CHAPTER 2

Simon Kimbangu and the Kimbanguists

1 Introductory Overview

Today, the bodily remains of Simon Kimbangu, his wife Muilu Kiawanga, and their three sons lie in a mausoleum in the small village of Nkamba in the Democratic Republic of Congo.¹ They mark the geographical and spiritual centre of l’Église de Jésus Christ sur la terre par son envoyé spécial Simon Kimbangu (EJCSK). For the Kimbanguists, Nkamba is not only the birthplace of Simon Kimbangu, it is the eschatological realization of the biblical New Jerusalem—having replaced the former Jerusalem, it is the centre of the world for all Christians. The church claims to have seventeen million adherents, but even less exuberant estimates make it one of the largest African Initiated Churches,² and notably it was the first African Initiated Church to be received into the

World Council of Churches (WCC) on 16 August 1969. Yet Kimbanguist theological practices have increasingly elicited scrutiny and criticism; their membership in the WCC is now precarious and many churches have ostracized them.

This first case study will investigate one instance of the global reception of Christianity by examining the ministry of Simon Kimbangu (1887–1951) and the development of the church that was created in his name. Broadly, this chapter will examine the history of the Kimbanguist movement (§2–5) and subsequently analyse several of their key theological texts and pronouncements (§6). The unique characteristics of the habits of reasoning evident in the Kimbanguist community stimulates our investigation of the formation of their tradition: how did this community come to construe scripture and the world in their particular way?

The present study will attend to a merger of traditions that began early in the ministry of Kimbangu, forming a specific, local, traditioned rationality. Simon Kimbangu’s ministry integrated two cultural and symbolic worlds: the Bakongo and the Baptist Missionary Society. The reading habits that subsequently developed in the community were deeply affected by their particular social history. Attending to that history, and the traditions that have contributed to it, will reveal important features of Kimbanguist reading habits and provoke the theoretical investigations of Chapter 3.

This chapter will examine the origin and development of Kimbanguism and the reading practices of the Kimbanguists. In the course of this chapter, we will see that Simon Kimbangu’s popular significance spread rapidly from the start of his ministry as a prophet, extending far beyond the ecclesial boundaries of the official Baptist community as well as the political borders of the Belgian Congo. The colonial government reacted harshly to Kimbangu’s popularity, perceiving a political threat. As a result, the movement was forced underground where it persisted with little ecclesial regulation for over thirty years. Yet, as will be described, in the two years before the nation gained independence from Belgium (effected on 30 June 1960) the Kimbanguists increasingly gained political favour from the government.3 While this may have been facilitated by a measure of ethnic favouritism, the Kimbanguists also represented the ideal of an authentically African church; such sentiments would later be codified in the nationalist ideology of authentïcitïé, most famously articulated

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