THE BELOVED CITY: COMMENTARY ON A KIMBANGUIST TEXT

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The Église de Jésus-Christ sur la Terre par le Prophète Simon Kimbangu (EJCSK), which claims a membership of at least a million, is the leading indigenous church of the Republic of Congo and has legal status equivalent to the Catholics, the Protestants, and the Salvation Army. Most Kimbanguists are Bakongo from the western Congo, but the church has important congregations in Kisangani (Stanleyville), Lubumbashi (Elisabethville) and other towns in Congo and in neighbouring countries.

The EJCSK, like almost all of the numerous indigenous churches of the western Congo, claims spiritual descent from Simon Kimbangu, nominal leader of the great messianic movement of 1921. Since Kimbanguism in general, and EJCSK in particular, have been the subject of several studies and usually appear on short lists of African messianic movements, it is regrettable that no Kimbanguist theological texts of any length have been published or studied. It is sometimes suggested that Kimbanguists have no theology, and make do with a syncretic assortment of heterogeneous beliefs. Here is a representative comment:

In brief, Kimbanguism seems to accept uncritically the body of Protestant belief on the one hand and much of tribal religious beliefs on the other. Thus far there seems to be small concern about the problems that would seem to be inherent in such a position.

Concern is small because, from a Kimbanguist point of view, the

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problem does not exist. The EJCSK would like to publish some formal theological statements, not for internal use, but to disabuse outsiders of their misconceptions; it is prevented from doing so by the demands made on the energy and talent of its leaders by the administrative problems involved in creating, with relatively small resources, an ecclesiastical and educational establishment to rival the non-indigenous churches. Another inhibiting factor, not mentioned by these leaders themselves, is the difficulty of translating from Kikongo the expression of beliefs profoundly rooted in Kongo culture, for which foreign languages (in this case, French) have no suitable vocabulary; and translating them for the attention of a largely unsympathetic public which automatically attaches pejorative connotations to expressions of 'tribal religious beliefs.' The operation of this inhibition is clearly seen in the public and private statements of church leaders, when discussing theology in French, and has led some observers to the view that the EJCSK demonstrates an opposition between its urban, bourgeois elements and the masses:

The oppositions come to light in questions of faith between educated elements who define themselves as a black christian Church and illiterate elements who claim to be essentially followers of Simon Kimbangu. This opposition however is easily camouflaged by the apparent doctrinal flexibility of the sect. 4)

Much of the apparent flexibility results simply from awareness on the part of spokesmen of the EJCSK that, of several possible French translations for a given Kikongo phrase, some will give rise to a more favorable reaction than others in a European audience or an audience applying European values. A conspicuous example is the official translation 'Chef Spirituel' for the title Mfumu a Nlongo, of the head of the EJCSK. The translation is legitimate, but a closer approximation to what Kikongo speakers, whether Kimbanguist or not, understand by the phrase is "Sacred Head."

Some ambiguities can be avoided, therefore, by going directly to texts on faith and morals put out by the EJCSK, in Kikongo, for internal use. Such texts are not very numerous. Most of them are short occasional papers of a transitory nature, or else catechetical aids. It seems that the basic organizing postulates of Kimbanguist belief, which the outsider unsuccessfully seeks, are so much taken for