KIMBANGUISM AT THE GRASS ROOTS
Beliefs in a local Kimbanguist Church

BY

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Much has been written about the history of the Kimbanguist movement in Zaire, but comparatively little is known about today’s Kimbanguists. Marie-Louise Martin, who is an author on Kimbanguism as well as a member of the Kimbanguist Church, Église de Jésus Christ sur la Terre par le Prophète Simon Kimbangu (EJCSK) (The Church of Jesus Christ on Earth through the Prophet Simon Kimbangu), confines herself in her book to the opinions of the elite of the church. Her book is therefore not only a documentation on Kimbanguism but also a Kimbanguist document. As she puts it: “instead of judging the church by what individual Christians say, we must pay attention to the authoritative leaders and to the tendency revealed in the total life of the church”.1 Though she states that Kimbanguist beliefs and theology are “still in flux”2 she does not allow for the integration of the ideas of the “simple people within the Kimbanguist Church”3 into her account of Kimbanguist beliefs. On the contrary. She goes to great pains to polish “clumsy”4 statements by Kimbanguists in order to maintain their theological orthodoxy and respectability. Not only simple members of the church, but intellectuals5 as well, and even one of Kimbangu’s sons, Dialungana6 have to undergo this treatment. Every indication of the “heretical” and the “syncretist” is retouched and argued away. In this way, an ideal picture is drawn in which the common members’ convictions are only mentioned in order to be criticized. The approach is subjectively theological in its main emphasis.

This also has consequences for Martin’s description of the history of the church. It is official history with the leaders of the church as the main spokesmen. It is not history from the viewpoint of the common adherents. The significance of Kimbangu’s activities is reduced to that of a religious revival which the
missionaries should not have been ashamed of. All the political implications of his public appearance are attributed to the "Ngunzists", with whom Kimbangu supposedly had nothing to do. As far as the history of the movement is concerned, the distorted image Martin offers has been dealt with in the thorough study by Werner Ustorf. In the present article an effort is made to counterbalance Martin's elitist version of modern Kimbanguist beliefs.

One would almost wish that Martin could have read Bryan Wilson's foreword to the English edition of her book before she started writing, especially where he writes: "Since prophets are made by their followers, it is the terms of acceptance rather than the terms of pronouncement which are the essential clue in the explanation of prophetic movements". Whether they have a theological status or not, "clumsy" remarks by "simple" people then become more relevant than the official statements by church leaders. "Misleading expressions which can border on the 'heretical' " should not be left out of consideration with the excuse that Kimbanguists have too little knowledge of current theological terminology. The question should be what people mean by them, even if the result may seem heretical. The understanding of religion and religions must not be hampered by the theological interests of the author. Moreover, one cannot constantly refer to the "African with thought", as Martin does, and at the same time do away statements by those closest to the traditional culture, the "simple" believers.

The data for this article was gathered between 1968 and 1977, when I spent a total of about five years in the field, doing anthropological research on other subjects besides Kimbanguism. I was also able to use material collected by a student-researcher who studied this particular local Kimbanguist Church in the summer of 1969 under my supervision. The bulk of my data come from a year of research in 1976-77, when I studied religious change in the tribe which most of the members of the local church reported on here belong to. When I write in the present tense, I am referring to that year of research. My data stems from participant observation, from content analysis of prayers, sermons, speeches and songs as recorded in eight church services, from a survey among more than 300 persons, fifty of whom were Kimbanguists, and from open interviews with Kimbanguists.