

**Kimbanguist Beliefs Taught in Zambia:
Law, Jesus Christ, Simon Kimbangu**
A Study of the Lusaka Congregation

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“**I**adore Simon Kimbangu.”
 “You need to talk to Prince Zako (Simon Kimbangu’s grandson) so that you will have no more doubts that Simon Kimbangu is the Holy Spirit.”
 “If you follow the Ten Commandments, you follow Jesus Christ because he followed God’s law. The Ten Commandments are the key factor in the whole Bible. They contain everything a man should do to be saved.”

Such statements from pastors and members of the Kimbanguist Church in Lusaka, Zambia, caused me to ask questions and discuss theology with these church people. Do Kimbanguists today believe that “Jesus alone is Savior and redeemer of mankind,” as their profession of faith states? Do they see Jesus, during his ministry here on earth, as the Son of God who shows us the Father? If Jesus is central, then what role does Simon Kimbangu have? And what is the relationship of our faith to the law?

I came to Lusaka, Zambia, in 1990 under the auspices of Mennonite Central Committee with an assignment to teach English to pastors and leaders of the Kimbanguist congregation in Lusaka, the headquarters of this church in Zambia. I have lived among the people, worshipped with them, and listened to sermons from various pastors for the past 18 months. As a preparation for this assignment, I spent one term (Oct. - Dec. 1990) at Selly Oak Colleges, U.K. There I studied new religious movements, especially African Initiated Churches (AICs), and I read every document in the Interact collection concerning the Church of Jesus Christ on Earth through the Special Envoy Simon Kimbangu (commonly know as the Kimbanguist Church). I was eager to meet and learn from these African Christians.

An English teacher by profession, I am a lay theologian by interest. I am not a sociologist or a researcher. But I am a Christian who desires to report as accurately as possible what I am hearing, and so to further our understanding as we dialogue/communicate with each other.

Procedure

Sermons in the Kimbanguist church are important. They are preceded by choir num-

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bers, prayers, Scripture reading, offering; and they are followed by welcome to visitors, announcements, reports on work of the church, and the long Sunday afternoon **nsisani** (competitive offering). Sermons always follow the same outline:

- comments on the opening reading from a Psalm
- comments on Exodus 20:1-17 (the Ten Commandments, read every Sunday)
- comments on a text selected by the preacher.

I wrote down near-verbatim notes from the translator for 27 sermons that I heard over a period of 18 months. To compile a 22-item questionnaire, I then selected some statements from those sermons, along with several statements from more orthodox Christian teachings which I found missing in the sermons. People were asked to circle **Yes** if they agreed with each statement, and **No** if they disagreed.

The 62 adults who answered the questionnaire were those enrolled in my English classes, those who sing in one of the five church choirs, those who attend women's meetings and church executive committee meetings. Persons could elect to read/respond in their most familiar language: Bemba, Chokwe, or English.

For those who had difficulty with reading, two women in the advanced English class read the questions individually to them and noted their responses. All adults in the congregation were welcome to give their responses. (See demographic compilation.)

Among the 22 items on the questionnaire, I included three that attempted

(1) to ascertain people's belief in magic/witchcraft:

You get sick because some person hates you. **Yes** 16% **No** 84%

(2) to check assumptions that Jesus was a white person's God:

Jesus did not understand the suffering of black people because he was white.

Yes 18% **No** 82%

(3) to express certainty about being a Christian:

I have no doubt. I am sure that I am a Christian. **Yes** 95% **No** 5%

In this congregation, then, some still fear the power of magic/witchcraft and some still see Jesus as associated with white people.

In addition to sermon notes and questionnaire results, the students in English classes have used the Good News translation of the Bible, since it is one of the few available and affordable English-language books in Zambia - thanks to the Bible Society. Discussions of theology have accompanied the readings of the Gospel of Luke, Acts, and Galatians. Some of what follows was reinforced in those sometimes heated debates.

Limitations

Certainly there are limitations and possible miscommunications in a study of this sort, especially where the precise language use of a literate culture meets the fluidity of oral-culture language. In addition, I recognize the problems posed by the following:

(1) All sermons came to me via translation from the Bemba language, so it is possible that the preachers' viewpoints were distorted. Similarly, I recognize that the

translation of theological terms in my questionnaire may have resulted in language-specific interpretations of a given question.

(2) Although worship is conducted in the Bemba language to accommodate people from many tribes, this is not the first language of many of the preachers. Consequently, these men and women who preach may repeat what is easy for them to say or what they have heard frequently. Thus sermons may not reflect new spiritual insights of pastors.

(3) Even though many items came from sermons and many people chose to have statements read to them, yet my questionnaire was definitely a literate tool, which may have been quite confusing, and perhaps intimidating, to some of the respondents.

(4) I gave only two choices of response: “yes” or “no.” Though I realized that this gave little room for ambiguities of uncertainties, I felt that the respondents would be further confused by a “maybe” or “not sure” category. However, a few persons wrote in qualifications to their Yes responses; these are reflected in my reporting.

(5) Many people said “yes” to all but one or two statements, even if two contradicted each other. Had I anticipated their cultural preference to agree with me—their teacher—I would have perhaps had a more complete picture of beliefs if I had phrased some statements to solicit “no” responses.

(6) Singing is very important to Kimbanguists. All songs used by congregation and choirs in worship are original compositions by Kimbanguists in their short 70-year history, rather than translations of missionaries’ songs. Even though many songs are sung in Zairean languages (Kikongo, Lingala, French) and thus are not understood by many Zambians, nevertheless their message needs to be studied alongside sermon content to get a more complete picture of worship emphasis. I regret that I was unable to include song lyrics in my study.

In spite of these limitations, my hope is that what follows will reflect, albeit imperfectly, what this one Zambian congregation is saying about its faith.

Scope

In this study, I center on three questions that keep recurring in sermons and in conversations with people:

(1) What must a person do to be saved, to inherit eternal life? Along with this, a corollary: What place does the law (Ten Commandments and Kimbanguist prohibitions) have in the life of the Christian?

(2) What do Kimbanguists say about Jesus Christ?

(3) Who is Simon Kimbangu, apart from the historic founder of this church?

I hope to compare sermon statements in this Zambian congregation with the official statements of belief found in Diangienda-Kuntima’s, their leader’s, “Essence of Theology.”¹ And I want to check whether church members affirm the beliefs of local church leaders, and whether church leaders themselves agree. I limit my study to this one congregation, which officially lists membership at 924, but on a typical Sunday has 200-300 in attendance. Since the Legal Representative of the Kimbanguist

church in Zambia, Rev. E. M. Kangonga, resides here and has authority in this country, what I hear is probably representative of the teachings in all the Zambian churches.

Grace and Law

One very prominent teaching of the pastors in this congregation is that Christians must follow the law—both the Ten Commandments and the Kimbanguist prohibitions (no buying or selling on Sunday, no drinking alcoholic drinks, no dancing, no smoking, no taking drugs, no polygamy or adultery, no bathing or sleeping naked, no eating pork, no praying with money in your pockets, no shoes on where people meet for prayer, no short skirts or uncovered heads for women, no long hair or beards for men). In the 27 sermons, people were admonished 134 times to follow/obey the commandments, and in addition they were warned of punishment for failure to obey 100 times. Such punishments included imprisonment, slavery, not entering the Kingdom of heaven, God's refusal to forgive, God's displeasure, death in the wilderness. In addition, people were told 33 times to obey their leaders and 25 times to obey Christ's command to love each other. And specific ones of the Ten Commandments were cited 100 times.

By contrast, God's love for us was mentioned seven times; God's mercy, two times; God's forgiveness, six times. Of these 15, two were conditional on our following the commandments/living according to God's desires. The word **faith** or **believe** was mentioned 12 times; in 5 of these instances, a Christian's faith depended on keeping the Ten Commandments.

But sermon texts which pastors chose themselves in addition were often taken from the New Testament.² Readings from Psalms and Exodus 20:1-17 in each worship service are mandated by headquarters in Kinshasa.) Even when texts speak of God's grace and love, often law was added to that love by the preacher. For example, Romans 8:12-14 speaks of Christians being children of God and freed from fear; the sermon emphasis was that as children of God, we must obey God's rules in order to make God happy.

Of course, many selected texts called for repentance or gave consequences of sin or used Jesus' words about commandments to support emphasis on the law. Also, often the text was not used in its context, or only a fragment of an idea was used.

What do Kimbanguists believe is necessary for our salvation? If we look at Diangienda's writing, we see major emphasis on the great love of God:

God's design since the creation of Adam and Eve has always been to save all human beings....By the death of his son Jesus Christ he has accorded grace potentially to all mankind....God's love for the human race is immense. Is it not written that the Eternal is slow to anger but prompt to forgive? What Kimbanguist theology does not accept is the assertion that this love has no limits. [He cites punishment for sin in the Old Testament.]....The Kimbanguist church does not conceive of God as grim and vindictive....The believing human being experiences God's

patience and love day by day.³

However, using the concept of covenant, Diangienda also asserts that we are not saved by grace alone:

For Kimbanguist theology, man is saved if, and only if, the following three conditions are fulfilled: divine grace, faith in God and his Messiah, good works....Man must make his contribution to the mechanism of his own salvation; for this it is sufficient, since grace is provided by God, for him to give proof of faith in the Holy Trinity and then to put into practice the commandments of God.⁴

While Diangienda's equation for salvation is grace + faith + good works, the church leaders in Zambia use a different set of three: love + Ten Commandments + work for the church.⁵ It seems that this second set of three could all be placed in Diangienda's equation under the "good works" portion, rather than substitute for the whole equation. When the Zambian preachers use love + Ten Commandments + good works, their emphasis moves from what God has done to what humans must do. In that transition, grace and faith seem to be replaced by admonishment to increase human effort to be good, to try harder. Noticeably absent from this congregations's sermons are the Apostle Paul's "by observing the law no one will be justified" (Gal.2:16) and "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." (Gal. 2:20) Instead, in our discussion of Galatians, people kept returning to the list of sins and the warning that "those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God." (Gal.5:19-21) Consequently, salvation for many here seems to be based on their "works" righteousness, not on "the just shall live by their faith."

The priority of the Ten Commandments was affirmed by responses to several questions:

The way to become a Christian is to obey the Ten Commandments and the church rules. **Yes 92% No 8%**

Exodus 20:1-17 is the most important part of the Bible.

Yes 85% No 15%

The Ten Commandments tell you all you must do to be saved.

Yes 95% No 5%

Alongside these three questions, there was also wide-spread support for Biblical teaching of faith and forgiveness:

You become a Christian because of your faith in God. **Yes 98% No 2%**

Jesus Christ died so that our sins could be forgiven. **Yes 100% No 0%**

But there was less support for God's unconditional love for us:

God does not love a person who sins.⁶ **Yes 64% No 36%**

It seems then, that for salvation, people here combine faith, forgiveness of sins through the death of Jesus, and following the Law. This would be consistent with Diangienda's writing; however, their uncertainty about God's love is not found in Diangienda.

Of the three things that are believed to be necessary for salvation (love, Ten Commandments, work for the church), laws and rules get by far the most attention. Such

emphasis on law seems to be supported by the authority given to church leaders and to the Bible, even if leaders make mistakes sometimes and even if the Kimbanguist prohibitions are not stated in the Bible. Responses to these two statements show this:

Good Christians will always do what church leaders tell them to do. **Yes**

90% **No** 10%

The Bible says that you should not drink alcoholic drinks (beer or wine).

Yes 87% **No** 13%

From conversations with leaders of other Christian churches in Zambia, from what I've read about African culture, and from my own rather strict upbringing, I am aware that emphasis on law is not unique to the Kimbanguist church. Perhaps legalism is a necessary step in our human moral development, a stage that young Christians and young churches must pass through before we learn to base our ethics on our relationship with God. Perhaps as we mature, we can do good works as our response to God's great love for us, rather than out of our fear of God's punishment. My experience of worship in this church, however, leaves me feeling that the Ten Commandments, rather than Jesus Christ's portrayal of divine love, have become the central focus.

Jesus Christ

In Sunday morning sermons, the name of Jesus is heard more frequently than is the love of God. In fact, there has been a marked increase in the use of the name of Jesus during the months I have worshipped here - perhaps in part due to my questioning its sparsity. Here is a rough compilation of the 104 references to Jesus in the 27 sermons which are noted:

20 times - Jesus told us to follow the Ten Commandments.

16 times - Jesus promised Simon Kimbangu, who completes the work of Jesus.

12 times - Jesus came from God.

7 times - Jesus was rejected.

6 times - Life of Jesus (preparation by John the Baptist, flight to Egypt, baptism, temptation, death on a cross)

4 times - Interactions with people (Zaccheus, the adultress, rich young ruler, disciples in a storm at sea)

6 times - Parables (soils, narrow path, foundations, likeness to child, salt and light, Lazarus and the rich man)

12 times - Jesus said: (a one-sentence quotation)

1 time - Jesus died for our sins.

1 time - Jesus gives eternal life.

6 times - Jesus will come again; be ready - confess your sin.

8 times - Follow Jesus.

5 times - "in the name of Jesus" (a formula)

If we set aside those times that Jesus was quoted to support following the law and to talk about the founder Simon Kimbangu's coming, we have left 68 references to

Jesus, as compared to 334 references to the Ten Commandments/punishment. In other words, a church member hears one mention of the name of Jesus for every 5 references to the law.

It may also be interesting to note what is **not** said about Jesus. Most significant, of course, is the failure to mention the resurrection. And while the rejection of Jesus⁷ is talked about, neither the accounts of Jesus' passion and death nor the meaning of his sacrificial death have been used as bases for sermons. In fact Holy Week, Good Friday, and Easter were not celebrated or mentioned at all in the Kimbanguist church here in Lusaka, and I have been told that the Eucharist has never been celebrated in Zambia.

Perhaps also significant to note is how seldom an account of Jesus' interaction with people is given in its entirety. Often a story is cited to make a point about something else. For example, Jesus' dealing with the woman who was taken in adultery (John 8:1-11) was used to show how Jesus tamed his tongue: he stooped and wrote in the dust rather than talking. Statements from the teachings of Jesus are also likewise truncated and thus the text may be used to say something very different from what the context seems to infer. Interesting also is the lack of the many healing stories where Jesus responded in compassion to those whose faith was evident. Furthermore, Jesus is not talked about as one who shows us in his interactions and teachings what God is like.

Diangienda in his "Essence of Theology" speaks about Jesus Christ many times and quotes many Scriptures that refer to Jesus. Here is an overview:

God the Father commands his Son Jesus Christ to come to redeem humanity. Christ in obedient submission joyfully accepts this mission....Not only does Jesus submit to his Father and obey him but he constantly humbles himself before him and ceaselessly glorifies him....The Holy Spirit in turn recognizes and submits to the authority of Christ....Jesus promised his disciples and the world the coming of the Holy Spirit....God sealed a covenant with mankind in the blood of his Son Jesus Christ....By the death of his Son Jesus Christ, (God) has accorded grace potentially to all mankind.... Jesus Christ is the king of kings whose dominion is eternal....Jesus will come again and receive the faithful into his kingdom.

In his section on baptism, he contends that Jesus did not baptize anyone with water, but with the Holy Spirit. (Thus Kimbanguists do not use water in baptismal services. Instead, the applicant kneels before a pastor whose outstretched hand symbolizes the laying on of hands; the person's baptism is by the Holy Spirit.) In explaining the meaning of baptism, he says this sacrament "makes us members of the people of Christ....We receive the Holy Spirit and thereby become one with Christ....The individual binds himself to live a new life in Jesus Christ." Similarly in the Eucharist, "the Lord Jesus Christ humbles himself by coming to dwell in the being of the communicant, and (that person) is united with Christ."⁸

As is indicated by the Kimbanguist sermons in the Lusaka church and by the

writings of Diangienda, Jesus is seen chiefly as one who makes possible our salvation, sends the Holy Spirit, is now in heaven and will return again as judge.

Few respondents disagreed with these statements:

Jesus Christ died so that our sins could be forgiven. **Yes 100% No 0%**

Good Christians will follow Jesus and do what he taught. **Yes 97% No 2%**

Thus, assent is given to these more orthodox beliefs about Jesus, but important themes such as these are not central in sermons here. Perhaps Jesus is seen as too far removed and too holy to be approached directly. One sermon comment was that if you say you are following Jesus Christ, you are making yourself “big,” i.e., not humble.

The church has no teaching program for children or adults, so I wonder where people learn about Jesus, if indeed they do. Some of my adult students say they learned most in Religious Education classes in public school. Some were taught these stories at home. But many, I fear, have only memorized statements of who Jesus is, rather than a picture of a compassionate human being who showed us what God is like. Often then, “Jesus died for our sins” may hold little real meaning for many. And Jesus’ teachings are reduced to “believe in God, don’t sin, and love each other”. Certainly from the dramas performed every year to celebrate the beginning of Simon Kimbangu’s ministry (April 6) and his suffering and death (October 12), this church recalls much more vividly the life of Simon Kimbangu than the life of Jesus Christ. Fervent emotional responses seem to be reserved for Simon Kimbangu.

Simon Kimbangu

Miracle stories abound about Simon Kimbangu. As a child he changed feathers into a bird and made palm nuts edible. He was put in burning oil while in prison, but he came out with no burns on his body. He was tied to a big rock and thrown into the river in an attempt to drown him, but when missionaries took a snapshot of this site, the picture showed him freed and sitting with Jesus atop the rock in the middle of the river. When he died in 1951, African doctors refused to do an autopsy, so they asked missionary doctors to do it; when they operated they found no heart, no stomach, no liver. (Therefore, he was God.) In 1951 he was buried near the prison in Lubumbashi; when his body was exhumed 8 years later in order to move it to N’Kamba, it had not decayed at all.

The documented facts about his life are sparse. (He left few written records, since he did not read or write well.) He was born in 1899 in N’Kamba, near Kinshasa, Zaire; a Baptist catechist; called by Christ to preach and heal; began his ministry 6 April 1921; told people to throw away fetishes and trust God alone; arrested six months later by Belgian colonial government because they feared an uprising; sentenced to death for sedition; as a result of appeals by Protestant missionaries, was instead imprisoned in Elizabethville (Lubumbashi); died of heart problems in 1951.

So what are Kimbanguist preachers saying about their founder? In the 27 sermons, Simon Kimbangu was named 135 times. Again, here is a rough compilation:

- 42 times - Simon Kimbangu is spoken of in God-language. He is the Holy Spirit (14); existed from the beginning (4); gave us the Ten Commandments (2); knows everything (1); has all power (1); promised by God/Jesus (9); like God, he is our Father (6); the Holy Spirit's coming as a black man is an offence to many (5).
- 34 times - Simon Kimbangu is spoken of in Jesus-Language. He left glory and came as a man (1); shows us what God is like (2); suffered for us (2); will rise again when all Kimbanguists follow the Ten Commandments (3); completes the work that Jesus began (2); will meet us at the end of life (3); will reward those who follow the rules (1); brought life to us (1); gives us freedom (2); leads us to happiness (2); empowers us to do right (5); all people will believe in him in the end (3); we must give our hearts to him (1); we must praise/follow him (3); doubting him is from the Evil One (2); said "God has put everything in my hands" (1).
- 34 times - Simon Kimbangu is seen as an apostle or prophet. He did the same work as Jesus (5); was filled with the Holy Spirit (1); was reluctant to follow God's call (3); followed the Ten Commandments (3); is an example of humility (2); included everyone, unlike the missionaries (5); suffered (4); teaches us (10); said "Black will be white, and white, black" (1).
- 25 times - Believers are admonished to tell others about Simon Kimbangu. We must teach everyone to please/respect him (6); give money and build a house for him (3); tell the world that he is the Holy Spirit (9); make all recognize him through our good deeds (7).

People here in Zambia are convinced Kimbangu is the Holy Spirit. They say he was with God in the beginning. He was without sin. Jesus promised in John 14 that he would send the Holy Spirit. This Holy Spirit was sent to Africa in Simon Kimbangu. We know that because Kimbangu did the same work that Jesus did. Also, Jesus said that not everyone who says "Lord, Lord" will enter the Kingdom of heaven. By this he meant that many people in the world know about Jesus, but they don't believe that Simon Kimbangu was the Holy Spirit.

Using Matthew 24:15, one pastor pointed out that 'the abomination that causes desolation' is that a black man, an African, is the Holy Spirit; many Christians refuse to believe that. According to the head of the Zambian church, Christians who know Jesus have a secondary school level of knowledge, but Kimbanguists have a university-level knowledge because they have the added understanding that the Holy Spirit is Simon Kimbangu. The Kimbanguist mission is to tell all Christians about Kimbangu.

On 17 April, 1991, I had the privilege of conversing with Zako Kiangani of Lubumbashi, Zaire, one of the grandsons of Simon Kimbangu and the first family member to visit the Zambian church. He explained that the church made a change in 1989 from calling Kimbangu a prophet (a white man's word) to calling him a special envoy (Simon Kimbangu's own word). And he affirmed that what I had been

hearing is the new Kimbanguist position: that Kimbangu was with God from the beginning, that he was the Comforter Jesus had promised, that he was without sin. God revealed Himself through a man Jesus Christ, so Jesus must reveal himself through a man, who was Simon Kimbangu. I pointed out that this view is not in agreement with what has been officially written by Diangienda, neither in the catechism nor in the theology. He replied that he himself has written this new teaching but he has as yet been unable to get the funds to have it printed (though the church has rather sophisticated headquarters in Kinshasa).

Diangienda's statements about the Holy Spirit do leave open the possibility of a one-time incarnation of the Holy Spirit. When discussing theological views of a trinitarian God, he has this to say:

For the Kimbanguist church, the Holy Spirit is far from being a sort of magnetic or electric current which provides energy for the accomplishment of some particular task. God created man in his image and likeness. That has been confirmed by the fact that Christ, God, lived here below in human form. From this it may readily be inferred that the third person in God, the Holy Spirit, also has a human likeness, whose body is spiritual and consequently invisible to living men. God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are three persons clothed in spiritual bodies (I Cor.15:44), but existing in the image and likeness of man, himself created in the image of God.⁹

However, in both the catechism and the theology, Diangienda states that his father Simon Kimbangu is the exemplary Christian who leads us to Christ and who encourages us to follow Christ. He includes Kimbangu alongside Christ's apostles, Old Testament heroes, and the faithful who now surround Christ, the king of kings, and comprise his court. In this position, Simon Kimbangu can be—if we choose to solicit his help—"an advocate on our behalf with Christ so that the Lord may answer our prayers as quickly as possible".

From the writings, then, Diangienda did not say that his father is the Holy Spirit. The reason he did not state this clearly, according to Zambian church leaders, is that it is never proper to elevate yourself or your family members. Therefore, even though Diangienda knew that his father was the Holy Spirit, they say, he has left it to succeeding generations and to those outside his family to recognize this.

What the Kimbanguist church as a whole believes about the relationship between Simon Kimbangu and the Holy Spirit is not at all certain. Dr. Marie Louise Martin, a Swiss theologian who worked for two decades to train theologians in the Kimbanguist seminary near Kinshasa, Zaire, maintains that Diangienda and some Kimbanguist theologians still hold strongly the classical doctrine of the Trinity and the view that Simon Kimbangu's function was prophetic. She reports that Diangienda remains tolerant and for some reason seldom admonishes the believers.¹⁰ Others who have worked with this church suspect that the appearance of orthodoxy was maintained only to keep from offending other Christians and to gain acceptance in World Council of Churches. This may be the case, for in Diangienda's instructions

to church members shortly before his death in July 1992, he includes Simon Kimbangu in the usual place of the Holy Spirit. He says: "Before asking forgiveness of the sin committed by our ancestors ADAM and EVE, it's advisable that everyone makes the true fasting that is accepted by GOD or Father, our Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Father - Simon KIMBANGU." (Capitalization is his.)¹¹ Kimbangu's grandson teaches clearly that his grandfather is the Holy Spirit. And Zambian church leaders in sermons in the Lusaka congregation also promote this view.

Most church members agree with the divinization of their founder, as questionnaire results indicate:

Simon Kimbangu is the Holy Spirit that Jesus promised to send.

Yes 97% **No** 3%

Simon Kimbangu was with God in the beginning at the Creation.

Yes 93% **No** 7%

Simon Kimbangu never sinned. **Yes** 74% **No** 26%

Our bodies decay when we die, but Simon Kimbangu's body has never decayed. **Yes** 97% **No** 3%

Kimbanguists must tell other Christians that the Holy Spirit came to Africa in Simon Kimbangu. **Yes** 97% **No** 3%

Kimbanguists pray to Simon Kimbangu in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. **Yes** 95% **No** 5%

Simon Kimbangu carries the prayers of black people to God. (Two people changed "black" to "all".) **Yes** 82% **No** 16% Not answered 2%

A believer is one who knows that Simon Kimbangu is the Holy Spirit.

Yes 77% **No** 20% Not answered 3%

Simon Kimbangu was powerfully filled with the Holy Spirit in the same way as church leaders like Peter and Paul in the book of Acts.

Yes 77% **No** 31% Not answered 2%

There seem to me to be some inconsistencies in the answers given to these questions. The first and the last were planned to be mutually exclusive: If Simon Kimbangu is filled with the Holy Spirit, then the Spirit is different from the man. Also, the first and the third do not show logically related results: If Kimbangu is seen as God, then it would follow that he never sinned. For some reason, people were more comfortable with the idea of Simon Kimbangu being the Holy Spirit than with his being sinless. Again, "Simon Kimbangu is the Holy Spirit that Jesus promised to send" may be an often-repeated formula whose meaning is not probed very deeply. But many of the members whom I conversed with are adamant that Simon Kimbangu is not to be seen as equal to the apostles, but above them, in spite of the belief that he and the apostles all did the same miracles as Jesus did: raised the dead, gave sight to the blind, made paralytics walk and healed all sorts of illnesses. These works are cited as proof of Simon Kimbangu's being the Holy Spirit. Yet people here proclaim their founder superior to any others who have been powerfully used by God's spirit in a similar way.

Other writer's reports

Many of the people who have written about the Kimbanguist church, especially before 1980, have emphasized the orthodoxy of Kimbanguist beliefs. Perhaps most willing to support this view was Dr. Marie Louise Martin.¹² Rev. James Bertsche, a Mennonite missionary, reported that "never, either before or after his imprisonment, did Simon Kimbangu lead people to believe that he regarded himself as anything whatsoever but a Christian whom God had called to preach the Word of Life to his people."¹³

A Mennonite Central Committee delegation who met with Diangienda in 1967 gave enthusiastic response to this church and suggested we work in partnership with them to communicate their message to the world.¹⁴ *The Ecumenical Review* in 1967 reported that the church "has never tried to break away from Christian tradition at any point" and "has no intention of modifying the content of the Christian Trinity, nor of identifying the person of the prophet with the Person of the Holy Spirit."¹⁵

These intentions are borne out in the writings of Diangienda, both in the catechism of 1963 and in the theology of 1977. This view is what Susan Asch¹⁶ has called "official Kimbanguism." By contrast, the head of the Zambian church, most preachers and members of the Lusaka congregation hold, in Asch's terms, a Kimbanguism of the Kimbanguists (the popular Kimbanguist religion).

Some people who have written since 1985 have been more cautious about affirming this church as in the mainstream of Christianity. Heinrich Balz, who taught at the Kimbanguist seminary in Lutendele for two years, says that defenders of the Kimbanguist church, who saw in the African Independent Churches the true future of African Christianity, are more cautious now, and less vocal. Dialogue is difficult. Though in 1984, Diangienda denied that Simon Kimbangu was the Holy Spirit, he maintains a careful silence on this. And when questioned later, he implied that yes, Kimbangu is the Holy Spirit. He had his own reasons for not writing that in 1984 and letting others proclaim it.¹⁷ Werner Ustorf has also written about this church, and though I was unable to locate his recent work or converse with him at Selly Oak, W. S. Hollenweger comments that Ustorf's research probably proves that the "official" version of Kimbanguism is legendary. The rural Kimbanguists are closer to African traditions and values, though present leaders in Kinshasa have rejected rural beliefs as heretical. He goes on to point out some of the problems in clarifying Kimbanguist theology: contradictions in sources and unauthentic sources, changing views about Simon Kimbangu over the years, interaction between the message and the situation.¹⁸ Balz also, on this latter point, says, "The leaders, it seems to me, adjust their behavior to the needs of the many, the simple people."¹⁹

Among my English students are several young men from the Kimbanguist Church in Zaire. They do not as heartily endorse the pervasive Zambian view that Simon Kimbangu is the Holy Spirit. One poignantly commented to me recently, "The Kimbanguist church here in Zambia is a sect." For many of the young and educated (perhaps especially if that education took place in Zaire; see Table of Questionnaire Results), whether or not Simon Kimbangu is the Holy Spirit is still open to discus-

sion. But the young and educated pose a threat. In the hierarchical structure of this church and society, they must defer to the older, less literate church leaders. So the Zambian church, isolated by difficulties in communication with headquarters in Kinshasa and by education/language barriers from other Christian churches in Zambia, has cherished its uniqueness and its African-ness in its declaration that Simon Kimbangu is the Holy Spirit.

Syncretism?

The concern of many who relate to African Initiated Churches is the amount of syncretism present in the teachings of a given church. Have these churches mixed cultural traditions with Christian truths to the extent that the message of salvation in Jesus Christ as found in the Biblical record is obscured?

In view of the fact that it is impossible for humans to ever give up cultural ways of viewing the world²⁰, churches in every country do well to step back and ask themselves this question from time to time. And all of us who follow Christ are called to critique cultural practices/values in the light of Jesus' teachings and example.

Certainly there are elements in the Kimbanguist church that, given my Western / scientific/democratic culture, cause discomfort for me. The hierarchical understanding of the Trinity where God the Father commands the Son Jesus and Jesus commands the Holy Spirit is not my way of thinking about God in three Persons. And while this understanding can be derived from Scripture and corresponds to tribal chief-spokesman-elder form of governance, I believe that it is not consistent with Jesus' teaching that "the greatest among you will be a servant". Moreover, this hierarchical arrangement is carried over into church structures and family relationships, again with support from African culture, with resultant abuses of power at times. Is this the style of our Servant-Leader Jesus?

Another emphasis that sounds strange to my ears is the prayer for the forgiveness of Adam and Eve (a special emphasis in 1992). Their original sin, so it is stated here, was never forgiven and as a consequence the world is full of trouble and war. If Kimbanguists pray enough this year, then the forgiveness of Adam and Eve will result in peace on this earth. Many local church members concur:

When we pray enough for the forgiveness of Adam's and Eve's sins,
then trouble and war will stop on earth. **Yes** 92% **No** 6%
Not answered 2%

Diangienda has stated in his theology that each individual must work out his salvation, that each will be judged according to his works. So this call to prayer seems to fit neither with Kimbanguist theology nor with Jesus' call to individuals to leave all and follow him. Is this solution to the sins of our age an attempt to manipulate God by magic? Or is it faith?

Holy water is used by Kimbanguists, but seldom in the public worship. Instead, members carry small vials with them which they use—by sprinkling, rubbing onto injuries, or drinking—to bring healing or provide protection. Such uses are always accompanied by prayer. The water is brought from N'Kamba, the birthplace of Simon

Kimbangu, which is called the New Jerusalem, where all nations will gather when Jesus returns. Is such use of water a fetish? Or is it only a symbol that reminds us of God's care? Perhaps in each of these three cases—hierarchy, prayer for Adam and Eve, holy water—what matters most is whether they lead people to faith in God, or to faith in the object/structure itself. Even though I would not follow/trust these practices myself, I do not feel that these obscure or radically distort the Christian message for many of these church people.

However, I feel differently about the emphasis on law in this church and the divinization of Simon Kimbangu. In my view and from my analysis of sermons, both of these set aside Jesus Christ as the one who is worthy to receive our greatest praise and adoration. People who depend on what they receive auditorially have heard much more about laws and Simon Kimbangu than about Jesus Christ. Both emphases can easily give rise to a sense of self-righteousness and superiority on the part of Kimbanguists: We're better than other Christians because we follow the laws; we know more than other Christians; our founder is more powerful than other church leaders; heaven will be filled with people from every nation who will have become Kimbanguists and will wear the green and white uniforms. (This scene is shown as background for a portrait of Diangienda.) Perhaps some of this is compensation for the years of oppressive church rule by missionaries in collusion with colonial governments.

I recognize that Africans do need to affirm themselves, to internalize the fact that white is not better than black. But to make an idol of a legal code or of a human being does not solve the problem, in my estimation. Nor does it even the imbalance of power. Instead it shows a lack of knowledge/regard for God's powerful work through many Spirit-filled leaders in positions equal to Kimbangu's in the history of the Christian church. Furthermore, it erects barriers in creating unity with other Christian groups, a unity frequently spoken of in Kimbanguist circles. Many Zambian Christians from other churches question whether Kimbanguists are Christians after they have attended worship services in the Lusaka church.

Conclusion

How then do we from other Christian traditions relate to this church? My stance has been to let Scripture speak for itself, to bring the Word to my students. I also try to help students get a glimpse of church history, especially that of my own sixteenth century Anabaptist origins, so that they can begin to understand that their church is not alone in "being persecuted for righteousness' sake". And I consistently hold up Jesus Christ as my Lord, my model, the One who is worthy to receive my adoration.

As Heinrich Balz²¹ has said, there is too much good and spiritual in this church to dismiss it as merely a syncretist movement in H. W. Turner's typology.²² Even if their reasons for following a strict moral code is to earn their salvation, yet the results have been less stealing, less adultery and promiscuity, more honesty than in their surrounding communities. They do have some effectiveness in freeing their people from the fear of witchcraft. And they speak of a holistic gospel that meets

human needs for health care, education, agricultural development, jobs (although sometimes here in Zambia these may be more a promise than a reality). They see women as equal with men in being spokespeople for God, so women serve as pastors and deacons (but few of them sit on the decision-making executive committee). They do acknowledge that Jesus Christ died for our sins, and they call all to confess and leave a life of sin. They teach that we must love each other, regardless of race or creed—a vital message for Africans with deep tribal and familial loyalties.

Gamaliel's words are still of help today: "If their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is of God, you will not be able to stop these people; you will only find yourselves fighting against God." Acts 6:38-39.

Who are we to judge? God is probably a lot more tolerant than many of us.

Demographic Information

Persons answering questionnaire: 61

Women: 29 Men: 30

Place of birth:

Zambia: 51 Malawi: 3 Angola: 5
Zaire: 1 + 5* Zimbabwe: 1

Ages: 60 years or older: 7

50 - 59 years old: 7
40 - 49 years old: 7
30 - 39 years old: 11
20 - 29 years old: 18
Below 20 years : 9

Educational level:

no formal schooling: 13
completed up to 5 years: 7
completed 5 to 7 years: 17
completed 8 years: 5
completed 1-3 years of secondary school: 12
graduated from secondary school: 4
studied in college/university: 3 + 5*

Those who preach: 30

Those who do not preach: 31

Age when attendance at Kimbanguist Church began

a baby: 12
a child: 4
a youth (ages 12 - 17): 16
an adult (over age 18): 29

Church attended previous to Kimbanguist

Christian Missions in Many Lands:	21
United Church of Zambia/Methodist:	8
Roman Catholic:	9
Seventh Day Adventist:	1
Faith Apostolic:	4
Full Gospel African Church:	2
None:	4

*Some respondents failed to complete all demographic questions. Thus totals may be less than 61. Included in the data for Educational Level are five Zairean students' responses. Since they are recent visitors to the Zambia church, their responses are not included in the other data, at Rev. Kangonga's request.

Endnotes

¹ Diangienda-Kuntima, English translation of his "Essence de la theologie kimbanguiste," 1977, published in Lutheran World Federation, *Christian Theology and Strategy for Mission*, (Geneva 1980), pp. 224-250.

Diangienda-Kuntima was the third son of Simon Kimbangu and named by his father to head the church. He died 08 July 1992. He was instrumental in pulling together various groups under his leadership and nonviolently forcing the colonial Belgian government to recognize and legalize the church in Zaire in December 1959.

² The following have been used as sermon texts. (Some pastors chose more than one Scripture as text.)

Genesis	1:26-27	Matthew	4:1-4	Acts	27:9-11
	4:5-9		5:13-15	Romans	5:12-14
	8:6-10		5:43-48		8:5-8
Haggai	1:3-8		7:13-14		8:14-16
Zechariah	13:1-5		7:21-23		11:33
Malachi	3:1-3		7:24-28		13:11-14
			13:1-9	Galatians	4:8-12
			18:1-3	Colossians	1:20
			19:16-22	Hebrews	12:12
			24:15	James	3:1-12
		Luke	8:24-26	I John	3:1
			12:54-59		4:4-6
			13:6-9		5:1-5
			21:25-28	Revelation	22:14-16
		John	1:10-15		
			14:15-17		

³ Diangienda-Kuntima, "Essence de la théologie kimbanguiste," in the section entitled "A Conditional Salvation."

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ These same three key words are cited by Marie-Louise Martin in her last circular letter (27 February 1990) before her death, and she expresses her concern that a lot more theological work must be carried out so that "Love is given its full New Testament meaning, then commandments and good works will follow in their biblical position." This letter was translated by Ralph Woodhall and printed in *Review of AICs*, Volume 1, Number 2 (May 1990), Centre for New Religious Movements (Birmingham, UK).

⁶ The negative way of stating this may have confused some people. However, since such a statement is often made in sermons, I feel that quite a few people believe that it is true as stated.

⁷ The suffering of Jesus is mentioned in some of the Kimbanguist songs. However, those songs that have been translated for me remind us that Jesus' suffering is like that of Simon Kimbangu's or like ours who suffer in this black skin.

⁸ Diangienda-Kuntima, op.cit., in the section entitled "Sacraments."

⁹ Diangienda-Kuntima, ibid., in the section entitled "A Trinitarian God."

¹⁰ Marie-Louise Martin, last circular letter, op.cit.

¹¹ Diangienda-Kuntima, "Preparing for Fasting" (instructions to churches), Kinshasa, 17 May 1992.

¹² Marie-Louise Martin, *Kimbangu: An African Prophet and His Church*, Friedrich Reinhardt Verlag (Basel 1971) and in English by Basel Blackwell (Oxford 1975). See also Beguin, W. and Martin, M-L *Study Reports on the EJCSK: Its Present Situation and its Ecumenical Relations*, 1969.

¹³ James Bertsche, "Kimbanguism" in *Nouvelles missionnaires du Congo*, July and October (Kinshasa 1965)

¹⁴ Harold Fehderau and Clarence Hiebert, "A Report on Kimbanguism: a visit to some Kimbanguists in the Congo," Jan. 29 - Feb. 5, 1967.

¹⁵ *Ecumenical Review* 19 (1), January 1967, pp. 29-36 (composite authorship)

¹⁶ Susan Asch, *L'Eglise du Prophete Kimbangu, de ses origines a son role actuel au Zaire*, 1983. Cited by Marie-Louise Martin in "Certain Aspects of Kimbangist Theology: Appreciation and Questions," Ministry in partnership with African Independent Churches, David A. Shank, editor (Mennonite Board of Missions, 1991)

¹⁷ Heinrich Balz in *Zeitschrift fur Mission* (Basel) 15:2, 1989, pp. 92-99 "Simon Kimbangu and the Holy Spirit" translated by Dr. A.S. Worrell

¹⁸ W. J. Hollenweger, "An African Independent Theology?" 198-.

¹⁹ Balz, op.cit.

²⁰ See Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, Baker Book House (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1985)

²¹ Balz, op.cit.

²² H.W. Turner in *Mission Focus*, 9 (3), Sept. 1981, p. 49

