



## Kimbanguism

**Author:** Aurélien Mokoko Gampiot

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### Introduction

At the root of Kimbanguism are [Simon Kimbangu's](#) (1887–1951) [prophetic](#) actions. A Baptist catechist in the colonized province of Lower Congo, Kimbangu launched a political and religious movement in 1921 after it was said he miraculously resurrected a young woman. This attracted crowds from both banks of the Congo River and Angola, who came for healing and to listen to his prophecies about the end of colonial rule. The missionaries in the Belgian Congo quickly denounced Kimbangu as a heretic, and colonial authorities, wary of his prophesying that 'Whites shall become Blacks and Blacks shall become Whites' (Diangienda Kuntima 1984, 82), had him arrested. His hasty trial ended with a death sentence, which the king of Belgium turned into a life sentence. Kimbangu passed away in October 1951 in Elisabethville (now Lubumbashi) after spending thirty years in jail. His life has inspired processes of idealization and reshaping of his public and private personas, as well as many leaders and independent religious movements, the best known of which are Mpadism (aka Mission des Noirs), founded in the 1930s by Simon Mpadi (1905-1950) in the Belgian Congo; Matsuanism, created in the mid-1920s by André Matsoua (1899-1942) in Congo-Brazzaville; and Tokoism, initiated in the mid-1940s by Simão Toko (1918-1983) in Angola. Several historical studies of the beginnings of the movement have been published, with Georges Balandier's *Sociology of Black Africa: Social Dynamics in Central Africa* ([1955] 1970) regarded as a classic work. My own research, published in *Kimbanguisme et identité noire (Kimbanguism and Black Identity)*, Mokoko Gampiot 2004), sheds light on the meaning Kimbanguists give to the beginning of the movement.

Kimbangu's immediate legacy was preserved by the underground activities his wife, Muilu Marie (ca. 1880–1959), which continued until her death. That year, the Belgian government officially recognized the Church of Jesus-Christ on Earth by His Prophet Simon Kimbangu (EJCSK) in a climate of messianic and millenarian hope that the French sociologist Henri Desroche described as follows:

*In various places, especially when the year had been very hot, we heard of collective trances. These were characteristic of the passionate hopefulness which bordered on hope for Resurrection—that of Christ, or of Kimbangu or of Black ancestors. Unmistakeably, people were waiting for the Kingdom to come—and the Church came. The independence of Congo came, too. So there was a new church in a new society, each one in search of its own peaceful coexistence with other Christian churches or other national societies. But there is little doubt that neither this church, nor even this society*

would have thus emerged unless there had been a promise reaching further than churches and societies alike—an explosive promise, whose spin-offs an ecclesiastical body as well as a political body have capitalized on. (Desroche 1971, 12)

Today, the Kimbanguist church ranks among the major African initiated churches, with an estimated seventeen million members and an active diaspora all over the world. It derives both from the Baptist church (of which Kimbangu and many of his followers were members) and the Catholic church, in which many other members were raised, including Kimbangu's three sons. It joined the World Council of Churches in 1969 and the All Africa Conference of Churches in 1974. Since 1991, the church's official name has been Église de Jésus-Christ sur la terre par son envoyé spécial Simon Kimbangu—leaving unchanged its acronym, EJCSK— for reasons explained below.

## Kimbanguist Messianism and Syncretism

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The Kimbanguist church is organized around two hierarchical orders, the first of which comprises Kimbangu's descendants and the second the pastors, deacons, deaconesses, and catechists. The two manage the church jointly. Yet, since 2002, the descendants have been embroiled in a succession crisis, which has resulted in a schism between the official church, led by Simon Kimbangu Kiangani (1951-), and the dissident church, headed by his cousins. The church also has two faces, described by the American sociologist Susan Asch as follows: 'official Kimbanguism', preached by the leaders and reform-minded theologians, and 'the Kimbanguism of Kimbanguists', coalescing around the traditional beliefs of the rank-and-file members (Asch 1983). In the latter, Kimbangu is identified as the Holy Spirit and his three sons as the incarnations of the Holy Trinity—the youngest, Joseph Diangienda Kuntima (1918-1992), being the Holy Spirit's second incarnation and the church's first spiritual leader from 1959 until his passing in 1992. Predictably, these beliefs have caused tensions with other Christian churches.

Kimbanguism may therefore be described as syncretic, as it offers a reinterpretation of the Bible through the lens of the [prophetic](#) sermons preached by Kimbangu and his three sons—in particular Diangienda—as well as the revelations conveyed by inspired hymns, which are spontaneously received in visions experienced by common laypeople, who may or may not be members of the church (Mokoko Gampiot 2014). These hymns are understood as messages sent directly from heaven to the faithful in order to help them decipher the visible and invisible world; they allow an interpretation of any event affecting humankind in general and Blacks worldwide in particular.

## Theology and Beliefs

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Although Kimbangu never left any theological writings suggesting a fully developed theory of Blackness, contemporary Kimbanguist theology is very much centred on race and racial oppression. The first tenet of Kimbanguist popular theology is the exaltation of Blackness as embodying the first race on earth—the biblical forebears, Adam and Eve, are considered as Africans. Secondly, this theology considers a negative dimension of Black identity—the belief that it bears the stigma of divine curse since the Original Sin, which is identified as witchcraft. This is how the son and successor of Kimbangu, Diangienda, explained the lack

of participation of Blacks in technological and scientific progress, the oppression they still have to endure all over the world, the lack of consideration of the dominant race, and the persistence of witchcraft among Blacks, which is seen as the main stumbling block to the progress of the race.

Conversely, Kimbangu's messianic action is to transform the status of Africans and African-descended people, by multiplying novel inventions by them. In this reading of the Bible, the White race is represented in three ways. It is first redefined as an offshoot of the Black race, being Jacob's lineage (Genesis 23:25). Second, Whites have benefited from Jacob's stealing the birthright of Esau (seen as the forebear of Blacks), which has allowed them to monopolize technological progress and oppress Blacks. Indeed, Kimbanguist millenarianism is inseparable from the idea of progress. According to the church's archives, Kimbangu allegedly taught that Whites' receiving a quarter of divine science had allowed inventions through the ages, but the remaining three-quarters was reserved for Blacks, so that the unprecedented discoveries they expect must come from Blacks alone. Finally, Whites are now divorced from God and have strayed away from religion, which will permit Blacks to resume their position as elders, under the church's three main principles—Love, Commandments, and Works.

A specific Kimbanguist mindset has developed from this set of beliefs, with a prevalent creed based on individual and collective salvation coming via supernatural means. As a result of this mindset, all events occurring in the political or social sphere or within the church itself are expected and deciphered based on eschatological expectations.

## Politics and Religion in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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After the first presidential elections of the Democratic Republic of the Congo were held in 1960, Joseph Kasa-Vubu (1917-1969) rose to power thanks to the ethnic and religious network of supporters making up his party, the Alliance of the Bakongos, whose vice-president was none other than Charles Kisilokele, Kimbangu's eldest son. His prime minister, Emery Patrice Lumumba, a brave and talented anticolonial orator, was the leader of another party, the Mouvement National Congolais. Due to the scarcity of archives documenting this first election, it is difficult to demonstrate the existence of a millenarian context around it. However, in his sermons, Diangienda said that he had hosted Joseph Kasa-Vubu for three days in a row before the latter was elected, which let his audience infer that he had given him his blessing and/or spiritual guidance.

Following the crisis in Katanga and the assassination of Lumumba (1925-1961), Joseph-Désiré Mobutu (1930-1997) took over the presidency of the DRC in 1965. Still, interpretations were numerous among Kimbanguist believers. For instance, Mobutu was said to have liaised between Diangienda and Diangienda's father, Kimbangu, while the latter was in jail under Belgian colonial rule, by bringing him mail. In return, Kimbangu allegedly told Mobutu he would become president of the country. Mobutu himself testified that he had received such a prophecy in 1958 from Diangienda, while they lived as foreigners in Katanga (Mokoko Gampiot 2017). President Joseph Kabila (1971-), following Mobutu's demise and the assassination of his father Laurent-Désiré Kabila (1939-2001), ushered in a new era in the relations between political leaders and Kimbanguism, particularly as regards the figure of Kimbangu. The believers claim that all these men were predestined by Kimbangu himself to rule the DRC, and that this is the reason why they all kept good relations with the Kimbanguist church.

## Kimbanguism Beyond the DRC

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The Kimbanguist church is not solely focused on DRC politics, and, while Kimbangu is identified and revered as a messiah by the members of the Kimbanguist church and many other religious movements stemming from it, he is far from being unknown to the other citizens of the two republics of Congo and Angola. Following the proclamations of independence in the early 1960s, the political leaders of the three countries have not ignored Kimbangu's messianic status. As the three birthplaces of Kimbanguism (the 'Belgian', 'French', and 'Portuguese' Congos) had become independent along with most other African nations, Kimbanguist hopes focused on the second independence (i.e. the spiritual liberation of Black people prophesied by Kimbangu). Because Congolese movements of resistance to colonialism occurred at the same time as the concept of national identity was being shaped in each country's population, Kimbangu's story of martyrdom was a fundamental element in the construction of the collective psyche in each of the three countries where it took place.

The link established in the Kimbanguist mind between religion and ethnicity seems to work as a pragmatic ideology that ultimately holds the political sphere accountable and engages elected officials. This explains why Kimbanguists remain acutely aware of, and interested in, the evolution of the Congolese nations, sub-Saharan Africa, and the world at large.

In Kimbangu's messianic discourse, millenarianism is also expressed in connection with the expansion of Kimbanguist faith worldwide, in what could be described as 'backlash missionizing'. Kimbangu prophesied in 1921 that 'young people will climb mountains' (Mokoko Gampiot, 2010, 311)—meaning that they would cross boundaries. Indeed, Kimbanguists see themselves as God's chosen people, hence entrusted with propagating the Gospel of God and/or Kimbangu anywhere in the world (Mokoko Gampiot 2004). This is made particularly explicit in this hymn, where Kimbangu himself calls his followers to travel the world:

You shall be victorious (*repeat*)

And rule all nations on the earth!

Abide by the God-given Law, and you shall be victorious.

Do the works I commanded, and you shall be victorious.

*Solo:*

Africa, Asia, Europe, America, Oceania,

You shall preach everywhere in these places,

And lead all nations on the earth,

Anywhere, thanks to my name, Kimbangu.

Although Kimbangu prophesied the increased death rate of young people lured by the temptations of Western lifestyles, paradoxically, the global Kimbanguist diaspora participates in the messianic and millenarian project. It is not about waiting for salvation but being engaged in collective action to achieve ambitious development projects—building hospitals, schools, a university, an agro-pastoral centre, radio and television stations, conference centres, and accommodation for visitors to the holy city of N’Kamba.

## Waiting for the Fulfilment of Kimbangu’s Prophecies

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Kimbanguists’ understanding of social transformations occurring around the world as resulting from a divine plan is buttressed by miracles performed by Kimbangu, since he continues to appear nowadays, keeping apocalyptic and millennialist beliefs very much alive. To make the long story of Kimbanguist apocalypticism a short one, let us begin with 1981, the year of the inauguration of the temple of N’Kamba. Many Kimbanguists believed that this would bring about the end of the world, for when Kimbangu had prophesied its construction, he had also announced that material and spiritual transformation would ensue from its inauguration (Diangienda Kuntima 1984, 245). The Swiss theologian Marie-Louise Martin (1962, 234) wrote in the 1960s, ‘With time, he influenced not just thousands but millions of Congolese. Kimbangu has become a mythical figure; they were and are probably still expecting his return.’ This observation is still accurate nowadays, as Kimbanguist tradition abounds in eschatological rhetoric steeped in the millenarian tradition around the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21:2–4 (King James Version)

*And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.*

To Kimbanguists, this biblical passage is already accomplished in N’Kamba, which is Kimbangu’s hometown and their church’s city upon a hill. Martin’s description has been confirmed today:

*The hill of N’Kamba-Jerusalem is still inhabited today, but in a few years’ time it will become solely dedicated to prayer, as the houses are being rebuilt on the neighbouring hills. When attending worship services at N’Kamba and living there, one is impressed by what may be called ‘lived eschatology’, in the sense of an awareness of God’s presence. It is as if the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21 were anticipated in the here and now. The great stairs leading up to the sanctuary symbolize Jacob’s ladder, which he saw in a dream as meaning the presence of God for all those coming up to it in prayer. (Martin 1969, 31)*

The identification of N’Kamba as the New Jerusalem further buttresses the belief in the fulfilment of Kimbangu’s promises about the redemption of Blacks, which are reiterated in the ever-expanding body of inspired hymns.

The 1990s were perceived by many Kimbanguists as a first step towards the fulfilment of eschatological prophecies. As their spiritual leader, Diangienda had predicted the *perestroika* and the fall of the Berlin Wall; when the latter event occurred in 1989, it immediately reinforced their millenarian stance. On 12 September 1991, Kimbangu's memory was officially rehabilitated by a high appeals court set up by the Mobutu regime. Upon this occasion, Diangienda stated on national radio and television channels that the whole world was going to make a new start, which further kindled his followers' hopes. But the new start actually coincided with his own death in July 1992, three months after that of his elder brother, Kisolokele (1914-1992), who had acted as deputy spiritual leader. These deaths were interpreted through the lens of the passages from the book of Revelation (11:3-4 and 7-10) that mention two 'witnesses' whose corpses lay exposed for three and a half days while the crowds rejoiced. Indeed, in Kinshasa, people celebrated and danced on hearing Diangienda had passed away, and even pelted his funeral procession with stones. For some Kimbanguists, this was the fulfilment of the biblical prophecy. They found confirmation of their belief when Paul Dialungana (1916-2001), the last surviving son of Kimbangu and the successor of his dead brothers, had verse 14 of the same passage read aloud shortly after he took over leadership of the church: 'The second woe is past; and, behold, the third woe cometh quickly.' This 'third woe' occurred nine years after the first two, in August 2001, when Dialungana's death ended the era of the three sons of Kimbangu and ushered in that of the twenty-six grandchildren. But Kimbanguist millenarianism also addresses and influences the realm of politics.

## Political-Millenarian Language in a Post-Colonial Context

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Congolese millenarianism today is dominated by the belief in the coming of God's anointed. Far from being new, it can be traced back to the early 1920s, when Kimbangu prophesied that Congo would be ruled by four successive presidents following independence, announcing that the fourth one would be invested with spiritual, scientific, and political power to bring prosperity and development to the country:

*The first head of state shall be a dignified man, an exemplary and respectable model, but he shall not rule until the end of his term, for he shall be poisoned. The second head of state shall be a major thief, embezzler and destroyer. Under his rule, children shall become immoral and cease respecting their parents. The country's economy shall be in the doldrums, the land riddled with robbers and the people mired in dire poverty. That president shall be totally rejected by the people and shall be ousted from power. The third head of state shall not remain in power for long, for his bad policies shall divide the country into several parts (hotbeds). Crime shall be widespread. There shall be many embezzlers. He, like the second one, shall be rejected by the people and ousted from power. The fourth head of state shall be a very quiet man, with strong self-discipline, and he shall have a difficult task putting the country back together and quelling the tensions between the regions. He shall receive help and have considerable sums of money to rebuild the Congo and rule it with honesty. Safety shall be guaranteed, and during his reign the Congo shall be prosperous. There shall be no more slaves and each person shall discover their roots and be free to join their own immediately. (RDC:Prophetie)*

This prophecy long remained unknown outside the Kimbanguist church and the independent religious

movements that also revere or worship Kimbangu. It became popularized under Kabila's rule, featuring in newspaper headlines and in news reports to this day. Kimbanguists and other believers in Kimbangu considered Kabila as the fourth president of the prophecy, because of his calm demeanour and young age when he seized power after his father was assassinated.

In a climate of heightened messianic expectations, the contested elections of December 2018 put Antoine Félix Tshilombo Tshisekedi (1963-) in the position of fifth president of the DRC after Joseph Kabila. But Kimbangu's prophecy is still topical, for many authors of speeches and prophecies will not recognize Kabila as the fourth president, although he does rank fourth on the list. Indeed, many Congolese people insist that he is a Rwandan and that his rule was simply the continuation of his father's. Several pastors and [prophets](#) infer that Tshisekedi is the fourth president, not the fifth, and publicly say so on social media, while others believe Martin Fayulu (1956-) (whom many observers said was the real winner of the ballot) to be the fourth president, stressing that he was number four among the candidates in the presidential race. Still others contend that the fourth president is yet to come. The reason for such debate is the promise of prosperity and peace in the Congo brought about by a nationally respected historical figure, and the fact that Kimbangu did not mention a fifth president but only four presidents before the coming of the divine king. But one year after his election, Tshisekedi not only received Simon Kimbangu Kiangani but also went to N'kamba (in December 2019), where he called for national unity and unity of the Kimbanguist church.

Amid the current proliferation of new churches and religious movements, the Kimbanguist church is now an established church on an equal footing with the Catholic and Protestant churches in the DRC. Its cultural and musical influence can be felt in the sermons and songs of evangelical and Pentecostal (known as 'revival') churches, which eschew race thinking, as well as in (neo-)prophetic churches belonging to the Nguzist movement, which often promotes Black nationalism and separatism from Whites and is very popular nowadays in the DRC, Congo-Brazzaville, and Angola, as well as the diaspora. Among these, Bundu Dia Kongo is a mystical and political movement based in the DRC (Wamba-dia-Wamba 1999) that not only worships Kimbangu as a messiah and the god of Blacks but also rejects Jesus and even the Bible. All these new movements share a common belief in Kimbangu's prophecies, now awaiting a supernatural phenomenon that only Kimbanguists used to announce until the twenty-first century. Despite the competition between these groups, and even the internal conflicts within them, the religious landscape of the two Congos, Angola, and their diaspora is hardly understandable without some comprehension of the [prophetic](#), messianic, millenarian, and apocalyptic project rooted in Kimbangu's figure and legacy.

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## Article information

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