RECLAIMING KIMBANGU’S PROPHETIC HERITAGE

When discussing the relation of Kimbanguists to their home countries, Georges Balandier evoked a sort of sacred nationalism, preaching the advent of God in Congo and thereby rejecting the foundations of colonial order: “By modifying the entire system of moral reference, Kimbanguism challenged the whole basis of authority, not simply that of the official chiefs . . . but that of the old-style chiefs as well.”¹ In the wake of African nations’ independence, the key issue was for the political leadership to gain autonomy from the religious leadership—an uneasy goal to achieve, since the former had emerged thanks to the impetus of nationalist religious movements.²

In a context of national autonomy, what part did the religious leaders take in the management of these new nations’ affairs? In the former Belgian Congo, Joseph Kasa-Vubu rose to power as the Democratic Republic of the Congo’s first president (1960–1965), thanks to popular aspirations that Marie-Louise Martin described as both ethnic and religious: as the head of the first cultural and social organization, the Alliance des Bakongo, developed in the 1950s, Kasa-Vubu was seen as the emissary of Kimbangu.³ When the Republic of the Congo became the Republic of Zaire in October 1971, the Kimbanguist Church was recognized as the largest denomination in Zaire after the Catholic Church. Although the Kimbanguist Church rejected the idea of becoming the state church, it remained very aware of its special mission to Zaire in trust from God.⁴ In Congo-Brazzaville, under
the reign of the Parti congolais du travail, which was the only political party from 1969 to 1991, Marxist ideology was imposed, and laws were voted on to eradicate cults. But the state recognized the Kimbanguist Church as a mainstream church, on an equal footing with the Catholic and evangelical churches and the Salvation Army.

Simon Kimbangu is recognized on the national plane as a liberator who raised national awareness among the Congolese. Kimbanguists see him as an embodiment of God, but Kimbangu holds a distinctive place in the collective psyche of the populations of both Congos and Angola. Along with his predecessor Kimpa Vita and political nationalists, such as André Mat- soua and Patrice Eméry Lumumba, he is mentioned in history schoolbooks as part of the history of Congolese resistance to European colonization. When visiting the Kimbanguist authorities in Nkamba in June 2001, the president of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Joseph Kabila, named Simon Kimbangu as the equal of Lumumba and his own father, Laurent-Désiré Kabila.

The political speech that came closest to the beliefs of the Kimbanguists was delivered in 1991 by the minister of justice, Ms. Nuyabu Nkulu:

> Beyond the symbolic nature of this political event, let me point out three major teachings. The first is about the very emergence of this great black leader, who came from the depths of the country, outside of any colonial influence, at a time when there seemed to be no other source of power on our African soil. But nothing in the experience of this modest worker—this humble catechist—had predestined him for such a noble mission. Nothing but the manifestation of the Almighty’s power may explain the miraculous rise, among his peers, of a charismatic leader sent to save the black people from the darkness caused both by traditions and by colonialism.

Musicians frequently express their veneration of the memory of Simon Kimbangu in their songs. The best example was performed in 1990 by the songwriter and singer Pascal-Emmanuel Sinamoyi Tabu, who is a celebrity on both banks of the Congo River and across sub-Saharan Africa under the stage name Tabu Ley Rochereau. In his song, he conjured up a long list of nationalist Congolese forefathers, including Simon Kimbangu, to beg them to oust the enemy (Mobutu) from power and make Zaire a democracy. Thus it is quite logical to question the relation between the Kimbanguist Church and political power.
Diangienda said that the Kimbanguist Church believes in maintaining a separation between church and state: “The Church of Christ on Earth through the Prophet Simon Kimbangu does not consider it fitting to express views concerning the political system that a country should support. But it is against any political system which deprives the citizens of the fundamental liberties, namely freedom of thought, freedom of speech, freedom of religion and worship, freedom of the press, freedom of opinion and freedom of movement.”

Although the Kimbanguist Church displays a conspicuously apolitical stance, which is generally understood as an attitude of submission to political authorities, it nevertheless grants importance to Congolese and pan-African politics. This duality—on the one hand, apolitical and supportive of political authorities and, on the other hand, messianic in its critique of the powers that be—has been generally misconstrued by scholars, including the sociologist Susan Asch. In 1983 she analyzed the church’s position as a trade-off between “apolitical” support for Mobutu’s regime and benevolent toleration of the church by the Zairian state, concluding that the Kimbanguist Church had ceased to be a tool for political protest because it followed the orders of Mobutist nationalism without questioning the nefarious consequences of the regime’s policies—economic dependency, corruption, wasting of national resources, inequality, injustice, unemployment, and increasing poverty.

What Asch omitted was that Kimbangu’s prophetic movement was never based on the principle of openly waging war on colonial political authorities. The writings of both the Belgian lawyer Jules Chomé and the Belgian Jesuit Joseph Van Wing concur: Kimbangu never called for civil disobedience or rebellion against the king of Belgium and never preached against paying taxes. Only indirectly did Kimbangu’s movement become a politico-religious and social one. He focused on ethnicity with the aim of reconstructing Black identity. His actions were effective in part because of his ability to mobilize his fellow citizens around the notion of Blackness in a context marked by the confrontation of discourses; increased race consciousness resulted from the encounter with Whites. The relations of Kimbanguist leaders to Mobutism are illuminated by Mobutu’s speech on authenticity:

Mamas and papas, brethren and sisters—they said that we pray [to] statues. But when you enter the churches of those who came to civilize us, what you see after passing the door are nothing but statues. . . .
Their statues are normal, because they come from Europe; but ours are evil, because they come from the trees. God is God; each person has their own way of praying. . . . Fellow citizens, this is the reason why what I am doing right now [the authenticity program] has been described as a conflict with the [Catholic] church. But there is no conflict with the church! We are a free people, and we must make our decisions as a sovereign nation. If anything is unclear, our duty is to proclaim that it is unclear.

Mamas and papas, look at what happened in 1921 in Lower Zaire [today’s Lower Congo] with our brethren who are with us and pray [to] the God of Kimbangu. Kimbangu is our brother, black like us. He said, “I saw God, and this is what God told me.” Now what did they do? They put him under arrest and sentenced him to death. . . . On the other hand, what do they show us? They tell us that the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared to children in Portugal, in Fatima, and then she appeared to a young woman in Lourdes, in France, or that she appeared in Belgium. Now this is normal: if God appears over there in Europe, they tell us to believe it. But if a black man says that he, too, saw God, they call him a fanatic, put him under arrest, and sentence him to death. Mamas and papas, brethren and sisters, what I am telling you is very serious. It shows the darkness in which we used to live, which is mental alienation. . . . He remained for thirty years in jail without seeing his wife. . . . They are white, we are black; they live in Europe and we in Africa; we cannot imitate them, nor can they imitate us. We eat manioc and they eat bread—that’s normal. If a white man comes to Africa, then he must eat manioc. This is what authenticity is about.11

It is hardly surprising that the Kimbanguist Church was perceived as Mobutu’s pet church. Yet it is regrettable that critics of Diangienda have often turned him into the scapegoat of the Mobutu regime, while remaining oblivious to the fact that Kimbanguist messianism is the result of a conjunction of doctrines that mutually support one another and fuel the process of identity reconstruction. This is an ongoing process. Believers hope to see the fulfillment of the spiritual leaders’ apocalyptic and prophetic promises, and thus escape the consequences of their situation: oppression, war, poverty, disease, famine, and suffering.

In the nationalist setting inspired by Mobutu, the theme of authenticity was ever-present and recurrent. Congo was renamed Zaire, the
greatness of the Zairian nation was extolled, while working together, known as salongo, was recommended. It was forbidden to wear suits, ties, close-fitting pants, or miniskirts and to use skin-lightening creams or hair relaxers. Christian first names were banned and Christian feasts abolished. The quest for authenticity resonated with Kimbanguist values, and these symbols of European influence have remained banned in the church, except for the suits, ties, and Christian first names and feasts. What unification achieved in the sphere of the state was also accomplished in parallel by Diangienda within the sphere of the Kimbanguist Church. This is why his apolitical stance was recast as a form of active support of Mobutism in the eyes of most observers. As a consequence, the Kimbanguist Church and the Church of Christ in Zaire were understood to be under Mobutu’s control, while the Catholic Church, led by Cardinal Malula, embodied resistance.12

Yet, for the leaders and members of the church, supporting the political leadership—not only Mobutu’s regime but all the others—was the right choice, and it was justified by the church’s recommendation to “submit to state authorities.”13 The conventional wisdom warning against throwing the baby out with the bath water may offer an explanation for the relations

Figure 22. President Mobutu (right) visits the spiritual leader Diangienda in the 1970s.
of the Kimbanguist Church with the state’s political leadership. The met-
aphorical baby stands for national independence, which Kimbanguists
believe to have been granted by God through Simon Kimbangu, while the
bath water symbolizes the political corruption of the successive regimes.
In a sermon where he was encouraging church members from Congo-
Brazzaville to submit to the state authorities, Diangienda said: “In 1921,
Papa Simon Kimbangu had said that ‘the Black man shall become White
and the White man, Black.’ This was misunderstood. President [Denis]
Sassou [N’Gueso] is a Black man. Let’s take pride in this.”14 Likewise, the
current spiritual leader of the church, Simon Kimbangu Kiangani, keeps
recommending submission to the established political authorities in his
sermons to church members.

The emphasis is laid on the fact that colonial rule is now over. As a
result, the new political players are not defined as intruders, whatever their
shortcomings may be; being sons of Africa, they are necessarily considered
worthy of ruling their countries, even if they do so in ways that displease
the church. While most experts consider the Kimbanguist Church to be an
accomplice of established political regimes, the situation may be more com-
plex. Although political leaders have enjoyed a form of legitimacy granted
by the people—often in proportion to their ethnic representativeness—and
by Western regimes acting as protectors, they are criticized by religious
leaders, who often grant them recognition begrudgingly. The Kimbanguist
Church, in particular, sees itself as arbitrating the political battles that have
shaken the countries in the half century since independence.

The evolution of Kimbanguist messianism must be analyzed in this
postcolonial context. Kimbanguist messianism is a belief in the restoration
of the kingdom of Kongo or in a “landing” of the kingdom of God. The
sociologist Henri Desroche had already observed it in the early 1970s,
when he wrote the following:

Unmistakably, people were waiting for the Kingdom to come and the
Church came. The independence of Congo came, too. So there was
a new church in a new society, each in search of its own peaceful
coexistence with other Christian churches or other national societies.
But there is little doubt that neither this church, nor even this society
would have thus emerged unless there had been a promise reaching
further than churches and societies alike; an explosive promise, on
whose spin-offs an ecclesiastical body as well as a political body have
capitalized.15
The 1990s were perceived by many Kimbanguists as a first step toward the fulfillment of eschatological prophecies. Since the spiritual leader Diangienda had predicted the perestroika and the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989), the millenarian stance of Kimbanguists was reinforced. On September 12, 1991, following a proposal of the court of appeals, President Mobutu signed an order of amnesty, which posthumously reinstated the civil rights of Simon Kimbangu, who had been a prisoner until his death. Upon this occasion, Diangienda stated on national radio and television that the whole world was going to make a new start, which further kindled his followers’ hopes.

In November 1991, the future Senegalese president Abdoulaye Wade, then the leader of the political opposition in his country, went to Zaire to ease the gridlock between Mobutu and Étienne Tshisekedi, the leader of the opposition party. In a sermon, Diangienda commented on Wade’s intervention by engaging the church members in a call-and-response exchange on a legend they were all familiar with:

“After Papa [Simon Kimbangu] was sentenced to death—that was October 10, 1921—when Papa was put on the train, what nationality was the mechanic [driver]?”

“Senegalese!”

“And when the order was given for the train to start, did the train actually start?”

“No!”

“Papa had said that the train would not start until he had seen his children. These days, we have a mbuta mutu [elder] who is here for an arbitration. Did you hear that or not?”

“We heard it!”

“He came to reconcile us. Children are taught by means of parables; let’s just see where we are going. Child of Papa Simon Kimbangu, keep your eyes and ears open, and use your mind.”\(^{16}\)

The legend he was alluding to refers to the time that Kimbangu was being transferred to Elisabethville (now Lubumbashi), where he was to be jailed. After his request to see his children was denied, he allegedly stopped the train—which was driven by a Senegalese man—until his children were taken to him and he could bid them farewell. By connecting this story from 1921 to the political situation in 1991, Diangienda was suggesting that Kimbangu’s invisible hand was at work. Instead of hoping for a Senegalese
politician to unlock the situation, Congo—as well as the whole continent—should trust the Kimbanguists to restore order.

In neighboring Congo-Brazzaville in the same year, a national conference was organized to help the country’s transition to democracy. It was supervised by a member of the Catholic clergy, Ernest Kombo, the bishop of Owando. Thanks to his political neutrality, he was unanimously elected as the leader and successfully defused the pressure exerted by many of the delegates, who insisted that President Sassou N’Guesso be arrested and that all officials of his socialist regime be barred from the political scene. Instead, drawing heavily on biblical quotations, Kombo encouraged the participants to practice forgiveness and make a clean break with the past to rebuild a new Congo. At the end of the conference, he organized a hand-washing ritual to symbolize these positive resolutions. In the wake of this conference, most citizens’ confidence in politicians’ ability to rebuild the nation was restored. Still, Diangienda and his church remained skeptical, for they maintained that the solution had to come from the Kimbanguists. The spiritual leader of the EJCSK preached several times about the national conferences taking place in both Congo and Zaire:

I will first discuss the problems in the Republic of the Congo, as their national conference is now over. . . . Papa Simon Kimbangu had said that everything would start from Brazza. All the problems started in Brazza, and now they are done with their conference. They are resting now, but the problems are not over. Have they sought the kingdom of God? Today, they will wash their hands, and all over the country, all the Congolese shall wash their hands. And what’s next?  

Pray as much as you can for the sovereign national conference [in Zaire] to be uneventful, for in that room [where the conference was held] there are minds of different natures; and the decisions that will be made there will result from arbitration, which may, in turn, imply discord and lead us to kill one another. If we are not careful, these arbitrations will result in a disaster, and we’ll be the laughingstock of the whole world. . . . Everything lies in your [Kimbanguists’] hands. Try as they might to do things right, as long as you [Kimbanguists] are left out of the talks, nothing will happen.

Since the time of African states’ independence, the Kimbanguist Church has ceased to be the political protest movement it was during the
colonial period and morphed into a spiritual laboratory of sorts, analyzing the political evolution of the three countries where it was born and the evolution of the African diaspora. Its support of the various undemocratic regimes is typically justified with the analogy of “a wife that remains faithful to her husband in spite of his infidelity.” In an interview with Hilaire Kimbatsa, a journalist from the national radio of Congo-Brazzaville, Diangienda explained his support of Mobutu with that analogy: “You call ‘papa’ the man your mother married. Mobutu was elected with 99 percent of the votes, so it was not just my vote which made him the president.” However, in these comments he was downplaying his personal relation to Mobutu. Indeed, he would frequently make this sort of comment while hinting that he knew the destiny of the DRC and the rest of Africa. For instance, he once said that President Kasavubu had spent in his company the night preceding his election as the first president of the country, letting his audience infer that Kasavubu had sought Diangienda’s spiritual backing.

It is worth stressing that while Mobutu was the self-styled spiritual leader of Zaire and almost raised himself to the status of a messiah, in the view of the Kimbanguist Church he was simply the living proof of the fulfillment of one of Diangienda’s prophecies. Indeed, to the Kimbanguists, the actual messianic leader was Diangienda himself. Mobutu reinforced this connection in the eulogy he gave at Diangienda’s funeral:

Mamas and papas, my Kimbanguist brethren, it is true, both you and I are aggrieved, for Papa Diangienda is no more. I want to tell you something which had remained a secret between him and myself. But Mama Mobutu, my first wife [who passed away in the 1980s], knew it, and Mama Bobiladawa [his second wife], who is sitting behind me here knows it too. We were the only three people to know this. In the testimony I am about to give, you should not consider the president of the Republic, but citizen Mobutu Sese Seko, who is not a Kimbanguist but a Catholic Christian.

In 1958, Papa Diangienda, who is now asleep but can hear me, had called me to his house. He told me this: “Papa, you wrote many papers to serve us Kimbanguists. This is agreeable to God and to us Kimbanguists.” He took my hand and knelt down and said, “Listen to the word of God: you shall become a great man; and when you have become a great leader thanks to the word of God, don’t forget your Kimbanguists, and keep serving them.”
these words—from the Round Table [which gave independence to the DRC] of 1960 to the level I have reached now—well, you’ll see that this papa who is asleep today, and whose coffin was thrown stones at, was a real prophet among us. People say that only his father was a prophet, but he too was a prophet.  

This interpretation of the connection between the political leader and Diangienda was reinforced by the apologies made by Mobutu for the people who threw stones at the funeral procession. I remember hearing a Kimbanguist preacher say the following on the occasion of Mobutu’s funeral:

Jesus was crucified with a robber on each side. When one of them insulted him, the other defended him and asked for his forgiveness. In return, Jesus Christ promised him he’d go to Heaven. Although President Mobutu was often called a thief and a dictator, he spoke in defense of Diangienda at the time his funeral procession was pelted with stones. He said, “For this, I ask for forgiveness in the name of the Zairian people and in the name of God. May they be forgiven, for he did not deserve this.” I am bold enough to believe that Mobutu, in spite of all the negative charges against him, is today in Heaven by Papa Diangienda’s side.

It is worth emphasizing that Mobutu and Diangienda had known each other since the colonial period and had been neighbors in Kananga, long before they became, respectively, the dictator of the country and the spiritual leader of the Kimbanguist Church. Mobutu was a journalist, and he helped Diangienda by writing the Belgian authorities to plead the case of the Kimbanguist movement, which was in search of freedom of expression. This closeness between the two caused Diangienda to be viewed by the Congolese population as one of Mobutu’s supporters, so that his funeral procession was pelted with stones by the inhabitants of Kinshasa. As a result of all this, Mobutu’s eulogy at his friend’s funeral was fraught with emotion and delivered with eyes brimming with tears. When it was broadcast on the Zairian national television channel in July 1992, it was criticized by Mobutu’s opponents, who saw it as a way for the dictator to gain Kimbanguist votes. But the eulogy was rather well received by Kimbanguists, who saw it as a confirmation of their leader’s divine authority over the president. They said, “Papa Diangienda is the one who gives you power; he is also the one who takes it back.”
The coup that deposed Mobutu and brought Laurent-Désiré Kabila into office in 1997 was a moment when much was discussed and many frustrations vented among the Kimbanguists. Diangienda had announced that the third republic of Zaire would be a Kimbanguist one, but he never specified in what way it would come, leaving his audience total freedom of interpretation. For certain Kimbanguist believers, the post-Mobutu period would be handled by a Kimbanguist presidency; for others, it would be a restoration of the ancient kingdom of Kongo. One pastor explained to me that a group of believers had paid a visit to the spiritual leader of the church, Dialungana, to ask how they should interpret Kabila’s presidency through the prism of Diangienda’s prophecies. Dialungana, he said, answered their query with the following: “If you entrust someone with your field for the purpose of weeding it, does it mean the field belongs to them?”

The Kimbanguist Church has been constantly wooed by politicians for electoral purposes, because it is strong in numbers on both banks of the Congo River. But politicians also seek to gain some spiritual backing from its leaders and solutions for peace when their nations are ravaged by fratricidal wars. For example, in Congo-Brazzaville, there were two civil wars during the presidency of the democratically elected Pascal Lissouba. The first took place in December 1993 between the regime and the so-called Ninjas—the paramilitary soldiers led by the ex-mayor of Brazzaville, Bernard Kolélas. When the war was over, a worship service of national reconciliation was organized by the president on December 24, 1993, with the patronage of the Kimbanguist Church at the Kimbanguist Center of Brazzaville. The second civil war occurred in June 1997 and lasted five months, with the so-called Cobras (Sassou N’Guesso’s paramilitary forces) opposing the Cocoyes (President Lissouba’s soldiers) assisted by the Ninjas of Kolélas (who was named prime minister in exchange for this support). When that war ended in October 1997, Denis Sassou N’Guesso, who had already reigned over the Republic of the Congo as a Marxist president for thirteen years (1979–1992), came back to power as Sassou II.22 This time, he seemed to promote a more religious attitude. In February 1999, he supported a march of Christian women for peace, and on August 15, 1999, during the celebrations of Congolese independence, he attended a big worship service for national reconciliation, organized with the patronage of the Kimbanguist Church, and said, “I am putting Congo into the hands of God.”

In April of that year, ambassadors from Congo-Brazzaville and Angola along with President Kabila’s representative met in Nkamba with Dialungana to reconsolidate the Congolese people, saying that the three nations,
united by history, were “bound to live together.”²³ But did this mean that the political leaders would take action and make statements on issues beyond their control, or were they simply appropriating religious rhetoric in their own interests? What matters from a sociological standpoint is that in the eyes of the Kimbanguists, these new behaviors were signs of a return of the three nations to God with the patronage of their own spiritual leaders. Indeed, an inspired hymn (sung in Lingala) conveyed Dialungana’s position about the change in attitude:

Mr. President of the [Democratic Republic of the] Congo
Mr. President of [the Republic of the Congo] Brazza
Mr. President of Angola,
You must find an agreement.
My time has come:
That which we had agreed upon
Has come to an end in this world.

Chorus: I, Dialungana, I am done.
My eyes are on you only.
I have but little time
To accomplish my will!
Open your hearts,
And the whole world will find peace!
Thanks to you,
That which we had agreed upon
Has come to an end.
Come and soften your hearts!

Tenor: Mr. President of the Congo, listen to me
Mr. President of Brazza, listen to me
Mr. President of Angola, listen to me!
My time has come:
I am waiting for you.
The mission I had entrusted you with
Has come to an end in this world.

Tenor: I, the Holy Spirit
Will lead my world.
I will solve the problem.
There is no turning back for me anymore.
As mentioned earlier, the Kimbanguist faith considers its three home countries—the DRC (Zaire), Congo-Brazzaville, and Angola—as places where God chose to reside on earth, with Nkamba being first and foremost. In his sermons, Diangienda referred to Zaire as a gift and an earthly paradise given by God to Blacks. In this hymn Dialungana reveals his divine identity and his plan for the three countries. He engages the political leaders in spiritual terms, hinting that he alone embodies the solution to the countries’ problems. The challenge to the political sphere is sent in prophetic terms through the inspired hymns sung in the church, where, as a rule, heads of state are not named.

What do the Kimbanguists blame Congolese political leaders for exactly? Many African heads of state, and Congolese heads of state in particular, first adhered to a Marxist ideology after independence and then were inducted into Freemasonry when their countries transitioned to democracy in the early 1990s. In Congo-Brazzaville, President Lissouba, Sassou II, their ministers, and certain members of their cabinets joined Masonic lodges.24 Mobutu was known to be fond of marabouts and traditional conjurers.25 But the Kimbanguist Church openly fights Freemasonry, which it holds on a par with witchcraft. The church teaches that while traditional witchcraft is inherently Black—since it was transmitted by Adam and Eve—Freemasonry is the European, “modernized” version of witchcraft. The messianic dimension of Kimbanguist beliefs allows the church to express disapproval or spiritual protest through its spiritual leaders’ speeches and sermons and by means of inspired hymns. Diangienda once preached that “Africa is ruled during the night,”26 which, from an African and, in particular, a Congolese worldview means that political decision making is done by way of occult practices. Against this backdrop, the inspired hymn below from the 1990s calls out both the political leadership and the elites for choosing the wrong solutions:

The crisis shaking the world
Can never end,
Even though intelligent men
Are trying to bring peace.
It will not end!
Upheavals in the world,
Conflicts and warfare
Will be without end,
Even if they hold talks after talks
In hopes of restoring peace.
It will not end—
All this labor
Will have been lost on pagans.

Chorus: I had warned you,
I had concealed nothing.
Both of your eyes see
At the same time,
Both of your ears perceive
A sound at the same time.
Believer, beware!
Peace, believer!
Let the world twist and writhe!
I had predicted this.
Leave the world in the vortex!
I had predicted this.
Let the world twist and turn,
I will come and bring peace.

In this hymn, sung in Lingala, the voice of Kimbangu or Diangienda deciphers for his followers the conflicts occurring in Africa, and calls to order the political leaders, warning them that the remedy for the ills of Congo and Africa will come from himself. The church’s members interpret every upheaval in the world and especially in Africa through a prophecy that Simon Kimbangu made on September 10, 1921, in Mbanza Nsanda, Lower Congo, shortly before he was arrested. Even if the contents of the message are not exactly clear, he is understood to have said that there would be two stages of independence—the first political and the second spiritual. In particular, the inauguration of the Nkamba temple would signal the spiritual liberation of Blacks, and the Black race would henceforth be treated on an equal footing with the rest of humankind. When the temple of Nkamba was inaugurated on April 6, 1981, many Kimbanguists believed this would bring about the end of the world, because when Kimbangu had prophesied its construction, he had also announced that material and spiritual transformation would follow its inauguration.

When interviewing or observing Kimbanguists, I have heard numerous allusions to the idea that Africa will experience a second independence after the time of political independence. But the coming of the
second independence will involve many fatalities and much suffering. This will happen at the same time as the advent of a great king, who will be a great political and religious leader. He will be a prince of peace who will pacify the African continent, starting from Congo-Kinshasa and northern Angola (Mbanza Kongo). From the Kimbanguists’ viewpoint, political leaders are looking for help in the wrong places, omitting the fact that the solution to Black people’s problems can only be given by their church. Diangienda’s exhortations to the members of the church made this point even more explicit, as the following example shows: “You are often taken for fools because you adhere to Kimbanguism, but you are no fools. You are more intelligent than all these people [detractors of the church]. . . . Until you are associated [with the affairs of the country] nothing will work. . . . You are a bridge that all these people have to cross.”

He went on with a parable which, though he left it unexplained, seems to buttress the believers’ assumption. Cast as an animal folktale, the “parable of the drunken man” gave them tools with which to interpret the coming political upheavals in the DRC:

A man who had gotten drunk with wine found himself in the bush. In his drunkenness, he lit a cigarette and dropped it on the ground. A huge wildfire broke out. The man came back to his senses and ran away. The wildfire caused panic among the animals of the bush. Now, the rat had prepared a nice house for himself in a hole—a very luxurious place. He scampered off to his place. The toad then came along and saw there was a hole, so he leaped in to find refuge. Then it was the turn of the viper, who decided there was room enough for him in this same hole. The rat and the toad were so scared they thought they would die! Alas, the rat had no window in his house that would allow them to escape from the snake. So the viper told himself he’d feast on them when the fire was over, hoping he’d survive the whole thing. But the owner of the bush, seeing the havoc wreaked by the wildfire, prayed to God to put it out. So God sent heavy rain. The rain put out the fire, but it also drowned the three little animals who thought they’d survive the fire.

In the late 1990s, a few years after Diangienda passed away, Kimbanguist believers saw this parable as a key to understanding the events shaking the former Zaire at the time. Mobutu was identified as the wealthy rat, because of the riches he had accumulated, and the lack of a window in
the rat’s hole was understood to symbolize his lack of love for his people. His rival Étienne Tshisekedi was the toad (an animal symbolizing poverty) while Laurent-Désiré Kabila, who would overturn the moribund Mobutist regime in bloodshed, was identified with the viper (an embodiment of authority). A woman I spoke to, who grew up in Diangienda’s house, reported that when Mobutu fled the country in 1997, soldiers from the army of Kabila entered Kinshasa and stormed into the house of the late spiritual leader and threatened his son Armand Wabasolele. The actual or political deaths of the three protagonists were seen as a confirmation of Diangienda’s prophecy in the parable.

The message conveyed by the hymn that begins “The crisis shaking the world” translates political terms into religious ones, reflecting the socio-political situation as it is experienced in Africa and particularly in the Congolese region. The hymn thus appears to be a coherent network of pre-constructed patterns about the role of Kimbanguism in political matters, the key to which is given by the church’s spiritual leader. Thus, the critique voiced by the Kimbanguist faith to politicians, while often implicit, is made explicit through inspired hymns, such as the one below—where Simon Kimbangu is outraged to see the political elite celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the independence of Congo without taking into account the role he played in the liberation of the country:

O, Congo! I am asking you:
Now that you are celebrating the fiftieth anniversary
Of your independence,
Congo, what place have you given me?
Congo, you have forgotten my suffering
You have neglected the recommendations
That I, Kimbangu, had given you;
How is your suffering supposed to end?
Congo, you have forgotten my greatness;
You have rejected me!
From the colonial yoke that weighed on your shoulders,
Who came to liberate you, Congo?
Yet today you refuse to hear
My name, “Kimbangu”!
But who said,
“Black shall become white
And White shall become black?”
But today you refuse to speak
My name, “Kimbangu”!
You have become lords
And you have disowned me; how shameful!
You opted for the wisdom of this world;
You keep glorifying yourselves though you are empty;
You refuse to hear
My name, “Kimbangu”;
You have forgotten
That the uplift of Congo
Lies in my hands,
The hands of Kimbangu—
It is shameful, it really is!
You are bragging
In vain, Congo!
When I think of my suffering,
Thirty years of suffering
In prison,
And think
That I had not done a thing—
And all of this was done for the sake of Congo!
Congo, you have forgotten me,
O, Congo, you have disowned me!
Africa shall rise through you
But you, Congo, lack clear-sightedness:
You are celebrating the fiftieth anniversary
Of the country’s independence;
But, Congo, you have forgotten my greatness
You have disowned the pain I have suffered
At the hands of the Whites.
They humiliated me,
They made me suffer
For saying,
“Black shall become white
And White shall become black.”
This is why they humiliated me.
I have given you independence!
Today you have become
A grown man,
And I have disappeared from the picture.  
What place have you given me?  
What is my place?  
Where is my place?  
This is shameful, Congo, you have disowned me!  

This expression of Simon Kimbangu’s indignation, albeit in a song, gives insight into the church’s critique of political leadership. This type of hymn, which is extremely common in the Kimbanguist Church, shapes believers’ attitude to the political sphere and seems to find an echo in that sphere, since political leaders keep an eye on developments within the church.

Joseph Kabila’s succeeding his assassinated father in office raised diverging reactions among the believers. Some vented their frustration, while others saw in Kabila the fulfillment of one of Kimbangu’s prophecies. Several narratives contend that Kimbangu announced a number of political transformations in his “prophecy on the four presidents,” which described each of them, including the type of regime and length of time in power. The repeated allusions to Joseph Kabila’s being predestined to be the president of the republic became so widespread that they eventually triggered the interest both of Congolese lawmakers, who hang or paste pictures of Simon Kimbangu in their cars, and of the man himself, as the following excerpt from the periodical *Jeune Afrique* shows: ‘Then, a wise young man shall come. He is the one who shall save the country and bring to the people happiness and real independence.’ . . . In terms of legitimizing an authority that came to [Joseph Kabila] almost from nowhere (‘I did not see it coming,’ he once confessed) this is not a negligible source of support provided people believe it. . . . Hence the symbolic usefulness of this resort albeit apocryphal to Simon Kimbangu.”

Although Kimbangu never saw a liberated Congolese nation during his lifetime even though he announced decolonization, it is often the glorious kingdom of Kongo that appears between the lines of the messianic and prophetic statements attributed to him. In this sense, the three nations, which, according to Kimbanguists, used to be a single, vast kingdom in precolonial times, are understood as a world in the making, whose reunification, prophesied by Kimbangu, will be accomplished by a king whom Kimbangu will designate and guide from above. This is why some people saw Joseph Kabila as a harbinger of this golden age. Indeed, Kabila’s rise to power as the head of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, following Mobutu’s demise and the assassination of his father, Laurent-Désiré Kabila, in 2001,
expressions of kimbanguist messianism ushered in a new era in the relations between political leaders and Kimbanguism, particularly as regards the figure of Simon Kimbangu. Kabila chose to build an alliance with the Kimbanguist Church on the basis of its political messianism.

Joseph Kabila is the first Congolese president who has behaved like a Kimbanguist. He stayed three days in Nkamba in March 2003 and refused to take the seat the people had prepared for him as the president; he sat instead among the rank-and-file Kimbanguists in the temple—something none of his predecessors had ever done, not even Mobutu, who had only made one brief visit to Nkamba, despite his friendship with Diangienda. It seems that the DRC’s political leadership has gained awareness of the role played by Simon Kimbangu in the country’s national independence. In the first months of 2008, Kabila ordered the creation of a monument in Matadi, Lower Congo, to pay homage to Simon Kimbangu, and Kabila named him a national hero in 2010.

In July 2011, Kimbangu was declared innocent by a Congolese military high court revising the decision of the colonial War Council, which had sentenced him to death for attacking the security of the state. With the patronage of President Kabila, an international conference entitled “Simon Kimbangu, the Man, His Work, and His Contribution in the Process of Liberation of Blacks” was organized by Professor Elikia M’Bokolo and held...
at the Kimbanguist Center in Kinshasa in the midst of the presidential campaign in the DRC. The spiritual leader Simon Kimbangu Kiangani encouraged church members to vote for Kabila by prophesying his victory.

After a thirty-year quest for identity, which saw the demise of both Marxism and Mobutism, the challenge facing political leaders in the three Congos is to find a history that is inspiring enough to provide their nations with constructive norms and ideological values. As a result, religion appears to be a tool helping politicians to reinfuse ideology into the countries’ populations, allowing the people to better handle uncertainty and to redefine the centrality of identity, without which the Congolese nations cannot be comprehended or ruled. As the playwright Pius Ngandu Nkashama pointed out, to the extent that Western discourse on Africa—particularly and most tragically in Francophone Africa—is in a deadlock, parallel languages, which, in this case, have combined with religious thinking, have become concrete spaces for discursive practices.

Beyond national political developments, the Kimbanguist Church simultaneously focuses on its dogma that Congo is the garden of Eden and on its goal to remedy the oppression of Blacks all over the world. The pan-African message of identity reconstruction is rooted in an acute awareness of the common situation of domination and leads the Kimbanguists to identify their cause with that of all Black people, who, they believe, all expect their redemption from God. This is evidenced by one of the prophecies of Simon Kimbangu, who announced in 1921 that African Americans and other African-descended people would follow God’s plan and go back to Africa to help the continent benefit from their knowledge and resources. Because of this prophecy, during his trial Kimbangu was accused, among other things, of trying to spread Marcus Garvey’s ideas in Congo. Two remarks must be made about this point. First, it is not known whether Kimbangu met or even heard about Garvey. Perhaps, when he tried to make a living before obeying the calling of Christ, he heard about Garvey or the Universal Negro Improvement Association at the oil factory where he worked. But there is nothing about Garvey in Kimbangu’s sermons, and the only mention of Garvey appears in the prosecutor’s attacks on Kimbangu during his trial. Second, when Kimbangu prophesied about the return of African Americans, he was very different from Garvey: he did not say he would live to see a Back-to-Africa movement but instead took his youngest collaborator, Michâelle (Mikala) Mandombe, as a witness who would live to see the fulfillment of the prophecy. This woman died in 2001 after seeing the delegations of African Americans led by
George Harris from Atlanta, Georgia, and Dr. Ramona Tascoe from Oakland, California.

Since the 1970s, the Kimbanguist Church has included a dynamic diaspora on all continents (with congregations in Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia, and China), which keeps alive the ideal of Black internationalism. But the Kimbanguist version of pan-Africanism grants a special, explicit role to Black America in its systematic interpretation of history as guided by divine Providence. The construction of Kimbanguist identity implies a pan-African consciousness of what Balandier described in the 1950s as “the racial solidarity existing between the Kimbanguists and black Americans”: “A third group of themes emphasizes the gulf [and] highlights the rift between the Blacks and the Whites . . . and reveal[s] the emergence of a kind of ‘counter-racism’ among the Congolese. These publicize the ‘trials and persecutions’ to which the Blacks had been subjected, and glorify their racial solidarity with ‘the Negroes who are now living in America but who will return to their own country, the Congo.’” This quotation provides an interesting backdrop to the analysis of the present situation, since African-descended people have played a part in the messianic ideal constructed by Simon Kimbangu from the onset of his politico-religious movement.

From the 1980s through today, groups of African American men and women have regularly visited Nkamba and Kinshasa to learn about the Kimbanguist Church in Congo. In the eyes of the Kimbanguists, this is less a matter of back-to-Africa pan-Africanism than the accomplishment of Kimbangu’s prophecy. Inspired hymns also reinforce the link between America and Africa, embracing the entire African diaspora, whose liberation lies at the core of Kimbangu’s mission, since Africana people also bear the consequences of the specific sin of Blacks. This is made plain by the following hymn, received in Kikongo and sung during the ceremonies of atonement for original sin in 1992:

Alas, my God!
Who made me a black person?
Indeed, suffering has been my lot to this day.
Both we, natives of Africa, the land of suffering,
And those living in faraway countries, we all share the misery
Caused by creatures just like us.

Chorus: Our ancestors transgressed and never repented;
But we are begging Thee, why not listen to us?
Consider at least the suffering of our fathers and pardon us!
See, my God,
For so many years I have been a prisoner,
I, the Black race, jailed for 4,400 years
To this day, why not listen to us?
Why allow these persecutions night and day.
As if the black race were not of Thy making?

This hymn emphasizes the subordinate status of Blacks as a racial group and the belief that it is the consequence of their forefathers’ sin. It leads the believers to identify with oppressed Black people all over the world and plead with God for their collective redemption.

Since the turn of the twentieth century, some African Americans have migrated to African countries. Among the factors leading them to visit and sometimes settle in Africa, religion appears to play a significant role. It was the prime motivation of a group of African Americans who currently live in the DRC within the Kimbanguist communities, who are in search of an identity and new forms of expression of their racial consciousness. How do they interact with Kimbanguist believers, and what role are they given by the latter? What is their perception of Kimbanguist messianism?

To better understand the relation between African Americans and Kimbanguism, it is best to grasp first their relation to the Bible. Wimbush analyzed it in the following terms: “For African Americans to read scriptures is to read darkness. By referring here to darkness I do not mean to play the usual rhetorical-symbolization games that set up endless but predictable polarities and dualities. . . . African Americans’ engagement of the Bible points to the Bible as that which both reflects and draws unto itself and engages and problematizes a certain complex order of existence associated with marginality, liminality, exile, pain, trauma.”38 African Americans who visit or settle in Kimbanguist communities may easily fit this description, as well as St. Clair Drake’s analysis of pan-Africanism as an African American initiative aiming at establishing trade relations with Africans and uniting with them to protest and eradicate color discrimination.39 Given that Kimbanguism is rooted in a critique of the subordinate status of Blacks worldwide and the need to build a Black internationalism, it is not surprising that it has attracted African Americans. Among them, three categories may be identified: the first comprises those who make the trip for religious reasons; the second, those who are in search of a history or traditions; and the third, those who go to Congo for humanitarian purposes.
Two types of visitors fall into the “religious” category. First, a number of African Americans go to Kimbanguist communities on ecumenical missions. On December 16, 1989, for example, an interfaith delegation, composed of twenty-seven African American men and women, flew from Boston to visit the Kimbanguist temple in Kinshasa. The head of the delegation, Rev. Lowry, was greeted by President Mobutu and justified their coming in the following terms: “You are at the head of a country which is heaven on earth.” To the Kimbanguists, Rev. Lowry said, “It’s so good to be home.... Let it be known that the spirit of your great leader and teacher is alive, and because of that, we will overcome.” Although these words may be interpreted as simple diplomacy, they were given uncommon significance because they perfectly espoused Kimbanguist millenarianism.

The second type of visitors are those who believe they have received a specific calling in relation to Kimbanguist spirituality. A woman called Harron Farrel, for example, had spent her life in the United States, but mentioned in her last wishes that she wanted to be buried in Nkamba. When she passed away in 1986, her husband complied, in the presence of the Kimbanguist community and the Zairian authorities. Diangienda explained that she had chosen to be buried there as a result of a vision, which had convinced her that Nkamba is the birthplace of humanity. Later, when the Kimbanguists celebrated the eighty-first anniversary of the creation of their church on April 6, 2002, the ceremony held in Nkamba was graced by the presence of a dozen African Americans. Their exhortations were peppered with references to Kimbanguist identity. For instance, some of them identified with the community and publicly (re)asserted their faith in Africa as their homeland, speaking in the names of their ancestors and identifying with the Africans.

I’m reminded right now of the Children of Israel, when they came out of the land of Egypt, by the hand of Moses, for the Lord brought them out. I am so thankful, for the Lord blessed me to come to see and to hear my own siblings before I go down into the earth. And I do believe just as the Lord brought the Children of Israel out, He’s going to bring us out.

I want first of all to thank you for welcoming me back home. And in the United States, promises are often made, but you have shown me the only beings who can make promises, ‘cause you can keep them. I was very humbled when I saw the homes that you have been building
for us [an allusion to the studios built by the church members to host their visitors].

As I meet you, I look around, and it makes me feel so good. I see so many of you who look like me. I feel like you!

I have been truly blessed by God to touch this ground and to see all of you, [to see] that Africa is the beginning of mankind. I am truly humbled by your hospitality and your graciousness.

I saw you in November, and I told you I was humbled by your presence, and I was centered spiritually. I promised you that I would return and that I would help to bring supplies to the hospital and to the church and to work on special programs. I have returned. I am again centered spiritually, and when I leave next week, you can be sure that we will continue to work on your behalf, and to spread the news among other African Americans about the Kimbanguist Church and about your efforts, and to help bring more African Americans back home to Congo.

My brothers and sisters in Africa, my brothers and sisters of Congo—most importantly, you’re my brothers and sisters in God—I give honor to you, grandmothers, great-grandmothers, grandfathers, great-grandfathers, and all of the Kimbanguist members. The road here is a spiritual journey. I’m here representing my great-great-grandmother and my great-great-grandfather. I give honor to God for sending me here to be reunited and to be at home.

The last visitor to speak chose to do so in Lingala and French, in order to stress her connection to the country: “Ngai/bino, té. Bisso. And, à cause de ça, ezali essengo mingi! [It’s not about me and you. It’s us. And because of this, it’s a great joy].”

The remarks above are consistent with the tenets of Kimbanguist identity on three points: the belief in Africa as the homeland of the first human beings, a sense of belonging to a Black international community based on a strong phenotypical likeness, and a shared situation of oppression. Most visits of African Americans to Kimbanguist holy places, particularly Nkamba, are typically experienced as a return to the motherland from which their ancestors were forcibly removed and transported across the ocean.
Another important factor in the reception of these African American visitors was the link some of them had established with Kimbanguist spirituality and the way in which they testified to it when justifying their presence in Nkamba. Two such testimonies were particularly significant. Dinah Smith, the wife of Rev. Alfred Smith from California, said she had come to seek a cure for her Parkinson’s disease and shared a vision she had: “When I came here to Congo, I heard a song in my spirit, and the name of that song was ‘We Are Standing on Holy Ground.’ The rest of the words are—I won’t sing it, but it says, ‘I know that there are angels all around.’ And I believe God is going to touch my body because God is here.”42

Dinah Smith’s description of her mystical experience bears a striking resemblance to Kimbanguist spirituality, which grants considerable importance to inspired hymns; it also neatly fits with the Kimbanguist reading of the Bible, which defines Nkamba as the Holy Land and the place where God resides. At this point, the spiritual leader Simon Kimbangu Kiangani drew the audience’s attention to a detail he found significant—Pastor Smith’s wife was called Dinah, just like the woman Simon Kimbangu had brought back to life in 1921. “According to me, it is the same Mama Dinah who has come to Simon Kimbangu again, to be healed a second time,” he asserted. “It is better for her to leave her illness here in Nkamba.” I am unable to say whether Dinah Smith was cured in Nkamba, for I have not been able to establish any contact with the California-based couple.

Another member of the same delegation, a man called Ronny, who managed a maritime company based in California, Nevada, and other states of the American Southwest, gave the following explanation for his presence: “A few months ago sitting in my office in the USA, I received an invitation. It was true, but the invitation was not on paper. It was through your prayers and will I received your invitation. So I decided to come.”43 Whether this statement was just meant to please the audience or expressed his actual motivation for his pilgrimage to Nkamba is hard to determine.

Further research is needed to find these men and women and interview them about their intentions and their perspective in hindsight. At any rate, to Kimbanguist believers, it looked as though there were a sort of magnetic spiritual power reaching people of African descent wherever they were and attracting them to Nkamba—as though Kimbangu, from the next world, had decided to bring into his fold Black followers hailing from the African diaspora. This representation seems valid because the visitors themselves described their experiences in these terms.
Other descendants of enslaved Africans, from other parts of the African diaspora, also testified that they had been through similar spiritual experiences with Kimbanguism. A French actress from the Caribbean island of Martinique, Joby Valente, who is well known to Black activists in France, first visited the Kimbanguist Church in the late 1980s. She explained that one day, while lying on her couch napping, she had a vision of a Black woman robed in white, with her head covered, who said to her, “Kimbangu.” Since this was the first time she had heard the word, she did not stir, but the same woman repeated in a loud voice, “Kimbangu!” She then began a quest to solve the mystery, which eventually led her to visit a Kimbanguist community in Kinshasa. In her testimony, she asserted that she had the gift of receiving inspired hymns, just like bona fide members of the Kimbanguist Church. A favorite hymn (which she received in French) says:

I believe in You, Lord
Yes, You are the mightiest.
I trust in Your goodness, for You promised us
That next to You we can win everything:
“Don’t ever forget that I am holding your hand,
As long as I am holding it, there will be no faltering.”

A Kimbanguist journalist asked whether she had received the hymn or composed it, since she was also a musician. She said, “When you compose a song, you elaborate on a theme. But in this case, it just came to me in the middle of a dream, without my refining it. I just got up and told myself I mustn’t lose it, so I jotted it down on a piece of paper.”

Another descendant of enslaved Africans hailed from the United Kingdom. His name was Raymond Reynolds, and he accompanied the African American delegation that visited the Kimbanguist Church in December 2000. He addressed the church members:

After more than 400 years, each one of us has finally—finally—found our way home. And the funny thing is, I could imagine that, you know, maybe one of our ancestors just popped into the forest to get a little bit of fruit. . . . But finally, we’re home. There [are] so many things that can be said and that I’m experiencing within my heart. A son of Africa—to be an African or a Black man, it really is a
expressions of kimbanguist messianism struggle. Each one of us has to fight for the little bit that we achieve in our lives—fight against a system which works against us. And many times this means spiritually as well as materially. I’m standing here in front of you with the name Dimonekene. And this is the name that Papa Simon Kimbangu gave me. The church that I worship at is not the Kimbanguist Church; in fact this is true for my wife and also for David Hughes [another member of the delegation]. But Papa Simon Kimbangu came to us and told us to come to Nkamba. This is the truth of what each one of us [is] involved in. Brothers and sisters, [we] . . . have been really moved and have a strong desire to move this fantastic spiritual Providence forward. So today, perhaps you only see a few of us, but in the future we’re going to bring all our brothers and sisters. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.45

Because Kimbanguists believe that the founder of their church has the power to appear even though he has been dead since 1951, such testimonies from outsiders do not come as a surprise. In the case of this man, the naming process was unusual because he received his new name from an apparition instead of a living member of Simon Kimbangu’s family. The meaning of the Kikongo name Dimonekene is “This was seen” or “This was revealed.” On the basis of his testimony, it seems that the experience of oppression or social exclusion is what drew him to Kimbanguism. Even if he and his Congolese wife did not join the church, he still promised to be an advocate for Kimbanguist spirituality and return with other people from the African diaspora.

As for the category of African Americans who are in search of a history or traditions, it is clearly represented in the speech given by George Harris from Atlanta when he visited the Kimbanguist Center in Kinshasa:

We have come because there is something special [here]. There is something special here in Kinshasa. You have a history here. You have a tradition here. That tradition is the tradition of excellence. You must give this tradition to the rest of the black world, and you must give it quickly. I come to you from Atlanta. Young people in Atlanta need you. They need you because they have been deceived about who is God. For one moment, remember: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said that he may not go with us to the Promised Land, but we would go. There would not be a place on this earth, but there will be a Promised Land for black people. We did not know! How could we know that
this promise would be fulfilled in the promise of Simon Kimbangu? Is this the Promised Land? Is Kinshasa the Promised Land? Is Congo the Promised Land for all black people—or not? We wait for your answer, and then we’ll go to work. Merci beaucoup.46

Two elements stand out in Harris’s account of his meeting with the spiritual leader Dialungana. The first was his request to be told the names of his ancestors; he said that Dialungana answered: Diambu Dia Kiese (“happy event” in Kikongo). Not actually naming the ancestors of his African American visitor, Dialungana chose to focus on the present moment of the accomplishment of Simon Kimbangu’s prophecy, since the presence of African Americans in Nkamba was understood as a sign of the future status of Blacks. The second significant element was the answer Harris received from the spiritual leader to his complaint about the suffering of African Americans: “The doors are open now.” It is not surprising that African Americans in search of a Black theology of liberation may feel attracted to the version of Black internationalism upheld by Kimbanguist theology. The need to believe that Congo may be the Promised Land announced by Dr. King led Harris to suggest that Kimbanguists spread Kimbanguism among all the other Africans and people of African descent. In an interview posted online in August 2015, Dr. Ramona Tascoe said:

My first reaction [to Kimbanguism] was very simple. In the African American church we talk about Jesus being black. We talk about the God of the disinheritated, the people who suffer the most, who live at the margin, the poor; and when I heard about Papa Simon Kimbangu, all of that theological, spiritual preaching that I had heard in the African American church came alive. It was something that I could touch, something I could see, something I could [witness inside], if I believed. And for me, there was no question: when I went to Nkamba, when I went to Kinshasa the first time, and I heard all of these stories, I became convinced that the Kimbanguist Church, Papa Simon Kimbangu, was the answer to the African Americans’ prayer.47

These words reflect the same quest for liberation and for a God who takes into account the suffering of African Americans as in James Cone’s definition of Black theology. He sees the historically White American theology as a tool of White oppression, which ignores the problems of being Black in a White-dominated, racist society.48
Finally, the category of African Americans who go to the DRC for humanitarian purposes includes nurses from California. A group came to Nkamba with a screening tool for mammography worth $150,000, with the goal of helping Congolese hospitals detect breast cancers. Of the two women from this delegation who decided to settle in Congo, one is a physician and works at the Kimbanguist clinic of Kinshasa.

It is worth asking whether African Americans who go to Congo to visit Kimbanguist communities are actually “back home.” The answer varies from one person to the next, judging by their choices. Two women from the nurses’ group chose to settle in Kinshasa, while the rest promised to return to Congo in the future. I know of three African Americans who converted to Kimbanguism—two women, both physicians, and a man who publicly gave a spectacular conversion testimony after delivering a speech at the conference on Kimbangu that took place in Kinshasa in 2011. Nkamba has been appropriated by African Americans whose discourses show a quest for roots or for a religion centered on reconstructing Blackness. Undeniably, many African Americans are now used to going to Africa as tourists, but in this case, they seem to deliberately claim the prophecies made by Simon Kimbangu in 1921 about African Americans returning to the homeland.

The symbolism of the return of African Americans is so deep that before he passed away in August 2001, the second spiritual leader, Dialungana, recommended that studios be built to house the African Americans who were expected to throng to Nkamba by the thousands. The construction of these apartments was called nkendolo, a Kikongo word designating the “final limit,” implying the ultimate effort required from church members. Kimbanguist millenarianism teaches that among the harbingers of a new Black identity, African Americans will return to Africa en masse to dwell among the Kimbanguists—hence the magnitude of the project and the fervor put into its completion. Dr. Ramona Tascoe from the humanitarian delegation commented:

It’s not because we’re more special than anyone else. We simply represent that group of Africans who were taken across the waters and separated from their families for over 500 years, who are now finally finding their way home to their mothers and their fathers. But this time, we are realizing that you love us, you need us, we need you, and we are going to be able to help one another on our road to prosperity, because we love the Lord. Thank you for teaching us the importance of the expression “our home is your home”; nkendolo belongs to all...
of us. Thank you for giving it to us first, so that we can share it with all of you. Thank you.

Last point: African Americans need your prayers in the United States right now. We are now beginning to step forward in our leadership. We’re becoming more courageous about our ability to lead, help our nation to be kinder, more fair, more loving, more spiritual. African Americans have found their voice to lead in America, and we need your prayers especially now, after the events of this past year [referring to the attacks of 9/11]. So continue to pray for us. Pray for our courage, pray for our determination. We are not afraid to call on the name of Jesus.49

In such a context, the election of Barack Obama as president of the United States in 2008 caused great interest among the Kimbanguists. A seventeen-year-old inspired person, a Roman Catholic named Abali Matuni (aka Mbuta), who was mentioned above, regularly sees apparitions of Simon Kimbangu, although he refuses to convert to Kimbanguism, as his mother did. He said in an interview that Kimbangu gave him a list of all the events transforming the world on a global scale, and Mbuta gave a local politician this list, which allegedly predicted 9/11, Obama’s election, and other upcoming events concerning Congo and the world, which he is not yet allowed to reveal.50 The election of a Black man as the head of the world’s most powerful nation triggered the hopes of Africans in general and African Americans in particular, but for Kimbanguists messianic hopes were rekindled by the confirmation of the prophecy contained in the following inspired hymn, sung in Lingala by the GTKI choir in 1996:

America, get ready, come to Jerusalem!
For the problem we had discussed
Will be solved now.

Chorus: Africa, be watchful, the time has come!
Now you shall realize the magnitude of the problem
That is yours, America. Come, the time has come,
I am waiting for you, the time has come.
America, sound the clarion!
You have been entrusted with this charge
Sound the clarion for the whole world to know
That I am the God of the end.
I have finished everything
Now I will shake the whole world
Let the righteous rejoice!

The perception of inspired hymns as messages sent directly from heaven to the faithful in order to help them decipher the visible and invisible world allows for an interpretation of any event affecting Blacks in the world, and particularly in the United States, as providential signs of change. In the process of messianic interpretation that situates America in the context of providential history, inspired hymns establish a link not only between America and Africa, but also among Black people worldwide. According to the Kimbanguist understanding of the Holy Trinity, Dialungana, as the Black reincarnation of Christ, holds the key to all Black people’s liberation. He has been dead since August 2001, but this has not put an end to believers’ messianic hopes. As already discussed, one of Simon Kimbangu’s prophecies announced the return of African Americans to Africa with the aim of furthering its development. This caused him to be accused of having ties with the Garvey movement when he was tried by the Belgian colonial authorities in 1921.51

Therefore, quite unsurprisingly, the election of Barack Obama as president of the United States was celebrated by the Kimbanguists. On the Sunday following the American vote, I attended a service at one of the congregations in the metropolitan Paris area. All of the preachers interpreted the U.S. vote as a sign from God and as the long-awaited fulfillment of the prophecies of their spiritual fathers. This went far beyond theological speculation, and they reminded the congregation of an episode during a visit to the United States by Diangienda in the 1980s. On stepping out of the airport, he experienced racism when the first cab driver declined to drive him, saying he never took Blacks in his cab. Diangienda answered calmly, “It doesn’t matter at all. You’ll see, one day, you’ll be driven by Black men.”52

The election of a Black man to the U.S. presidency triggered hope in all Black people, but among Kimbanguists, it also reinforced the messianic hope conveyed in the hymn above. They expected what to them was the logical next step in the realization of the process of Black liberation—President Barack Obama’s visit to Nkamba. George Harris, who visited Nkamba several times, encouraged Simon Kimbangu Kiangani to write Obama a letter of invitation to the city of Nkamba. In an interview with a Kimbanguist journalist, a Congolese-born Catholic identified only as Marie, who lives in Charlotte, North Carolina, testified in Lingala that on December 10,
2009, she had a vision of Simon Kimbangu with Barack Obama standing by his side; she described the visits Obama would make to Lubumbashi and Nkamba. The faithful are confident they will some day see Mr. Obama tread the sacred ground of their holy city. A process of appropriation of the Bible led to the birth of a church that is both centered on identity reconstruction in and from Congo, and oriented toward the African diaspora with the aim of mutual salvation from situations of oppression.