

Deep Thought: Structure and Intention in Kongo Prophetism, 1910–1921

BY JOHN M. JANZEN

IN 1963, as a graduate student at the University of Chicago, I wrote a master's thesis on the antecedents of 1921 Kongo prophetism (*ngunzisme*, after the KiKongo for prophet, *ngunza*; "Kimbanguism," after the name of the most prominent prophet, Simon Kimbangu). The thesis pieced together accounts of traditional and new urban cults which sought, through purification and initiation, to fashion an institutional reality capable of dealing with the exigencies of early colonialism of the 1880–1920 era. The thesis was not very successful because available sources could not document conscious continuity from traditional cultic activity to the dramatic messianism of the prophets, who healed the sick, smashed sacred medicines, cleaned cemeteries, raised the dead, and advocated worship of the one true God. Scholarly writers had forwarded the standard causal explanations for Kimbanguism: economic dislocation,¹ "the total fact of colonialism,"² detailed individual actions of principal figures during the 1921 events,³

¹ Vittorio Lanternari, *The Religions of the Oppressed: A Study of Modern Messianic Cults* (New York: Knopf, 1963).

² G. Balandier, *Sociologie actuelle de l'Afrique noire* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963).

³ Efraim Andersson, *Messianic Popular Movements in the Lower Congo* (New York: Heinman, 1958).

or the injustices inherent in military occupations throughout history.⁴ Yet even with these theories, the content of Kongo messianism seemed to rise from nowhere, least of all from Kongo culture.

Having been raised in a tradition of scholarship on the radical wing of the sixteenth-century Reformation, I brought to anthropology a strong inclination to give visionaries the benefit of the doubt regarding their rationality. Thus, despite the master's thesis fiasco, I left for fieldwork in Central Africa, resolved to identify the continuity—cultural or conscious—that led from the cults to the prophets. Surely, I thought, Kimbangu and his cohorts must have had deep insights into the troubles of their times if their pronouncements and actions had precipitated so strong a response from the populace. And even if one were to call the movement of 1921 and the brutal colonial repression “mass hysteria,” the question remained, on what basis had the prophets shaped their message? What was the viewpoint from which their words and actions made rational sense?

Occidental Anthropology Meets Kongo Thought

When I arrived in Central Africa in late 1964, the Congo was in the midst of a vicious civil war. Not terrain alone, but symbols and ideologies were being disputed. Then, as now, Central Africa was an arena for the big powers' struggle over allies and resources. Locally, the battle tended to be waged around differential loyalty to a pantheon of diverse African stars such as Lumumba, the martyr for radical nationalism; Mulopwe, the restored sacred kingship of the BaLuba; Mwaat Yaav, the Lunda emperor; a variety of shadowy reincarnations of Ntotila, king of Kongo; and Kimbangu, the prophet. Particularly in Kongo country—land of three million BaKongo extending over Congo-Brazzaville, Zaire, and Angola—the

⁴ J. Chomé, *La passion de Simon Kimbangu* (Brussels: Présence Africaine, 1959).

independence movement of the 'fifties and early 'sixties had produced scores of documents to Kongo spiritual and cultural revival, including dictionaries, grammars, utopian schemes, and plans of action. The challenge facing a foreign inquirer thrust into this scene was to grasp both the contemporary use of historical symbols and ideas as well as the historical emergence of those images—and to differentiate the two.

Soon after I settled in a local region for a long-term study, the local government head advised me to pay a visit to Fukiau, a young MuKongo nearby who was, on his own, pursuing work akin to mine. Fukiau had left a lucrative urban teaching career in order to found a rural development center in his home region. Amid the pastoral beauty of the rolling Manianga countryside, and the richness of "traditional" African life, he taught his students several Central African languages and African culture history, as well as practical arts required for rural living. His aim was to create self-respecting youth, knowledgeable in their cultural heritage so long deprecated by colonialists, but a youth able to move about within modern life. Thus emphasis in curriculum extended to include the standard sixth-year courses. His small but vital institution took root and thrived. Agriculture and arts were added to the curriculum. Community leaders, appreciative of this renewal of their way of life, gave the institution their collective blessing and placed more land at its disposal. Neighbors began to whisper that he must be a prophet (*ngunza*); a few brought their sick children to him to be healed.

Fukiau, the educator-prophet, and I, the anthropologist, found much to discuss in the months after my arrival. We had lengthy exchanges in the cool of shady grass-covered porches, on walks to public palavers, weddings, funerals, and other festivities. In response to my persistent questions about the meaning of proverbs, role-terms, symbols, judicial practices, kinship patterns, and the origin of Kongo prophets, he produced a lengthy manuscript that I shall here call the "Kongo Cosmology." Put together first into a rough set of notes, then

amended to include observations of numerous elderly "informants," the Cosmology offered a key to Kongo—and Central African—ritual symbolism and religion. Excerpts from this digest of Kongo thought read:

The N'kongo [generic human] thought of the earth as a mountain over a body of water which is the land of the dead, called Mpemba. In Mpemba the sun rises and sets just as it does in the land of the living. Between these two parts, the lands of the dead and the living, the water is both a passage and a great barrier. The world, in Kongo thought, is like two mountains opposed at their bases and separated by the ocean, Kalunga [Fig. 1].

At the rising and setting of the sun the living and the dead exchange day and night.

The setting of the sun signifies man's death and its rising his rebirth, or the continuity of his life. BaKongo believe and hold it true that man's life has no ending, that it constitutes a cycle. The sun, in its rising and setting, is a sign of the cycle, and death is a way of changing one's body and location; he will continue in the cycle on earth, as the initiation song puts it,

"Man turns in the path
He merely turns in the path,
the priests the same."

Contrary to what many students of Kongo have said, the sign of the cross was not introduced into this country and into the minds of its people by foreigners. The cross was known to the BaKongo before the arrival of Europeans, and corresponds to the understanding in their minds of their relationship to their world. . . . In the Nkimba rite, a priest initiated his charges, using the sun in order to expound his teaching about the earth

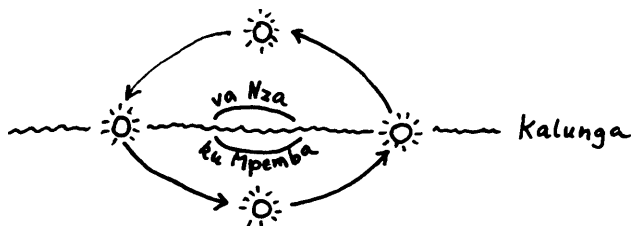


Figure 1. Kongo world according to tradition.

and the life of man, following the sun through its course about the earth and thus pointing out the four stages which make up the cycle of man's life: (1) rising, beginning, birth, or regrowth; (2) ascendancy, maturity, responsibility; (3) setting, handing on, death, transformation; (4) midnight, existence in the other world, eventual rebirth.

. . . Since he did not succeed to make direct contact with God, man found it easier to strike up an alliance with Mpemba, the world of the dead, through chiefs, priests, and prophets or conciliators.

The mission of these mediators is to watch over the equilibrium between the dead and the living, those who are on the earth and those who have left for Mpemba, to remove fear from between them. Between the two worlds, such a mediator must be a wise judge, orator, man of "four eyes," two in front, two behind. This will give him wisdom and the faculties to watch in all directions.

Clan heads enjoyed the role of mediator; this mediation was limited to the clan. Priests also played the role, however their deceitfulness and lack of other virtues weakened their powers; the prophets now can play the role, but they cannot detach themselves from their mortality; only through trance can they arrive at mediation. The spirit of the ancestors is in the prophets, it can drive them into a trance. Persons who return from the trance invoke Jesus because they consider him the greatest of the mediators, wise, elevating, purifying, and freeing from ignorance. He is the central mediator, originating neither from the earth nor Mpemba, belonging to no human race . . .

Every mediator was considered as clairvoyant, representing redness. N'kongo perceived that white (*mpemba*, *luvemba*, chalk), red (*tukula*, bark powder), and black (*kala*, ashes, charcoal) explained and predicted the future phenomena in the clan and the life of man.

Fieldwork offered many occasions to witness the signs of this cosmology. For example, at one clan chief's inauguration, the patrilineal children (collective offspring of matrilineage males) "occupied" a space around the deceased chief's house. They began drumming at sunset and continued throughout the night, singing commentaries on the living, hymns of the prophets, and other songs. At dawn they left their space

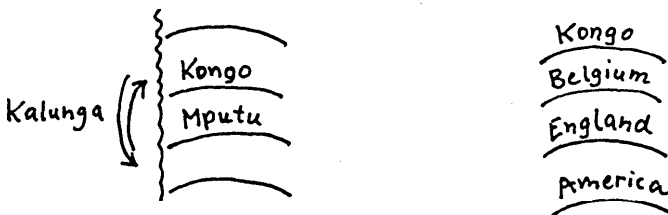
through one of three palm arches before the house of the deceased and circled around the square to the chief designate's house. There they fired salvos from their guns and retreated through another palm arch into the "enclosure of the dead," where their drums fell silent. Major tenets of the cosmology illustrated here include the interaction of Mpemba and the world of the living; the formal analogy of time between day/night, and the transition from one political regime to the next; between ceremonial drums of the patrifilial children, and the welling up of Mpemba forces in the world of the living.

On another occasion my neighbors observed that the world was "round like a plate," not "round like a ball" as they had been taught in school. The underside of the plate was *mputu*, whence came Whites. (*Mputu* here derives from the KiKongo for Portuguese, *Bamputulugezo*.) Furthermore, one could get from here to *mputu* magically. Someone, it was rumored, had recently discovered a door to *mputu* in the forest. A dying person's soul had been seen on its way there, and to the other world. The significance of this coming and going between the two worlds was brought home to me vividly when villagers, on several occasions, commented to my guide that "your White must be a visiting ancestor because he asks questions about clan names and origins, and eats our food."

Perhaps the fullest confirmation of the Cosmology came from conversations with prophets of the Church of the Holy Spirit at their Holy City, high in the hills of Sundi Mamba, overlooking the Zaire river valley. These prophets had all been in colonial exile in Upper Congo, having been arrested in the 'twenties, 'thirties, and 'forties for practicing "Kimbanquism" or another type of prophetism. One night, after having bathed and attended evening prayers, a number of prophets gathered with me in the house of the men's hut chief. After a time I introduced the drawings of the upper and lower worlds, the great sea Kalunga, and the path of the sun around the world with its four positions—the Kongo Cosmol-

ogy. Did it mean something to them? One prophet stated that without a doubt it was authentic. Another queried, "Where is *ku mpemba*?" "Can you tell me?" I asked. "Yes," returned the prophet, "it is *mputu*, land of the Whites." At this point a third prophet rose excitedly and fetched a notebook of his own writings and drawings. The sign was indeed ancestral, but another sign could be used to represent the world, one with levels, like stacked dishes, representing different lands (Fig. 2a). This prophet understood the relationship of Mputu to the world of the living, but he wished to know, "What land lies beyond Mputu?" I replied that I could not answer that question until there was agreement on the shape of the earth. To this he responded by placing four plates on the table in a row, naming them, in order, "Kongo, Belgium, England, and America" (Fig. 2b). Then he clarified his earlier question, asking, "Now, what land lies beyond America?" I hesitated: Should I reply in the framework of the latter version of the cosmology? But did he understand it? What was the difference between this view of the world and the earlier one? It seemed that they were really one, the second representing nuances within a category embracing Mpemba, the land of the dead, *mputu*, land(s) of the Europeans (and Americans), both standing in contrast to Kongo, *va nza*, "on the earth." The second interpretation seemed to have been "flattened out," to accommodate maps in schools and textbooks, without thereby losing the original contrast between Mpemba and The World.

The prophets then related the Cosmology to the history of slavery, the departure of their ancestors to *mputu*, and the



Figures 2a and 2b. Modern representation of Kongo world.

repeated return of Whites to Africa. Africans had been enslaved by their own chiefs and by strangers, and "transported by boat to America, through *nzau*, a huge hole in the sea" (*nzau* also means elephant, or elephant trunk, i.e., a tube or passage). Could the American anthropologist tell what had happened to the ancestors? The prophets reasoned that if the ancestors were free, they would surely want to return home back up through *nzau* by boats, planes, or cars. The prophets had, in their lifetime, seen the end of colonialism and had "returned home" to Kongo. It figured that if the slaves in America were free, they would return. If they had not returned, it indicated they were still in bondage.

The presence of an American from *mputu* who listened and spoke in KiKongo released a barrage of further concerns about the world's injustices and hopes. Had the anthropologist heard how Jacob, father of the Whites, had stolen the birth-right from Esau, father of the Blacks? "Jacob tricked his father Isaac into giving him treasures destined for Esau and his people. While the black people were running around in the forest looking for food, Jacob's people, the Whites, were conniving to usurp the riches."

It was by now two o'clock in the morning. I was getting tired while the prophets, accustomed to all-night worship dances, were only beginning to enjoy themselves. Before I went to bed they reassured me that injustice, looming so formidably, had not prevailed. Despite the ancestors' failure to return en masse, Jesus, Kimbangu, Mbumba, Masamba and other prophets had returned, bringing justice and truth to Kongo. It was as the hymn said,

When Lord Jesus ascended from the sea
The heavens opened wide.
Look at the words spoken in humility,
He who is a child I will love.

Perhaps the ancestors would still return. In any case, they had been very strong. But their sciences had been irretrievably

lost; there seemed no way of regaining them. Truth had come via the prophets, in a book, and in power over illness and death. This major point was illustrated in the prophet's notebook drawing in which a bird-like being hovered over an open book and beneath the Bible-like book there was a robed, winged figure, made to appear like the prophet's ceremonial garment. These three figures, aligned hierarchically, were framed above and below by rainbow-like arches or circles, resembling the frame provided by the Kongo cosmology's path of the sun (Fig. 3).

Sources and Theories on Kongo Prophetism, 1921

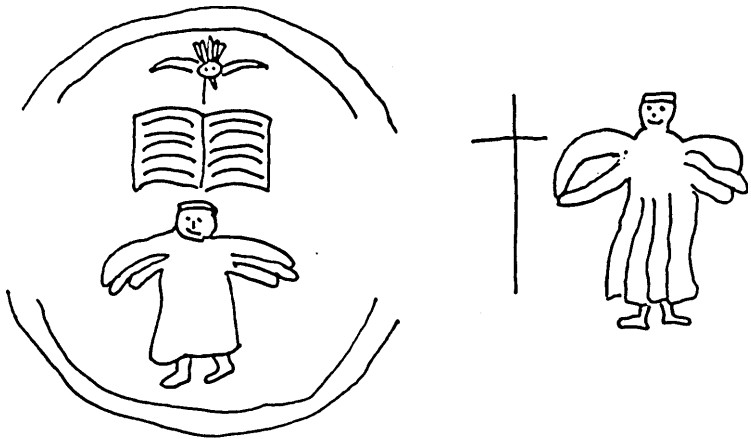
The foregoing accounts illustrate how BaKongo articulate in act and word their world view, the Kongo Cosmology. Publication of this cosmology in KiKongo and French⁵ has made it accessible to a sizable number of Central African and Kongo literati, by whom it has been both criticized⁶ and highly praised.⁷ Some have recognized in it the basic elements of a universal philosophy.⁸ Analytically, the Cosmology could be defined as an explanation of the world, a network of metaphoric spaces and colors, an analogy of time in the movement of heavenly bodies, and a set of classificatory relations between natural and human domains. It is, as well, a plan for action, containing a theory of political expectancy in which one order or dynasty, when discredited, dissolves into another, newly endowed with the benediction of ancestral power. The Cosmology is therefore transformational, retaining certain basic axioms about the interchange of worldly power, justice, and reality with the beyond of Mpemba, even

⁵ Fu-kiau kia Bunseki, *N'kongo ye Nza yakun' zungidila/Le Mukongo et le monde qui l'entourait* (Kinshasa: O.N.R.D., 1969).

⁶ Batsikama ba Mampuya, "A propos de la cosmogonie Kongo," *Cultures au Zaire et en Afrique* no. 4 (1974): 239-264.

⁷ F. Baziota, *Ne-Kongo en Afrique Centrale* (Rome: Catholic Book Agency, 1971).

⁸ R. F. Thompson, personal communications, 1975.



Figures 3a and 3b. Prophets in Kongo cosmology.

in the face of school learning in geography, natural science, and technology. For these reasons the Cosmology is our primary vehicle for understanding the thought of prophets. It is itself a theory of prophetic mediation.

In a sense scholarly studies of Kongo prophetism have shared with this indigenous theory of prophetism the important characteristic of projecting a model back upon less well-known origins of previous movements. Sinda, working on the whole history of Kongo prophetism, from the obscure Kongo prophet Francisco Kassola of 1632 through the Croix-Koma, current in 1960–70, has

sought to study the Kimbanguist and Matswanist movements from an inside perspective, so as to determine the psychosociological climate that preceded their birth and their development. Through this technique it would be possible to extract the internal causes of their evolution, indeed, to determine their deepest goals, and in terms of these goals, to decide in what measure they failed or succeeded.⁹

His main sources for this internal model of the two movements were texts of “heavenly songs” (*chants du ciel*) and “ser-

⁹ M. Sinda, *Les messianismes kongo et leurs incidences politiques* (Paris: Payot, 1972), p. 19.

mons to the faithful" (*méssages aux fidèles*), produced during the 'twenties and 'thirties in Lower Congo settings. Motifs and perspectives gleaned from these texts, and compared with analogous songs in the pre-1920 era, led Sinda to conclude that the prophetic oral literature of the post-1920 period was basically different from conventional Kongo oral literature. It was a new anticolonial literature with clear nationalistic aspirations. Yet because of its heavy Christian content its more basic *political* intent foundered on the rocks of *attentisme mystique*, instead of leading on to political action.

The method of analysis used by Sinda, although it corresponds in one important aspect to Kongo thought—that is, the projection onto history of a contemporary model—is not per se an assurance of valid conclusions about prophets' intentions. Andersson, drawing from the same sources as Sinda, is led to opposite conclusions about the intentions of early twentieth-century Kongo prophetism. Himself a well-known missionary and churchman, he sees Kongo prophetism as having led to a vigorous grass-roots Christianity, able, because of its intentions, to endure colonial persecution and grow into a strong regional and national church.¹⁰ Sinda, in contrast, had predicted that the churches, having grown up around Kongo prophetism, would wither once their political goals had been achieved. Despite the value of both these analyses of Kongo prophetism, the preferences both scholars project upon the movements' intentions vary so markedly that we cannot be certain whether either interpretation is correct.

MacGaffey's work is significant in this connection. He, too, constructs a model in some ways based on contemporary evidence and projects it back upon the history of Kongo prophetism. But he assumes that intentions articulate social structural roles ("commissions of Kongo religion"). Kongo prophetism may thus be accounted for—in 1975 as well as in 1921 or 1500—by looking at the matrix of all commissions,

¹⁰ Andersson, *Messianic Popular Movements in the Lower Congo, and Churches at the Grass Roots* (London: Lutterworth, 1968).

which include not just the prophet (*ngunza*) but the chief (*mfumu*), the magician (*nganga*), and the witch (*n'doki*). These commissions are endowed with mutually complementary rights, duties, and characteristics, such that the prophet emerges in response to a loss of chiefly authority and a rise in perceived witchcraft activity.¹¹

The task we have set ourselves here is to evaluate the relationship of prophetic intentions—the prophet's conscious or willful participation in significant actions—to structural matrices which might also determine events. This will be done in light of several types of primary documents that have become available since the foregoing anthropological analyses were undertaken. One of these texts is a "diary" of the prophet Kimbangu, compiled by two secretary-helpers during the crucial phase of his early ministry in 1921.¹² A second document is that of a well-informed eyewitness of the events of 1921 who interpreted what was occurring.¹³ The third document is a recent synoptic chronology of events of 1921 connected with the prophetic movement, compiled by a knowledgeable scholar from all available source material.¹⁴ We shall examine the relationship of individual intentions to situations and structures from these very helpful documents, beginning with the chronology.

Recurring themes in Africans' reports of what was said, done, and written may be noted in the Kongo prophet movement of 1921. (1) Bidumbu, a friend of Kimbangu, is recorded to have observed that early in 1921 Kimbangu had a series of visions. (2) Acts of healing, attempted resurrections, eventually successful resurrections, were reported by several

¹¹ W. MacGaffey, "The Religious Commissions of the BaKongo," *Man* 5 (1970): 27–38, and "Cultural Roots of Kongo Prophetism," Third International Congress of Africanists, Addis Ababa, 1973.

¹² P. Raymaekers, *Histoire de Simon Kimbangu, prophète, d'après les écrivains Nfinangani et Nzungu* (Kinshasa: University of Kinshasa; Archives de Sociologie des Religions, 1971).

¹³ Kwamba, "Lumbu kiaki tumweni mambu manzenza," *Minsamu mia Yenge* (1921).

¹⁴ C. Irvine, "The Birth of the Kimbanguist Movement in the Bas-Zaïre, 1921," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 6 (1974): 24–76.

“witnesses,” both African and European, prompting multitudes of people to come to Kimbangu for help at his village, Nkamba. (3) People in Nkamba were reported by visitors to wonder whether the prophet’s healing powers were made possible by the blessing he and his mother received from missionary Cameron decades earlier in his youth. (4) Other prophets (*bangunza*), at first a few, then hundreds, made their appearance in many regions of the Lower Congo. (5) Protestant catechists were reported to be exhorting people to destroy their charms and medicines (*min’kisi*); some of the other prophets were reported to destroy cult objects within Catholic chapels, including removing bells and burning images and crucifixes; government chiefs were reported to fear the prophets’ *n’kisi* (power), and thus could not arrest them as instructed by colonial officials. (6) Prophets other than Kimbangu were reported to encourage or practice tax boycotts. (7) Colonial “medallion” chiefs were rejected, as were the Belgian authorities; some prophets—again, other than Kimbangu—said, “We are the rulers” and “America will come.” (8) Prophets other than Kimbangu forecasted and waited for the “end of the world.”¹⁵ These accounts may begin to satisfy historiographic demands for a factual, objective series of features, but they hardly offer an understanding of actors’ intentions as do the following texts.

One interesting interpretation of these events is available. Its author, enthusiastic Protestant catechist Kwamba, wrote from Mukimbungu, not far from Nkamba, the following commentary, published in the Swedish Mission’s *Minsamu Miayenge*.

Today we have seen strange things! The strength of the words of the Lord were made known in the land of darkness, and brought joy and love to the hearts of the people. It removed anger and enmity from among the people. We saw in this our Kongo, how the anger and witchcraft (*n’doki*) of the olden times was removed. Now the peace of Christ alone reigns everywhere.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

The name of God is praised and the churches of God are being built and are growing in strength of God. Because of the power of God we see crowds of people listening to the words of God and believing. It is because of this power (*lendo*) that (we are amazed at how) the magicians (*banganga*) are throwing away their charms (*min'kisi*) and stop believing in them.

We are truly amazed! These are strange and great things. But we know that we shall see even greater! We shall see the New Heaven and the New Earth. The heaven shall open and the angels of God shall appear and descend in glory. . . .¹⁶

This interpretation makes the prophet movement out to be an enthusiastic revival within the Protestant churches—a stance taken by many catechists, including Kimbangu, and one or two missionaries, until most of the Africans were arrested by the government and “abandoned” by the missions. It becomes clear, with the themes and interpretations seen so far, that intentions were multiple: some making it out to be a Protestant revival; others an anticolonial protest movement; perhaps still others a revival of Kongo religion.

These multiple nuances of intention are far better understood after examining Kimbangu's remarkable diary, seized by Belgian authorities shortly before Kimbangu's arrest, translated for the military tribunal, and recently published in its French translation.¹⁷ The study of intention is somewhat complicated here because from section to section the voice of narration shifts. The diary opens in the voice of his “mother” describing auspicious encounters with Whites during Kimbangu's youth. His early adulthood is also described in the third person. Kimbangu's early ministry, beginning with his intense desire to be a catechist, is however narrated in the first person. In the account of the end of his free ministry, and in his confrontation with his enemies, the narration shifts to the third person. We shall summarize these sections, with particular attention to intention and structure.

¹⁶ Kwamba, “Lumbu kiaki tumweni mambu manzenza.”

¹⁷ Raymaekers, *Histoire de Simon Kimbangu*.

(Mother's voice) Kimbangu's mother has two encounters with White missionaries. Missionary Comber appears in a market, frightening all present to flight except her. Comber blesses her. Another encounter occurs when missionary Cameron flees through Nkamba, pursued by an angry mob. Cameron stops at her house and asks for a drink. She gives him water. He blesses her and her son, Kimbangu. The pursuers attack her, but they die, as do all who saw Cameron pass through the villages.

Kimbangu's commission is rooted in the imagery describing mothers of exceptional persons as having been visited by emissaries from the spirit world. Obvious parallels exist with mothers of twins and mothers of spirit children such as *bisimbi*. Evidence of the forces of Mpemba is present in the symbolism of "three-ness" and sudden death: three persons die in each village Cameron passes through; he passes through three times; etc. This symbolism, consistent with the Cosmology, continues in the mother's account of Kimbangu's childhood and youth.

(Mother's voice or other third person) Kimbangu is sick with "dysentery" in a neighboring village. His mother is called to fetch him. She sets out at night, borrowing fire from people along the way. She hears a voice. She finds her son in a dirty house, and hoists him on her back. He asks to "go aside" and falls into a hole, momentarily getting lost. With the help of God, she finds him. A man tells her that her son will be healed (alternative, that he will be a healer). The boy asks for a *kinsakulu* vegetable. It is given him by a woman, and he recovers. He grows up and marries this woman, and they have a child.

This passage relates further encounters with Mpemba. Runny bowels are often indications of purification or of a mystical encounter in Kongo therapeutic thought; falling into a hole—that is, downward into the presence of ancestors—is an auspicious encounter with spirits. Taking *kinsakulu* (*nsaku*, blessing, benediction) seals the experience. The structure of these encounters is typical of Central African hero-origin myths, in which a series of male-female couples conveys to an offspring their particular gift or "fruit," which in turn becomes the

source of the next fertile encounter. Thus Kinzembo and Kuyela are cited as Kimbangu's parents; Kimbangu's mother Kinzembo encounters the White, who blesses the prophet child; an unidentified man assures her that her son will be healed; the woman who had offered him *kinsakulu* marries him and they have a child. An entire spiritual genealogy is thus interjected into a conventional one.

(Third person) Kimbangu is married and baptized, after having had catechetical instruction. He wants to become a catechist, but is refused for not being sufficiently pious. Against his elders' will he goes off to Kinshasa to take a job. But because of this sin against them, he makes repeated mistakes, and is arrested. Released, he returns to the village, asks pardon of his elders. Again he requests permission to be made a catechist, and is refused.

(First person) In a dream God tells him that because Man has denied him the catechist's career, God will make him an apostle. Shortly thereafter, on his way to market with pipe in mouth and hat on head, he heals a sick girl with his blessing. He tells her husband, and a passing catechist, of his success.

Kimbangu then attempts to raise three separate dead children. Contrary to other eyewitness accounts, he acknowledges failure each time. In the first case, God withdrew permission for the dead to be raised. In the second, the parents of the child failed to believe. In the third, the child died again because of the surrounding evil. Only later are multiple successful acts of healing and resurrection performed.

In Kongo Cosmology, an auspicious act such as Kimbangu's effort to resurrect the dead, repeated three times, is an initiatory symbol expressing entrance, presence in, and exit from Mpemba. Especially because it is the encounter with death, it represents an initiation to full power over death, the power of Mpemba.

(First person) The work of healing, resurrecting, and teaching increases, and Kimbangu appoints helpers. Other prophets appear, some receive his blessing; others are named "inadequate to the task," or are called "false."

As Kimbangu begins to attract a following, and as others join

with him in "the work," he sets standards for their sanctification.

His main criterion for the work of prophecy appears to be church membership. He recognizes and blesses those who are "believers"; he disowns those who are pagan. This raises a serious problem, because whereas the catechists and believers initially do not follow Kimbangu, the church members in disgrace, and pagans, flock to him.

Kimbangu frequently encounters catechists. He challenges their ability to interpret scripture. On several occasions he "explains" what they fail to understand. Catechists, ordinary believers, and even missionaries are shown to be awed by this. However when church members in disgrace and pagans come to Kimbangu to work with him, the church members become discontented. Kimbangu resolves this problem in a council (akin to the mission's councils, or to a kinship palaver). Catechists and church members may do the sacred work of healing, whereas pagan supporters and others will have to be content to perform menial tasks for the multitudes who come to Nkamba in search of help. Pagans and disgraced church members are unhappy with this decision. Kimbangu shows great anger with them, and orders them to ask for forgiveness.

For Kimbangu the new world was clearly within the church. He held to this ideal so strongly that he alienated pagan supporters and church members in disfavor with their authorities. Within the ranks of those church members in good standing, including the prophets he favored, some were perceived to be in need of correction.

(Third person narration) Kimbangu criticized another prophet, Monika, for referring to himself as "the vine," and "Paul the Apostle." Kimbangu withdrew to pray for clarity in knowing whether his prophets were "true." The response came in the form of an order to conduct a white tomatoe (*binsukulu*) ordeal, each prophet including Kimbangu obliged to eat one of the vegetables. Those who refused to eat "white *binsukulu*" [*binsakulu*?] were deemed "false prophets."

This white symbolism of truth or purity is part of a set of contrasting symbols that run throughout the last half of the

diary. White and black flags, pure virgins and impure, a "pot" and a dirty tin can, represent respectively belief, truth, and purity in contrast to disbelief, falsity, and impurity within the ranks of followers and the public.

Radical action is forced upon Kimbangu, and nowhere is it as apparent as in his confrontations with pagan prophets, Belgian administrator Morel, and missionary Jennings.

The visit of administrator Morel to Nkamba is reported on at length. Trembling ecstatically, Kimbangu shouts that before Jehovah he is not afraid, for God shall send Gabriel to defend him. Before the pagan prophets that come to visit him, he "froths at the mouth" in anger, because they want to enjoy the privileges of spiritual ministry. Their force emanates from the devil when they tremble. At least two dozen such prophets appear at Nkamba, but refuse subservience to Kimbangu. Although told that their power is "of the devil," they respond, "Whether of the devil or not, we'll stick to our prophecy." With missionary Jennings, before whom Kimbangu trembles, there is reconciliation after Jennings has clarified his good intentions.

A review of the foregoing summaries and interpretations leaves us with a picture of the various modes in which prophetic intention and expression is couched. Kimbangu's principal verbal rationale for his actions comes across in a very self-effacing way: "What I have done is not me, but. . ."¹⁸ Or he attributes his first healing episode to "an inspiration":

I passed Kintondo's village, and an inspiration led me to her. She was all disfigured. . . . I had my pipe in my mouth and hat on the head. God told me, "Take your pipe and hat in your hand." I felt my arm raising as if someone was lifting it. That is how I let my hand go while I said, "You are blessed in the name of Jesus Christ, be healed. . . ."¹⁹

In some passages, such as that relating his altercation with the catechist Mowala, Kimbangu explains God's intentions. Disputing Mowala's own interpretation of a dream about the white and black flags, the pot and the dirty tin can, etc., Kimbangu

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

states that “. . . God, in showing him these things, meant, ‘You Mowala who are believer and catechist, why do you deny the light of God in the fact that He has produced?’ ”²⁰ Elsewhere, Kimbangu describes onlookers’ recollections of events and their interpretations of Kimbangu’s motives. Thus, in a passage following the above, Kimbangu explains his actions to a youth. The youth’s words are then given: “Mowala thought one thing, but you in your intelligence knew that it was wrong.”²¹ The text then jumps midstream to third-person narration, saying that “Simon added to the youth that this was how God had revealed himself.”²²

The avoidance of explicit statements of intention reaches its highest expression in those moments when ecstatic trembling occurs: of these instances—before his enemies—the one before the administrator is most notable. The text states that Kimbangu was seized by the Holy Spirit and cried to Jehovah with a loud voice, raising his eyes to heaven and saying, in a new language, “Tek Tektel Tek.”²³ This glossolalic outburst is explained in the next paragraph:

The reason for these glances to heaven and these words is that God had promised Simon Kimbangu that, whenever your enemies confront you, it is you who shall speak; I will send the Prince of Angels, Gabriel, to defend you. Thus God did not renege on his promise when the Whiteman arrived.²⁴

This extremely interesting passage suggests how intentions may be mediated through cultural categories and symbols. Kimbangu is clearly not a puppet of unconscious symbolism in the Kongo cosmology. But neither is he stating his intentions explicitly. He is working out the dilemma of powerlessness within the idioms of the Cosmology, in the “language of Mpemba,” glossolalia. It is the conscious, and intentional, use of otherwordly symbols.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

This use of nonverbal symbols and categories, and the repeated negation of personal intentions by Kongo prophets, raises squarely the dilemma social theorists have had to face with most millenarian movements. The challenge is one of respecting the intentionality of individual thought, while at the same time allowing for the significance of heavily charged symbols in action settings. Most anthropological explanations minimize the significance of the prophet's words, leaning heavily on the symbolic, or structural, implication of his actions. A few theorists have offered a solution to the issue (of intentions *and* structure) by identifying "intentional thought" as thought based on purposive, goal-oriented behavior, verbalized by an actor. These same theorists have also propounded a less explicit order of meaning which they call variously "institutional," "implicational," or "rational," neither fully explicated or verbalized, nor necessarily conscious.²⁵

Yet even this dichotomy, widely represented in social thinking, fails to offer a satisfactory explanatory framework for Kimbangu's (and his fellow prophets') apparently intentional use of nonverbal, glossolalic and other, symbols. For if we relegate such activity to the realm of the structural or institutional, we have negated its thought-like attributes entirely. However, to call it strictly intentional activity leaves us open to the pitfalls of imposing motives upon prophets who, like Kimbangu, are reluctant to give themselves credit for even having personal intentions.

"Continuity-of-consciousness" explanations of both the intentional and the structural type fail to deal adequately with Kongo prophetic thought. This thought, like much religious thought, and especially millenarian thought, is dialectical. That is, it defines being and knowledge through negation and opposition. Mpemba, the dominant symbol of Kongo prophetic thought, negates the phenomenal world. Yet Mpemba of-

²⁵ Joseph G. Jorgensen, *The Sun Dance Religion: Power for the Powerless* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 244; F. A. Hanson, *Meaning in Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975).

fers the legitimacy of roles of temporal power in human society. Mpemba is the source of solutions to human social problems. Any change from the status quo must, therefore, come from Mpemba. Change, in political, economic, or natural domains, is accounted for by the welling up of Mpemba's forces in the universe. By definition, these forces are outside of and beyond individuals.

This feature in Kongo prophetic thought has much in common with the dialectical thinking in some nineteenth-century European philosophy. Hegel's dialectic has recently inspired at least one anthropologist to construct a logical set of oppositions which prophets exercise in creating their models for a New Society, for example, absolute authority vs. diffuse authority, exchange economy vs. cash economy, etc.²⁶ Kant's "cosmological ideas" similarly operate so as to "make dialectical assertions which, on the basis of pure reason, each have an opposed, contradictory assertion," for example, infinite vs. finite time and space, simple vs. composite elements in all things, freedom vs. necessity in causation, etc.²⁷ This parallel between Kongo prophetic thought and certain features of Western philosophy does not explain the former, but it does allow us to identify the unique feature of Kongo thought in more familiar terms.

To render justice to the nature of thought inherent in individual utterances and acts of persons like Kimbangu, without at the same time dimming the significance of culturally specific symbols from Kongo society and cosmology which they utilize, the notion of *dialectical intention* is here proposed. This may be defined as problem-solving thought and action which negates the problematic condition surrounding an actor or group of actors, and leads them to search within cultural categories for logically related alternatives. In explicit Kongo cultural categories we see this in the assertion that Mpemba

²⁶ K. O. L. Burridge, *New Heaven, New Earth: A Study of Millenarian Activities* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1969).

²⁷ H. D. Aiken, ed., *The Age of Ideology* (New York: Mentor, 1956), pp. 40-42.

occasionally replaces or pervades "the world." A particular actor in a localized situation will usually take an element out of available symbols of Mpemba to resolve his own perhaps idiosyncratic problematic situation. It is a tenet of Kongo thought that innovations do not emanate from individuals, so we cannot expect a Kongo prophet to state explicitly just how he thinks, individually. However, to the extent that a large public responds to a Mpemba-rooted innovation, thereby recognizing its integral derivation from tradition, and its unique appropriateness to the situation, we can call it rational thought. In the 1921 Lower Congo setting such thinking, on the part of prophets like Kimbangu, recognized the political dialectic opposing Europeans and Africans, and dealt with it in terms alternative to those which had been used but had become bankrupt. This process of finding solutions to the effects of colonialism had begun well before 1921, and it is to this that we now turn.

Exploring the Preconditions of Kongo Prophetism, 1921

Voluminous writings by Kongo catechists from 1910 to 1918, by some of the very persons who joined Kimbangu, offer grounds for the study of dialectical intentions. Cultural categories evident in migration legends, genealogies, fables, origin accounts of sacred medicines, histories of chiefs and clans, reflect latitudes within which are apparent both the perceived problem and the dialectical intention resolving it. In the following pages such issues will be sampled having to do with power, social legitimation, technology, life and death, issues very much on the minds of the prophets.

(1) *The catechists' notebooks offer an early twentieth-century Kongo perception of Whites in colonial government and missions; the prophets strove to come to terms with Whites' growing power over them.*²⁸ The first appearance of Europeans is relegated by

²⁸ After Mafula, Notebook 246, Laman Collection, Lidingö, 1915.

Kongo thought into the legend of the founding of the Kongo kingdom. In one typical legend of this sort from Mbanza Manteke, catechist Mufula describes Kongoliya's (generic "Kongo ruler") rule and succession. Kongoliya drove out the "red people," built his town, and had sons bearing his name: NaVusi "na Kongo" (Kongo's son), Nanga Na Kongo, Nkazi a Kongo, Mbenza Kongo, etc. NaVusi succeeded Kongoliya, Nanga NaKongo followed him, then Nkazi a Kongo, in customary successional pattern. The Whites' arrival during the rule of Nkazi a Kongo is told in the legend:

During the rule of Nkazi a Kongo the Catholic Whites (*mindele mia mpelo*) entered the land, at the same time that Nkimba, Nkita, and Manzanza cults were begun. These Whites, who emerged at Mbala [on the coast?] also introduced salt, cloth, and a variety of other items of European culture (*kisi mputu*). Nkazi a Kongo and his brothers fought the Whites in a fierce battle, defeating them so they returned to their land.

The legend goes on to relate that even though Nanga was posted to guard the coast, the Whites returned to attack the King. The outcome is not indicated, but what is told is revealing. Nanga was defeated by Mabuku, who went to the coast to trade and, presumably, to accept the Whites' support and lend them assistance in their attack on the king, Mabaku's "father." The legend thus represses from the oral tradition Europeans in their complicity with others and dwells explicitly on the struggle between brothers.

In this vein the legend relates dozens of battles between Kongo clans over disputed terrain and resources. One side is invariably described as the victor, while the other side, the loser, flees and locates elsewhere. (This is very much the pattern of events of the time of narration, 1880–1910, when wholesale dislocation occurred as well as feuding and revolts against Europeans.²⁹) The Mbanza Manteke legend dwells at great length on the peaceful rule of one leopard skin chief,

²⁹ E. Dupont, *Lettres sur le Congo* (Paris, 1878).

but closes this portion of the text with the puzzling statement that "all this occurred before the arrival of the Whites" (*mindele*). Evidently, what is meant is the modern European intrusion.

Even so, no further mention is made in the legend of Whites. What is stated after their mention as a chronological "peg" for migrations and the rule of chiefs and kings is a "time of desolation" (*kimongi*) when rains stopped, hunger became widespread, disease, raiding, and poisoning increased. Then, in the midst of desolation, God's "spider web" (a reference to this fabled form of getting to and from heaven) descended in Ndembolo village in Mbanza Manteke territory, with four persons on it. They told the people that the rain had been held up because someone had "stolen from heaven." Earth people were henceforth to refrain from killing any living thing, even from eating meat: "You die because you kill." A dense fog then settled over the land, and God's web returned into the sky with the four emissaries on it.

The legend suggests that as long as Whites are dealt with politically as another clan or people, and defeated in battle, they are human, on a par with the people of Kongo. When colonial powers invade, the subservient BaKongo make their colonial masters into judgmental agents of the ancestors or God. Rain-making and rain-holding are symbols of political centrality in this part of Africa. The tale thus suggests idiomatically that power had been lost. The "problem" was not, however, the conquest by the Whites so much as that "a dense fog settled over the land"; the cultural light had gone out.

The dialectical intention of Kimbangu and the prophets, faced with this set of problems, took the shape of entering the domain of Mpemba in ecstasy, battling the supernatural enemy "in the spirit," thereby making the Europeans human again, on a par with Kongo in the new world (recall Kimbangu's glossolalic confrontation with administrator Morel and missionary Jennings). It was, in effect, a Promethean act of standing up to the gods!

(2) *The catechists' notebooks describe recurrent episodes in which chiefs lost their legitimacy; the prophets were concerned with regaining power and finding legitimation from Mpemba.*³⁰ By 1900 most of the great Kongo chiefs had been replaced by colonially backed strongmen ("medallioned" chiefs), who were usually more interested in labor recruitment and tax collection than in the public good. Where no great chiefs had existed, the medallion chiefs were imposed. Gradually all rights to judicial process and capital punishment such as the poison ordeal were suppressed. By 1910 the last armed uprising had been defeated. The problem that prevailed in BaKongo minds was no longer that of "how to resist" but "how to accept and explain powerlessness." In Lutete's text which follows, the loss of chiefly power is explained as the inability of *bisimbi* spirits to protect the chiefs' souls (*lunzi*, *bunzi*) from witches. A great *nganga*-priest, in the text, succeeds in finding a medicine to identify witches without the help of the poison ordeal.

A certain ancient chief Na Ngana Nweka had a pool named Kidi-Kidi. It was very dark at the bottom and difficult to see there. Stones were placed at the bottom of the pool by *bisimbi* whose powers were considerable. Na Ngana Nweka entrusted his soul to a *simbi*, who hid it beneath a rock at the bottom so witches could not kidnap it . . . The result was that this chief lived a very long time, even after his body had developed bad ulcers all over. In fact, he lived twelve years with his sores and reached a ripe old age. He then spoke to his sister's son Mabete Masambama Manbangu, "Come to the pool where I am going and the elders preceeded." When he died—the elders said he had not been eaten by witches—he went of his own accord. They gave his soul to the *bisimbi*, to whom he returned. For the elders and the head of the *simbi* meet annually and in each generation. No ordinary person can escape from this pool, Kidi-Kidi, the pool of *bisimbi*.

Now the witches also meet with the *simbi* elder to hide their life breath. In the past many witches took *n'kasa* poison. But [no longer]. A clever *nganga* who knew how to divine and interrogate, got Mbuangi medicine (also called Mayodi) to help him identify the witches hiding their powers (*kundu*) in Kidi-Kidi . . .

³⁰ Based on Lutete, Notebook No. 225, Laman Collection, Lidingō, 1915.

This *nganga* declared who was a witch. He told the witches that whoever of them would not eat poison in the ordeal would henceforth come under the *nganga's* spell. One utterance (of Mbuangi) would suffice to kill him, even if he had hidden his soul-force beneath the water with the *bisimbi*. Repetition of the spell two or three times would suffice to assure that a suspect was not a witch.

In this text, and others like it, the legitimacy of chiefly power is shown to be rooted in a series of creatures such as crocodiles, water pythons, etc., who in turn are expressions of *bisimbi* spirits and, ultimately, of Nzambi-God. Loss of chiefly power is interpreted as the rise of alternative mediators within this hierarchy who, like rival clans, find a superior *simbi* patronage. If such a witchcraft rival manages to kidnap a chief's soul, he and his regime die. An *nganga* may combat this situation by finding either better protecting spirits or more powerful witchcraft-finding medicine. A theory is developed regarding the gaining and losing of legitimate authority, propounded to deal with the banning of the antiwitchcraft poison ordeal early in the colonial era.

In terms of the prophets' dialectical intentions, the problem of the early colonial era was the loss of chiefly power, of chiefship itself. A moderate response by *banganga*, who had mediated *bisimbi* spirits for chiefs, was to invent new medicines. The prophets were held by some to be in possession of powerful medicines. But a more radical dialectic intention was evident in the prophets' abandonment of ineffectual medicines, without completely discarding the important role of the *bisimbi* spirits' legitimacy. In Kimbangu's diary there are important *simbi* type symbols—his falling in a hole, his mother's special status for having given Whites water, the mediating symbol of water. The symbolism persists in contemporary Kimbanguist ritual, which includes purificatory baths in and prayers at the pools of Nkamba, bottled holy water, and legends among believers about the safeguarding of membership cards under pools and waterfalls. Some evidence suggests that contemporary Kongo prophets, while respecting

the power of *bisimbi* as mediators from Nzambi, believe they can bypass these for direct access to the forces of Mpemba—generalized otherworldly power.

(3) *The catechists' writings reveal an orderly hierophany of medicinal powers; the prophets were preoccupied with the relationship of technique to power, either through more powerful medicines or the abandonment of medicines altogether.*³¹ The Kongo ritual system is built around several hierarchies and axes, as the Cosmology indicates. One dimension is a hierophany of beings originating in the invisible omnipotence of God, and moving through lesser, more visible, beings such as Funza, patron spirit of twins; Mpulubuzi, a *simbi*; the generic ancestor Mukulu; or any other mediator, to a technique such as chiefship, blacksmithing, or healing. This is a theory about power and institutions, the effectiveness believed to inhere techniques. A priestly operator may act on the technique in an *n'kisi* or role, or he may strive for direct mystical access to power. Like tree branches extending upward from a trunk, fundamental power finds its way into land, water, and air domains of the cosmology, as well as the facets of human life. There is here a tradition of symbolic integrity in which ineffectual institutions and techniques are discarded when they lose their power "and become dead, lifeless things," as well as in which the underlying unity of the universe is sought for the empowerment of new institutions and practices. Two cases from the catechists' writings, one dealing with governing, the other with antiwitchcraft medicine, reflect this tradition.

Lulendo was an *n'kisi* of sanction, or judgment, not held by all the clans [in contrast to Bweno]. Lulendo was not a healing medicine . . . rather a medicine of chiefship, used for example to punish people in the marketplace for having violated market laws . . . The chief of a locality could not himself speak in the market, but would have to sit in an alcove and drink his beer there. He could enter the market only in the event of the "nailing" of a person. The chief must first drive Lulendo's knife

³¹ Based on Nsemi, Notebook No. 391; Lunungu, Notebook No. 172; Lutete, Notebook No. 224, Laman Collection, Lidingō, 1915.

into the culprit's forehead, following which others had permission to come up to the hole and strike him with other objects . . . Lulendo's chief's staff was carried by a youth. The chief wore a special loincloth, a headpiece, and a toga over his shoulder. He also had a sword, and his Lulendo knife in a magical sheath. His escorts were called "Law Enforcers." His wife was called "The Vigilant One" because she must stay awake while her husband was away settling affairs. If she fell asleep during her husband's absence, his affairs, whether war, arrest, or whatever, would go badly.

The oldest person who told of the introduction of Lulendo lived prior to the arrival of the Whites in the land. It was *nganga* Misangu who brought Lulendo into Bwende country (north bank of Zaire river). Then another *nganga* named Bendo decided to end all *minkisi* pertaining to Lulendo. Minsangu warned that if this *n'kisi* were abandoned, its laws ignored, the Whites would enter the country. But Bendo insisted on doing away with Lulendo. So Minsangu himself put the *n'kisi* to an end. Then—and it was long ago—the Whites arrived in the country.

When they arrived they traveled about and asked, "Where is Chief Bendo of Malemba?" until they came to Malemba. When they arrived there they asked for Chief Bendo, but the chiefs did not look at the Whites. Any who did would die. So the Whites returned to wherever it was they came from.

A stand-off existed between partisans of centralized chiefship and those of acephalous market associations in north-bank society during the nineteenth century. Minsangu, having introduced Lulendo as *n'kisi* of centralized power, preferred to destroy it by decree rather than to have another *nganga* impose his will, even in face of the threat that to do so would permit the Whites to enter. There is in this account a reflection of the historic conflict between followers of Lulendo and those of the acephalous form of government. But more correctly, perhaps, is the suggestion that this is a myth about the transfer of loyalty from one centralized authority, Lulendo, to another, the colonial government, with Bendo, supporter of the medicine Bweno, caught in the middle. It explained how Europeans broke down big chiefs and entered into alliance with smaller chiefs such as Bendo. But Minsangu's actions, at first puzzling, are clear if we regard Lulendo as a threatened

institution. To have willfully decreed the end of Lulendo was to symbolically validate the European colonial structure that was now all pervasive. Kongo ritual did away with insignia of an eclipsed institution.

The quest for symbolic integrity, for the correspondence of the institution ("medicine") with the means beneath, was also expressed in the early colonial proliferation of medicines to replace institutions canceled when Europeans moved in. The already-mentioned effort by *banganga* to find a satisfactory substitute for the poison ordeal is an example of this. (See text on Mbuangi medicine above.) But even these substitutes were, like Lulendo, being abandoned before the prophets appeared in 1921:

Solo, which is no longer used, consisted of the tail of a monkey and other animals and the crotch cloth and the fingers of persons who had died of the *n'kasa* poison ordeal, part of a chicken and claws of a rooster and a parrot. A medicinal ingredient called Solo was attached to the cloth that formed the *n'kisi* satchel. The person who wore this must dance all day and others would follow him [to establish innocence or guilt]. Mabala, Kimpenbe, like Solo, do not hurt people, they are made in order to identify witches, and to divine the person who is being injured by the witch and to know where the witches are hiding so they may be caught . . .

Both Lulendo and Solo were abandoned because the symbol no longer embodied the intangible force it was originally designed to have. Lulendo no longer represented centralized power, and Minsangu knew it. Solo, we may surmise, was an ineffectual substitute for the poison ordeal. It could "not harm a person," and was abandoned.

The 1921 prophets' dialectical intention to destroy all *minkisi* was therefore not unprecedented, even though missionaries exhorted it. Like Minsangu's decree to put away Lulendo, it was a way of breaking the dependence on ineffectual medicines. It was also a way of emphasizing the intangible, unified, powerful forces in the world. Some prophets must have known of Minsangu's decree, for they were catechists like

the one Laman hired to record the story. But our main point lies elsewhere. They were operating within the same framework for generating symbols, and within it their response to weakened, invalid institutions was soundly within Kongo political and ritual possibilities.

(4) *The catechists and other early colonial writers reflect a preoccupation with the power of agents of death; the prophets assert the power of life.*³² The problem of death entailed both the human dilemma of mortality as well as the exact status of "the dead." Since the dead, in Mpemba, represented the legitimation of authority, and since a new legitimation was being sought, a new "modus vivendi" with the dead was needed as well as a way of forging a new type of line from them to the living. Sources as early as 1895 already reflect a preoccupation over man's relation to the dead, as well as the distinctions between the types of dead, and the nature of Whites in relation to all others. A letters-to-the-editor section of the first KiKongo newspaper reveals many inquiries such as: "Do Whites eat black souls?" "Do the souls of Blacks go 'to the mission station' when they die?" If so, "Where are they kept?" "Those who become Christian, do they die, i.e., pass to the mission?" "When you 'love God' (i.e., follow the mission), must you first die?"

Encounters with the dead had always been precarious, and subject to a great variety of legends and ritual institutions. One classic Central Africian myth cycle portrays a beautiful young girl marrying an ogre of the dead, mistaking him for a suitor.³³ Kwamba, the catechist whose eyewitness interpretation of 1921 prophetism spoke of the New Heaven and the New Earth, had, at an earlier date, recorded a number of myths about the "young girl and the ogre." In several versions of the story the girl is courted by numerous suitors, all of whom shower her with bright promises. She is drawn to the stranger,

³² Based on Kwamba, Notebook No. 423, Laman Collection, Lidingö, 1915.

³³ L. de Heusch, *Le cru et le cuit dans le domaine bantou* (Brussels: Présence Africaine, n.d.).

against the better judgment of her elders. The marriage takes place, bride payments are made, food and drink are exchanged as customary, and she departs with her new husband for his distant unknown village. She discovers she has married an ogre (*munkuyu*) and in horror tries to flee back home. In some of Kwamba's variations she succeeds, the wiser for her experience. In other variations she is killed outright by the ogre and his kin. Kwamba's final version of the myth contains major Christian elements, including that the girl is a church member and that she resurrects. Kwamba, or the storyteller, has solved the "problem of the dead" via an adaptation of a traditional tale:

A woman died in the daylight and she slowly came back to life by next morning . . . Her suitor mourned for her at the palm tree. In the morning they were going to close the coffin. As they were preparing the body for burial they were astonished, for she was alive.

"What?! We wrapped you. Yesterday you died!"

She replied, "No, I didn't die."

"How can you say that you weren't dead?" they insisted.

She told them, "When I went to that village where I was married, I arrived, and as I had expected, I was greeted. But as I was walking across the village I saw creatures in the likeness of birds fluttering [*mayembo*, trembling; cf. Fig. 3]. These creatures came to me and asked,

"'Have you sinned?'"

"'Yes, of course,' I said.

"'Have you thought worldly thoughts?'"

"'Why yes,' I said.

"They fetched a book and read from it, 'She has fornicated and stolen groundnuts.'

"But they said, 'Go in peace and do good.'"

One, standing on a high dais, forgave her, and resurrected her from the dead.

The dead may be clan elders, devils, ogres (*minkuyu*), twins and special spirit children (*bisimbi*, *binkita*). Here the beings of Mpemba, "the likeness of birds fluttering, trembling," while rooted in the tradition of mediatory birds, resemble angels, doves, and Whites as seen on prophetic flags and passports,

and in some of the drawings of the prophets (Fig. 3). These figures are sculpted on tombs in Kongo country, and the dancing, flying, bird-like enactment of the rites of "weighing of the spirit" and of "healing," both of which involve judgment and forgiveness, resemble them. In the Kongo setting of 1921 they restored the human link to a legitimate world of "the White," Mpemba. In this variation of the myth of the girl who marries an ogre, as well as in Kimbangu's diary, Mpemba becomes a transcendent inversion of chiefship. Power over death is made into the power of resurrection. Ancestral judgment is made into ancestral forgiveness.

Conclusion

We set out to see whether a contemporary rendering of Kongo Cosmology could be projected upon the facts of the Kongo prophet movement of 1921 in order to shed light on the intentions of prophetic acts. Examination of details of prophets' careers, chronologies of events, eyewitness accounts, and interpretations brought to light fewer clear intentions on the part of the prophets of 1921 than those bestowed on them by later scholars, later Kongo prophets, and cosmographers. The observation must be made that although the 1921 prophets were aware of forced labor, colonially imposed political alliances, tax collections, and the usurpation of chiefly rights, they often spoke of these issues in terms of witchcraft, rivalry within the society (even between prophets), and the demand for renewed power from Mpemba, the realm of the beyond. Within the idiom of Kongo prophetic action much occurred. Specific medicines, hero figures, and chiefly orders were being unfastened and forgotten. They were replaced by other images and figures.

This manipulation of imagery, and the general context of Kongo prophetic action, bear some important lessons for social theory. (1) Some of these idioms appear to express more

general propositions about the basic powers of the human and natural universe, and how to go about mediating them. (2) Prophetic thought thus bears some similarity to anthropological thought in that it seeks ever-embracing generalities about fundamental questions of the symbolic universe. Robin Horton, for one, has warned us not to always take the ghosts, spirits, and objects of magic in Africa as literally believed-in objects. Rather, he said, they represent vehicles of problem-solving, postulate-making, reality-building, much like Western science.³⁴ (3) Where intentions do appear, they are self-effacing, deeply embedded in culturally particular idioms.

Any social theory-building must therefore resolve the dilemma of intentions and structures. If conscious, verbal intentions—the “prophet’s word,” so to speak—are emphasized in theory and explanation, the more the explanation of prophetic action, like Kongo *n’kisi* figures, will be tied to that particular idiom in reality. On the other hand, the more the emphasis is placed in theory-building on deep underlying structure derived from successive movements—for example, role structures, an abstracted cosmology—the more likely such a theory will explain little about particular actions.

We have proposed the notion of “dialectic intention” to resolve this theoretical dilemma. It corresponds closely to what we feel the 1921 Kongo prophets were doing. Dialectical intentions are problem-solving propositions which confront and destroy the exhausted paradigms of the culture, and come up with new paradigms clothed in tangible, often idiomatic, form. In prophetic thought of 1921, Europeans had seemingly become prevalent forces within the conceptual domain of Mpemba. They could be dealt with only by entering that sphere and standing up to them “in the spirit.” Chiefship, destroyed by witches who had dislodged the chiefs’ souls from the *bisimbi* ‘spirits’ protection at the bottom of deep pools, could be reinvigorated by contacting greater *simbi* mediums, or

³⁴ R. Horton, “African Traditional Thought and Western Science,” in Bryan Wilson, ed., *Rationality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), pp. 132–155.

bypassing particular *simbi* altogether, to deal with Nzambi, ultimate unity, invisible power, through visionary possession. *Min'kisi* medicines, their integrity destroyed in a time of great contradiction, could be abandoned in their particulars, since power and technical integrity had to be captured anew, at its source. Power, once reached in Mpemba, then needed to be brought back to the world of the living. This was done by bringing life back from Mpemba, in the form of resurrection motifs and acts, "on the wings of beings" from Mpemba. It is a mark of the powerful dialectical thought exemplified by Kongo prophets that their culture can be renewed from within, in terms of its root metaphor, "Mpemba and the World."³⁵

³⁵ Fu-kiau kia Bunseki, *N'kongo ye Nza yakun' zungidila* / *Le Mukongo et le monde qui l'entourait*.