Kimbanguism

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Belief in witchcraft is not commonly accepted in the Christian faith as defined today by the Catholic and Protestant churches in the West; it is considered paradoxical, if not contradictory, for a Christian to profess a belief in witchcraft. In African countries, missionaries combated practices of witchcraft by designating them as pagan beliefs. Colonial missionizing included an ideology of conversion rooted in the labeling of Africans as pagans, as the French ethnologist André Mary emphasized: “The first task of colonial missionizing is the demonization of cultural difference.” Yet, as the Congolese sociologist Joseph Tonda explained, “it is still in an ethnocentric manner that the civilizing God chooses to treat the genie of witchcraft, by fashioning the latter into the representative of the entirety of Black mankind, who must be freed of its grip through conversion.” Consequently, the definitions of godliness, witchcraft, and healing must be examined, since salvation is inescapably tied with normative, racialized understandings of civilization, purity, health, and cleanliness.

While ethnologists and historians evidence the difficulties in defining witchcraft, Kimbanguists find explanations for it in the scriptures. The book of Genesis offers an interpretation of the origins of humanity and evokes the transgression of divine law by the forebears Adam and Eve, who ate a mysterious “forbidden fruit.” But the biblical symbolism does not explain the stakes of their fall from grace. Kimbanguist doctrine, as developed by Diangienda, offers its own interpretation for this founding myth,
connecting it to the Trinitarian dogma and the origin of evil. He explained that Lucifer, who, as in classic Christian doctrine, used to be the highest ranking of angels and God’s favorite intermediary with them, had fallen from grace after refusing to take orders from the Holy Spirit and acknowledge that the three persons of the Trinity are one God. Diangienda justified the eternal banishment of demons and their leader by quoting Matthew 12:31–32, where blasphemy against the Holy Ghost is presented as the one unforgivable sin. In his subsequent exegesis of the fall of Adam and Eve, man appears as a superior creature to angels so as to resist Lucifer’s attacks. This is successful for decades, until Eve is given to Adam as a companion and forgets their renewed covenant with God. This is how their “eating of the fruit” is understood by Kimbanguists: “When she listened to the voice of the serpent, Eve received witchcraft from Satan; and in her turn, she passed it on to her husband, Adam, and their eyes were opened and they knew they were naked.”

Witchcraft—a key aspect of sub-Saharan African cultures—is thus designated as the original sin and identified in the Bible as the root cause of the predicament of Africans and African-descended people. It is not really surprising that this cultural notion was chosen to explain the metaphor of the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, given that many personal testimonies and academic studies on African spiritualities and beliefs concur in identifying the “gift of double sight” as proof of initiation to witchcraft or of an understanding of invisible realities. One of the best-known examples concerns a French Catholic missionary, the Jesuit Éric de Rosny, who, after living in Cameroon among the Douala ethnic group for decades, spent ten years being initiated into occult practices between 1970 and 1980. In the book he wrote about this experience, he related what he had been told by the Cameroonian conjure doctor who had initiated him: “We are the ones who can open our eyes at night, in the ndimsi. The ndimsi, then, is just like being in the light. That’s what the ndimsi is all about. You can see what’s going on in Europe, what’s going on over there and in other places too, while staying home all the time. That’s what the ndimsi is like: you see good and evil.”

In another text, Rosny summarized his personal experience in the following terms:

The night-time activities of a local nganga [conjure man] could not but attract me, since I was looking for a path to further penetrate the otherworld my students lived in. I later understood that he interpreted my regular visits to him as a wish to become his disciple. . . .
His name was Din. . . . Din was the first and only person who took me beyond the stage of simple knowledge by deciding to “open my eyes” in a ritual introducing me to the practice of his art. To do so, he worked on the eyes of a goat, in conformity with the customs of his tradition. This was completed by August 30, 1975.  

Sonia Lazareff, who earned fame in France as a psychic, wrote about her initiation to witchcraft in Ivory Coast: “I accepted everything, for my goal had remained unchanged—I wanted to be initiated, master the secrets of Africa, and become empowered to possess the fetishes created for me and programmed for me. . . . [A]t first I did not experience much. Then I received waves as powerful as electric shocks. The curtain of shadows was ripped apart, and I could see.”

While witchcraft is an object of attraction and positive interest for Europeans, it remains a source of terror for people in Congo and the rest of Africa. What Sinda wrote in 1972 still rings true: “Witchcraft has branched out even into the cities inhabited by Africans raised in the European style. Today still, witchcraft is a cause of panic in such milieus, where people fear it more than any other harm.” Hence it is not surprising that what is understood by an overwhelming majority of Africans as the ultimate tragedy and the timeless embodiment of calamity should be interpreted in the Kimbanguist cosmogony as the original sin and the cause for the curse of Blackness. The biblical episode of the curse of Africans and their descendants through their ancestor Ham (Genesis 9:24–27), which was used and propagated by Christian missionaries in the nineteenth century (see chapter 2), is appropriated and redefined by the Kimbanguist faith against the backdrop of its project of identity reconstruction. Indeed, Diangienda first celebrated Africanness as revealing the origins of humankind; then he gave Blackness a negative charge by blaming Adam and Eve for the original sin of witchcraft, making Blacks the bearers of the resulting curse. In this case, combating witchcraft amounts to challenging social classification, since it is by equating witchcraft with their own original sin that Kimbanguists, as Africans, became conscious of their oppressed situation and the negative identity that has been foisted on them.

The difference linked to ethnicity may be steeped in a sense of shame, if it is stigmatized as a negative identity, or it may manifest as self-assertiveness or a claim for official recognition, if it is redefined as a positive identity. Kimbanguist identity is both a racial and a religious one, since the Kimbanguist faith embraces racial consciousness. Yet Blackness is perceived
as a negative identity while the Kimbanguist identity is positive. The negative identity does not disappear but is transformed in the processes of self-identification and in the critique of Blacks’ subordinate status, since Kimbanguist theology analyzes the worldwide oppression of Blacks to first establish hypotheses and then to offer metaphysical interpretations for this situation. As already mentioned, this predicament is understood as resulting from a divine curse caused by the original sin—witchcraft—of the forebears Adam and Eve. The existence of a curse is said to be proven both by the lack of participation of Blacks in discoveries and inventions at every turning point in the history of humankind and by their oppression and victimization by the dominant Other.

In Kimbanguist racial consciousness, the negative image of Blacks bequeathed by European missionaries has been internalized, and believers have consequently accepted their place in the social order, seeming to participate in their own domination and oppression. To an outsider, it may be surprising and even shocking to see an African-initiated church embracing as a fact the curse of Ham; yet here, the appropriation of the negative identity is part of the construction of a renewed identity. By asserting the curse of Blacks, Kimbanguists, as Black men and women, define themselves as objects of study and problems to be solved. Internalizing the negative image is combined with appropriating Christianity to eventually engage them in a new interpretation of the Bible and the creation of a better-structured identity.

The prophetic movement initiated by Simon Kimbangu still includes a strong affirmation of Blackness, as it did at its inception, but today it offers a positive-negative dualism. Kimbanguism, as presented by the spiritual leader Diangienda, perceives itself as a type of “Christianity . . . resulting from the sum of the actions and teachings of Simon Kimbangu,” and as such, it perfectly corresponds to Bastide’s definition of syncretism: a “reinterpretation of the Christian message through the African genius and sensitivity.” In agreement, Martin pointed out, “Kimbanguism is not only based on a mere acceptance of the Western frame of mind and formulations, but it constitutes an African expression of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, rooted in African tradition and embodied in cultural and ritual patterns.”

The relation of Kimbanguists to Blackness appears clearly in their interpretation of the Christian message. Thanks to the existence of an independent religious institution, Blackness is no longer defined from the outside but is perpetually (re)constructed outside of the White gaze. As Pierre Bourdieu remarked, “The veritable miracle produced by acts of institution lies
undoubtedly in the fact that they manage to make consecrated individuals believe that their existence is justified, that their existence serves some purpose.” Bourdieu also observed that the representation of the social system is not a given, but the result of countless processes of construction. The negative image of Blacks framed by the Kimbanguist religion is distinct from that defined by European Christianity, not only because it is dynamic and not static, but also because it is constructed within the processes of interaction with the dominant Other, the White man.

The image of Whites in the Kimbanguist mind dates back to the founder’s childhood. As noted earlier, Simon Kimbangu’s aunt Kinzembo was the only person in her village to have hosted the Reverends Comber and Cameron, while the other villagers were persecuting the missionaries, whom they considered to be invaders. A well-known anecdote in the Kimbanguist Church tells about Rev. Cameron giving little Kimbangu his blessing and presenting him with a knife. That Kinzembo—who is still featured as one of the icons of Kimbanguism—not only offered shelter to a White fugitive, but also allowed her nephew to accept his blessing, offers ample evidence that in spite of the actual oppression suffered by her people, she did not have a radically negative perception of White people. Kimbangu’s choice to become a catechist in the Baptist Church was not incidental, since his aunt had been the first convert of the missionaries she had rescued. Kimbangu would eventually change popular views of both Whiteness and Blackness. While acknowledging the technological gap separating the two races, he promised all Blacks a better future in his famous prophecy “the White man shall become black and the Black man shall become white,” without demonizing the oppressor. Although he had every reason to hate all Whites, having been jailed for life by the Belgian colonial authorities, Kimbangu consistently preached nonviolence.

Still, Kimbangu did not leave his successors and followers with any explicit theological guidelines from which they could develop a perception of Whites. These only became articulated in the teachings of Diangienda. The reconstruction of Blackness in Kimbanguist theology is achieved thanks to the confrontation of sameness and Otherness. While, in many cases, the Other is unknown, for the Kimbanguists, the Other is not only known but named—mundele, which means “White person” in Lingala. This may be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, it may signal the paucity of terms indicating racial differences in African languages. On the other hand, it may be read as a reassertion of identity on a plane other than pseudo-scientific racial classification. The French sociologist Pierre-Jean
Simon argued that racist thinking and doctrines, including a “scientific raciology and ideology meant to justify such practices and policies,” are the origin of the idea of races in the first place.  

Kimbanguism does not reject the logic of classifying races; its racial doctrine is derived from missionary rhetoric and the colonization experience, which are reinterpreted in its own identity project. My analysis of Diangienda’s sermons and messages and of inspired hymns reveals that only two races are under consideration: the White race (mundele) and the Black race (moyindo). As a result, Kimbanguist identity is built in contrast with the White man, for whoever discusses Whiteness also discusses Blackness. The Kimbanguist perspective has three distinct images of Whites: first, the White man as the descendant or sibling of the Black man; second, the White man as the recipient of God’s blessing; and finally, the White man divorced from God.

The image of the White man as a descendant or sibling of the Black man derives from the dogma that the first man—Adam—was Black. Diangienda asserted, “The Black man is the origin of the other men; he is the one who gave birth to the other races.” Thus, Kimbanguism consciously or unconsciously enters the logic of racial classification. Its claim of superiority is focused on the anteriority of Blacks in the history of humanity, rather than framed in terms of moral or intellectual hierarchy. Africa’s prominence as the cradle of humankind holds a central place in Kimbanguist representations and psyches.

The image of the “blessed White man” stands in contrast with that of the “cursed Black man.” Here, the biblical episode of the usurpation of the birthright and blessing of Esau by his twin brother, Jacob (Genesis 25:23), is used to justify the lack of participation of Africans in technological revolutions, as well as the subordination of one race by the other. When visiting the Kimbanguist congregations of Kinshasa, the French pastor Jacques Marion, from Rev. Sun Myung Moon’s Unification Church in Korea, prostrated himself at Diangienda’s feet three times in public and said, “Your Eminence, I am not sure I can call you my brother, for my father killed yours.” Diangienda accepted him and acknowledged him as his brother, explaining that it was up to Blacks to rebuild “the spiritual link” with God: “It won’t be done by force, but we have to do our penance so that God may give it to us” and the gap may be bridged.

The White person who broke the ties with God is the third representation of Whiteness in the Kimbanguist psyche. Certain Whites were identified by Diangienda as dealing in witchcraft, but in a modern form: “We are
the ones who inherited witchcraft, but the White man transformed it and became a magician, a Rosicrucian, a Freemason. He knows that his divorce from God is already a fact.” In this case, the image of Whites that prevails in the Kimbanguist mind is that of the White man who not only errs but takes pride in his separation from the grace of God.

Thus, the Kimbanguist representations of Whites are ambiguous and contradictory, since they imply that Whites are both the descendants and the younger brothers of Blacks; that Whites are blessed (as evidenced by their scientific inventions and technical progress) but also cursed by God (due to their appropriation of witchcraft); and that Whites are both tied to and separated from God. Yet Kimbanguist believers do not blame God or Whites, but rather Blacks, for being the cause of all suffering around the world, since Adam and Eve were Black and received witchcraft from Satan, which they passed down to all their descendants. The following inspired hymn (received in Lingala) exemplifies this tenet:

How is it that you, man, are meditating
On your suffering, to try and find the means
To remedy it?
Why is it that, between the two races in the world,
The White one is rejoicing and the Black one in pain
Oh, why is it so?
Adam and Eve, the ancestors of all mankind,
Committed a sin on the earth
For which God punished them.
This punishment, to this day on the earth—
Tell me which race suffers from its consequences?

Chorus: It’s you, race of snakes!
You, Black people!
You refuse to abide
By my commandments!

I sent my Son to death for you,
But you won’t meditate on this.
The Holy Spirit also came to you,
But you won’t meditate on this.
My will, children, is that there should be on earth
Only one religion.
My will, children, is that there should be on earth
Only one head.
My will, children, is that there should be on earth
Only one language.

This hymn, like many others, expresses a theology of Blackness that brings radically new elements to Christianity. Here, the believers are told of the remedies to solve the issues of Black people. It depicts Blacks and Whites as part of the same humankind, stemming from the Black forebears Adam and Eve, and traces the history of humanity from the Edenic beginnings to the original sin. Positive identity, as defined by the Kimbanguists, remains tied to Blackness, but it is to be understood mainly from a religious perspective, with particular emphasis on the notion that Blacks preexisted Whites. Aware of the consequences for Blacks of their oppressed status, Diangienda preached the following parable about humanization on returning from the 1990 WCC general conference:

[Let’s take] two children—one White and the other Black. Isolate them so that there’s only the two of them, seeing no one else, hearing no one else’s voice nor any language, and being fed automatically by means of machines. . . . When they turn three or four, what language shall they speak—the language of the Whites or that of the Blacks? When they start looking at each other, which of the two will fear the other? . . . On this point, there is a secret. . . . Let’s follow the Commandments, Love, and Good Works, and we’ll discover the real secrets which separate us and hamper our progress.  

While humanization commonly includes the acquisition of culture through the process of socialization, the path shown by Diangienda also transforms it into a process of liberation from the mental conditioning inherited from centuries of racial oppression. Given the Kimbanguist reformulation of identity parameters, it is clear in this context that the Black child, who embodies the ancestor of humankind, is compelled to take the leadership position instead of his junior—the White child. Thus, the quest for a positive Black identity implies a new understanding of Black-White relations. Likewise, Kimbanguists consider Blacks to be unable to invent anything in the fields of technology and science as a result of original sin. Whites are not blamed for the hardship of Blacks, but God is the receiver of Kimbanguists’ laments about the sinfulness of the Black race and its
subsequent subordination to Whites, as shown in the following hymn (received in Kikongo):

My God,
My God,
My God and Father,
I, Black person, have become
Like game lost in the forest.
Am I the only person who ever sinned in this world?
My Lord, White people too have sinned!
I was the first man in the world,
But you abandoned and forgot about me.
You gave intelligence to the Whites,
And they have invented weapons to get rid of me.
I am Black, Lord,
Am I the only person who ever sinned in this world?
You have punished me to this day,
But White people too killed Your Son in this world!
Yet for the sin they committed, they received blessings.
Father, I thank you.

This hymn reflects the Kimbanguist understanding of the brotherhood between Blacks and Whites. Here, it is clearly implied that God is a father to both Blacks and Whites, but the elder race suffers more for similar or lesser sins than those committed by the dominant race, whose technological advancement is emphasized as evidence of God’s blessing.

Such a distinctive perspective on Black spiritual identity is worth comparing with other theologies claiming links with African independence. While, for Kimbanguists, the Black man is the ancestor or elder brother of the White man, for the followers of the prophet William Wadé Harris, the White man is the elder. Harrists hold God and Whites responsible for this state of things—God, because when creating the Black man, he did so inconsiderately, and the White man, for not playing his role as the elder brother since he refused to share with his younger brother what he had received from God. Albert Atcho, one of the successors of Harris, concluded, “We have remained ignorant and always forced to borrow everything from the Whites. Although we keep saying we are on an equal footing, we never created anything by ourselves.”19 Jean-Pierre Dozon, a researcher of Ivorian prophetic movements, similarly emphasized “this
belief in one God who had freed [Whites] from fetishism and witchcraft, allowing them as a consequence to produce ever more new and smart machines, contrary to ‘Blacks.’”

The Bwiti movement of Gabon also offers elements for comparison. The Bwitists see Jesus as the new Adam or the new Noah, who came to liberate Blacks from the curse linked to their original witchcraft practices. But they believe that Whites killed Jesus to prevent him from giving Blacks the secret of divine power, a crime for which they are blamed. Thus, Africans who belong to the Bwiti movement believe that Jesus came to redeem Blacks. Their need for identity reconstruction persuades them that Whites have confiscated the secret of God’s power, which brings them to blame Whites for Blacks’ present suffering.

Likewise, the Nation of Islam focuses on the reconstruction of Black identity and offers a good comparison with Kimbanguism insofar as it also gives a new interpretation of the Bible, considered by Black Muslims to be a source of inspiration. The Nation of Islam’s version of creation also extols Africa as the cradle of the human race. In the words of Malcolm X, “Original Man was black, in the continent called Africa where the human race had emerged on the planet Earth.” Yet in this case, “Africa” is identified as either Egypt or Mecca in present-day Saudi Arabia. Black Muslims also focus on Esau and Jacob, but the Nation of Islam infers that Whites have an evil nature, whereas the Kimbanguist Church reads the story as evidence of God’s blessing of Whites. Both sets of beliefs reject White Freemasons. Black Muslims believe that they are “White secret societies plotting for the annihilation of the original man,” while, for Kimbanguists, Freemasonry is a product of witchcraft, which they consider to be quintessentially African.

Kimbanguists go even further in their representation of races, since they believe that no color line is impossible to trespass. The power of God or the devil can indeed make a person physically White while being Black on the inside, and vice versa. Kimbanguists routinely share among themselves anecdotes about the victims of witchcraft sold to the West, which Western people find unbelievable but which fit with African worldviews. In the commonly held view of witchcraft, a person may be physically dead, while continuing with his or her life on earth in a different place, where he or she is compelled to work for a sorcerer. Not only are sorcerers able to take the shape of any animal, but they can also turn other human beings into animals or sell them far away from their hometowns, giving them a different family and ethnic group.
The spiritual leaders of the Kimbanguist Church have not rejected this belief. Once, when speaking to Marie-Louise Martin, the dean of the Kimbanguist divinity school, Diangienda addressed her in Lingala. Martin, who was on her knees like all the church members, did not seem to understand his words. On seeing this, he stopped and resumed in French, “Mama Miss Marie-Louise Martin, you have been living in Zaire for quite a long time now, so you certainly grasped what I said in Lingala. . . . Many of the White people we see in Kinshasa are not Whites.” His linking of the two concepts implied that Martin herself might not be White, in spite of her skin color. Then, he told the congregation of students and instructors an anecdote about one of his friends from the colonial period, a Black sergeant major who regularly morphed into a White man in order to eat at fancy restaurants forbidden to natives. One morning, Diangienda had to help the man, who had gotten stuck in his white skin and risked being absent without leave.26

While based on the belief in witchcraft, this worldview is partly comparable to the phenomenon of racial “passing” in the United States, which consisted of letting oneself be identified as a White person in order to escape race-based discrimination.27 Although the goal is the same—accessing White privilege and challenging its unfair, exclusive nature—Americans who passed usually did so in an irreversible process, cutting ties with their relatives and often moving to a different state where their family background was not known. In Diangienda’s story and in Kimbanguist belief, it seems that the trickster is capable of two distinct appearances and is relatively free to choose which one he or she will use, depending on the context. Family ties are not severed, and the person may enjoy a “normal” life as a full-fledged member of each racial group, without being asked any questions, until a confrontation with a seer combating witchcraft results in his or her being trapped in the usurped appearance.

Privilege may also cross the racial line in the other direction. An anecdote related by Kimbangu’s eldest son, Kisolokele, is about a White man who recognized the godliness of Simon Kimbangu. That White man was none other than the Belgian administrator Léon Morel, who had sentenced Kimbangu. He was receiving treatment at the same Belgian hospital as Kisolokele, who claimed that he saw Morel repenting for the wrongs inflicted on the Congolese and particularly Kimbangu, whom he was terrified to meet after dying. This story obviously reinforces the Kimbanguists’ belief that the founder of their church was more than human. From this perspective—notwithstanding the reality of the Belgian oppression of Kimbangu and his followers as enforced by Morel—what meaning can be given to
such an incident taking place in Belgium, far away from the country’s former colony? The meeting in person between Kimbangu’s eldest son and Morel on his deathbed seems providential, and Morel’s confession has implications on two levels.

First, in spite of his Whiteness and Catholic faith, Morel acknowledged that Blacks are part of the human race, and he believed in sharing a common God with the formerly colonized subjects—even the Kimbanguists, whom he suppressed in their religious expression—and in the next world. Second, his qualms indicate that he believed not only that Kimbangu was well situated in the next world, but also that Kimbangu would greet him after his own death—which explains his confession to the doctors. In the Catholic faith, the last sacraments entail a confession by the dying person of his or her sins and an effort to make peace with fellow human beings. The fact that members of the Kimbanguist Church attended Morel’s funeral may also be read as a sign of their acceptance of his plea for forgiveness. At

Figure 15. Rev. Angelo Rodrigues Figueiredo (right) with the author in Nkamba, November 2000.
any rate, the remorse of a former colonist was another means for Kimbanguists to further buttress their faith in Simon Kimbangu as an incarnation of God and in racial reconciliation.

The Kimbanguist understanding of races goes further than cases of tricksters using witchcraft to change skins. It is a metaphysical notion that escapes biological control; in the Kimbanguist worldview, a person may very well look White but be Black inside, and vice versa. Diangienda’s words of wisdom have led most Kimbanguist believers to perceive certain
Figure 17. Indian ecofeminist Corinne Kumar D’Souza receives a blessing from Diangienda during the symposium on nuclear energy in Kinshasa. According to the photographer, she asked for the blessing after Diangienda’s prayer healed her comatose mother.
expressions of kimbanguist messianism

Whites as actually being Blacks, which can cause cross-cultural misunderstanding when a White person joins the Kimbanguist Church. In 2000 I interviewed Angelo Rodrigues Figueiredo, a Kimbanguist pastor who many Kimbanguists say is the same person as a Black man that his uncle supposedly sold to Portugal many years ago. Figueiredo is a native of Portugal, married, and the father of two. His conversion and settling in Nkamba are understood by most Kimbanguists as evidence of his homecoming. When asked how he identified racially, he answered:

I am White, as you can see! My father is Portuguese, and so is my mother. But I came over here to make a good living, that’s all. I am a mechanic, and I made good money. But now I know that I came here to fulfill a mission. . . . I haven’t found a “home” here. I have my family in Portugal; my wife and children live there. . . . I was never sold! I used to have my father, and my mother, and my grandfather, a whole family. . . . When my mother had me, she was in her thirties, and I’m an only child. . . . The first time I met His Eminence Diangienda, he told me, “I know you!”

Undeniably, Figueiredo’s choice to live in Nkamba testified to the fact that he deeply believed in Kimbanguism. While most native Congolese are reluctant to do so, due to the lack of food and the hardship linked to a life of prayer and asceticism—which is precisely what led Figueiredo’s wife and children to return to Portugal—he decided to live as an outsider in a group where race-centered discourse is the norm. Yet he adamantly denied being Black. At the same time, he looked unsurprised to be asked this question, which seems to indicate he was often confronted with the assumption. Possibly, being a pastor, he did not want to offend a community with which he shares strong bonds of faith. He claimed to have received from Diangienda some secrets that he absolutely refused to share, and said he still saw and communicated with the dead spiritual leader, although Diangienda passed away in July 1992. Figueiredo’s eyes brimmed with tears when he answered my questions about his conversion to Kimbanguism.

Thus, whether they like it or not, any White person who converts to Kimbanguism is identified as Black. A Belgian woman interviewed in Nkamba by the Kimbanguist press explicitly gave credit to the Kimbanguist metaphysics of race. Defining herself as “very Kimbanguist,” she testified on her 1980s conversion:
February 8, 1985, exactly. . . . At first we came to Congo because of financial interests, and then we were introduced to Kimbanguism. . . . Papa Diangienda received us early in the morning after we arrived in the center. . . . It really felt as if we had never been away from each other. When I stepped into his house, it felt as if I knew the place already . . . and it felt the same when I came to Nkamba. [There] were places I had already seen; but I can’t tell you why or how come. That’s what I said to Papa Diangienda. So he told me, “Maybe, in your former life, we had already met here.” . . . If I could, I would stay here and live with you all, because I may be a mundele [White woman] but inside of me I am a moyindo [Black woman]. This is what I want you to know.29

This testimony introduces elements that tend to disqualify the primacy of phenotypical features such as skin color, since the woman is blonde and fair-skinned, with blue eyes. The hypothesis of reincarnation, suggested by Diangienda, is here associated with a worldview where each soul, or deep self, is assigned a given color.

Hence, the representation of Whites in Kimbanguist beliefs is consistent with their understanding of Blackness. It is positive rather than negative and shapes the entire Kimbanguist theology, even though the latter was elaborated in response to White control. Consequently, Kimbanguism should not be considered to be a racist religion; if racist elements appear in its expressions, they reflect the awareness of Blacks’ oppressed status rather than any focus on anti-White action. Martin observed in the 1960s: “People of all tribes, languages, races and colours are welcome as visitors or full members of the Church. That this welcome extends to white people is a miracle when we think of the forty years of persecution through a European colonial administration. There are no traces of xenophobia in the Church.”30 In 1991, when the city of Kinshasa was pillaged by both soldiers and its own residents, many Westerners were manhandled and robbed. Diangienda reacted by warning his followers against theft as a rule, but also against violence toward Whites, saying, “If we are suffering, it is not the White man’s fault. Don’t be violent with them, for you [Black men] are the root of all suffering in this world.”31 Finally, even though Whites may sometimes be held responsible for the problems of Blacks, they are never blamed. In a hymn received in Lingala, Whites beg God to be lenient with Blacks:
We are calling You, Lord,
We are calling You, Lord,
We are calling You, come and solve this problem!

Tenor: We have searched around the world:
No other race has ever suffered as much as yours
It is true that you, black-skinned people, are cursed

Tenor: We Whites are rejoicing, while Blacks
Know only suffering
Eating is difficult, sleeping and walking are difficult

Tenor: The people we had eaten
Today have become the race of God;
But they don’t even give it a thought.

This hymn discloses the hidden dimension of things and the mechanisms of human relations. The angel who is believed to have transmitted the song insists on Whites’ feeling of guilt; they call on the Lord to put an end to the effects of the divine curse on the Black race. The hymn also asserts that Blacks, although historically dominated by Whites, have become God’s favorite race—but without realizing it.

The Kimbanguist process of identity reconstruction consistently hinges on the blaming of the Black race, which is perceived to be responsible for original sin and which must be made aware of its redemption by Simon Kimbangu. The next stage in this theology is to offer Blacks a positive identity through the Kimbanguist faith. Kimbanguists understand the world as being neither eternal nor immutable, but a product of history whose destiny is to be transformed by the volition of God. Hence, their attitude toward the current state of things is determined by their expectation of an impending sociopolitical revolution led and waged by God himself. The cornerstone of this revolution will be the shift from an oppressed status to a new status, understood as the primordial one because it will reinstate Black people in the position of the Black forebears Adam and Eve and therefore in a position of seniority vis-à-vis Whites. In Congo, as in all African cultures and social systems, the status of elder implies not only privileges but duties toward the younger siblings. The firstborn has the right of inheritance and the management of family affairs, but also must absolutely be respected. With age, social recognition and prestige increase, until one becomes
revered as an ancestor after death—a sacred position that determines the preservation and happiness of the person’s descendants and sometimes of an entire community. Yet, if blessings may be passed down to future generations, the same is also true of stigma when the ancestors of a lineage have been sinful.

Among the factors that may help explain Kimbanguist messianism today, the first is the identification of Simon Kimbangu as the incarnation of the Holy Spirit in the shape of a Black man, whose goal is to liberate his brothers and sisters from both White oppression and the rule of Satan. The doctrine of original sin—without which, as shown earlier, there can be no understanding of the process of identity restoration—implies the acceptance of the negative part of Blackness and its remediation thanks to the recognition of Kimbangu as the savior and the Kimbanguist Church as the chosen people and the engine of the salvation of humankind. Thus, the Kimbanguist Church offers a rhetoric of globalization bearing on Black internationalism, which they understand as being shaped by the history of Black oppression—a persistent predicament that is considered to derive from a divine curse and is as such critiqued by believers. Another type of rhetoric harps on the Kimbanguist religion and its activities, and Kimbanguism is seen as both the remedy for Black oppression and the means for the reconstruction of Blackness. The following hymn in Lingala, sung by the GTKI choir, gives insight into the belief that this church is the only way to achieve these results:

God struck an agreement with Moses
So that he should free the Children of Israel
From the bondage of Satan,
In Egypt’s land.
Today He has struck an agreement with Kimbangu
So that he should free the Black race
From the bondage of Satan,
On the African continent.
Today, for you and me,
What is the situation?
Purify your heart,
And God the Father will save you!
Think of the suffering our ancestors
Went through in prison!
Here is my parable for you,
Followers of my Father:
When an arrow has struck an animal,
It does not return with nothing.
These are my last words, oh, oh,

Tenor: This problem is not unknown
To you, My children:
It is the word I have spoken
Since the beginning, oh,
Stop your evildoing and you shall see joy, oh!

While Moses’s mission is commonly understood as resulting from the punctual intervention of God into human affairs, in the Kimbanguist faith, this intervention did not come to an end after the deaths of Moses, Jesus, or the apostles. In the hymn above, the same God also sent Kimbangu to liberate Black people from Satan and their curse. Consequently, the end of the European colonial order was interpreted by the Kimbanguists as the fulfillment of one of Kimbangu’s missions. This explains why they remain acutely aware of and interested in the evolution of the Congolese nations, sub-Saharan Africa, and the world at large. These aspects of Kimbanguist messianism were highlighted in Balandier’s study: “They speak of God ‘having now arrived in the Congo,’ as the ‘liberator’ of the Congolese. ‘God’s presence does away with fear,’ it justifies putting up with every kind of suffering and makes it possible to reject all other authority. God will reward the ‘elect,’ that is to say, the most zealous members, by giving them the ‘first places.’”

A specific Kimbanguist mind-set has thus developed, with a strong belief in individual and collective salvation coming via supernatural means. In this perspective, Simon Kimbangu is constantly referred to as the ultimate messianic figure and the instrument of salvation. As Balandier insightfully summarized, “Through the transfiguration of a man—partly assimilated to God, a deity, or any other power—the transfiguration of history is expected to occur, abolishing an era and ushering in a new one.” This can be seen in the following hymn (received in Kikongo), sung by the choir of the Groupe des guitaristes kimbanguistes:

An event, an event, an event is impending
An event will occur in this world
Do not be surprised by it
Tenor: I will show my Kimbangu[ness] to the world
Yet the world has not known me
I am the one who led
The children of Israel;
I am the One who drowned
Noah’s generation;
I am the One who destroyed
Sodom and Gomorrah,
And I am still the One leading
This fourth generation [the present time]

Chorus: Miracles will occur in this world
I would be quite idle if I did not warn you,
If I did not announce it to you. Beware! (3 times)
Hardship and happiness will occur all at once.

For Kimbanguists, the passion of Christ and the story of Moses were reenacted in the person of Simon Kimbangu, but from the perspective of the salvation of the Black race; Kimbangu is believed to have supernatural powers enabling him to trigger the expected transformations. This hymn from the 1990s has Kimbangu unambiguously revealing himself to be the God of the Bible. He also announces that history will unfurl again its fabric of hardship and happiness. This is the type of hymn that, along with the prophetic speeches of the leaders, contributes to maintaining the believers in an expectation of a messianic salvation, which is sustained by eschatological promises of happiness for the Black man—or, more precisely, the Kimbanguist person. Diangienda would often repeat these words: “Whether they like it or not, we [Kimbanguists] shall prevail” and “Truth will never turn into lies, nor lies into the truth.” Likewise, his elder brother and successor Dialungana used to say: “No matter how long the night may be, the sun always ends up rising.” Kimbanguist believers, with a mixture of hope and perseverance, thus keep expecting salvation in a context of global crisis. Froelich noted this millenarian element when he stressed that Kimbangu took advantage of his success to preach Christ’s message in these terms: “Christ will come soon, the dead will resurrect, Blacks will be very happy, and even more so than Whites,” and a “golden age” will begin on earth, which will benefit Blacks.35

When studying the corpus of inspired hymns, one can see clearly that promises on the new status of Blacks remain preeminent, as in the following (sung in Lingala):
While we wait for the accomplishment of the promise,
It is best for us to persevere!
Among the temptations imposed by Satan
Let us keep persevering!
God only will help us in this battle
But brother, you must persevere!
See, joy is getting closer.
O, Black man, rejoice! Rejoice! Rejoice!
Your punishment on earth will come to an end,
Your tears will be dried up,
Satan’s buffeting will come to an end.
O, Black man, rejoice! Rejoice! Rejoice!
See, joy is getting closer.

These lyrics, like many others, emphasize the new Black identity as expected by Kimbanguists. The hymn recommends perseverance through hardship. These promises are as inseparable from the identity and mission of Simon Kimbangu as from the salvation of the Black race. Indeed, Kimbangu is the one who, as God or messiah, will help and is already helping Blacks in their struggle for recognition in the eyes of the dominant Other.

When preaching about the Blackness of Adam and Eve and their being created in Nkamba, Diangienda did not offer his audiences any insight into biblical history or, more particularly, the history of the Jewish people. Nothing was said about when God’s people moved from Nkamba, the forefathers’ birthplace in the Congolese land, and the territories associated with the chosen people’s history, such as Mount Sinai, or African territories, such as Egypt or Ethiopia, which are quite remote from Central Africa. This gap in the Kimbanguist reading of the Bible sometimes leads to ethnic, instead of religious, self-identification insofar as a parallel is made between the Jews and the Bakongo people. A recurrent thesis in Kimbanguist literature and oral material (such as lectures, roundtables, sermons, and debates) identifies the Bible’s “children of Israel” with the Bakongo people. A number of Kongo sources that do not belong to the Kimbanguist Church also back this theory, even drawing linguistic parallels between Kikongo and Hebrew, thus encouraging a reinterpretation of the origins of the Jewish people.36

The remarks of Pope John Paul II during his 1990 visit to Kenya are also abundantly commented on, since he encouraged Africans to seek authenticity in the following terms: “God is Black, and Christ himself is African.”
The pope asserted that if “the sap is that of the universal Church, then the fruits also must have the taste of Africa.” The writings of the famous Afro-centric theorist Cheikh Anta Diop from Senegal are also frequently quoted, since he too claimed that the biblical Hebrews were originally Black.

The need to identify with the chosen people of the Bible may be explained as a desire to appropriate the historical legitimacy of the Hebrew people and consequently have a positive self-image. An unwary outsider may be misled by strategies meant to give a better image of Kimbanguists and to portray them in a positive light, although it cannot be denied that the Jewish people of the scriptures, although persecuted for centuries, have benefited from a positive image, thanks to savior figures such as Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, or even Jesus. However, Kimbangu never actually said that Jews were black-skinned, while Diangienda, without doing so either, summed up his own teachings by elaborating on the parable of the lost sheep. He applied the metaphor to Black people, emphasizing their oppressed status and the curse they have to cope with in order to raise awareness of the negativity associated with Blackness. However, as Anthony Smith stressed, the association of ethnicity with religious notions of “purity,” “authenticity,” or chosenness transforms an ethnic group into a “sacred community.” It may be contended that the ethnic dimension of the Kimbanguist community leads it to represent itself as God’s chosen people, with special ties binding it to God—read: Kimbangu—just like the Jewish people. It is essentially Blackness that is the raison d’être of the Kimbanguist religion.

Today, Kimbanguists are focused on searching the ruins of the former cathedral of Mbanza Kongo, which is also known as Kulumbimbi, from the Kikongo words nkulu (elder or lord) and mbi (evil). The place is called “ancestral evil” in reference to the biblical episode of the Tower of Babel, which is revisited in the Kimbanguist interpretation of the new status of Blacks. In this perspective, since Adam, the Black forefather, was created in Nkamba, later events such as the episode of the Tower of Babel took place in Angola. It was supposedly in Mbanza Kongo that Nimrod, a great Black king recast as a grand wizard, gathered around his throne a council of sorcerers with the aim of discovering God’s designs, which triggered divine wrath and linguistic confusion among human beings. The Kimbanguist Church is said to have asked Angolan authorities for a transfer of the property of the ruins, in order to add the former cathedral to the long list of Kimbanguist sacred places.

The historical dimension of this Catholic cathedral is nearly absent, however, from the concerns of Kimbanguist believers, who are much more
focused on theological speculation about the place itself. An eschatological expectation is apparent in the fact that the prophet Kimpa Vita herself has addressed the Kimbanguist community through inspired hymns, speaking about the significance of Kulumbimbi. In the one I heard, the prophet identifies herself as the person who was given by Kimbangu the mission of fighting against what she calls the “lies” Whites told about Blacks. Regarding the property transfer of Kulumbimbi, she claims it will have a universal significance for Black people all over the world. This future event merges with the concept of *layisua*, a Kikongo word meaning “going to sleep.” Kimbangu will cause all human beings to fall into a deep sleep, at the end of which Blacks will recover their initial status—that enjoyed by Adam and Eve before the fall from grace. This is expected to take place on earth, its starting point being the three Congos with Nkamba as the epicenter.

While Kimbanguists wait for the spiritual leader Simon Kimbangu Kiangani to set a date for the inauguration of the site, their millenarian expectation of a new status for Blacks remains as intense as ever. But achieving this final and definitive positive status implies abiding by the Kimbanguist principles dictated by Diangienda in the famous triad: love (bolingo), commandments (mibeko), and work (misala). This is illustrated in a hymn sung in Lingala by the GTKI choir:

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Cultivate love,
     It is the key to Heaven.
Good works
     Are what gives
Man a sense of dignity.
Commandments
     Are what gives
Man his intelligence.
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It is believed that abiding by these three principles will allow for the enjoyment by all Blacks of all skills, particularly those pertaining to technological inventiveness. The aim is to achieve a better position in the social order by moving up from the oppressed situation common to Blacks all over the world and eventually enjoy a dignified status in the eyes of the dominant Other. In this quest for social recognition, which is rooted in Black internationalism, Black elites are often called to action.

Since Black elites are commonly criticized in the discourse of Kimbanguist believers and the rhetoric of their leaders, how is education addressed
by the Kimbanguist Church? To answer this question, it is necessary to first understand how learned elites perceive themselves in Africa, particularly in Congo, and how they have contributed to their countries’ histories. As already explained, the education system was used for Christianization purposes during the colonial period. Africans had to be schooled away from their traditional value systems and convinced of the curse of Ham so that they would participate in their own domination. Although Kimbanguist theology includes a belief in the curse of Ham, it also insists on deconstructing an intellectual identity built on an educational system that, from preschool to the university, remains dependent on European models and incapable of inventing its own templates to compete with Whites in the fields of science and technology. This perception of Blacks as incapable of inventing anything certainly seems shocking to anyone well versed in Afrocentric theory or cognizant of books on African American inventors, such as McKinley Burt’s *Black Inventors of America* (1969) or Nathan Aaseng’s more recent *Black Inventors* (1997). But popular Kimbanguist theology does not acknowledge the participation of Blacks in scientific or technological progress or in improving inventions already bearing the hallmark of a Western mind.

Since the time of African nations’ independence, African elites have become more numerous in all fields of knowledge, and they work in all the sectors of economic and intellectual activities offered by their home countries—health care, agriculture, economics, finance, history, sociology, and many more. Yet, the situation of the elites who have jobs at home is difficult, since they are harshly criticized by the societies they come from and are supposed to serve. Some decades ago, under Mobutu, one of the “sayings of the day” appearing on the screen of the national television channel was “The failure of Zaire is the failure of its elites.” Likewise, students graduating from high school in Brazzaville in 1994 were given a quotation to comment on, which lamented the “tragedy” of the waste of talents by African governments and called for a wiser use of graduates, who were described as languishing, desperate “wrecks steeped in alcohol of all kinds.”

From a Kimbanguist perspective, this critique is relevant because it usually coincides with the perception of a lack of inventions by Black people, who always seem to need the help of Whites. Given the context, how does the Kimbanguist Church view Black elites? Since the 1960s, the Kimbanguist Church has built its own schools, which are open to all children, including Kimbanguists and nonmembers of the church. Yet the Kimbanguist membership includes a considerable number of men and women with very little schooling, who coexist in the church with others who hold
university degrees. Misunderstandings and conflicts often occur between the two categories, because supernatural gifts are valued much more than intellectual ones in this milieu.

There are two reasons why academically trained people are perceived poorly by uneducated church members. The first is that their spiritual leaders have not had any higher education.41 Most Kimbanguists identify with the leaders and hence do not have any incentive to pursue their studies or revere academics in any way. Second, Kimbanguists’ negative perception of academics is backed by the often judgmental attitude of Diangienda. He criticized elites several times in his speeches and sermons as lacking the spiritual stability to remedy Black subordination, because of their imitation of secular Whites (“You may be very learned and hold doctoral degrees of all kinds, [but] you won’t do anything”)42 or White sorcerers: “Even if all Black men of learning get together to find a way to fill the huge gap that keeps us lagging behind, they will never get a positive result. You may be a magician, a Rosicrucian, a Freemason, or whatever you want, you can’t find a solution. Let’s walk up to the first flight of stairs [he was probably pointing to the entrance to Nkamba] for this is where we’ll discover what we lost over there. We have to reclaim it. Haven’t I told you time and again that the Black man is God’s image?”43 This challenge sounds like a provocation, since the speech was delivered at the inauguration of a training seminar for the religious officials in charge of Kimbanguist school boards.

Paradoxically, Diangienda also encouraged Kimbanguists to persevere in their studies. His discourse on intellectual elites was ambiguous: it rejected contemporary Black elites while recommending that Kimbanguists, who are also Black, hone their own intellectual skills. What, then, do Kimbanguists expect from highly trained individuals, and how do they define their own elites as opposed to “traditional” ones? Although most Kimbanguists are unaware of it, Diangienda’s perception of elites corresponded to Seymour Martin Lipset’s definition of “intellectuals” as “those who create, distribute, and apply culture—the symbolic world of man, including art, science, and religion.”44 For example, responding to the Zairian press, which regularly insulted him, Diangienda made this barbed comment: “You all have degrees by the truckload, but all you can do is insult and slander. The pencil with which you are writing your papers, do you even know how it was invented? Why, you can’t even tell what will happen tomorrow. What makes you so intellectual?”45 Here, it is useful to discuss the contributions of Kimbanguism to Lipset’s “symbolic world,” particularly in matters of art, science, and religion.
One of the most emblematic achievements of the Kimbanguist Church in the realm of learning is the script known as Mandombe, a Kikongo term meaning “for Black people” or “in the way of Black people.” This script was invented in 1978 by David Wabeladio Payi, a Catholic who claimed to have been inspired by Simon Kimbangu and eventually joined the Kimbanguist Church. When I interviewed him, he explained that he had experienced a series of supernatural events. First, he was continuously hearing a voice calling him and commanding him to go to Nkamba to pray because he was meant to receive a mission for the Black race. Then, on the road to Nkamba, he had several extraordinary experiences. Simon Kimbangu in apparition form appeared in the car where Wabeladio Payi was riding along with five relatives, causing them to flee the vehicle in a panic. While still traveling to Nkamba, he heard Kimbanguist hymns coming from above, which said, “He is holy, and you must never reject the holy One.” Then, as they were getting near Nkamba, Wabeladio Payi found himself glued to the soil for several hours, as if he had taken root in it; his relatives’ efforts to remove him from the spot were to no avail, until the soil freed him. Finally, when entering Nkamba, he saw a man in blue pants and a white shirt, who held out his arms as if on a cross, then rose up in the air, flying to and fro between the mausoleum of Simon Kimbangu and the Kimbanguist primary school a few hundred yards away. The man eventually went straight up into the sky. Panic-stricken by this vision, Wabeladio Payi yelled that a man had just flown away, but he was the only one who could see this man. After these experiences, he decided to go to Kinshasa and meet Diangienda, in order to make sense of them. The spiritual leader recommended that he “pray a lot, for it is through prayer that [he] will discover the nature of [his] mission—because [he has] a great mission for the Black race.”

Having decided to retreat from the world into a long period of prayer, which lasted for eight months, Wabeladio Payi eventually discovered while meditating that the bricks making the walls of his room were forming the numbers 5 and 2 in their imbrications. On that day, he said, “I had a dream.” Wabeladio Payi (who died in 2013) claimed that from this basis and thanks to the Mandombe script, he discovered the African way of understanding mathematics, statistics, visual arts, mechanics, geometry, architecture, and physics. He earned recognition for his invention at various African universities, and he claimed he had convinced experts of the truth of his discoveries. This earned him a position as a professor at the University of Kinshasa, where he was given an honorary doctorate in 2011. Mandombe now is taught not only in Congolese schools and universities, but
also in the diaspora, and the number of Mandombe proficiency certificates awarded was estimated at 700,000 in 2010.47

The Mandombe script, which the inventor codified in the Kikongo language, is considered to be the first of a coming series of inventions by Blacks and a sign of the advent of new African elites. Wabeladio Payi had been initially trained as a mechanic, but he was transformed into a man of learning—in the Kimbanguist understanding of the term—thanks to a mystical experience, which is the only meaningful way of finding one’s calling from the standpoint of the church.

The continued quest for healing has also led to unprecedented discoveries. Until recently, only Kimbangu’s descendants were considered to have healing powers, but members and nonmembers of the Kimbanguist Church are currently enthused by the cures developed by a Muslim woman who claims to be inspired by Simon Kimbangu. A DRC citizen, Véronique Kabeya, born Kaké in 1961, is a housewife who converted to Islam (her husband’s religion). Interviewed as a special guest on a TV show broadcast by the national channel RTNC, she explained that she first saw Kimbangu in 2002, during the period of Ramadan. Around 5 A.M., she said, he appeared in her bedroom and told her, “Mama, I came to tell you that God has sent

Figure 18. David Wabeladio Payi, inventor of the Mandombe script, teaches church members.
me to give you Heaven and Earth.” She asked, “Papa, who are you?” He answered, “I am Simon Kimbangu. Do you know me?” She replied, “I do, but by name only. I have never seen you before.” He said, “It’s me, and I came to show you some things that will save the world.” She explained that he then proceeded to show her “how to make medicines that cure AIDS, eye diseases, several forms of cancer, and many sorts of diseases. At 6 A.M., I woke up and told my husband what had happened. He retorted that it was out of the question to bring these stories here. He said, ‘We are Muslims; how can you possibly be seeing Simon Kimbangu?’”

She thus remained silent about this experience, because her husband was skeptical and did not want to have anything to do with Kimbangu. Later in 2002, however, Kabeya became his wife’s first patient. Suffering from a prostate disease, ailing kidneys, and poor eyesight, he was supposed to be flown to France for dialysis, but he could not leave the country due to red tape. Since his condition was worsening into kidney failure, he eventually asked his wife to try her knowledge on him. She purchased the ingredients shown to her in her visions and cured him in a span of five hours, after which he asked for diabetes treatment as well. Also a guest on the TV show, the sixty-four-year-old Kabeya added that from age forty-five he had had very
poor eyesight and used three pairs of spectacles, but since his wife cured him he had enjoyed perfect eyesight and did not need glasses anymore. In another interview, Kaké Kabeya claimed that she had been sick with uterine cancer until she was cured by the herbal medicine revealed by Kimbangu, who also gave her a diet to solve her obesity and tension problems.49

These successes persuaded Kabeya to encourage his wife to publicize her accomplishments and cure others. In 2005, they created a pharmacy called Souffle divin (Divine breath) in Kinshasa, where they receive patients who have been diagnosed by physicians or labs, offer them treatment, and finally send them back to the doctors to confirm their recoveries. Souffle divin initially received a hundred visits per day, according to Kaké Kabeya; the visits have now increased to such a point that she cannot keep track. The Agence congolaise de presse stated that more than a hundred AIDS-infected patients have been definitely cured after treatment.50 The press agency mined medical reports and recovery certifications signed by doctors from the main hospitals in Kinshasa to support these statistics. Kaké Kabeya is now so renowned that African patients from all professional backgrounds, along with Europeans, Turks, and Australians, come to her for treatment. She was given a national award, is often invited on TV shows, and has earned a measure of prestige in non-Kimbanguist milieus where people worship Simon Kimbangu.

I had the opportunity to interview her over the phone in January 2016 and asked about her connection with Simon Kimbangu and the church. She claimed to be regularly in contact with Kimbangu, either in apparitions or in her sleep: “He appears whenever he finds it necessary, depending on what he wants to show me. Sometimes he tells me about things related to our country, Congo, but usually he shows me healing plants. By now he has shown me over 500 plants.” She contends that this herbal medicine can cure any disease.

Kaké Kabeya is also celebrated in the Kimbanguist Church, with which she is in relatively close contact. When I asked whether she contemplated converting to Kimbanguism, she answered, “All Black people are Kimbanguists.” She said that her medicines are sold in Nkamba and that when she met Simon Kimbangu Kiangani, he told her: “In the days to come, various kinds of illnesses will appear in the world, so that people will come to Congo from all over the world to ask Black people for a cure.” The medicines are given authentic Congolese names, similar to those of Kimbangu and his descendants; she told me that Kimbangu himself names the cures he reveals to her. Although she has not converted to Kimbanguism, her mystical
experiences with Simon Kimbangu seem to corroborate the church’s theology about the new status of Black people, especially since she claims that Kimbangu told her that he granted her this gift to “enhance the honor of the DRC and Africa.”

Another example of the Kimbanguist definition of a person of learning is Armand Wabasolele Diangienda, one of Kimbangu’s grandsons, who rose to fame thanks to his musical talent. He has been recognized as a composer of classical music in his native DRC. Although he was initially trained as a pilot and never attended a music academy (“I thank God for that talent, because I can just look at someone playing, and I can figure it out,” he told a journalist), his work was affirmed by a committee, including a professor from the University of Leuven, Belgium, and the head of the Institut national des arts of Kinshasa. In November 2003, he was awarded an honorary degree as an artist, musician, and composer of classical music by the president of the Congolese parliament. His performances combine Kimbanguist inspired hymns with famous classical masterpieces by Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven.

Wabasolele’s father, Diangienda, recommended that he create a group in which all the choirs of the church would be represented. Thus was born in the 1990s the Kimbanguist Symphonic Orchestra, which includes a brass band, a flute group, a guitar ensemble, and a number of different choirs, all composed of amateur musicians who practice during their spare time, when they are not looking for a job or working as electricians, garment cutters, physicians, or housekeepers. Initially, these volunteers made or repaired their instruments themselves: “In the early days, instruments had to be borrowed or made from scratch by reverse engineering. Violin strings were concocted from bicycle brake wire. Hundreds of scores were copied out by hand, individual parts had to be deciphered by listening to the works on CD, over and over again. Music stands were cobbled together from old pieces of wood.”

His talent and energy in setting up and conducting the 200-strong Kimbanguist Symphonic Orchestra triggered the interest of two film directors, Claus Wischmann and Martin Baer, who released in 2010 a documentary on him called Kinshasa Symphony, whose behind-the-scenes promotional video was shown on CBS under the title Joy in the Congo. The film was well received both in Europe and in the United States. While it says very little about the Kimbanguist Church, its success prompted invitations for Armand Wabasolele Diangienda from universities in Africa, Europe, and the United States as well as from Prince Albert II of Monaco and the actress
Figure 20. Armand Wabasolele Diangienda and the Kimbanguist Symphonic Orchestra after a concert in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Figure 21. The Kimbanguist Symphonic Orchestra in concert in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.
and filmmaker Angelina Jolie. He was given an award for peace and reconciliation from the Tran Nhan Tong Academy at Harvard University in September 2012. In the United Kingdom, he became an honorary member of the Royal Philharmonic Society. At the University of California, Los Angeles, he performed at the TED conference of February 2013 and subsequently met with the musicians Peter Gabriel, Lionel Richie, and Herbie Hancock. In Seoul, he was invited to conduct the Korean Symphonic Orchestra on the fortieth anniversary of the Arts Festival of Korea. He was awarded the National Prize for Merit in Culture, Arts, and Sciences by the DRC government in December 2015. Besides conducting the Kimbanguist Symphonic Orchestra, he has also composed three classical pieces with French titles, translated as “Breath of Truth,” “Reconciliation,” and “My Identity.”

The inventor of the Mandombe script, the composer-conductor, and the herbal healer reveal the meaning of what the Kimbanguist Church sees as a person of learning: someone who is spiritually connected with Simon Kimbangu and therefore knows herself or himself and who has a mission to benefit Africa. The church asserts that people of learning will offer unprecedented achievements in the arts, sciences, and technology, which will be received as signs of progress for Black people worldwide. This definition is congruent with what Diangienda said of inspired people, whom he considered to be learned, visionary, and prophetic. However, inspired though they may be, these intellectuals remain human, and since they are connected to a church seeking the kingdom of God, they need to abide by the three cardinal virtues of Kimbanguism: bolingo, mibeko, and misala (love, divine commandments, and work). Finally, as Black people, they are expected to always be aware of their subordinate position in the world’s social stratification—in order to successfully challenge this situation. This vision of the mission to be accomplished is quite broad, and it also entails a critique of political leadership.