

The Spirituality of African Prophetic Churches

Ecumenical Group Church and Society, Portugal

Michael Knoch

For more than 10 years, we have been participating, like a small Christian solidarity group, in the life of migrant churches and associations in the suburbs of Lisbon, which are constituted by migrants especially from Angola and Congo. In the beginning, these contacts, visits and dialogues gave me very strong emotional impressions, deeply touching my European background of living faith as an inner speech with God or as a theological-critical study or a socio-political engagement.

In a migrant church

To be church together with African people works in a profound way. In a service and also in the houses of the families, you will be integrated with many people, joining together as relations – God's family. The service proceeds for 3 to 4 hours with a living but strongly organized liturgy. The services have singing and music, often loud, with corporal movement and dancing, used, for example, when collecting the offering at the end of the service. There are bible-lectures, which include testimonies about the foundation and the beginning of the Church (like in the Gospel), speeches from various people including guests, and only a short sermon. In an African service, many people with different functions speak; sometimes you find competitions between singers, choirs or lecturers of poetry. This is solemn in order to express holiness. The participants come in their best clothes, and prefer traditional African or specific church costumes. Participants are intentionally immersed in a strong emotional rhythm, which at rare times can reach to ecstatic phenomena.



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We all know the social background of the African migrants. The majority of the women stay home with their children or work in households, and the men work in civil construction. Without the labour of African migrants, Portugal would not be able to continue growing economically. Other migrants work as pastors; the communities always have various pastors which are elected and deposed by an inner circle. The churches function by a clear hierarchic order, but the functions can be retired much more easily than in European Churches.

In our community in the suburbs of Lisbon, we live together with two African churches. These are not missionary churches, but are purely African and I would like to give them the name “Prophetic Churches”, because they were born or founded by a prophetic person without white missionaries. These are the Kimbanguist Church founded in N’kamba Congo by Simon Kimbango in 1921 and the Tocoist Church founded in Luanda/Angola by Simão Toco in 1949.

Kimbanguist church



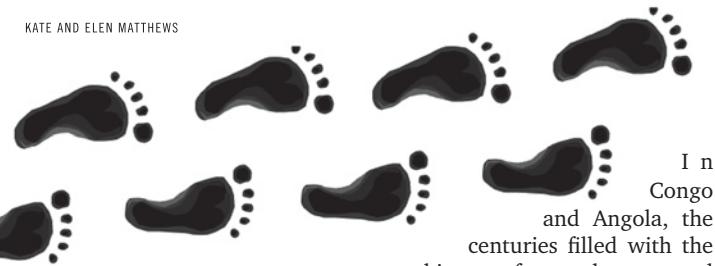
Their history is comparable. Simon Kimbango, an evangelist, began to heal and preach in N’Kamba (200 km from Kinshasa), and after six months he was put in jail by Belgian colonialist authorities, condemned by the missionary churches, and banned in the South of Congo 1500 km away. But the development of the new Church did not stop and about one million people were martyred (the number is not clear). In our theological conversations, the Kimbanguist national pastor explained to me that God sent Simon Kimbango to demonstrate that “the African does not stand under the level of the dog!” And I could only agree with this theological affirmation, which was equally a strong political affirmation of denied human rights. We ask: what was the dominant culture and social structure that made such a sharp affirmation necessary? To understand, go to the African Museum in Tervuren (Brussels) to see these sentiments of supremacy and the reality of repression, exploration and death in the time of white colonialism.

The religious form of the social protest was only possible through the lived reality of the Spirit of God. The spirit, poured about Simon Kimbango, is the heart of the Kimbanguism. You can touch him when you go to the Holy Place N’Kamba, but also in every service. The official name of the church is “Church of Jesus Christ about the earth through his special messenger Simon Kimbango.” The person of the Founder is fundamental for all, reflecting in the liturgical year and in the legitimization of the actual chief, Simon’s grandson. This is also visible in the tentative divinisation of Simon Kimbango, which creates a strong dogmatic problem for the ecumenical movement in which the Kimbango Church is an important member.

Is Simon Kimbango a divine person like the Holy Spirit? Is he equal to the Holy Spirit? Is he a bearer of the Holy Spirit? These questions are not resolved at the moment and it seems to me that an intensive dialogue will be necessary, especially as the vision of the world is much more “archaic” or spiritual like the modern western culture. In the healing stories in the Gospel of Mark or the ecstatic phenomena in the apostle Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, sometimes I feel I touch a vision of the cosmos, touching the deep repression and humiliation of the Africans in the colonial time.

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In Congo and Angola, the centuries filled with the ambience of war, hunger and illness provoke the daily presence of death, giving rise to an apocalyptic vision to end the unbearable injustice and soliciting the desire that the Spirit and Salvador will come. This is comparable to the social situation of poorness, illness, hunger and slavery in the first century.

On the other hand, there are churches in Europe like the Lutheran or Calvinist Church which also began with deep liaisons. We know how Martin Luther has refused to attribute his name to a church, and no Lutheran makes a divinisation of his person. But the human expression of fidelity to the “founder” depends also on cultural patterns, which can be very different in Africa. Is not fidelity an inherent element of faith? Is it not essential that people claim affiliation to the Church as they do to workers’ institutions?

Tocoist church

The Tocoist church has a more or less parallel history. Her foundation occurred at the end of July of 1949. Three years before, at a missionary conference in Kinshasa, the (white) missionaries preached for a floating of the Holy Spirit (following Romans 5, 5) about all of Africa. For three years, a group of women and men around Simon Toco asked God and spoke with others about the desire that the Holy Spirit would arrive for Africa in a true Pentecost event. The Spirit came down in such a strong manner that it began a religious movement. It arrived in Luanda, capital of the Portuguese colony of Angola. It seems to me that this immediately became a political struggle and was viewed as a danger to Catholicism, which like the European culture was always a source of colonial spiritual support. So Simon Toco was sent to prison and deported for years by the PIDE (the Salazarist political police) to the islands of Açores, where he stayed together with a communist friend of ours.

This church is not a member of the WCC, but has taken an interest in ecumenism anyway. In Portugal and in other

European countries, they maintain fidelity to their founder and celebrate the Pentecost event from 1949. This year, they celebrated the Pentecost with 250 participants, including guests of Angola and 5 white people (only!) in a space given by the local State authorities. On the other hand, this church always searches to be more of a community and church together, sharing an evangelical understanding of the Gospel and of Jesus Christ as the unique Salvador. This is a complex process, because it takes on questions of modernity. Questions arise about having confidence in scientific medicine or about the absolute power of God in health problems, or in workplaces and with needed qualifications. How should one speak about social problems or initiatives? How should the New Testament be read and what is its relationship to the Old Testament?

Dialogue and the Spirit

My question in this article is a question of recognition of the role of the Spirit in the Pentecost events, which are the fundament of these two churches and probably also others. Prophets arise in Africa and the Middle East much more directly than in the spiritual broken and sceptic Europe. And in situations of socio-politic crises, the Pentecost always expresses a cry for life and social dignity!

In the Gospel of John, it is written that “the Spirit (pneuma) blows, where he will; you hear the sound of it, but you do not know, where he comes from, or where he is going. So with everyone who is born from Spirit” (John 3, 8). This verse must remind us about the strong significance of the Spirit when the Christian Church arose—no through a dogma, but through the history of a living person, also a martyr, and also full of Spirit, Jesus Christ. For the Gospel of John, the Pentecost related in the biblical book of Acts can not be a unique event like foundation of the (unique?) Catholic Church, but will be repeated, in Africa and in the entire world. The German theologian Ebeling has written in his dogmatics, faith and the Church will die without enthusiasm. The Prophetic Churches have implicated us in such a spiritual movement and their enthusiasm will be good for us. We have a long way of intercultural dialogue ahead, in the context of being Christian Church together.

