

Religious Pluralism and the limits of Ecumenism in Mbanza Kongo, Angola¹

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Ecumenism has been a constant effort of many Christian agents in war-torn Angola ever since the 1960s, and certainly in the reconciliation initiatives that have taken place since the end of the war in 2002. Today, ecumenism is a structuring concept in the new law of religious freedom, which stipulates that in order for religions to be legal, they must belong to an 'Ecumenical Platform'. Yet, in the Northern parts of Angola Bakongo people remember too well how strongly allied Christianity has been with oppressive forms of power since the arrival of Diogo Cão five centuries ago, and especially since the martyrdom of Kimpa Vita in 1706. The local cosmology and an acute sense of historical resentment have created a strong resistance to any form of Christian ecumenism, especially so among the thousands of exiled Bakongo who are returning to the country coming from the neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo, where they explored their Kongo, rather than their Portuguese, roots. Thanks to these returnees Kongo religious institutions, some officially banned by Angolan laws, are being visibly revitalized and spread among local people to whom Christianity and ecumenism have little to offer beyond memories of suffering and oppression. How far grassroots ecumenism may be possible among these Kongo religious institutions themselves remains uncertain.

Keywords: religious pluralism, Ecumenical Platform, charismatic prophets, revitalization movements, problematic belonging

Introduction

Ever since the anti-colonial war in Angola started in 1961, the country has experienced a succession of violent wars, divided into two overlapping ones: the anti-colonial war bringing together three indigenous political parties (FNLA, MPLA and UNITA) against the Portuguese colonialists (1961-1974) and the Civil War (1975-2002) among the parties themselves, especially between UNITA and the MPLA, once the country became independent in 1975.² The place of religions in the wars has been analyzed by many authors,³ but they have not fully analyzed the many conscious efforts at creating ecumenical encounters between religious groups during or between wars. My own analysis in this article addresses the shortcomings in the literature, and it brings into a fresh perspective the political importance

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² It is difficult to say when the civil war started, as violence between MPLA and the other two groups had already been occurring before the end of the anti-colonial war.

³ C. Messiant, 'Les églises angolaises dans la guerre', in *L'Angola postcolonial. Vol 1: guerre et paix sans démocratisation* (Paris, Karthala, 2008), pp. 303-324. See also B. Schubert, *A guerra e as igrejas: Angola 1961-1991* (Basel, P. Schlettwein, 2000; Original German edition, 1997).

in today's political and religious spheres that certain emerging institutions have, namely the institutions now called 'Ecumenical Platforms'. No matter how well-intended and organized ecumenical initiatives may have been, there are very deep roots in Angolan cosmologies and histories that make ecumenism a very difficult endeavour. Worse still, as a consequence, agents of ecumenism are perceived as unreliable, if not utterly feared or rejected.

This article is an analysis of the conditions under which such rejection becomes possible. My account focuses on Northern Angola, which harbours the capital of the ancient Kingdom of Kongo, and which incorporates the spiritual inheritance of historical Kongo prophets (*bangunza bakongo*). 'Prophets' is the term I use to translate the Kikongo concept of *bangunza* (sing. *ngunza*). I intend to show that the religious culture in the Kikongo-speaking part of Northern Angola is particularly fragile in ecumenical terms. Many of the individuals I am referring to ended their lives in prison or had tragic deaths at the hands of colonial forces in either the Belgian Congo or Portuguese Angola. Prophets are remembered, in worship and in popular culture (songs, paintings, objects, etc.), as having articulated a struggle against Western oppression. It is an oppression whose main actors are very often perceived to have been allied with Christianity. Historically speaking, many of these *bangunza* were indeed 'prophets of rebellion', as Michael Adas calls them, and they have been the object of some of the most significant work on African prophecy and its political entanglements.⁴ Significantly, the leaders of churches based on the historical *bangunza* are also considered *bangunza*, and in some cases, they are perceived to be the current reincarnation of historical *bangunza*.

The Problem of Belonging and the Role of Christian Religion

Belonging is now very problematic in postcolonial and postwar Angola. The difficulty is especially pressing for certain Bakongo in the north of Angola, given the particular perspective they have on the Angolan past. Most of these Bakongo are, in fact, returnees from the Democratic Republic of Congo, where they lived during the war. They are often marginalized by political elites and by members of both the MPLA, the state party, and UNITA, the main opposition party. They are very often looked down upon by people of the capital, Luanda, and many do not see themselves and Luanda people as belonging to the same political and spiritual community. In order to understand their sense of exclusion, we need to reassess the entanglement of history and religion and the part Bakongo played in the making of the nation.

The role of Christian religion in the origins of the post-colonial Angola is easily seen. The three movements - the UPNA, later called UPA (*União dos Povos de Angola*) and finally FNLA, UNITA, and the MPLA- that started the anti-colonial war in the early 1960s had Protestant roots. Of the founders and leaders of these movements, Holden Roberto (FNLA)

⁴ 'Prophets of rebellion' is the title of the classic cross-cultural study on anti-colonial prophets by Michael Adas (*Prophets of Rebellion: Millenarian Protest Movements against the European Colonial Order*, The University of North Carolina University Press, 1979). Despite its title, however, this study did not attribute real political effects to the prophets considered (none, in any case, from the Kongo region). Instead, Adas sees their ritual activities as symbolic and expressive rather than instrumental. Georges Balandier gives a more positive reading of the effective anti-colonial political activity of prophets and their churches in his *Sociologie de l'Afrique Noire* (Paris, PUF, 1955). Many of Balandier's examples come, precisely, from Kongo regions.

was trained in the Baptist church and was the nephew of a pastor; Jonas Savimbi (UNITA), was a son of a Congregationalist secular leader, and Agostinho Neto (MPLA), the first president of the nation, was the son of a Methodist preacher, although later he embraced an atheist socialism. None of them was Catholic. Neto famously announced, in 1977, that in fifty years Angola would have no religion whatsoever.

The anti-colonial war has sometimes somewhat problematically been called a 'Protestant vs Catholic' conflict, because the Portuguese colonialists were largely Catholic, and openly anti-Protestant.⁵ This perception, common in the days of the war, was strengthened by obvious political facts: Portugal was a dictatorship and the Catholic Church was aligned with it. It is a perception that lingers in today's religious culture and memory, and it is so troubling that some Catholics are proposing to make a martyr out of Father Angelo Graziani, an Italian Catholic (Capuchin) priest killed the day the anti-colonial war started, on 15 March 1961.

If, admittedly, there is some historical truth in the Catholic vs Protestant opposition in colonial Angola, then it has to be qualified in two senses. Firstly, many members of the early anti-colonial movements I have interviewed were Catholic. They fought fiercely against colonialism side by side with Baptists. These Catholic fighters include the commander of the UPA who on 15 March 1961 led the unsuccessful attack against São Salvador (today's Mbanza Kongo), the capital of the province where the war started. Secondly, some Catholic fathers, either Portuguese or Angolan, supported the anti-colonial parties. The Mestizo priest Manuel de Neves, who sympathized with the UPA (and later with the MPLA too), was imprisoned by the Portuguese and died in exile in Braga. Another priest, the Portuguese Fernando Santos Neves, wrote the first book on ecumenism in Angola, a book apprehended by the PIDE (political police) before it went to print.⁶ The Angolan Father Fernando Pinto de Andrade, brother of Mario Pinto de Andrade (the founder of the MPLA), was an active member of the party from the early 1960s.⁷

The strict opposition between liberating Protestant versus oppressive Catholics during the anti-colonial war needs therefore to be qualified. We must also be wary of recent efforts by Angolan Catholics to make the most of a putative anti-colonial aspect of the Catholic church in the 1950s or 1960s. There were some Catholic voices of dissent, and imprisonment of Catholic activists was widespread. Nevertheless, the Roman Church more often than not oppressed, rather than liberated, African subjects. Besides, in many parts of Angola, and especially in the Kongo regions of the North, from the arrival of the Catholic Church in the 15th Century, the church had been a supporter of the local kings, who were

⁵ Catholicism was of course as old as the arrival of the Portuguese on the coast of Angola in the 15th century. Although a bit dated, the most detailed overviews of the history of the Catholic Church in Angola are still M.N. Gabriel, *Angola: cinco séculos de cristianismo* (Braga, Literal, 1978) and E. A. Macua, *Breve história da evangelização de Angola* (Luanda, CEAST, 2001).

⁶ A. F. Santos Neves, *Ecumenismo em Angola: do ecumenismo cristão ao ecumenismo universal* (Nova Lisboa, Coloquios, 1968).

⁷ The most thorough account of persecution of Catholic priests for their involvement in anti-colonial movements is the recent study by C. A. Alves, *Esperar pela hora de Deus: nove sacerdotes angolanos exilados em Portugal* (Luanda, Mayamba, 2015). See also the earlier study by M. Gonçalves, *Angola: reconciliação e paz em perspectiva cristã* (Luanda, CEAST, 1995), and the 'appendix' by M. Gonçalves to T. Neves, *Angola: justiça e paz nas intervenções da Igreja Católica 1989-2002* (Luanda, Texto Editores, 2013).

often Catholic. Through these Catholic kings colonial rule was later channeled, and they were often incredibly despotic.⁸ Bakongo opposed them in many resistance movements. The most famous is the revolt, led by Alvaro Buta in 1913, against the King for his involvement in forced labour and forced displacement. The revolt ended up opposing Baptists who supported the rebels, against Catholic supporters of the King.⁹ In colonial times, the Catholic church was perceived by non-Catholic natives as the legitimizer of a whole order of oppression; it legitimized the Portuguese colonialists and their unfair forced labour and other injustices, and it also legitimized the kings and the local channels through which unfair policies were implemented. This perception, which in the North was no doubt reinforced by Baptists, still lingers in post-colonial rural Angola.

From Polarized Christianity to Proliferating Churches

The entanglements of churches, the Marxist Leninist ideology of the MPLA and the civil war have been the focus of several studies. There is solid research on ecumenical initiatives and their role in creating peace and conflict resolution, in particular in the 1990s and in the early 2000s, when the war was definitely over.¹⁰ The ethnographic situation we find in postwar Angola is one of an increasing proliferation of religious movements, indeed a spiritual 'boom' (especially in urban areas) that contrasts with the country's past, both the bipolar Catholic-Protestant situation during the anti-colonial war and also the atheistic Marxist-Leninist approach of the late 1970s. The confusing abundance of religious institutions actually started before the end of the war, in the mid-1990s, after the first attempt at ceasefire (1992). It reached a peak ten years later, upon the definitive end of the war in 2002. Its legal regulation has depended on a combined action between INAR (the National Institute of Religious Affairs, at the Ministry of Culture) and the Ministry of Justice. According to Professor Fatima Viegas, formerly the director of INAR and a prominent researcher on religious pluralism in Luanda,¹¹ there are today 81 legalized churches or religious institutions, and somewhere

⁸ By 'Kongo regions of the north', I mean the Kikongo-speaking provinces neighbouring the Democratic Republic of Congo that once constituted the 'Congo Português' and which, in a much more distant past, were the central part of the Kingdom of Kongo. Today they comprise two provinces: Uige and Zaire.

⁹ For a very detailed account of the social conditions that led to the rebellious movement, see J. Vos, *Kongo in the Age of Empire 1860-1913: The Breakdown of a Moral Order* (Madison, Wisconsin University Press 2015).

¹⁰ T. Neves, *Angola: justiça e paz....* offers a good account of the role of the Catholic church in the immediate period after the war, and so does, with a focus on reconciliation initiatives, M.J. Chaves, *O papel da Igreja no pós-guerra civil em Angola*, Anápolis, Transcultural, 2008). For the delicate position of the same institution during the war, see A. Vela Ngaba, *Angola: a voz profética dos bispos da CEAST (1975-2002): uma antropologia teológica para a educação para a paz* (Mbanza Kongo, Sedieca, 2008).

¹¹ F. Viegas 'Panorâmica das religiões em Angola pós-colonial', *Religiões e Estudos* (2008), pp. 11-35, and 'Igreja e conflitos em Angola', in B. de Sousa Santos and J. O. S. van Dunen (eds), *Sociedade e estado em construção: desafios do direito e da democracia em Angola* (Coimbra, Almedina and CES, 2012), pp 497-526.

between 1200 and 1700, non-legalized ones, including huge numbers of Angolan Muslims.¹² In Angola now, a church can be legal only if it reaches 100,000 members. The ruling party, in collaboration with INAR and the Ministry of Justice, seeks to force illegal churches to create certain Ecumenical Platforms. Each such Platform groups churches with similar doctrines, thus making it possible to reach the 100,000 threshold of legalization. Four Ecumenical Platforms have been already authorized. All of them are led by Christian pastors, and all are quite explicitly pro-MPLA, at least according to their own pronouncements. A new law of religious freedom is being discussed as this article is written, which, among other things, proposes to downsize the legality threshold to 60,000 members. I think this is still a very unrealistic number; it is too much for many tiny religious groups. It is likely that new Ecumenical Platforms may emerge in the immediate future. Small churches will disappear or remain illegal unless they find partners with whom to create a platform and reach 60,000 members.

New Non-Christian and Anti-Christian Churches

A significant stumbling block comes from the fact that some religious institutions which are churches are distinctively and professedly not Christian. The Ecumenical Platforms initiative is welcomed by churches considered Christian. However, many others, including churches that are explicitly anti-Christian, find it very difficult to join Christian churches in existing platforms. Given their difference from recognizably Christian churches, these other churches confront a religious peril. It is the pressure to be dominated, against their ability to express their distinctive beliefs, rituals and doctrines, in terms that resonate with the strong Christian connotations of the governmental language used in the phrasing of the ecumenical platforms and in the draft of the proposed law of religious freedom. I base my view upon, among other things, my access in September 2016 to that draft. Even further, 'ecumenism' is not a concept that is neutral in the eyes of everybody, or even all Christians. I have interviewed members of some Evangelical movements who, despite their undeniable Christian identification, would never want to participate in an activity that has the word 'ecumenical' or ecumenism in it. 'Ecumenism is a snare of the Catholic Church to capture us', I was told by the pastor of a Pentecostal church in November 2014 in Mbanza Kongo. Leaders of other churches were equally explicit in their apprehensions.

As is well known, the Catholic church invested in ecumenical activities and discourses in the post Vatican II 1960s. It was an attempt to reach conviviality with Protestants. In the early post-council days, however, Angolan (i.e. Portuguese) Catholics and Protestants were fighting against each other, and even the World Council of Churches was perceived as suspect by the Portuguese colonizers.¹³ Ecumenism was sought after, sometimes by Catholic priests who disliked Portuguese official directions, under very difficult conditions. From the Catholic side, the most compelling description of the difficulties are the testimonial pages of Francisco de Mata Mourisca, a Portuguese missionary who became bishop of Uige and who has

¹² Viegas, Personal Communication, September 2016.

¹³ L. Henderson, *A Igreja em Angola* (Lisbon, Além-Mar, 1990), offers the best available written account, based on a very intense personal involvement as a Protestant missionary, of how suspicious Portuguese authorities were vis-à-vis Protestant missions and the World Council of Churches.

authored invaluable first-hand accounts of ecumenical activities in the northern parts of Angola.¹⁴ His question has always been the same: would it be ever possible to attain ecumenism and, through it, to secure peace in the country? Mourisca offers very moving examples of how the initiatives helped people cope with the two long wars, to bypass situations of hunger and to minimize the separations along religious lines. But it is obvious to me that, still today, they fail, and that they fail especially in the northern part of the country.

Priests and *Bangunza*: The Religious Landscape of Mbanza Kongo

In the Kikongo-speaking regions of the north, bordering the Democratic Republic of Congo, many religious institutions based on understandings of Kongo history and cosmology are theologically opposed to Christianity and reluctant to open a dialogue with Christian agents, and vice versa. We must here take into account that, because of the horrible wars, especially the anti-colonial one, which were particularly acute in those regions, the northern Angola provinces became almost entirely uninhabited between 1961 and 1974. Although exiled people returned in 1975, the immediate civil war again provoked a massive flight to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and the northern provinces were again largely, though not entirely, depopulated between 1975 and 1993.

In the war periods, the inhabitants went to their relatives and were incorporated into kinship networks in the DRC. They were never regarded as national citizens there, however. An initial return to Angola in 1993, upon the first peace agreements, was thwarted by the violent return of the war in the Northern regions in 1999. More exiles started to return to Angola in the mid 2000s, either with help from international organizations or by their own means. Sadly, once in Angola they were regarded with suspicion and mistrust. Today, many thousands of Bakongo find themselves in a liminal position in which they are neither Angolan nor Congolese. What becomes very appealing to these individuals is the imagery of the Kingdom of Kongo and of its restoration, channeled through the messianic churches led by *bangunza*.

In the postwar conditions of today, when many Bakongo, attracted to messianic, non-Christian churches, are repopulating their region, we witness a clash of spiritual and national imaginaries. Bakongo are suffering from a political and religious campaign to spread the image of the Angolan nation, based on Christian political theology and values. The intent is subjection, in which Christian ideas are meant to dominate all the spaces and subjectivities of the national territory. Members of Christian churches try by all possible means to secure alliances with the MPLA. Very often, returnees from the DRC are given a party membership card before they are given a national ID.

Despite such efforts, or indeed as a reaction to them, many Bakongo individuals are much more moved by images of a Lost Kingdom, the kingdom of Kongo, than by empty discourses of common *Angolanidade* ('Angolaness'). After all, many of their parents most likely fought in the UPA/FNLA and not in the MPLA, and they very likely grew up in the DRC and not in Angola. Prophets are particularly adept, either through verbal or indeed artistic means, at creating Lost Kingdom images. They are very skillful in moving people's historical

¹⁴ F. de M. Mourisca *Angola: escândalo da paz* (Luanda, Gráfica Luz, 2001) and *Católicos e protestantes na aventura da unidade* (Uije, Sedipu, 2008).

imagination and emotions through such images. Even further, to make the clash head-on, many of the prophets present the idealized Kingdom as having been perverted, or morally destroyed, by Christianity. Using the concept of *oikumene* as it has been often invoked in cultural anthropology to refer to areas of vivid cultural exchange and ethnogenesis,¹⁵ we could perhaps claim that the Kikongo-speaking regions constitute indeed an *oikumene*, but one which is acutely distinguished by opposition to the alternative unity. That is, it is marked apart by resistance to being absorbed by another *oikumene*, and especially any one that is proposed by Catholic and Protestant churches or by the state structures. Moments of negotiation do occur, but so too is fierce opposition sustained.

The ancient capital of the Kingdom of Kongo, Mbanza Kongo, situated in the Zaire province of today's Angola, is home to one of the oldest Catholic temples in Sub-Saharan Africa. The temple, called Kulumbimbi, has its magnificent ruins in the centre of town, and it helped Mbanza Kongo to acquire the status of a UNESCO world-heritage site in 2017. Mbanza Kongo itself is a place where, as far as religious encounters go, history 'went wrong', to use an expression I often heard in interviews, and must be 'repaired'. The town has been the locus of a very strong and violent opposition between Baptist and Catholic communities since the 20th century. In colonial days, when the Baptists became strongly involved in anticolonial clandestine operations, the opposition was inscribed in the topography. The city of São Salvador was divided into Catholic and Protestant quarters, and people of one religion would not even dare to walk in the 'wrong' quarter, as many elderly interviewees still remember. The religious division was dangerous, when the guerrilla war was started on 15 March 1961 by people, trained in the then Republic of Congo, who penetrated the bush close to São Salvador. Baptists were regarded by the authorities as being accomplices of the anti-colonial movement, whereas rebels tended to see Catholicism as the religion of the oppressor, even if many members of the anti-colonial movement UPA were Catholic. As a consequence, by the mid-1960s the Baptist community in the city had severely diminished. Most Baptists had gone to the neighbouring Republic of Congo in search of refuge. The Catholic community, in contrast, became stronger and stronger, and the Catholic cathedral itself often became a place of refuge for people escaping the violent attacks of the UPA rebels.¹⁶ Because it was in the Republic of Congo that the UPA was being organized and trained, the displacement of Baptists to that new independent country reinforced the perception among Portuguese Catholics that Baptists and UPA were operating together. British Baptist missionaries were officially expelled from the colony in 1966.

The 1960s Baptist and Catholic disagreements were but the tip of a much deeper conflict. The religious history of Mbanza Kongo has been a violent one for a very long time. In the beginning of the 18th century, Kimpa Vita, a well-known Kongo prophetess, was burnt

¹⁵ See, for instance Sidney Mintz' description of the Caribbean as an *oikumene* (Mintz, S. 'Enduring Substances, Trying Theories: the Caribbean as Oikumene', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 2(2): 289-311, 1996), or, closer to my field site, Igor Kopytoff's work on the Cameroonian Grassfields as an *oikumene* ('Aghem Ethnogenesis and the Grassfields Ecumene' in C. Tardits, *Contribution de la Recherche Ethologique à l'Histoire des Civilisations du Cameroun*, Paris, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1981). It is rather surprising that the anthropological literature on *oikumene* and the Christian church literature on ecumenism never meet, and that while the former focuses on cultural exchange, the latter focuses on the religious and institutional.

¹⁶ L. Henderson, *A Igreja...* p. 112.

alive after an inquisitorial trial, partly provoked by Catholic intrigue and partly by Kongo royal disputes (though today a lot of non-Catholic people in Mbanza Kongo put the lion's share of the blame on the Catholic agents).¹⁷ The notion that things 'went wrong' in the Catholic and Kongo encounter is pervasive. It is at the heart of a general lack of understanding between Catholics and non-Catholic communities. For instance, when I inquired about the murder of the above-mentioned Catholic Father Angelo Graziani, an old Baptist man told me that we must understand that Catholics had started killing Kongo people a long time ago. Furthermore, he told me, the resentment against Catholics was very strong in the 1960s, when colonized people were very tired of oppression, forced labour, taxation, and humiliation by Catholic Portuguese. He added that part of the resentment was due to the fact that Bakongo were not able to vote for the King they wanted, but were forced to accept the one sanctioned by the Roman church and the colonial ruler. Although we were talking of the early 1960s, the old man also brought into the conversation the killing of Kimpa Vita, which had happened almost three hundred years earlier.

Catholics have tried to make amends, for instance by having the pope John Paul II pray in Kulumbimbi in 1993. The non-Catholic local populations are not satisfied, however. Kimpa Vita is used as a strong symbol of resentment against the Catholic church. In my view, the Catholic church deals clumsily with their complicity in Kimpa Vita's death. Academics and researchers organize conferences, year after year, on Kimpa Vita in efforts to dignify her, to , to remind the Angolan publics that, whatever her religious beliefs were, she was a proto-nationalist heroine and martyr. Nevertheless, it is still common today to hear local Catholics in Mbanza Kongo, including priests, claim that Kimpa Vita was killed because, quite plainly, she was a 'sorceress', as a Catholic father in Mbanza Kongo told me in August 2016.

While from a historiographical point of view Kimpa Vita's deeds cannot be understood outside the Christian religious culture of her days, and while historians seem to agree that she was indeed a member of the Christian faith, the common understanding among many Bakongo interviewees in and around Mbanza Kongo is that she was not a Christian, even if she was baptized as Beatriz. Contrary to the historical scholarship, Bakongo now claim that she was a prophetess of Nzambi Mpungu Tulendo, the high God shared by many religious groups in the culture area, and that she was killed because of that.

The list of *bangunza bakongo*, starting with Kimpa Vita, would include, among a very long series of names, that of the famous Simon Kimbangu, who spent 30 years in prison in the Belgian Congo (1921-1951). For many Bakongo there exists a direct connection, sometimes expressed in matrilineal idioms, between Kimpa Vita and Simon Kimbangu. While Kimpa Vita and Kimbangu are the two most important *bangunza*, they are not the only ones. Many other prophets were also prosecuted and taken to jail by either Portuguese, Belgian, or French colonialists in the Kongo regions; the list includes Simon Mpadi, Simon Lassa, André Matsua, Mabwaka, Simão Toko, Tata Wonda, and many others.¹⁸

¹⁷ J. K. Thornton, *The Kongoese Saint Anthony: Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Antonian Movement 1680-1706*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1998).

¹⁸ The list of rebellious-prophetic agents who created political upheaval in Kikongo-speaking areas of French, Belgian and Portuguese areas is enormous and still poorly known by researchers. A very good study of the most important ones and of their context is the now classic, M. Sinda, *Le messianisme congolais* (Paris, Payot, 1972). W. MacGaffey, in his equally classic *Modern Kongo Prophets* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press 1983) offered a compelling analysis of how the

Theology and the Anti-ecumenical Persecution of Prophets

In my opinion, it was mostly for a political reason that these prophets were so fiercely prosecuted. The fear was that they could mobilize colonized subjects against the colonizing agents who provoked the repressions against the movements the prophets were charismatically creating.

More important than my own opinion is that of my religious interlocutors. For them, the colonizers were so driven into anti-prophetic frenzy by a theological, not a political motive. The despised theology was that of Nzambi Mpungu Tulendo, also referred to, by many of the *bangunza* I interviewed, as 'the God of the Africans'. The prophets were and are his. Serving the God of the Africans, and thus having a theological motive which they knew the colonizers hated, they engaged in revitalization. They were trying to revitalize the belief and the ritual linked to the God of the Africans. Even more, their religious duty was to remind local people that they were *African* and should be proud of being so, instead of becoming imitators of White people and believers in the White People's God.

There is a perceived crisis of memory, and it has a deep theological significance for Bakongo. The colonizers are seen to have been dangerously successful at making African people *forget* that they had knowledge of any form of High God. Kimpa Vita, Mafuta, Andre Matsua, Simon Mpadi, Simon Kimbangu, Mabwaka, Tata Wonda, and many other anti-colonial prophets, are now thought to have been struggling against such forgetfulness. They were *reminders*, not reformers, it now seems. To put it even more strongly, according to many of my interviewees, their memories and their legacies were corrupted by Catholic or Protestant hegemonic views, which managed to present them as *reformers*, not reminders, and as having been Christian, not traditionalists.

An example is helpful. A pastor of the Bundu-dia-Kongo (henceforth BDK), one of today's most important prophetic churches,¹⁹ once asked me, in November 2014,

Do you think Simon Kimbangu was a Christian, as they say? Nonsense! If he had been a Christian, they would not have sent him to prison for 30 years. They sent him to prison, because he wanted people to pray to the African God and not the God of the Christians! This is why we pray to Kimbangu now'.

The historical content of such claim making is very complex. The quotation merely gives the gist of that opposition between the *bangunza* Bakongo and Christianity which so thoroughly pervades much of the public religious sphere in Mbanza Kongo. Admittedly, today thousands, if not millions of Bakongo and other ethnicities, consider that questioning Simon Kimbangu's Christianity is a very grave insult. Certainly, this defensive attitude holds strongly among those who belong to the Church of Jesus Christ on Earth by his Special Envoy Simon Kimbangu, a Christian institution that was inducted into the World Ecumenical Council in 1966. Nevertheless, Kimbangu has become a bone of contention in

different prophetic movements in the Kikongo areas of the DRC (or Zaire in his days) had to be analyzed together, as they only made full sense when seen in structural relation to each other, a methodological suggestion I take very seriously. The most updated analysis of the movements led by *bangunza* in the Democratic Republic of Congo is Y. Covington-Ward, *Gesture and Power: Religion, Nationalism and Everyday Performance in Congo* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2016).

¹⁹ It was founded by Ne Mwana Semi, who resides in Kinshasa.

historical interpretations. It seems that many Bakongo think of him as a Christian agent and his teachings as a product of Baptist training. But against that, many other Bakongo, indeed, several thousands of them across the border, consider that he was a *ngunza*, and not a Christian convert. They blame the official Kimbanguist Church itself for having perverted the historical importance of the *ngunza* by Christianizing him.

Members of churches based on the learning of the *bangunza* very often blame Christian churches, including that of Kimbangu, for having destroyed Kongo culture and perverted Kongo cultural inheritance. 'Christianity is our enemy', I was told by another BDK interviewee, and similar phrases were obtained in many of my interviews and conversations with religious leaders of local churches. 'The Bible is our enemy', the leader of another church said.

However, things are more complicated than a strict opposition between institutions - Christian priests and pastors versus traditional *bangunza* would allow us to think. In fact, several of today's *bangunza* incorporate in their theology Christ together with historical *bangunza* and Kongo cosmological ideas. They see themselves and their followers, therefore, as Christian. Needless to say, these individuals and their followers do not subscribe to the 'Christianity is our enemy' kind of statements of the BDK and of some other churches. But some other *bangunza*-led churches do express themselves in terms that very clearly blame Christianity for the destruction of Kongo culture.

A Wide Spectrum of Churches

There is therefore a very wide spectrum. At the one extreme, we find churches like the Catholic and the mainstream Protestant churches, and at the other extreme, movements that explicitly reject Christianity and are led by *bangunza*, such as the BDK and many others. Many positions are in between the extremes, and we should avoid too narrow definitions of either Christianity or of *ngunza* in order to capture the dynamics and positionality of the solutions. Censuses and 'ecumenical platforms', however, do not help, as they are forcing people to harden self-definitions and perceptions of what is and what is not Christianity or tradition.

For Mbanza Kongo, a 2016 census listed more than 70 churches, many of which have numerous parishes. On the Christian side, as well as a huge diocese, there are several congregations of Catholics, of which the Capuchin is the oldest and biggest; there are several Protestant churches, of which the Baptist is the biggest, but there are also Methodists, Congregationalists, Jehovah Witnesses, several Pentecostal churches, such as the Assemblies of God, and many recent Neo-Pentecostal churches arriving from either Brazil (such as the Universal Church or the Kingdom of God(UCKG)), which has recently built a massive temple) or from Kinshasa, the capital of a country situated only 60 kilometers from Mbanza Kongo.

The Church of Jesus Christ on Earth by his Special Envoy Simon Kimbangu, otherwise known as Kimbanguism, occupies a special place in the middle of the religious spectrum. This is undoubtedly a church with a self-perception of being Christian, though this is a claim often contested by other Christians and even by some international observers, to the point that the position of the Church within the World Council is today in peril. It originated in the Belgian Congo through the prophetic activities of Simon Kimbangu in Lower Congo, but it boasts a very long tradition in Angola, probably dating back to 1921. It is today fiercely divided in two wings along theological lines. One wing consists of those who believe that

Simon Kimbangu's oldest grandson, also called Simon Kimbangu (born in 1951), is the Paraclete announced by Jesus Christ in John's Gospel (John 14:15-27). Another wing considers that this succession of charisma is not true, and that all the grandchildren of Kimbangu should be considered as equally holy.²⁰

In numerical terms, Kimbanguism is followed in size by Tokoists, followers of the Christian reformer Simão Toko. They, too, consider themselves Christian, but we need take into account that, Simão Toko is, like Kimbangu, considered a Kongo *ngunza* by many other local churches, who do not see him as a Christian at all and who will give you a very different biography of Toko to the one you would obtain within the official Tokoist church.²¹ Like Kimbanguists, Tokoists have their roots in Baptism (Toko himself was originally a Baptist). Both Kimbanguism and Tokoism are original syntheses of the Kongo religious imagination, successfully bringing charismatic historical figures considered by local people as *bangunza* (Simon Kimbangu and Simão Toko) together with Christian theology and history, and mixing the spirit of Kongo cosmology (*mpeve*) with the Holy Ghost of the Christian faith (*mpeve anlongo*). In the Kimbanguist case, with the figure of the Paraclete too. But despite Kimbanguism and Tokoism being very numerous churches and being extremely influential in local administration and national politics, they remain in fact a rare phenomenon. Churches founded by *bangunza* or using the name of a historical *ngunza* in their denomination²² would not be accepted on any ecumenical platform, as they do not see themselves as Christian and are not perceived as such by others.

Most of the churches based on *bangunza* have arrived in Angola in the last 20 years, brought by returnees coming from the Democratic Republic of Congo. The biggest and more solidly established ones include the Mpadists, who, in Mbanza Kongo, are led by a female priest, herself also born in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the above-mentioned BDK, which so far remains illegal in Angola. It is held to be 'politically subversive', a state agent told me in 2016. Indeed, both in the Democratic Republic of Congo and in Angola, the BDK under the leadership of the very charismatic Ne Mwana Semi, based in Kinshasa, is accredited to struggle for the restoration of the Kingdom of Kongo. Members of the church are quite reluctant to accept strangers in their worship, which lasts for several hours and consists of spiritual ecstasy and drumming, accompanied by long readings of the *Kekongo*. This sacred book contains the history of the *bangunza* in terms which contradict much of the historical knowledge one normally reads about them. In particular prophets like Kimpa

²⁰ Ever since the days of studies by Sinda, *Le messianisme*, Balandier, *Sociologie*, and MacGaffey, *Modern Kongo*, among many others, Kimbanguism has been, by and large, the best studied prophetic movement in colonial and postcolonial Africa, and Simon Kimbangu the most commented upon anti-colonial prophet of Christian inspiration. For a recent collection of studies, see E. M'Bokolo and K. Sabakinu (eds), *Simon Kimbangu: le prophète de la libération de l'homme noir*, (Paris, L'Harmattan, 2015). However, Angolan Kimbanguism is still largely understudied. A preliminary attempt at describing its current shape, with special emphasis on the schism, is R. Sarró, R. Blanes and F. Viegas, 'la guerre dans la paix: ethnicité et angolité dans l'église Kimbanguiste de Luanda' *Politique Africaine*, 110 (2008), pp. 84-101.

²¹ For the biography of Simão Toko and its contested interpretations, see the study of R. Blanes, *A Prophetic Trajectory: Ideologies of Place, Time and Belonging in an Angolan Religious Movement*, (Oxford and New York, Berghahn, 2013).

²² A case in point would be the Angolan 'Church of Kimpa Vita'.

Vita, Simon Kimbangu, Mpadu, and others appear in the *Kekongo* systematically as victims of Christian proselytism and never as Christian agents themselves.²³ BDK are politically persecuted on both sides of the border DRC-Angola. In my interviews with BDK members, however, it appeared clear that for many BDKists the putative restoration of the Kingdom is more eschatological than political, and I felt that political suspicion against them could in fact feed into their radicalization, rather than open a dialogue with them.

BDK and the Mpadists, also known as 'The Church of Black People in Africa', are the bigger churches led by *ngunza*. The latter is now legal, but its theology is hardly different from BDK's. It is equally restorative vis-à-vis the Kingdom, and equally distant from Christianity, to the point that they consider that Jesus is the saviour of the Whites, but not of the Africans. Together with these two major churches, there are many smaller prophetic churches, normally called *mpeve anlongo*. This term covers a concept normally translated as 'holy spirit', though it could also be translated as 'healing spirit'.²⁴ Some of these churches are tiny, and they all share many theological tenets with the Mpadist Church and the BDK.

In good measure, it is difficult for the observer to distinguish the differences among them.²⁵ To start with, they all give centrality to *mpeve*, God's spirit, and they all value the capacity of some people to be visited in their bodies and minds either by *mpeve* itself or by the historical *bangunza*. Their services, held on Wednesdays, become ecstatic feasts in which, to the rhythm of two drums and metal instruments and clappers, people get seized by the spirit or *bangunza*. Sometimes, also, they are seized by the *bakulu*, the ancestors of their own clan. Important in the paraphernalia are the images of the historical *bangunza*, painted by local artists who may or may not belong to the church at stake. Church goers must pray in front of these images in order for the spirit of the *ngunza* to enter their body. When this happens, they start to speak in tongues and shake their heads. I have seen people visited by several *bangunza* at the same time, and reproducing in their glossolalia conversations between Kimbangu and Kimpa Vita. Among the many churches considered as *mpeve anlongo*, one could single out churches known by their acronyms as ACK, DKB, KBA, ACKA. Each of these churches has several places of worship in Mbanza Kongo or in the immediate surroundings. Very often their sacred sites are on the top of hills, for hills are associated with either *bangunza* or the *mpeve*. I was told that it was BDK (Bundu-dia-Kongo) that started to use an acronym, and the others copied it in an effort to compete with BDK in the spiritual market. Indeed, some of these churches are schismatic results of the BDK, which claims to be the mother church of all *mpeve anlongo* churches. Not surprisingly it is a claim very much contested by many of my interviewees from other churches.

²³ Other churches have similar books, often named *Keluka*, but very similar in their structure to the *Kekongo*. These books, received by spiritual inspiration, are written in Kikongo and contain very detailed accounts of the lives and deeds of the *bangunza bakongo*, insisting on the suffering they were forced to endure because of a combination of Christianity, imperialism, and lack of respect towards Kongo.

²⁴ This is a common term in the Democratic Republic of Congo to refer to them, but it is rarer in the Angolan context. The Kikongo concept of *longo* is not used to refer to sacredness and healing in the Kikongo dialects of Angola.

²⁵ Y. Corrington-Ward has documented that the tiny differences are often purely gestural and difficult to perceive. See *Gesture and Power*.

Some *mpeve anlongo* believers I interviewed in Mbanza Kongo belonged to small churches whose main doctrine is that the *mpeve* of the Kongo and the Holy Ghost of the Christian faith is exactly the same spirit. Many also claimed that Jesus Christ was an *ngunza*. Some of these *mpeve anlongo* churches may have been making such claims for a long time, but there is room to suspect that some others may be modifying their theology so as eventually to be able to jump onto one 'Ecumenical Platform' or other and gain legality and legitimacy.

The Igreja Crista Uniao Espirito Santo (ICUES- Christian Church Holy Ghost Union) is one of the numerically most important of the churches that bring the Christian Holy Ghost into their theology in no uncertain terms (as its name reveals) while remaining strongly rooted in Kongo cosmology and *ngunza* charisma. The ICUES is a church founded in the Democratic Republic of Congo by the *ngunza* Tata Wonda. He was persecuted by colonial Belgian authorities and died many years ago. In Mbanza Kongo, the church is represented by a young man who claims to be the re-incarnation of Tata Wonda and who goes by that name, too. He has grown a beard so as to look more like the historical Congolese Tata Wonda. Many followers of the historical Tata Wonda do not accept that he has reincarnated in that young Angolan man, whom they consider a charlatan.

This church stressed the identification between the Christian Holy Ghost and the Kongo *mpeve* in ways most of the other *mpeve anlongo* would reject. For this reason, it could perhaps have become a locus of encounter between, on the one hand, the nativistic approaches of the *bangunza*-based religions and, on the other, the Christian element of the churches and the governmental forces fighting for ecumenism. However, in August 2016 Tata Wonda was imprisoned, accused of causing public disturbances connected to the successional debates. So much, I must say, for a potential ecumenical solution in Mbanza Kongo between traditionalists and Christians. The imprisonment of Tata Wonda, or the man claiming to be his reincarnation, has been interpreted by many local observers as one more example of the anti-Kongo attitudes of the pro-Luanda and pro-MPLA local government in Mbanza Kongo.

Nationalism, Congolese Religious Movements and KiKongo

However, much more than pursuing a policy against traditional Kongo institutions as such, Angolan authorities are positioning themselves strongly against movements whose origins can be located outside the national territory. *Mpeve anlongo* Churches, now giving spiritual salience to *bangunza bakonko* in Mbanza Kongo, were introduced in the 1990s and especially in the 2000s from the Democratic Republic of Congo, when Angolans started to return. Kimbanguism has its origins in Belgian Congo and its headquarters in the DRC. Tokoism has a powerful Democratic Republic of Congo origin, since it was born in 1949, when the Angolan-born Baptist priest Simão Toko was in Leopoldville. One could claim on solid grounds that they are all not only *Kongo* religious movements, but also *Congolese* ones. However, banning them because they are 'foreign' would not be possible. As it happens they have been introduced by people who are Angolan, either by birth or at least by direct descent, but who became exiles. Owing to a combination of tragedies, such as forced labour in Portuguese times, and wars in the post colony, they were forced to leave the country. They had to live in the neighbouring DRC, where they were the objects of exclusion, because of their being Angolan, not Congolese. They are returnees now, and they are returning with a

Kongo religious, cultural and historical awareness they would not have acquired in Angola. Their worship meetings are often conducted in Kimayanga, a Congolese Kikongo dialect that local people in Mbanza Kongo find hard to follow, although it is the dialect in which are written sacred texts, such as *Kekongo* and *Keluka*. *Bangunza* sometimes switch to Lingala, which is used to bridge dialectal variations. The provincial Directorate of Culture has officially banned the use of Lingala in religious meetings, though this Congolese lingua franca is increasingly becoming the lingua franca of the entire Mbanza Kongo.

Many people, from very different walks of life, are becoming worried about the fate of the local Kikongo. It is problematic that the religious meetings involve Kongo ancestral spirits on the one hand and Congolese Lingala on the other. There is awkward ambivalence around the cultural goods brought by returnees. Are the Bakongo of Northern Angola *discovering*, or are they *losing*, their cultural roots because of the half a century spent in Congolese exile? It is difficult to tell.

Conclusion

Mbanza Kongo is a place of effervescent exchange and cultural dynamism and creativity, and in that respect a perfect laboratory to study the cultural logics underneath religious pluralism and the possibility of grassroots ecumenism. I think it offers some hints indicating that living in a plural setting has its built-in conflicts. Life in Mbanza Kongo is hard on almost everybody. Given the communitarian, wealth-in-people ethos of the Bakongo, and the demands of Obviously, people do want to live together, and this is why they chose to move into a city that, owing to the returnees from the DRC, is growing at an exponential speed. The difficulty is that, in the conditions of post-war religious pluralism, living together implies sharing contested views of the past and notions of divinity.. What exacerbates the difficulty is the fact that Angola is a postwar country that has never experienced any proper reconciliation. Moreover, Mbanza Kongo is a historical place, a '*lieu de mémoire*' (perhaps one of the most important ones in the history of central Africa) where the past is perceived from competing perspectives which rarely agree or even enter into dialogue. Prophets, the Catholic church, the Protestant churches, the FNLA, the MPLA, UNITA, the owners of the farming lands, the exiled, the descendants of the last Kings, and others, coexist and all vie for their own perspective. This plurality of understandings of the past is often obliterated by messianic expectations about the restoration of the Kingdom or more secular promises linked to the UNESCO understanding of heritage and culture. But a consensus on what direction to take, what future to collectively construct out of this entangled multiplicity of 'pastness', has not been achieved.. This lack of consensus is probably one reason why there are so many religious movements in the city. It may be why there are so many processes of microcosmic affirmation, because these processes construct worlds that give people a sense of dignity and cultural pride. If people are creative of unity in their idioms of affliction, then, while they create some 'symbolic consensus', in James Fernandez's sense,²⁶ this is fragmented and limited to small groups of people. There are grassroots movements struggling to propose ecumenical activities. It seems, however, that the grassroots ecumenical movements fail time and time again, and instead of regarding the collective

²⁶ J.W. Fernandez, 'Symbolic Consensus in a Fang Reformatory Cult', *American Anthropologist* 67 (1965), pp. 902-929.

present, people tend to look from their individual perspectives on the past, even if these may insult their neighbours' sensitivity. Thus, while the Catholics would like to make a shrine where a Catholic priest was killed in 1961, without noticing they are implicitly accusing the Baptists of having been involved in the killing, the followers of many *bangunza* would like to write a history of Kimpa Vita showing she was not a Christian, without noticing they are insulting the Catholics, who see her a saint. Dialogue seems to be impossible.

Or perhaps I am wrong? Let me finish with the sight of what may be a silver lining. One of the things I came to realize in my fieldwork in Mbanza Kongo is that people are concerned about many things, and that religion is merely one of them. It is perhaps not even the most 'important' of their concerns, and certainly not a concern all the time.

As I have noted, some of the successful ecumenical stories remembered by de Mata Mourisca in his biographical texts are about hunger during the war. Food and labour are, indeed, two of the main preoccupations of people whenever they are not preoccupied with religion. I owe my understanding of the importance of these main preoccupations to fieldwork among Bakongo farmers together with Marina Temudo, who was conducting fieldwork on livelihoods and agricultural practices. We both came to realize how relevant non-religious activities are for the analysis of religious pluralism and grassroots ecumenism. Because farms are many kilometres away from Mbanza Kongo, and it may take an entire day just to reach them, some people spend several days there. We were told that some people actually live in the farms, avoiding the city altogether. A farmer usually works together with distant relatives or with people who happen to have the adjacent farm. Very often, a farmer will work co-operatively with a neighbour or relative who does not belong to his or her church. In our last visit to a farm, we found ourselves talking to a group of people who were farming together, sharing a shelter and eating together during the days they spent in the farm every week. One was a Catholic, the other one was a Jehovah Witness, and the third one was a BDK member. They were helping each other with much amity in their struggle towards a common goal. Their concern was not the restoration of a Kingdom, but rather the difficult business of daily survival, of securing food at the most elementary day-to-day level. Their performance of co-operation in farming together was more significant than the apparent symbolic consensus attempted by would-be ecumenical city dwellers. Perhaps it is there, in the farms, that the real oikumene takes place. And perhaps it is there, too, that the successful grassroots ecumenical activities ought to, and might well, start, far away from the ruins valued by the UNESCO, the government palaces controlled by the MPLA, and the official religious temples of the city.

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