PART III

EXPRESSIONS OF
KIMBANGUIST MESSIANISM
A study of Kimbanguism from its origins justifies the use of every concept listed by David Barrett to define African-initiated churches (see the introduction). It was born out of the prophetic activities of an exceptional person, Simon Kimbangu, who is believed to have had the power of resurrecting the dead and healing the sick and who also gave his followers a religious message challenging colonialism, with the promise that they would see a new social and spiritual order in which the established patterns of domination would be reversed. The millenarian dimension of Kimbanguism is present in believers’ expectation of a golden age where the dead will return on earth to coexist with the living. Their spiritual leaders often insist “be ready, for the dead are returning,” and inspired hymns are sent by the dead themselves to announce their impending return and to give their vision of a new social order that promises happiness and freedom from witchcraft.

Millenarianism plays an essential part in the Kimbanguist faith, to such a point that it may be said that the eschatological dimension is what draws believers to the church. The millenarian view hinges on the reinterpretation of the Christian message through the inspired hymns and the prophetic sermons of Diangienda and other spiritual leaders; it represents the essence of Kimbanguism and may account for the church’s decision to focus on identity reconstruction. The French sociologist Henri Desroche borrowed the philosopher Pierre-Joseph Proudhon’s neologism “messianosis,” that is, placing a messiah on a pedestal against his will, suggesting that it be applied to
representations of Simon Kimbangu as a symptom of both the natives’ aspirations for a new order and the colonizers’ distress in the face of resistance.¹

Millennial expectations emerged when the first prophecies of Kimbangu—those announcing the independence of African colonies—were taking place. In his 1955 book, *Sociology of Black Africa*, Georges Balandier showed how Kimbanguism developed on the basis of prophetism, messianism, and millenarianism. When it became a church, it built its rhetoric on the principle that Kimbangu would radically transform the status of Blacks, which gradually took hold among the believers. Marie-Louise Martin insisted on the same point: “With time, not just thousands, but millions of Congolese people were influenced by him. Kimbangu has become a legendary figure, whose return was and probably still is expected.”² These observations made in the 1950s and 1960s are still relevant nowadays, and eschatological rhetoric is still present in Kimbanguism. A list of events is also given to the believers in the church’s inspired hymns. For instance, the following, sung in Lingala by the GTKI choir, warns the believers regarding the harbingers of the Kimbanguist revelation at the end of time:

The Lord’s secrets I have shown you already
Let no one fool you!

Chorus: If you hear

Tenor: About
Ethnic strife,

Tenor: Be careful!
If you hear

Tenor: That
There are rivals for power,

Tenor: Be careful!
If you hear

Tenor: That
Nations [races] hate one another,

Tenor: Be careful!
Rejoice and hold fast
Leave it all to Me
Rejoice and hold fast
I will reveal Myself
Rejoice and hold fast
Let the world know you!

One of the key aspects of the church’s messianic dimension is the belief that God or Kimbangu will work things out when he chooses, as the hymn above announces by encouraging believers to hold fast until he reveals himself (as Simon Kimbangu or as his youngest son and reincarnation, Diangienda) to the world. This revelation will coincide with a revelation of the Kimbanguist Church’s saving nature and message to Black people worldwide. In this logic, ethnic warfare, conflicts, and other social unrest are to be interpreted through the lens of the inspired hymns. This blend of messianism and millenarianism may be compared to what Gérard Mordilhat and Jérôme Prieur analyzed in early Christianity: “The sudden advent of the Kingdom, the apocalypse promised by Jesus and taken up by his successors, is literally a revelation, a change in the face of the world, and not just a spiritual change, but also a transformation of beings and things.”

As the anthropologist Mircea Eliade explained, wars often trigger a resurgence of apocalyptic enthusiasm—the certainty that God will soon intervene by hastening the Second Coming of Christ. The messianic dimension of Kimbanguism is also perceptible in features that the Swedish missionary Bengt Sundkler identified in his observation of South African messianic churches in 1948: messianism often appears with the second generation, with the founder and his successor (usually his son) acting as liberators and mediators for their followers, bridging the gap between the living and the dead but also between humanity and the divine, like the kings of African traditions. Indeed, the Kongo royal tradition is visible in the rituals of the Kimbanguist Church, with church members and clergy kneeling in front of the descendants of the founder. The Kimbanguist moral code recommends kneeling in front of all authority, especially the descendants of Kimbangu and members of the clergy. The spiritual leader is sometimes considered to be a God-king reigning over the dead and the living and ensuring an ethnic, transnational, and pan-African balance of power.

Martin applied the parameters defined by Sundkler to the case of the Kimbanguist Church, focusing on the biblical, prophetic, and royal factors: “A prophet-healer, Simon Kimbangu, founded the movement which
led to the creation of the EJCSK. . . . The last son of the prophet, Joseph Diangienda, is the head of the church—in fact, its ‘king,’ or mvuala, a term which designates the prophetic and royal scepter. But neither Kimbangu nor Diangienda plays the role of a messiah.”⁶ As already mentioned, the mvuala, or sacred rod, was a royal attribute, which the king used at the time of the kingdom of Kongo to materialize his charismatic and traditional position of dominance. Kimbangu also carried a rod or cane, which his followers held to be sacred and which they called mvuala. It is claimed that it was used for the miraculous healing of several people as well as to give information to its owner about how to respond in confrontations with the Belgian colonial administrators. But Martin was incorrect in writing that neither Kimbangu nor his son Diangienda played the part of a messiah, which she considered to have been reserved for Jesus Christ alone in the Kimbanguist faith. It is likely that she missed or hid the messianic aspect of the church. Yet it remains troubling that each time she addressed this question, in her many articles and in her book on Kimbanguism, she never acknowledged that Kimbangu was considered by the believers to be the incarnation of the Holy Spirit or a messiah. Long before her works were published, Balandier had already pointed out the specificity of Kimbanguist messianism: “First of all there are those proclaiming the omnipotence of God, that represent the Trinity in the form of God (Nzambi Pungu)–Jesus–Kimbangou [sic].”⁷ But Martin refused to acknowledge this fact, and she portrayed Kimbangu not as a second savior or messiah but as a saint in the Catholic tradition, who lives in the presence of the Lord. When faced with Kimbanguists’ belief that the founder was the incarnation of the Holy Spirit, she chose to normalize and justify it, explaining it away as a misinterpretation of the dogma or pointing out some exaggeration in Kimbanguist testimonies.⁸

Today, it is undeniable that Kimbanguists consider the founder of their church to be a messiah on an equal footing with, or even above, Jesus. This is clearly reflected in the following hymn, sung in French, where Kimbangu is identified as Simon of Cyrene (Matthew 27:32):

Tenor: A mystery occurred en route to Golgotha where Jesus had to die

Chorus: There appeared an African whom they took by force,
To bear the cross behind Jesus.

Tenor: Yes, God came to rescue His godly son!
Chorus: Yes, Papa Kimbangu, we have recognized you (bis)
On Golgotha in Judah, Kimbangu was present
In Nkamba in Zaire, Jesus Christ was present
These words are a mystery
Our God is a Spirit
Jesus Christ is a Spirit
Kimbangu is the Holy Spirit.

Tenor: Jesus told us, brethren,
That he had a lot to say
But we cannot bear it;
The [Holy] Spirit will come and reveal it to us.

Tenor: Why are you doubting so much?
Why is there such unbelief?
It was indeed written,
“Through a foreign people I shall speak, Jerusalem.”

The scriptures are thus perceived as a mystery that Kimbangu came to reveal. Jesus announced that the kingdom of God would be taken away from the Jewish people (Matthew 21:42–44) to be given to another, and Kimbanguists consider Blacks, and particularly themselves, to be this new chosen people. As in other hymns, the sin that cost Jesus his life was committed by Blacks, and Kimbangu was present at the same spot where Jesus was crucified. Diangienda commented on this biblical passage as follows: “The man who, the Bible says, came from the fields with a machete and a hoe—where did he come from? After he laid the cross down, what did he and Jesus tell each other, and where did he go? The Bible is silent on this point, but all these things shall be revealed to us in the days to come.”

The Bible’s silences are very present in another dimension of Kimbanguism, which remains to be analyzed: the church’s rhetoric around identity reconstruction.

The honoring of ancestors, which is always central to ethnicity, is endowed with a particular significance in Kimbanguist theology. Van Wing wrote the following observations about Simon Kimbangu’s attitude toward what Van Wing called “ancestor worship”: “Before [Kimbangu] appeared, during the Kiyoka movement which had been started in northern Angola around 1872, all the fetishes had been burned with eagerness. But neither Kimbangu nor any other leader ever called for a rejection of ancestor
worship. Quite the contrary, the Kimbanguist movement squarely based itself on ancestor worship, having their graves cleaned up, as well as the paths leading to them, since their return to life supposedly was to bring back the Golden Age.”

What Van Wing did not say is that the Kimbanguists’ concern about ancestors does not include ritual practices around the dead, such as making libations or performing rituals on and around the graves. As explained earlier, the Kimbanguist Church focuses only on Simon Kimbangu, Marie Muilu, and their three sons. Consequently, it includes no ancestor worship in the African or Bantu meaning of the phrase, but a displacement of practices to approximate Christian ritual: praying silently in front of the graves. As Issiaka-Prospèr Lalayette observed, in African traditions, only those who led a blameless life or had historical or social prestige eventually became ancestors after passing away. While “anonymous” ancestors—those who led simple, discreet, moral lives—are mentioned and invoked collectively, the specific ancestors who are still present in their descendants’ memories are viewed as heroes.

This perspective may be applied to the Kimbanguist worldview, with the difference that, in this case, the process of transformation into ancestors bears the stamp of the Christian faith. Indeed, the Kimbanguist way of referring to the dead who are believed to be in heaven was explained by Diangienda: “In short, Kimbanguist theology renders constant homage to those righteous men and women who in time and space were worthy servants of the Eternal and his redeemer Messiah. They do not belong to the past, they are living and active with Christ, interceding constantly in favour of humankind. They support the action of the Holy Spirit in His intercession for us to the Eternal and Christ.”

This passage demonstrates that in the Kimbanguist worldview, not all dead men and women are part of the ancestor community; the only ones admitted are those who gained fame during their earthly lives thanks to acts of charity, faith, or good works in the church. The preservation of the memory of a dead person corresponds to the importance that person had in the life of the church. Yet this cannot be equated with ancestor worship in the sense Marie-Louise Martin intended: “Though Simon Kimbangu is a mediator, the great ‘ancestor,’ who indeed precludes worship of one’s own ancestors in the family, kindred and tribe, he stands in the closest relationship with Christ and leads his own to Christ and to the Father.” But Kimbangu and his three sons are in no way considered to be ancestors by the church members; they are held to embody the mystery of the Holy
Trinity. Consequently, any prayer to God is by definition directed to them. Kimbangu’s wife (always addressed as Mama Muilu) represents the feminine dimension of God; she is often identified, along with her husband and their three sons, in visions, dreams, and inspired hymns. A number of Kimbanguists even consider her to be Jesus’s mother, which is reinforced because her first name was Marie.

Kimbanguist theology does not discard tribal or family ancestors, contrary to what Martin contended, but it treats them somewhat nontraditionally. The dead fathers and mothers of the church may be heard in inspired hymns and seen in visions, dreams, or even apparitions. When great feasts are organized in Nkamba, it is not uncommon to hear that someone has seen a parent or another relative who passed away some time ago. Yet this is not necessarily attributable to ancestor worship. The Congolese historian Martial Sinda indicated that Kimbangu insisted on “reverence for the elders” and “paying respect to the dead” based on his Christian perspective rather than ancestor worship. Sinda suggested that Kimbangu’s “sole preoccupation was to raise awareness of a historical community.”

It is interesting that Sinda seemed to credit Simon Kimbangu with promoting an ethnic concept, that of “the Bakongo nation.” Yet, even though Kimbangu’s movement developed in the Kongo ethnic group, no archived materials show him preaching about Kongo identity; his message, rather, aimed at unity. Indeed, the main prophecy that struck both the colonial authorities and his fellow Congolese was “the White man shall become black and the Black man shall become white,” not “the White man shall become Kongo and the Kongo man, white.” Kimbangu’s focus must therefore be understood from the perspective of a reconstruction of Black, not just Kongo, identity. In his preaching, Kimbangu did not particularly celebrate Kongo forebears, not even Kimpa Vita, though she now holds a central place in the Kimbanguist faith. Instead, he preached the Bible and Jesus, which implied the restoration of a historical consciousness that is rooted less in the history of Congo than in biblical history. As a result, the subjective belief in a common origin, which is at the root of any sense of ethnicity, was framed within the norms imposed by the Bible. While Kimbanguism took root during the rise of Kongo ethnic claims, as depicted by Sinda and Balandier, its modern version reveals a deep need for an affirmation of Blackness beyond ethnic affiliations. Roger Bastide was aware of this, as the following analysis shows: “What is particularly striking is that from now on, messianic movements will be rolled back by prophetic ones, as the temporarily suppressed Blackness [négritude] will re-emerge in the new sects that are currently appearing.”
Hence, awareness of Black identity takes on great importance in the Kimbanguist worldview and representations. As a religion, Kimbanguism bears the signs of ethnic thinking. By reprocessing the Christian message, Kimbanguist identity offers a new understanding of all the major aspects of Christian identity. Thus, by rereading the Bible and analyzing the norms imposed by colonists to explain the positioning of each race, Kimbanguists have been enabled to critique their ethnic identification under the guidance of their spiritual leader Diangienda.

Consequently, the biblical forebears Adam and Eve—who were always represented as White during the entire colonial period—are here believed to be Black. Diangienda preached, “The Black man was the one who was created in God’s image and likeness; so Adam and Eve were Black people.”17 This statement by their spiritual leader is considered by Kimbanguist believers to be an actual revelation, and it is all the more important and credible because their inspired hymns (which are a theological mystery) regularly insist on these biblical forebears. The following is from a hymn sung in Lingala by the GTKI choir, which conveys this message:

Tenor: Humble dust  
Was turned by God into a man:

Chorus: These two, Adam and Eve,  
They are our ancestors.

Tenor: Black skin,  
God has loved you  
From the time of Genesis.

Chorus: These two, Adam and Eve,  
They are our ancestors.

For Kimbanguists, it is an absolute certainty that Adam and Eve, whom the scriptures identify as the ancestors of all humankind, were a Black man and a Black woman. It is worth mentioning that Simon Kimbangu never preached this; Diangienda did. But because his early sermons were neither transcribed nor taped due to a lack of adequate devices and the predominance of the oral tradition, it is difficult to know when he began articulating this tenet of the Kimbanguist faith. I have already discussed the manner in which the Kimbanguist Church’s interpretation of the Bible has been
shaped by the teachings of Diangienda, who addressed from a theological angle matters of high scientific and ideological importance. In his speeches and sermons, he emphasized the positive nature of Blackness as the original form of humanity, based on the premise that the first human beings originated in Africa. Marie-France Briselance summarized the present state of knowledge: “The debate is still going on. Whether the oldest human being was discovered in Tanzania in the person of Oldoway or in Ethiopia in that of Lucy, we are certain of one thing—Africa really is the cradle of mankind.”

The most recent discovery was of a hominid between 6 and 7 million years old, unearthed by a Franco-Chadian research team; this is the oldest known member of the human lineage, with links to the last common ancestor shared by chimpanzees and human beings. This discovery was made public in a paper published in *Nature* on July 11, 2002. This new species of hominid was named *Sahelanthropus tchadensis* (“Chadian man from the Sahel”) and the specimen was called Toumai, which means “hope for life” in the Goran language.

Diangienda’s take on the debate was framed in purely spiritual terms. From his perspective, the Adam and Eve of the Bible are in no way fictional, but were actual people who really existed. When he spoke on the African origins of humankind, he sometimes hinted at the notion of intellectual property rights, as the following excerpt shows:

Haven’t I told you time and again that Blacks are made in God’s image? All the time I was saying this, people refused to believe me, but now it has really become a topical issue. I see many journals where Blacks are mentioned. . . . It was not until recently, when people—White people—began speaking of Africa as the cradle of mankind, that Blacks began paying attention. But when I was saying the same thing, no, people called me a madman and challenged me, saying, “How do you know?” Oh, but we are the ones who were created in the image and likeness of God!

Diangienda’s assertion is perceived as being authentic because he gave details on the appearance of Adam and Eve: “Let me tell you about the size of Papa Adam and Mama Eve. They were giants and could be taller than this house [pointing to a three-story building in the parish of the Plateaux des quinze ans].”

The Kimbanguist version of the episodes of creation and the book of Genesis is distinct from the relatively sketchy narratives of the scriptures,
for it is supplemented by the prophetic teachings of Diangienda, which have shaped the representations in a more precise fashion. If Adam and Eve are considered to be Black, it is logical to represent them as living on African soil and speaking an African language. According to the French sociologist Pierre-Jean Simon, an ethnic community generally defines itself in relation to a territory of its own, a geographical and environmental space that is imbued with representations, memories, and shared feelings. Hence there is a territorial dimension behind ethnicity—not in every single case, but in most cases—framed in terms of nostalgia, symbols, or myths. This dimension is all the more significant when communities are physically standing on their soil, the ground of a country that is real and not mythical—even though every territory tends to become idealized.

This analysis can be seen in the Kimbanguist community as regards Nkamba, which was Kimbangu’s birthplace and the setting for his prophetic activities and preaching. It was subsequently renamed Nkamba–New Jerusalem, the place where Kimbangu and his followers were arrested and deported. His body was buried in Nkamba in a mausoleum on April 3, 1960. The significance of Nkamba can only be understood if one takes into consideration the believers’ worldview and approach to the place: everyone walks barefoot there since shoes are forbidden, as are spitting on the ground and cutting trees. The soil itself, a red clay, is sometimes taken by pilgrims as a souvenir or for healing purposes; it is said to have therapeutic virtues. Nkamba also holds a unique place in the Kimbanguist faith because it is a theological element of the process of identity reconstruction.

Indeed, chapter 21 of the book of Revelation, which evokes a new heaven and a new earth, is considered by Kimbanguists as having already been accomplished in Nkamba. They therefore consider all the sites there to be sacred—from the mausoleum containing the bodies of Simon Kimbangu and his three sons to a three-story building called Nzo a Mitsinu (“house of promises” or “house of kings”) to a sacred spring flowing into a pool called Sima, in which people immerse themselves to be purified or healed. There is also in Nkamba a huge temple with a seating capacity of 37,000, whose construction was prophesied by Simon Kimbangu shortly before he was arrested. According to oral tradition, Kimbangu said that the period following its inauguration would coincide with great spiritual upheavals in the church as Kimbanguists and all other Christians, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, would accomplish acts of power similar to the ones Jesus and the apostles accomplished. The spiritual and moral foundations of the world would be shaken to the core.
The devotion of church members to their holy city is such that a number of distinguished visitors have been deeply moved. Hank Crane’s testimony, quoted above, is an example of this effect, but he was not alone. Marie-Louise Martin reported her own impressions upon entering the city in the 1960s:

The hill of Nkamba–[New] Jerusalem, which is still inhabited by a number of families, shall in a few years become a place dedicated to prayer, as houses are being rebuilt on neighboring hills. When worshipping in Nkamba and living in this place, one is impressed by what might be called “the achieved eschatology,” in the sense of an awareness of the presence of God. The heavenly Jerusalem of Revelation 21 is somehow anticipated *hic et nunc*, in the here and now. The great stairs leading up to the sanctuary symbolize the stairs that Jacob saw in his dream, signifying the promise of God’s presence for all those who will walk up to it in prayer.24

Nkamba–[New] Jerusalem [shows] the reactivation of the redeeming work of Christ. . . . It is the city of Kimbangu just as ancient Jerusalem was the city of David. . . . This is the fulfilment of the divine promises, which are transferred from the ancient city to the New Jerusalem—the promises that people of all nations will come as pilgrims to Zion.25

Likewise, the secretary general of the WCC visited Nkamba in 1999 and imparted his impressions to the Kimbanguist congregation:

Nkamba bears a very special name among these centers of Christianity [in Congo]. We have heard about miracles taking place in Nkamba, blind people recovering sight, deaf people hearing, paralyzed people being able to walk. These are indeed signs of the presence of the Spirit of our Lord. We visited the spring of holy water. We have realized that this really is the Source of Life. It is the source of a Life to be fully shared, not protected and kept for oneself alone. It is a Life that is multiplied in order to be shared. It reminds me of this wonderful vision at the end of the Bible—the vision of the heavenly Jerusalem. Certainly, in the center of this holy city, there is a spring that flows into a river. On both banks of this river, there are trees, and you certainly remember that the leaves of these trees are meant to heal all peoples. So it is my prayer upon leaving Nkamba that the Source of Life, the Source of the Living Spirit, should flow into a River of Life.
This Spirit is healing not just the Congolese people, which has been
tried and devastated by a long war; but let this spiritual awakening in
Congo become a source of awakening for the whole region in Africa,
for a renewal, a reconstruction, a renaissance—an actual renaissance
of Africa. So, having visited Nkamba in a pilgrimage, we shall bring
back with us this message—a message of life and hope, a message of
simplicity, of the Spirit of the Beatitudes; and may the Spirit of Our
Lord Jesus Christ be with you every day.26

Such praise for the holy city of Nkamba from an official of the WCC nat-
urally paved the way for theological speculation among the members of the
Kimbanguist Church, since they understood this as a confirmation by reli-
able religious officials of a real and tangible manifestation of the presence
of God. Nkamba is a city of blessings, which, following Simon Kimbangu’s
prophecy, welcomes religious leaders from various denominations around
the world as well as Congolese and other African politicians, popular music
stars, traditional chiefs, and so on. It is open to all races and nationalities.
The Nzo a Mitsinu was built there to host the presidents of the three coun-
tries of the ancient kingdom of Kongo, because the Kimbanguists see them
as the bedrock of the world. This belief is grounded in an inspired hymn
received in French and sung by the Chorale des dirigeants:
The God of all nations is Black,
Hallelujah, amen!
Our Lord Jesus, the Savior of the world, is Black,
Hallelujah, amen!

Chorus: The spurned race was the chosen race;
Get together, natives of the initial Congo!
Jesus is calling you.

This hymn is worthy of a lengthy analysis, for it does not simply address Kimbanguists or the modern Congolese, but the Congolese of ancient times. The essential point is that “the initial Congo,” which may be identified as the kingdom of Kongo—unless it alludes to a Congo undocumented by the contemporaries of Kimpa Vita but blended in the Kimbanguists’ collective psyche with the garden of Eden—is inseparable from the Black race and from the Blackness of God and Christ. The hymn reveals the sacredness of Congolese territory in the Kimbanguist faith. Congo—or, more precisely, the area of the modern-day DRC, Angola, and Congo-Brazzaville—is thus considered to be the original garden of Eden mentioned in Genesis. Further, the reason that the kingdom of Kongo was appropriated in the Kimbanguist mythical topography is probably that the Congolese have kept vivid memories of the fight of Kimpa Vita for independence. They care little about the stories that claim that the kingdom of Kongo was founded on acts of violence or even witchcraft, for the nationalist spirit of Kimpa Vita has led many church members to believe that the kingdom was rooted in an unchanging peace and an Edenic form of unity.

The Kimbanguist faith locates in Nkamba the specific place where God took some dust from the soil to shape man, leaving the imprint of his fingers. On February 3, 1989, a map of Africa was discovered in Nkamba: the soil allegedly cracked open, disclosing the shape of the African continent. This place is still visible now; bricks were laid all around it to protect the soil from the rain.

The Kimbanguist faith considers to be sacred any material space that holds memories from Simon Kimbangu, Marie Muilu, and their three sons. Anything that bears their imprints is held sacred. Besides Nkamba, which is the Kimbanguists’ holy land, other sacred places include the courthouse of Mbanza Ngungu, where Simon Kimbangu was tried and sentenced; the prison where he was jailed in Lubumbashi; and Luntendele on the bank of the Congo River, some 120 miles east of Kinshasa, where the Kimbanguist
divinity school was built. Luntendele is where, according to oral tradition, Simon Kimbangu in chains was thrown into the river by Belgian colonists, but he stood on the surface of the water and walked to a safe place in a grotto, where he left his handprints and footprints, which serve today as evidence of his divine power. I have viewed documentaries made by the church, and I saw the marks of two hands and two feet on a rock in the middle of the river.

Other sacred places include areas where Kimbangu, while imprisoned, appeared and spoke to his followers, for example in Boko and Kunzulu in Congo-Brazzaville and in Boma and Lowa in the DRC. His sons have imparted sacredness to Lukulu, DRC, where Diangienda was run over by a car, and to Kieba, a hill near Nkamba, where Dialungana passed away; these sites have become dedicated to meditation. Each sacred place can be considered to be a spiritual antenna that connects with Nkamba–New Jerusalem, with a mission of its own. When prayers are made during memorial ceremonies in these places filled with memories, such prayers are held to be particularly effective. The Kimbanguist identity is thus best understood in correlation with this network of sacred places, whose epicenter is Nkamba.

For Kimbanguists, time is also hallowed in commemorations that tie past events to present and future ones. In the Kimbanguist Church, time is given spiritual significance, and certain dates are singled out as especially fit for prayer. The Kimbanguist conception of time has two aspects—a chronological or historical dimension and a cyclical dimension. In the latter, time renews itself during the celebration or commemoration of past events. As a result, past events are never relegated to mere history, for they rekindle the faith shaped by the spiritual leaders’ messages and the inspired hymns. The present continuously tends toward the future, which is the time of promises. Religious feasts give insight into the Kimbanguist experience of time.

The calendar of the Kimbanguist liturgy opens on April 6, the anniversary of Kimbangu’s first miracle, which is considered to be the date of the founding of the church. Since this date often coincides with Easter, the latter feast is either not celebrated or given less importance. The other feast days are:

May 25: Kimbanguist Christmas, which corresponds to the birthday of Dialungana (1916).
June 6: the day the Belgian authorities failed to arrest Simon Kimbangu.
June 30: anniversary of the independence of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which is perceived as the fulfillment of a famous prophecy by Simon Kimbangu.


July 29: the day Diangienda was run over by a car in Lukulu (1959), shortly before he took command of the church; this is understood as manifesting the transmission of power from the founder to his youngest son.

August 4: the day Diangienda had a vision of his father (1951) showing him hosts of young disciples who had been called to serve God under his guidance; this has become Kimbanguist Youth Day.


September 12: Simon Kimbangu’s birthday, his arrest by the Belgian authorities, and his official recognition by the Zairian state.

October 3: the day Kimbangu was sentenced to death by a Belgian military tribunal (1921). His execution, scheduled for October 4, was canceled, and the sentence became a life sentence.

October 12: anniversary of Kimbangu’s death (1951) after thirty years in the Elisabethville jail; the official Kimbanguist Church also celebrates Simon Kimbangu Kiangani’s birthday on this day.

December 24: official recognition of the church by the Belgian state (1959) as Église de Jésus Christ sur la terre par son prophète Simon Kimbangu (EJCSK); on December 24, 1992, the church organized an atonement ceremony for the sin of Adam and Eve.

February 12: birthday of Simon Kimbangu’s eldest son, Kisolokele (1914).


March 22: birthday of Diangienda, the founder’s youngest son (1918).

On these days, many Kimbanguists travel to Nkamba to attend the celebrations. Yet, this calendar also attracts criticism. In 2002, attendees at a symposium of the divinity school of the Simon Kimbangu University urged the church to hold fewer celebrations in order to put an end to the confusion between commemorations and religious feast days.27

The Kimbanguist psyche is shaped by an experience of time as consecrated by the succession of feasts and is rooted in a three-part territorial perspective, in which (1) Africa is defined as the motherland, (2) the three Congos (the DRC, Congo-Brazzaville, and Angola) are the landmarks of the world, and (3) there is an ongoing hope of reuniting the three nations into a reborn kingdom of Kongo. Believers associate the reborn Kongo with a
millenarian kingdom of God on earth, where human beings will speak only one language again—Kikongo.

The languages spoken by the inhabitants of the vast territory of the kingdom of Kongo may be grouped into three main categories: languages designated as “ethnic” or Congolese, national languages, and official languages (French for the two republics of Congo and Portuguese for Angola). All Congolese and Angolans speak at least one of the 200 ethnic languages, since they are used locally and for communication with other communities. The people who only speak an ethnic language or dialect are generally the least educated and most rural citizens. These languages, though spoken by many, do not enjoy the same respect as the official and national languages in public opinion.

In Congo-Brazzaville and the DRC, Lingala is the dominant national language in each capital. It represents the linguistic signature of Congolese identity, and it is widely known and circulated across Africa and throughout the world via the extremely popular Congolese rumba. The Kikongo spoken to the south of each capital—which is distinct from the Kikongo dialect—is known as Munukutuba, Kikongo ya l’état (“state Kikongo”), or the Kikongo of the press. It ranks second after Lingala as a national language in both republics of Congo. The DRC has two other national languages, Ciluba/Tshiluba, spoken in the southeastern provinces of Kasai and Shaba, and Swahili (the most common African language), spoken in the eastern part of the country. In 2003, Lingala ranked sixth among the most spoken languages of sub-Saharan with 15 million speakers, according to the Francophone newsmagazine Courrier International, after Swahili and Hausa (39 million speakers each), Yoruba (22 million speakers), Amharic (21 million), and Ibo (18 million). Kikongo came in twenty-fourth, with 3 million speakers. This language, which holds a special place in Kimbanguist theology, is connected to the Kongo ethnic group, which finds its roots in the kingdom of Kongo.

The Kongo group, which has been scattered since the dismantling of the kingdom, is one of the dominant ethnic groups living in the three states born of the colonization of the region—Congo-Brazzaville, the DRC, and Angola. Yet the Bakongo people are not identifiable as a homogeneous group today, and it is quite difficult to visualize the ethnic map that existed at the time of the kingdom of Kongo; only ideologues in search of a lost genealogy are still trying to accomplish such a feat. The Africanist historian Sophie Le Callenet explained that “the group constantly referred to the ancient kingdom as to a Golden Age, and was seeking to restore the unity of the Ba-Kongo and their cultural and social grandeur.”
A similar feeling of nostalgia for the past greatness of the kingdom of Kongo may be perceived to various degrees among the members of the Kimbanguist Church through the celebration of the Kikongo language not only as Simon Kimbangu’s mother tongue but as the sacred language that preexisted the Tower of Babel and is destined to be the universal language of the future. The consecration of the Kikongo language was facilitated under the leadership of Dialungana (1992–2001) because he had not received a formal education or lived in an urban environment, and therefore spoke only his mother tongue. Instead of weakening his aura by making him appear to be a “country boy,” this led believers to see his monolingualism as a sign that Kikongo is a special language. The Kimbanguist pastor Assumbe, the aide of Dialungana when he gave me an interview in November 2000, shared the following anecdote:

Papa Mfumu a Mbanza [Dialungana] had given me a mission: I had to bring one hundred copies of the Bible in Kikongo to Europe, including Geneva. When I landed at the Geneva airport, the White man who was in charge of checking my luggage pointed to a café, asking me if I liked coffee. I said I did, and that I usually had Nescafé [instant coffee]. Then he asked me why my bag was so heavy, and if he could check it. . . . After doing so, he cried out, “But what is wrong with you? You go to great lengths to export a hundred copies of the Bible to Geneva, but couldn’t you figure out they are published in Geneva?” I answered, “You asked me about coffee in its processed form, yet coffee comes from Africa. It is the same thing with the Bible—it may be printed in Europe, [but] it still comes from Africa.”

What is significant in this story is not the pointlessness of bringing back to Switzerland books that were printed there, but the meaning assigned to this act. The fact that the Bible was translated into Kikongo situates the answer in the Kimbanguist worldview, particularly that of the church members who contend that Kikongo is the original language of humanity and thus the language of the biblical patriarchs. This consecration of the Kikongo language is clearly part of the process of appropriation of the Bible by the Kimbanguists. However, this belief is not part of the official dogma and does not seem to be shared unanimously by the members of the church, which includes many different ethnic and linguistic groups. Indeed, since language is in many cases, an extremely significant marker of ethnicity and a very strong factor in maintaining a feeling of belongingness to a particular
community and of separation from the rest, if the church officially identified Kikongo as the original language, it would place this language above the rest and seem to minimize the other linguistic and (therefore) ethnic groups, which would weaken the community bonds that Diangienda had insisted on consolidating and preserving. Neither in his sermons to the church members nor in inspired hymns was he ever heard to dwell on the linguistic issue. On the contrary, he avoided taking sides in ethnic matters and always encouraged the church members to pray in their own mother tongues. He also encouraged the young Kimbanguists pursuing higher education to learn international languages, such as English, French, and Spanish, and in an official statement about the EJCSK’s position, he said:

Thus the Church of Christ on Earth through the Prophet Simon Kimbangu condemns all tribal, regional and racial arrogance. It hopes for the furtherance of a new humanity in the world, which brings people closer together irrespective of their race, tribe or regional loyalty and whatever their colour of skin or their social position may be. This emphasis on a new humanity which condemns all kinds of racial arrogance shows clearly that the Kimbanguists cannot be accused of “hatred of foreigners” or “hatred of the white.” It also shows that the church is not the prerogative of the Bakongo tribe, as is sometimes still claimed today. This is a church which is conscious of its “world mission,” hence its name, the Church of Jesus Christ on Earth through the Prophet Simon Kimbangu.

Still, it is worth noting that Diangienda and his two brothers gave Kikongo names to a number of people, both members and nonmembers of the church and both members and nonmembers of the Kongo group. This has resulted in certain names being identifiable markers of a Kimbanguist identity. In the Kimbanguist worldview, when a person is given a name by the spiritual leader—a relatively unusual occurrence—the traditional African understanding of individual personhood is displaced by a Christian theological significance. The two value systems are thus mingled. The process is not new, since the subjects of the king of Kongo had integrated Portuguese first names into their own naming processes. A brief look at the names borne by Kimbanguists may give a better understanding of an identification process that has a direct impact on individual personhood and includes the person thus named in the church’s global project of identity reconstruction.
Simon Kimbangu’s parents gave him a name meaning “the one who reveals hidden truths.” When it was his turn to participate in the traditional naming process, he gave his sons similarly meaningful names in Kikongo: Kisolokele (“It was revealed”) Dialungana (“It was accomplished”), and Diangienda (“It’s gone”). It is also worth mentioning that family names, in the Western sense of the term, were not common in the traditional Congolese naming process. This is why none of Simon Kimbangu’s sons bore the name “Kimbangu,” just as Simon Kimbangu himself never took the last name of his own father, Kuyela. However, when Diangienda and his siblings succeeded their father, they initiated a new system, which both disrupted and maintained the traditional naming patterns. Their children all bear their names, but in a new form since the names of the fathers come first: all of Kisolokele’s children have names beginning with “Kisolokele,” while those of Dialungana have “Kiangani” as their first names, and those of Diangienda have names beginning with “Diangienda.” It seems that family names have taken on a new significance for the founder’s grandchildren, who bear the names of their fathers, who are regarded as superhuman beings by Kimbanguists. The descendants of the “three papas” are also considered to varying degrees to be the reincarnations of their own fathers. They insist on being called “Kimbangus”: the founder’s name has been transformed into a concept, designating his biological lineage and possibly his reincarnation in one of his direct descendants. One last important point is the near-absence of any mention of the figure of the maternal uncle, in spite of its vital importance in the Kongo kinship system.

The new naming process is not limited to the family circle, however. Besides the unsurprisingly high numbers of boys named Simon or Joseph or Charles in Kimbanguist families, several members of the church either were given their names at birth or were renamed by the spiritual leaders. Indeed, many parents now take their newborn babies to the spiritual leader for him to name them. This is why many members of the Kimbanguist Church bear Kikongo names while not belonging to the Kongo ethnic group. These names may be grouped in the following way:

1. Circumstances of birth. A well-known story in the Kimbanguist Church features a three-month-old girl who was abandoned by her biological mother behind the house of Diangienda in Kinshasa. The spiritual leader adopted the baby, naming her Touzola Divengi Nzambi, which means “Let us love what God created.” Likewise, Ndoko, whose name means “curse,” had been given this traditional name by his
mother in the hope of countering fate, for he had been born after two stillborn boys. When Ndoko converted to Kimbanguism in his fifties, Diangienda renamed him Lulendo Lua Nzambi, which means “God’s pride.” I received this testimony from his son who, at age thirty-three, had kept this name for himself too.

Other names are evocative of less tragic circumstances. For instance, children born to parents who were thought to be barren and who were cured by the spiritual leaders of the church were given the names Bafuidinsoni (“They are embarrassed”), Lusakumunu (“blessing”), Malungidi (“It has been accomplished”), Nsilulu (“promise”), and Wavuezola (“The one who was neglected”—a name with clear biblical symbolism).

2. Events. George Harris, an African American Baptist from Atlanta who visited Kimbanguist communities in the DRC in 2000, caused a great deal of emotion among Kimbanguists. He asked Dialungana to reveal the name his ancestors bore. He was told it was Diambu Dia Kiesse, which means “happy event,” and so he returned to Atlanta with a new name. Another visitor from the African diaspora, a British man called Raymond Reynolds, who was married to a woman from the DRC, testified on the same day that he had had a vision of Simon Kimbangu asking him to go to Nkamba and change his name to Dimonekene, which means “It became visible” or “It was revealed.” Both testimonies were videotaped and circulated among Kimbanguist communities in December 2000.

3. Context of a person’s birth. While Diangienda was busy organizing the return of Congolese pastors and their families to Brazzaville in the midst of the Katanga war in 1964, my older brother was born in the hospital of Gombe Matadi, thus keeping our parents from fleeing the country. The spiritual leader, seeing my father, Antoine Mokoko, the next morning, asked him why he had not left yet, and my father answered that they had just had a baby boy. “He then put his hand into his pocket and retrieved a piece of paper which read ‘Kayendako,’” my mother, Joséphine Elo, testified several decades later. The meaning of the name in Kikongo is “He had not left.”

4. Prophecies. In the Kimbanguist Church, the 1990s were marked by a series of prophecies made by the spiritual leaders, especially Diangienda. While he was in the midst of this euphoria, parents came with their newborn babies for him to name them as usual, and these children received prophetic names, including Mbotumonamo (“We’ll
see”), Molueki (“It is coming”), Munantangu (“There will be a time”), Tufinamene (“We are getting close”), Diakubikua (“What is prepared”), and Situakembela (“We’ll rejoice”).

5. The mission or task of the child. “When I was seven, my mother took me to see Papa Diangienda. When he saw me, he called me Mbuta, and encouraged my family to call me this way.” Mbuta means “elder” or “big brother.” This particular church member is renowned for his gift of receiving “songs from the angels” and sometimes puzzles other members of the community.

These names and others become part of both the families’ names and the process of identity reconstruction. They are often read as clues to individual life stories.

Even if it seems that the contemporary Kimbanguist naming process implies a distance from the Congolese cultural context, in reality it has been only a semantic evolution. In the Kimbanguist worldview, a newborn child may be perceived either as an angel or as the reincarnation of a biblical ancestor. But being the reincarnation of an ancestor (or, rather, of God) is only thinkable if the child is one of the descendants of Simon Kimbangu, for he is considered to be the only envoy of Jesus whose mission is to liberate Black men and women from the curse attached to original sin.