Part II

SPIRITS, BODIES, AND PERFORMANCE IN BELGIAN CONGO
“Take That Which Your Ancestors Used in Their Battle”

July 23, 2010. Ma Makanda sits in a small chair next to the wall of a ranch-style house shading her from the blazing sun. My research assistant Kilanda and I greet her as we enter the compound. She pulls me down into a hug, looking closely at my face. Cataracts affect her vision, but she smiles in recognition and sings a short song in greeting, as we had last seen each other four years ago. Her daughter, whom we also greet, sets up several chairs on the porch of the house for the interview. At seventy-three years of age, Ma Makanda moves gingerly, wrapping her pagne more securely around her waist as she takes faltering steps, her legs racked with arthritis. After exchanging pleasantries, her hands, wizened and hardened from years of agricultural work, grip the photos of my family that I have brought for her. As the interview gets under way, she speaks in a low, controlled voice, punctuating her responses with songs as she reflects on her experiences growing up as a participant in the colonial-era kingunza or prophetic movements. She remembers hiding in the forest to worship: “It was a war between soldiers and bangunza (prophets). During that time we couldn’t play the drum or shakers; we only tapped our legs and sang in low voices. If you sang in high voices you would be arrested” (July 23, 2010). She sang...
several of the songs that she remembered including the following, accompanied by vigorous hand clapping:

Buabu Tata muana Nzambi telama wabonga
Bio bianuanina Bambuta Tata wutunungisa
Now Child of God, stand up and take
That which your ancestors used in their battle

Ma Makanda explained that the music they made during their clandestine meetings in the forest would bring on the descent of the Holy Spirit, whose presence would be evidenced through the trembling of the prophets’ bodies. If, however, they were caught singing or trembling, colonial authorities would arrest the bangunza. Clearly, the Belgians saw the kingunza movement as a threat to their hegemony in the Belgian Congo.

Ma Makanda’s story captures the critical uses and meanings of Kongo embodied practices in the context of the colonial period. In European colonies in Africa, embodied practices often became a point of contention between the indigenous population and colonial authorities. While Europeans targeted economic systems, political and social structures, and language for change, they also sought to alter embodied practices such as forms of dress, funerary rituals, hygiene, secular dances and other forms of recreation, and even spiritual worship. With the start of a prophetic movement in the Lower Congo in 1921, certain activities of the Kongo population such as singing, drumming, and more important, trembling, became cause for arrest and punishment. For those involved in the kingunza movement, “it was a war” being fought—not by guns—but with music, prayer, and bodies. Why was controlling the bodies of their colonial subjects so critical for the Belgians, and why did they and other Western occupants of the Congo see these embodied practices as such a threat? More important, how did Kongo people themselves interpret the same embodied practices and use their bodies to resist Belgian colonial authority?

This chapter examines trembling in the Lower Congo as an everyday cultural performance of the BisiKongo that was also a site of religious and political contestation between the church, the colonial state, and the indigenous population. In this chapter, I focus on one year—1921, as this year laid the foundation for both nationalist aspects of the kingunza movement, as well as provided a template for later colonial policies for suppressing the movement. The movement began in March 1921 with a Christian MuKongo prophet named Simon Kimbangu. Thousands of people flocked to him,
alarming Belgian colonial authorities and leading to the severe repression of the movement in the following months, followed by the prophet Simon Kimbangu’s arrest in September and his trial and sentencing in October 1921. Kongo religious performances in the context of the movement—including practices such as trembling, jumping, prophesying, singing Protestant hymns, and using traditional instruments—were seen as subversive actions menacing the smooth running of the colony and the hegemony of the European-led missions.

Through performative encounters, the kingunza movement used a type of spiritual legitimacy gained from the spiritual realm to subvert Belgian colonial authority, using Kongo bodies as the key weapons of resistance. Embodied cultural performances played a crucial role in the making and unmaking of political and religious authority in Belgian Congo. This was particularly evident when missionaries and colonial agents were placed in positions of having to fight off challenges to their authority. These challenges, in fact, were often mustered through embodied cultural performances on the part of the Kongo people, as shown by the trembling, jumping, singing, dancing, and revelatory visions that characterized the Kongo prophetic movements, which established a powerful, competing religious authority through their prophets. Thus, the desire of European missionaries and colonial agents to maintain their religious and political authority then necessitated numerous efforts to control the embodied cultural performances of colonial subjects, efforts that often failed.

A Note on Methods

Although Simon Kimbangu was the impetus for the movement, the kingunza movement did not end with his arrest and imprisonment; in fact other prophets continually emerged from 1921 (both with and without Kimbangu’s recognition) up until independence in 1960. While the terms Kimbanguism and Ngunzism were often used interchangeably to describe them as well, the movements overall can be called kingunza, or prophetism. Later expressions of prophetism such as Salutism (Salvation Army) and Mpadism/Khakism, while not emerging until the 1930s and later, can also be included under the larger umbrella of Kongo prophetic movements. Many of the same embodied practices described above prevailed in all these groups and movements, and some still exist today in churches of bangunza, such as the DMNA church that I visited quite frequently during my time in the Congo.

Most of my material for this chapter came from archival documents, especially the records of different missionary societies and the colonial administration. I use correspondence and letters from the African Archive of the
Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Brussels and materials from the archive of the American Baptist Historical Society in Atlanta, Georgia, which houses the correspondence and personal papers of missionaries of the American Baptist Foreign Missionary Society who were posted in the Lower Congo. I also incorporate documents from the Archives of the Baptist Missionary Society in Oxford, UK, and published compilations of firsthand accounts (including those of both missionaries and Congolese) printed by the Royal Academy of Over Seas Sciences in Brussels (Vellut 2005, 2010). In addition to my archival research, I also conducted ethnographic research in Kongo independent ngunza churches and interviews with Congolese people in and around Luozi in 2005–6 and 2010. However, virtually no firsthand witnesses are still living who would have experienced the kingunza movement in the early 1920s. Several interviewees, however, were able to discuss their experiences as participants in later waves of the movement occurring several decades after Kimbangu’s movement began. As a result, while this chapter is based largely on archival material, the next chapter includes both archival and some interview material.

Using missionary and colonial administration records as the primary sources for this chapter presents both benefits and challenges. On one hand, the observations of missionaries and colonial authorities were often written down and included in letters and other correspondence to their headquarters, home societies, or to other missionaries/agents. These records are usually well preserved in multiple archives and often provide details that colonial administration records lack because the missionaries usually lived in close proximity to the indigenous population. On the other hand, these written reports and letters also reflect the biases of the missionaries and colonial administrators themselves, who generally saw these religious movements as a threat to their own authority and security. As a result, I tried to remain vigilant to the intentions behind the use of terms such as *heathen* or *demented* that different Europeans and/or Americans used to describe the movement. Moreover, these documents do not usually reflect the voices of the Congolese themselves, although there are some written accounts of the movement and letters authored by Congolese participants and some records of interrogations of suspected bangunza written by both colonial administrators and missionaries. Wherever possible, I have tried to draw from these sources as well to provide multiple perspectives on events of interest. What is gained through the use of such a wide variety of sources on the movement is a more complex and nuanced description and analysis of the kingunza movement and its impact on the Congo, both for Congolese and Europeans alike. Missionaries were not an undifferentiated whole; a few even supported the movements.
Likewise, not all Kongo people supported the bangunza. The kingunza movement of 1921 remains, however, a watershed moment in Congolese history, not only for its relation to an emergent nationalism, but also for its use of spiritual power to combat and challenge both religious and secular authority.

**Brief History of Christian Missions in the Lower Congo**

The history of Christian evangelization on the Lower Congo began with the baptism of Nzinge-Nkuwu (Joao I, the sovereign of the Kongo Kingdom) by Portuguese missionaries in May of 1491. The Kongo Kingdom established contact with Portugal and Rome and received European Catholic missionaries of different nationalities until the late 1700s. Several of these Catholic missionaries (in this case Capuchins from Italy) witnessed a religious revival in the Kongo Kingdom, now known to scholars as the Antonian movement. Dona Beatrice Kimpa Vita was a young woman who in 1704 fell gravely ill and became possessed by the spirit of Saint Anthony. She told others that she had been charged with the mission of restoring the Kongo Kingdom, which at the time was fractured by competing claimants to the throne. She preached about the Kongoese origins of Jesus and certain saints (challenging the European Catholic hegemony established by the Italian missionaries), implored people to return to the abandoned capital city, and said that she alone would choose the next ruler of the kingdom, as revealed by God. Thousands of people came to follow her, and her success threatened both religious and political players in the kingdom, and she was burned alive as a heretic in 1706 (Mbemba 2002; Thornton 1998). Dona Beatrice looms large in the larger Kongo imagination today as a type of cultural and nationalist hero. Thus in many discussions of Simon Kimbangu and kingunza, Dona Beatrice’s name is often mentioned as a precolonial example of Kongo nationalist and religious movements. While both were Christian movements where BisiKongo people were seeking autonomy from European dominance of the Christian narrative and ritual practice, in the era of Kimpa Vita, Kongo people were the political rulers while for Kimbangu’s era, European dominance extended to political, economic, and social arenas. Moreover, in comparing the movements, Kimbangu’s movement drew much more on the body as a weapon of resistance, while such inferences cannot be as clearly drawn about Kimpa Vita’s movement, largely owing to the lack of extensive historical documentation.

The BisiKongo were soon to see major transformations in their lives with the arrival of colonialism and the second wave of Christian evangelization, which began in 1865 when the area of Lower Congo was transferred from the Capuchin missionaries of the seventeenth century to the Holy Ghost Fathers, French Catholic missionaries based in Gabon. In 1878 British Protestant mis-
sionaries of the LIM (Livingstone Inland Mission) established a station at Mpalabala, near the coast, signaling the start of Protestant evangelization in the Lower Congo. The Lower Congo was opened to colonial exploitation beginning with H. M. Stanley’s travels there starting in 1877, leading to the designation of the entire Congo Free State as the personal fiefdom of King Leopold II of Belgium at the Berlin conferences of 1884–85. From 1885 to 1908, the Congo was under the rule of the Belgian king, and his desire to expand Belgian influence in the colony affected Christian evangelization. While the Holy Ghost Fathers had been in the area since 1865, establishing posts at Landana, Boma, and Banana, they withdrew to the French Congo after 1888, when Belgian Catholic missionaries replaced them through an agreement made between King Leopold II and Rome (Koren 1958, 189–90, 223; Slade 1958, 23–24, 142).

King Leopold II never set foot in the Congo Free State himself; instead he used a concession system where private companies made agreements with him for operating in the Congo. The lack of oversight and accountability led to numerous scandals involving forced labor (for example, the red rubber scandal), human rights abuses, and large-scale death and destruction caused by these companies. As a result, the Congo was then removed from the king’s supervision and became a colony of the Belgian government from 1908 to 1960. Along with European soldiers, merchants, and colonial officials, missionaries entered a field now opened for evangelization. Protestant missionaries of the LIM established a station at Mpalabala in 1878 and continued to establish stations along the caravan route between Matadi and Stanley Pool. In 1879, the BMS (Baptist Missionary Society of England) founded a post at San Salvador (the former capital of the Kongo Kingdom), and then Ndandanga. In 1881 the first Swedish missionary of the SMF (Svenska Missions Förbundet, or Swedish Mission Covenant Church) arrived. In 1884, after encountering financial difficulties, the LIM divided its stations between the ABFMS (American Baptist Foreign Missionary Society) and the SMF. The first Belgian Catholic missions were established in 1888 by the Scheutists, followed by Peres of Gand (1891), Sisters of the Gand Charity (1892), Jesuits (1893), Sisters of Notre Dame of Namur and the Trappistes (1894), Priests of the Sacred Heart (1897), and the Redemptorists (1899). The Lower Congo during the colonial period had a very substantial Protestant presence (in a country that would become majority Catholic) as most of the Protestant missionaries first established stations in the Lower Congo before spreading to other parts of the colony. By 1921, the major Protestant mission organizations in the Lower Congo were the BMS, ABFMS, SMF, and the CMA (Christian and Missionary Alliance) (see map 2.1).
When the Congo Free State was under his authority, King Leopold, as a Catholic himself, lobbied Belgian Catholic missionaries to come and evangelize the Congo. This commitment was first officially recognized in 1906 through a concordat signed between the Congo Free State and the Holy See in Rome (Markowitz 1973, 7). Initially, Catholic missions were given large tracts of land and were often shown state favor in comparison to the Protestant missions, which were not Belgian (Reardon 1968, 86–87). Overall, however, the missions (both Catholic and Protestant) and colonial authorities tended to work together. “The Belgian colonial system operated on the basis of an interdependent triumvirate of missionary, administration, and commercial interests. The missions provided the government with a measure of social and territorial control, and they educated and trained Africans for work on the plantations and in the mines. In return they received subsidies, protection, and land. The collaboration . . . was mutually satisfactory” (Markowitz 1973, 17–18).

The generally good working relationship between missionaries and colonial authorities for much of the early period of the Congo Free State perhaps explains why it took a person unassociated with a mission to publicly condemn the numerous atrocities committed against the native population. In his 1890 public document “An Open Letter to his Serene Majesty Leopold II,” based on his own travels in the Congo Free State, George Washington Williams, an African American pastor, civil leader, historian, and
journalist brought attention to numerous abuses of the indigenous population (Franklin 1985, 264–79). In 1894 Prosper Phillipe Augouard, a French missionary of the Holy Ghost Fathers, became the first missionary to publicly express discontent with the policies and actions of the state (Lagergren 1970, 147). Numerous public writings and speeches by Protestant missionaries condemning the atrocities followed from 1895 to the annexation of the Congo Independent State by Belgium in 1908. The overall reprehensible treatment of the indigenous population was one among several key factors contributing to the emergence of the prophetic movement in the Lower Congo.

Conditions Leading to the Prophetic Movement
The Kongo cosmological system includes a belief in the continual influence of the dead, of ancestral spirits, on the world of the living. In numerous historic instances, paralleling these ideas, when disastrous situations and general social discord existed in Kongo communities, religious leaders had to reconcile with the ancestral and spiritual world so that a sense of balance and harmony could prevail (Mahaniah 1975, 285). According to MuKongo historian Kimpianga Mahaniah, as Kongo traditional systems of political leadership, healing and therapy, and overall livelihood and health were dramatically transformed as Kongo people were incorporated as colonial subjects, healing movements led by prophets emerged to address the many social and political conflicts (Mahaniah 1975). Like Tshidi ritual practices in South Africa, where the spiritual healing of individual bodies functioned as an attempt to heal the social body (Comaroff 1985), the prophetic movements of the Lower Congo sought to right a world turned on its ear by European colonialism. What sorts of conditions were the Kongo people dealing with?

The Lower Congo suffered a period of depopulation directly caused by many of the brutal policies enacted as the nascent colonial state sought to control the indigenous population. The devastating conditions the BisiKongo faced were multifold, including forced labor (especially portage), violence, the corrosion of traditional forms of chiefship and spiritual leadership, famines, and health epidemics, among other negative social transformations. The Lower Congo became a launch pad for European exploration and navigation into the interior of the vast colony. Boma, a port city in the Lower Congo, was the colonial capital of both the Congo Free State and the Belgian Congo from 1886 to 1926 (Gondola 2002, 75). The Congo River was unnavigable inland after a certain point owing to intermittent waterfalls; thus most goods and supplies were carried on the heads and backs of Congolese porters, as pack animals could not survive in the area and the railroad was not yet constructed.10 The portage system was sanctioned in an 1889 decree, and later
in 1891, another decree established a labor tax system compelling Africans to work for their colonizers. Portage affected so many men in the Lukunga district of Lower Congo that ABFMS missionary Peter Frederickson reported in 1898 that “the carrying of heavy loads to Stanley Pool is the cause of death to many of the men.” Many Kongo people reacted to these changing conditions by moving away from the caravan routes, and later, the railroad, depopulating certain areas of the Lower Congo. However, by 1920 the trend was reversing, as men and boys left villages and small towns in the countryside to seek work along the railroad and in large cities. This led American missionary John E. Geil to complain in his 1920 annual report about the impact of labor migration on church membership. “A revision of the church roll,” he wrote, “has shown a much smaller membership than that which was reported formerly. . . . In our quest for young men and boys for the schools we were told repeatedly that they were nearly all away to Matadi and places along the railway in quest of money.” Geil’s report clearly indicates the Lower Congo was undergoing a major demographic shift that was to have a major impact on both the city and the countryside alike.

Between 1872 and 1921, military expeditions into villages, a lack of rain, and a growing “immigrant non-producing population” all impacted disastrous incidences of famine across the Lower Congo (Mahaniah 1975, 187; see also Axelson 1970, 256–63). An American medical missionary writing in 1895 noted a lack of food owing to both state demands and a drought in 1894. Because of such conditions, the Lower Congo was deeply impacted by unexpected food shortages.

Yet another factor increasing the general stress of the indigenous population was the large number of health epidemics that devastated the area. Between 1890 and 1913, sleeping sickness caused many deaths and population movements from plateaus to valleys. In the annual report for the American Baptist mission station at Banza Manteke (Mbanza Manteke) in 1891, the mission was noted as having been “severely afflicted by the mysterious ‘sleeping sickness.’” Over a decade later in 1904, the Baptist community mourned the loss of two female British missionaries in the Congo who died of sleeping sickness caused by the bite of the tsetse fly.

Part of a worldwide medical crisis that lasted until 1920, Spanish influenza added to the destruction starting in 1918 (W. MacGaffey 1986a, 271; Mahaniah 1975, 189). An entry from the Kinshasa station logbook of the Baptist Missionary Society dated November 10, 1918, reveals the extent of the devastation caused by Spanish influenza: “During November and December a terrible epidemic of ‘flu.’ Thousands sick, hundreds died, and 3000 Congos fled to their homes. Many died on the way. Business all upset and much hunger in
the town. Mr. Hynes did good work in dispensary and helped many a poor creature.” Likewise, in the Sona Bata (Nsona Mbata) medical report for 1919, American Missionary Mattie Frederickson reflected on the impact of Spanish influenza on the area, as well as other epidemics. “This time last year the Spanish influenza had about finished. We reopened schools and services. The death toll had been great, and the people called it the foreign disease, as they call Infantile Paralysis and a couple of other dreaded diseases.” Infantile paralysis (also known as polio), smallpox, influenza, and sleeping sickness all had a devastating effect on the population of the Lower Congo in the decade leading up to 1921. Many in the local population referred to these scourges as “foreign diseases” and even “colonial diseases,” revealing that the Congolese made negative associations between the presence of Europeans and their impact on the health of local communities.

For all these reasons, the indigenous population in the Lower Congo declined dramatically; one scholar estimates that the population dropped by as much as 75 percent between 1885 and 1921 (W. MacGaffey 1986a, 271). All these factors contributed to an enormous sense of crisis for the Kongo. To add to this, traditional forms of chiefship were also destroyed by colonial imperatives. To administer the colony, the Congo was divided into four provinces, with each province divided into districts, which were themselves subdivided into territories, and then sectors, and then chefferies. Each chefferie (composed of five to twenty villages) was headed by a chief who supervised the heads of each village. The chiefs that were in this system were by and large chosen by the colonial administration, ignoring traditional systems of legitimizing chiefship (Feci 1972, 6; Mahaniah 1975, 176–78). Moreover, banganga, traditional healers, diviners, and priests, were specifically targeted by the colonial state for arrest and execution (Axelson 1970, 266–73). This led to additional social conflict. As a result of all these social transformations, by 1921 the ground was fertile for a spiritual means of addressing the growing discord in Kongo society. The means of doing so, however, would not come from the mission churches. Indeed, as American Baptist missionary John E. Geil reported on the overall declining church membership at the Banza Mantekte and Mpalabala churches in his annual report for 1920, he also made a declaration: “We need missionaries, land, buildings, and equipment but above all a great spiritual awakening in the church.” Little did he know that the spiritual awakening that he sought would emerge the next year, through the teachings, prophecies, and very body of a MuKongo man named Simon Kimbangu, especially through one particular form of embodiment—zakama, spirit-induced trembling.
Trembling Embodied Blessings

August 4, 2010. It is my last full day in Luozi, as I am leaving for Kinshasa the next morning. I am finishing a month of follow-up research in the Congo and was invited to dinner at the home of Pastor Kasambi, whose family I had become quite close with since 2005. Their youngest son brings a bowl of water with a small bar of soap and each of us washes our hands in preparation for dinner. I eat at the simple wooden table with the pastor and his wife, while their four children sit in the small seating area of the room. After a wonderful meal of *mfumbwa* with peanut sauce and *kwanga*, along with a small bowl of oranges for dessert, I am stuffed. I compliment Ma Luzola on her cooking and relax in a woven chair in the small room lit by several lanterns as night falls. We chat about our families, Ma Luzola's health, and my pending trip back to Kinshasa and then the United States. Finally, as my departure for the evening draws near, Papa Kasambi stops our conversation.

“Mama and I want to give you a spiritual blessing to make sure that you travel safely.”

“I would like that,” I respond. I didn't want to be rude to my adopted family. Moreover, I didn't see any harm in a spiritual blessing, although I am not a member of the DMNA church. He tells me to stand and move my chair to the center of the room. As I sit there, he leaves the room to change and returns wearing his white *soutan* and cap, with his white towel over his arm. He stands in front of me with both of his arms bent at the elbows and perpendicular to the front of his body, with the white towel hanging from one forearm. He begins to lead a song, which all the family joins in singing, shaking several *nsakala* to accompany the song. As the singing gets louder, he then begins to pray in Kikongo, and I sit watching, hands folded in my lap. Suddenly, his body begins to vigorously tremble. His upper body is quaking, his shoulders are jerking up and down, his fingers gesticulating, and his head intermittently making sudden shaking gestures. I had experienced the trembling before in numerous visits to the worship services of the DMNA church, but never had I experienced it up close. I can feel the energy pouring off his body. My hands relax to my sides at first, but then I grip the arms of the chair. I can hear his teeth actually chattering as each tremble wracks his frame. He uses his white towel to vigorously whip/beat the air around me as he continues to tremble. On the other side of me, Mama Luzola begins to speak in tongues as she prays, the children continue to sing, and the air around me is filled with sound and energy. Pastor Kasambi circles me and completes the blessing.
“Mfiaukidi” (Thank you), I whisper.

“Next time you return,” he says, folding his towel across his bent arm, “I will perform the ritual to give you the spirit, dikisa mpeve.”

I smile in response, but inside I am scared. What if I was overtaken by trembling? What would it feel like? My senses are still reeling from the blessing, and I think about the experience over and over again as the entire family escorts me to the main road that leads back to the house where I am staying. As I walk back through the dark, my path lit by the beam of a single flashlight, I wonder, how can trembling be so powerful?

Pastor Kasambi’s embodiment of spiritual power through trembling in the present echoed the trembling that became the most notable ritual practice of Simon Kimbangu’s colonial-era religious movement. During the precolonial era, trembling was used by banganga in the healing of sick patients and for divination purposes, representing the physical possession of the body by spiritual beings and forces. For example, Catholic missionary Laurent du Lucques, who was stationed in the province of Soyo in the Kongo Kingdom in the early eighteenth century, described a ceremony in which an nganga reveals to his apprentices their specializations through divination. “The teacher . . . makes the drums to beat and assembles his disciples . . . He begins to invoke the demon, clapping the hands, turning, always turning the head, making a thousand unrestrained movements of the body, such as crazy people could do no worse” (Cuvelier 1953b, 135). Similarly, the embodiment of trembling of some sort seems to also have taken place in a seventeenth-century travel description published by Olfert Dapper, which describes an nganga seeking to heal an illness in the Kingdom of Loango, located to the immediate north of the Kingdom of Kongo. “The Ganga [sic] . . . paints the eyelids, the face and all the body in red and white figures . . . He makes violent contortions of the body, raising the lowering the voice from one extreme to the other . . . the Ganga [sic] begins to roll the eyes and enter into a fury” (1686, 336–37). Both of these accounts suggest that some sort of trembling was likely taking place, although these European observers did not use that exact term. Trembling as a sign of possession and contact with the spiritual realm—with territorial spirits for example—played a crucial role in healing, divination, and initiation during the precolonial period.

In his analysis of trends in Kongo religious thought before, during, and after European colonialism, anthropologist John Janzen associates trembling with the concept of mpeve and its relevance for spiritual belief and action: “Mpeve specified the vital principle or attribute of every individual. Its verbal
root, *veeva*, meant to blow, to breathe, or implied the breeze responsible for the fluttering of a cloth or flag. . . . But the interior manifestation of *mpeve* in Kongo thought is trembling, ecstatic manifestation accompanied usually by glossolalia and exorbited eyes” (Janzen 1977, 107). Kimbangu incorporated this cultural tradition into his worship and healing practices so that, as a professed adherent of the Protestant church, his trembling was caused not by territorial spirits but by the Holy Spirit (*mpeve ya nlongo*).

“I Would Be an Apostle”: The Prophet Simon Kimbangu

Simon Kimbangu was born in 1889 to his mother Lwezi and his father Kuyela in the village of Nkamba in the Lower Congo. While both of his parents died while he was young, first his mother, and then his father, Kimbangu witnessed his father working as an *nganga-ngombo*, or diviner before his death (Mahaniah 1993). He was raised by his mother’s youngest sister, Kinzembo, and Kimbangu became a Christian and a baptized member of the BMS Wathen church in 1915.25 “Judging by his record,” wrote Robert Lan-yon Jennings, a BMS missionary stationed at Wathen, “he [Kimbangu] was a good Christian man.”26 Kimbangu apparently had a vision in 1917 or 1918 that evidenced his calling to preach. Other documents suggest that afterward Kimbangu went to study with Kimbangudi, a deacon and traveling pastor, who saw Kimbangu as having a true understanding of religion but lacking sufficient reading skills. Thus, when Kimbangu asked to be appointed the BMS evangelist for Nkamba, the missionaries refused based on his poor reading ability (Mackay 1987, 124). He was clearly a committed member of the mission while at the same time limited in the roles that he could take. He left Nkamba for Kinshasa, against the wishes of local church elders, trying to escape the visions that he continued to have. In Kinshasa he worked for three months at the Huileries du Congo Belge, an oil refinery. Many researchers believe that there Black Americans and other African employees exposed him to Garveyist ideas and readings.27 Kimbangu was not, however, paid for his work at the refinery and eventually returned to Nkamba, continuing to have visions. In 1920, Nkamba was made into an official substation of the BMS Wathen mission station, and Kimbangu asked the local church elders if he could be the evangelist for Nkamba. While they agreed, other people at Nkamba did not support him, and the position was given to his step-brother instead.28 After this devastating setback Kimbangu went home to pray. Kongo chroniclers of the movement describe what Kimbangu himself explained happened next: “Then I had a dream and God said to me, ‘I have heard your prayer; people think you need the spirit to do my work but I will give you something even greater.’ I took no notice of this. But from day to day...”
day I heard a voice that told me I would do the work of Peter and of John. I
would be an apostle” (Pemberton 1993, 204).29

Sometime in mid-March 1921,30 Kimbangu heard that a woman named
Kintondo was sick in the neighboring village of Ngombe-Kinsuka and was
compelled to go and heal her. He laid his hands on her in the name of Jesus
Christ. He began to pray, and his body began to tremble. Astoundingly, she
recovered.31 Writing in his diary on April 4, 1921, Robert Lanyon Jennings was
“informed by Tezo [his cook] that a man was present at communion yester-
day who had done miracles.”32 Clearly, news of Kimbangu’s healing of Kin-
tondo was spreading. This first healing was followed by other healings, and
soon people began to come in droves to Nkamba to be healed by the prophet
Simon Kimbangu, so many that “it became impossible to move through the
vast crowds” (Pemberton 1993, 212). In a handwritten letter dated May 1, 1921,
from Sona Bata, an ABFMS mission station also located in the Southern Cat-
aracts, Thomas Moody describes the impact of Simon Kimbangu: “There has
been a great revival of interest the past month at Wathen the English Baptist
station next to us. There is a man who is reported to be healing a large num-
ber of the people, the blind, half lame, sickness of all kinds. . . . At Thysville
the English Baptist Mission has sold out all their hymn books and N.T. [New
Testament] . . . The people are coming to Church in greater numbers. We
believe that the man is of God and we are praying that it will lead to a great
revival among the people.”33

The religious movement that was emerging around the figure of Kimbangu
was rooted in Protestant Christianity. At the same time, particular practices
that came to define the kingunza movement had their origins in precolonial
Kongo forms of embodiment. Simon Kimbangu prayed, healed in the name
of Jesus Christ, used the Bible faithfully, and upheld the doctrine and moral
rules of the Protestant church; he also incorporated many ritual practices that
came from his Kongo cultural background, with the most important of these
being trembling (zakama). For BisiKongo people living in Luozi decades
later, many different terms describe trembling including tuntuka, epileptic
trembling and shaking; sunsumuka, jolting or shuddering after being star-
tled; tita, a manifestation of cold conditions; mayembo, trembling caused by
spirits entering banganga, and zakama, trembling caused by the Holy Spirit.34
Many respondents in 2010 as well as bangunza during the colonial period
emphasized that their own trembling came from the Holy Spirit rather than
non-Christian spirits. Nevertheless, it is in fact this embodied practice (and
its potential connection to pre-Christian practices) that caused concern and
anxiety on the part of both missionaries and colonial administrators.

Numerous accounts describe trembling during Kimbangu’s movement,
both from the point of view of Belgian colonial administrators and European missionaries, as well as from the perspective of the Congolese themselves. For example, a Swedish missionary used the testimony of eyewitnesses to describe Kimbangu’s actions as “somewhat violent, and greatly resembling those of the heathen banganga. He tossed his head, rolled his eyes, and jumped into the air, while his body often twitched all over” (Andersson 1958, 58). William Brown Frame, a BMS missionary stationed at Kibentele, reported going to investigate several prophets nearby and finding them “in a ringed off compound with our Christians singing for all they were worth while the prophets kept up a shaking of the head or body” (Brown Frame 1935). Robert Lanyon Jennings, a BMS missionary at Wathen station, the home mission of the prophet Kimbangu, circulated a letter to other Protestant missionaries describing what he and a colleague witnessed at Nkamba: “We witnessed five or six ‘prophets’ who by their shakings and grimaces seemed demented.” Andreas Walder, an SMF missionary at Kibunzi, wrote, “The state of ecstasy was characterized by violent trembling and strong muscle contractions. A young man from Kibunzi had received the spirit, and his body trembled for three days and three nights.” Walder and another missionary tried to hold his hands, but the shaking increased in intensity. When they released him, “our hands and arms were burning” (Vellut 2005, 103).

For the indigenous Kongo population during the prophetic movements of the colonial period, falling sick and trembling could be taken as a sign from the spiritual world that a person should become an ngunza, a prophet, and go and heal others. Such an interpretation of illness is part of a larger belief system where the dead or those in the spirit world can influence the lives of the living, such as when bisimbi (territorial spirits) “indicated their desire to confer their powers upon particular individuals by afflicting them with certain diseases. . . . Such individuals could only be cured by being initiated into the cult of the appropriate spirit.” The importance of trembling as a sign of being called to be an ngunza was also evident in popular songs of the kingunza movement, such as the following song recorded in the mid-1930s in the town of Kingoyi in the Manianga region (present-day Luozi territory).

**Song No. 17**

Nzambi wakusola,  
Wenda zakama  
Mfumu Nzambi wansola,  
yandi wampana salu  
Kamba lendo yena yaku,  
Vo Nzambi wakusola mu kedika  
Vo masumu maku meni
God has chosen you.
Go and shake.
The Lord God has chosen me,
He gave me the work
If you have received power,
If God has really chosen you,
If your sins are wiped out.38

This song illuminates the importance of shaking and trembling in the worship of bangunza in general, and specifically, what the embodiment of the Holy Spirit signifies in regards to a person’s relationship with God. If a person receives the Holy Spirit in their body and begins to tremble, it is a sign that they have been forgiven for their sins and chosen by God to become ngunza (Simbandumwe 1992, 167). This embodied indicator was recognized by the Kongo people and colonial administrators alike, who then arrested and questioned anyone suspected of trembling. Trembling thus became a primary way of identifying troublesome bangunza for colonial authorities, but also a means for BisiKongo people themselves to evidence a calling to become bangunza. On August 19, 1921, in a set of interviews in the administrative region of Northern Cataracts in the Lower Congo, the following exchanges took place between Léon Cartiaux, the territorial administrator, and several suspected bangunza from the subdistrict of Kinkenge:39

D: How many days have you been ngunza?
R: For only a day. Today I am cured.
D: How did you become ngunza?
R: I don’t know anything, one morning I was trembling.
D: You haven’t tried to heal people?
R: No, I trembled one day only.

He sent this first interviewee, a woman by the name of Sombe, back home and told her to be wise. Then, he questioned a man named Mahambu:

D: Since when have you been ngunza?
R: For a day; I had a headache; I trembled several hours only. I did nothing but pray.

After the native head of the village confirmed his story, Mahambu was sent back home with a warning. Then, Cartiaux interrogated another man by the name of Bombe Maloba.

D: How many days have you been ngunza?
R: I think that I had a fever, I trembled during a day; the people of
Pembo took me by the hand [and] I was healed. Today I am healed, I haven’t done anything.  

The sentinels of the chief of Pembo said they hadn’t seen the three bangunza in question trying to heal people. Thus, none of them were prosecuted for being ngunza. What is noteworthy is that they were arrested and accused of being bangunza precisely because they had trembled. However, according to these respondents, the trembling was not self-induced or even sought after but was brought on by experiences of sickness. This clearly relates to what John Janzen calls cults of affliction and incidents that were seen as signs that people should be initiated as prophets or healers—whether banganga or prophets possessed by the spirit of Saint Anthony, such as Dona Beatrice Vita Kimpa (Thornton 1998). In yet another earlier document dated July 30, 1921, and addressed to the district commissioner, Léon Cartiaux provided a short list summarizing the statements of six bangunza who had been arrested in the subdistricts of Kibunzi and Bamba:

Inspired by the Holy Spirit in visions and daydreams or dreams
Having wanted to heal sick people through prayers, songs, and the laying of hands on the head of people
Not having said nor did evil
Having trembled like the ngunza do.

Although he doesn’t specifically say what the list is for, this list of characteristics collected from the bangunza who were questioned most likely entails the experiences and qualities that lead one to become an ngunza. Again, trembling is an important element of this list. Moreover, visions and dreams are also seen as important as evidence of having contact with the spiritual world. Overall then, trembling played an important role in the kingunza movements, both for calling people to become prophets or adherents of the movement, as well as providing an embodied sign that attracted the attention of colonial authorities for immediate suppression.

An additional point concerns the role of women in the kingunza movement. As several of the above documents indicate, women, as well as men, were overtaken by the Holy Spirit and called to be bangunza. Positions of spiritual authority and expertise were held by people of both sexes during the precolonial era, and this continued with the kingunza movement. I examine women in the Kongo prophetic movements in greater detail in other work (Covington-Ward 2014), but here it is enough to say that women acted as healers, diviners, singers, and helpers, in addition to being prophets in their own right exhibiting the same embodied trembling (zakama) as the men in the movement.
Battling the Prophets: Colonial Administrators and Missionaries Respond to the Movement, May–September 1921

Initially, the Belgian colonial administration regarded Kimbangu’s movement as a purely religious matter in which they had no reason to intervene. Until the end of May in 1921, they saw it as an issue for churches and priests. However, their assessment of the situation changed as businesses were affected by absent workers who joined the crowds leaving to visit Nkamba and witness the miracles of the prophet Kimbangu.43 Business owners began to pressure the administration for action. Léon-Georges Morel, the territorial administrator for the Southern Cataracts, filed a report on May 17 that is worth quoting at length to demonstrate his ideas about Kimbangu and his practices:

I learned after from the mouths of the Protestant missionaries of Gombe-Matadi, that these expressions . . . are the exact reproduction of the manner of behaving of native witch-doctors of the past. . . . I have noticed that the current that reigns at Kamba [sic] isn’t sympathetic to us: the natives know very well that we can never approve of these grotesque and insane manifestations that accompany the religion of Kimbangu. . . . The goal of the latter is to create a religion that corresponds with the mentality of the natives, a religion that contains the elements of Protestantism, which adds to itself external practices bordering on fetishism. . . . Everyone can readily see that our religions of Europe are all filled with abstractions, not responding to the mentality of the African, who longs for concrete facts and protection. The teachings of Kimbangu please the natives because they are allegedly accompanied by palpable facts: healings, protection against sickness. . . . It is therefore necessary to oppose Kimbangu because the tendency of his movement is pan-African. . . . The natives will say that they’ve found the God of the Blacks.44

Kimbangu’s embodied practices (trembling, jumping, and so on) that Morel witnessed at Nkamba and categorized as “fetishist” are what led Morel to distinguish the movement as different from Protestantism. He thus concluded that its goal of founding an African religion was in fact pan-Africanist and therefore a threat to the colonial regime. Indeed, Morel assessed the movement of Kimbangu, enacted through its practices and representing an indigenous Kongo understanding of an alternative religious authority, as a direct challenge to the hegemony of European religious and political authority.

The majority of both Protestant and Catholic missionaries expressed the same hostility that Morel showed in regards to Kongo traditional culture,
with some exceptions. In the constant competition between various missionary societies for Congolese converts, Kimbangu’s movement provided an advantage for the Protestants in comparison to the Catholics, as Catholic missions emptied in response to the movement. Writing about the impact of the movement at Nsona Mbata in the *Congo News Letter*, Mrs. M. Frederickson notes, “The attendance at our Sunday services are much larger. Backsliders are begging to be restored into the church” (July 1921, 27). However, many more missionaries weren’t as pleased with the movement and doubted Kimbangu’s abilities. Robert Lanyon Jennings, the district head of the BMS Wathen mission under which Nkamba fell, wrote to the missionary staff of American Baptist and Swedish missions that he and his colleague Albert William Hillard had visited Nkamba and “we did not see one miracle. . . . We have heard of hundreds of miraculous healings, but as far as we can judge we have not been convinced of one. . . . Use every influence . . . to induce your people to keep away from there.”45 In a letter to the governor-general in July of 1921, James H. Starte, the legal representative of the Baptist Missionary Society, reassured the colonial government that “our missionaries at Wathen, Thysville, and Kibentele have publicly and privately discouraged ‘Les affaires des Prophets’”(the prophet affairs).46

In regards to the embodied practices of the movement, many Protestant missionaries saw them as a revival of traditional Kongo religion. Georg Palmaer, a Swedish medical missionary, believed that Kimbangu’s practices resembled those of “heathen banganga.” Similarly, Protestant missionaries in Ngombe-Lutete convinced the administrator Morel that Kimbangu’s practices were an exact replication of that of “witch-doctors.”47 Mrs. M. Frederickson, an ABFMS missionary stationed with her husband at Nsona Mbata, wrote in the July 1921 issue of *Congo News Letter*, “Thousands of people flocked to the little village of Nkamba where Simon Kimbangu, the original prophet, was doing his work. . . . We realize . . . that the prophets may naturally use the witch doctors old ways in their forms and ceremonies and acts of healing etc. For instance . . . the shaking of his body” (26–28). Missionary and administrator use of problematic terms such as “witch-doctor” implies that the Kongo prophets are deceitful, dealing in trickery. Such an association denies recognition of kingunza as a valid, Christian movement. These reactions of different Protestant missionaries in the Lower Congo make sense because of the threat that the bangunza movement posed to the religious authority of the missionaries. If the Kongo people can receive visions and the Holy Spirit in their bodies, and hear the voice of God themselves, what need do they have for European missionaries to interpret for them? By focusing on condemning embodied practices such as trembling as evil, pagan manner-
isms, these missionaries sought to discredit any associations that the prophet movement had with Christianity and a Christian God.

The Catholic missionaries were more unified in their discontent with the movement. For example, territorial administrator Léon-Georges Morel received letters from the Tumba Catholic mission demanding that the “agitation of the prophets” be brought to an end.48 Jean-Constant Van Cleemput, the vice-provincial of the Redemptorists and the superior father at the Tumba Mission, was likely the author of these letters, as he wrote in another commentary on the movement, “the immediate goal, if one can say: that of founding a religion of a prophet, a Negro religion, must lead to a goal . . . to get rid of the whites, to expel them, to become independent, in a word ‘Africa to the blacks.'”49 Monsignor Van Rosle demonstrated similar animosity to the movement when, in the August 1921 issue of La Voix du Rédempteur, the journal of the Catholic Redemptorist Fathers, he threatened excommunication of all Christians who affiliated themselves with Simon Kimbangu’s church. In the same issue of the journal, other missionaries agreed that the movement was a political problem, as “these individuals could provoke an insurrection” (Chomé 1959, 22–24). In all these examples, the connection is made between the growing religious authority of the bangunza movement, and what that meant for possibly ending European domination in the Belgian colony.

Missionaries, colonial agents, and European business owners began to work together as they jointly saw the kingunza movement as a threat to European religious hegemony, business interests, and colonial authority. On June 1, 1921, Léon-Georges Morel arranged a meeting with head missionaries of both the Catholic and Protestant churches in the area. During this meeting, according to Morel, Father Van Cleemput, representing the Catholic missions “energetically demanded, and I support his view, that there must be an immediate end everywhere to the unrest of prophets,” while on the other hand, Reverend Jennings, representing the Protestants, was inclined toward a more “prudent” solution. Ultimately, the Belgian administrators chose the plan of the Catholics since “they were afraid that Kimbanguism could turn into a political movement” (M. Martin 1975, 58). The district commissioner ordered Kimbangu’s immediate arrest. On June 6, Morel returned to Nkamba with soldiers to carry out this order; however, Kimbangu escaped and his followers hid him for several months.

During this time, railroad company officials and other European businessmen were threatened by worker strikes and thus insisted that the government show the native populations that it was “their master,” while the movement continued to spread all throughout the Lower Congo.50 On June 14, martial law was imposed on the subdistrict of Zundu, where Nkamba was located.
On June 20, Morel ordered that all native people owning guns hand them in to the local administration, prohibited “the usage of gongs, drums, or other means of communicating by signals of all kinds,” restricted people’s movement, and forbade all gatherings. On September 12, 1921, Simon Kimbangu willingly gave himself up to the colonial authorities and was arrested, along with some of his disciples. I have identified a number of incidents from the start of his movement until his trial as key performative encounters that redefined the relationship between Europeans and their colonial subjects in the Lower Congo.

**Performative Encounters and the Making of a Movement**

For the remainder of the chapter, I will focus on this trembling, zakama, in four specific performative encounters during the year 1921. I see zakama as a type of everyday cultural performance with larger social and political consequences. Each embodied instance of trembling analyzed here meets the criteria of performance: based on restored behavior, consciousness, and intention (as directness and aboutness) owing to the presence of multiple audiences, and having the capacity to transform.

In each specific case that I consider here, the trembling is a form of restored behavior, expressing a manner of embodying spirit possession that dates to the precolonial era. Undergirding this behavior is a belief in the copresence of spirits and their impact on the everyday lives and bodies of humans, which has implications for consciousness and intention. Thus, the Holy Spirit is causing the trembling and other associated acts, such as speaking in tongues. Moreover, bad spirits are also believed to inhabit the body, causing illness or misfortune. They must be chased out with the Holy Spirit (Bockie 1993, 76; Janzen and MacGaffey 1974, 144–45). These insights, along with the work of other scholars researching African spirit possession (Boddy 1989; Engelke 2007; Masquelier 2001) support the assertion that Western conceptions of the willful intentions of an individual person do not apply here. Spirits have a place in many African worldviews as actors using the bodies of individuals to get things done. Matters are further complicated since people have different experiences when possessed by the Holy Spirit. Some claim to lose all awareness, while others experience visions and hear voices while trembling. Thus, Simon Kimbangu’s explanation to Léon-Georges Morel that “it’s God that ordered him and his apostles to tremble in this way” implies Kimbangu’s awareness of his own communication with the Holy Spirit. These varied experiences remind us that consciousness must be understood in a broader way and on multiple levels.

The concept of “audience” also applies in each of these situations, in many
ways. In these instances, the person possessed by the spirit, along with their human interlocutor, is also an audience to the mpeve. Each of these incidents is also a public encounter—large groups of people witness the interactions between bangunza and missionaries/colonial authorities. Last and most important, these encounters subvert the existing status quo in regards to relations between colonial subjects and Europeans, showing a larger sociopolitical transformation is taking place. As stated in previous chapters, performative encounters change existing sociopolitical relationships in a manner that did not exist before. These examples of performative encounters demonstrate the important role of individual bodies in processes of social action.

David and Goliath: Léon-Georges Morel and Kimbangu at Nkamba (May 1921)

Kimbangu’s exhibition of trembling is most clearly shown in the eyewitness account of territorial administrator Léon-Georges Morel, who went to Nkamba on May 11, 1921, to witness events for himself. Morel’s five-page report describes the embodied practices of Kimbangu and his followers. Morel encountered Kimbangu on the road into town as Kimbangu “was shaken by a general trembling of the body, pushed to a fever pitch. Next to him were two native men and two young girls, all shaken by the same trembling and all making bizarre shouts. They began to uncontrollably execute a crazy saraband around me [erratically whirling].” I tried in vain to speak with them. Understanding that these grotesque contortions and literally madness was obviously for the goal of trying to impress me, I took the part of calmly contemplating these exhibitions, which themselves slowed down after ten minutes, the dancers being visibly exhausted by fatigue.”

Kimbangu and his disciples met Morel on the road while trembling and then surrounded him. This suggests that they wanted him to unequivocally see and recognize the spiritual authority they were imbued with, as Kimbangu attributes his particular reception of Morel to the will of God. Morel enters Nkamba to set up his tent, after failing to communicate with Kimbangu and his small group. Morel described the home of the prophet as being in a barricaded enclosure at the entrance to the village, facing the road, with a huge crowd of people gathered in the enclosure vigorously singing Protestant hymns. Although some of the people suggested another area further away from the prophet’s home, Morel stubbornly chose a spot 20 meters from the prophet’s home to have a better view of the activities taking place. “In the meantime, Kimbangu came closer with his associates and had resumed his contortions around me and my porters who erected the tent” (page 1).

According to Morel, Kimbangu then read in a loud voice the story from
the Bible of David and Goliath, and one of the young girls came to show him a picture of Goliath killed by David. Then, some of the people told him that they wait to see fire fall on him from the sky like in the story of Sodom and Gomorra. Morel then spoke with the native chief of the local administrative subdistrict of Zundu, telling him that he didn't come with hostile intentions (page 2). A little after the commotion had calmed down, Kimbangu came to shake Morel's hand: “I notice that his hand is icy, a reaction following the period of nervous shaking. I took advantage of this period of calm to ask Kimbangu the reason for this not very suitable and grotesque manner of receiving me. He responded that: ‘It’s God that ordered him to come to meet me in that way and that the bizarre shouts are nothing but his conversation with God. It’s God that orders him and his apostles to tremble in this way’” (page 2).

This exchange between the prophet and Morel reveals two things. First, Morel’s observation that Kimbangu’s hand is really cold suggests physical ramifications for the trembling that Kimbangu is exhibiting. Second and more important, Kimbangu’s response that God spoke to him and ordered him and his apostles to tremble subverts Morel’s attempts to control their behavior. Later, when Morel asked to question Kimbangu in private, Kimbangu said that he needed to confer with God first. A catechist soon thereafter told Morel that God had ordered Kimbangu not to talk and that the spirit alone would talk and make the necessary responses. “At this juncture, the singers resumed their tunes stressed by the dances, while the five tremblers resumed their manifestations. . . . I tried to interrogate Kimbangu, but in vain; the séance of epileptic craziness resumed. After a quarter of an hour of trembling the visionary began to read suggestive sentences taken from the Bible. . . . It is certain that Kimbangu is not in possession of all his faculties but he is not completely without them. The two native men that are his associates are pretenders, and the two women seem to have a touch of hysteria” (pages 2–3).

The above passages demonstrate the second component of trembling as performance—heightened awareness. While all these interactions are taking place between Morel and Kimbangu, the assembled crowd is watching them. Thus, those in the crowd can view Kimbangu’s refusal to stop trembling and his unwillingness to talk as an open protest against Morel’s secular authority. Morel’s account reveals conflicting definitions of trembling in this colonial context. For the prophet Simon Kimbangu, while in the past trembling was understood as symbolic of the political authority of the king or the ability of the banganga to communicate with a particular deity or nature spirit (Covington-Ward 2008), Kimbangu provides a rationale for his embodied
actions that is based on orders from God, a Christian God, and the trembling is an embodied manifestation of that spiritual relationship, and more specifically, the Holy Spirit. This encounter between Morel and Kimbangu, taken as a whole, shows that Kimbangu is establishing his own authority to exhibit behavior that supersedes the wishes and commands of the colonial administrator. Herein lies the transformative and performative aspect of this encounter. Kimbangu’s authority is a religious authority, based on the voice of God. Since he is receiving his instructions and spiritual inspiration directly from God, it is God’s wishes as relayed by Kimbangu that prevail in shaping this encounter with Morel, who is himself the physical representative of colonial power. Such an encounter is incredibly performative because, through his trembling and interactions with Morel, which are being observed and witnessed by the assembled crowd at Nkamba, Kimbangu is reshaping the normalized structures of power that would typically guide interactions between a common native MuKongo and a Belgian colonial administrator. As the crowd watches Kimbangu and his apostles openly defy Morel’s orders and blatantly challenge Morel’s presence in Nkamba, they are able to envision an alternate social order able to be realized by and through the prophetic movement.

Léon-Georges Morel, however, is threatened by the overall encounter. His own reactions and choices, from setting up his tent in an area near Kimbangu although he had been directed to another area, and trying to control the singing occurring around him, can also be interpreted as Morel’s own performance of his power as a colonial administrator. His attempts at reasserting his own authority in Nkamba were undermined many times, especially with the trembling. Morel describes the ecstatic trembling with many negative terms, including crazy, uncontrolled, and inappropriate, and even using medical terminology such as epileptic and hysterical. Trembling, then, was an embodied cultural performance that physically helped to establish the religious authority of Kimbangu and other Kongo prophets, an authority that colonial subjects were not supposed to exercise. Thus, Morel’s derogatory attitude in regards to trembling would color how colonial authorities overall would come to view and then suppress trembling in the Lower Congo.

Leading the Faithful: Geil and Anonymous Ngunza (April–July 1921)

The next encounter that I examine occurred between John E. Geil, a missionary of the American Baptist Foreign Missionary Society, and an unnamed ngunza, sometime between April and July of 1921. Geil was stationed at Mbanza Manteke in the Lower Congo and the prophet movement also affected the area where he worked. The following account comes from a
report on the movement penned by P. H. J. Lerrigo, the foreign secretary for the ABFMS, who summarized his correspondence with Mr. Geil.

A prophet emerged near Mbanza Manteke, and John Geil sent word to the prophet asking to meet and speak with him. The prophet came after a few days accompanied by others, and they stood outside Mr. Geil’s home. The prophet:

foamed at the mouth and shook violently, but said nothing for a time. Then he suddenly broke out: “You sent for me. What do you want?”

Mr. Geil said, “I would like to talk with you about the work you are doing.”

“It is the work of God. Don’t you believe it is God’s work?” This he ejaculated in a very truculent manner.

Mr. Geil replied, “I do not want to quarrel with you. I should like to talk it over quietly.” (Lerrigo 1922, 96–97)

I see this encounter as performative for a number of reasons. First, during the colonial era, Congolese were supposed to address missionaries and other Europeans in the Congo with deference and respect. Numerous everyday interactions, such as missionaries being physically carried in hammocks by Congolese porters, reinforced ideas of African inferiority and European superiority. They often had a paternalistic attitude toward the Congolese and expected them to respect their authority, especially in religious matters for missionaries in particular. In this instance, however, this anonymous ngunza showed from the start that the typical relationship between missionaries and the Kongo population was to change. When summoned by Geil, he did not come immediately; he came a few days later, on his own schedule. Second, in addressing Geil while trembling, he did not show deference. He said, “What do you want?” a phrase that would be used to address someone lower in status rather than higher in status. He also directly challenged Geil, by asking if he believed that the work he was doing was God’s work. This was a tricky question, because others were present witnessing their encounter, many of whom already believed or had some idea that the rapidly spreading movement was the work of God. If Geil denied the veracity of the prophet’s claim, he would have to convincingly explain the physical manifestations of the prophetism (trembling) as well as explain why only his interpretation of the movement was valid. This would be held up against the Bible itself, which many of the prophets and adherents of the kingunza movement were using to justify the presence of prophets among them.

The prophet had in fact chosen to visit Geil on a Sunday morning. Geil and his church members were heading to a pool of water at the foot of the hill for
a baptismal service.54 “The prophet seemed anxious to assume charge of the assembled crowd, and Mr. Geil feared a disturbance. Placing his hand upon the prophet’s arm he warned him not to cause any trouble. Meanwhile the prophet was working himself into a frenzy, shaking, leaping, and rolling his eyes. Mr. Geil led the way to the baptism, but the prophet and his followers came also, shouting and making a noise” (Lerrigo 1922, 96–7). In continuing the analysis of this encounter as performative, this anonymous ngunza also challenged Geil by attempting to take over one of the most importance ritual functions of missionaries in the Congo—baptism. The assembled crowd of people waiting to undergo baptism and their families were all witnesses to this outright challenge to Geil’s authority. The way that Geil tries to stop this ngunza is also notable; he “placed his hand” on his arm. Bangunza, especially in the midst of trembling, were not to be touched. Whether Geil knew this or not, his actions could be seen as undermining the power of the prophet. Unfortunately, we do not know the response of the prophet: did he jump higher? Tremble more vigorously? And how did the crowd interpret this? In all, this highly charged encounter diminished the power of missionaries and disrupted their hegemonic hold on religious instruction and interpretation, and on the performance of rituals such as baptism. This anonymous ngunza’s open, public challenge to Geil’s missionary authority is a performative encounter in that it reconfigured everyday relations and interactions between Congolese and White missionaries and created the possibility of an alternate Kongo spiritual authority willing and able to perform the same functions as a Christian missionary. This encounter disrupted and undermined the status quo by and through the actions of this prophet, especially the trembling, which represented his being chosen by the Holy Spirit.

"We Do Not Want Chiefs Anymore, We Do Not Want Anyone but Jesus Christ" (June 1921)

The third performative encounter considered here involves a more violent interaction between Kongo prophets and the colonial state. Léon Cartiaux had entered into Belgian colonial service in 1909, and by the summer of 1921 he had been territorial administrator for the Northern Cataracts since 1920 (Vellut 2005, 168). As the prophetic movement spread throughout the Lower Congo, he left Luozi, the administrative center for the district, to conduct an investigation of prophets in the area, between June 13 and 16, 1921. After assembling fourteen porters in the Lemba chefferie, he arrived at Dembo village in Buchefferie. He interrogated the medal chief there and asked him what he has heard at meetings of bangunza that he had attended. Chief Libasa, the medal-chief responded, “They said send us all of your sick, we will
heal them. . . . The Whites demand too much money from us for taxes. . . . You don't have to pay. . . . Those were the words of the ngunza of the chefferie of Chief Kau, village Kiesa, Southern Cataractes.”55

Cartiaux continued his investigation in the village of Pangu, also in Bu chefferie. There, when Cartiaux asked whether he had heard ngunza tell people not to pay taxes, a chief named Fielo told him that while he had not heard it spoken directly by an ngunza, a local catechist named Kunku had told him, “Ngunza told us that this year we should not pay taxes. . . . It is Kimbangu, ngunza from the village of Kamba [sic] . . . who said that.” Upon further questioning, Fielo also revealed that the catechist said “people shouldn’t work anymore because there would no longer be anyone to pray.”56 Cartiaux continued his investigation, arriving the same day at Kimbanza village under Chief Muntanda. The chief tells him that people are going to see prophets in the village Mayombe-Yanga where a man named Timosi leads a group of bangunza. Timosi was the brother of the head catechist on the American mission, and Chief Muntanda reported him as saying, “Now, we should not pay taxes any more. They said: there is one God and we do not obey anyone else but him.”

Cartiaux then asked, “You all don’t want to pay?”

Chief Muntanda replied, “The people are waiting to see what the ngunza will do.”

Cartiaux, hot on the trail of the bangunza, leaves Kimbanza at 5:30 in the morning, arriving at Yanga where he questioned Chief Bemba, who then accompanied Cartiaux so that they finally arrive at Mayombé village at 9:00 in the morning. There they saw a large crowd of people singing very loudly. After Chief Bemba pointed out the three bangunza leading the crowd, Cartiaux tried to approach them. “In spite of the songs and howls shouted by the entire crowd, I approach the three N’Gunza and ask them to calm down. . . . So the crowd yelled saying we want nothing else but Jesus Christ, no more chiefs, no more obeying the Whites of the state, nothing.”57

The reaction of the crowd suggests that they were openly opposed to Cartiaux’s presence. Using the language of religion, “we want nothing else but Jesus Christ,” their discourse prioritizes religion over everything else. Their opposition to “chiefs,” who are themselves Kongo as well, is also telling, because as the previous exchanges reveal, these chiefs were working for and with the colonial administration; most of them had been appointed as chiefs as opposed to inheriting the position. Moreover, Chief Bemba had led Cartiaux to this bangunza gathering. That the crowd not only refused to quiet down but also shouted that they no longer wanted to obey representatives of the colonial state reveals that they are challenging the status quo in the

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Belgian colony. Cartiaux continued in his report: “The chief of the N’Gunza, named Timosi, saw that I was opposite him, wanted to take the stick that he had within reach and tried to hit me. At the same time, I gave the order to my twelve soldiers who accompanied me to apprehend them. The soldiers obeyed immediately. The three N’gunza, but the named Timosi above all, mounted a very strong resistance, continuing while all the crowd shouted, ‘We do not want chiefs anymore, we don’t want anyone but Jesus Christ.’ I gave everyone the order to stop the noise and I achieved nothing.”

Cartiaux’s description of these events clearly shows that the normal order of things was being challenged in this interaction. While it was common to see Belgians and other Europeans inflicting harm and punishment on Congolese bodies during the colonial period, whether with a chicotte, rod, or other implement, the reverse was not true. Clearly, the ngunza Timosi was breaking everyday protocol and stepping out of his place as a colonial subject by trying to hit Cartiaux. Moreover, if he succeeded in hitting the territorial administrator, it could embolden the rest of the crowd to attack as well. Cartiaux did not give an estimate of the size of the crowd. However, his frustration at trying to control the crowd suggests the number of people at the bangunza meeting (along with others in the community who may have come to see what would take place in the encounter between the state administrator and the bangunza) outnumbered Cartiaux and his porters and soldiers. Even after his soldiers grabbed the three bangunza, they continued to display resistance and the crowd persisted in ignoring Cartiaux’s calls for quiet: “I ordered all my soldiers to tightly tie up the three n’Gunza. They finally did it, but Timosi did not calm down, and all three of them continue the shouts being repeated by the crowd. They [the three ngunza] were making movements with the arms, the head, the body, the eyes rolling up to the sky. All the crowd was singing really loudly so that the three n’Gunza may fly off into the sky.”

Here, the movements that Cartiaux is attempting to describe are likely zakama that physically indicated one’s possession by the Holy Spirit. It is not clear how Cartiaux came to the conclusion that the crowd wanted the bangunza to fly up into the sky; did he hear this in the songs? Did a porter or soldier, or even Chief Bemba himself, explain this to him? We do know that in the context of the kingunza movement, the loud singing was needed to help bring on the vigorous trembling of the bangunza. If members of the crowd indicated that they believed the bangunza had the power to raise themselves from the ground and fly, they would in fact echo similar beliefs that people had about the prophet Simon Kimbangu himself. Whether or not the prophets could perform such incredible feats is not really what is most important; instead, what the ability to fly represents is the ability to escape and liter-
ally rise above the everyday indignities to which the indigenous population were often subjected. Flying away from Cartiaux would also suggest that the prophets were in fact above the reaches of his authority, and closer to God as well.

Cartiaux then ordered his soldiers to tie ropes around the necks of those present, starting with the catechists who were at the front of the crowd. “The catechists against my will continued to sing, but without offering any resistance.” Cartiaux then called for silence for the third time. “No one obeyed me. A native of Madimba, chefferie Kimpaka, named Fataki Petro, finding himself across from me, took me by the arm with the intention of hitting me. I quickly freed myself and armed myself with a soldier’s gun—in that moment all the noise stopped, and I achieved perfect calm, except for the three N’Gunza, on the ground, who tried to resume the songs.”

Once again, Cartiaux’s authority is being directly challenged. Here he was actually grabbed by Fataki Petro, and it was only through the very visible threat of his gun that he was able to quiet the crowd. The soldiers tied up Fataki Petro, and he and the three N’Gunza, who all refused to walk, were carried by the crowd in improvised hammocks away from the village. It is not clear whether the catechists were also arrested, or even if other people in the crowd were apprehended as well. This entire encounter, including the obstinate singing of the crowd, trembling of the bangunza, suggestion of the ability to fly away, multiple attempts to physically attack the territorial administrator, and even the refusal to walk of those who were tied up and arrested all signal a performative shift in social relations. The authority of the state was being openly challenged, and Léon Cartiaux himself was physically attacked. The naturalness of the colonial social order was undermined, and while the resistant bangunza were arrested, their bravery and actions remained an inspiring example for all those BisiKongo who witnessed the encounter.

**Trembling in the Courtroom (October 1921)**

The last performative encounter focuses on trembling in the court trial of the prophet Simon Kimbangu. Kimbangu’s trial began almost immediately after his arrest and lasted only eighteen days; from September 15 to October 3, 1921 (Chomé 1959, 55). The sources for the description of his trial are problematic, because they were written by parties who were definitely against the movement; one a Belgian Catholic priest and the other a reporter for a daily newspaper which deeply criticized the movement. What we can take from their accounts of the trial, however, are the multiple ways that the Congolese prophets were challenging colonial authority.

During the trial, Kimbangu and his disciples were not given any legal
counsel; they had to mount their defense themselves (Chomé 1959, 56). M. de Rossi, the presiding judge, questioned them about the movement, and their responses demonstrate how spiritual beliefs were being used to challenge the authority of the Belgian colonial state. For example, the first prophet who was questioned, coolly and calmly sought to establish the spiritual authority of the kingunza movement by saying, “The judgment of God will come punish those who do not believe.”

The magistrate responded, “The state, and all the whites who are here, if they don’t believe?” “Yes” said the man, “the state and all you whites will go to hell if you don’t believe in our doctrine” (Chomé 1959, 62).

While the judge and his assistants laughed at this prophecy, the statement of another prophet led to a different response. “He dared to question the judge in the middle of the court and asked him the reason why it was forbidden for Africans to have their god, their prophet, and their Bible, while the whites have their own” (Chomé 1959, 62). Judge de Rossi stopped the proceedings. Yet another significant encounter occurred with Kimbangu himself. Kimbangu's embodied practices during a manifestation of possession brought into stark relief the anxiety and fear that such practices provoked for the colonial administration. Mandombe, a young female disciple of Kimbangu, was being questioned, when suddenly, Kimbangu, who was loaded with chains and under guard, turned toward the other defendants and began to tremble. M. de Rossi, threatened Kimbangu: “If you don't stop, you will get the chicotte.” When he didn’t stop, de Rossi called a recess and sent for a doctor. The doctor called to the scene to examine Kimbangu found nothing abnormal and prescribed a treatment of a cold shower and “twelve blows of the whip” (Chomé 1959, 63). These were promptly administered, and there is no other mention of trembling during the trial after this point.

Kimbangu's trembling directly defied de Rossi, who unsuccessfully ordered Kimbangu to stop and had to take a recess and make everyone leave in order to find another means of trying to control Kimbangu’s embodied behavior. One can imagine de Rossi repeatedly banging his gavel in vain as Kimbangu continued to shake and tremble. Kimbangu’s public trembling, in a court of Belgian law no less, is a performative encounter that placed the spiritual authority of the Holy Spirit in direct conflict with the secular authority of the Belgian colonial state. Like Morel in Nkamba, de Rossi sought a medical explanation for Kimbangu's actions. By doing this, he was trying to take away any grounds for legitimacy that Kimbangu may have by reducing his actions to a condition that can be cured as opposed to a revolutionary ideology.

On October 3, 1921, Kimbangu was accused of sedition and hostility
toward the White population, along with other crimes. The text of the sentencing reveals a host of fears that gripped the colonial administration:

Whereas Kibangu [sic] was recognized by the doctors as sound of body and spirit and by consequence responsible for all his acts, that his fits of nerves are nothing but shamming . . . that the accused profited by deceiving the good faith of the masses destined to serve as an unconscious instrument to his ends, that the goal pursued was that of destroying the authority of the state. Whereas it remain established that by his acts, remarks, schemes, writings, songs, and his history dictated by himself, Simon Kibangu [sic] has set himself up as a redemptor and savior of the black race in indicating the White [race] as the enemy . . . the sect of prophets must be considered organized in order to bear attacks on the security of the state, [a] sect hidden under the veil of a new religion. . . . It is true that the hostility against the established powers was manifested up until the present by seditious songs, insults, outrages, and some isolated rebellions, yet it is true that the march of events could have fatally led to a big revolt.62

This selection from the sentencing text reveals that, by the conclusion of the trial, the colonial administration saw the prophetic movement as more of a political rather than a religious threat. In the words of the presiding judge, Kimbangu’s movement, a “sect hidden under the veil of a new religion” sought to destroy “the authority of the state.” In this regard, Kimbangu’s religious movement and sudden status as a prophet imbued him with a particular religious authority that the colonial administration found menacing to their own political authority, and in fact construed as a political movement. Moreover, Kimbangu’s bodily practices of trembling, while understood in the context of Kongo traditional religion, had no place in the Belgian cultural ethos, and thus the colonizers saw them as fake, stopping his trembling with force as demonstrated in the account of the trial.

Kimbangu was initially sentenced to 120 strokes of the whip and then death. However, several Baptist missionaries (including Ross Phillips of the BMS and Joseph Clark of the ABFMS), along with the substitute public prosecutor appealed to the governor-general in Boma and King Albert in Belgium to commute the sentence (M. Martin 1975, 62). On November 15, 1921, King Albert changed the sentence to life imprisonment. Simon Kimbangu, like many other prophets and followers of the movement, was sent into exile into a penal labor colony far away on the other side of the Belgian Congo. Marie-Louise Martin, who likens these penal colonies to colonial concentra-
tion camps, estimates that approximately 100,000 people were sent into exile, when both heads of family and the family members who accompanied them are accounted for (1975, 69). Kimbangu himself died in a camp in Katanga province, in October 1951, thirty years after his initial imprisonment.

Overall, this section demonstrates the critical importance of zakama as a form of resistance by Kongo people against European missionaries and the Belgian colonial state in 1921. Each of these performative encounters was public with a significant audience of onlookers, and in each instance normalized relations of interaction where Europeans are superior and Congolese inferior were upended. One similarity between all the encounters is the inability of the Europeans to control the bodies of the prophets, from Kimbangu’s trembling in front of Morel and the judge de Rossi, to the refusal to walk of those arrested by Cartiaux, even to the loud singing of the followers of these prophets. Moreover, European attempts to medicalize the trembling as a “condition” of an illness was a common thread as well. The Holy Spirit, a supernatural powerful entity that supersedes any earthly laws, customs, or rules, and was recognized as real by most European Christians, supposedly caused the trembling that marked these performative encounters. Accordingly, the Holy Spirit buttressed the prophets’ blatant disregard for the orders and questions of both state officials and missionaries, as the words and actions of the prophets were not supposed to be of man, but of God. Through access to the Christian spiritual realm expressed through their bodies, these bangunza disputed the unquestioned power of Europeans to decide and control the “natural order” of social life in the Belgian Congo. The reactions of the missionaries and administrators challenged in these encounters were also similar—they often responded with violence or the threat of violence. With this, they participated in their own public performances of colonial power, with the goal of thwarting and discouraging the movement, its leaders, and its followers.

Kingunza and Early Seeds of Nationalism

While thus far we have examined individuals using their bodies to advocate for social and political change, did this religious movement create or coalesce around shared ideals, goals, or identities—in essence, was it a nationalist movement? As stated previously, nationalism is “an ideological movement for the attainment and maintenance of autonomy, unity, and identity on behalf of a population some of whose members deem it to constitute an actual or potential ‘nation’” (A. Smith 2006, 175). And what elements are necessary for nationalism to exist? In an earlier study, Anthony Smith writes that “to achieve their common goals—autonomy, unity, identity—there need to be
some core networks of association and culture, around which and on which nations can be ‘built,’” and language, religion, and historic territories have often provided this common basis for constructing nations (1996, 108). The kingunza movement that started with the prophet Simon Kimbangu shows that in 1921 the inhabitants of the Lower Congo were starting to think, act, and behave in ways that suggested a burgeoning nationalist sentiment, growing out of and alongside the prophetic movement itself.

The most explicit evidence of nationalism in the prophetic movement is the many efforts to seek autonomy through establishing independent churches, separate from the missionaries. This is reflected in the Mbanza Manteke annual report for 1921, where John E. Geil noted, “like all work on the lower Congo our work has been affected by the ‘prophet’ movement. . . . The Bangu section which joins on the Wathen (BMS) district where the ‘prophet’ movement had its origin . . . has followed the example of the natives in the Wathen district and separated themselves from the mission and are proposing to establish a church and work of their own.”64 He then added that in the last six months there have been no financial contributions/collections from this particular section, while the contributions of the larger Lukunga field had increased in relation to previous years. From what I can tell, Bangu was one church included in the larger Lukunga area and was closely located to Kimbangu’s home village of Nkamba.65 While it is unclear who the leaders of this exodus from the church are, they sought to establish their own church and had stopped contributing financially to the home mission. This reveals that they are seeking to become an autonomous religious institution, away from European and American missionaries. Many other examples of similar aspirations for religious independence abound. Joseph Bowskill, a BMS missionary reflecting on the prophet movement, writes, “When Mbandila, Kuyowa & Co. found the prophet would not be recognized by the BMS they worked hard to separate the whole native church from the BMS. The flood of money pouring in, began to make them feel independent. Kimbangu, for some time, protested against separation, but in the end he agreed.”66 Mbandila and Antoine Kuyowa were part of the first group to convert to Christianity at the Wathen station. While their actions were surely seen as an affront by Bowskill, their desire to establish their own independent church reveals early seeds of nationalist sentiment, vis-à-vis their urge to redefine their relationship to Europeans in such a colonial context. There are many other examples of the quest for autonomy all across the Lower Congo; from SMF missionary Sven A. Floden’s confrontations with Malia and Yambula, a woman and man in Kibunzi (Cataractes Nord) who both trembled, claimed to be prophets, and held mass meetings against Floden’s wishes (Vellut 2005, 117–22), to
Robert Kirkland, a BMS missionary in Kinshasa, who testified about men on their mission who “wanted to have private meetings” and “met and plotted in secret” (Vellut 2010, 71) to Peter MacDiarmid, an ABFMS missionary in the Nsona Mbata district of the Southern Cataracts, who wrote about “one church of several hundred, quite independent of the Mission, [that] sprang up with mushroom growth” (Congo News Letter, September 1922, 21). Moreover, the leaders of these new religious communities took on many of the powers that until then had been reserved for missionaries; baptisms, marriages, and even removing and restoring people to church membership based on their sins were now responsibilities being enacted by bangunza across the Lower Congo (Congo News Letter, September 1922; Vellut 2010, 102).

The second major component of a nationalist movement is creating a sentiment of unity for the group in question. During the kingunza movement in 1921, there was a coalescing of a growing racial identity, such that Africaness and Blackness were defined in diametric opposition to Whiteness—whether Belgian, British, or American. In her hand-corrected typescript of an annual report for 1921, ABFMS missionary Catherine Mabie wrote that “the prophet movement has been an interesting phenomena in race consciousness and closely akin to the world wide developing sense of race solidarity among negroes. . . . Its chief peril lay in the wonderful solidarity it effected in so brief a period among a hitherto disassociated population; also in its undoubted anti-white attitude.” Here, Mabie notes a growing sentiment of commonality and racial identity amongst Congolese who in the past did not seem to see themselves as similar. Likewise, in his testimony at the Protestant Mission Conference about his experiences during the outbreak of the prophetic movement in villages on the Bangu, ABFMS missionary Thomas Hill recounted “I held two services on Bangu in one village. In another the leader refused me a chance to speak saying, “We have nothing to do with white men” (Vellut 2010, 206). The anti-White sentiment expressed in this village on the southern bank of the Congo River reflects similar sentiments expressed by the assembled crowd in Léon Cartiaux’s encounter with Timosi and the other bangunza in Luozi territory on the other side of the river. Anti-White sentiment in connection with the movement even spread outside of the Lower Congo. In his 1921 report for the Tshumbiri station, located further up the Congo River, ABFMS missionary Paul Metzger writes about the impact of a temporary docking of a ship carrying arrested bangunza. “Though our people knew of the arrests in the Bas Congo they began singing the prophet songs . . . parading through the town. . . . It is claimed by some that the movement is not political. This . . . is an error for it is decidedly anti-white, every means being used to breed race hatred. God’s back is turned against the white man
and the last shall be first. All white men will be compelled to walk home in the dried ocean bed. Black men from America will come to fight for us” (Vellut 2010, 219). Pronouncements of racial solidarity with Black Americans are echoed in other accounts, such as Léon Cartiaux’s letter to the district commissioner where he reports the claims of two BisiKongo who went to Nkamba and said they heard Kimbangu say publicly that, “for so many years the Belgians are our rulers and haven’t done anything for us till this day, but before long Americans will arrive here in order to make war with the Belgians and become our rulers.”

All of this suggests a burgeoning racial consciousness emerging in direct response to white domination, a consciousness that was extending beyond clan, language, and geography, to embrace a solidarity of people of African descent both within the Congo and across the Atlantic.

The last component of a growing nationalist movement, according to Anthony Smith, is identity. What defines the kingunza movement as unique, different? This is probably the least developed aspect of the kingunza movement as it emerged in 1921. One potential defining factor for the movement is that of ethnicity or ethnic identity. While the movement started in the Lower Congo with a MuKongo prophet, ethnic identity does not seem to be a very important part of the movement in 1921. Cries for freedom from whites and autonomy for newly established native churches are much more common. In fact, in the documents that I examined, there are very few explicit signs of a significant ethnic identity. One possible example is Robert H. C. Graham’s recounting of the prophet movement where he writes, “it seems that the original ‘prophets’ said there would be twelve real prophets in all, and that the very greatest of them would appear here in San Salvador” (Missionary Herald, October 1921, 192). This passage is significant because San Salvador (also known as Mbanza Kongo in Kikongo and located geographically in modern-day Angola) was the capital of the former Kongo Kingdom. The rumor of the greatest prophet emerging in San Salvador points to attempts to recreate shared connections with the former Kongo Kingdom. While ethnicity will become more and more important in later variations and waves of the kingunza movement, in 1921, however, the movement is focused much more on autonomy and racial solidarity based on opposition to whites and white oppression.

**Conclusion**

By focusing on the Kimbanguist/kingunza movement as it emerged and developed in 1921, I have tried to show that placing the body at the center of analysis can reveal a lot about struggles for power and control in everyday contexts in the Belgian Congo. The kingunza movement in the Lower Congo
presents a number of examples of performative encounters that show the ways that Kongo people used their bodies to challenge the hegemony of both the Belgian colonial state and Western missionaries. Embodied trembling allowed multiple prophets to publicly defy European rule in both civil and religious matters and posit an alternate reality where the Congolese ran their own affairs. Moreover, the movement encouraged the development of a nascent nationalism by bringing disparate people together who coalesced around similar circumstances, shared embodiment, and some common goals and ideals for the future. In the next chapter, we will examine how the kunguza movement became even more nationalist and political in the decades leading up to independence from Belgian colonial rule and the multiple ways that both colonial administrators and missionaries sought to use embodied movement to combat the bangunza.