Prophetic Diasporas
Moving Religion Across the Lusophone Atlantic

Ramon Sarró\textsuperscript{a)} and Ruy Llera Blanes\textsuperscript{b)}
\textsuperscript{a)} Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon
ramonsarro@gmail.com
\textsuperscript{b)} Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon; Leiden University
ruy.blanes@gmail.com

Abstract
In this article we examine the concept of a religious Lusophone Atlantic, highlighting historical and contemporary exchanges in this continuum and situating research within recent scholarship regarding the ‘Atlantic,’ religious diasporas and contemporary Christianity. We focus in particular on the place of prophetic movements (namely the Kimbanguist and Tokoist churches) within the Portuguese and Angolan religious fields.

Keywords
Lusophony, Atlantic, prophetism, Kimbanguism, Tocoism

Résumé
Dans cet article nous examinons le concept d’un Atlantique lusophone religieux, mettant en évidence des échanges historiques et contemporains dans cet ensemble et plaçant la recherche dans l’érudition récente à propos de l’'Atlantique,’ les diasporas religieuses et le christianisme contemporain. Nous nous concentrons en particulier sur la place des mouvements prophétiques (à savoir le Kimbanguisme et les églises tocoïstes) dans les domaines religieux portugais et angolais.

Mots-clés
Lusophonie, Atlantique, prophétisme, Kimbanguisme, Tocoïsme

Introduction

The study of Prophetic Christianity in Africa has a long tradition in anthropology. The 1960s and 1970s appear to be the zenith of ethnographic studies on them. At that time most authors tended to connect prophetic religious movements with political oppression, linking their emergence to what Balandier
(1955) characterised as ‘the colonial situation,’ and to the dreams of liberation, through millenarian expectations, of oppressed people by a charismatic ‘prophet of rebellion,’ to use the expression coined by Adas in his comparative study (Adas 1979). This socio-political contextualisation based on colonial oppression, typical also of some major reviews of prophetic movements until the mid 1970s (Lanternari 1963; Dozon 1974; Balandier 1976) was fully justified. However, as a Pastor of the Kimbanguist church (once a classic example of a prophetic anti-colonial movement) astutely told us very recently, the connection between colonialism and prophecy was so strongly expressed by early scholars of his church that by re-reading their works today one should be surprised that the movement did not disappear once the colonial situation ended. We are not going to delve into it here, since the combination between political and religious agencies in the emergence of African prophetic movements would require a full article in its own right. In any case, even if there was an ‘elective affinity’ between colonial oppression and prophetic expression, the fact, as the Kimbanguist pastor was highlighting in our conversation, is that these movements did not disappear with the end of the colonial situation. In fact the Christian imagination, including prophetic trends, has turned out to be as creative and innovative in postcolonial times as it was during the colony – churches do not cease to appear, grow and diversify. Indeed, as several authors have argued (see below), African and other southern parts of the earth have become in one way or another ‘reservoirs of Christianity.’

The resilience of propethism in postcolonial times is not only interesting because it forces us to critically re-assess what was written about its context of origin during the colony, but also because it makes us explore new angles and connections, including transnational and trans-continental ones. The shift of interest from colonial emergence to the place of prophetic and other African Christian churches in the globalised word of today is particularly welcome in the analysis of what we could call ‘the Lusophone Christianity.’ Whilst, formerly, Christianity embarked in Portuguese ports and crossed the Oceans so

1) See also the many studies dedicated to prophetic movements in the classic collective volume on power and protest in Africa (Rotberg and Marzrui 1970) or in that on social change under the colonial situation (Wallerstein 1966). Later overviews became increasingly critical with the ‘deprivation theory’ angle of earlier studies of prophetism; see especially, Fernandez (1978) and Ranger (1986). However, even in the 1980s an author like John Peel could criticise Fernandez himself for having minimised the colonial contextualisation in his symbolic analysis of the Bwiti movement (Fernandez 1982; Peel 1983). For a review of perceptions of colonial religious movements see the first chapter of Sarró (2009). For the problems of defining a ‘prophet’ and of using the category cross-culturally, see Johnson and Anderson (1995).
as to arrive in Africa and America and evangelise the peoples it encountered along the way, today the ‘ways of the Lord’ are far more complex: there is a crossing of Christianities coming from Africa to Europe and America, from Europe to Africa, and from America to Africa and Europe. Think, for instance, about the revival of Pentecostal (and implantation of Neopentecostal) forms of Christianity in the Portuguese world, thanks to the input of contemporary, late twentieth century migration from Brazil and Africa (see Mafra 2002; Vilaça 2006).

Indeed the particularities of the globalised Christianity of the twentieth century have created a situation where, as historian Philip Jenkins has argued, ‘the average Christian of today lives in the Congo or in Brazil’ (2002; see also 2007) or, as Grace Davie explains, as far as ‘effervescent religiosity’ goes, (secularised) Europe is today ‘the exception’ when compared to the rest of the world (1999; see also Berger, Davie and Fokas 2008). If, on the one hand, we cannot deny the importance of Christian institutions in the promotion of colonial subjects outside the metropolis, it is also true that this subjectivity is travelling in the inverse direction and redefining senses of tradition, belonging and even citizenship for both ‘locals’ and ‘foreigners.’ Thus, a ‘southernised’ Christianity returns to the place it originally came from, in most cases composed of former colonial subjects that are today postcolonial citizens living with a composite heritage: a global Christianity, a ‘multiple (African, Angolan, Portuguese) belonging’, a migration experience and, finally, a universalising conscience of person, humanity and citizenship.

The increasing presence of African Neopentecostal movements in Africa, together with the increasing literature about them, might give the impression that prophetic movements have been totally outrun by these newer forms of Christianity. Indeed, for many African contexts, this is much more than an impression, since it is backed by statistical surveys. Such is the case, for instance, in Ghana today, as described by Rijk van Dijk (Van Dijk 2003). Yet, prophetic churches survive, and not only do they survive in Africa, but also in African diasporas, be they based in Europe, the Americas or elsewhere. Using a Weberian approach, it could be argued against such a claim that the churches that emerged out of the prophets (say, the Église de Jésus-Christ sur la terre par son envoyé spécial Simon Kimbangu, created after Simon Kimbangu, or the Igreja do Nosso Senhor Jesus Cristo no Mundo, created by Simão Toko) are ‘routinised’ forms, not truly prophetic movements. But a clear-cut distinction between ‘charisma’ and ‘routine’ or ‘movement’ and ‘church’ would in this particular case be more obscuring than illuminating. We will argue that these (and many other) churches continue to be very prophetic both in their message and, indeed, in the centrality of the founders’ presence despite their death.
This article has two parts and twin aims. Firstly, we discuss the need for scholars today to study the flux of Christianities across the Lusophone Atlantic, offering an overview of the basic literature and some clues for further comparative analyses. Secondly, we offer some ethnographic data on the diasporic expansion of Angolan and Congolese prophetic-based movements: the above mentioned Église de Jésus-Christ sur la terre par son envoyé spécial Simon Kimbangu, (henceforth ‘Kimbanguism’) and the Igreja do Nosso Senhor Jesus Cristo no Mundo (henceforth ‘Tokoism’), with whose members we have worked both in Luanda and in Lisbon since 2007.

We would like to suggest that Portugal offers in many ways a paradigm of the ‘religious southernisation’ mentioned above for two reasons: firstly, in a context where Catholicism has historically been instrumental in the definition of the nation, migrants coming mostly from Africa and Brazil have dramatically reconfigured, in the last decades, the religious setting. The newcomers offer unheard of understandings of what it is ‘to be Christian,’ incorporating novel expressions of Christianity such as Charismatic, Neopentecostal, Prophetic, Neocatecumenal, etc., previously unknown in the Portuguese territory prior to the end of the colonial endeavour. Often, the Catholic Church firmly reacts to these new Christian presences, especially those coming from Africa or Brazil. These arrivals also redefine the historical branch of Protestantism in Portugal. Often, the established churches (Catholic, Protestant) firmly react to these new Christian presences, especially those coming from Africa or Brazil, provoking an open competition where Catholicism struggles to remain attractive to its traditional clientele and simultaneously receive new believers, and where historical Protestants try to redefine spaces for their tradition.

Secondly, the inventiveness of ‘Southern’ forms of Christianity has staged a particular movement of Christian expression around the Atlantic Ocean, mediated by a common linguistic ground: ‘Lusophony,’ as the histories and cultural logics informing Portuguese colonialism in South America and West and East Africa are usually referred to. Lusophony, as a postcolonial outcome of centuries of political, cultural and economic cultural exchange, has revealed a particular history of religious activity through missionisation and migration between Portugal, Brazil and African countries like Cape Verde, São Tome and Principe and, especially, Angola, a point to which we shall return in a later section of this article.²

² We do not intend to convey or build on an idea of an ‘exclusiveness’ in the Lusophone exchange contexts. Rather, we interpret it in terms of wider dynamics within the Atlantic context. Yet, our point here is that the contemporary situation of movements such as the ones discussed in this article is, to say the least, affected by the specific heritage of Lusophony.
African Christianity and the Making of the Atlantic

According to classic mythography, the Atlantic owes its name to one of those Heathen gods that so much influenced Christian geographical and religious imagination: Atlas (son of Titan, who Jupiter forced to carry the sky on his back), who would later be transformed into a mountain chain in northern Africa by Perseus and finally associated with that vast and distant sea previously known as ‘the dark sea.’ A truly ‘remote area’ in Ardener’s sense (Ardener 1987) that was to become, from the fifteenth century on, illuminated and converted into a familiar place by the torch of Christian civilisation.

We do not aim to reconstruct the history of this Ocean. Nor do we intend to retrace the history of Christian missionaries on both its shores. Those who have worked in Atlantic contexts know that for every piece of shoreline there is an endless bibliography regarding the arrival of missionaries and their encounters with the Africans or Americans living there. Our goal is rather to connect emerging research on Christianity and diasporas with the rich body of literature that, in the last 15 years or so, has revitalised and offered new insights on the making of the Atlantic and its understanding. In 1992, John Thornton published a book that immediately became highly influential, *Africa and Africans in the making of the Atlantic World*. In this book, Thornton argued that the ‘Atlantic,’ thus far seen as the medium through which imperialism arrived to the African and American coasts and through which persons and goods were taken away, is in fact the outcome of a complex interaction in which the agency of African societies had to be fully acknowledged. For historians and anthropologists alike, this study represented an immediate epistemological rupture in the way the Atlantic had been approached, especially so for scholars working on the African Atlantic coast, where many societies had been perceived as being ‘passive’ and therefore not agents of their own history. Almost simultaneously, the literary critic and postcolonial theorist Paul Gilroy wrote, inspired by Mintz and Price's milestone *The Birth of the African-American Culture* (1976), the equally milestone *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), a ‘must read’ for anyone interested in understanding that western ‘modernity’ is not exclusively a product of transformations taking place solely on European ground (Enlightenment, industrial revolution, scientific revolution, Cartesian philosophy, ‘disenchantment of the world,’ liberal individualism, etc), but also included events taking place far away, such as the Atlantic slave trade – a foundational element of modern consciousness and of its contradictions and paradoxes.

For Lusophone scholars, the work of Gilroy became crucial. It inspired, among others, Miguel Vale de Almeida, for whom Gilroy’s approach was valid
for the Anglo-American context, but not so much for research on the Luso-
phone Ocean, given the particular racial ideologies and identity disputes that
cveyed Portuguese colonisation in Brazil and Africa. Vale de Almeida
invokes Gilroy’s proposal with reference to luso-tropicalist ideologies and
shows us an Atlantic that is self-proclaimed ‘brown’ (Vale de Almeida 2002) or
‘earth-coloured’ (2004) prior to the postcolonial paradigms of hybridity or
creoleness. In other words, the Portuguese colonial project was, in its very
conception and production, *mestiço*.

In the religious domain, Gilroy’s groundbreaking work was also to be par-
ticularly inspirational for another author working on Lusophone Atlantic:
J. Lorand Matory, who in his *Black Atlantic Religion* (2005) described the
fl uxes of African religiosity and their reception in the Lusophone contexts of
South America (focusing on Candomblé in particular). But the study of reli-
gion along the Lusophone Atlantic has yielded many other outstanding prod-
ucts. Noteworthy here are Roger Sansi-Roca’s work on the sailing of the ‘fetish’
across the Atlantic (2007); Stephan Palmié’s study on Cuban spiritism with
Congolese origin (2002); Linda Heywood and colleagues’ study of the
Bakongo diasporas (2002); or Marcio Goldman’s work on Candomblé (2007),
which faithfully incorporates the legacy of the study on the ‘Black Americas’
proposed and started by Roger Bastide almost half a century earlier (Bastide
1967, among others).

These are but tokens that show that the religious history of the Atlantic has
been, over the last few years, thoroughly studied by historians and anthrop-
ologists. Yet, we still feel that the characterisation of the religious Atlantic
remains somehow patchy. Studies such as Palmié’s, Sansi-Roca’s or Goldman’s,
for instance, while being quite faithful to modern anthropological theories
and ethnographically based, focus on varieties of religious movements such as
Spiritism, Santería, Candomblé, or Umbanda. Even if they see the Christian
saint behind the *orisha*, these studies risk, firstly, looking at a one-sided move-
ment with no return, neglecting that many of these religious forms actually *do*
 bounce back onto Africa in the process of ‘mutual transformation’ of African
and African-American cultures (Matory 2005), and, secondly, of giving the
impression that the most characteristic ‘African’ religion in the diaspora is one
based on trance and spirit possession.3 Tellingly enough, Kenneth Routon
recently entitled a review article on the religious imagination in the Atlantic

---

3 As Naro, Sansi-Roca and Treece remind us, ‘(...) In the end, Europe also, by the same token,
was not only an agent of transformation, but also a result of it: Europe was also changed by the
with the suggestive pun ‘trance-nationalism’ (Routon 2006). In reality, however, the number of mainstream Christian communities in what has been named the ‘Lusophone Black Atlantic’ (Naro, Sansi-Roca and Treece 2007) that are not and have never been linked to trance or spirit possession is simply overwhelming. Based on our own fieldwork in Lisbon we can assert that Methodist, Presbyterian, Pentecostal and Catholic churches in Portugal (to name but a few of the ones our research team has surveyed), have benefited enormously from the flow of African (and Brazilian) immigration, while Candomblé or Umbanda terreiros are so far thin on the ground – and surprisingly enough, wherever they are to be found the followers of these movements appear to be Portuguese rather than Brazilian or African migrants, for reasons that have been explored by other authors (Saraiva 2008, Pordeus Jr. 2009). Much as in the days of Prince Henrique the Navigator, the Lusophone Atlantic of today is a vector in the transmission of mainstream Christian religion.

Of course, ‘mainstream’ is a problematic word here. Much as everything else Portugal sent away in its imperialist enterprise, Portuguese Christianity would soon become mixed with cultural and religious elements of other places. It is this mixture that now is bouncing back to the ex-metropolis. It may be worth remembering here that the Lusophone Atlantic has given rise to highly creolised societies, such as Cape Verde, and has been a privileged area of creolisation studies (see for instance Trajano Filho 1998; Heywood and Thornton 2007 among many others). Many of the religious forms disseminated through it are, in fact, explicitly syncretic and highly incorporative in their nature; see, for a brilliant example, the analysis of the self-conscious syncretistic Christian Rationalism churches in Cape Verde (Vasconcelos 2007). But then again, a word of caution is needed here, for ‘syncretism’ can become a pitfall. As some authors have argued, what counts is not what is perceived as ‘syncretistic’ by the external observer, but by the believers themselves, and in many cases they have clearly anti-syncretistic views about their own practice (Stewart and Shaw 1994). While some external observers might think that Christianity is ‘external’ to Africa, that the ‘real’ African religion has to be something else, the

4) The research team is that of the project ‘The Christian Atlantic: Ethnographies of religious encounters in Lisbon’ (2007-2010), directed by Ramon Sarró and funded by the Ministry of Science and Education of Portugal, in which eight senior and junior researchers are conducting fieldwork in Portuguese, Brazilian and African churches of Pentecostal, Neopentecostal, mainline Protestant and Afro-Brazilian backgrounds.

5) Obviously, along with the Christian notions of God, Jesus Christ and heaven, the opposite or complementary notions of devil and hell have also navigated throughout the Lusophone Atlantic. See, among others, Mello e Sousa (1986; 1993), Birman (1997), Pina Cabral (2008).
movement of African Christianities out of Africa is teaching the world not only that one can be Christian in many different ways, but also that being ‘African’ is far away from a monolithic concept. Today, what to be ‘African’ means, or where such a place called ‘Africa’ is, are questions that any researcher of the Atlantic cannot avoid asking (see Palmié 2007). Following the provocative proposal in Jean-Loup Amselle’s work on ‘connexions’ and universalism (Amselle 2001), we could perhaps say that in the world of today the ‘African’ is not he or she who lives faithful to their ancestral roots or remains fixed in the continent called ‘Africa,’ but he or she who claims to be so based on their own way of perceiving their history, regardless of their place of residence or their religion. ‘Africa’ and ‘African’ become, in Amselle’s Lévi-straussian words, ‘floating signifiers’ that different people can invoke to explain the way they experience their place in the world. We shall come back to the meanings of Africa in a later section of this article. As we will point out, the case of prophetic movements in the African diaspora – namely the rapports and tensions between the Tokoist and Kimbanguist churches in the diaspora and the homeland to be described below –, is an interesting example of how many Africans today position themselves from a transnational perspective that provokes dialogues (and often frictions) between ‘centrifugal’ (universalistic) and ‘centripetal’ (African) constructions of cultural identity.

**Prophetism In and Out of Africa**

In his book *African Reformation*, Allan Anderson (2002) describes the emergence of novel forms of Christianity in the African continent that shaped a new understanding of their place as spiritual and social movements in the continent (see also Anderson 2004; Gifford 1998; Ranger 2008). One of the main theses behind this description is the recognition that the sphere of action of these movements no longer rests within a political geographic circumscription (be it ‘Nigeria,’ ‘Africa’ or elsewhere), but is located within a ‘universalistic’ concept of religious action that no longer uses local terms but broad-ranged worldviews. Certainly, contemporary mobility and geopolitics have played an important role in the process (see De Bruijn, Foeken and van Dijk 2001;
Ferguson 2006), namely through the incorporation of African diasporas into the game, as well as the ‘global orders’ that bring people, products and ideas into circulation in and out of Africa and affect local dynamics.

One of the most fascinating local expressions of these developments in contemporary Christianity is precisely the development of what certain authors have described as a ‘religious boom’ in postcolonial and post-war Angola (see Viegas 1999; 2007). After years of an explicit anti-religious policy led by the Marxist-Leninist inspired MPLA government, since the 1990s the authorities have progressively opened the field for the legalisation of religious movements other than the Catholic Church, and progressively engaged them in public debates and initiatives in different areas, from health campaigns to education programmes and electoral enrolment.

Yet, with the end of the civil conflict in 2002, the visibility and social agency of Christian churches has not only increased but also multiplied due to the development of strategies that no longer have an impact solely in the Angolan territory, but also within transnational networks and contexts. One such example is the important growth of Neopentecostal movements in Southern Africa (Anderson 2002; Freston 2005), and their role in local politics. In most cases, this growth responds to a mission strategy developed by Brazilian-originated churches such as the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG), operating in a network that ties believers in Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde and so on in a South-South – or ‘third world,’ in Freston’s terms (2005: 34) – Lusophone continuum that benefits from the common linguistic ground and brings Brazilian pastors to preach and proselytise in Luanda or brings Angolan migrant believers to churches in Lisbon.

The UCKG example illustrates how Brazilian and other foreign churches are staging transnational strategies in the Atlantic using – though not exclusively – Lusophony as a marker (see also Corten and Marshall-Fratani 2001; Oro, Corten and Dozon 2003). This strategy has had a strong impact on the Angolan religious scene, opening the field for both an extremely diverse number of legalised churches (84 in the year 2007) and churches awaiting recognition (729 in 2007 – see Viegas 2007). Taking these figures into consideration, the above-mentioned ‘religious boom’ does not refer only to charismatic forms of Christianity: other churches have gained new visibilities and developed new

---

7) Many other churches could be mentioned at this point: the Maná Church (founded by the Portuguese migrant to South Africa Jorge Tadeu and spread throughout Lusophone Africa and Portugal), the new mission projects of Portuguese based evangelical churches like the Assembly of God and the Centro Cristão Vida Abundante (see Caldeira 2006), etc.
configurations to respond to the new challenges of contemporary religiosity. Such is the case of the two most important prophetic movements in Angola: the Kimbanguist church and the Tokoist church. Although working with a different timeline – Simon Kimbangu lived c.1887-1951, while Simão Toko lived 1918-1984 –, both churches respond to a similar historical pattern. They were both born after the following of a Bakongo prophet that opposed the colonial regime and claimed the legitimacy of an African Christian theology, both were seen as the renewal and remembrance of the true intentions of God, both insisted on the dignity and pride of the African person.

Simon Kimbangu started preaching in April 1921, and in September that year he was imprisoned by the Belgians, who considered him a troublemaker. He died in prison thirty years later, in 1951. During these thirty years of imprisonment, the movement continued clandestinely, mostly thanks to Kimbangu’s wife and their three sons, especially Joseph Diangienda, the youngest of them. In the 1960s once Congo had become independent, the movement became an official church and, under Diangienda’s leadership, obtained international recognition from the World Council of Churches, becoming one of the biggest churches in the region, with millions of followers. It was in the 1960s that the movement started to be introduced in Northern Angola and eventually to Luanda itself, although Portuguese colonisers tried to keep it at bay, in many instances being brutal in its repression. If in colonial times Kimbanguism was feared by the Portuguese because it was a well-known movement of liberation and because Catholicism was to be the main religion of Angola, in the postcolonial times (i.e. from 1975) Kimbanguism was looked at with suspicion because it was, and still is, associated with the Bakongo ethnic group and with the Democratic Republic of Congo, a neighbouring country often blamed for allowing many evil things to penetrate the national territory of Angola. Yet Kimbanguism has grown in Angola during the last forty-five years, and today there may be around one million Kimbanguists, though they are divided into two very separate branches of the church.⁸

Albeit born in the Portuguese colony of Angola, Simão Toko also started his preaching career within Bakongo networks in the Belgian Congo, in and around Kinshasa (then Leopoldville), although working almost exclusively with Angolan migrants of that ethnicity – as he was himself a Mukongo from the region of Uíge, in Northern Angola. When his work, leading an

⁸ The history of Kimbanguism in Angola, the place of the Bakongo in Angolan society and the political implications of the current schism in the church have been the object of another article (Sarró, Blanes and Viegas 2008).
independent Christian choir called Coro de Kibokolo, began to gain notoriety, the Belgian colonial authorities decided in 1950 to imprison and deport the prophet and his followers to their country of origin, to be held by the Portuguese authorities. This decision would become decisive in the church’s posterior ethos, since they were dispersed in small groups to forced labour camps all around the Angolan territory, that later served as ‘land of mission.’ Thus, what started as an outcome of the ‘Kongo prophet’ tradition (MacGaffey 1983) soon became an ‘Angolan project’ (see also Grenfell 1998).

The following decades, despite the forced exile of the prophet in Portugal (1963-1974) and persecution of its members both by the declining colonial regime and by the new Marxist-Leninist inspired independent Angolan government after 1975, were of progressive growth in frequency and allegiance. Today, the Tokoist Church is the second largest Christian movement in Angola after the Catholic Church, with over a million followers, and both these churches are the only ones with a nationwide implantation in this country (see Viegas 2007).

Both churches, at a certain point in their history, were faced with the fundamental problem: would they be able to survive the death of the prophet and become established institutions? This is a challenge that still resonates to this day in both churches, although in different ways. When Simon Kimbangu died, succession to office went to his son Diangienda. According to some interviewees, Kimbangu and Diangienda were two manifestations of the same person, and this is why Kimbangu preferred him over his other two children, though our impression is that this is a point of debate within the church. Whatever the case, Diangienda took over from 1951 to his death in 1992, and was succeeded by his two brothers until the last one died in 2002. The succession to the third generation was the most problematic one, and there is a huge schism in the church today among Kimbanguists, whose main bone of contention is precisely the issue of succession among Kimbangu’s grandchildren. Be that as it may, the centrality of the Holy Ghost applies to all Kimbanguists alike: they all claim that Simon Kimbangu was the Paraclete (Kayongo 2005). As far as the current division goes, while a group today claims that the Holy

---

9) This is an interesting paradox in the history of Tokoism. As has just been said, Tokoists were spread along the national territory in the 1950s. This was meant to separate them so that they would not become a strong group. The outcome, however, was that they were very successful in proselytising in the name of Toko, and Tokoism quickly spread in the whole national territory within different ethnic groups and languages (from Umbundu to Tchokwe), becoming ‘involuntarily’ a multiethnic endeavour that used Angola (and no longer the Bakongo region) as a framework during the following decades.
Ghost is reincarnated in Simon Kimbangu’s grandson (Simon Kimbangu Kiangiani, currently living in the holy city of Nkamba, in the Democratic Republic of Congo), the other group believes that it is the whole patrilineage of Kimbangu (i.e. Kimbangu, his three sons, and his 26 grandchildren) that represents the Holy Spirit, they are all part of a divine lineage chosen by God to make himself present on earth.

Simão Toko, on the other hand, did not explicitly declare a successor or a transition strategy before his death in 1984. This provoked an open (and violent) conflict between several groups that claimed legitimacy and authority regarding the church’s leadership – to the point that the Angolan government officially recognised, in 1992, three different Tokoist branches. The situation did appear to suggest the end of a prophetic movement that didn’t seem to be able to solve the puzzle of its own survival. Yet, after the year 2000, things changed dramatically: a man called Afonso Nunes appeared in Luanda, claiming to have been visited and incorporated by the prophet’s spirit, and soon enough became the newly instated Bishop of the Tokoist church. His goal was to fulfil the prophet’s message: that the church should reunite and become a universal project. Despite the controversial character of these claims, those goals have almost been completed: having reunited most of the church’s dispersed branches, Nunes now preaches every Sunday to an audience of tens of thousands of believers, and frequently travels abroad to visit the Tokoist churches of the diaspora, including those of Japan, a country that is becoming particularly interested in Tokoism for reasons we still have to find out.

The resilience of these prophetic movements from the most oppressive times of colonial rule through Marxist regimes down to the neoliberal age, and their involvement in local politics (for the Kimbanguist case, see Sarró, Blanes and Viegas 2008) is a good example of the interrogation we started this article with. Prophetic churches seem to be offering something to the Angolan public that makes them still very appealing. Just what it is exactly is difficult to say at this stage of our research, but based on several informal conversations and formal interviews we can single out a few elements of the prophetic discourse that make it clearly distinct from other Christian options: a particular insistence on the ‘Africa-ness’ of their religion and of the prevalence of African Christianity over the forms brought by colonialism, very often described as being ‘hypocritical’, a rather successful fusion between Christian history and

---

10 The hypocrisy of Catholic and Protestant missionaries is a topic that appears often in conversations. As one of our interlocutors remembered (a man in his early forties who had been brought up a Catholic), the Catholic missionary in his village in Northern Angola was a drunkard and a
African history; an insistence on ‘suffering’ as a way to understand human nature and history, and particularly the history of their churches, which is presented as an encapsulation of the history of Black Africa, from the times of slave trade and of colonialism to an eschatology of absolute liberation (see Blanes 2009, Sarró 2008).

Thus, the place of prophetic Christianity in countries like Angola, perhaps surprising if one were to follow older theoretical paradigms, appears as compelling and competing with other Christian logics, inasmuch as it updates previous pan-Africanist emancipation discourses with ‘modern’ discourses regarding Africa and the Africans’ place in the world (Ferguson 2006). Churches like the Kimbanguist and Tokoist are currently investing in education projects as a way of reinforcing their place in Angolan society. As Bishop Afonso Nunes, leader of the main branch of the Tokoist church, told us: ‘(….) without education, the church will not go well, the understanding of God’s words will be mutilated. This is why we need to build schools, so that the schools may hear the conscience of the people, better understand and interpret the phenomena of this world and, finally, be able to interpret the Holy Bible’ (personal interview, Luanda, December 2007; our translation).

But not only in Angola, or on the African continent, do these movements take place. Much as any other form of southern Christianity, these movements have sailed away from Angolan ports and arrived in Europe, and in Portugal in particular. Kimbanguism and Tokoism first arrived in Lisbon in the 1980s and 1990s. The two churches settled in areas of Greater Lisbon, not too distant from each other, though they work rather independently from each other in institutional and strategic terms. The Kimbanguist church, whose numbers in Lisbon are tiny (on an average Sunday there are around 70 people in the church) appears to be particularly attractive to a certain category of people: young Bakongo men and women (the older members are in their early forties) who migrated from Angola to Congo (then Zaire) several years ago or who were born in Zaire but consider themselves Angolan. Many of them live in a chain of exclusions: they are not welcome in Angola because despite having Angolan nationality they have almost never lived there and, what is more, because they have spent a lot of time in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

womaniser who used to tell his followers ‘do as I say, not as a I do’. According to this man and to other oral accounts collected in Angola and in Portugal, early missionaries did not let Africans own Bibles because through reading the Bible they would realise that what was being taught was not at all the real spirit of the Christian message. It was only when Kimbangu, Toko and other leaders started to spread Bibles and encourage its reading that people could realise the hypocrisy of missionaries and get the real message.
But they are not welcome in Congo either, because legally they are strangers in that country even if they were born there; and they are not really welcome in Portugal because they are stigmatised as ‘migrants.’ They are all Bakongo and a good portion of the church service is conducted in either Kikongo or Lingala. Almost all them live off work in construction (men) or cleaning (women), but most of their time is spent on church-related activities. Their church (and many of its members’ homes) is located in a very problematic quarter of Greater Lisbon called Quinta da Fonte, especially famous for its drug-related violence. Since September 2008, the Kimbanguist church, till then mostly unknown to the Portuguese, is gaining visibility in the media because it acted as mediator and peacemaker in a very violent conflict, partly drug-related and partly racist, between Afro-descendants and Ciganos living in the Quinta da Fonte.11

The Tokoist church in Lisbon, a bit larger than the Kimbanguist one (approximately 100 people), displays a more varied sociological background: believers from the North to the South of Angola, and also a good number of youngsters born in the European territory who have never even visited Angola. The Lisbon church has played a pivotal role in the expansion of Tokoism throughout the diaspora, and to this day still serves as a ‘revolving door’ of migrants coming to and from Angola and Europe. The ethnic factor seems to be weaker than among Kimbanguists, because, as we described earlier, Tokoism spread through the whole of the Angolan territory and not only among the Bakongo of the north. Yet, there is also a tension between ‘Africanity’ and universalism, between a centripetal rhetoric aiming at concentrating the attention of the believers on the history and centrality of Northern Angola and centrifugal forces aimed at spreading the message throughout the entire world. Both Kimbanguism and Tokoism in Lisbon are inscribed in wide networks linking them to other Kimbanguist and Tokoist communities across Europe, but above all they are linked to an imagined community that ultimately has its roots, and its ideal place, in Africa, where, as they often remind in their cults, humanity started. This explains why the offerings collected every Sunday in the Kimbanguist church of Lisbon are carefully remitted to a small village south of Kinshasa called Nkamba (place of birth of Simon Kimbangu), also known as the ‘New Jerusalem.’

11) Ciganos is the Portuguese word for Roma citizens, used as an ethnonym even by themselves. We use it here because the concept of Roma, although increasingly common in English literature, has no currency in Portugal, not even among Ciganos themselves. Unlike what happens in Northern Europe with the concept of Gypsy, for instance, Portuguese Ciganos do not consider the word Cigano to be offensive or derogatory.
A Christian Black Atlantic

Religious movements such as Tokoism and Kimbanguism constitute two examples of the complexities behind the Atlantic exchange, invoking a long history of Portuguese (and, at a later stage, European) mission in Central Africa. African prophetic movements such as these subvert perceptions of ‘authentic Christianity,’ as well as – mediated by the tides of the Atlantic – introducing ambiguity in ancient senses of territory and civilisation. These movements invoke a very long history of suffering that links Africans, and Bakongo in particular, to the history of Jesus and of Moses, whose liberation of the Hebrews from the slavery of Egyptians is seen as an anticipation, a prefiguration, a ‘photocopy’ as is often said, of the liberation of Africans by Kimbangu, or by Toko, after hundreds of year of oppression, slave trade and false Christianity. Whether, in these prophetic narratives, ‘African’ means only Bakongo people (the ethnic group of almost all Kimbanguists and many Tokoists in Lisbon, as well as of the original followers) or Africans in general is a matter of contention, even within the churches themselves. In any case, they are universalistic, and claim that the message of liberation brought about by Simon Kimbangu or Simão Toko is for everybody, white or black, African or European. This interest in the African past could be interpreted as being in sharp contrast to the rupture of historical and biographical narratives characteristic of Pentecostal movements in Africa (Meyer 1998), but in prophetic historical consciousness continuity and rupture are too entangled to allow for such clear distinctions. In fact Kimbanguists themselves have told us that their religion is (and we quote here a concept used by one of them), a ‘discontinuity in continuity,’ because the descent of the Holy Ghost in Africa made a fundamental rupture with the past while being in continuation with both historical Christianity and pre-Kimbanguist Kongo culture. Besides, much like Neopentecostals, Kimbanguists and Tokoists disdain many aspects of African tradition (beliefs in ‘witchcraft’ and in powerful objects, for instance) that they consider as the main culprits for keeping Africa ‘behind.’

However universalistic, the most striking feature of prophetic movements is that they have such a highly dignified notion of their African-ness. Both religions are, or have been, ‘paracletistic’ in that they interpret, or have in some point interpreted either Simão Toko or Simon Kimbangu as the Holy Spirit made flesh, the Paraclete announced by Jesus. Both are particularly proud that the Holy Spirit should choose Africa as the place to appear and to build the New Jerusalem (Nkamba, in the case of the Kimbanguists) or a ‘holy ground’ (Ntaia, in the case of the Tokoists). Both have among their members intellectuals who write pamphlets proving that the Bakongo area was the cradle of
humanity and, more importantly, of ‘civilisation.’ They have learned to use this concept so as to create a highly respected notion of themselves and to delegitimise any kind of discourse on the ‘civilising mission’ the Portuguese or other Western intruders: Bakongo had already a high civilisation, and did not need any other form of it.

In this urge for expressing a civilisation for themselves, Kimbanguists have gone as far as to invent a prophetic scripture, revealed to a Congolese man in the 1970s, called the mandombe, which literally means the writing of the ‘Blacks’ (or, of the ‘Africans’) in order to escape what they called, in an interview in Luanda, the ‘linguistic colonization’ of having to write using the Latin script system. In doing so, they have produced a religious system and a civilisation that they see as profoundly Christian (and indeed, not only it is based on Christian ethics, but without Christ having announced the Paraclete the whole movement would lack legitimacy), but that has, as part of his appeal, the fact that is profoundly African, and offers such pride to their followers – and not only to those living in Luanda or other African cities. Indeed, through these movements, a most noble and dignified notion of Africa sails from shore to shore of the Atlantic, feeding religious and geographical imaginations, helping to re-situate Africa in a spiritual map, and, according to some of the members of these churches, provoking movements of the ‘back to Africa’ kind. A Kimbanguist pastor in Luanda once told us that some African American visitors asked him why did Kimbanguism need Jesus Christ. If Kimbangu, an African man inspired by God, could establish a link between human beings and God and reveal such wonders as a characteristic African scripture (the mandombe), why then have the intermediary of Christ, a figure that was introduced to the Congo basin and to Angola by foreign agents? The pastor felt offended, and replied that Christ is for them as important as for any other Christian church; Kimbangu had come to earth, precisely, to accomplish the words and works of Jesus.

---

12) For Kimbanguism, see for instance Quilombo (n.d).

13) Mandombe is a very complex system, taught in Kimbanguist contexts but also used by other churches (at least in Northern Angola), that deserves the most careful attention of scholars of literacy. The reasons given to us as to why the Africans need to have their own system of writing, revealed by God to an African person, thus making it possible to bypass ‘linguistic colonialism,’ reminded us of the explanations given to Jean-Loup Amselle on the N’ko, an equally complex writing system of the Malinké people of West Africa, also first learned through divine revelation (Amselle 2001).

14) According to some interviewees in Luanda, many African Americans are taking interest in Nkamba, the holy city of Kimbanguists, though we have no direct evidence of it. For the centrality of Nkamba for Kimbanguist migrants, cf. Eade and Garbin (2007).
The Tokoists, on the other hand recall the Prophet’s actions mainly as a ‘remembrance’ (relembrar) of the original, true, authentic church – that is, the church of the Scriptures. Toko sought, like many other African prophets, to reform Christian practice to the times of the Hebrews’ Tabernacle, as is described in the Book of Exodus. Yet, posterior interpretations by Tokoist theologians also read Toko’s preaching in terms of the unmasking of the ‘fake’ Christianity that is practiced in Europe (and previously imposed on the Africans). For them, Toko is also the Paraclete – an interpretation also used to contest the Vatican’s ‘concealment’ of the third secret of Our Lady of Fátima. For many Tokoists, the contested ‘third secret’ that the Virgin Mary handed down to the three pastors in 1917, revealed many decades later, was not the one set forth by the Vatican (a vision of the Pope’s death), but that a messiah would be born in the African territory. Thus, contested interpretations are at stake even within the Portuguese territory and spiritual framework.

Whatever the future of these churches will be like, it looks as though it is prefigured by the tension between what we have called the centrifugal universalistic versus the centripetal Africanistic (and, in the case of the Kimbanguists, Bakongoist) tendencies, and also by the powerful images of Africa that these churches invoke. They are not only spreading prophecies, but also a notion of belonging to Africa that empowers African migrants abroad, as well as bringing to the public sphere memories of slave trade and African humiliation that will no doubt create new ways of understanding Africa at a global level and renew interest in the people who suffered during colonial times. For instance, in Lisbon we have seen Kimbanguists explain with insistence to non-Kimbanguists that, contrary to what has been published, Nelson Mandela is not the African man who spent the longest time in prison. He stayed there for twenty-seven years, while Simon Kimbangu was imprisoned for thirty years, – a telling indicator of the kind of learning about colonialism and suffering that these churches can bring about in the diaspora.

---

15) Our Lady of Fátima is the title given to the vision of the Virgin Mary that took place in 1917, when she appeared to three children in Fátima (Portugal). Today, the shrine of Fátima is one of the most popular Catholic pilgrimage sites in the world. It is said that the Madonna handed down three secrets to the children, the first two being disclosed in 1943 and the third one in 2000.

16) The same claim is offered by the Kimbanguists, who believe that Kimbangu’s second son, Dialungana Kianganí Salomon (born in 1916) was a reincarnation of Jesus Christ, and that was Fatima’s third secret. These are telling examples of how Portugal – that throughout the twentieth century has assumed the Fátima event as a major identitary, cultural and spiritual milestone in their nation-building policies – has become an object of appropriation and contestation by African Christians.
The notion of a dignified ‘Africa’ that sails through the Atlantic waters with these movements is, to say the least, profoundly Christian. It was in Africa that the prophets announced (‘remembered’ in the words of many of our interlocutors) the true spirit of Christianity, now disseminated through the world by their followers. As the National Pastor of the Kimbanguist Church in Portugal told us in Lisbon in November 2008, when we were discussing with him the above-mentioned involvement of his church in the local politics of the Quinta da Fonte, every time there are manifestations of African ‘culture’ in Portugal (such as ‘African festivals,’ of which there are several every year), the only thing visitors get to know about the continent are a few instances of traditional dances and several typical dishes from Cape Verde or Angola, but never the real African culture, the profoundly spiritual base that has shaped the continent and that Kimbangu made explicit with his messages and suffering. He continued to express his gratitude to the authorities of Quinta da Fonte for having now been officially asked to inform the wider community about it, and particularly the African community of Quinta da Fonte (mostly composed of migrants from Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde, not from Angola), who do not know about their own continent.

In the Lusophone Atlantic this marriage between ‘authentic’ Africa and ‘authentic’ Christianity is particularly visible in the two movements commented on here, but we are certain that this will be a bone of contention in discourses of African identity at a global level and also among other prophetic movements that are today spreading along worldwide prophetic diasporas.

**Bibliography**


