

THE DEVIL'S COMMA

The Holy Bible as Postcolonial Technology for Reconfiguring the National Narrative of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

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We may suppose that 'mythical behavior' will disappear as a result of the former colonies' acquiring political independence.

Mircea Eliade (1963)

AFTER MORE THAN FIFTEEN YEARS of absence from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), my homeland, I started going back there on a regular basis in 2003, and even living in the capital city of Kinshasa for half of the year since then. This experience was not so much a narrative of non-return as a cultural turbulence of re-entry. For instance, during the Congolese presidential electoral campaign in July 2006, watching television one night, I was mystified to see and hear a pastor who was being interviewed exclaim, 'This is a special country and a special people: God had prophesied on this land and its people! Politicians better watch out' ('Interview avec un Pasteur'). Asking people around me what he meant by that admonition, they advised with condescension that I read Isaiah 18. And I, for one, was among those who used to claim, 'No one reads anymore in the Congo.' I meant by this aphorism that the practice and performance of literature as experienced in the West has all but disappeared in the country.¹ But I was discovering that night that I needed to amend the aphorism as follows: 'The one book being read and misread in the Congo is *The Holy Bible*.'²

Consider this other instance: On another one of my stays in Kinshasa, a cousin of mine, who had just converted to an evangelical sect, suddenly turned vegetarian. As I was jokingly warning him against the danger of such a radical dietary change in a city where daily protein intake was far from granted and the very act of getting food amounted to foraging, he told me

¹ Literature in the literal Western sense of the word as a daily individual and cultural practice does not exist in the DRC. This function of literature is instead performed by modern Congolese music - with an extensive corpus of lyrics, a self-referential domain, pop and religious genres, a language (Lingala), and a cohesive narrational texture of national experience. Congolese written literature as a practice emerged and briefly enjoyed its heyday under the rule of Mobutu, and had synergetic relations with the Afrocentrist biopolitical practices of that regime. This parentage was such that this emergent literature was 'cannibalised' by the regime and, unlike the French nineteenth-century nomothetic literature, failed to carve out a territory of its own where it could function as an alternative space of independence and supremacy. (On nineteenth-century French Literature as a nomothetic field, see Bourdieu 1995).

² All biblical quotations in the text are taken from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version* published by Thomas Nelson & Sons in 1946 and 1952.

to look up Genesis 6:19–21. I did look up this passage with him: Noah is being briefed by God who has ‘determined to make an end of all flesh’ (Genesis 6:13) prior to his boarding of the ark. Noah is told to bring into the ark ‘every living thing of all flesh...two of every sort,’ all the biodiversity on earth, but God adds in the last verse of this passage (21): ‘Also take with you every sort of food that is eaten, and store it up; and it shall serve as food for you and for them [living things].’

According to my cousin, this verse clearly shows that God meant us to be vegetarian, for, why would He tell us to take all the ‘food that is eaten’ in addition to ‘every living thing of all flesh’? My cousin’s close reading also points to the nature of *The Holy Bible* as an amulet in the DRC: every single passage in the Good Book, even a comma, or for that matter the actual physical printed book one carries to Sunday service, is worth its weight in gold. And this attention to minute detail even bleeds into the way people now read secular documents like the new Constitution enacted in February 2006, following the referendum that took place in December 2005 (République Démocratique du Congo 2006). In the run-up to that referendum, some politicians of the opposition, especially the maverick pastors Théodore Ngoy and Gabriël Mokia, known to the local media as the most prolific ‘injurologues’ or ‘injurologists’³ in the country, who were campaigning against the new Constitution, claimed that a comma in the first sentence of the first paragraph of its Article 40 was a clear opening to gay marriage - an abomination, according to them. That paragraph states:

Tout individu a le droit de se marier avec la personne de son choix, de sexe opposé, et de fonder une famille (République Démocratique du Congo 2006).⁴

[One has the right to marry the person of one’s choice, of the opposite gender, and to set up family].

Now, these opponents of the Constitution contended, why would the legislators put a comma between ‘choix’ [choice] and ‘de sexe opposé’ [of the opposite gender] if they did not intend to have gays wedge into official marriage through that gaping opening while leaving the subsequent fragments unscathed? Or, as Reverend Ngoy put it in one of his televised interventions, that comma is the devil’s own highway into the soul of the Congo.⁵ Such is the state of close, partial reading today in the DRC - a paradoxical state of reading, as it were, a reading which is at the same time paralipitic, cryptic and elliptical, as this essay evinces, for while these contradictors of the new Constitution insisted on this devil’s comma, in their daily reading and hermeneutics of the Bible they often take serious liberties with the text. A state of reading one could term ‘pathological’ - a pathology that borrows its symptomatic signature, as will be shown below, from the country’s home-grown religion: Kimbanguism. This pathology is also seen in the flourish of rumors not only in the streets but also in what would pass as legitimate mainstream media.

Though this reading pathology and the undergirding rumour-mongering at first struck me as novel, its origins can be traced back decades earlier to the heyday of Mobutu’s era when the party-state monopolised - or attempted to monopolise - all communication technologies, including the media, which were indeed all state-owned. As is the case with propaganda, the information circulating through these technologies was falsely exaggerated on behalf of the

³ A Congolese neologism to describe politicians and TV pundits specialized in heaping injures and other verbal abuses upon each other

⁴ All English translations are mine, except where otherwise indicated.

⁵ ‘Dialogue et Débat’. Canal Congo TV CCTV, Kinshasa, 10 November 2005

regime and to the detriment of the opposition. This state of affairs led people to deploy alternative technologies of communication, chief among them being what was called 'Radio Trottoir' [Sidewalk Radio]: that is, information by word of mouth. Soon, even the 'Radio Trottoir' had its own anchors, called 'Parlementaires Debout' [Parliamentarians Standing], who, at street corners, would analyse, comment on and interpret political, social and cultural developments in the country. Most of the members of this guild, who ironically are also today called 'theorists', were then unemployed. It is worth noting that some of them have now found employment that turned them into genuine politicians, journalists and TV pundits in the emerging democratic practice in the country. And it is all the more striking to observe that the current political and media discourses have the hallmarks of the 'Parlementaires Debout': insults, little or no cross-checking of sources, and the abuse of the conditional mood - in short, a recipe for rumours and violence which in fact have marred the democratic process in the Congo.

This empowerment of the people through an informal technology of expression occurred in tandem with another empowering drive: the spread of revivalist churches, in which almost anyone with some basic notion of the Bible could set up a church and have what the critics of this trend in the Congo call a lucrative or entrepreneurial ministry. This was in part encouraged by the powers that be under the banner of Mobutu's biopolitical practice of Afrocentrist policy called 'Authenticité' [Authenticity] that came to be vehemently contested by the domestic Catholic Church, which frowned upon the 1972 regime's decree banning suits and ties as well as Christian names, thus forcing citizens overnight to scurry to find new African 'Authentic' names.

It was also in the shelter of these evangelical churches that most people found solace and meaning during the five-year regional war with Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda dubbed the 'First African World War'. No wonder then that, more than Mobutu's virulent nationalism, it was these evangelicals that effectively used the Bible as a technology in 'the production of citizenship' (Hansen & Stepputat 2005: 26), especially at a time when the collapse of the state meant that the latter could not protect its own citizens. This process is illustrative of the shift, introduced by Thomas Bloom Hansen and Finn Stepputat in the concept of sovereignty in the postcolony, from the traditional Western notion of 'unequivocal linking of sovereignty to the state' to one that construes the 'sovereignty of the state [as] an aspiration that seeks to create itself in the face of internally fragmented, unevenly distributed and unpredictable configurations of political authority that exercise more or less legitimate violence in a territory' (Hansen & Stepputat 2005: 3). In the Congo, this process of fragmentation was heightened by war and the rise of warlords, which also dialectically bolstered civil society and individuals willing to carve out parcels of sovereignty from the virtually non-existent state. Among the latter were a growing number of non-government organisations (NGOs) and Christian revivalist groups that took matters into their own hands for the protection of the people. This 'devolution' of the state's attributes 'to a multiplicity of units' (Mbembe: 158) was also often accompanied by violence meted out against children branded as 'sorcerers' by a fringe of evangelicals who would then carry out, sometimes with the consent of families, very cruel rituals of 'exorcism' on those unfortunate children.

Congolese Christian revivalism was first accompanied by the genre of confession writing,⁶ then afterwards by oral testimonials at church gatherings. Though this phenomenon could be construed as the constitution of the Congolese individual postcolonial self through the genre of religious confession, the turn to oral testimonials could also denote a reversion to the 'natural' discursive mode of oral literature prevalent in Congolese traditional cultural practice.

⁶ See Nkashama (1995). Nkashama sees these confessions as organised ploys by Mobutu's associates to avoid prosecution and public wrath, though the genre quickly spread to laypeople in the streets

This reversion could also be a symptom of the destruction of the public library system inherited from Belgian colonial rule after independence, the high costs of books, the disintegration of the school system through years of neglect that started under Mobutu, and the sorely devastating war. Today, reading as routine entertainment has almost vanished, while television viewing (in urban areas) and gregarious habits have either emerged or soared, with streets becoming the 'sociological location' par excellence.

To turn back to *The Holy Bible*, as stated above, this book has thoroughly reconfigured the foundational myth and the *Bildung* narrative of the DRC. This essay recounts : **1)** how Chapter 18 of the Book of Isaiah is being read as the new foundation of the nation's 'narration'; **2)** how Kimbanguist theology defines the Congolese mythographic production; **3)** how the nation's *Bildung* provided by an alleged prophecy by the Congolese prophet Simon Kimbangu was appropriated during the presidential electoral campaign by the camp of the incumbent Joseph Kabila; and **4)** how a counter-prophecy on the historical unfolding of the country's history was offered by the transitional vice-president and presidential contender Jean-Pierre Bemba's side: a prophecy based on Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the 'Golden Image' in Chapter 2 of the Book of Daniel. As this essay draws heavily on personal observation, it is at the locus of transdisciplinarity - literature, cultural studies and ethnography - with a particular stress on the latter, especially as it 'is a mode of knowing that privileges experience - often going into realms of the social that are not easily discernible within the more formal protocols used by many other disciplines' (Das & Poole 2004: 3). For, '[a]s such, ethnography offers a unique perspective on the sorts of practices that seem to undo the state at its territorial and conceptual margins' (Das & Poole 2004: 3).

But two remarks need to be made before getting to the gist of the essay's argument. **1)** In the DRC, there are two strands of reading strategy applied to the Bible: a strong, literal reading and a mild, allegorical reading. The former consists in the actual reading of current events into the Bible or vice versa; its technique and methodology are found in Kimbanguist theology. It is made up either of re-readings that purport to be prophetic visions, taken verbatim from the Bible in the mode of a *roman à clef*, or of prophecies envisioned by local prophets, as is the case with the country's alleged *Bildung* offered by Kimbangu. The latter is the old allegorical reading, where the passages of the Scriptures would generally provide moral lessons for the flocks. An instance of mild reading is that made by Reverend Daniel Mulunda whose NGO, PAREC (Programme Oeucuménique de Paix, Transformation des conflits et Réconciliation [Ecumenical Programme for Peace, Conflict Transformation and Reconciliation]), which exchanges light weapons for ploughs and other agricultural tools as well as melting those weapons to make farming tools, has as its motto Isaiah 2:4:

[A]nd they shall beat their swords
into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning
hooks[.]

2) In these current prophecies and counter-prophecies, the vision has dramatically shifted from the Cargo-cult perspective on the eve of independence in 1960, in which independence was held up as a millennialist marker of the moment when people would have direct access to the bounties of paradise; a phenomenon encapsulated by Mircea Eliade in a telling anecdote of what went on in the Congo in 1960 at independence:

In some villages the inhabitants tore the roofs off their huts to give passage to the gold coins that their ancestors were to rain down. Everything was allowed to go to rack and ruin except the roads to the cemetery, by which the ancestors would make their way to the village. Even the orgiastic excesses had a meaning, for, according

to the myth, from the dawn of the New Age all women would belong to all men.

Eliade 1963: 3

Today's vision is utterly different in that the ancestors have completely vanished from the plot. It is Jesus who has turned into the central character. Since Jesus-God is life itself, the cemetery is no longer the topos; but the streets and the land have turned into topoi. A cunning strategy is furthermore deployed to bar from the 'living land' the Others, the invaders: Rwandans, Ugandans, Burundians and their perceived backers, the international community. (But in turn, as we are about to see, the same strategy is also used to demonise domestic political enemies. It needs to be stressed, as the essay evinces below, that, contrary to the Congo where it is a new construct, the sense of 'nation-ness' in Rwanda and Burundi predates the colonial period.) The Eliadean 'orgiastic' streak has given way to prudishness and puritanical attitudes. And to outright verbal or physical violence meted out against those perceived to be on the wrong side of God, i.e. one's own political enemy - for, in this 'dispensationalist' approach, God is foremost a Lord of Hosts, a title which captures the very material violent essence of this God in a country already torn by war. In other words, if you can't fight your enemies with weapons, curse them with words from the Bible. More importantly, today's myth is based on what I term 'actionable theology', a reading of the Scriptures yielding immediate practical results and action in the here-and-now. One does not hold any longer that sudden bliss will come *ex nihilo* from heaven and make the passive world holistic for good in an instant. It is instead the daily vigilant practice of the word of the Lord against Satan, the sorcerers, and the enemy of his people that will make one's country a viable and sustainable environment where the faithful can see God 'radically breaking into our world' (Bock 2006). The plot of the new Congolese mythology has therefore undergone a radical break from the Eliadean mould and is thus characteristically magical-realist, based, not unlike the mythical world of the Afrikaner Calvinists of apartheid South Africa, upon a 'mythologising of history and a politically charged biblical hermeneutics' (Carr). In the postcolonial state, mythology, far from disappearing 'as a result of the former colonies' acquiring political independence', as Eliade wrongly anticipated (1963: 3), has in fact been redeployed and turned into a sophisticated hermeneutic myth-generating machine.

ISAIAH 18: 'A Nation Whose Land the Rivers Divide'

The title of this section illustrates the strategy of the Congolese in reading their story in the Bible: a partial reading consisting of chopping off huge blocks of the text, toning down those parts of the text that seem to contradict their plot, appropriating and cleaning out the original narrative, all of this often accompanied by a runaway paraliptic hermeneutics. Consider the title above: to come up with this title as applying to the nation-state of the DRC, one had to cross out some critical elements that would have otherwise contradicted one's claim. In order to demonstrate this, let's consider the prophet's text, while first pointing out right away that this book is currently one of the most hotly debated by theologians (McCann).

At the beginning of Chapter 18, the prophet is relaying God's message intimating to a nation 'which is beyond the rivers of Ethiopia' (18:1) to:

Go, you swift messengers,
to a nation, tall and smooth,
to a people feared near and far,
a nation mighty and conquering
whose land the rivers divide.

There are elephants in the midst of this excerpt that are willfully occulted by the Congolese prism through which this verse is being read. Indeed, in order to realise the magnitude of these omissions, one has to consider the common myths, prejudices, and history in Africa's Great Lakes region, as well as eyewitness accounts of explorers recorded in their travelogues. In precolonial times, in that region, only the old kingdoms of Rwanda and Burundi (or Urundi, as it was called until its independence in 1962) had organised armies able to ward off raids by Arab slave traders at their borders. These two kingdoms were ruled by the Tutsi minority who, on average, were taller than their fellow Hutus, though centuries-old intermarriages have today almost dissipated this trait but not quite wiped it out from the psyche of the peoples in the region. In 1876, in one of his reports to the *New York Herald*, Henry Morton Stanley, the famous British-American explorer and an associate of King Leopold of Belgium, while at the border of the Rwanda-Urundi territory, was informed that these 'long-legged natives' were unco-operative and that 'at five different times Arabs had endeavoured to open intercourse with them, but each time had been repulsed, and some had been murdered by the treacherous people' (Stanley 1970: 271, 273). In yet another of his reports, Stanley expresses his frustration and bemoans the loss to geographical knowledge caused by these kingdoms' impenetrability, saying that he would have gone back to wrest this knowledge by force had he not named a lake, Gulf Beatrice, 'after a daughter of Queen Victoria':

Here, within two degrees of longitude, where seven [European] countries meet, representatives of seven [European] nations are unable to give a clear and connected account of this most interesting region. The cause of this ignorance arises from the peculiar character of the northern Warundi and Wa-Ruanda, who are a jealous, treacherous, and vindictive race. If an explorer could cross the country of Urundi, and enter Mkinnyaga, he meets with a different race, with whom it could not be difficult to establish amicable relations; but unless he had balloons at his disposal I am unable to see how he could reach Mkinnyaga from the east or the south. Were the Warundi or the Wa-Ruanda anything in disposition like the tribes or nations we have met between here and Zanzibar, how easy a task it were to push one's way direct to the utmost reach of the Nile! We have tribes who exacted tribute, and we have paid it and passed on our way, and have met tribes who compelled us to fight

our way through them; but here are two nations (not tribes) of one peculiar distinct breed, who are neither to be subject to the power of sweet suasion with gifts of sugar-candy, knick-knacks and gaudy cloths, or to be forced from the position they have assumed with a few dozen Sniders. Heaven knows the original progenitors of these fierce nations. I had half a mind once to make an alliance with the bandit Mirambo, ...and, with the addition of a thousand Brown Besses, ...drag the secrets of the Nile by force to the light of day. But the name of the amiable Princess of Wales could not be taken then to cover such a stain as this would have been on the source of the Nile.⁷

Stanley 1970: 313

And very recently, the Rwandan army has demonstrated an ability to carry out blitzkriegs into the neighbouring country of the DRC, even providing the late Congolese president Laurent-Désiré Kabila's rebel ragtag army with the backbone that would ultimately lead to the toppling of the Mobutu regime in May 1997. More importantly, when his former Rwandan allies turned out to be cumbersome, and Kabila decided to have them withdraw from the Congo, Rwandans conquered in matters of weeks vast swathes of the Congo and installed their own local puppets in the eastern DRC. Now, if anything, a literal reading of the passage from the book of Isaiah above would grant the attributes 'people feared near and far' and 'a nation mighty and conquering' to Rwanda, and not to the Congo, whose army has not fought any heroic battle since 1960. In fact, in order to twist verse 1 to have it apply to the Congo, the only characteristic retained was 'a nation whose land the rivers divide.'

A major leap has thereby been made from the book of Isaiah to the current Congolese national narrative. This 'crisis narrative' was mainly fleshed out during the 'First African World War' which, according to a United Nations Security Council report, was one of the most vicious colonising and plunderous enterprises of modern times:

The illegal exploitation of resources by Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda took different forms, including confiscation, extraction, forced monopoly and price-fixing. Of these, the first two reached proportions that made the war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo a very lucrative business.

United Nations Security Council Report 6

According to the same report, this 'mass-scale looting,' carried out 'by foreigners aided by [some] Congolese', saw 'wave[s] of "new businessmen" only speaking English [in a Francophone country], Kinyarwanda and Kiswahili,' and took place on such a scale that:

[b]etween September 1998 and August 1999, occupied zones of the Democratic Republic of the Congo were drained of existing stockpiles, including minerals, agricultural and forest products and livestock. Regardless of the looter, the pattern was the same: Burundian, Rwandan, Ugandan and/or RCD soldiers,⁸ commanded by an officer, visited farms, storage facilities, factories and banks, and demanded that the managers open the coffers and doors. The soldiers

⁷ The 'obscure hydrological debate' over the sources of the Nile still rages on today, attracting its lot of adventurers with its accompanying human toll. See Duane.

⁸ RCD or 'Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie' [Congolese Rally for Democracy] was then a rebel outfit dominated by Congolese of Rwandan descent, that has since transformed into a political party after the 2002 Sun City [South Africa] Congolese Global and Inclusive Agreement, whose charter determined the form of transitional rule in DRC starting in 2003.

were then ordered to remove the relevant products and load them into vehicles. The [UN Security Council] Panel received numerous accounts and claims of unlawful removal of products by Rwandan or Ugandan armies and their local RCD allies.

United Nations: 3, 7, 8

These acts of plunder were often accompanied by what human rights groups and the UN term today 'sexual terrorism', consisting of mass rapes of women and girls as young as a few months old.⁹ Faced with such searing egregiousness, the silent indifference of the international community, and the utter inability of the nation-state to defend its borders and its citizens, the Congolese had no one to turn to but the proliferating religious sects dotting their neighbourhoods, where they rerouted and reinvested their mental energies and where they found readymade narratives to account for their sufferings.

In any event, the reading mode of the Congolese is thus established, with its paradoxical accessory strategy of leaps, omissions, and 'forging' of correspondences. Yet, the reading we just had of verse 1 would in itself be partial if we were not to include the reading of the last verse of Chapter 18. After briefly quoting God in verse 4, the prophet interrupts God and embarks on a somewhat cryptic, threatening and lengthy indirect speech recounting what God has told him before concluding, with a Messianic promise to the chosen nation, in a palimpsesti iteration of the lines already used in verse 8:

At that time gifts will be brought
to the Lord of hosts
from a people tall and smooth,
a nation mighty and conquering,
whose land the rivers divide,
to Mount Zion, the place of the name of the Lord of hosts.

Despite the iterations that once again would not let anyone miss the characteristics in this text which clearly point in the direction of the Rwandans, that is, if we were to read the text as my fellow Congolese do, the blinders are firmly in place. What is more, in the messianic time of reckoning, Congo would then not only have the status of one of the most favoured nations among those gathering with Israel at Mount Zion but would be on a par with Israel itself - a view that firmly places Congolese biblical interpretation among the 'traditionalist' evangelicalism that sees the actual nation-state of Israel having 'a central role in the [messianic] future' (Bock 2006).

But this peculiar interpretation and rereading of the Bible has little to do with academic exercises in exegesis. It evinces instead a new redeployment of 'autochthony'¹⁰ with this biblical hermeneutic gone haywire as an encapsulant of what Mbembe would call a 'project of identity-creation' (Mbembe: 166) and Comaroff and Comaroff a 'popular consciousness-under-construction' (Comaroff & Comaroff: 139). Such conditions could only have been exacerbated in the face of the 'fragmentation and the diffusion' of the state in the postcolony where people now have recourse to 'a plurality of repertoires of action and a parallel entanglement of conflicting

⁹ See for example, *IRIN.org*; Mbembe sees in the 'conjunction of the gun and the phallus' in these gang rapes of women in war-torn regions of Africa the absolute othering of women - death:

[E]njoyment through the gun and through the phallus are conjoined, the one ending in a corporeality that is inert and emptied of all life, death; and the other by a discharge as violent as it is brief, the orgasmic satisfaction by means of which the power of enjoyment is converted into a power of radically objectifying the Other, whose body one bores into, digs into, excavates, and empties in the very act of rape. (Mbembe:165)

¹⁰ I subscribe to Comaroff and Comaroff's definition of autochthony as 'a form of attachment that ties people to place, that natures the nation, that authorises entitlement' (Comaroff & Comaroff: 147).

codes of legitimation' (Mbembe: 153) with a host of 'informal sovereigns' (Hansen & Stepputat 2005: 179). In the particular case of the Congo, one such code of legitimation is the irredentist religious revivalism. The Pastor has turned into a 'sovereign' over family, community and even state matters. And a whole range of vocabulary has been deployed to describe the powers of these new informal sovereigns, in the increasing order of respectability, respectively, of the Pastor, the Evangelist, the Apostle and the Prophet. In the face of this proliferation of religious sovereignty, the biggest loser seems to have been the domestic Roman Catholic Church, which has now revamped its propagation tools through the creation of smaller 'charismatic' neighbourhood proximity groups in a lame attempt to counter the massive loss of its congregants to the new revivalist movement.

The irredentism of Congolese revivalists, which mirrors the racination ideologies peddled by populist politicians, was triggered, as we have seen, by the five-year occupation of the eastern parts of the country by foreign armies and their local allies who operated like 'doppelganger anticitizens' (Comaroff & Comaroff: 140). Given that the occupied zones were being administered by these foreign powers as de facto annexed territories, with little that the Congolese central government could do on behalf of its citizens, alternative modes of resistance and belonging were developed to draw a symbolically secure circle around autochthons. With the end of the occupation, the irredentism has been reinvested against domestic others, who are deemed 'non-autochthonous'. Chief among the latter are Congolese ethnically associated with Rwandans and, specifically in the capital city of Kinshasa fired up by populist rhetoric, the incumbent Joseph Kabila, who has the misfortune of having grown up abroad (in Tanzania) while his father, a rebel leader, was Mobutu's number one enemy of the state. Anecdotally, when Joseph Kabila had to replace his assassinated father in 2001, the opposition to the succession was based on the fact that the Congo, not being a hereditary monarchy, the president's son had no right to succeed his father. This line of attack found ammunition in the all-pervasive book of Isaiah (3:4):

And I will make boys their princes,
and babes shall rule over them.

The youth of leaders that this curse of God alludes to reflects Joseph Kabila's age; he was just 29 when he acceded to power in 2001. Then, when, after a few years, he turned out to be popular in his own right, especially across the eastern provinces once occupied by foreign armies and which are the most populous in the country, the rationale transmogrified into the questioning of his filiation with the assassinated president, with some politicians even demanding that he establish this filiation through DNA analysis.

The locus of Isaiah in the Congolese psyche is intersected by that of Prophet Simon Kimbangu, a catechist turned religious leader in the early 1920s, who died in internal exile under Belgian rule in 1951. Unlike Isaiah, Kimbangu did not write prophecies but left a 'word-of-mouth' corpus that his family and his followers have used to set up one of the most successful churches in Central Africa, spanning multiple countries, complete with mega-churches, radio and television stations in Congo-Kinshasa and Congo-Brazzaville, as well as schools and a university. And still unlike Isaiah, Kimbangu is today a messiah in his own right, God's 'Special Envoy' as the Kimbanguists call him in the full name of their church, the ECSK ('Église du Christ au Congo par l'Envoyé Spécial de Dieu Simon Kimbangu' [the Church of Christ in Congo by God's Special Envoy Simon Kimbangu]). Moreover, the prophet's birthplace at Nkamba, in the southwestern province of Bas-Congo, is now the 'New Jerusalem', according to another peculiar interpretation of a biblical prophet, Ezekiel, as shown below. Kimbangu - or what his followers purport to be one of his prophecies - provides the first most comprehensive *Bildung* of the nation-state of the Congo. But before turning to that development of the country according to the vision of Kimbangu, a closer look at the concept of the Kimbanguists' 'New Jerusalem' is warranted, as it shows the methodological approach of the current Congolese biblical literalism.

NKAMBA, SOUTHWESTERN DRC: *The New Jerusalem*

The birth place of Kimbangu (1887–1951), Nkamba, today a thriving holy city, started to be turned into the New Jerusalem by his followers on March 3, 1960, upon the return of the remains of the prophet from Jadotville (today Kolwezi) where he had died in internal exile. Besides the claim that in 1935, the temple his followers had built in that city was suddenly spatially moving to avoid destruction by colonial authorities, the city owes its present-day status of New Jerusalem to a reading of Ezekiel 47. This reading by Kimbanguist theologians is so critical in understanding the current Congolese production of mythography that an examination of their extreme close reading of this chapter of the book of Ezekiel is warranted and compels quotation at length:

As for the interpretation of the remainder of the biblical text (Ezek. 47: 8–11), we considered the Congo River as the image of the Dead Sea, evoked in the Bible. Thus, where the brook, turned into a torrent, flows into the Congo River, there are villages of fishermen whose livelihood depends on agriculture, fishing and hunting (Ezek. 47:9). These fishermen use nets one can see drying in the sun, on the bank of the Congo River. Others do angling (Ezek. 47:10). Hunters could find game in the surrounding forests and savannahs. On any given day, one can buy diverse species of fresh, grilled or smoked fish. We have ourselves often bought grilled and smoked fish there. Thus, this location yields a good livelihood to the inhabitants of the surrounding villages. A remarkably particular and touristic joy also exists there: a motor-propelled ferry allows permanent daily crossings of people and goods at this location of the Congo River. It is therefore a meeting point of people from various horizons. Cars are often lined up, awaiting such an entertaining crossing of the Congo River, at least three kilometres wide at this precise location.

At this location, one can also observe swamps and lagoons invaded by mounds of white sand (similar to salt reserves), coming out of the littoral of the brook and of the river, running towards each other (Ezek. 47: 11).

On each bank of the brook, off Nkamba New Jerusalem, different kinds of fruit trees grow whose leaves are always green and never wither. These trees, watered by the stream coming from the holy source (south of the altar), incessantly produce fruits, all year round. Their fruits are used as nourishment and their leaves as remedies (Ezek. 47: 12).

The similarity found between Ezekiel's biblical vision and the reality at Nkamba New Jerusalem will astound any investigator or any good observer.

This vision of Ezekiel, written a long time ago in the Bible, describes in fact a very concrete reality that presently exists at Nkamba New Jerusalem, in the heart of Africa. Get your knapsack ready and go discover more, on the ground at Nkamba New Jerusalem!

The Kimbanguist theologians gives us the hermeneutical device of the Congolese misreading: **1)** wishful reasoning (or rather, speculation) on a tenuous link between the text and actual events or sites; **2)** yielding plausible interpretation; **3)** based on anything deemed

uncannily similar - a word association run amok. What is more, as this interpretation has to be materially perfected to conform to the biblical landscape design, and as the holy land of Nkamba was proclaimed a 'permanent building site', a likewise permanent hefty tithe called 'nsinsani' (literally, 'competition' in the Kongo language) was set up whereby every Sunday women's and men's groups compete through donations to the church. Thus, if other-worldliness could so easily permeate the *here-and-now* and vice versa, prophetic visions could as effortlessly reach far into the future and unravel destinies of present nations-states, as illustrated in the vision of Kimbangu of the *Bildung* of the DRC.

PROPHECY:

Simon Kimbangu's alleged Bildung of the Congo

With no written document left by Kimbangu to go on, as stated above, one has to rely on word-of-mouth. The one recent written account of this prophecy was found on the official website of the Congolese president, in its January 2006 editorial, penned by the presidential editorialist Marcel Nzazi Mabidi and entitled 'Joseph Kabila's Exceptional Destiny' (then recycled after the incumbent's victory, in December 2006, as 'Joseph Kabila Has Won His Challenge'), which was clearly pandering to the Kimbanguist church, with deep roots in the Kongo ethnic group of the southwestern province, where incidentally the incumbent performed poorly during both rounds of the presidential election in 2006 despite the following panegyric:

[Congo will one day be independent. For 40 years the country will be put to fire and sword and will experience daunting difficulties and sufferings of every kind. Then good fortune will come. The country will first be led by a sheep [Joseph Kasavubu, Congo's first president]. That man will be a native of the province where I was born.

The country will then be led by a wild beast [Mobutu] who will come to cast aside the sheep. During the rule of the wild beast marked by terror, the country will be ransacked. Money will be lacking in the country. Even banks will be empty.

Then a man will come, a meteor, a native of the province where I will die [Laurent-Désiré Kabila]. His rule will be very short. His main role will be to chase the wild beast from power.

Then someone will come, a young sage [Joseph Kabila]. It's he who will save this country and bring to the people true independence.]

One would rightly think that this kind of prophetic lore could only be used by politicians to coax unsuspecting and credulous masses to vote for them, especially as the *Bildung* of the country suddenly stops at the moment of rule of the incumbent, without opening up to the future, as if the development of the country's story ends with the administration currently in power; an impasse that the counter-prophecy of the incumbent's opposition also somehow emulates to a certain extent, before conflating the whole nation with Israel of messianic times, just as in the Isaian foundational myth.

But one should bear in mind that Congolese theology is foremost 'actionable' in the here-and-now, with immediacy thus being at its core - in this case, the near future being the farthest removed horizon. Furthermore, the Bible is often taken as a potent anti-sorcery amulet and Christianity as a competing worldview to sorcery, not only in the DRC but in other African countries as well. One indication of this can be found in the success of the Nigerian Christian films in the DRC and in the plots of locally produced television drama and comedy. The plots of these movies and television series are often about Christians being protected by their faith against sorcerers. Another indication is the ghastly number of children thrown into the streets after being accused of sorcery. This phenomenon has been so pervasive that the new Constitution, in its Article 41, has a specific provision deeming unlawful and criminal any accusation of sorcery leveled at a child:

The abandonment and ill-treatment of children, including paedophilia, sexual abuses as well as the accusation of sorcery are

prohibited and punishable by law.

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And the supposed perpetrators of sorcery continue to be routinely burned alive, while rebel groups have been accused of cannibalism of pygmies as game meat or for the purpose of making their fighters impervious to bullets (Griswold 2004).¹¹ All this establishes the fact that evangelism is all-encompassing, as is the belief in sorcery in the Congolese cultural landscape. It may thus turn out that politicians themselves may strongly believe in the myths they feed to the people.

In the face of such powerful prophecy allegedly proffered by Kimbangu in favor of its opponent, the transitional vice-president Jean-Pierre Bemba's camp came up with its own counter-prophecy, based on the Book of Daniel, with the same loose word association as exhibited by Kimbanguist hermeneutics.

¹¹ See also for example Radio Okapi 2006, Independent Online 2003 and UN News Centre 2003.

COUNTER-PROPHECY: *Nebuchadnezzar's Dream of the Golden Image*

On August 17, 2006, seven months after the editorial of Marcel Nzazi Mabidi was posted on the official website of the DRC president, the opposition to the incumbent produced its own counter-*Bildung* of the country on its television network Canal Congo TV CCTV ('Prophétie sur les élections'). Though the opposition narrative did not have the prestige and the seal of Kimbangu on its own counter-prophecy, it utilised the same methodology as the one the Kimbanguists used in conflating the city of Nkamba with the New Jerusalem, which evinces the fact that Congolese reading takes its cue from its home-grown religion. The textual point of departure this time was Daniel 2:31–45.

'Show me the dream and its interpretation' (6) were the threatening words Nebuchadnezzar had uttered to the 'magicians,' 'enchanters,' and 'sorcerers' of Babylon who were put to the test of finding out not only the king's disturbing dream but its interpretation as well. The biblical narrative goes on to say that 'the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision of the night' by God (19), thus saving those 'wise men' from destruction by unveiling Nebuchadnezzar's dream and its interpretation as the *Bildung* of the kingdom: the famous messianic 'Dream of the Golden Image'. Duplicating Daniel's process, the Congolese television prophet likewise had a nightly vision in which God allowed him to crack open the unfolding mystery of Congo's future. But his vision was instead simply a palimpsestic re-interpretation of the same vision of Daniel.

According to the Congolese prophet, Nebuchadnezzar's dream as pertaining to the Congolese situation was to be interpreted as a narrative in six instalments:

- 1) The 'head of [the] image' in 'fine gold' represented the Belgian colonial regime, as gold is associated with a monarch's crown.
- 2) The 'breast and arms of silver' represented the administration of Congo's first president Joseph Kasavubu.
- 3) The Mobutu regime was the image's 'belly and thighs of bronze'.
- 4) Laurent-Désiré Kabila's regime was the image's 'legs of iron'.
- 5) The transitional government led by the incumbent was the image's 'feet partly of iron and partly of clay'.
- 6) The regime that was about to unfold in the wake of the presidential elections would be Jean-Pierre Bemba's upcoming regime of 'stone' ('Pierre' being 'stone' in French) - which, according to verse 34, was set to shatter the image's legs to pieces: 'As you [Nebuchadnezzar] looked, a stone was cut out by no human hand, and it smote the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces[.]' But the Congolese prophet does not stop there. Contradicting himself, he then equates the stone, which he had previously conflated with the person of Bemba, with the Congo: 'the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth' (verse 35). But this contradiction somehow turns out to be an improvement over the other prophecy that abruptly stopped with Joseph Kabila's takeover. Here, at the very least, the country continues to live on, and inflates into a mighty power, thus rejoining the Isaian destiny of the Congo in messianic times.

Congolese street and television preachers have a built-in disclaimer in their prophetic dithyrambs. The television prophet who made these predictions about a month prior to the

runoff elections couched his disclaimer in the following terms: if you choose the incumbent despite these dire warnings, everything he does will be doomed to fail as he is already doomed by the Good Book.

Incidentally, that month of August 2006 was very creative for CCTV. In the evening of August 20, 2006, just a few hours before the opposing sides in the presidential elections resorted to a two-day armed confrontation in the capital city, CCTV broadcast a political talk-show in which one of the pundits was explaining why it was so dangerous to vote for the incumbent, who had all but sold out to Western interests that were busy rigging the elections on his behalf. Western powers were hellbent on seizing the Congo, according to this pundit, because of the depletion of the ozone layer. With the ozone depletion caused by the greenhouse effect (whose culprit is the West), the ice caps on both poles was melting, and a huge volume of water was slowly and inexorably adding to the ocean. Countries with long coastlines were doomed to be flooded. But as 'God Almighty had blessed us with only a 27-km coastline, we will be spared the impending doom because of our elevated and sprawling hinterland. The whites thought this doom could only happen in 15 years, but as it turns out, this would come sooner than expected.' That's why 'these people' are busy stealing 'our paradise by installing stooges at the helm of the state' ('Débat politique').

The prophetic books of the Old Testament, especially Isaiah, have been re-appropriated as technological devices in reinventing 'we-ness' and autochthony in the DRC. This reappropriation was mediated by grassroots pastors during the long years of war, a situation predicated on Mobutu's Afrocentrist biopolitics and the seeming indifference of the international community during a time of untold sufferings. The surge of the sovereignty of pastors, evangelists and prophets in the postcolony is illustrative of the 'devolution' of state powers to 'informal sovereigns' (Hansen & Stepputat 2005: 179), as evinced by contributions to Hansen and Stepputat's seminal volume, especially when the state, as in the Congo, has been blatantly incapable of protecting and defending its citizens.

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