Kimbanguism

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What part do sacred scriptures play in Kimbanguist healing practices? The question is worth asking because the founding act of the movement was an act of healing, performed by Kimbangu on a young woman, Nkiantondo, in 1921. From the outset, Kimbangu’s prophetic activity was enhanced by his healing powers, and contemporary witnesses certified that he resurrected dead people. Martin mentioned that she met some of these eyewitnesses and one of the people resurrected by Kimbangu, who passed away in the 1980s.¹

To help him handle the massive influx of followers asking him to cure their loved ones, Kimbangu chose collaborators (both men and women) whom he had previously selected in a session aimed at sorting the good prophets from the bad ones. Diangienda Kuntima wrote that Simon Kimbangu had been shown by the Holy Spirit how to identify those who were filled with the spirit of the devil. He had to publicly subject them to the test known as binsukulu—the local word for eggplant—which consisted of presenting with an eggplant each person on whom the Holy Spirit had descended.² Whoever refused to eat it had not received their spirit from God and hence had to be cast out. This is how Kimbangu evicted all the false prophets from Nkamba.

The Kimbanguist collective psyche contains many significant similarities with the Gospels. For instance, the eggplant test to separate true and false prophets is often compared with John 13:21–27, where Jesus gave Judas a piece of bread dipped in sauce in order to identify him as the
betrayer—except that in the Kimbanguist narrative it was the refusal rather than the acceptance of food that revealed possession by the devil. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the chosen helpers and Kimbangu preached, spoke in tongues, and worked miraculous healing acts and resurrections: this came to be known as the Pentecost of Nkamba.

The proliferation of such events had so great an impact that Western missionaries attempted to defuse it. Diangienda’s account related an episode in which Rev. Jennings challenged Simon Kimbangu, asking the crowd to be silent and for sick people to be brought to him so that he too might show that he could work miracles in the name of Jesus. After praying for some time, he ordered a paralytic to walk in Jesus’s name, but his three attempts were unsuccessful, and the crowd jeered at him. Eventually, Kimbangu approached the same man and said, “For the unbelievers to witness the power Jesus gave me, I command you to rise and walk.” The paralyzed man dropped his crutches at once and began to walk amid the cheering of the crowd. Also according to the official history of Kimbanguism, the administrator Léon Morel had a tent set up in Nkamba so that he could see for himself whether healing was actually taking place. He personally chose five patients, including three paralytics, and asked Kimbangu to heal them. Kimbangu did so without touching them, and the three paralyzed people walked away, dropping their crutches in the enclosed plot of land where the healing sessions were held.3

These two accounts, related by Diangienda, emphasize the power relations between the colonizers and the colonized people that surrounded Kimbangu’s prophetic activity, showing how it entailed a historical and social critique of the structures of domination. Indeed, beyond the personalities of the protagonists—Jennings, Morel, and Kimbangu—these interactions reveal the deep social changes then under way in Congo and the stakes at play within the existing Christian structures. It may seem paradoxical that Catholic and Protestant missionaries attacked Kimbangu’s ministry instead of rejoicing about the genuine cures performed in the name of Jesus among the Congolese people or even suggesting, as did Rev. Frederickson, that “it was quite possible that God may have given this Negro some form of power, for Kimbangu was known to have accomplished miracles, and it was said nowhere in the Bible that God or His envoy must be white.”4 Instead, it seemed more vital to discredit this healing as pertaining to fetish worship rather than consider it to be part of the Christian structure they were elaborating, because Kimbangu was enjoying a form of liberty that was normally precluded by his status as a member of the colonized
group. This is corroborated by the report Morel wrote on Kimbangu after witnessing the events: “In reality, I think the man’s goal is to create a religion that fits the natives’ mind-set. . . . Everybody can see that our European religions, fraught with abstract notions, do not answer the needs of the African, who demands protection and solid facts.”

In the early twentieth century, there was no questioning the idea that only Whites could liberate African people. Indeed, African societies back then typified a system of domination in which the social structure was characterized by what Pierre Bourdieu called the principle of distinction or differentiation—in other words, the balance of power between the dominant and the subordinate. For Bourdieu, individuals holding various positions are competing with one another for better positions on the social ladder, which he described as a “field of forces” and a “field of struggles” where conflicts between dominant and subordinate occur. The field of miraculous healing here may be analyzed as a locus of power that compelled Western agents to work for the preservation of their monopoly of the religious field—always connected with the political and economic fields—in order to maintain their dominant position over African natives. Yet the forces at work here, while engaged in antagonistic relations, eventually resulted in a new reality. The fact that Kimbangu was having visions and a mystical exchange of his own with Christ set him apart from this frame of White control, whether he liked it or not. Kimbangu pioneered Christian awakening in Central Africa because he successfully disrupted the existing balance of power to transform it, paving the way for the emergence of the future Kimbanguist Church and other independent religious groups claiming his legacy.

The field of healing practices logically took on a territorial dimension as Kimbangu’s hometown, subsequently renamed Nkamba–New Jerusalem, became the holy place for physical and spiritual healing, the Kimbanguist Mecca. At the foot of the hill where the town lies, there is a spring called in Lingala *mayi ya Sima* or *mayi ya Nkamba* (Nkamba water). Kimbangu would ask the patients who had just been cured, and his healthy or ailing followers, to immerse themselves in the pool for purification. This water is seen as sacred and is still believed to have curative properties. When they go on pilgrimage to Nkamba, church members bring jerry cans to collect the water to take back home. The clay-like dust is also collected for personal consumption or massaging, since it is also believed to have therapeutic virtues. Any observer can witness such scenes, as MacGaffey did: “The water is drunk, for vaguely defined health-giving purposes, and water, or a mixture of earth and water, is rubbed on the body as a therapy.”
References to the Gospels, sometimes in the shape of actual comparisons, often serve as evidence of miraculous healing. The Nkamba spring and pool are thus constructed by Kimbanguist subjectivity as completing and furthering the series of miraculous healing actions narrated in the Gospels. Typically, John 9:1–7, where Jesus healed a blind man by first anointing his eyes with the clay he made out of his spittle and then sending him to the pool of Siloam, is quoted to explain the existence of a sacred pool in Nkamba. Additionally, a secret document of the Kimbanguist Church stated that a blind man called Ngoma had been healed by Kimbangu in exactly the same fashion. To what extent is there a mimesis of the Gospels in this account? This is hard to determine, yet the spring of Nkamba does exist, and its sacredness and healing virtues in the Kimbanguist faith are extremely significant.

Another important element in Kimbangu’s healing practices was the mvuala, as already mentioned. This rod, which Kimbangu used to hold in his hand, is said to have healed and resurrected people without even touching them; it is often compared by Kimbanguist believers with Moses’s rod from Exodus 4:2–4 and 17. The following story is found in a book written by a Kimbanguist entitled Éphémérides kimbanguistes. Kimbangu was said to have been aware that his time was up, and he had realized that he could not heal all the sick people who were coming to him. Before he left Mbanza Nsanda, the village that had secretly hosted him for three months, “he said a prayer for all the sick people, all the departed, for Congo, for Africa, and the whole world. He held out his right hand, which held the sacred scepter, ostensibly pointing from East to West and from North to South.” Many witnesses, who had come from Angola, the French Congo, and remote parts of the Belgian Congo, testified that many of the sick people were healed and many of the dead people who had been carried to Nkamba were resurrected before arriving there. Although this sacred staff is part of Kimbangu’s legacy, it is neither exhibited nor held in public by the church leaders, which reinforces its mysterious character. According to certain Kimbanguist sources, it is kept in Kimbangu’s mausoleum in Nkamba.

This mausoleum, called kilongo in Kikongo—where the allegedly uncorrupted body of Kimbangu is exposed on top of those of his three sons—is the sanctuary par excellence. Church members go there to meditate, pray, ask for blessings, and unburden their souls. It is possible for anyone, not just Kimbanguists, to visit or stay in Nkamba, as the following stanza from an inspired hymn (received in French) exhorts:
Come to Jerusalem (3 times)
There you will find
God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit
Have no qualms, come to Jerusalem
The promise our God made is now fulfilled
In Nkamba, the new Jerusalem, in Lower-Congo, Africa
God is black, Jesus Christ is black, Kimbangu the Holy Spirit is black.
Brothers, come to Nkamba, all of you,
To the divine spring take all your problems
Come to Nkamba and you will find the solution.

This hymn clearly indicates that Kimbanguists consider the Nkamba spring to be the solution to all kinds of problems, including health issues. It remains inseparable from Kimbangu’s prophetic mission and his charisma. Since Nkamba also grounds the authority of his sons and grandsons as his successors, the spiritual leaders of the church, and the guardians of its sanctuaries, the Nkamba water gives them a particular aura with church members seeking healing. Indeed, mentioning the role of the successors of Kimbangu within the church implies an acknowledgment of their healing powers. In this context, healing is a matter of faith between the figures
involved in the supply of and demand for healing. The authority of the leaders as descendants of Kimbangu reflects the broader role they play in Kimbanguist tradition.

The structure of the Kimbanguist Church displays two facets: an official, hierarchical church with legal texts and a traditional church in which the authority of tradition and in particular the biological lineage stemming from Simon Kimbangu tend to prevail over the hierarchical order. Since the Kimbanguist Church rests on texts and statutes in conformity with modernity, the status of the spiritual leader is also two-faceted: it is based on legal texts and ecclesiastical functions, but it is also traditional to the extent that there is a sacred function on top of the ecclesiastical function. On the basis of legislation, the spiritual leader is a public persona who fills an administrative and official function, but he is also a traditional leader whose rights and duties, prerogatives and responsibilities, privileges and obligations depend solely on his traditional charismatic skills.

The spiritual leader is recognized as possessing the gifts of clairvoyance, mediumship (he speaks with the dead and knows about their afterlife), and healing (he cures and resurrects the dead) and the ability to interpret signs and decipher omens (he advises people and foretells the future). Finally, he reveals his supernatural identity through inspired songs, dreams, visions, and even apparitions, because, like Simon Kimbangu, he is supposed to have the gift of ubiquity. All these charismatic gifts are deemed hereditary; hence, they confer on the leader a traditional form of legitimacy, while myths about Kimbangu play a dominant role in strengthening his successors’ aura. The pastors or collaborators who are not Kimbangu’s offspring but have the gift of healing and have been endorsed by the spiritual leader do not enjoy as much consideration (save for Mikala Mandombe, the only helper of Simon Kimbangu who survived until 2001, who was just as much in demand during her lifetime). The spiritual leader’s position must be distinguished from the status of church members. He is considered to be a deity, or at least an embodiment of the presence of Simon Kimbangu, and thus able to heal. The church members’ positions are grounded in their belief in the spiritual leader’s powers.

These two aspects reveal two forms of devotion. On the one hand, church members may seek and find healing on their own by praying and fasting. On the other hand, the spiritual leaders are expected to take on the mass of problems and diseases imparted to them by the church members and to find the solutions by praying and fasting themselves. This second option is the most common among Kimbanguists; consequently, spiritual leaders are
constantly called upon to solve all kinds of issues—deaths, illnesses, infertility, quests for a match, advice, blessings, visas for Europe, passing grades for exams, and so on. The list aptly reflects what the Congolese sociologist Joseph Tonda called “the bodily issues”—unemployment, illnesses, exams, elections, declining businesses, deaths, cheating spouses, infertility, thwarted aspirations, the ever-deferred promise of holding a position in government, money losses, alcohol problems, prolonged celibacy, “unclean thoughts,” “bad dreams,” “nightly husbands,” “bad luck,” and so on. “In short, all of the misfortunes undergone by people, regardless of age, gender, social class, or education, are supposed to find stronger therapeutic solutions or be better countered in Christian healing places than anywhere else.”

In the Kimbanguist Church, all evils can be cured by the spiritual leaders because evils are believed to be caused by the devil and by witchcraft practices. Only the church’s spiritual leaders are endowed with the power to counter the effects of witchcraft and the actions of warlocks, the tools of evil. A well-known anecdote among Kimbanguist believers is that Simon Kimbangu once caught sorcerers by surprise and caused them to remain paralyzed, so that they were found by their relatives at daybreak, stark naked, stunned, and prostrated; these people were eventually banished from their village.

In 1991, I personally witnessed a case of healing at the Kimbanguist welcome center in Kinshasa. I was standing right next to Diangienda when a woman holding a newborn child told him, “Papa, I am a witch.” He snapped, “I know you are, I have been watching you for some time now. You waited until you killed people, and now you are coming to me for shelter?” Then, he walked away. But another woman was kneeling close by; she too had witnessed the exchange, and she began weeping and pleading for the witch, saying, “Papa, please help her for love’s sake. She is your child and a poor sinner.” The spiritual leader returned to the witch and told her, “You are lucky. I will spare your life for the sake of the newborn you are holding in your arms. What do you want now?” The woman answered, “I’d like for you to remove it.” He poured some Nkamba water on her hands and asked her to rub it on her face; he sprinkled some more around her head and in her eyes and ears. This scene exemplifies the exchange between the seeker and the healer. In this case, witchcraft, which is customarily feared and combated within the church, became both a disease and a sin, which must be both cured and forgiven by the spiritual leader. He is recognized as having the power to heal diseases and forgive sins, the latter being the cause of the former.
Like many other Africans, Kimbanguists attach considerable importance both to the realm of angels and dead people and to the invisible world—a term encompassing evil forces and warlocks. As a result, for Kimbanguists, the supernatural is mingled with the natural, and the invisible world is mingled with the visible one. In Nkamba, dead people, including leaders and church members who have passed away, appear to relatives or community members. Against the backdrop of the Kimbanguist faith, animist beliefs resurface, coinciding with the established norms of African societies. For instance, church members watched the televised testimony of J. C. Katanga, a conjure man (féticheur) for several stars of Congolese rumba music before he became a convert to Kimbanguism. When he went to Nkamba in 2007, Katanga brought the spiritual leader Simon Kimbangu Kiangani a live crocodile in a coffin. He is said to have used this crocodile for his nightly misdeeds, leaving his human body and inhabiting that of the animal. When he became a Kimbanguist, he decided to relinquish all of his fetishes, particularly the crocodile. This conversion testimony was deemed so significant that the church found a place for the crocodile in Nkamba; it was kept in a pool that was built especially for it, and tourists and pilgrims were invited to come and see it as proof of a conversion.\(^\text{15}\)

While this event, steeped in animist beliefs, includes an ostentatious confession, such is not usually the case for healing practices in the Kimbanguist Church. These are never publicized nor performed conspicuously. The healing is done discreetly, although often publicly. When healing sessions are open, either the spiritual leader is seated in an armchair while the church members line up in front of him, waiting for their turn to kneel down in deference to his authority and pose their problems, or the church members are lined up on their knees, waiting for the guide to approach and talk with each of them. When no session is organized, people looking for a cure directly come up to the spiritual leaders or their collaborators to request help. Church leaders hold consultations every day save Wednesday, which is their fasting day, and Sunday, the Lord’s day, but they do make exceptions in cases of emergency. They are in such demand that church members in need of help seize any opportunity to ask them for advice, blessings, or healing.

When the people needing healing are dead or thought to be so, or in a coma or unable to walk, they are carried by relatives and brought to the spiritual leaders, but this is always done in an inconspicuous manner. The words spoken by the current spiritual leader, Simon Kimbangu Kiangani, after he had raised a dead or comatose woman, were quite illustrative of
this atmosphere: “If you see a person being raised, do not clap your hands, but rejoice deep down in your hearts, for I am a man, and I cannot take pride in this.” Diangienda likewise said, “When a person comes to me for healing and is cured, don’t tell yourselves that Papa has done the healing. It is the person’s faith and mine which have combined and led up to the healing.” In his own day and age, Simon Kimbangu answered Judge De
Rossi’s question about his method for resurrecting the dead by saying, “By the divine power Jesus gave me.” Consequently, spiritual leaders and designated pastors are considered to be agents of healing, those who serve as tools for miracles to happen. The hopes of the patients and their families are always high.

The pattern emerging here concerns solely the relation between the patient and the healer. Healing sessions are unpaid and follow a code set up by Kimbangu for his helpers and successors: “As some of you will be elected by Christ to help me, I must remind you what your conduct shall be. Under no circumstances shall you be paid after healing or resurrecting a person, for you have received from the Lord the power to work acts of power, and He who gives freely will harshly punish anyone going counter to His will. You will often have to leave the dinner table or hurry out of bed to help out people who may need your spiritual assistance. In such cases, go and help them without delay or resentment. Be humble and abstain from pride.”

In this tradition, healing sessions take place one-on-one and are never managed collectively—unlike what happens in the Pentecostal churches filmed in the DRC by Gilles Remiche in his documentary *Miracle Merchants* or those described by the French ethnologists Sarah Demart and Sandra Fancello, who each showed how a person’s illness was handled as a collective issue, publicly proclaimed and processed by the pastors and congregations. Consequently, unlike Pentecostal churches where entire services and campaigns are organized around patients’ liberation and microphones play an important part in the atmosphere, making collective prayer particularly loud, in the Kimbanguist Church there are no healing campaigns—which is paradoxical, since this is how Kimbangu began his ministry. The legacy of his prophetic and therapeutic rituals among his successors is prayer—either audible or silent—and the sprinkling of patients’ ailing body parts with Nkamba water kept in plastic bottles.

Although healing remains God’s prerogative, Kimbanguism combines faith-based healing with modern medicine, which is fully part of the practices of the hospitals and dispensaries developed by the EJCSK and coexists with traditional treatments based on plants. While the latter has lost popularity as a result of the Christianization of lifestyles under the tutelage of evangelical and Pentecostal churches, it is still considered to be a solution of last resort, although it is not regarded favorably within the Kimbanguist Church. As the anthropologist John M. Janzen wrote, “Kimbangu himself decreed that minkissi medicines, now discredited, should be abandoned.”
Likewise, Martin related in her book that after healing Nkiantondo, Kimbangu saw her husband, who inquired about plants that might cure his wife. Kimbangu answered the man, “Your wife no longer needs any remedies, for she has found better than that.” In an interesting twist, it is said that Nkiantondo accused Kimbangu of having initiated her condition by casting an evil spell on her, only to appear as her savior later. Kimbanguist commentators give an exegesis on this episode, explaining that since the name Nkiantondo means “what thanks?” in Kikongo, the woman was only confirming the ungratefulness inscribed in her name when attacking her healer. Yet, if the story is true, it is worth asking why Kimbangu was assumed by Nkiantondo’s husband to be knowledgeable about herbal medicine and why Nkiantondo suspected Kimbangu of being a sorcerer. A current within Kimbanguist tradition holds that Kimbangu’s father was a conjure man or a traditional healer, which may be why the other two protagonists of the story asked him for advice or accused him of witchcraft. Building on the same premise, Van Wing wrote that Kimbangu had succeeded his father as a conjure man, while Efraim Andersson asserted that Kimbangu’s mother healed patients with herbs and leaves, and E. Bazola contended that Kimbangu’s aunt Kinzembo was a traditional healer. Martin aptly concluded, “All these assertions are attempts at ranking Kimbangu in the category of African conjure men and traditional healers.”

To gain a better insight into Kimbanguists’ attitude toward herbal medicine, it is helpful to delineate the role given to it in their church. Both witchcraft and fetish worship have been strongly rejected, both in Kimbangu’s time and in the present-day church. Yet herbal medicine is not so explicitly condemned. One of Simon Kimbangu’s grandsons gave me a private interview in which he explained that one day, while a teenager, he suffered from a cavity that kept him awake all night, crying. His father, Diangienda, the spiritual leader, asked his driver to go to Lutendele and pick leaves from a particular tree, which, Diangienda instructed, should be folded and placed in the cavity. Once this had been done, the pain instantly disappeared and the tooth was cured. This is evidence that the use of herbal medicine is not banned, but rather is left up to the individual person, with no specific recommendations or taboos. J. C. Katanga, the convert mentioned earlier, said in a televised interview that he had requested official authorization from the spiritual leader Simon Kimbangu Kiangani to use herbal medicine on members of the Kimbanguist Church. Since this was denied to him, he eventually chose to leave the church and start a congregation of his own.
Conversely, it is both authorized and recommended to utilize modern (Western) medicine. The Kimbanguist Church owns dispensaries, clinics, hospitals, and pharmacies. Even in the Nkamba area, there is a dispensary. Church members use both modern medicine and Kimbanguist religious medicine; in extreme circumstances and when in a position to choose, they often prefer to be seen by a spiritual leader. I can still remember the moans of a sick woman who was unable to walk and shivering with fever; when the spiritual leader Dialungana asked her if she wanted to go to the hospital, she answered, “No, you are greater than the hospital.” Church members do recognize the skills of modern doctors, but they bear in mind that healing is a God-given process. For instance, a church member told me how, following the instructions of a dream her younger sister had, they both decided to take their diabetic father out of a hospital where he had been admitted more than a fortnight before, in spite of the physician’s opposition. During his unauthorized transfer to another hospital, she phoned one of Kimbangu’s grandsons, Armand Wabasolele Diangienda, who immediately left Sunday service to join them. In the new hospital, the doctor confirmed that the patient was in urgent need of dialysis and could not have survived another day without it. Next, “Papa Armand also came and asked everybody to leave the room and leave him alone with my father. Then he prayed, and immediately, my father, who was nearly dead, opened his eyes and began speaking.”

This account clearly shows how the quest for healing among church members associates modern medicine and spirituality: the woman trusted the French medical system, but also held fast to her religious values, since the catalyst for the decision to transfer her father to a new hospital was a dream. In following the suggestion in her sister’s dream, she called on her spiritual leader, thereby recognizing his healing powers, while also putting her trust in the hospital system. Dreams are implicitly granted special importance and are frequent in similar situations, but they are not systematically expected to occur in the quest for miraculous healing. The spiritual leader’s request to be left alone with the patient provides additional evidence of the need for discretion surrounding Kimbanguist healing practices, especially in a hospital. Miracles are a recurrent and essential element in the Kimbanguist conception of spiritual healing as performed by Kimbangu’s descendants, which is valued more than both the White man’s medicine and traditional African medicine.

In a sermon that I attended in 1990 at the welcome center of the Kimbanguist congregation of the Plateaux des quinze ans in Brazzaville, Pastor
Jean Kouka explained that his wife was five months pregnant when a sonogram indicated that the fetus was dead. The desperate couple decided to see the spiritual leader Diangienda, who said a prayer and gave the woman some Nkamba water to drink, after which she felt her baby moving again. The doctors ordered another sonogram and confirmed the fetus was alive, and she was able to continue her pregnancy and deliver a healthy baby four months later. This testimony shows how Kimbanguists in search of healing subordinate the authority of modern medicine to that of spiritual leaders who have inherited Kimbangu’s prophetic traditions. Furthermore, Kimbanguist physicians and nurses never miss an opportunity to testify about the victories of Kimbanguist spiritual medicine over modern medicine. For instance, on September 12, 1991 (the day of the rehabilitation of Simon Kimbangu), I was attending the celebrations in Kinshasa when another Kimbanguist pastor, who was a gynecologist, testified in public about a sterile patient who had gone to Diangienda to cure her in spite of the doctor’s initial diagnosis and the unsatisfactory results of the tests he had ordered following the spiritual leader’s prediction that she was pregnant. The gynecologist reported that he confronted Diangienda with the woman’s test results, and the latter retorted, “Let me repeat that she is pregnant and will deliver a baby girl in the month of July.” . . . This was in November. In March, the same woman came to see me again; she was five months pregnant and . . . in July, she delivered a little girl.” This testimony was given in the Kimbanguist welcome center of Kinshasa in front of Diangienda; it is particularly revealing of the mix of cooperation and competition between modern medicine and Kimbanguist spiritual medicine, for the pastor-gynecologist ended his testimony with a question directed to the spiritual leader, “Eminence, who are you?,” suggesting that Diangienda was endowed with the divine authority of healing. This divine authority, stemming from the prophetic tradition initiated by Simon Kimbangu, gives his descendants a monopoly over the field of miraculous healing. However, this monopoly leads to a problematic situation since there are too few of them to meet the needs of both church members and nonmembers in search of cures. Pentecostal churches thus attract increasing numbers of followers and even some Kimbanguists, drawn to their ostentatious miracles.

One of the attractions of the Kimbanguist Church is the festive nature of its worship services and feasts. Services are held every Sunday and on specific dates that correspond to landmarks in the church’s history (see chapter 7). Sunday services consist of three distinct parts. First comes the
liturgical section, which begins with collective singing and an opening prayer, always delivered by a female member. The latter may be designated by the preacher or volunteer spontaneously if she feels drawn to do so. Kimbanguists explain this feature by saying that since Eve was the first to sin, a woman should be the first to ask for forgiveness in worship services. Then, the preacher for the day, who may be a male or female pastor, deacon, or catechist, reads aloud a psalm of her or his choice, and asks all the groups and choirs in the congregation to share a round of hymns—about ten minutes for each choir. Next comes a second reading, an excerpt from the Ten Commandments (either Exodus 20:1–17 or Deuteronomy 5:6–21, depending on the choice made by the preacher), after which a second round of hymns is called for. Next comes a session of three prayers, usually delivered by a man, then a woman, and then a young man or woman chosen by the preacher; each of the three prayers is preceded by a hymn and focuses on the hardships undergone by human beings all over the world—diseases, war, hunger, poverty, and so on.

The blessing of young children, who are presented to the congregation by their parents, and the collection (called matondo, “thanks” in Lingala) are then organized by a pastor chosen by the preacher for the day. The sermon follows; it is delivered in the language understood by the majority of the congregation (generally Lingala, Kikongo, Swahili, or Tshiluba), and its duration is not limited—it may last for thirty minutes, an hour, or more. The sermon is built on biblical themes, which are commented on and buttressed by as many hymns and messages of the spiritual leader as the preacher is familiar with. This is one of the key moments in the service since it allows the congregation to benefit from the spiritual experience of the preacher, as the latter testifies to the miracles she or he has experienced, heard of, or been told about by the spiritual leaders, the descendants of Kimbangu. In addition, dreams and visions experienced by the preacher or someone else are related. The preacher has so much leeway that she or he is the main figure of the liturgical part of the service. The preacher is free to comment on the Bible based on personal or collective understanding, and may not be interrupted during the sermon. The sermon may elicit either the agreement of the congregation or negative reactions, which are expressed during the second section of the service, known as the “social part,” during which church members may debate among themselves. After the recitation of the Lord’s Prayer, a final hymn closes the liturgical portion of the service.

The social part is divided into two phases. The first is the announcement of weddings, births, deaths, news of church members in the
hospital, and other such information. The second phase consists of music played by the band and the public greeting of Kimbanguist visitors from other congregations, non-Kimbanguist visitors attending the service, and various church officials. This phase closes with the public greeting of any descendants of Kimbangu attending the service: the band plays a special tune for them while the congregants march to honor their spiritual leader, whether he is present or not. After this, the spiritual leader or the descendant of Kimbangu representing him gives the congregation a final exhortation.

The third and last part of the worship service is known as nsinsani, a Kikongo word meaning “collection.” It is a sort of financial competition among the various groups and choirs, in which the band plays the lively tunes of the church’s hymns while the donors march in ways sometimes akin to dance. In her study of Kimbanguism in Zaire, Asch noted that “dance moves (which are sometimes difficult to distinguish from rhythmic marching for an outsider) are strictly forbidden and promptly repressed by the guards.” Today, many sermons focus specifically on the ban on dancing, since this dimension of Congolese popular culture seems to contaminate Kimbanguist religious practice in the ritual of the march. Many church members openly display new ways of marching, which sometimes clearly borrow from popular, nonreligious dance styles.
The festive atmosphere of the march is extremely important, for it is thanks to the nsinsani that the church raises the funds necessary to help members in the community and to accomplish the church’s development projects—such as the building of a great auditorium seating 2,000 in Kinshasa, hospitals, studios to host foreign visitors, or a radio and television station in Kinshasa. This section of the worship service is considered to be part of the good works (misala) in the Kimbanguist triad of love (bolingo), commandments (mibeko), and work (misala).

Kimbanguist worship also involves celebrating the many religious feasts and special events of church life, which include baptisms, the Lord’s Supper, weddings, funerals and wakes, and the various anniversaries in the church calendar. The Kimbanguist Church recognizes what it calls “baptism in the Holy Spirit,” which is celebrated with the blessing of clergy members; applicants are accepted from the age of twelve, and they may also be converts coming from other denominations not recognized by the WCC. Kneeling down in front of the pastors, they often wear green and white clothes, the two colors of the church—green symbolizing victory and white, purity.

Religious wedding ceremonies are extremely important, and more significance is granted to traditional wedding customs than to the official wedding performed at the town hall. For the couples conforming to Congolese
and, more generally, African traditions, the groom’s family is supposed to pay a dowry to the bride’s family: cash and presents demanded by her parents and other relatives. In this context, before the pastor performs the religious ceremony, the two families participating in the wedding are publicly asked whether there is any objection to it.

The sacrament of the Holy Supper is administered by clergy members under the supervision of the spiritual leader. Because wine is taboo in the Kimbanguist Church, honey juice is used as the symbol of the blood of Christ, while corn bread is used to symbolize the body of Christ.