangu, while he could be embraced by my mother and brother, became impossible to embrace and immaterial to me. This was so hard to bear that I would start crying again. At that point he would tell me, ‘You and I can’t hug, because we are one.’”

Kimbanguist lore also contends that in 1910, Kimbangu had announced that he would be reborn in 1918, which coincides with Diangienda’s birth. Diangienda reinforced the belief in a second incarnation of the Holy Spirit in himself, explaining how the Comforter promised by Jesus could “abide with you forever” (John 14:16). This type of belief is akin to the ancestor figure as defined in many African traditional religions, who may very well be reborn in a new person while being honored at his or her grave. The difference here is that the father was reembodied in his son while the father was still alive.

It is likely that Marie-Louise Martin, who was still active in Kimbanguist spheres in the 1990s, witnessed the expression of this novel element. This is because Kimbanguist theology is expressed in hymns that are not only sung but commented upon, and they shape the beliefs and update the doctrines as they buttress them. Even if some reform-minded leaders express resistance to such beliefs, they are stifled and silenced by the overwhelming mass of believers, who often display their faith in a very vocal manner. My interviews of church members show that Diangienda himself often discussed the matter, sometimes in cryptic ways and sometimes in the form of life stories. Especially when expressing outrage, he would openly claim either that he was none other than Simon Kimbangu or that he was the only possible way. Black men and women, after passing away, would necessarily face him in the hereafter—as he had warned the inhabitants of
Kinshasa who had celebrated the premature news of his death and as he told members of the church:

Don’t you defy me! For if I hit you and you come whining to complain about me to my father, you won’t see my father, but you’ll see Diangienda.5

Here you are, rejoicing because Diangienda is dead; but don’t you ever forget that you and I will meet on our way—for there is but one way.6

These statements clearly show how Diangienda projected an image of himself as both mortal and immortal, which leads to the issue of the representations of the godliness of the other two sons of Simon Kimbangu within the frame of Kimbanguist theology. For the Kimbanguist community, Christ was reincarnated in the person of Dialungana. He remained the second spiritual leader of the church from 1992 until his death in 2001. Residing in Nkamba–New Jerusalem, Dialungana had received no formal education. Although the inspired hymns attributed to him come in many languages, he spoke only his mother tongue, Kikongo, and had the reputation of being a man of extremely few words. I had the opportunity to meet him several times. His silent demeanor only confirmed his reputation. He almost never gave an individual answer to the church members who came up to him on their knees, begging for healing or advice, but he uttered short prayers while sprinkling them with holy water (known as “Nkamba water” among the Kimbanguists). The believers craving advice or comforting words could only try to decipher his every move. For instance, people often said: “Papa did not answer me, but he looked at me, so I know I’ll be fine,” “He smiled at me, which means he’s pleased with me!” or “I spoke to him, so my problem is already solved.”

I personally witnessed an incident with Dialungana during my stay in Nkamba in 1994. A woman who was considered to be dead by those carrying her body was brought from her hometown to Nkamba. Dialungana made a short prayer, asked for the woman’s name, and then took her hand while saying three times her name and the Kikongo word *telama,* which means “get up.” The woman opened her eyes, looked surprised at seeing the people around her, and got to her feet with her hand still in his. He took three steps forward with her and then let her hand go, telling her relatives and friends, “Don’t touch her, let her go,” while the woman was walking. Approximately two hours later, I saw the woman spontaneously return to Dialungana, kneel before him, and talk with him for a few minutes. I was
not able to overhear their conversation or even learn anything about her illness, since discretion is a significant feature in this environment, where even photographers are not allowed.

Hence, the customary silence of this spiritual leader—whose sermons rarely lasted for more than five minutes, unlike his brothers, who typically preached for more than an hour each—was compensated by miraculous healing sessions and by believers’ testimonies about dreams, visions, and inspired hymns through which he appeared or communicated. His secretary and attendant, Simon Kayobo, gave a personal testimony on Kimbanguist television. Diagnosed with severe appendicitis, Kayobo had been unable to have surgery in Kinshasa due to social unrest. Sent back to Nkamba by Diangienda, he thought he would die there, but one night he saw the three sons of Kimbangu (Diangienda had remained in Kinshasa and Kisolokele was in Brussels) dressed like doctors; they operated on him in his room. Then, he said, “I woke up, and it felt like a dream. . . . But what impressed me was that when I put my hand on that place [on his body], there was blood and a wound [at this point in the interview, he showed to the camera the surgery scar on his right side]. . . . The next day I thanked Papa for what they had done for me, and he answered, ‘Whoever puts their trust in God shall not die in shame. Your hope has saved you.’” This testimony seems reliable because the man who gave it is well known to all church members. Being Dialungana’s helper, he was more likely to have had a mystical experience with the leader considered by the community to be the reincarnation of Jesus Christ.

Although Dialungana never officially said that he was Christ who had returned to earth, he nonetheless expressed himself openly in hymns, where he revealed his identity. For instance, the following hymn was received in Lingala by a young Kimbanguist man on March 30, 2000:

Let them be puzzled!
The Lord Jesus, the King of all nations,
Is called Dialungana.

Solo: The truth has been revealed, it’s an outburst of joy
The Lord Jesus, the King of the world,
Is called Dialungana

Chorus: You’ll recognize him by his conduct
You’ll recognize him by his godliness
You’ll recognize him by his works
The Savior, Lord Dialungana (bis)
The Savior, the Savior, the Savior
Of the entire world
Joy is coming (bis)
Children, go into the whole world
And have no fear!
Tell them this:
“I have already returned:
Whoever is looking for me,
Let them ask, ‘Where is Jerusalem [Nkamba]?’” (bis)
Joy is coming (4 times)
It’s an outburst of joy
In the world of the Father.

This hymn was released through the choirs just two months before Dialungana proclaimed “Christmas, Christmas, Christmas!” (Noele, Noele, Noele) while celebrating his eighty-third birthday in Nkamba in 1999. In response, the Kimbanguist Church experienced an awakening of sorts. The church even changed the date of Christmas, which is now celebrated on May 25 (Dialungana’s birthday), drawing the media’s attention as well as the wrath of the Ecumenical Council of Churches in Congo (see chapter 6).

The third member of the Trinity, God the Father, is represented by the eldest of Simon Kimbangu’s sons, Kisolokele. Traditional Kimbanguists swear that they never saw him pray—which they claim is a sign that he had no one to pray to, being at the top of the Trinitarian hierarchy. According to a popular anecdote in Kimbanguist circles, an official once asked Kisolokele to say a prayer to close the service, but Diangienda immediately took the microphone from his brother’s hands. He warned the church members that asking Kisolokele to pray amounted to asking him to “solve the problem”—that is, trigger the end of the world—for God the Father is the one to whom prayers are said. In the very few archived speeches Kisolokele gave to the Kimbanguists, he did not say explicitly that he is God the Father, but he implicitly allowed the church members to hold this belief. He revealed himself more often in inspired hymns, particularly those that were received in the wake of his death.

Speaking in the names of his two absent brothers during a New Year ceremony held in their honor in 1992, Diangienda took the opportunity to send the community a farewell message:
We are going to leave you someday, because, as I have just said, we are sojourners. One day Papa Kuluulu will go, or Papa Mfumu a Longo, or Papa Mfumu a Mbanza [the order in which they are named here corresponds to the chronological order of their deaths, not of their births]. We will leave you because we were sojourners on earth. We have stayed a long time with you. You saw us, spoke to us, and because of your love for us, you fed us and clothed us and gave us everything we needed, you did all this for our sake. Today, on January 2nd, 1992, you came to wish us a Happy New Year. My brothers are not here, but the three of us are present because we three are but one person.\(^8\)

In the Kimbanguist’s mind, the one God, Simon Kimbangu, is trinitarian through his sons, who are the three persons of the Holy Trinity. The words he spoke have a unique significance in the Kimbanguist religious worldview and offer answers to the existential questions that both Kimbanguists and African(-descended) people grapple with on a daily basis. Because it provides a consistent discourse on Blackness, Kimbanguism has become a racially defined frame of reference or identification. While Diangienda did not explicitly say that God is Black, much of his preaching contained elements that are conducive to such a belief. In one sermon, he shared with a congregation the testimony of a White European woman about a dream she had asked him to decipher. The woman knew about Simon Kimbangu but despised all Blacks. One night, she saw her dead body being laid in a coffin, and her soul embarked on a quest for Jesus. She met a Black man who instructed her to choose among three paths. But every path she took invariably led her to either one or three Black men. Utterly frustrated, she finally begged the first Black man she had seen:

“Since I can’t see Jesus Christ, show me Papa Simon Kimbangu.” The man laughed at her, saying, “How come you’re asking this, even as you doubt Simon Kimbangu because he is black? . . . Come on and I’ll show you Jesus.” They arrived there, but what happened next I won’t talk about. This lady suffered and eventually begged for forgiveness. The man told her, “Don’t worry, you shall not die right now, but go back to where you came from and spread the news.”\(^9\)

Diangienda’s account remained silent about the color of God but implied that the three persons of the Christian Trinity are Black. He suggested that
through a dream, the color of God was revealed to a prejudiced White person who doubted the godliness of a Black man, Simon Kimbangu.

Even though Kimbangu and his three sons have passed away, the belief in the incarnation of the Holy Spirit is still being transmitted from one generation to the next, currently through the identification of the present spiritual leader, Simon Kimbangu Kiangani, as the Holy Spirit. Yet, for any spiritual leader of the Kimbanguist Church to be identified with its founder, a number of signs must be perceived and recognized by the mass of Kimbanguist believers. That certainly was the case for Diangienda, which accounts for the unanimous reverence still shown to him.

Presently, Simon Kimbangu Kiangani has a greater measure of personal prestige (due to his name and date of birth) compared to the other twenty-five grandchildren of Simon Kimbangu. Born in 1951, he says he does not know the exact day of his birth, because he was born in Nkamba, a country town without a hospital or any record of births. It is true that during 1951, three grandchildren of Simon Kimbangu were born, and Simon Kimbangu Kiangani is today the eldest grandson alive. But although the exact date of his birth is unknown, most Kimbanguist believers claim that he was born on October 12, which was the day of Simon Kimbangu’s death, and they conclude that the bad news of Kimbangu’s death in Lubumbashi was compensated by the good news of his grandson’s birth in Nkamba. By
facilitating the identification process, this unverified assertion buttresses the belief that this particular grandchild is Simon Kimbangu’s reincarnation. Hence Simon Kimbangu Kiangani is now recognizable as a distinct voice in the more recent inspired hymns, in which he self-identifies as the returned Simon Kimbangu:

I, Kimbangu, am the one and only,
With one temple
One mausoleum
One spring of holy water!
I have a problem
I want to tell you about:
From the beginning,
There are not two Kingdoms of God;
The Kingdom of God is one,
Any second kingdom
Has to belong to Satan.

Chorus: From the beginning,
I have been Kimbangu
I begat Kisolokele
I begat Dialungana
I am Diangienda;
I created Heaven and the whole world,
Now that I have passed away,
I have come back among you
In the body of Kimbangu,
The son of Kiangani
Who is also the father of Kiangani.
Why are you criticizing? (bis)
This is me, Kimbangu!
I have already returned among you,
So listen to me.

Chorus: Why are you criticizing?

Tenor: I am Kimbangu
I have already returned among you,
So listen to me, Kimbangu.

This hymn, received in Lingala, mentions criticism because Simon Kimbangu Kiangani is in conflict with the rest of his family, which has thrown the church into an unprecedented crisis.

In the 1980s, Marie-Louise Martin had the foresight to raise the issue of the succession of Kimbangu’s sons at a time when it was not an urgent matter. She had perceived the danger of a personality and dynastic cult with simple believers. The succession problem began with the passing away of Kisolokele and Diangienda in 1992, and intensified following the death of Dialungana in 2001. In October 2002, Kimbanguist clergy members from all nations hosting a Kimbanguist community were summoned by the spiritual leader, Simon Kimbangu Kiangani, to an extraordinary general assembly in Nkamba, whose purpose was “the restoration of the Kimbanguist fundamental order, namely, strict abiding by texts such as statutes, principles and methods, unalienable fundamental principles, the commandments, the essence of Kimbanguist theology, and measures of application.” After two weeks of debates, sixty-three resolutions were passed that redefined the leadership of the church. Simon Kimbangu Kiangani was confirmed as the spiritual leader, while the rest of the grandchildren were downgraded to advisers, instead of deputy spiritual
leaders—the title they had chosen for themselves. From this moment, the storm that had been silently brewing since shortly before Dialungana’s death broke out in the open for both church members and outsiders to see. Deeply mortified by these measures, all of Kimbangu’s grandchildren—except Simon Kimbangu Kiangani, his siblings, and Diangienda’s eldest daughter, Marie Muilu Diangienda—came together to protest the resolutions. They accused Kiangani of acting in violation of their fathers’ will, which was that all decisions be made by the assembly of all of Kimbangu’s grandchildren.

In such a critical context, it is worth analyzing the evolution of the tenets of Kimbanguist ideology. Regarding Kimbanguist beliefs about the continuity of Simon Kimbangu’s legacy, a major change has occurred since the implementation of the Nkamba resolutions. Simon Kimbangu Kiangani has placed himself on a higher spiritual ground, putting himself on an equal footing with the founder and his three sons. Yet the belief that he embodies the founder’s spirit is countered by a parallel ideology within the church: family consensus. His twenty cousins harp on the claim that all of Simon Kimbangu’s grandchildren are one, in an effort to stop the power from crystallizing around Simon Kimbangu Kiangani. But the latter’s followers overtly consider him to be the reincarnation of his grandfather and
of his uncle Diangienda. This further buttresses their belief in an endless process of incarnation of the Holy Spirit, stemming from their interpretation of John 14:16. From a Kimbanguist perspective, forever abiding with the faithful means that the Holy Spirit remains on earth by being embodied in a succession of interchangeable physical envelopes—but always within the lineage of Simon Kimbangu, so as to stay among Kimbanguists, who identify with the audience Jesus was addressing.

However, one of Diangienda’s sons, Armand Wabasolele Diangienda, is granted a particular status by other believers. He is allegedly the real successor chosen by Diangienda, as indicated by the meaning of his middle name; in Kikongo, Wabasolele means “the chosen one.” In the current disunity plaguing the Kimbanguist Church, the inspired hymns addressing this question are more cryptic than ever, apparently letting believers choose while reminding them of the rules:

Meditate about these times:
Satan is testing [the believers].
Keep your faith,
To win this battle.
Child, listen to the two voices,
Pray and meditate about the voice of salvation,

Tenor: Leave the darkness behind and meditate, believer!
Kimbangu, the spirit of truth,
Has called you.

While this inspired hymn (received in Lingala) sketchily delineates the right behavior, the church is tightening its enforcement of the Nkamba resolutions: the members objecting to them are disciplined, or even excommunicated.

The shockwave that Diangienda had so often announced is under way and having a deep impact on the church members, who all make individual choices. A great number of Kimbanguists do not go to church anymore. Others have left the church to join new, typically Pentecostal, churches, while still others persevere but take sides in the conflict—either they remain within the official church led by Simon Kimbangu Kiangani, or they are part of the parallel church led by other members of the founder’s lineage.
This succession crisis in the Kimbanguist Church offers striking parallels with the split in the Nazareth Baptist Church founded by Isaiah Shembe in South Africa. When he died in 1935, his son Johannes Galilee succeeded him. He kept the church united under his leadership, since he was considered to be the continuation of his father: “The old Shembe had always declared that although the old flesh might die one day, the essence of Shembe remains in the new flesh.” But when Johannes Galilee died in 1975, the church split between his brother Amos and his son Londa. To this day, succession conflicts are still rife in the Shembe church. The pattern is the same as in the Kimbanguist Church, where successors come solely from the founder’s descendants, but there is a lack of unanimity.

Among Kimbanguist Church members, the succession crisis has caused such discouragement that many are now hoping for a miracle to salvage the church and are expecting a sign from the three Papas. Indeed, the latter seem exasperated with the situation of the church, if the inspired hymns are accurately conveying their reactions from the other world. In the following hymn received in Lingala, one of Kimbangu’s three sons indignantly calls the church members back into the pews:

Believers, come back into your Father’s house,  
Seats have been left vacant.  
We [the three Papas] departed first,  
And some already concluded  
That we are gone.  
Where is joy, this joy? (bis)

Chorus: God never lies, my children!  
Return quickly!

This is a shame, my children,  
It would be terrible in that day,  
It is a shame, a shame, such a shame!  
What joy? Whom shall I rejoice with?  
Don’t follow the crowd, my children!  
Believer, look only to what is yours.

One of the three spiritual leaders is indicting the behavior of the church members since their passing away. He stresses that some no longer believe
in the Papas’ eschatological promises and have strayed away, and he calls them back into the “Father’s house,” that is, the church.

The conflict the church is now going through is not just about a handful of ambitious members of the Kimbanguist clergy; above all, it is about the descendants of Simon Kimbangu, who have vested interests. Indeed, the stability of the church is based on traditions of which they are the only gatekeepers. Their unity is the prerequisite for the church’s welfare. To make matters even worse, the inner crisis is aggravated by an outer crisis, since the Kimbanguist Church is being rejected by its sister churches in the World Council of Churches.

In an earlier chapter I discussed how Africans had been given an ambiguous place within Christendom, being perceived as a cursed race whose only hope for redemption lay in submission to a racialized social order designed by the imperial powers. African-initiated religions such as Harrrism or Kimbanguism offered new understandings of Christian doctrines and sacred scriptures. What impelled these particular churches to join the World Council of Churches (WCC)?

In gathering together Christian churches, ecumenism recognizes only two criteria: faith in Jesus as God and savior on the grounds of the scriptures, and belief in the Holy Trinity. The WCC was born from the will of Protestant churches to gather Christian churches from many different countries, pursue high-quality theological research, and take positions on major social and international issues. For instance, the WCC’s Programme to Combat Racism was set up in 1969 to support Christian and non-Christian movements fighting for “equality among races and the liberation of oppressed peoples.” It is certainly not by accident that the Kimbanguist Church joined the WCC the same year.

Before joining, the Kimbanguist Church was assessed by experts like the Swiss theologian Marie-Louise Martin, who had a rich experience of combating apartheid in South Africa. The WCC had taken a position against the apartheid policy of South Africa by granting financial help every year to organizations combating racism. In so doing, the WCC was trying to avoid losing South African Blacks. But the Kimbanguist Church’s application for membership in the WCC was perceived as a less-than-candid way to ask for financial help. Diangienda, the spiritual leader, answered these suspicions by revealing the tension prevailing during discussions at the time in Geneva and by stressing that the Kimbanguist Church was one of very few churches with a nonmissionary origin that had been able to grow without any outside financial backing.
The Kimbanguist Church’s application for membership received the support of a number of prominent figures. Rev. Jacques Maury, the former president of the Protestant Federation of France, explained in a private interview that William Hank Crane, the American secretary of the Division of World Mission and Evangelism of the WCC for the African continent, had been the person who ushered the Kimbanguist Church into the WCC. I retrieved the report written by Crane on his visit to the Kimbanguist Church in Zaire, which included a unique testimony on his personal experience of Kimbanguist spirituality:

One last, unforgettable experience took place just before we left. In a last-minute gesture I do not think he had planned to make until he was certain of my reaction, Mr. Diangienda opened the mausoleum where his father is buried [his body has remained intact], and we went in for a couple of minutes to pray in silence. It was a shock for both of us. Until then, I had perfectly contained my emotions, but all of a sudden my conscience was overwhelmed by the immense cohort of prophets and martyrs who had to “leave the camp” to meet with Jesus Christ and proclaim the power of his Spirit at work in the world. The figures I could recognize in this procession were Jan Hus, Martin Luther, John Knox, Roger Williams, Michel Servet, the Wesley brothers—and glowing in the first row, the images of Martin Luther King and his aides. The figure of Simon Kimbangu, in his prison uniform as in the only known picture of him, was part of this group, so that I could not help but blurt out an almost incoherent prayer: “Father, forgive us, for we know not what we do!” It is impossible to grasp the power of this man—dead though he may be—over his followers, unless he is considered to be one of those who had to “leave the camp” to assert at the same time a faith integrating all the elements of human life in a comprehensive vision of Jesus Christ and his present work in the world—and their freedom as normal human beings. If the traditional churches of Africa are ready to make this step, they will be headed toward a liberation from their own history, [they will] found their own identities, and create a theology that will respond to the actual needs of African Christians.

This report shows striking similarities with the core of Kimbanguist spirituality, which is filled with dreams, visions, inspired hymns, miracles, and personal testifying. It is significant that this same mystique should have
played a part in facilitating an attitude of acceptance toward the Kimbanguist Church among the decision makers of the WCC. Rev. Crane also raised the question of the creation of a theology geared to the actual needs of African Christians, because theological issues were also on the list of priorities for the WCC. Indeed, in their home countries, the members of various churches still gather once a year to pray and reflect on the evolution of their societies. Yet, while these Christians are united in ecumenism thanks to their faith in Jesus Christ, the Kimbanguists differ from them in terms of both methods and forms of action. It is worth trying to understand why the Kimbanguist Church sought membership in the WCC even though the expression of its faith is so distinct from that of the other member churches.

Diangienda claimed that by applying to the WCC, the Kimbanguist Church was trying to broaden the circle of its friends and to contribute to the unity of Christians across denominational lines. He stressed that the Kimbanguist Church could have withdrawn its application to the WCC if it were uncomfortable with others’ suspicion. The WCC admitted the Kimbanguists into its fold even though they were considered to be fake Christians by some member churches. But, Diangienda concluded, this did not matter, for “we [Kimbanguists] are accountable to Jesus Christ alone.”

This is the point most noteworthy here. It was precisely this state of mind that led to tension with the WCC thirty years later.

In 2000, relations between the Kimbanguist Church and the other member churches of the WCC began souring as a consequence of Kimbanguist theology. The starting point was the decision to change the date of Christmas to May 25, which, as already mentioned, is the birthday of Dialungana, the church’s spiritual leader at the time. Yet it was not Dialungana himself who made this decision, but the mass of believers who, reacting to inspired hymns with a very demonstrative kind of faith, pushed for the change. Although Dialungana never officially claimed to be the reincarnation of Jesus, nor did he order the church to change the day it celebrated Christmas, he did not stop the movement either. A hymn in Kikongo attributed to him congratulated his followers instead:

I am filled with joy, oh children,  
For everything you did!  
I thank you  
I am delighted that you  
Chose the day  
Of Jesus’ birth (in this world)!
The news has spread
All over the world.
Children, what joy!
You say that only Whites
Are intelligent (in this world);
But you too have intelligence!
You are only lacking the spirit of research.
The worthless (Black) race
Was also clothed by God.
How do you know
That the day when Jesus came
In this world is May 25?
My children,
Discard silly thoughts,
And rejoice my children!
I approve what you did:
Jesus was born
In the worthless race!

Kimbanguists who believe in Jesus Christ as their God and savior and in the Holy Trinity still perceive themselves as being on the same wavelength as the other Christians who belong to member churches of the WCC. But they read the scriptures on a different basis and interpret the Second Coming of Christ as having already happened through Dialungana, and they see the Holy Trinity in the persons of Kimbangu’s three sons.

Of course, this interpretation of the Holy Trinity triggered negative reactions from the Ecumenical Council of Churches of Congo-Brazzaville, which excluded the Kimbanguist Church in December 2000. Its president, Rev. Albert Poungui Sambou, explained, “The statements of the Kimbanguist Church are not derived from the Holy Scriptures, where they are nowhere to be found or introduced. The Kimbanguist Church is engaged in the process of developing, teaching and proclaiming heresy. From the moment when it became heretical, it excluded itself from the Ecumenical Council of Christian Churches of Congo.”

In March 2002, the Church of Christ of the DRC published an open letter to announce its break with the Kimbanguist Church. In July 2004, the cardinals and bishops of the DRC publicly stated their position in a declaration of the National Episcopal Conference on the relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the Kimbanguist Church:
Considerations:

1. We, Cardinal, Archbishops and Bishops of the National Episcopal Conference of Congo, gathered into a plenary assembly in Kinshasa from June 28 to July 3, 2004:

—conscious of our role as Pastors of the people of God in the DRC;
—anxious to overcome divisions and cultivate ecumenical dialogue in a spirit of truth with the other Churches and ecclesial Communities, and promote by all means unity among all Christians, in conformity with the Catholic principles of ecumenism which are founded on faith, hope and charity, to build the people of the New Covenant, which is the Church;
—respectful of the dignity of human personhood and of the freedom enjoyed by any man to search for truth and embrace it according to his own beliefs or convictions and his desire to relate to God;

Figure 8. The three sons of Simon Kimbangu are represented \textit{(left to right)} molding Adam out of clay (Kisolokele), holding a chalice with the blood of Christ (Dialungana), and preparing to breathe life into the first man’s body (Diangienda). This painting is the work of Muze, whose choir, the GTKI Brazzaville choir, presented it posthumously to Dialungana in 1994.
—concerned with the recent evolution of the doctrinal situation within the Kimbanguist Community:

—have resolved, in the aim of enlightening our Catholic brethren, to issue a public statement on the nature of the relations we should have with the Kimbanguists.

Observations:

2. The official title of the Kimbanguist Community is “Church of Jesus Christ on Earth by His Special Envoy, Prophet Simon Kimbangu.” From its birth, this community has been recognized as a disdendent daughter of the Protestant Church. As such, it benefited from the recommendation of the Church of Christ in Congo when applying for membership in the All Africa Conference of Churches within the World Council of Churches (WCC).

3. While, at first, the spirit and modus operandi of this Community of faith were in conformity with the universally recognized Christian principles based on the recognition of Jesus Christ as God and Savior according to the scriptures, and on the faith in only one God in Three Persons, this is no longer the case today, as the recent evolution of the Kimbanguist doctrine has led to serious aberrations and drifts away from the Christian doctrine.

4. Indeed, today a number of statements evidence a clear identification of the three sons of Prophet Simon Kimbangu, namely, Kisolokele, Dialungana and Diangienda, with the three Persons of the Holy Trinity. Now the latter is the truth in which the faith of all Christians is rooted; it is the fundamental teaching in the “hierarchy of the truths about faith.” This mystery of faith may in no way be understood in human dimensions.

5. Such statements, which demonstrate idol worship and a divinization of men, prove that the Kimbanguist Community is no longer a Christian church. In divinizing the three children of Prophet Simon Kimbangu, it has renounced the Holy Trinity. Kimbanguism is from then on a non-Christian religion, and must be treated as such.

Conclusion:

6. Consequently, the relations of the Catholic Church with Kimbanguism must be the same as with the other non-Christian religions. This entails the following:

—Kimbanguist baptism is invalid for the Catholic Christians, since it is not given in the name of the Holy Trinity (see [Matthew] 28:19).
—Catholic Christians may no longer practice spiritual ecumenism (ecumenical prayers) with the Kimbanguists.

Resolved in Kinshasa, July 3, 2004

It is important to note that this solemn procedure is exceptional in the relations between mother churches and African-initiated churches. Indeed, it seems that the WCC had never recorded any previous case of appropriation of the Bible with such far-reaching consequences.

This declaration caused a variety of reactions from Kimbanguists. On the one hand, the reform-minded class, particularly the theologians of the church, tended to understand the feeling of indignation expressed in the statement. For example, a Kimbanguist theologian interviewed by the Swiss scholar Jean-François Mayer argued that the Kimbanguists had excluded themselves by not worshiping the same Christ as the other Christians, thus voiding ecumenical services of all meaning. On the other hand, most Kimbanguist believers remained completely indifferent to the crisis—which is unsurprising, given that their faith rests largely on oral tradition and beliefs.

However, even if Simon Kimbangu is identified by Kimbanguists as the Holy Spirit, this belief appears nowhere in the written texts of official Kimbanguism—neither in its catechism, published in 1963, nor in its declaration of membership in the WCC, nor in the Kimbanguist book of reference L’histoire du Kimbanguisme, written by Diangienda in 1984. The latter work was reviewed by the Africanist and Protestant missionary to Gabon and Cameroon Rev. Jean Keller in a letter he sent to Rev. Olivier Dubuis. This letter emphasized the role and authority of the Bible and the clarity and importance of the Holy Spirit in Kimbanguist doctrine, negating that the official doctrine held Simon Kimbangu to be the third person in the Trinity.

The specific form of control exerted by the WCC over the Kimbanguist Church seems to have been complicated by the way Kimbanguist believers combine oral and written traditions. Indeed, although the official texts presenting the Kimbanguist Church to the WCC were unanimous about the identity of Simon Kimbangu as a saint or as Jesus’s envoy, the Kimbanguist catechism reads: “Question: What does Simon Kimbangu represent for us Kimbanguists? Answer: Simon Kimbangu is the witness of Jesus Christ with whom he is our support. Thanks to him we know that Jesus Christ by his death and resurrection has saved mankind without distinction of races.”

The issue now is to understand how Simon Kimbangu is perceived today by Kimbanguists. The status of the spiritual leader of the Kimbanguist
Church is an essential point that distinguishes the EJCSK from other churches, particularly within the WCC. Indeed, the resolutions of 2002 emphasized that the spiritual leader can only be a descendant of Kimbangu; this entails that he is an incarnation of God in the eyes of most believers. This aspect appears explicitly in the following stanza from a hymn sung in Lingala:

God’s messenger has come  
To show men God’s love for the race which broke the Law.  
Keep the Law, do exactly as you are told, Black person, wake up!  
Cultivate love, do exactly as you are told, Black person, wake up!  
Keep working, do exactly as you are told, Black person, wake up!  
The church of the Envoy comes from Heaven!  
The revelation, listen to the revelation!  
Worldly people don’t know it.  
The revelation, listen to the revelation!  
He Himself is the Head  
And the members are angels  
The revelation, listen to the revelation!

Here, Kimbanguists perceive themselves as an assembly of angels on earth, with the incarnation of God as their head. This self-image of the church necessarily has implications in its relations to other Christian churches. Given this belief among most Kimbanguists, what is the official position of the church on Simon Kimbangu?

The spiritual role of Simon Kimbangu is revealing of what Asch called “the two faces of Kimbanguism.” Distinguishing “official Kimbanguism” from “the Kimbanguism of Kimbanguists,” she highlighted “the actual gap between the Christ-centered orientations of the pro-reform leading circles, on the one hand, and the Kimbangu-centered traditions of the overwhelming majority of members of the church, on the other hand.” She explained that the church’s joining the WCC had led it to distance itself from its traditional tenets and build a double discourse to bridge these contradictory trends.26

Asch’s observation, made in 1983, is not at odds with the present situation of Kimbanguism; the only difference is that the transformation process has tilted the balance in favor of the single creed held by most believers, which has stifled the theologians’ Christ-centered discourse. Kimbangu’s role, when he is identified as the Holy Spirit, does not contradict but rather supplements his role as the aide of Africans with Christ.
Yet the latter aspect is only valid within the understanding of Blackness offered by the Kimbanguist Church, a point I develop below. The belief in Kimbangu as the Holy Spirit helps the believers grasp part of the mystery of the Holy Trinity, which is allegedly reenacted within the founder’s family.

Marie-Louise Martin was one of the scholars who observed the Kimbanguist Church and commented on its specificities. She wrote her doctoral thesis on the biblical concept of messianism compared to messianism in South Africa and taught at the National University of Lesotho in Roma; she was then driven out of South Africa for criticizing apartheid. In 1968, she put herself in the service of the Kimbanguist Church in Congo-Kinshasa, where she created the Kimbanguist divinity school and became the first dean, with the sole intention of training ministers. Among the works she has published on this church, her most important book is *Kimbangu: An African Prophet and His Church*, first published in German in 1971. Her resolve to train ministers bore fruit; since the creation of the divinity school, the Kimbanguist Church has boasted African ministers who are also theologians.

Consequently, inside the Kimbanguist Church there are two categories of pastors. The first consists of people from the community, who have distinguished themselves by their calling and their regular participation in church activities. They are appointed (or nominated for an appointment) by the spiritual leader. The second category includes theologians educated at the Kimbanguist divinity school, who are trained by Congolese as well as Western elites. The areas of research chosen by these students are often focused on African reality and cultures and on the Kimbanguist faith. Having dedicated their lives to their calling, they are completely dependent on the church for financial support.

The issue of the training of clergy has often been raised by Martin. But what authority can pastors—well trained though they may be—have over a mass of church members devoted to the worship of Kimbangu and his descendants? The leaders and representatives of the official, reform-oriented Kimbanguism are held hostage by this base, which embodies traditional Kimbanguism and is deeply rooted in oral tradition. The founding fathers of the Kimbanguist Church deftly preserved both facets of their church without jeopardizing its relations with the WCC. But when they had all passed away, traditional Kimbanguism entirely prevailed over official Kimbanguism, until the WCC became aware of the dissonance. From this perspective, the tensions with the WCC are understandable.

Kimbanguists have been often reproached with resorting to doublespeak and misleading the WCC, but the reality is probably quite different. When
analyzing the two aspects and the real position of the church, it seems more relevant, from a sociological standpoint, to wonder what leads the Kimbanguists to desire and believe that the sons of Kimbangu are the three persons of the Holy Trinity. The answer to this question depends on the sources of the Kimbanguist faith, particularly the hymns, since these shape the beliefs of the church members, keep their faith alive, and maintain them in the wait-and-see attitude they are known for today. For instance, when the split took place over the Trinitarian doctrine, a hymn in Lingala offered the following commentary:

Many, many people
Are beginning to wonder
If Kisolokele really is God,
If Dialungana really is Lord Jesus,
If Diangienda really is the Holy Spirit.
Tenor: So many questions!

Chorus: I have nothing to say.
Whoever wants to follow us,
Let him not look back!

Tenor: It’s a pity, such a pity!

You haven’t known us;
Because of your doubts and lack
Of faith, you shall weep.
The name of Jesus is sweet
In every mouth,
But ask them if they know

The Lord Jesus for real!
Ask them if they
Have grasped the meaning of the Bible
Whoever wants to follow us,
Let him do so till the end (listen)
If someone wants to leave the church,
We are not forcing anyone to stay (listen)
Let everyone choose their path!
The end [of time] shall solve this problem

Soprano: On that day

Tenor: The real God shall be revealed.

Bass: It’s a pity, such a pity,
Such a pity for the slanderers!

This hymn, sung by the GTKI choir, expresses the reaction of one of the late sons of Simon Kimbangu to the present challenge of the Kimbanguist Trinitarian dogma. It invites believers to adjust their behaviors to their conscience and faith: if they want to follow the leaders, they must persevere, and if they prefer leaving the church, they are free to do so. Since the Trinitarian doctrine is being rejected not just by the Kimbanguists but also by other Christians, the hymn challenges the faith of these Christians,
pointing out their unbelief and their lack of understanding of the real identity of Jesus and the actual meaning of the Bible.

When Kimbanguists are asked why they believe that Kimbangu is the Holy Spirit and his sons are the three persons of the Holy Trinity, in addition to the testimonies about miracles and the rereading of biblical passages, the answer is almost always, “because it is said in our hymns, which are not works of art, but inspiration from above.” Indeed, analyzing the songs allows one to grasp the Kimbanguist identity, since core beliefs, such as faith in Simon Kimbangu and his three sons, are rooted in them, as are the views that Kimbanguists have of themselves and their church. Inspired hymns must never be underestimated, for they entirely inform the spiritual and mystical worldview of this church. Unless they are analyzed and understood by expert theologians, tension with the WCC will persist. Meanwhile, the rejection or exclusion of the Kimbanguist Church from the WCC has left Kimbanguists’ traditional beliefs unchanged so far.

Here again, it is useful to compare the case of the Kimbanguist Church with that of the Harrist Church, which joined the WCC in 2000. It is surprising that one of the oldest African-initiated churches was so late in joining the organization.

In the eyes of Harrist believers, their prophet was the African equivalent of Jesus. This formulation, conflating the historical savior figure with the founder of a religion of redemption for a specific people, paved the way to a possible deification of William Wadé Harris. To assess the evolution of this perception among present-day Harrist believers, I did fieldwork among leaders of the Harrist Church in the greater Paris area. One of the apostles in charge of the community quickly answered before anyone else could speak: “It is out of the question to deify him.” This attitude implicitly pointed to an unspoken form of competition between the missions and identities of Harris and Jesus. It seems clear that the place given to Jesus within the Harrist movement is blurred, even though Jesus was identified by Harris as the universal savior worshiped by Christians around the world. The American anthropologist Sheila Walker acknowledged these questions and concluded that the still-ongoing evolution of Harrist doctrines may need to be interpreted by an African theologian.

Another comparison may be made with the Shembe church, the Church of the Nazarites. Bengt Sundkler’s research, building on his analyses of Isaiah Shembe’s hymns and interviews with Johannes Galilee Shembe and other members of this church, showed that Isaiah Shembe has several identities in the eyes of his followers: on the one hand, he is identified as a
Moses for the Zulu people, and, on the other hand, he is called the Christ of Zulu, a co-creator with God and a mediator in heaven. In Oosthuizen’s analyses of the hymns of this church, Isaiah Shembe appears as the mediator and the messiah, but also as the manifestation of God and the personification of supreme power. The parallel with Kimbanguist dogma is obvious enough, especially since these aspects of the Nazarite faith are not explicitly acknowledged outside of the community, as in the Kimbanguist case. Sundkler noted that Nazarites are sometimes careful not to call Isaiah Shembe “God” out of awareness of other Christians’ reactions to their beliefs. In such cases, he is only designated as a prophet in front of outsiders, while worshiped as God within the church.

Apparently, the Church of the Nazarites never applied to the WCC; otherwise it would have triggered a similar institutional reaction to that which met the evolution of Kimbanguist belief. Indeed, as Magnus Echtler noted about researchers’ assessment of the Shembe church’s theology, “the treatment of the Nazareth Baptist Church within the academic discourse has centered on the theological evaluation of the status of Isaiah Shembe. Early theologians emphasized his messianic character and excluded the church from Christianity.” This alone would explain the absence of any move from the Shembe church leaders toward recognition by the WCC.

It thus appears that the tension caused by the Kimbanguist Church was unprecedented in the history of the WCC. Indeed, the only other conflicts occurred with churches that chose to withdraw over diverging viewpoints on apartheid or in reaction to the financial help sent to organizations combating racism. This is because the WCC had until then been accustomed to commonly accepted doctrines and religious discourses, whereas the Kimbanguists, by defining their faith along other religious norms than those universally recognized, have drawn a line between themselves and all other Christians. As a result, there is still no answer to the recurrent question of the Kimbanguist Church’s identity: Christian or non-Christian? This issue, which constantly resurfaces in the analyses of scholars studying modern Kimbanguism, is vexing to observers because Kimbanguism’s recognition as a Christian church allowed for the emergence of independent Kimbanguist movements not under the church’s control.

“What Identity for the Kimbanguist Church?” The Swiss scholar Jean-François Mayer gave this title to his interview of the Kimbanguist theologian Nduku-Fessau Badze. According to Badze, the chair of the Kimbanguist divinity school, Léon Nguapitshi Kayongo (who succeeded Marie-Louise Martin), had been required to give an analysis of the crisis between
the Kimbanguist Church and the WCC. He was suspended for declaring, “From the moment the Church insists on asserting that the sons of Simon Kimbangu are God the Father and the Holy Spirit, we [Kimbanguists] must admit that we are not Christians anymore.” The theologian concluded as follows: “Within the Kimbanguist Church, the crisis is here; unfortunately, the intellectual elite, and theologians in particular, are not doing their duty of calling out the hierarchy of the Church, for fear of being punished or excluded.”

Given this, a number of points still remain unclear. Who excludes and punishes whom in the church? Do Kimbanguist theologians believe that Kimbangu is the Holy Spirit or not? Do they believe in the Kimbanguist Trinity or not?

Most Kimbanguist theologians, who have many opportunities to preach to crowds, regularly express their faith in the Kimbanguist Trinitarian dogma by means of slogans or sermons, thus mirroring the Kimbanguist psyche and its evolution in an atmosphere of religious excitement. It is important to stress that pastors from the Kimbanguist divinity school are less well perceived by the base, because of the White influence assumed in their background. For the educated Kimbanguists, Martin was sent by the WCC to train anti-Kimbanguist pastors, because some theologians from the Kimbanguist divinity school did not believe, or had difficulty believing, that Simon Kimbangu was the incarnation of the Holy Spirit. As for the uneducated church members, they did not even know of her.

A 2005 report of the EJCSK’s Commission théologique kimbanguiste (COTHEKI), signed by Simon Kimbangu Kiangani, clarified the church’s Trinitarian doctrine, asserting that it had remained unchanged since the publication of The Essence of Kimbanguist Theology in May 1963 and that of the 1969 document sent to the WCC. The report acknowledged that “the popular spirituality which seems to prevail at present” needed to evolve, but admitted that the education of “the people of God” would be a gradual one, “for fear of destroying the faith of the believers.” It unambiguously asserted, “The three sons of Kimbangu have not replaced the classical Holy Trinity, nor has Simon Kimbangu replaced Christ.”

COTHEKI’s stance was embraced by a well-known member of the Kimbanguist clergy, Lucien Luntadila, the president of the national board of the EJCSK in the DRC, who was dismissed from this position as a result.

On one occasion, Diangienda directly addressed this issue in an effort to educate the masses: “Whatever the enemy does, we [Kimbanguists] shall prevail no matter what, for we stand behind God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. . . . These three beings are not like us—Diangienda,
Kisolokele, or Kianganzi [Dialungana]—for their nature is entirely different.”42 The reformists’ attitude echoes Rev. Keller’s comments on the EJCSK’s official position as expressed in Diangienda’s book. Keller emphasized the church’s need to be part of world Christianity and surmised that if the church is adequately helped to train its pastors, “it will correct itself thanks to contacts with the outer world, which it evidently lacks.”43

Can theologians equipped with this form of training be effective in the face of the Kimbangucentrism shown by the popular base? The theologians’ real position remains ambiguous and difficult to identify. Indeed, when some theologians have the chance to express their views outside of the context of the Kimbanguist community, they display more than reluctance as regards the Trinitarian dogma. Yet in 2008, Pastor Sidia Kisonga, the executive secretary of the Kimbanguist Church in France, made a statement in front of the congregation of Saint-Ouen (greater Paris area) explaining that the spiritual leader had reasserted that Simon Kimbangu was the Holy Spirit. This proves the extent of the split between the two forms of Kimbanguism—that of the elites and theologians, which is trying to remain within universally recognized theological norms, and popular Kimbanguism, which is the expression of the oral tradition and, especially, the inspired hymns. The inspired hymns continue to shape the Kimbanguists’ relations with sister churches, as shown by the hymn below, sung in Lingala and entitled “Bilanda Landa” (Herd Instinct):

The world feels the need
To pray the Lord Jesus:
Follow Kimbangu the Comforter
And you will see Jesus, Christians!
At the time of Jews, Jesus had said,
“Whoever wants to see my Father
Has to go through me first.”
In this fourth generation,
Kimbangu is saying,
“Whoever wants to see the Lord Jesus,
Let him follow Simon Kimbangu.”
But leave the herd instinct behind,

Bass: Children, leave the herd instinct behind,
Leave the herd instinct behind.
Chorus: Follow Kimbangu, follow him,
And you will see Jesus.
If a man has his own magic
And performs miracles,
He creates his own church
And you say he’s guided by Jesus.
If a man has his own witchcraft
And performs miracles,
He creates his own church
And you say he’s guided by Jesus.
If a man has his own money
He buys himself a radio station,
He creates his own church
And you say he’s guided by Jesus.

Bass: Even if he’s also filled with pride,
Chorus: You say he’s guided by Jesus.

Bass: Even if he’s also an adulterer,
Chorus: You say he’s guided by Jesus.

Bass: Even if he’s also a thief,
Chorus: You say he’s guided by Jesus.
Children, leave the herd instinct behind,
Leave the herd instinct behind!
Follow Simon Kimbangu

Tenor: Father Holy Spirit,
Chorus: He and Jesus are One.

This hymn both reveals and shapes Kimbanguist perceptions of the churches that have increasingly penetrated the Congolese religious market. Here, an anonymous figure is calling out all Christians, reminding them of the words of Jesus in John 14:6—“Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me”—and
asserting that the only way to find Jesus now is through Kimbangu. The hymn describes the social context of the emergence of the new preachers, featuring them as they style themselves—as performers of miracles and the rich owners of TV channels or radio stations. Yet these wonders are critiqued as scams performed by false prophets claiming to be sent by Jesus. Finally, the speaker in the hymn warns the Christians (whom he calls “children”) about the lack of purity of these pastors, who are branded as arrogant men, adulterers, and thieves. Only Kimbangu is understood to embody universal salvation in Jesus Christ.

Because inspired hymns remain one of the essential sources of Kimbanguist faith and theology, it is regrettable that scholars studying Kimbanguism have not spent more time analyzing them when examining the question of the church’s identity. One exception is Léon Nguapitshi Kayongo, who cited hymns as one of the causes of the novelty in Kimbanguist theology. But he simply dismissed them altogether; without any in-depth study of inspired people, he called them fake and self-proclaimed, denouncing the “very pronounced misuse of the gift of inspiration of hymns in the Kimbanguist Church.” Although the biblical and Christian themes of the first hymns could “give[e] the impression of some sort of second word of God, conforming orally to the written biblical word,” he surmised that the quest for personal recognition within the church had led many to call themselves recipients and compose heterodox messages. Yet this theologian failed to understand that the same person may have received hymns on both biblical themes and syncretic ones, leading to a rereading of Christian notions.

Undeniably, specific honors are bestowed on inspired people within the Kimbanguist Church, due to the importance of these hymns in giving Kimbanguism a unique identity among Christian churches. It is also true that Kimbanguism is rooted in an African understanding of the Christian faith and religion and a determination to live following an African value system. The church is also different in that it subjects the authority of the scriptures to Kimbanguist traditions born from Simon Kimbangu’s prophetic activities.

It is useful here to refer to the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who offered a presentist approach to collective memory and also analyzed the shaping of traditions as social facts catering to present needs through the history of the localization of New Testament events. He demonstrated the importance of present-day power relations in the religious appropriation of “historic” geographical locations in the Holy Land, such as the competition among Jews, Muslims, and Christians that led each group to actually have its own “King
David’s grave.” This struggle is not a matter of scientific rigor with DNA or carbon 14 tests as evidence; it is a question of the power relations underlying the beliefs and discourses of religious institutions all claiming to have exclusive access to the truth.

The same can be said of the representations of Jesus as blond and blue-eyed—certainly very far from what a Palestinian from his time would have looked like. It is useful, however, to distinguish between the historical Jesus and the Christ as an open figure for all kinds of imaginings and appropriation, as the French historian Émile Poulat pointed out by quoting a Christmas carol from Normandy: “If the good Lord had given it a thought, surely He’d have been born among us.” Based on this tendency for each nation to shape Christ in its own image and for its own purposes, Poulat pleaded for the study of the post-European, post-Christian Jesus, asking, “Why not have black Christs, and a black God? If Jesus the Savior became a man like unto all men, a pauper unto all paupers, why wouldn’t he be black like so many oppressed people on earth, and be a black man among other blacks—one of them?”

The French theologian Bruno Chenu gave a similar analysis of Negro spirituals as transforming Christianity into “a space for self-assertion, recognition, and identification” where collective identity and personal dignity come from “a loving God, who can be nothing but close and active.”

These analyses are crucial to understanding the insistence of Afro-Christian churches, and particularly the Kimbanguist Church, on giving Christ familiar physical features. From the ideal representation of Christ that Dialungana embodied for his church, it is possible to grasp the processes of religious reconstruction stemming from the power relations between colonial missionaries and the formerly colonized people. It is an ontological framework that takes its significance from the appropriation—albeit symbolic—of the Trinity or Jesus Christ to further an African understanding of the Christian message. Beyond the question of religious truths, the crux of the matter here is the status granted to tradition, since the sons of Simon Kimbangu embody the authority of tradition. This ultimately raises the question of the definition of “religion.” The French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger, positing that “any belief may be shaped into a religion, provided it gains its legitimacy by invoking the authority of a tradition,” helps one better understand the case of the Kimbanguist Church.

Such complexity demonstrates the need for in-depth analyses of Kimbanguist theology; but as matters now stand, rather than trying to determine
whether the Kimbanguist Church is or is not Christian, it is more useful to determine with what concepts one may analyze contemporary Kimbanguism (see chapter 7). Because healing practices hold a crucial place in the Kimbanguist Church, justifying and reinforcing the believers’ faith in the godly nature of Simon Kimbangu and his descendants, the experience of miraculous healing is discussed next.