

Kimbanguism (Central Africa)

Kimbanguism originated in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire), and has now spread to many countries in Africa and beyond. The movement takes its name from the founder Simon Kimbangu who was born in 1889 at N’Kamba, a small and isolated village in the Lower Congo, some 200 miles from the capital Kinshasa. He grew up in the church of the British Baptist Missionary Society. But in 1918 Kimbangu believed he received a call from God to go and look after his people, for God was telling him that the Europeans had been unfaithful to the call of Christ. On 6th April 1921 Kimbangu began his ministry of healing, and extraordinary scenes followed, with vast numbers flocking to N’Kamba to hear his message and to be healed. Kimbangu healed in the name of Jesus Christ, and stood up against local sorcerers. But the large numbers pouring into N’Kamba were too much for the Belgian colonial power, which feared a political uprising. A state of emergency was declared and in September 1921 Kimbangu was arrested, flogged, and sent into exile in Lubumbashi: 1500 miles from his home. He died in solitary confinement on 12th October 1951. The persecution of Kimbanguists was severe, but through trials and tribulations their following grew. The movement is now officially known as The Church of Jesus Christ on Earth through his Special Envoy Simon Kimbangu and is a member of the World Council of Churches.

According to his followers, Simon Kimbangu taught a very close respect for nature. Independent witnesses tell a variety of stories which substantiate this claim, and provide evidence that Simon Kimbangu’s approach was distinctive. Kimbangu stressed that human beings are themselves a part of nature. Flora and fauna are a part of the

environment to which humans belong. As such, a special respect for nature is required. Animals are seen as close neighbors whilst plants are to be used with due deference. The indiscriminate destruction of the natural environment is not permitted.

Nowhere is Kimbangu's own attitude to nature more clearly seen than in his teachings on the primate cousins of human beings. Kimbangu strictly forbade any of his followers from killing or eating other primates. The reasons he gave for this edict, which remain strictly enforced amongst his followers to this day, are instructive, and, whilst we must always guard against the dangers of anachronism, they mark him as a prophet in the area of primate conservation. Kimbangu used several arguments to support his claim that primates are our cousins. In the first place, he taught that we share a common ancestry with other primates. To kill a primate is to kill a cousin and such an act would be intolerable: indeed tantamount to murder. Second, Kimbangu pointed to the way that, when left to fend for ourselves in the forest, we mimic the activities of our primate cousins. We are forced in survival to forage like them: indeed to become as them. This demonstrates, said Kimbangu, our commonality. Thirdly, he said that nowhere is the human-like quality of the primate world seen more clearly than when human beings, in their sinful activity, point a rifle at primates. For when this happens, primates look the hunter in the eyes, cower, bow down, and whimper in distress. They act, in other words, as humans. Fourth, Kimbangu taught that it is part of God's plan to unify humans and animals. One day we will lie down with the lion in peace, and this cautions us against treating nature as a servant instead of cousin. For all these reasons, Kimbangu strictly forbade the killing of primates. It is particularly interesting to note a predominantly nature-based, rather than theological, reasoning of Kimbangu in this regard. In a region well-

known for its eating of primate meat, Simon Kimbangu's teaching is all the more remarkable, and the taboo extends into the life of his estimated 10 million followers today. {fascinating; can you work into this entry which countries; is there any diaspora abroad yet of members?}

If the teaching and practice of Kimbanguists towards primates is unusual and instructive, then further examples of their positive attitude to nature can be seen. The holy mountain of N'kamba in the Belgian Congo is an example, seen elsewhere in African religions, of the importance of sacred place. Shortly after Kimbangu's death in 1951, his followers began constructing a temple on the site where his ministry had begun. The 37,000 capacity temple that now stands on the holy mountain was built with the help of ordinary believers, many of whom literally carried rocks and stones several kilometres to the site. At the same time as the building program, Kimbanguist followers went to strenuous efforts to maintain the environmental surrounds of the village. A number of sacred trees, important sites in Kimbangu's own ministry, and sacred groves, were preserved. And whilst there is an element of subjectivity in such remarks, N'kamba is a remarkable place: quiet and peaceful, full of lush trees, and a gentle breeze. Small wonder then that Kimbanguists themselves today proudly call the village 'N'kamba New-Jerusalem'. The village receives large numbers of visitors. Many of them go to bathe in a site where they believe there is holy water: and both this water, and the very soil from N'Kamba, is taken elsewhere for healing. This material dimension is thus an important theme of the movement. The whole site of N'kamba is seen as holy ground by the Kimbanguists and, as such, shoes are always removed around the village complex: a sign of respect not only for the prophet and his God, but also for the very land on which he

and his followers walked. In this Kimbanguists mirror some traditional African religious attitudes to nature in which land and belief were inextricably linked. The fact that such an approach is now cause for some wonderment is testament to the severe environmental crisis now reaching Africa.

Another example of the close relationship of Kimbanguists to nature can be seen in their headquarters in Kinshasa. In the compound humans move alongside animals in a curious harmony: a stark contrast to the huge, bustling, and now pollution-ridden city of Kinshasa. A crane lives in the compound, for no other apparent reason than that it looks beautiful and is an animal cousin. Other animals fare likewise. There are ponds with fish in, which are regularly fed and which, it seems, are only rarely used as a supply of food if necessary. A sermon preached by one of Kimbangu's sons, Papa Diangenda Kuntima, extolled the virtues of looking after animals. One day, stopping at a pond at the headquarters in Kinshasa, he began to throw bread into the pond to the fish; saying how important it was to feed and preserve the livelihood of fish and other creatures. Such attitudes are most unusual in modern Africa, particularly so in a country which has seen much of its population on the edge of starvation for a decade or more.

Faith Warner, Brookes University, United Kingdom

Richard Hoskins, Bath Spa University College, United Kingdom

Further reading

Hoskins, Richard. *Kimbanguism*. London: Hurst & Co., 2003.

Martin, Marie-Louise. *Kimbangu: A Prophet and his Church* London: Blackwell, 1975.