Introduction

In this chapter I would like to pay attention to dynamics of ruptures linked to prophetic imagination in Africa. Prophets bring new religious discourses and convince followers that they have to abandon old religious cultures and convert to these innovative ones. Tempting as it is to analyse the prophetic work as rupture, as an effort at redirecting people’s imagination towards the ‘new world’ and towards the future, it would yield a very partial view on the work of prophetic imagination. In several prophetic movements I have been studying in West and Central Africa, the invitation of the prophets is not only to make a break with the past, but to critically reassess the past in order to understand the predicaments of the present too (Sarró 2018a). In other words, rupture and repair, to borrow the phrase from Rowlands, Feuchtwang and Zhang’s chapter, are more often than not the two sides of the same coin, especially in places where the past is remembered with a combination of pride and suffering, as is often the case in Africa.

The dyad of prophecy and invention is mediated by the unknown (Paine 1995). The ways prophets bring the unknown into the familiar could be analysed in many different social fields, but in this chapter I will focus on only one: writing systems. Writing has been seen by many scholars, certainly those endorsing Pan-Babylonists and other civilizational views of humanity, as the historical rupture par excellence. Indeed, a very popular book stated in its title that ‘history begins at Sumer’ (Kramer 1956), precisely because anything prior to the emergence of history was – and according to many authors today still is – considered as human
'pre' history. The emergence of writing works like a totemic operator that distinguishes a certain ‘we’ from a certain preliterate ‘they’ and that has been used to explain (or mystify?) the transition from mythical existence to logical thinking. Although as far as philosophy of history goes this is today an outmoded problematic epistemology, the fact remains that access to writing is regarded in many parts of the world as one of the most important achievements that individuals and societies may boast, their true coming of age.

But how do you access the alphabet? There are two ways: either you learn to use an existing alphabet or you invent your own from scratch. The invention of the alphabet has been a topic of research of both historians and anthropologists. Ethnographic evidence shows that in many places creative individuals, very often considered as prophets by their publics, have invented their own way to transcribe sounds into graphic symbols. The most famous individuals studied by anthropologists would include Sequoyah, a Seneca Indian who, despite being illiterate, was able to invent a syllabary (Foreman 1938), that of the Hmong prophet Shong Lue, who invented an alphabet in Vietnam (Smalley et al. 1990) and that of Souleymane Kante, whose visions gave birth to the N’ko alphabet in Mande West Africa (Vydrine 2001). Building on those cases, over the last decade, I have been investigating the emergence of an alphabet in Congo and the biography of the man who invented it through divine revelation.

Like many other alphabets, this one is closely connected to a prophetic movement, in this case to the Church of Simon Kimbangu, an institution based on the message of the prophet Simon Kimbangu (1887–1951). Since 1921 this Church has been making great efforts at bringing something ‘new’ to the Bakongo people of central Africa, while at the same time making them proudly aware of their cultural roots. The writing system, Mandombe (an expression that can be glossed as meaning ‘the writing system of the Africans’), was invented by a man called Wabeladio Payi (1958–2013). In 1978, after having some dreams in which Simon Kimbangu promised to send a mission for him, young Wabeladio spent nine months praying in a room, and in 1979 finally received a revelation. He realized that the lines separating the bricks on the wall against which he was praying could be interpreted in such a way as to give rise to graphic symbols, ‘graphemes’ to use his word. In a subsequent dream, God told him that his mission was to investigate the graphic symbols of the wall.

Wabeladio then started to investigate the mathematical and geometrical properties of the different figures he could draw with the lines of the wall. In 1985, six years after his initial revelation, he wrote...
an insightful unpublished report on the relationship between creativity (in art and technology) and geometry (Wabeladio Payi 1985). By 1994 he started to ascribe phonographic qualities to the symbols he was creating, and a proper alphabet (a syllabary at first) was born. It was, therefore, a very long process, which lasted many years, although in the popular imagination of his followers his invention is telescoped to the 1978 dream and presented as an invention of a ‘sudden genius’ instead of a long process of investigation, incubation and experimentation. In his inventive process, Wabeladio started by analysing the mathematical and geometrical aspects of the lines and of the figures, making an intellectual regression to what I would call ‘the elementary forms of rupturing life’. Like the pre-Socratic philosophers, like Ramon Llull, like Descartes, like the Cubists, Wabeladio realized that if you really want to start anew, you must start from geometry. And, indeed, he became a sophisticated geometer, offering something that was so absolutely new that people could not relate to it at all, and only a few understood what he was doing. The names of the graphemes he was inventing were, at first, sui generis concepts, bearing total independence from any other graphic system, and with no cultural connotations at all for any possible public. The very concept of mandombe, a Kikongo word, was not invented until 1994. Between 1978 and 1994, Wabeladio was referring to its invention as écriture imbriquée, a clever pun as the French imbriquée means both ‘overlapping’ and ‘made out of bricks’. In the 1990s, he started to rename all the elements of the writing system, including the name of the system itself. Thus, the names of the two basic elements upon which the entire alphabet rests, which resemble 5 and 2, were changed from solita and aldo (two entirely invented concepts) to pakundungu and pelekete, two onomatopoeic nouns of great connotation in the ‘affliction cult’-oriented culture of the Bakongo. Pakundungu represents the grave sound and pelekete the acute sound of the two ngoma (drums) that must be present in all Kongo ritual. The names of the more complex graphemes he developed, upon which syllables are constructed, were renamed from canne (‘walking cane’, in French) to mwuala (‘royal sceptre’, in Kikongo). This renaming and cultural rerooting on his invention in the Kongo imagery was a rather late development. At the beginning, and for a long time, no matter how impressed people were with the young man’s drawings and three-dimensional geometries, they could not relate to the invention, and Wabeladio was a rather solitary thinker with little impact. He even had to make a break with his matrilineal family, who were convinced the young man was wasting his time with the invention and suspected he was either bewitched or mad. He only started to gain public acceptance when he
managed to rephrase his quasi-surreal language and imagery in a way that resonated with people’s histories and experiences, and particularly with the messianic matrix inherent in Kongo cultural roots.

Kimbanguism and the spread of Mandombe

Since its beginning in 1978, the Mandombe alphabet and art have been strongly associated with the Kimbanguist Church, and they are taught in Kimbanguist centres in the Democratic Republic of Congo, in its neighbouring Republic of Congo (Brazzaville), in Angola and in the diaspora. A succinct description of this Church is therefore in order.

Kimbanguism was born among the Bakongo people in 1921, when Simon Kimbangu, a young man educated at the Baptist mission of Wathen (Ngombe-Lutete) and often described in colonial sources as a ‘prophet’, started to heal, make prophecies and even, oral history claims, make miracles in Lower Congo, then part of Belgian Congo. He became especially famous after allegedly having brought one dead woman to life on 6 April 1921. This is considered by members of the Church today as the official date of the start of his miraculous activities. Why Kimbangu was considered a prophet and whether he can be, sociologically or theologically, considered a prophet is a debate within the Kimbanguist Church itself. The official line within the Church today is that Simon Kimbangu was the incarnation of the Holy Ghost (Kayongo 2005); whether he can or cannot be considered a prophet is becoming less and less relevant.

The fame of Kimbangu, healing and making miracles on top of the hill of N’kamba, spread like bushfire throughout the Lower Congo regions. According to some accounts, thousands of people from the entire region and also from the French colony of Congo and the Portuguese colony of Angola came every day to be healed by him. People made long pilgrimages in order to deliver or destroy ritual objects linked to traditional cosmology, in a clear effort to abandon practices and start a new society afresh. As soon as the movement began on 6 April, the Belgian government decided to ban it, under pressure not only from local authorities but also from Catholic and Protestant missionaries, as well as from merchants who feared the movement might have a negative effect on their activities. Kimbangu was taken and imprisoned in September 1921, following two months of fierce persecution in the hills and forests around N’kamba. The Kimbanguist movement, however, continued clandestinely and despite persecution by the Belgian authorities (MacGaffey 1983; Diangienda Kuntima 1984; Mélice 2009, 2010).
The Kimbanguist Church was finally recognized by the Belgian state in 1959, just one year before Independence, and it became one of the two major religious institutions in independent Congo (or, as it would later be known, Zaire, and today the Democratic Republic of Congo) under Mobutu’s rule in the 1960s. Today, it is still one of the major Churches in the Democratic Republic of Congo, as well as being a huge international institution. Its members often assert that the total number of Kimbanguists worldwide is around 17 million, but a complete census has not yet been undertaken. Moreover, at the moment, an internal schism is making it difficult to establish precise numbers and memberships (for the schism, see Sarró et al. 2008; Mélice 2011; Apo Salimba 2013).

The Church’s slogan is ‘Kimbanguism: Hope of the World’, and its theology is indeed very much based on messianic hope (Sarró and Mélice 2010; Sarró and Santos 2011; Sarró 2015), with a political theology centred on the restoration of the Kingdom – identified both with the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Kongo – around the holy city of N’kamba (also known as N’kamba-New Jerusalem). N’kamba was Simon Kimbangu’s birthplace and is today the spiritual and administrative centre, as well as the most important pilgrimage site, of the Church. It offers a paradigmatic case for the study of political theology and for theoretical comparisons with other messianic-oriented religious communities based on notions of suffering and on the restoration of a divine-political kingdom.

In 1960 Kimbangu’s coffin was transferred from Lubumbashi, where he had died nine years earlier, to a mausoleum built in his natal village of N’kamba. In the late 1960s the Kimbanguist Church was inducted into the Ecumenical Council of Christian Churches, and N’kamba was officially declared the Church’s central headquarters. It would be impossible to summarize the current configuration and theology of the Church in the space of this chapter, but it is important to emphasize that the suffering of past Kimbanguists is very present in the Church’s liturgy and symbolism. Thus, for example, there are said to be 37,000 seats in the main temple in N’kamba, which equals the number of Congolese families who were forcibly displaced and taken away from their homes by the colonial authorities in a futile effort to put an end to the movement.

Today, Kimbanguists form one of the biggest religious communities in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and also in the Republic of Congo and Angola. This fact cannot be stressed enough in understanding Mandombe’s widespread acceptance in the public sphere. Over the last twenty years Mandombe has been used within the Church to transcribe Biblical and other texts. And, by the time Wabeladio passed
away, there was a fierce debate, especially in the Democratic Republic of Congo, about whether Mandombe should be ‘secularized’ and taught outside Kimbanguist circles too. Wabeladio created CENA (the Center for the Study of Mandombe) in 1995. Between 1996 and 2012 CENA created teaching centres (called nsanda) across the national territory, covering the entire Lower Congo, but also parts of Bandundu, Province Oriental, the two Kivus, Equator, Kasai and many countries outside the Democratic Republic of Congo. In Kinshasa, each of the 22 local municipalities (or ‘communes’ as they are called) had one teaching centre by the time Wabeladio died. It is probably fair to say that some 10,000 certificates were granted by the different teaching centres over that period. This means that 10,000 people had learned the rudiments of Mandombe by 2012. These rudiments could be acquired in three months by literate people, but could take up to six months if the students did not know how to read and write. Mandombe teachers were always connected to professional pedagogues so as to improve their teaching techniques. ‘For those who are literate, we explain the principles of Mandombe, but for those who are illiterate, we teach them to draw without any theory whatsoever’, one of the teachers explained in an interview in 2012. There was never a shortage of teachers, for one thing learning Mandombe did was to encourage people to become teachers of the alphabet.

In a tour I did with Wabeladio across the Lower Congo in summer 2012, I noticed the enthusiasm of some elderly people in truly remote places in the forests of Mayombe who, while being illiterate in the Roman alphabet, could nevertheless write and read in Mandombe (although I did not find anybody who could read with fluency). I was equally, if not more, impressed by the enthusiasm of young people who worked in the nsanda on a cooperative basis, having their own cassava field and orchards. The different nsanda I visited in the urban and rural areas that year in Lower Congo – including Mbanza Ngungu, Kinsantu, Matadi, Boma, Muanda, and several small forest villages between Boma and Tchela – were all quite big, and in some of them I was received by thirty or forty people. The word I heard most often when asking why they were learning Mandombe was ‘identity’. Mandombe was an alphabet sent by God to a Mukongo man, and it was their duty and pride, as Bakongo, to learn how to read it and write it.

Such huge numbers of enthusiastic people do not mean, however, that all of them used Mandombe. As Wabeladio explained to me, a lot of people learned it but they very rarely used it and ended up forgetting how to. In order to encourage people to keep using it, the Mandombe
League was created in the late 1990s. This encouraged Mandombe users to write to each other. Because, obviously, postmen were not expected to be able to read an address written in Mandombe, these letters were sent through CENA itself. They were taken from the nsanda in the sender’s village to Kinshasa; from Kinshasa they went to the nsanda in the recipient’s village. This allowed the people at the headquarters of Mandombe in Kinshasa to keep tight control of the League’s progress. Up to 2012 they were very happy with the huge number of letters that were circulating among the different centres every year. The League also organized social visits to help people to get to know each other. In 2011, for instance, Wabeladio hired a van in Kinshasa and took many Mandombe students to pay a friendly visit to some nsanda in the southern province of Bandundu.

**Mandombe: the world on the wall**

In 1978, when he was 21 years old and a Catholic, Wabeladio had a series of disturbing dreams in which he saw the late prophet Simon Kimbangu calling him. Against the will of his Catholic family, he decided to go to N’kamba-New Jerusalem, the Holy City of Kimbanguism (in Lower Congo), to find out why he was having the dreams. The journey to N’kamba was full of mysteries, especially when Wabeladio got stuck to the ground for several hours in the middle of the path, unable to move; a ‘miracle’ (his own words) still today haunting him. Yet it was also fruitless. On his way back from the Holy City, he decided to report the mysterious trip to the leader of the Church, Joseph Diangienda Kuntima (Kimbangu’s son), who lived in Kinshasa. The latter told Wabeladio: ‘My father [Simon Kimbangu] is preparing you for a mission; you have to pray and pray and the mission will be revealed to you.’

Wabeladio then went to the town of Mbanza Ngungu, where part of his family was based, and prayed for nine months in a small room, until one day he noticed that the lines between the bricks on the wall were drawing the two figures 5 and 2, as bricks do. He sensed that the message was hidden in these two figures. That night, he dreamt that an insect was drawing with its saliva the figures 5 and 2 repeatedly on his skin, until his entire body looked like a wall.

That was the confirmation, and from then on he started to ‘study the symbols’ as he says, a process that would take him ‘from the simple to the complex’ (i.e. from the two elementary symbols 5 and 2 to a complex and mysteriously symmetrical script and numerological system).
I have no room to describe all the implications of Wabeladio’s invention of Mandombe, which became a very popular alphabet to transcribe Kikongo and Lingala, as well as a very ingenious form through which to create art by following the geometrical principles underneath Mandombe. Some artists in Kinshasa have specialized in Mandombe art, also called Kimbangula. By 2009, when I met Wabeladio Payi, the alphabet was being taught in hundreds of specialized centres all across the Democratic Republic of Congo, as well as in Congolese diasporas in Africa and Europe.

The fact that Wabeladio’s invention was grounded on a brick wall is in itself a good place to start drawing some implications from his work. It is of course a coincidence that he saw the writing on a wall in 1979, the same year that Pink Floyd were producing their album *The Wall*, but it is a thought-provoking coincidence. Take archaic walls such as those of Jericho’s falling apart, or that in the cavern described by Plato, which deludes us into believing in shadows, or take modern ones such as the vile one separating Thisbe from her lover Pyramus, the ambivalent one in the 1909 poem by Robert Frost ‘Mending Walls’ (Frost 1914), the exasperatingly never-ending one in Kafka’s novella *The Great Wall of China*, written in German in 1917 (Kafka 2007); take the walls that gave power to imagination by becoming canvases for so much rebellious graffiti in Paris 1968 (Besançon 1968). Whenever and wherever they appear, walls and bricks have been used as metaphors for several aspects of human existence. There has also been a close connection between spirituality and walls. Thus, in the Old Testament’s Book of Daniel we learn about King Belshazzar, who sees a mysteriously disembodied hand write on his wall the Hebrew words *mene mene teke uparshim*, an apocalyptic message that only the prophet Daniel could decipher (Daniel 5: 13–24).

The connection between seeing forms on walls and getting inspiration – divine or artistic – is very old. Leonardo da Vinci made a method out of it, instructing young artists to look for accidental stains on walls in their search for art forms (Turner 2011). Walls have also been very important for the development of new forms of art in the twentieth century. In a letter to A. Pieyre de Mandiargues in 1957, Jean Dubuffet, an artist to whom I will return, wrote that he got inspiration just by looking at walls, and that all his art was linked in one way or another to walls (Webel 2008). But probably the most astonishing connection between walls and artistic creativity is the work of Fernando Oreste Nanetti (1927–94), an Italian artist who spent much of his life in a mental hospital in Tuscany on whose walls he inscribed more than 70 metres of drawings and texts (Peiry 2016).
Bricks and walls are indeed good to think about and to imagine. British psychologist Liam Hudson proposed a brick test to assess individual creativity. It consisted in asking subjects what things could be made out of bricks (Hudson 1966). Some people could give more than 15 different answers to the question. I doubt, however, that anyone ever answered: ‘an alphabet’. In their recent book on creativity, John Kounios and Mark Beeman write: ‘If you look at a brick, you’ll probably think of it as a part of a building or a wall. But you could also think of it in other ways: as a paving stone, a doorstep, a paperweight, or a walnut cracker’ (Kounios and Beeman 2015, 8). Other ways there are indeed, but surely it is still Stone Age compared with Wabeladio’s usage of bricks as the bases for an alphabet!

In truth, Wabeladio did not invent the alphabet with the bricks, but rather with the mathematical relations in the lines between bricks. As in some spiritual ladders imagined by medieval thinkers such as Ramon Llull’s (which consisted of seven steps, and then God as the eighth, final one), the materiality of the brick (or of the stone in Llull’s case) was the first step towards the most immaterial principles and ultimately towards knowledge of God. In his writings, of which sadly only very few remain, he argued that for ‘creative imagination’ (his words) to construct beauty it must abide by arithmetical principles. Here he would have been a good interlocutor of Paul Valéry. In an article on aesthetic invention in which he wrote against romantic views that glorify pure, boundless imagination, the French poet and thinker argues that not even the imagination of the poet is entirely free of constraints, as he or she too has to comply with strict rules of composition (Valéry 1957).

Theoreticians of creativity seem to agree that invention does not work out of the blue. It works by invoking and playing with knowledge and images stored in our mind and in a dialectical relationship with the surrounding human and physical environment. Some authors have argued that madness is an exception, and that ‘outsider artists’ can create truly innovative art because they are free from any connection with other people and free from the ‘asphyxiating culture’, ready to deliver themselves to the invigorating faculty of forgetfulness, as Dubuffet, the founder of the art brut movement, put it (1968). A lot of writing on delusion and on the so-called art brut follows this problematic assumption and portrays outsider artists as the maximum exponents of genius, free from the subjugation of received aesthetics and from other structures of domination and subordination. Dubuffet’s idea that artists must develop their ‘faculty of forgetting’ to get away from the tyranny of culture and develop genius is suggestive. Unfortunately, he never told how one develops such a faculty.
The view that connects true artists with mad people, so dear to Dubuffet, needs to be qualified in two ways. First, very often what we find in outsider art is not a free association of disconnected elements, but on the contrary an obsession with detail, repetition, geometry and symmetry. This was characterized in 1922 as the ‘decorative urge’ (Smucktrieb) by Heidelberg psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn, one of the founders of the study of what was later to be known as outsider art (quoted in Cardinal 1972, 18). Secondly, we should remember that, as Lévi-Strauss put it in Tristes Tropiques, ‘human societies, like individual human beings (at play, in their dreams, or in moments of delirium), never create absolutely: all they can do is to choose certain combinations from a repertory of ideas which it should be possible to reconstitute’ (Lévi-Strauss 1955, 160; my emphasis). Notice that Lévi-Strauss, who was surely aware of the usages that surrealism and other rebellious art schools were making of delusion, notes that his denial of absolute creation includes delirium. Clearly inspired by Lévi-Strauss, French physician and philosopher Henri Laborit wrote in an essay on discoverers: ‘Most likely, creative imagination does not create anything; it discovers relations of which one was still not aware’ (Laborit 1970, 38; my translation). This capacity to combine, to find new relations, has ever since Lévi-Strauss and Laborit been explored more systematically by creativity scholars. Kounios and Beeman write: ‘We define creativity as the ability to reinterpret something by breaking it down into its elements and recombining these elements in a surprising way to achieve some goal’ (2015, 9), a definition that not only accords very well with the notions expressed by Lévi-Strauss and Laborit, but one that is also very appropriate when thinking about the invention of Wabeladio, based as it was on breaking down the perceived wall into its composite elements and then reconstructing something different out of the elements. In a study on technology and invention, Brian Arthur (2009) stresses the cumulative effect of these combinations and reinterpretations: the more we innovate through combination, he argues, the more elements we create for future combinations to emerge. It may therefore be problematic to thwart incipient innovations such as Mandombe, since nobody really knows what further combinations they will give rise to in the future, and therefore what greater inventions we may be avert-ing with our early judgement. Wabeladio once told me that should he have the conditions to develop his invention, it would be very useful in the future to develop architecture and even the construction of spaceships. Sadly, he died at the moment when the University of Kinshasa was finally showing some real interest in his creativity and scientific promise, and had hired him despite his lack of any formal university degree.
Connection and combination seem to be at the heart of most theories of creativity. I would like to propose a more balanced view in which disconnection is at least as important as connection. I believe that invention consists in a double act of separation, a double rupture. Firstly, the inventor must disconnect elements from their context of origin (as Wabeladio separated lines from the bricks) so that they can be ‘originally’ recombined; secondly, they must disconnect the final product from specific influences (in the case of Wabeladio, he received a lot of technical feedback from Kinshasa artists, mathematicians, linguists and theologians). Only an artful disconnection between the process of creation and the final product will yield a product that will appear to the public as having been created by an individual genius (with the help, in this case, of God). One could put this idea in dialogue with Gell’s notions of technology/enchantment (Gell 1994) or Graeber’s works on fetishes and creativity (Graber 2005), but also with theories of influence and artistic creativity. In two different but related studies on those topics, literary critic Harold Bloom (1973; 2011) has argued that influences are accompanied by anxiety; authors must present themselves as original, even knowing they are building on models and ideas created by someone else. What he called ‘anxiety of influences’ he could as well have called ‘anxiety of inventors’. Inventors have to make sure that their invention will not be attributed to anybody else. They also have to make sure that the influences are duly acknowledged, but in such a way that the resulting work is perceived, first and foremost, as their creation, not as a sum of different parts. Furthermore, for their invention to be a contribution to humanity, they have to disconnect the result from their own personal or parochial concerns and link it instead to universal concerns. Wabeladio offers a paradigmatic example. He learned from God, he learned from the landscape and from the built environment, and he learned from his peers and from scholars. He took very good notice of the comments and feedback he received and made every single effort to meet university professors in Kinshasa and elsewhere to discuss with them, and he deeply impressed some of them. His life was one of learning, but nobody doubts, not even those who helped him with the most technical aspects, that Mandombe is Wabeladio’s invention.

**Absolute beginners**

Rupture was a fundamental aspect of Wabeladio’s life and work, and the burgeoning literature on rupture in anthropology has indeed helped me understand his relationship with his background and ambitions. This
literature has been refreshing as it has allowed us to understand why and how so many thousands of young people today want to lose their roots and live as ‘absolute beginners’ (to borrow the title of a famous novel on London youth in the 1950s; MacInnes 1959), usually in urban areas far away from their rural traditionalist elders. That said, an exaggerated stress on rupture may have two limitations. One is that we risk portraying rupture as being irreversible or definitive in cases where it is not. Very often a longue durée approach shows that rupture is dialectical. One breaks up now to make up later, as Wabeladio did with his tradition and even with his maternal family, with whom he split when he was in his mid-twenties but reconnected two decades later. The other pitfall is that by insisting on the importance of rupture today we may lose sight of its relevance to understand the past and its role in the making of history in general. Humans have always been rupturists. Socrates, the founder of Western philosophy, was condemned to death for persuading youths in Athens to follow their ethical principles and make a clean break with their elders’ instructions. The Old Testament (let alone the New Testament, where rupture with kin ties and obligations is explicit in many of Jesus’ teachings) is full of young people rebelling against their elders. More recently, one of the interpreters of the birth of modern history, Alexis de Tocqueville, highlighted, in his The Old Regime and the Revolution (Tocqueville 1856), on the force of breaking with the past for the birth of modern France (although his main point was, precisely, that even the revolutionaries ended up creating a continuity with the past rather than a rupture with it). Robespierre was reported to have said ‘in order to achieve our mission, we need precisely the opposite of which existed before’ (Guigon 2007). Not to mention the glorification of the écart absolu by Fourier and other utopian and revolutionary thinkers, later inherited by Dadaists, surrealists (Guigon 2007) and, especially, proponents of art brut such as Dubuffet and his follower Michel Thévoz, author of an insightful essay on the connection between art brut and the invention of alphabets aptly entitled Le language de la rupture, the language of rupture (Thévoz 1978). Let me finish this digression on rupture with an apocryphal phrase attributed by Dadaists to Descartes in 1918 (on the cover of the third issue of their journal Dada): ‘I do not want to know if there have been men before me.’ Although scholars have proved that the founder of modern philosophy never wrote this thought, at least not in these exact words (Behar and Carassou 1990, 91), the idea is certainly in the spirit of his philosophy, especially of his 1641 Metaphysical Meditations. He needed to ground his certainty on himself, not on the authority of tradition. Now, the paradox is: why did Dadaists, who were
also trying to make a break with the past, need the authority of Descartes? Even when breaking with tradition, people need a tradition from which to unpick stitches. We are inescapably historical animals. 

Like Descartes’ case, Wabeladio’s is particularly good in showing that for ruptures to be effective, they need to be solidly grounded. His efforts to root his new certainty in geometry were an avatar of many prior historical ruptures, also grounded on mathematics or geometry. Think about the importance of geometry for the birth of Western philosophy in pre-Socratic thinkers such as Pythagoras, breaking up with prior mythical models. Consider Renaissance thinkers such as Leonardo da Vinci breaking away from medieval cosmology by grounding human beings on the certainty of numbers. Think about the (religious) importance of geometry in the fathers of modern philosophy such as the above-mentioned Descartes, or Pascal, or Spinoza, for whom geometry was a secure way to ground the human in a supra-individual order of reality in the new post-medieval world, in which humans were detached from the great chain of beings and in which they had to look for certainties within themselves, not in the expanding infinite universe.

Wabeladio’s life tells us that he was advancing solidly in the path of creativity by making more and more complex associations. The death of the creator froze the elaboration of a writing system that was in constant transformation. Its evolution might be usefully compared with that of the Vietnamese writing system invented by the prophet Shong Lue (Smalley et al. 1990). Despite being a revelation, Shong Lue kept transforming it, and different versions of it existed at different times, the last one being the easiest and most effective. Surely Mandombe would have continued to be transformed too, and I suspect that it would have evolved towards simplification. As I witnessed in a presentation in Kinshasa in 2011, Wabeladio was often accused by his detractors of having created a too cumbersome writing system. He agreed that the writing was a bit too difficult, and he was in fact working towards a way to make the syllables less complex. He told me that God had sent him some ideas in a dream as to how to simplify the writing, and he was putting them to work. This was the reason why he did not want Mandombe to be computerized. Whoever invented a software for Mandombe would stop the flow of creativity and deter Wabeladio from improving the invention. He would only accept the introduction of software if this was done by someone working very close to him, so that he could keep on introducing the necessary modifications, many of which came directly from God. This had not happened by the time of his death. However, some people have invented different software possibilities (at least one in France and one in Canada) and I am
sure that, if Mandombe is to persist, one form or another of computerization will become standard in the future.

The presence of the persona of Wabeladio in his invention can be understood in two opposite ways: secular and spiritual. One could argue that Wabeladio wanted people to know that he and nobody else had invented Mandombe. Like Ulysses shouting his name to Polyphemus after having blinded him (a moment that, according to Horkheimer and Adorno [2002], was like the birth certificate of the Western self), Wabeladio wanted Mandombe to be shouting his name to us: ‘Remember, Wabeladio was the name of he who created me!’ That would be one plausible interpretation. But having known the man, I would insist on the other interpretation. Wabeladio wanted his biography to be known because it was the only way in which to erase himself from his invention. By making sure everybody knew the extraordinary revelation he received in 1979, he was making sure we understood that his invention was rooted in a transcendent domain. In his public presentations (or ‘demonstrations’, as he called them), Wabeladio used the concept of ‘we’ quite often. Thus, he would not say ‘I thought that by rotating the false element I could generate new keys’ but rather ‘we thought that by rotating … ’. In a lecture he gave in Matadi in 2011, someone in the audience asked him why he was using the first person plural. Wabeladio answered that it was because he was not doing this by himself, but with the spirit of God working through him. One could argue that for him, as for Spinoza, mathematics was a supra-individual structure, a matrix weaving the entire world, an infinite geometrical grid providing individuals with a sense of dependence on a transcendent order.7

**Conclusion**

Wabeladio was indeed an ‘absolute beginner’. He made himself from scratch the day he observed two symbols on a wall of bricks, and he offered ‘the new’, in the form of an alphabet and of an artistic system, to his Bakongo publics. At first, the concepts he invented to refer to his invention were totally out of the blue, and the materiality on which the invention was based (the brick) was, as far as Kongo traditions of making go, rather unusual. His life was accompanied by conversion from Catholicism to Kimbanguism and by painful rupture with his family, especially his mother’s brother, the authority in the family. His invention, Mandombe, is a paradigmatic locus where the need for inventors to be clever at making their invention is realized, but they have to be even
more clever at presenting the final product to the public. They have to present it in a way that the influences, the roots of the invention, are concealed, perhaps forgotten, lest they are accused of copying, not creating from scratch. I could say with Deleuze that they have to inscribe difference upon repetition, but I will rather say with Harold Bloom that they have to inscribe genius upon influence.

Wabeladio noticed that he had to keep on experimenting with connections and disconnections if he wanted people to follow him. If he continued with his incomprehensible language and imagery, he would be taken as mad (as indeed he was for a long time). He rescued himself out of madness by reconnecting his original invention with something even more original, like the sounds of the healing drums of the Bakongo. But it was a very clever move, for it gave legitimacy for his publics to accept Mandombe and to see him as its ‘inspired inventor’ (a category used by Simon Kimbangu Kiangani, the head of the Kimbanguist Church, to refer to Wabeladio in 2005), bringing together his prophetic dimension with his creative one. As Robert Paine argued (Paine 1995), the voice of prophecy (Ardener 1987) and the logics of scientific discovery are different but complementary dimensions of our relationship with the unknown. Wabeladio brought together the two. Like a prophet, he received from God and revitalized culture. But he also explored three-dimensional, descriptive geometry with true scientific spirit and methods. Elsewhere I have described prophets as ‘masters of connection’ (Sarró 2018a) and, following Dozon (1995), I have characterized their imagination as a work of synthesis. With his unique capacity to synthesize and to connect the seemingly unconnectable, Wabeladio simultaneously introduced the new and revalued the old.

Notes

1. In this chapter I offer some theoretical reflexions on prophetic invention, without entering into the very complex descriptive geometry of Mandombe as a graphic system that gives rise to both art and writing. The inner geometrical workings and the aesthetics of Mandombe have been dealt with in another place (Sarró 2018b).
2. For a genealogy of the Western notion of ‘genius’ and a criticism of the suddenness of inventions attributed to a genius, see Robinson (2010; 2011).
3. A good collection of early sources on Kimbanguism is currently being most carefully edited by Jean-Luc Vellut (2005; 2010). A very detailed account of the early days of Kimbanguism, based on Baptist sources, is the unpublished doctoral thesis by Mackay (1985).
4. Such being ‘hard to learn, easy to forget’ must of course be a common feature of scripts in general, and not only of Mandombe.
5. Caroline Humphreys offers, in her chapter, a thoughtful view of French Revolution as rupture. This works as a good companion to the 1962 historical novel El Siglo de las Luces by Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier, which offers not only a powerful reflection on the making of modern Europe,
but also on the role of rupture, and of the symbolism of the guillotine in particular, in the making of the Atlantic world.

6. At least ‘we’ are the relatively healthy people, psychiatrically speaking. Some psychiatrists, such as Eugene Minkowski (1927), argued that in schizophrenic delusion historical consciousness disappears, and the temporal atrophy is compensated for by a spatial hypertrophy. For the schizophrenic patient, according to Minkowski, everything is here, now, and ‘here’ becomes a hyperconnected space where everything can be contemplated, like seeing ‘the world in a grain of sand’, as the famous poem by William Blake goes.

7. I am grateful to some comments in this Durkheimian direction that both Maurice Bloch and Bruce Kapferer made in different presentations they heard about the mathematical aspects of Mandombe.

References


