



Kimpa Vita

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Published: 31st January 2021

Aurélien Mokoko Gampiot. 2021. "Kimpa Vita." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.) *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. 31 January 2021. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/kimpa-vita.

Introduction

In the early eighteenth century, Kimpa Vita, aka Dona Beatriz (1684–1706), intervened in the history of the Kingdom of Kongo as an envoy chosen by God to restore order in the midst of the chaos caused by both the Portuguese colonial domination and the civil war that was pitting the heirs to the throne against one another. Her messianic rhetoric and the movement she led prompted reactions from the Catholic and colonial authorities as well as the Kongo aristocracy. This article discusses the emergence of this movement and its messianic, millenarian, and apocalyptic features, as well as the persistence of its legacy in present-day Congolese messianic and millenarian expressions.

A Brief History of Kimpa Vita

Kimpa Vita cannot be studied aside from the Kingdom of Kongo, where she was born, raised, and executed. Kongo oral traditions about Kimpa Vita are either lost or unreliable, being refashioned from academic sources. The primary sources documenting the Kingdom of Kongo are the writings of the Italian mathematician Filippo Pigafetta, who transcribed into Italian the account given by the Portuguese explorer Duarte Lopes (1591) as well as those of Jesuit and Capuchin missionaries such as Cavazzi (1654–1667) and Bernardo Da Gallo (c. 1700), which all other historians quote, particularly the latter when Kimpa Vita is discussed. These historians are de Lucques (1953), Jadin (1961), Vansina (1963), Balandier (1965), Randles (1968), Sinda (1972), Thornton (1983, 1998), and Heusch (2000). Recent doctoral dissertations that discuss the Christianization of the Kingdom of Kongo include Kabwita (2004), Mboukou (2010), and Fromont (2014).

In the early eighteenth century, Mbanza Kongo, the capital of the Kingdom of Kongo—renamed São Salvador by the Portuguese—was in deep turmoil. But an equally profound longing to restore the kingdom in the capital under a single authority was perceptible when a young 22-year-old prophetess came to prominence in 1704.

Raised in an aristocratic family of the Kongo ethnic group, Kimpa Vita had received the traditional initiation of *Kimpassi*, of which she was a priestess (Kabwita 2004, 38). She had also received an in-depth Catholic

education, informed by devotion to the Virgin Mary, the saints, the sacraments, and the use of the rosary and crucifixes; it is documented that she knew the Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary, and the Salve Regina (Thornton 1998, 29). Catholic missions to the Congo were organized by the Capuchins, mostly hailing from Italy or Spain, who extolled St Anthony of Padua (the patron saint of Portugal) by depicting him as an intermediary to whom prayers could be addressed (Balandier 1965). Consequently, the Congolese perceived the saint to be in a position to accomplish miracles and save them from misfortune, illness, or plagues such as leprosy. He was expected to ward off the devil and bring women suitable matches. To the natives of the Kingdom of Kongo, St Anthony was the only saint endowed with so many powers and was thus deserving of particular worship (Randles 1968, 150-51). For the Capuchin Father Bernardo da Gallo, the movement was launched the day Kimpa Vita attempted to fell a cross located by the king's court (Thornton 1998, 110). She said she had received from God, through the intermediary of St Anthony, the mission to heal the suffering of her people. Her testimony was that:

While she was seriously ill and on the brink of death, in her agony she saw a friar dressed as a capuchin. He identified himself as Saint Anthony, who had been sent by God into her head to preach to the people and announce the restoration of the kingdom. (Quoted in Randles 1968, 48.)

She claimed that St Anthony took possession of her body and spoke out of her mouth to preach against White missionaries, who, she said, represented an obstacle to this restoration but also to witchcraft and the use of traditional fetishes.

Kimpa Vita's Mission and Prophecy

Kimpa Vita began proclaiming the impending arrival of Judgment Day, putting forward three main themes. Firstly, she condemned the use of the cross and images of Christ, which many Congolese perceived as new, more powerful fetishes than the traditional magic. Secondly, she preached for the first time that a Black Christ would come to liberate oppressed peoples from bondage. Thirdly, she prophesied the prompt restoration of the Kingdom of Kongo, bringing with it the return of prosperity (Martin 1981, 33-34). Appropriating the imported Catholic saints in the traditional logic of ancestor worship, she identified Jesus, Mary, St Francis, St Alexis, and St Anthony of Padua as Kongo ancestors, explaining that Kongo was the actual Holy Land and that the founding figures of Christianity were African (Randles 1968, 157; Sinda 1972). She also theorized about Catholic prayers and sacraments, haranguing her followers:

You say 'Salve', but you don't know why. ... What matters to God is your intention. Your intention is what God accepts. Marriage is useless, for your intention is what God accepts. Baptism is useless, for your intention is what God accepts. Confessions are useless, for your intention is what God accepts. (Quoted in Jadin 1961, 556.)

The nationalist movement of spiritual revival initiated by Kimpa Vita was known as the Saint Antonian movement. It was a millenarian project of restoration of the Kingdom of Kongo that would free the Congolese from colonial oppression, bringing back peace and national unity. According to da Gallo's

rendition of Kimpa Vita's preaching, Europeans were accused of monopolizing the secret of divine revelation and the wealth deriving from it while countering the salvation offered by 'Black saints', so that Whites were ultimately considered devils by Saint Antonians (Kabwita 2004, 59-62).

Soon, the Kongo aristocracy and Catholic authorities began paying attention and seeking to hinder the progress of the movement. Kimpa Vita was perceived as a menace for she worked miracles, spoke against Catholic sacraments, and burned fetishes but also crosses. Furthermore, her giving birth while proclaiming herself a virgin was held against her by the Capuchins, who precipitated her arrest. Following Kimpa Vita's arrest on the authority of King Pedro IV on Mount Kimbangu, where she had found shelter with her lover and their baby, in July 1706 an ecclesiastical tribunal sentenced the young prophetess to be burned at the stake.

Kimpa Vita's Legacy

Not all historians agree about Kimpa Vita's legacy. For some, the Saint Antonian movement died out, for, in the wake of her execution, many of her followers, including the man she had designated as the legitimate king, died in fratricidal conflicts (Heusch 2000, 95). For others, Kimpa Vita's martyrdom fostered a long-lasting sense of belonging among the Kongo people (Lucques 1953, 238), for her messianic preaching deeply shaped Congolese history and collective identity. Indeed, without having wielded any official power, Kimpa Vita is considered as a historic forerunner of African messianism and millenarianism. Today she is revered as having planted the seeds of nationhood in Angola, Congo-Brazzaville, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. At a time when the Portuguese meant to stay indefinitely in the Kingdom of Kongo, Kimpa Vita harnessed the creative powers of messianism to inscribe the colonial order in a temporal arc tending towards liberation. She extolled the history of the Kingdom of Kongo as a glorious past that White settlers had falsified, demanding reparation and denouncing the subjugation of Africans under the colonial yoke.

Today, Kimpa Vita is celebrated by many as a 'Congolese Joan of Arc' (Kaké 1976) whose messianism fostered a national conscience in Central Africa long before nation-states were born there, bequeathing a legacy of millenarianism among the Kongo people. Although the Saint Antonians no longer exist, Kimpa Vita's memory, which remains inseparable from mysticism, is still very much alive in the two Congos and Angola, and even beyond Central Africa. Her brand of messianism resonates in the expanding Ngunzist movement, whose nativist message of rejection of Whites, Jesus, and even the Bible strikes a chord in the three countries. The restoration of the Kingdom of Kongo remains central to the beliefs of the Kimbanguist Church and many other neo-prophetic movements in Central Africa.

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Article information

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Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements. 31 January 2021. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/kimpa-vita.

Downloaded: 2021-10-01

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