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Part I

Introduction

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1 A Writing Lesson (in Luanda)

This book emerged as a serendipitous part of my wider research on the church of Simon Kimbangu, a religious institution born in Central Africa (officially recognised in Belgian Congo in 1959) out of an anti-colonial prophetic movement started by the preacher Simon Kimbangu in the southern provinces of the Belgian Congo in 1921. From being a local prophetic movement in a tiny Kongo village, Kimbanguism has become a world church with several million followers in many countries. It has also become a paradigmatic case study for students of African religion who want to highlight the relationship between religion, contestation, oppression and spiritual independence.

I met Kimbanguists for the first time in February 2006 in Lisbon, and I immediately became a keen follower of their activities. There was a continuity but also a rupture in my research interests. In my previous work about African religion, I had been looking at the effects of an anti-colonial Muslim-inspired religious movement in Guinea (Sarró 2009). This triggered my interest in prophetic religious culture, prophetic imaginations and the relationship between religion and creativity, which I have studied ever since in Guinea-Bissau and in Kongo (Angolan and Congolese) prophetic movements. In 2006, while employed at the University of Lisbon, I became interested in prophetic diasporas in Portugal and embarked on a series of research projects on religious pluralism in the Portuguese capital and in the Lusophone world (Sarró and Blanes 2009; Sarró and Mélice 2010). In 2006, thanks to Father Rui Pedro, a Catholic priest who was very active among migrant communities and with whom I organised several inter-religious dialogue and ecumenical activities in Lisbon between 2004 and 2010, I got to know of the small Kimbanguist parish of Apelação, a neighbourhood in the *banlieue* of Lisbon. I started to attend services after getting in touch with the community; very early on, I began to be invited into households. Less than a year later, I found myself doing fieldwork with them in northern Angola and in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and I became totally immersed in a new project that, to a large extent, is still ongoing.

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I maintain very strong links with the Portuguese Kimbanguist church, I attend services when I am in Lisbon (where I live whenever I am not teaching in Oxford), and I continue studying Kikongo and other aspects of Kongo culture with my Kimbanguist friends, most of whom are originally from Angola. In 2009–11, I directed a research project on African churches in Europe that allowed me to become familiar with Kimbanguist parishes in other European countries, and in 2014–17 I was a member of a European project on religious heritage in the Atlantic for which I conducted fieldwork in Mbanza-Kongo (northern Angola), the ancient capital of the Kingdom of Kongo.

One of the things that captured my immediate attention on the first day when I visited the Kimbanguist parish in Apelação was a panel of pictures on the wall with several Congolese and Angolan news articles about a man called Wabeladio Payi and about an alphabet that Kimbanguists used, called Mandombe (literally meaning the alphabet, or the writing system, of Africans). The pastor explained to me that Wabeladio Payi, a Congolese man, had received that alphabet from God and had given it to the people. That was my first contact with the Mandombe alphabet. At the time, it caught my eye because just a few years earlier I had read Jean-Loup Amselle's book on the Mandingo N'Ko alphabet (Amselle 2001), which made me realise how little we know of the social and individual processes that lead to the emergence of graphic systems in Africa. It struck me that, as with N'Ko, I was being confronted with a case in which the origin of an alphabet was connected to a religious revelation.

One year later I was to learn about Mandombe in Angola. In November 2007, in a long, detailed lecture at the headquarters of the Kimbanguist church in Luanda, Lei Gomes, a Brazzavillian teacher of Mandombe, told us that God had sent the Mandombe script to the Congolese Wabeladio Payi so that he could give it to Black Africans, providing them – like the Muslims, Hebrews and Western Christians – with their own script (Figure 1.1). In order for a society to be considered a 'civilisation' and not a mere 'culture', Lei explained, it needs a prophet, a God, a temple, a calendar and an alphabet. For many years, before Mandombe, Africans had had to rely on the Western alphabet and were forced to write God's name (Nzambi in Kikongo) in Roman script, in what he called 'linguistic colonialism'. In accordance with a prevailing model in Central Africa (Fabian 2006), in which colonialism is portrayed as a technology designed to make people forget about previous aspects of local knowledge, their God or gods, languages, writing systems, names and crops, among other things, Lei told us that African writing systems had existed in the past.

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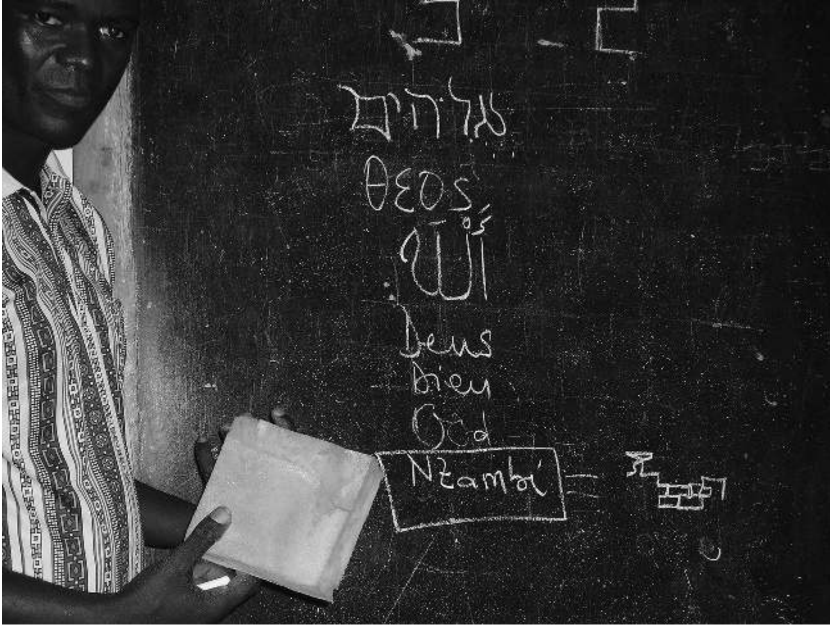

Figure 1.1 Mandombe teacher Lei Gomes writes 'Nzambi', the name of God in Kikongo, using Mandombe script.

Thus, what Wabeladio was doing was an exercise in recovery, in historical and cultural remembering.

In October 2009, during my third visit to Africa with my Kimbanguist interlocutors from Lisbon, I went to the DRC. Among my Lisbon friends was José Emery Kimbamba, a man known in the Kimbanguist community for his witty spirit and sense of humour. The first night we were in Kinshasa, Kimbamba introduced me to someone at the Centre d'Accueil Kimbanguiste, the biggest urban headquarters of the church in the world.[1] Pilgrims were gathering there to begin a major pilgrimage to the holy city of N'kamba–New Jerusalem, some 200 kilometres to the south. Suddenly, in the midst of hundreds of people, Kimbamba said to me: '*Ndoki*, let me introduce you to Wabeladio Payi.' Perhaps owing to my joking relationship with Kimbamba – who at the time I called my *mfumu* (chief) and who was the only person I would allow to call me *ndoki* (a 'witch') – I did not believe he meant the Wabeladio Payi I had heard so

[1] The residence for the spiritual chief of the church is almost as large at Kinshasa's Centre d'Accueil Kimbanguiste as in the holy city of N'kamba.

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much about since beginning my research on Kimbanguism almost four years earlier. Therefore, I said: 'Wabeladio Payi? Like the inventor of Mandombe?' Wabeladio laughed and clarified: 'I *am* the inventor of Mandombe!' For some reason, I was expecting the inventor to be a much older man. Wabeladio was 52 years old and looked younger. The next day, Kimbamba and I went to the holy city of N'kamba in a car. Wabeladio followed us in a different car. We met again in N'kamba the next day and started talking immediately. Coincidentally, we were both to be received by the spiritual chief, Simon Kimbangu Kiangani (the grandson of the founder Simon Kimbangu), and therefore we had to sit together in the waiting room for hours.

It was then, in that waiting room at the end of 2009, that Wabeladio gave me a succinct account of his life and revelation. And it was then, too, that we decided to write together a book about him and about Mandombe, and we began brainstorming on how to tackle the collaborative project. Wabeladio wanted the book to consist of three parts: a biography of the inventor (himself); a biography of Simon Kimbangu (his inspiration); and the structure of the graphic system Mandombe in its dimensions of both writing and art. He had already authored some texts and had many manuscript notes that we used in our brainstorming. Sadly, Wabeladio passed away in 2013, still young and very painfully. I was very lucky that, by then, we had recorded his entire biography, in very long sessions that took place either in the DRC or in Europe, where he spent time in May 2010 and June 2012 (he had lived in Europe for more than six months some years before we met). For the second part of the book, where the linguistic and aesthetic dimensions of Mandombe are analysed, I had to rely on what he had explained to me, his unpublished manuscripts, and the help of his closest collaborators in Kinshasa, who included his widow Eugénie Dinkembi.

Wabeladio often came to our meetings, where I would take notes and record him speaking with texts he had written beforehand. In the beginning he used the third person singular, saying 'Wabeladio' did this or felt this, instead of 'I'. Although we both realised it was often easier for him to speak of himself in a semi-fictionalised way, objectifying himself as the main character of an adventure, we decided early on not to do so, as it was very confusing for both of us, especially because the narrative often dealt with Wabeladio's grandfather, who was also called Wabeladio – the pronoun 'he' often made it impossible for me to know whether he was speaking of himself or of his grandfather, with whom he identified in many ways. Besides, this way of presenting his life made the narrative stilted and made it uncomfortable for me to interrupt for clarification or to open up a more improvised dialogue; so,

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we started all over again. As the reader will find in the first chapters of this book, the biography (which is but a tiny summary of the very detailed account Wabeladio offered me) was recorded episode by episode, and every single episode was told at least three times, while sitting in his office at the University Simon Kimbangu in Kinshasa or at his home, while driving or using public transport in the lands of southern Congo (in the provinces of Kongo Central and in the city of Lubumbashi), while walking through the streets or driving on the roads of Portugal and Spain (which we visited together in 2010), or while sitting in my office at the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon. Apart from talking to each other, we also interviewed together most of the people he mentioned as having been important in his life and who were still alive in Kinshasa, N'kamba or Lubumbashi. I continued with these interviews after his death, either with Eugénie Dinkembi or with Wabeladio's closest collaborators.

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Learning about Mandombe in Luanda through Lei Gomes in 2007 made me realise that, in some contexts, where a community is able to use its own alphabet – especially one God has sent to one of its members – that alphabet becomes much more than a communication tool: it becomes an end in itself. In fact, by the time Wabeladio passed away in 2013, there had been thousands of *learners* of Mandombe in the DRC, Angola, France and other countries, but there were relatively few regular users. It was the *performance* of learning that brought people together. Not everybody who learned Mandombe made much use of it, but they all felt a deep pride in having gone through the collective process of studying it. I should add here that I speak in the past tense not because Mandombe has now disappeared (all the teachers trained by Wabeladio are still active), but because the bulk of my research stopped with Wabeladio's death on 4 April 2013. More than Mandombe itself, the topic of this study is the connection between Wabeladio's biography and Mandombe.

Alphabets and the Struggle for Recognition

Today, Lei's introductory lesson on Mandombe in Luanda resonates in my memory with a conversation I had in 2011 with Rubain Watulunda, a Kinshasa painter whose work I discuss in Chapter 7. Watulunda explained that there had been an 'epistemological crisis' in Africa. Owing to the hegemony of Western modes of thought, Watulunda argued, Africans had been forced to base their identity on Western science, Western writing, Western religions and Western aesthetics, and this had led to a deep identity crisis. Africans were not truly themselves; they had to use external

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things even to express their identity. Mandombe offered the possibility for Africans to start from zero with something that had emerged out of Africa and that could become art, writing or science.

Unlike many of his followers, Wabeladio Payi was not at all convinced that you needed anti-colonial theory or attitudes to explain his invention. For him, Mandombe was an invention, and that was all. 'I have told them many times to stop presenting Mandombe in this way,' he said to me when I summarised his Luandan disciple Lei's words. On one occasion, he told me that he had developed Mandombe so that people could choose between alphabets. 'It is not one or the other; nobody should abandon the Roman alphabet because they can write using Mandombe. It has to be regarded as having two pairs of trousers: you can choose which one you want to wear for this or that occasion.' Wabeladio often criticised those who tried to bind Mandombe too tightly with ideology, and often expressed his misgivings about the usefulness of the concept of 'linguistic colonialism'. Yet, the intimate connection between 'civilisation' and 'writing' made by many of his followers needs to be explored in order to have a better understanding of the conditions of possibility of the reception of Mandombe, different as they may be from the conditions of possibility of its invention. These two concepts, invention and reception, have been twins for a very long time. In what is now a classic volume on the history of writing, Ignace Jay Gelb stated that, according to authors such as Carlyle, Kant, Mirabeau and Renan, the invention of writing was 'the real start of civilization'. And, he added, much to my embarrassment as an anthropologist: 'These opinions are well supported by the statement so frequently quoted in anthropology: as language distinguishes man from animal, so writing distinguishes civilized man from barbarian' (Gelb 1952: 221). For Gelb, echoing Rousseau, the equation was simple: if you had no writing you were a barbarian.

Much as we may think that there is sheer racism in such a straightforwardly divisive formula, the truth is that no one today would like to live in a world without writing. The number of things – starting with education and the ability to learn many other skills – from which one would be excluded is just too huge. Some authors, starting with Lévi-Strauss (1955), have minimised writing's importance in the transformation that made it plausible to speak of a transition from 'prehistory' to 'history', or in the distinction between 'unlettered' and 'lettered' societies, as Clifford Geertz – also critical of the 'easy contrast' around a 'literacy revolution'– ironically put it (Geertz 1976: 1481). Many others, however, such as Gelb, Samuel N. Kramer, in his classic *From the Tablets of Sumer* (1956), and his interlocutor in France, Jean Bottéro, would subscribe to the grand notions of Carlyle and the like and consider that the invention of

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writing was essential in establishing an irreversible step between prehistory and history or even between 'cultures' and 'civilisation' (Bottéro 1957) – a problematic distinction that, as we see in Luanda today, is still being used by local actors to express their perception of their exclusions.

There are many aspects to the impact of writing in human history. In the 1960s, Jack Goody began a series of studies on the effects of literacy on cognition and on social, political, and religious organisation (Goody 1968; 1986). Many authors have followed his seminal input and have explored how writing technologies intermingled with local politics and with identity struggles in different parts of the world. But the inner workings of writing systems and the life and work of those rather unique, often prophetic individuals who invent them have not been explored so thoroughly. My main interlocutors in this study are therefore scholars working on the invention of prophetic alphabets, starting with the key works by Grant Foreman on Sequoyah, the inventor of the Cherokee alphabet (Foreman 1938), and, more importantly, the ground-breaking study by linguist J. Smalley and his collaborators on the Hmong prophet nicknamed the 'Mother of Writing' (Smalley et al. 1990). Recent studies, such as Amselle's work on the West African N'Ko alphabet (2001), Bordas's work on the Ivorian script invented by the visionary artist Félix Brouade (2010), Hales's work on Nsibidi writing (2015) and Orosz's work on the writing of the Bamoun chief Njoya (2015), have made scholars aware of the importance of either developing new African scripts in the postcolony (as in the case that is the focus of this study) or at least knowing about previous ones. Meanwhile, the work of Pierre Déléage (2013; 2017) has highlighted examples in American contexts that illustrate the prophetic conditions of possibility for the emergence of writing systems in non-Africanist contexts.

Africa has been the scene of the birth of very complex graphic systems that have undoubtedly been instrumental in transmitting cosmological notions and senses of cultural identity. Examples of this include the Dogon, studied by the Griaule school (Griaule and Dieterlen 1951; Cissé 1987; Zahan 1950), and, more relevant here, the Kongo graphic systems studied first by Robert Farris Thompson (Thompson and Cornet 1981) and much more recently by his successor Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz (2013), who has demonstrated the need to move beyond Eurocentric ways of looking at writing systems if we are to grasp the ritual cosmological significance of the symbols the Bakongo and their diasporas have been using in their inscriptions for centuries. Since precolonial times, some graphic systems (though not precisely the Kongo ones studied by Martínez-Ruiz) have clearly been alphabetical; these have been the subject of a large bibliography by authors writing in colonial times (van Gennep

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1908; Delafosse 1899; Labouret 1935; Baumann and Westermann 1948; Joffre 1943; Lassort 1951; Adams 1947) and by contemporary authors who have either reviewed the existing literature on colonial writing systems from postcolonial and contemporary frameworks (Dalby 1967; 1968; 1969; 1986; Tuchscherer and Hair 1995; Tuchscherer 1999; 2005; 2007; Hales 2015; Akoha 1994; Cissé 2006; Kelly 2018a) or have studied emerging systems and their competition with the Roman alphabet, which was introduced in much of Africa through colonialism (Pasch 2008; 2011). Whether graphic or alphabetical,[2] African writing systems are interesting for scholars for a variety of reasons. First, they are often intertwined with non-alphabetic design and are thus a very good source for studying the relationship between art and alphabets in graphic systems (Battestini 2006) and for countering the excessive, clearly too Eurocentric importance that alphabets have received in the history of what is now referred to as 'graphic pluralism' (Debenport and Webster 2019). Several writing systems in Africa are so deeply imbued with spirituality that they do not represent any sound at all, but instead try to capture through lines and drawings the lived experience of being connected to the cosmos, forcing us to ask ourselves what is this thing that we call 'writing' anyway. Webb Keane has offered a very compelling argument for the study of the spiritual logics underpinning many 'spirit writing systems' across cultures, not only in Africa (Keane 2013). Second, African alphabets show an epistemological independence that is greater than was assumed in precolonial and colonial times – or, indeed, as in our case, in the postcolony. Third, African writing systems inscribe the discontent with Western imperialist linguistic impositions and the need to search for identity. For many people in the world, owning their own script, as opposed to having to use one through which they have been oppressed and marginalised, belongs, as James Scott puts it, to the 'art of resistance' (1977) or to the 'art of not being governed' (2009). This is the case not only because scripts offer the possibility of articulating resistance to the powers who have imposed their own alphabet as a mechanism of control, but also, as Piers Kelly has argued (Kelly 2018b), because very often

[2] It is very difficult to classify graphic or writing systems, and there is an entire body of literature devoted to this issue. Broadly speaking, writing systems are divided between those in which a graphic symbol represents a sound (a phoneme or a syllable or a word) and those that represent an idea one would need several words to verbalise. Some authors call the first group 'logographic' and the second 'semasiographic'. But a clear-cut distinction between the two is difficult to establish, as most graphic systems are composed of a mixture of both and combine the phonological with the pictorial. To get a sense of how complicated issues of classification are, see Unger and DeFrancis (1995) or Glassner (2009). In any case, Mandombe is clearly an alphabet, a phonographic system in which sounds (phonemes) are matched by individual visual symbols.

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