

Inventing an African Alphabet

In 1978, Congolese inventor David Wabeladio Payi (1957–2013) proposed a new writing system, called Mandombe. Since then, Mandombe has grown and now has thousands of learners, not only in the Democratic Republic of Congo but also in France, Angola, and many other countries. Drawing upon Ramon Sarró's personal friendship with Wabeladio, this book tells the story of Wabeladio, his alphabet, and the creativity that both continue to inspire. A member of the Kimbanguist church, which began as an anti-colonial movement in 1921, Wabeladio was deeply influenced by spirituality and Kongo culture, as was his script. Combining biography, art, and religion, Sarró explores a range of ideas, from the role of pilgrimage and landscape in Wabeladio's life to the intricacies and logic of Mandombe. Sarró situates the creative individual within a rich context of anthropological, historical, and philosophical scholarship, offering a new perspective on the relationships between imagination, innovation, and revelation.

Ramon Sarró is Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Oxford. His book *The Politics of Religious Change on the Upper Guinea Coast: Iconoclasm Done and Undone* received the 2009 Amaury Talbot Prize for African Anthropology from the Royal Anthropological Institute. His current research, funded by the Leverhulme Trust, focuses on prophetic imagination in Angola.

THE INTERNATIONAL AFRICAN LIBRARY

General Editors

LESLIE BANK, *Human Sciences Research Council, South Africa*

HARRI ENGLUND, *University of Cambridge*

DEBORAH JAMES, *LSE, University of London*

ADELINE MASQUELIER, *Tulane University, Louisiana*

HELENE NEVEU-KRINGELBACH, *University College London*

DAVID PRATTEN, *University of Oxford*

Managing Editor

STEPHANIE KITCHEN, *International African Institute, London*

The International African Library is a major monograph series from the International African Institute. Theoretically informed ethnographies, and studies of social relations ‘on the ground’ which are sensitive to local cultural forms, have long been central to the Institute’s publications programme. The IAL maintains this strength and extends it into new areas of contemporary concern, both practical and intellectual. It includes works focused on the linkages between local, national and global levels of society; writings on political economy and power; studies at the interface of the socio-cultural and the environmental; analyses of the roles of religion, cosmology and ritual in social organisation; and historical studies, especially those of a social, cultural or interdisciplinary character.

For a list of titles published in the series, please see the end of the book.

Inventing an African Alphabet

Writing, Art, and Kongo Culture in the DRC

Ramon Sarró
University of Oxford

International African Institute, London
and



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-19948-3 — Inventing an African Alphabet
Ramon Sarró
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)



Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India
103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment, a department of the University of Cambridge.

We share the University's mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009199483

DOI: 10.1017/9781009199476

© Ramon Sarró 2023

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press & Assessment.

First published 2023

First paperback edition 2024

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data

Names: Sarró, Ramon, author.

Title: Inventing an African alphabet : writing, art and Kongo culture in the DRC / Ramon Sarró.

Other titles: International African library.

Description: Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, 2023. | Series: International African library | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022030721 (print) | LCCN 2022030722 (ebook) | ISBN 9781009199490 (hardback) | ISBN 9781009199483 (paperback) | ISBN 9781009199476 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Wabeladio Payi, David, 1957- | Mandombe alphabet. | Kongo language–Alphabet. | Kongo language–Writing. | Kongo (African people)–Ethnic identity. | Congo (Democratic Republic)–Languages–Alphabet.

Classification: LCC PL8402 .S27 2023 (print) | LCC PL8402 (ebook) | DDC 496.390411–dc23/eng/20220629

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022030721>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022030722>

ISBN 978-1-009-19949-0 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-009-19948-3 Paperback

Cambridge University Press & Assessment has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

To Eugénie Dinkembi Dimbueni and her and
Wabeladio's five daughters:
Vumi Wanzambi Bénédicte
Mayoka Masingama Gradie
Lombo Vidila Davina
Fwala Diakubikua Christelle
Luvuvuamu Mbonga Élisée

Frantz Fanon stated that Africa is shaped like a gun and the DRC is the trigger.

Wabeladio has just pulled that trigger with the invention of Mandombe.

Anonymous text published in the journal *Mpata Natu* (Kinshasa),
31 December 2011, as a commentary on the ceremony that nominated
Wabeladio Payi *Doctor Honoris Causa* at the University of Kinshasa

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	page viii
<i>List of Maps</i>	x
<i>List of Glyphs</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xii
Part I Introduction	1
1 A Writing Lesson (in Luanda)	3
Part II Biography	29
2 N’kamba: The Road to Revelation	31
3 Kinshasa: The Road to the University	53
4 The Eagle and the Silk-Cotton Tree: My Road with Wabeladio	73
Part III Writing, Art, and Kongo Culture	97
5 The Road to the Alphabet: The Basics of Mandombe	99
6 On the Kongo Road: Writing and Entrapping Culture	116
7 The Road to Art: The Basics of Kimbangula	126
8 A Different Road: Reading Wabeladio’s ‘Method of Discovery’	149
Part IV Discussion	163
9 How to Make Words with Bricks: Some Final Thoughts on Creativity	165
<i>References</i>	179
<i>Index</i>	191
	vii

Figures

1.1	Mandombe teacher Lei Gomes writes ‘Nzambi’, the name of God in Kikongo, using Mandombe script.	<i>page 5</i>
1.2	A letter in Mandombe sent to the author as an email attachment in 2012.	22
4.1	Arrival of Mama Mwilu’s coffin in N’kamba.	76
4.2	Wabeladio praying on the very spot where he had been stuck to the ground in 1978.	82
5.1	The cyphers on the wall. Drawing by Wabeladio.	100
5.2	Wabeladio extracting the consonants from the two grids during a public presentation at the University of Lisbon in 2011.	109
5.3	A Kimbanguist temple in Kongo Central built entirely with <i>konde</i> grids.	112
7.1	A page from the teacher’s manual <i>Kimbangula 1</i> .	127
7.2	Kimbangula learning as a ‘technique of the body’.	128
7.3	Kaleidoscopic colouring of Mandombe patterns created by Wabeladio.	129
7.4	Artwork by the painter Rubain Watulunda.	130
7.5	Nkua Tulendo drawn by Wabeladio in my notebook in 2009.	131
7.6	Steps towards Nkua Tulendo.	131
7.7	Wabeladio looking at a Nkua Tulendo in Kongo Central, August 2011.	132
7.8	Wabeladio teaching how to find the <i>Nzila Kongo</i> during a Kimbangula course in Lisbon in 2011.	135
7.9	A non-interpreted skeleton scientific scheme used by Rubain Watulunda.	136
7.10	Some basic notions of architecture using Mandombe.	138
7.11	New forms of bricks based on Mandombe principles shown to the author in Luanda in 2007.	139
7.12	A meander pattern around Kulumbimbi, northern Angola.	141

List of Figures	ix
7.13 Typical pavement meander pattern in Lisbon.	142
7.14 The same meander pattern in the depths of rural Kongo Central. (This one is clearly influenced by Mandombe art; note the Nkua Tulendo by the door.)	143
7.15 Chokwe Tshihondo.	144
8.1 A page of ‘Method of discovery’ with Wabeladio’s later inscriptions, undated. These additions to the original text, which contained no reference to alphabets or writing, include Mandombe vocabulary (‘cyphers’, ‘letters’, ‘ <i>konde</i> grid’, ‘ENA’ (<i>écriture négro-africaine</i>)) and characters.	160

Maps

2.1 Kongo Central.	<i>page</i> 32
4.1 The walk with Wabeladio in 2011 and 2012.	84

Glyphs

5.1 Transitional elements.	<i>page</i> 101
5.2 Complex element.	102
5.3 Complex elements.	103
5.4 Stroke angles.	104
5.5 Rotating false element.	104
5.6 Complex <i>konde</i> grid.	107
5.7 Elementary <i>konde</i> grid.	108
5.8 Tiny complex <i>konde</i> grid.	109
5.9 Tiny elementary <i>konde</i> grid.	110
5.10 Expanded complex <i>konde</i> grid.	111
5.11 Threads from <i>konde</i> grid.	113
5.12 Vowels.	113
5.13 Syllable ‘ba’.	113
5.14 Syllable ‘da’.	114
5.15 Syllable ‘ga’.	114
5.16 Word ‘faba’.	114

Acknowledgements

This book is the main output of a decade of collaboration across several continents. I have shared parts of it with many colleagues in seminars, workshops, and conferences, and in informal conversations in many countries in Africa, Europe, and the Americas. It would require an entire book (a kind of ‘the making of ...’) to name all the people who have helped me by giving either feedback or encouragement, and often both, in Portugal, Spain, Angola, Congo, Guinea-Bissau, Belgium, the USA, Brazil, France, the Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland, Italy, and, of course, the UK. However, among those who must be remembered are Lei Gomes, who first introduced me to Mandombe in Luanda, Papa Emery ‘Mfumu’ Kimbamba, who first introduced me to Wabeladio Payi in Kinshasa, and Papa Chico Garcia Mayamona, who first introduced me to the rudiments of Kikongo in Lisbon and in Kinshasa. The Kimbanguist church in N’kamba supported my research by lending Wabeladio and me a car for some of our journeys together, while its members gave us shelter and food in parishes across Congo. My thanks go to all of those who helped, starting with the head of the church, Papa Simon Kimbangu Kiangani. The University Simon Kimbangu of Kinshasa, where Wabeladio was employed, became my official research base in Congo and provided crucial administrative help. At the University of Kinshasa, Professor M’Bokolo, the late Professor Sabakinu, and Professor Lapika proved very good interlocutors, as were all the individuals Wabeladio and I interviewed in the reconstruction of his biography. I am particularly thankful for the support offered by certain members of the CENA (the Mandombe research and learning institution created by Wabeladio) and of the University Simon Kimbangu, including Martin Benga, George Ngentadidi, Maurice Bamuinikiese, Georges Ndeka, and Aurélie Makiela, as well as, most especially, their colleague Artur Cimuanga in Kisangani. To those erudite Mandombists I should add other important predecessors in Mandombe studies whose work, although often very hard to locate, has been crucial. Several students have dedicated BA theses to different

aspects of Mandombe, going from the spiritual to the social, aesthetic, and linguistic. My thanks to the staff at University Simon Kimbangu in Kinshasa for allowing me to consult and photocopy those referred to in this book. There is also some unpublished material circulating among Mandombe students that contains very useful explanations either on the history of Mandombe or on its workings. Among the latter, the manuscripts authored by Simon Malueki Matuasilua, who worked very closely with Wabeladio on the development of Mandombe teaching materials, deserve special attention. Simon elaborated a rather thorough biography of Wabeladio by mostly interviewing Wabeladio's older sister.¹ We compared notes on the different accounts we had in a series of illuminating conversations for which I remain most grateful.

Academics in various specialities have helped me understand both the linguistic work of Mandombe and the context of its emergence. In France, particular thanks go to Béatrice Hibou for encouraging me to write this book and for her (and Jean-François Bayart's) invitation to present my work at a REASOPO seminar. Lauren Gabail and Julien Bonhomme provided valuable feedback on several parts and invaluable moral support when Wabeladio passed away in 2013. Writing systems specialist Pierre Déléage graciously read an entire early draft of the manuscript, commented profusely page by page, and made me aware of its potential achievements as well as its actual failings at that early stage. In Belgium, my dear friends and colleagues Anne Mélice (and Daniel – and, of course, their much missed child Kaba, who was a great admirer of Wabeladio), Filip De Boeck, and Katrien Pype supported both me and Wabeladio's family in the difficult moments when Wabeladio's health was failing and he was suffering deeply. I and German linguist Helma Pasch – who was a close collaborator and friend of Wabeladio and his family and whose pioneering work on Mandombe has been most important to me – also supported each other in those difficult days. My Oxford neighbour and Kongo *mpangi* Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz, currently a professor at Indiana, has been a very special and very close companion in my studies of Kongo culture and writing systems since we met in 2014 thanks to Bruno Pastre.

In the USA, Webb Keane, Mike McGovern, and, most especially, Stephan Palmié provided insightful comments on several presentations and drafts of papers I gave while based at Yale for a year. Kamari Clarke was very important when I first met Wabeladio, particularly in helping me navigate the ethics of working so closely with an individual while also

¹ Simon Malueki Matuasilua, personal communication, Kinshasa, 2013.

xiv Acknowledgements

writing about them. James C. Scott helped me understand prophetic writing as being a part of what he calls the arts of not being governed in a series of fantastic conversations I had with him when I was a Fellow of the Agrarian Program. Several years later, Stephan Palmié, Eric Gable, and Mike McGovern read the entire manuscript (as did João de Pina-Cabral in the UK), suggesting some useful improvements to the final version. Eric was also critical in helping me digest and respond to the anonymous readers' comments, as was André Celtel in the UK.

In Brazil, Marcio Goldman and his students in Rio de Janeiro and Wilson Trajano Filho and his students and colleagues at Brasilia made me think of several aspects I had not considered before. In particular, some deep Lévi-Straussian conversations with Tania S. de Lima in Rio de Janeiro helped me understand the transcultural, perhaps universal, element in the graphics and geometry underlying Mandombe. Special thanks go to her for that afternoon of intellectual sharing and learning. From archaeologist Bruno Pastre I learned a lot about the historical roots of Kongo cultural innovations.

In the UK, my thanks go first and foremost to Mike Rowlands, with whom I have discussed my work on Kongo culture, writing systems, and prophetic heritages for several decades. I must also acknowledge J. D. Y. Peel, who, after a seminar based on very preliminary research on Mandombe and on Wabeladio's life story I gave at SOAS University of London in 2010, was the first to tell me that I should write a book about it and gave me valuable feedback on the importance of biographical work. That day, Phil Burnham also encouraged me, rather counter-intuitively, to explore the connections between Wabeladio and Kandinsky. Some years later, in 2013, I shared my then still inchoate thoughts on Mandombe with some colleagues at the LSE. Maurice Bloch made one comment that day that helped me rewrite Chapter 5 of the current version. Martin Holbraad, Julia Sauma, and, especially, Bruce Kapferer gave very valuable oral and written feedback on a paper (from which the conclusion of the book emerged) that I gave at their conference on 'Rupture', as did Joel Robbins and others in a departmental seminar in Cambridge, and Benedetta Rossi, Karin Barber, and Paulo Farias at Birmingham. Ruy Blanes (who saw the birth of this project in Luanda in 2007 and has followed it closely and fed back into it) at Bergen, Rijk van Dijk in Leiden, Roberto Beneduce and Simona Taliani in Milan, and Albert Roca in Lleida are others I should thank for inviting me to give seminars and for their constructive feedback.

At Oxford, my thanks go to the 'anthropology and language' group centred around Elisabeth Hsu, David Parkin, and David Zeitlyn; all three have given me very solid feedback, as have Elizabeth Ewart, David

Gellner, and Zuzanna Olszewska, among others. My most recent ‘thank you’s in the UK must go to Murray Last, David Pratten, and especially Hélène Neveu Kringelbach for having encouraged me to submit this book to the IAL series (as did Benjamin Soares, who was always fascinated by Mandombe). Speaking of the IAL series, I must also thank the series editor Stephanie Kitchen for her support and technical help. Likewise, I also need to mention Kay Celtel, who was a very astute copyeditor of the entire manuscript – often very demanding, but always very helpful. Most important, for the overall shape of the book, was the feedback provided by the four anonymous readers selected by the IAL, as well as the consolidated comments supplied by the series editor, Harri Englund, which helped me focus and clarify the presentation of the overall argument.

On the Iberian Peninsula, my thanks go to my very astute Catalan readers Joan Bestard, Álvaro M. Maluquer, Josep Maria Casasús, and Xavier Barnadas, who carefully read and commented on all – or almost all – the chapters of an earlier draft. In Lisbon, special thanks must go to José da Silva Horta, who invited me and Wabeladio to give a joint paper at the Faculty of History at the University of Lisbon.

Last-minute thanks go to the vibrant team around Kongo Academy – a young institution created in the USA by Adrien Ngudiankama – who provided me with most valuable feedback to a presentation of Chapter 4. From that team, particular thanks must go to Gloria Mangoni and her friends at the University Kongo in Mbanza-Ngungu, who, just as the book was about to go to print, made some crucial corrections to the names of places in Map 4.1, which describes both my walking journeys with Wabeladio across a mystical landscape and the tragic path of spiritual leader Simon Kimbangu when he was made a prisoner by the Belgians in N’kamba in September 1921.

All the people mentioned so far deserve special thanks, and there are many more to whom I am grateful but the lack of space prevents me from mentioning them. Two individuals, however, deserve *very* special thanks. The first is Marina P. Temudo, who had to put up with this work for longer than she would have wished and who joined me for much of the fieldwork in Lisbon, Luanda, and Mbanza-Kongo. Not only did she help logistically (including cooking for Wabeladio for weeks in Lisbon), but she also read every chapter of the book most critically, submitting them to her demanding, critical eye. The second is Eugénie Dinkembi, Wabeladio’s widow, who has been a solid interlocutor on the subject of her husband’s work, especially following his death, when she and I met and went through some of his papers, visited some of the places he often mentioned in his biography, and interviewed, either for the first time or

xvi Acknowledgements

again, some of his most significant collaborators. Eugénie is currently on her own path to academic excellence at the University of Kinshasa, where she is writing a dissertation on art and spirituality. I hope that, by dedicating this book to her (and to the five daughters they had), I can encourage her to write her own account of Wabeladio's life, his work, and the legacy she now holds in her hands.