



Simon Kimbangu

Author: Aurélien Mokoko Gampiot

Published: 15th January 2021

Aurélien Mokoko Gampiot. 2021. "Simon Kimbangu." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.) *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. 15 January 2021. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/simon-kimbangu.

Introduction

In 1921 in the Belgian Congo, a Baptist catechist defied the colonial authorities, delivering to his fellow Congolese [prophecies](#) of hope and liberation with strongly millenarian and apocalyptic overtones that rapidly gave rise to a nonviolent religious movement. Today, Simon Kimbangu (c. 1889--1951) is a national hero in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and enjoys a messianic status in the dogma of the Kimbanguist church and other splinter religious movements that recognize him as a saviour sent to Africans. To explain this, the current entry first presents the history of Simon Kimbangu, then shows the content of the messianic ideal he constructed from the onset of his politico-religious movement, and finally describes his place in the Congolese messianic and millenarian landscape.

Historical Background of Simon Kimbangu's Prophetic Career

Simon Kimbangu was born circa 1889, according to scholars, but the church born of his movement claims the real date is 12 September 1887. A literate Baptist catechist, he lived and taught the Bible in his hometown, N'Kamba, in the Belgian Congo (now the DRC). His personal status gave him both a solid knowledge of the Bible and a strong familiarity with the aspirations and concerns of his fellow Congolese.

In 1918, he repeatedly heard the voice of Jesus ordering him to convert the Congolese people. He first tried to ignore the calling, for he had not been ordained to pastor, even though his abilities had been recognized by his peers, and because there were White missionaries already doing this work. In the early twentieth century, it was assumed that only White people could liberate African people from their (presumably) sinful state. Yet, the simple fact that Kimbangu was having visions and a mystical exchange of his own with Christ set him apart from this frame of White control. On 6 April 1921, he was understood to have worked his first miracle in his hometown, N'Kamba; Kimbangu healed a dying young woman called Nkiantondo. An effect of this was that crowds of people came to see him from both banks of the Congo River and from Angola. Kimbangu's preaching was now enhanced by his healing powers; it is even claimed that he resurrected dead people.

As a result of this transformation in his mission, Kimbangu began preaching that Jesus had taken mercy on

Black people and sent him as an envoy to them. Dispensaries and hospitals in the Lower Congo province were deserted as patients and their families went to Kimbangu for healing. Domestic workers, construction workers, and administrative agents were all leaving work to attend Kimbangu's sermons, while Catholic and Protestant missions were losing attendance. In just five months, what had been a social movement had become a spiritual awakening. Kimbangu's preaching revolved around three axes. Firstly, on the spiritual plane, he extolled Jesus as the only source of power and as the saviour of Blacks, not just Whites. Secondly, on the moral level, Kimbangu condemned witchcraft, the use of fetishes, alcohol consumption, dance, and polygamy. And, thirdly, with sociopolitical implications, he [prophesied](#) about national and spiritual independence for African people.

In relation to the sociopolitical axis of Kimbangu's ministry, he announced that Blacks would become independent in two ways. Firstly, this would be thanks to the political independences of African nations and the return of African Americans or African-descended people, who were to follow God's plan and go back to Africa to bring their knowledge and resources. Secondly, he [prophesied](#) what is known as the spiritual independence of Blacks, when he said, 'the Black man shall become white and the White man shall become black'—a phrase which resulted in a trial and a life sentence on 3 October 1921, when he was accused, among other things, of trying to spread Marcus Garvey's (1887-1940) ideas in Congo (Mokoko Gampiot 2017). Kimbangu was to die in jail in 1951, after thirty years of confinement. The traditional narrative of Kimbangu's arrest insists that he turned himself in to the Belgian authorities, calling on his followers to remain nonviolent and saying, 'It is now time for me to turn myself in to the authorities; let impatient men prone to anger be gone' (Diangienda Kuntima 1984, 71-72). Not only Kimbanguist oral tradition, but also Belgian outsiders like Father Braeckman confirm that Kimbangu did turn himself in: 'The region was placed under military control and a military tribunal was set up in Thysville, where the most unruly were taken to court. Yet Simon disappeared. It took energy and cunning to track down the prophet, who ended up turning himself in. On 15 September, 1921, Simon Kimbangu was put behind bars in Thysville.' (Braeckman 1925, 160.) And, the writings of both the Belgian lawyer Jules Chomé (1959) and the Belgian Jesuit Father Jan van Wing (1938) agree on the fact that Kimbangu never called for civil disobedience or rebellion against the king of Belgium, and never preached against paying taxes. Only indirectly did his movement become a politico-religious and social one. Kimbangu focused on ethnicity with the aim of reconstructing Black identity. His action was effective partly thanks to his ability to mobilize his fellow citizens on the notion of Blackness in a context marked by the confrontation of discourses, since race consciousness resulted from the encounter with Whites.

Thanks to the underground work of his wife, Marie Muilu (1880-1959), and their three sons, the first of Kimbangu's [prophecies](#) to be fulfilled was the emergence and national recognition of his African Initiated Church, in 1959, just before the DRC gained its independence. As the French sociologist Henri Desroche said, 'They were expecting a Messiah, but a church was born, and with it, the independence of the nation.' (Desroche 1971, 11-12) In this newly independent Congo, the Kimbanguist church kept its messianic message, rooted in the need to reconstruct Black identity and Pan-Africanism. Besides, Kimbangu's prophetic action inspired other nationalist movements in Africa, such as André Matsoua's (1899-1942) in the French Congo in the 1940s or Simão Toko's (1918-1983) Kitawala movement of civil disobedience in Angola (Balandier [1955] 1970; Sinda 1972). These resulted in the independences of African countries in the 1960s, in 'a logic of hope ... rooted in the permanent re-reading of past religious and political events and the reactivation of belief and credibility systems, such as the constant reference to the intemporal figure of the "messiah" or founding prophet' (Kouvouama 2002, 154). One century after his prophetic

action and sixty years after the Congo's independence, Kimbangu remains a major figure in the Congolese religious and political landscape.

Simon Kimbangu as an Incarnation of God or a Black Messiah

In Georges Balandier's ([1955] 1970, 418) anthropological reading and analysis of the Belgian colonial archives and beliefs of Kimbanguist believers in the 1950s, Kimbangu appears either as the third person of the Holy Trinity after Jesus and Nzambi a Pungu ('Almighty God' in the Kikongo language) or as the saviour of Blacks, just as Jesus, Buddha, or Muhammad were saviours of their own peoples. It is quite understandable that an oppressed, colonized people should feel the need to shake the yoke, including by miraculous means. Due to his life story and his uncommon mystical experience, Kimbangu was the ideal candidate to be a Black messiah, sent by God to free his fellow Congolese from colonial oppression and, further, to liberate all Black people all over the world. In this sense, the purpose of his movement is inseparable from the Congolese people's self-perception as a colonized people.

Additionally, Kimbangu's messianic action was noticeable as a result of his ability to persuade his followers in relation to aspects of ethics where Catholic and Protestant missionaries had failed. Indeed, he was not only listened to but also obeyed when he told his people to discard their 'fetishes', sacred drums, and suggestive dances; men renounced polygamy, repudiating all but their first wives. A White contemporary, the aforementioned Jesuit Father van Wing, acknowledged this revolution in his 1938 book:

When Simon Kimbangu, once recognized as a saviour by his people, imposed the destruction of the Nkisi, he was obeyed—not just by his conscious followers, but by entire regions which had no direct contacts with either him or his aides. Even before he came, during the Kiyoka movement which started in northern Angola in 1872, all the fetishes had been burned enthusiastically. Yet neither Kimbangu, nor any other leader ever called for an end to ancestor worship. On the contrary, the movement clearly built on ancestor worship, by having the graves cleared of weeds, as well as the paths leading to them. Their resurrections, he said, would bring back the Golden Age. (Van Wing 1938, 168)

Kimbangu's special aura was linked in part to his martyr status; his imprisonment, far from undermining his legacy and the faith of his followers, actually reinforced them. His unfair condemnation was compared with Jesus's passion, even by European observers such as the Belgian lawyer Jules Chomé, who titled his 1959 book *The Passion of Simon Kimbangu*. His death also was portrayed as a form of atonement for the specific sins of Black people, bringing them the redemption which Jesus's cross had apparently failed to secure them. Then, the fulfilment of his [prophecies](#) further propelled the movement forward. Kimbangu had announced a reversal of racial hierarchies, in a preaching style that combined nonviolence and prophetism anchored in faith in Jesus. He portrayed Jesus as the saviour of Blacks as well, not just the God of White people and an imported deity. Among other announcements, he prophesied the building of a huge temple to the glory of Jesus in N'Kamba, his own hometown, asserting that its inauguration would coincide with deep social, political, and spiritual transformation all over the world. The fulfilment of this prophecy occurred sixty years later, with the inauguration on 6 April 1981 of a massive temple in N'Kamba-Jerusalem, seating an estimated thirty-seven thousand people.

In addition to these historical landmarks, Kimbangu's messianic aura is regularly reinforced by the publicized mystical experiences of people who have apparitions of him within and outside the African continent. These apparitions are at the root of the invention of 'Negro-African writing' (a term used by the Kimbanguist church) by David Wabeladio Payi, a Catholic man who converted to Kimbanguism later in life. Kimbangu seems to enjoy complete freedom of choice in the process, for he appears to people regardless of religion, gender, or race. For instance, Kristin Shrader Frechette, a White American physicist, posed kneeling before the portrait of Kimbangu after experiencing apparitions (Mokoko Gampiot 2017). Véronique Kabeya, a Muslim housewife from the DRC whom I interviewed, attributes to Kimbangu her transformation into an expert in herbal medicine; she claims to have cured AIDS, cancer, and other serious conditions in several patients from Africa and Europe (Mokoko Gampiot 2017). The media coverage of these accomplishments contributes to enhancing Kimbangu's messianic status and further anchoring the beliefs of the members of the Kimbanguist church and other religious movements who profess he is the messiah of Black people.

Another major dimension in Kimbangu's messianic status is the existence of inspired hymns, which he inaugurated during his preaching and healing campaign, when challenged by the Baptist missionary Pastor Jennings (1874-1946) in 1921. The latter, seeing that the choir accompanying Kimbangu used the Baptist hymnal, dared him to find a new one in the following terms: 'You say the Lord is working miracles through you; is He incapable of giving you a new repertoire, so that you have to resort to ours?' Instead of answering on the spot, Kimbangu left for a few minutes to pray on his own and came back with a new song he taught his choir. From then on, his followers have had a growing body of songs known as 'inspired hymns', which echo the Bible, either by revealing aspects of its episodes or by interpreting present events or announcing future ones (Mokoko Gampiot 2014). By this means, Kimbangu's message continues to be received by his followers and by many other Black people, and it is said that Black people can only find their salvation in him. In several of these hymns, indeed, Kimbangu is presented as the liberator sent by God for the Black race. This is the case, for example, in the following Kimbanguist hymn in Lingala, where Kimbangu warns Blacks that unless they acknowledge him as a messiah, there will be no redemption for them:

You, Black person God has loved you for a long time.

You, Black skin that God had favoured in this world,

You, Black person, are forgetting the name of Kimbangu!

Wherefore is your salvation?

Chorus:

God has loved you He sent the Holy Spirit.

Today, the promise is accomplished:

he came, clad with a black skin

In this perspective, Kimbangu is both a God whose incarnation was a Black man and a messenger sent by God to liberate the Black race from its double—political and spiritual—oppression. Finally, Kimbangu's messianic legacy is demonstrated in the very existence of the Kimbanguist church, which is presented as the best keeper of his message and has become the instrument that is understood to be used by him to deliver his liberating message to Blacks via dreams and inspired hymns. Although, during his lifetime, Kimbangu never called for the foundation of a church, the religious institution that bears his name—the Church of Jesus-Christ on Earth by His Prophet Simon Kimbangu (EJCSK)—is a material testament to his legacy. It is also the keeper of his uncorrupted body and the legal owner of the sites where he left the prints of his fingers and feet, the courthouse where he was tried, the jail where he served for thirty years, the chains he had to bear, and his personal belongings. Its belief system is based on a Pan-Africanist discourse of which Kimbangu is both the initiator and the messiah. Yet, as a messianic figure, Kimbangu is not confined to the EJCSK; his legacy has left deep influences in the three countries that used to be part of the Kingdom of Kongo, a now-mythicized golden age celebrated in millenarian and apocalyptic beliefs.

Expressions of Mesianic, Millenarian and Apocalyptic Beliefs in Simon Kimbangu's legacy

Kimbangu, the forebear of Congolese independences and Christian revivals in the early 1920s, left a twofold [prophecy](#) concerning the Belgian Congo. Firstly, he prophesied the country's independence, which became a reality on 30 June 1960, nine years after his death. Secondly, he announced the spiritual independence of Blacks, which had to be tied to the future of Congo, as he proclaimed the advent of a king chosen by God to hold three powers—namely, spiritual, scientific, and political. Political leaders seem to have only recently realized the role played by Kimbangu in the Congolese struggles for independence. Kimbangu was awarded the title of national hero in 2010 under the presidency of Joseph Kabila. In July 2011, under the patronage of this same president, an international conference titled 'Simon Kimbangu, the Man, His Work, and His Contribution in the Process of Liberation of Blacks' was organized by Professor Elikia M'Bokolo and held at the Kimbanguist Center in Kinshasa (M'Bokolo and Sabakinu 2014).

While Kimbangu seems to be enjoying a positive image in the Congolese national psyche, his image is also used on an equal footing with those of political figures in popular demonstrations denouncing the party in power. For instance, a 'movement of the combatants' was created in 2006 in the United Kingdom to oust Kabila from power. The movement considered Kabila to be a Rwandan usurper; during protests, they often held placards with the portrait of Kimbangu while chanting nationalist slogans such as 'Kimbangu, arise! It is time to liberate the country from foreign enemies.' Several narratives contend that Kimbangu announced a number of political transformations with his alleged 'prophecy on the four presidents', identifying each of them based on his type of regime and length of time in power.

Yet Kimbangu never saw a liberated Congolese nation during his lifetime, even though he announced decolonization; it is often the glorious, golden-age-like Kingdom of Kongo that appears between the lines of the messianic and [prophetic](#) project attributed to Kimbangu. Indeed, the precursor of this millenarian,

messianic, and apocalyptic project is the seventeenth-century prophetess Kimpa Vita, (1684-1706) who, at the head of her Movement of the Saint Antonians, tried to put an end to Portuguese domination and announced the coming of the Black messiah and the return of prosperity in a unified Kingdom of Kongo (Balandier [1955] 1968; Thornton 1998). This kingdom entails a dual dimension, both political and religious: the three Congolese nations, which used to be a single, vast kingdom in precolonial times, are understood as a world in the making, whose reunification, prophesied by Kimbangu, will be accomplished by a king that he will himself designate and guide from above. The belief in the coming of God's anointed, which is now very popular, was explicitly prophesied by Kimbangu, who, according to Kimbanguist tradition, said that the Congo would be ruled by four successive presidents following independence, and announced that the fourth one would bring prosperity and development to the country, after a period marked by factionalism and robbery. It is difficult to find the authentic source of this prophecy by Kimbangu, but it is very popular and can easily be found on the Internet.

The current politico-religious climate in the DRC reflects the latter part of this [prophecy](#), with a decades-old occupation and warfare in the east, while in Kinshasa, political life is dominated by antagonism between those who keep awaiting the advent of God's anointed as the saviour of the Congo, and those who are themselves candidates for the 'royal throne' announced by Kimbangu. The candidates for the royal throne organized press conferences and interviews while official candidates to the succession of Kabila were campaigning in 2018. Among them are Nowa Amani, Benjamin Kawanga, Élie Nzeza, and Albert Tuzolana. The advent of God's anointed is supposed to be accompanied or preceded by a last ordeal that the Congolese people are supposed to undergo, in the form of an event that is expected to kill many Congolese and shake the world. Prophecies now conveyed on social media (via the airing on YouTube of the Congo Bololo show hosted by Marceline Mido, by Pastor Bobo Koyangbwa, or on EHP Media Kinshasa by Hecky Bumba, all of whom invite people who prophesy on the DRC's future [see video links below]) by evangelical churches as well as independent churches converge around one point—namely, that a major supernatural event will soon occur in the Congo. They echo an inspired hymn from the Kimbanguist church that announced a similar upheaval:

An event, an event

An event is impending

An event will occur in this world

Do not be surprised by it

Solo:

My Kimbangu-ness, I will show it to the world

Yet the world has not known me

I am the one who led the children of Israel

I am the One who drowned Noah's generation

I am the One who destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah

And I am still the One leading this fourth generation [the present time]

Chorus:

Miracles will occur in this world

I would be quite idle if I did not warn you

If I did not announce it to you

Beware (*repeat*)

Hardship and happiness

Will occur all at once.

This inspired hymn from the 1990s is one of many but it illustrates the identity of Kimbangu as disclosed by himself. Here, Kimbangu unambiguously reveals himself to be the God of the Bible. He also announces that history will unfurl again its fabric of hardship and happiness. It is the type of hymn that, along with the prophetic speeches of the leaders, has contributed to maintaining Kimbanguists in a position of expectation of a messianic salvation, itself sustained by eschatological promises whose outcome is happiness for Black people, or more precisely Kimbanguist people. By the late 2010s, this brand of apocalypticism had clearly been embraced by other Congolese churches.

Conclusion

Nowadays in the Congo Basin, Kimbangu is widely recognized and there is wide agreement about his significance, the only disagreements revolving around his status as national hero, [prophet](#), saviour, messiah, or God. Not only did he lay the foundations of Congolese religious revivals and prophetism but he also articulated Congolese apocalypticism and millenarianism as they may be observed in the present-day DRC and Congolese diasporic communities. Kimbangu's prophetic and messianic legacy is thus multidimensional and must be analysed through his actions, teachings, recommendations, political guidelines, and Pan-African ideal. Kimbangu, who certainly was an exceptional figure in many respects, deserves to be studied in the history of the political impact of millenarian prophetism, since his prophecies are so well known that they have now become a steppingstone to strengthen political ideologies in electoral periods. The Congo has therefore become a particularly fertile ground for the study of messianic, millenarian, and apocalyptic narratives.

Further Reading

Anderson, Efraim. 1958. *Messianic Popular Movements in the Lower Congo*. Trans. Donald Burton. Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells.

Martin, Marie-Louise. 1975. *Kimbangu: An African Prophet and His Church*. Trans. D. M. Moore. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Video Sources

'Message ya Kimbangu na Cardinal Mosengo, Emission ya Bazoba Vol. 55' (14 Jan 2018):

'MPBTV - Prophétie choc: Parole de Dieu pour la RDC Bishop Claudio' (14 Nov 2018):

'La prophétesse Rebecca alobi pasi oyo ekoya pona batu basali volonté ya Nzambe te' (9 Mar 2019):

'Prophétesse Rebecca prophétise encore pour le Congo' (20 Feb 2019):

'Botala maman oyo asalaki ba prophéties pona Pdt Félix lelo adimi Komonana na vidéo' (5 Feb 2019):

'Prophète Jonathan apesi explication ya oint de Dieu oyo asengeli a dirige R.D.Congo' (4 Mar 2019):

'Prophéties ebimi na makambo oyo eko salema avant le 31 décembre' (17 Nov 2018):

'Prayer for Felix Tshisekedi' (17 Jan 2019):

References

Balandier, Georges. (1955) 1968. *Daily Life in the Kingdom of the Kongo, from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century*. Trans. Helen Weaver. New York: Pantheon.

Balandier, Georges. (1955) 1970. *Sociology of Black Africa: Social Dynamics in Central Africa*. Trans. Douglas Garman. London: Andre Deutsch.

Braeckman, R.P. 1925. «Le Kibangisme» in *Les Aspirations Indigenes et les Missions, 159-163*. Louvain:

Editions du Museum Lessianum.

Chomé, Jules. 1959. *La Passion de Simon Kimbangu: 1921-1951* [The Passion of Simon Kimbangu: 1921-1951]. Brussels: Les Amis de Présence africaine.

Diangienda Kuntima, Joseph. 1984. *Histoire du Kimbanguisme* [History of Kimbanguism]. Kinshasa: Editions Kimbanguistes/Lausanne: Éditions du Soc.

Kouvouama, Abel. 2002. « Les énoncés du croire dans les messianismes en Afrique », *Rue Descartes*, 2002/2 (n° 36), 151-66. DOI : 10.3917/rdes.036.0151. URL : <https://www.cairn.info/revue-rue-descartes-2002-2-page-151.htm>

M'Bokolo, Elikia and Jacob Kivilu Sabakinu. 2014. *Simon Kimbangu le prophète de la libération de l'homme noir* [Simon Kimbangu the Prophet of Black Liberation]. 2 vols. Paris: L'Harmattan.

Mokoko Gampiot, Aurélien. 2014. 'Inspired Hymns as a Belief System in the Kimbanguist Church: A Revelation of the Meaning of Blackness.' In *Churches, Blackness, and Contested Multiculturalism in Europe, North America, and South Africa*, edited by R. Drew Smith, William Ackah, and Anthony G. Reggie, 217-34. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Mokoko Gampiot, Aurélien. 2017. *Kimbanguism: An African Understanding of the Bible*. University Park: Pennsylvania University Press.

Sinda, Martial. 1972. *Le Messianisme congolais et ses incidences politiques* [Congolese Messianism and its Political Implications]. Paris: Payot.

Thornton, John. 1998. *The Kongolesse Saint Anthony, Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Saint Antonian Movement, 1684-1706*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Van Wing, Jan. 1938. *Études Bakongo II: Magie, sorcellerie et religion* [Bakongo II Studies: Magic, Sorcery and Religion]. Brussels: Librairie Falk fils.

© Aurélien Mokoko Gampiot 2021

Note

Updated 31 January 2021.

Article information

Aurélien Mokoko Gampiot. 2021. "Simon Kimbangu." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.) *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. 15 January 2021. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/simon-kimbangu.

Downloaded: 2021-10-02

Provided under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0