



Kimpa Vita (Dona Beatriz) and “Afro-Catholicism”: re-examining controversies and unsolved problems

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Abstract

My paper concentrates on certain unsolved or controversial questions regarding the famous *nganga marinda* (person communicating with the spiritual world), prophetess and religious leader and rebel, Kimpa Vita (Dona Beatriz) (1684-1706), who - in a period of civil war - "supported" Pedro IV (Nusama a Mvemba) to conquer and maintain the throne of the Empire of Kongo (now part of Angola and the DRC) with Sao Salvador (now Mbanza Kongo) as capital, and then “betrayed” him. She has been compared to Jeanne d' Arc and black Christians have insisted that the Pope make her a saint. She believed that she was the incarnation of St. Anthony of Padua, and her followers have been called *Antonines*. She has also been labelled in a 2016-film "Mother of African Revolution", trying to free the slaves. The results of these political and religious actions, real or attributed to her, need re-examination and further investigation. In the same context, her Africanism, expressed in her use of traditions, the establishment of an African-Catholic indigenous version of Christianity, her symbolism and philosophy as well as references to another older prophetess, Appolonia (*sic!*) Mafuta, receive renewed attention. The question is asked whether and in how far her court case and execution as a heretic, resulting from interventions by the Church and the King, were related to the Inquisition. Today, it is recognized that Kimpa Vita has introduced a new theology, an African version of Catholic Christianity. Finally, a *post-mortem* considers her influence after her death.

Keywords: *Nganga marinda*, Kingdom of Kongo, Afro-Christianity, Kongo Prophetism, Saint Anthony of Padua, Inquisition, Mother of African revolutions.

Introduction

The Old Kingdom of Kongo stretched from Angola to the Zaire River and then further northwards until Gabon. In the south the boundaries were over the river Kwanza. It was a region of over 300,000 km². There were six provinces (Mpenba, Soyo, Mbamba, Mbata, Nsundi and the Mpangu) plus some attached or vassal territories. The capital city was Ubanza (Sao Salvador) (Balandier, 1965:5-11).

In 1482 Diego Cao reached the river Congo (Zaire). In the Portuguese epic, *Os Lusíadas*, Luis de Camões called the Kingdom of Kongo "the greatest of the Kingdoms" (Balandier, 1965:55). King Nzinga (João) converted to Catholicism in 1491, the Kongo nobility and peasantry being invited to follow his example. This conversion, which he rejected later, strongly helped the Kongo economy and its trade with Portugal. Catholic Christianity was swiftly accepted, perhaps not as much as an imposed new religion, but rather as a syncretic religious form, integrating the existing traditional local beliefs in Catholicism and vice-versa, thus creating a tolerant version of “Kongolese Catholic Christianity”. It was King Afonso I (1506-1543) who was the most ardent Catholic and arguably the most-sincere Christian ruler.



King Afonso, helped by the Portuguese missionaries, instituted a culture of education and schooling for the nobles, men and girls, and some nobles went to Lisbon to study (Kizobo, 2016:137-143; Ross, 2003: 3). Churches were established and the capital (Sao Salvador) took the name of *Kongo dia Ngunga* (Kongo of the bells). Christianity also grew especially under the reigns of Alvaro I and Alvaro II (Thornton, 1998:10-36; Hilton 1985:1-160; Balandier, 1965:26-76; Sweetman 1984: 48-50). The disintegration of the Kongo begun in the 17th century resulting from internal pressure and Portuguese aggression. At the battle of Mbwila (Ambouilla) King Antonio I (1661-65) was killed by the Portuguese and the Kingdom broke up (Batsikama; 2012; Ross, 2002; Mabilia, 1979; Bortolot, 2003). As a result, from October 1665 onwards, we enter a state of pre-colonialism or quasi-colonialism. The kingdom enters a time of difficult co-existence with the Portuguese and civil wars (Thornton, 1998:1-2, 90-104, 205-211). The deterioration of the relationship between Kongo and Portugal was also due to the establishment of the Portuguese colony of Angola, which was directly controlled by the Portuguese (Conliffe, 2017). The Portuguese imposed their language and while accepting the structure of the state, they introduced titles such as Duke, Count, Prince, Don and Dona for the great chiefs and nobility.

There are many archives preserved in Portugal and even in Angola. Balandier (1965:7-9) is right to say that the "history of the Kingdom of Kongo is exceptional in Africa". Moreover, a great list of modern research works also exists.¹

Nevertheless, as Christina Mobley (2018:26) has remarked, the famous letters of the Kongo Kings reveal King Afonso I (1509-43)'s attempts to create a European-style centralized Kingdom. This set the stage for the destructive consequences of the slave trade (Heywood, 2009, 1-22; Elnaiem, 2019). Likewise, according to Heywood, the subsequent correspondence of the rulers and elite of the Kongo and Angola were "deeply conditioned" and "shaped by political considerations". Thus, the scholars must not assume that documents created by the African elite are unbiased accounts (Mobley, 2018: 26)².

Kimpa Vita (**Figure 1**) was born in the nobility in 1684 and began her preaching in 1704, when she was visited - so she claims - by Saint Anthony of Padua (Elnaiem, 2019). In that time, Catholicism was well-installed in the country in co-existence with the indigenous pagan religion (Vansina & Obenga, 1992: 573; Okome, 2008).

In this article I will give an overview of her life, activities and death. The background of the Kongo history and cultural tradition are important hereby. I will pay more in-depth attention to her establishment of the Antonine form of Christianity and her philosophy and theology, her death and possible Inquisition procedures, as well as finally her influence after her death and relevant conclusions. At the same time, I will highlight the African conditions and beliefs in relation to Portuguese Catholicism.

¹ For a list of these sources, mainly see Hilton, 1987: 289; Balandier, 1965:8-11; Thornton: 1998:3-8 and 2002. Of great importance is the study of Thornton, 2011:195-208 on modern oral tradition in Kongo, who refers to three Belgian scholars as the leading researchers in Kongo Traditions: Vansina, Cuvelier and De Munck, whose works he carefully describes and analyses. MacGaffey (2003), however, has warned against the (mis)use of traditional material.

² Most of the old sources were written by white Europeans (Catholic priests). All of them are biased, up to a different degree. As for the modern, contemporary works and notes, a great difference can be seen between those written by whites and black or coloured commentators. This is due to a diversity, sometimes opposition in mentality, ethnic-social and religious-ethical education and background. It must also be stated that several shorter notes are often repetitive of each other, or more relying on popular traditions of Kimpa Vita's life and on the writers' own ideology and purposes. They may often be useful to discover the different facets of her actions, intentions and doctrine.

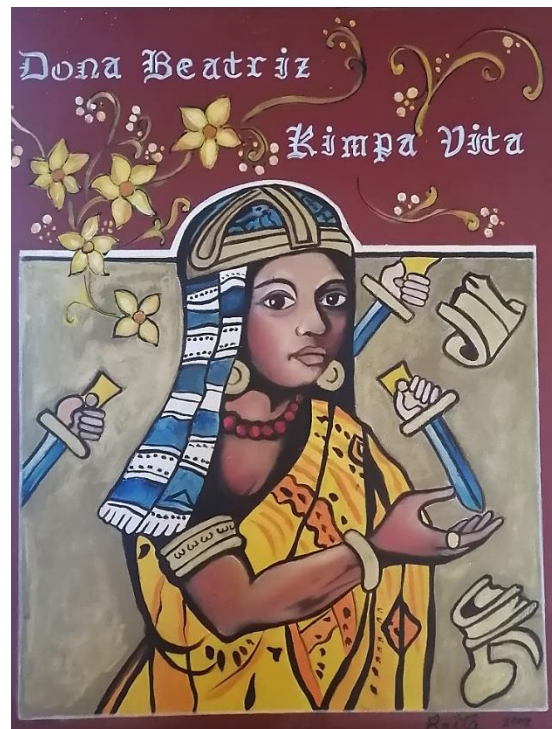


Figure 1: Kimpa Vita (Dona Beatriz). Artist: Raita Steyn (free copy from <http://kineticlive.com/2012/10/29/kimpa-vita-dona-beatriz-1684-1706-saint-of-congo/>)

Kimpa Vita's early life: from *Nganga Marinda* to Roman Catholic

The *nganga marinda* were the traditional religious agents; they were the persons communicating with the spiritual world, the mediums and even priests. The term *kitomi* is connected to the old higher nobility of the Kongo Kingdom (Vansina & Obenga, 1992: 573-574). The *kitomi* was a religious minister (priest), while the *ndoki* was a witch, who could pronounce a curse (*loka*). All of these were believed to be able to communicate with the *nkita* (spirits) according to the *kimpassi* (tradition), a term which can also be interpreted as the suffering of the community. They all possessed *kindaki* (ability of operating with the assistance of the Other World). All these beings and concepts have played a role in understanding and interpreting Kimpa Vita's brand of Catholicism (Thornton, 1998:42-44 and index). All these terms are sometimes used with different meanings by different authors.

Kimpassi associations were in general autonomous religious organizations, which were a threat to unifying factors within the Kingdom and thus to the unifying rulers themselves. Catholic priests burnt down houses and fetish objects in public displays demonstrating the impotence of African spirits and pagan religious leaders. Kintiba (2015:27) mentions the burning at Kibangu of a *Kimpassi* society initiation lodge, considered one of the big Witchcraft Houses.

These associations provoked or created "local conditionings", of which headmen could or would become dependent (Piętek, 2011:77-80; Thornton, 1983:61; Hilton, 1985: 26-28). Therefore, so Piętek believes (2011:70-72), the role of missionaries, who organized Christian brotherhoods and orders, were welcomed and recognized by the Kings "as being compliant with indigenous solutions, albeit essentially more powerful in standing". Thus, the *Militia Christi*, the 'Military Order of Christ', became a knights' order with a sacred character, to which the elite belonged (Piętek, 2011:77). Piętek's thesis is built on the information of Father Jean-Francois de Rome, who published in 1648 a book, a unicum as for our knowledge of 17th Century Kongo, and which was only republished last century by Bontinck (1964). Especially



King Garcia II used the Order which among other religious orders created the opportunity to combat the *kimpassi* (Piętek, 2011: 78; Bontinck, 1964: 104-105, 127), although it appears that he as well as other Kings were defenders of both Catholicism and the *kitomi* (Vansina & Obenga, 1992: 573, 582). However, it appears that after Garcia, the Order lost its influence and I could not find evidence of its role in Kimpa Vita's time.

Vansina sees in this symbiosis the origin of Haitian *voodoo* and the notion of *zombi* ("a kind of corpse-slave"). For the European missionaries, sent to Kongo, these agents, institutions and beliefs were the work of witchcraft and the Devil (Vansina, & Obenga, 1992: 573; cf. also Elnaiem, 2019) and were not worthy to receive any religious consideration or recognition. Kimpa Vita believed that she was "speaking as a medium for Saint Anthony ... called for the revitalization of the kingdom through adherence to a vision of Catholicism that was set firmly within Kongo history and geography" (Bortholo, 2003). Her movement of *Antonianism* was in fact not the only movement having these goals, but "various religious movements have been recorded since the 1630's when a first attempt was made to establish an indigenous church" (Vansina & Obenga, 1992: 573).

The fact that Kimpa Vita's father was a regional commander of the King's army, had given Kimpa Vita the occasion to enter the "schools" that educated the *nganga marinda*. This should not surprise us: it was a privilege of her status.

Neither was her baptism as Dona Beatriz surprising. It certainly predates her becoming a *nganga*. Exactly as a noble, her father must have felt obliged to follow the belief and religion of his King, be it in its "pure" form or in the form of a synthesis. The Kings themselves continued to consult the traditional visioners. Kimpa Vita grew thus up in this milieu as a real "Kongolese Catholic". It appears that this form of Catholic synthesis may have been recognized by the Pope and the Catholic authorities in Europe as "real" Catholicism (Thornton 1998: 114, 121; Bortolot, 2003).

The step from *nganga* to prophetess (*munaki*) was neither surprising nor difficult. Prophetism in ancient and contemporary Africa was and is a current phenomenon (Sundkler, 1997). By the end of the 17th/beginning 18th Century, the restoration of the Kingdom, the renaissance of political unity, success of the "revealed" religion, and also an awakening of nationalism were the current political-religious movements.

These movements were introduced and accompanied by a series of (minor) prophets. Thus in 1704, an old woman, named Ma-Futa, revealed that she had found the head of Christ, totally malformed by cuts of a knife symbolising the badness (evil) of the Kongolese people. It was a stone from the Ambriz River. She also had claimed to be witness of an apparition of the Virgin Mary (Thornton, 1988:120; Hendrickx & Molefe, 2010:444).

Dona Beatriz prophesized a Golden Age: she told that the ruins of the old dilapidated towns were filled with precious metals and precious stones and that her followers, the true believers, would obtain these riches of the whites.

The Antonine movement: lived religion and nationalism

Kimpa Vita's *Antonianism* was a movement which can be described as a lived religious movement with a well-defined nationalistic aim: the restoration of the Kingdom of Kongo in its old glory. This religious-political combination is specifically Africa-centered within a Roman-Catholic framework.

The name of the movement comes from Dona Beatriz-Kimpa Vita's personal *nganga* background and lived experience. She believed that she had received Saint Anthony when she was at the point to die. Then she was "resurrected". This supernatural *epiphania*



became a 'rite'; every Friday she died and was resurrected every Saturday. It was also a *theophania*, since St Anthony replaced God in this ritual. This was also part of the *kimpassi* initiation rite, where initiates were resurrected as *nkita* spirits of the other world.

The lived religion, revealed to her by St Anthony on God's behalf, had a geographical, geopolitical as well as prosopographic Africanizing character: the Holy Family, the characters in the Bible, the place names and the 'race' of the 'population' of Paradise were Africanized. Kimpa Vita built up her own brand of Christianity, faithful to the Pope of Rome (Hendrickx & Molefe, 2010:443; Vansina & Obenga, 1992: 574; Bortolot, 2003). Jesus-Mary-Joseph were born and lived in Kongo in the Sao Salvador area. Kongo is the holy land - the founders of Christianity are black by race. Christ is born in Sao Salvador (Bethlehem) and baptized in Nsundi (Nazareth). The Virgin Mary's mother was a slave of the black leader (Marquis) Nzimba Npanghi, Saint Frances belonged to the clan of the Marquis of Vunda.

Within two years, she elaborated her own dogma, constructed a rudimentary Church organization, basing her doctrine upon her belief that blacks differ from whites (Balandier, 1965:264). The whites originate from a religious white stone (*fuma*), the blacks from a tree of figs (*nsanda, musenda*) (Randles, [1968], acc. 2021]: 6, par. 47). Therefore, the blacks cover themselves with dresses confectioned from the bark of this tree, which is the *tissue of negritude* (Sweetman, 1984:52). According to tradition, the Antonians "insisted on the wearing of a special cloth, woven from the bark of the *nsanda* tree", allegedly having covered Baby Jesus (Thornton, 2011: 203).

White is the colour of death, of the ghosts and spirits and the supernatural. Therefore, the whites were considered as being connected to the supernatural: when arriving in 1645 in Kongo, the Capuchins were greeted as *enganga* (Randles, [1968]: Acc. 2021: 4, par. 22 and note 300). The blacks were human, and black is the colour of humanity and life, white is the colour of death.

Kimpa Vita does not *per se* exclude the whites, but the latter's perception of Catholicism is – she believes- incomplete and incorrect. It was used by the white Church to suppress the Kongolese Kingdom and to exploit the black people. This explains her hate against the Capuchins, whom she – quite logically in her Africanizing context – identified with witches. The Capuchins themselves certainly came to Kongo "with the very best of intention", but they had not the ability and awareness to act in a tactful, humble and generous way (Sundkler & Steed, 2000:58).

It is remarkable that in a period when slavery and the transatlantic slave trading as well as the inhuman captive passage to the Americas earnestly begun, Kimpa Vita gave for the black Africans, whose colour became a sign of their diminished status, a doctrinal image of blackness as the real human colour and of beauty, thus turning upside down the image, and bringing new hope and some liberation for the Kongo blacks. These were originally not sold as slaves; only foreign-born blacks were sold. But in time, the distinction fell away, and even putting free-born citizens in danger of being enslaved (Heywood, 2009:1-27).

The Antonine movement, which contained a messianic character, received support from all sections of the Kongo population, being rooted in the tradition of the *mbumba* dimension³. Already before Dona Beatriz, other women had found *mbumba* type stones in the river Mbrije, and Saint Anthony had appeared in the heads of several men and women (Thornton, 1998:108-118). Later, Dona Beatriz gathered three stones in her chapel, which she considered to be Saint Isabel, Saint Ursula and Saint Ann.

³ *Mbumba kindonga*: guided by a *nganga* and the Other World, a cathartic meeting could guide to renewed harmony.



Dona Beatriz's 'cult' was accepted by many Kongolese as 'true Christianity' opposed to the elitist approach of the Capuchin "witches" and the kings. Anne Hilton (1985) strongly believes that the Antonine movement of Dona Beatriz was the result of the weakly established political and religious authorities of Central Kongo, the growth of warlords and large slave populations. New structures had emerged and these sought security in the cults of the *mbumba* dimension.

Kimpa Vita's Antonine movement was able to develop rapidly and successfully due to social-political circumstances in Kongo, mainly lack of security resulting from civil wars, poverty and increased misery and growing slavery, especially due to Portuguese slavers. These factors led to a climate of fear and to an eventual surplus of females in the country, due to the loss of males in wars and through increased slavery. This led to polygamy, which could nevertheless stabilize the number of births and contra the diminution of population. The Antonine 'doctrine' and the preaching of Kimpa Vita gave hope and confidence, while encouraging nationalism. Consequently, it found its many followers among the poor masses of the agrarian population and the commoners (Mabiala, 1979), as well as among the women and these nobles who found benefit in this group's ideals.

In this context, Gucha (acc. 2021:7) pays attention to the problem of the status of the black woman, writing that:

The incorporation of African traditional religion with some cultural elements into Christianity gave a place and position to women who were shamans, healers and diviners. Their role as shamans or diviners were no longer treated as 'a threat' or suppressed at the expense of missionaries believes (sic) and practises.

Kimpa Vita also brought a mystic dimension to the Kongo royalty. She herself receives one of the *insignia* of royalty: a purse (*sanctissimo sacramento*)⁴, and she invites her followers and the Kongo people to install themselves in the old capital. According to the writings of Bernardo de Gallo "*la fausse Sainte fut faite la restauratrice, and sominatrice et seigneur du Congo*" (Balandier, 1965:266; Bernardo de Gallo, 1961:99). Thornton (1998:159-161) connects this political-ceremonial behaviour of Kimpa Vita with what he calls "something of a theocracy", in which she as St Anthony would be the real force. She also preached that an Angel would descend from Heaven to appoint the King.

Her practical action was the crowning of one generally accepted King for the whole Kingdom. The situation was complicated and probably above the capacity of what the young woman could handle. It was the political side of the Antonine movement that eventually provoked her final fall, but I do not believe – as Sundkler and Steed (2000:60) did – that her "call for the people's return to Sao Salvador", was only a dangerous *idée fixe*. There were at the time immediately before her death three King-pretenders and she honestly believed that the whole Kingdom should have only one king.

In fact, Beatriz struggled with problems of religious, ethnic, ideologic and even economic nature.

Kimpa Vita's theology

Kimpa Vita's way and method of teaching followed the model established by the white (Italian and Portuguese) missionaries and priests. She rejects superstitions, fetish adornment and vices. She makes a selection of Catholic songs and prayers. She institutes a certain hierarchy: she sends her "ambassadors" (little *Antonines*) out and creates a group of religious women,

⁴ The purse was a wide-spread royal *insignium* among several African kingdoms, especially in Nubia and Ethiopia, and also in Byzantium (Steyn, 2017:83).



similar with nuns. Thus, she could build up a dogma which grew out of the lived religion of Antonianism and was based upon her doctrine and beliefs that made her and the Antonine movement popular. Modern scholars have recognized in this doctrine a theology, which has provoked ample interest in the 21st century. One can partly explain the “theology” of Dona Beatriz as a commentary on the original Catholic prayers of *Salve Regina* and *Ave Maria*, two prayers for the Holy Virgin, of which she ‘rewrote’ the first as ‘*Salve Antoniana*’.

Here follows the ‘reconstructed’ *Salve Regina*, becoming the *Salve Antoniana*:

Salve you say and you did not know why. Salve you beat and you do not know why. God wants the intention, it is their intention that God takes. Marriage serves nothing, it is the intention that God takes. Baptism serves nothing, it is the intention that God takes. Confession serves nothing, it is the intention that God takes. Prayer serves nothing, it is the intention that God wants. Good works serve nothing, it is the intention that God wants.

The mother with her Son on her knees. If there had not been St. Anthony what would they have done? St. Anthony is the merciful one. Saint Anthony is our remedy. St. Anthony is the restorer of the kingdom of Kongo. St. Anthony is the comforter of the kingdom of Heaven. St. Anthony is the door to Heaven. St. Anthony books the keys to Heaven. St. Anthony is above the Angels and the Virgin Mary. St. Anthony is the second God...” (Thornton, 1998:115-117, 215-219).

Thornton believes that Kimpa Vita stresses intention rather than sacraments (or their formal performance). However, he admits that the prayer has two parts. Part two begins with the ‘Mother with her Son’. Here the prayer shifts from denying the validity of the sacraments to reasserting the concept of advocacy of the Virgin and saints before God.

Kimpa Vita also rejected the Cross, baptism, confession, some prayers and the sanctity of marriage. Thornton (1998:50) believes that she did so because the Cross was the symbol of Jesus’s suffering and death. Barret (1968:52), however, claims that Beatriz and her Antonines were anti-Catholic and even anti-Christian, because of her stand against the cross, and because she wished all Christian priests to be driven out of the land. She replaced the cross with statues of St Anthony (Nightingale, 2020). The preserved crosses, in the churches as sculptures, the cross kept or worn by St Anthony in his pictures, even the crosses with a female figure in the place of Jesus, found in museums witness of their popularity (pictures in Elnaïem, 2019). The cross was also integrated in the *Kimpassi* tradition (Kabitwa, 2004:38; Balandier, 1965:259). The anonymous author of *Pedantry* (2004: 2 of 4) gives his personal thought as follows: “Like many Protestants, with whom she had no contact and probably no knowledge, she claimed that the ceremonies and symbols of the church were meaningless and unnecessary fetishes. However, she went one step further than the likes of Martin Luther – she burned both crosses and pre-Christian religious objects that were held to increase the efficacy of prayer.” The article added that this increased her popularity. But Adler (2020:123) sees this action as a grave mistake, the cross being the quintessential symbol of the Kongolesse Christianity. Anyway, from the above opinions, one can deduct – I strongly believe – that the real reason for Kimpa Vita’s destructive action may be explained as – true to her own theology – destroying crosses as pagan (*Kimpassi*) fetishes!

In a broader perspective, Gucha (acc. 2021:6-7), believes that Kimpa Vita’s values, beliefs and practices could also be seen as equivalent to Bevans’s two models of doing contextual theology” (Bevans, 2000:70-79):

...praxis and transcendental models. Bevans explained that praxis model is applied where Christianity already has a foothold in the community and that a given community has practical issues to solve. In Kimpa Vita’s time there



was political instability and slavery going on within the kingdom and these two issues needed practical solutions. Kimpa Vita's approach is classified under the transcendental model because the theology in this model, begins with an individual expression of our own spiritual experiences which eventually is shared by the community.

Bevans (2000:70-79; 2010) states that human experience should indeed be the third source of theological expression, next to scripture and tradition. He argues that all theology is contextual, whether practical or systematic theology.⁵

Ellis Adler (2020:114-117) has tried to explain how the Kongo Catholics specifically incorporated elements of the Iberian (Portuguese) Catholicism and how the *Antonines* acted in the same tune as a unique African Christian response to Catholic oppressive practices. The slave trade and the hypocrisy-stained Catholic missionaries were important factors in Kimpa Vita's negativity. Common practices between the Kongo Catholics and Iberian ones were e.g. the rosary and bringing candles to the cemeteries of the ancestors.

Vansina & Obenga (1992: 573-574) believe that Dona Beatriz' far-reaching reform cannot solely be explained in terms of the political situation. She was perhaps influenced by ideas of the Reformation, although there is not yet found evidence for it, but she recognised the Pope. Her views were even more syncretic than the religion practiced in her time.

Thornton (1998:101-103) believes that Dona Beatriz came to a similar conclusion as Protestantism. Perhaps he comes to this conclusion because the Catholic Capuchin who witnessed the death of Beatriz had found the prayer "unworthy, disordered and without any connection", diabolical craziness and truly desecrating blasphemy. Father Bernardo had thought for a long-time that the prayer was strongly influenced by a Catholic Iberian heretic theologian, the Miguel Molinos, or was introduced by Calvinist Dutch merchants who visited the Atlantic coast. He never finally decided that the "heresy" came from the form of Kongolese Christianity.

Kimpa Vita's fall and death by burning at the stake

The missionaries reacted aggressively, especially Bernardo de Gallo and Lorenzo de Lucques accusing her of heresy and working on the feelings of the King in order to condemn her (Anne Hilton (1985: 208-210). Gucha (acc. 2021:6-7) maintains that nevertheless in many old African states the punishment for witchcraft was death by burning at the stake. Vansina (1992:566) gives his own version. In 1704, Dona Beatriz – whom Vansina names a Joan of Arc, was preaching a refurbished Christianity (Antonianism). Above all she exhorted rival claimants to the throne to give up the struggle, restore one king and repopulate Mbanza Kongo (Sao Salvador) (Batsikama, 2012:4-5/16). She persuaded a claimant to the throne, Kibangu (Pedro Constanthino da Silva), a brigand and ex-army commander of Pedro IV, to settle in Sao Salvador. It was there that she crowned Pedro da Silva with the black Antonine crown. But in 1706 she was captured by Pedro IV and burnt as a heretic in Evululu. Pedro IV then restored the full Kingdom on 15 February 1709 (battle for Sao Salvador between King Pedro IV and Pedro da Silva).

The fall of Kimpa Vita, leading to her execution was the result of several factors:

- (i) Her opposition to the use of the cross and her encouragement to destroy the crosses (crucifixes) as fetishes, did not go down well with the Kongolese masses, who used the cross intensively.

⁵ See also Hendrickx & Molefe, 2010:445-446, where we spoke about a 'revision' of Catholic Christianity by Beatriz, not a theology. I nevertheless accept that according to Bevans's theory her 'revision' can be seen as real theology.



- (ii) Her pregnancy appears to have been an embarrassment for Kimpa Vita herself, who had hidden her physical transformation and had fled in hiding to deliver. It was there that she was found by soldiers of Pedro IV and brought as prisoner to Pedro.
- (iii) Her hesitance and unhandy presentation of her 'partner' as St John and as her Guardian Angel.
- (iv) The continuous struggle with the Capuchins resulted in the latter's obstinate desire to get rid of her.
- (v) Her self-imposed role as kingmaker, and certainly also her using of the purse as royal *insignium*, became a political and military problem for Pedro IV.
- (vi) According to Robert Piętek (2011:86): 'The Kongo remains an interesting case study of an African pre-colonial state, which through contacts with Europe undertook modernisation of state institutions and underwent significant transformation in its ideology and religion under the influence of Christianity. He believes, like Balandier (1965:260-261) that Dona Beatriz gave national identity to the Kongolese and awakened national consciousness. According to Piętek (2011:85-86), King Pedro IV (1703-18) had beforehand come to the conclusion that Beatriz posed a significant threat to his position which hinged on Christianity and not on heresy.'

Taken prisoner, Kimpa Vita was brought, together with Appolonia Mafuta, her child and the child's father before the court of Pedro IV to be sentenced. On her death sentence, Thornton (1998:183) writes that although she was condemned according to Kongolese law, which included ample provisions for crimes of a religious nature, and "in this the judge [*vuzi a nkanu*] had an excellent command explaining in detail and with many asides the reasons that were to be considered heinous and the logic for applying the death penalty in this particular form." He stressed the fact that she had fooled the people with heresy and lied under the false name of Saint Anthony and that the King and his Royal Council had condemned her to death by fire. So were her lover Barro, her archangel and guardian, and her baby. Thornton, relying on the texts of Fathers Bernardo and Lorenzo appears to believe that indeed the King wanted her death and that although the Fathers had pushed the King to come to this decision, they had acted honestly and at the end, they had showed genuine pity for her.

Thornton believes that the Fathers had no permission to put Beatriz to death and that therefore they relied on the King and the Council. Thornton does not critically examine these facts. He does not refer to any direct role of the Inquisition of the Church. I do not agree with this presentation. The text of the two fathers' relations witness of their strong intention to burn Beatriz at the stake in the way the Inquisition did it. But they justified their actions by hiding themselves behind "having or not having official permission." One knows that the Inquisition was very active in Spain, Portugal and Italy, but also over Europe and in the colonies (Baigent & Leigh, 2000, *passim*).

People, accused of heresy, witchcraft and blasphemy, were those who were arrested by the Inquisition and then interrogated, sometimes with torture. Only when the inquisitors were certain of their guilt, they were introduced to the civil judge, which is called relaxation. This was done in the ceremony- style. The inquisitor "relaxed" the accused to a civil tribunal, because the Church and Inquisition were not allowed to have blood on their hands. Thereby the Inquisitor read the following formula:

We dismiss you from our ecclesiastical forum and abandon you to the circular arm. But we strongly beseech the secular court to mitigate its sentence in such a way as to avoid bloodshed or danger of death. (Baigent & Leigh, 2000: 36).

The verdict could then be read. The guilty could then be "reconciled" to the Church by swearing before a Crucifix that he /she adhered to the Catholic Church, detested heresy and accepted punishment by way of penance. The next day in general the *auto da fe*, took place. In the case of condemnation to death by burning, a profession of repentance secured for the guilty



preliminary mercy of garrotting, only the corpse then being cremated at the stake. Confessors were normally at work already the evening before the *auto da fe*, the ceremony of the fire. So, it was believed that the soul of the guilty would be saved. The *auto da fe* was a great spectacle for everyone, a public festival for amusement. After the burning, often the next day, the ashes were to be scattered. We found the same elements in the case of Dona Beatriz's death. The monks' reluctance and hesitance to judge Dona Beatriz, which in fact was given to the tribunal of the King, conforms with the whites' introducing the *auto da fe*.

Amongst black authors, only George Kintiba (2015: 27) referred to the death of Kimpa Vita as to the Capuchins instilling fear and imposing Catholicism, by using "the threat of excommunication of the King and the nobility" so that the Kongo leaders "gave in on the pressure and accepted to use the same methods of punishment developed and utilized in Europe during the inquisition time". This resulted in the Kongo cosmology being dead "before Catholicism, at least in the open."

Kimpa Vita *post mortem*

With Kimpa Vita's death and the final defeat of *Antonianism* in Kongo, it looked as if she and her movement would disappear for good. This is not the case. She and her ideas lived on to inspire revolts in America (Davis, 2016:4-36), to inspire newly created Christian religious movements and doctrines and even a movement to ask or demand recognition for her role, especially from the Catholic Church. As well Father Lorenzo as oral tradition inform us that it was Kimpa Vita's mother who continued the movement after her daughter's death and who is linked to the origin of today's *Bundu dia Kongo* movement (Thornton, 2011:200). Finally, there is also information perhaps through tradition, but also through Father Lorenzo that shortly after Beatriz's execution yet another woman, calling herself Mother of Virtue' preached to console the followers. Thornton (2011:201) is puzzled with this information, which he deems slightly possibly coming from tradition into the more official texts.

Covington-Ward (2016:190-95) refers to such iconic images were strategically placed around the stage area. One is a painting of Mama Vita Kimpa, majestically posed in front of roaring flames that took her life on July 2, 1706. One of the most important movements is the *Bundu dia Kongo*, of which the main mission was the diffusion of the Kongo religion. The movement continued a long tradition, permeating Kongo culture and history since the possession of Dona Beatriz by St Anthony to Simon Kimbangu in the 20th century. Their prayers which go first to divinised ancestors carrying their messages to Ne Muanda Kongo, the archangel of the Kongo people (Covington-Ward, 2016:198). Dona Beatriz is their major prophet with an enormous influence on modern Kongo culture and thought: one prayer-song goes as follows: "*Oh Mfuma Kimbangu come/oh Ya Kimpa Vita come/come wipe /the tears from your eyes /oh, everyone /you all come wipe the tears /from your eyes.*"

There are many other songs and prayers around Kimpa Vita. These songs became a kind of chronicles (Covington-Ward, 2016:205), contrasting European Christian treachery and hypocrisy with African suffering, and full of nostalgia for Africa's great past. In President Mobutu's time and thereafter, several groups, religious–nationalistic, looked back to the Old Kongo Kingdom.

In her interesting short article, Ellie Nightingale (2020) wrote that "Gender has played an integral role in understanding and (mis)understanding African religion, in particular in the case of the Antonine movement. Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita (1684-1706), a rather obscured African historical figure, claimed in 1704 to have been visited and then reincarnated as St Anthony of Padua during a nearly fatal fever". Indeed, one should ask the question with Ellie Nightingale – why Dona Beatriz claimed her authority through 'self–conceiving' as St Anthony, a white European man.



Nightingale believes that Beatriz, aiming at holding the utmost authority in a milieu of Catholics, used the voice of a white male Saint. It was a strategic decision to focus more on St. Anthony than on the role of any African prophet, and it brought her popularity. Moreover, the Capuchins had united the Christian values, which were presented as examples to the Kongoles population, in the person of St Anthony (Randles, [1968], accessed 2021:1).

Kimpa Vita remained popular during the middle and end of the 20th century and in the 21st century. One finds online a great number of information and pseudo-information on her role, her prestige, her sermons and her death in different contexts. Thus, she has been presented as a Saint, an Africanist, a liberator of the slaves, an anti-colonialist. There is even the 2016 film made on her with title “Mother of African Revolution”.

Gucha refers to Pope Paul VI who visited in 1969 Uganda – at a conference of African Bishops said that “*the throne is ripe for Africans to rise up with a distinctive expressed culture that has ability to reach perfection and be part of Christianity which is truly African.*” (Gucha, acc. 2021:6). The Catholic Church has angered or disappointed Africans who expected from the pope to declare Kimpa Vita a saint, but Pope Paul VI rejected the claim in 1966 (Batsikama, 2012:11/16), thus missing the chance to rectify a wrong.

However, in 1987, a Congolese Catholic priest, Kabasele Lumbala has published a book on the inculturation of the religious rites in Congo.⁶ The book was clearly a Congolese manifest of Catholic Congolese faith, which was open to Beatriz and African religious concepts.

Conclusion

It is beyond any doubt that Dona Beatriz-Kimpa Vita has become an important symbol in African culture and black consciousness. This article has discussed the how and why of this conclusion. It is thereby evident that she remains also a controversial figure.

The recognition of Kimpa Vita as “mother of (African) revolutions” or as a “black Jeanne d’ Arc” is rather exaggerated but can certainly be understood and accepted in the framework of our own era of decolonization, Africanization, new age, anti-discrimination and redressing of racism and slavery.

On the other side, Kimpa Vita’s role as a Christian, a Christian reformer, a zealous believer and – more recently – a theologian, who is today revered by Africanists as well as by new age Christians, and – surprisingly perhaps – by (parts of, if not the majority of) the Catholic leadership itself and the Afro-Christians.

Dona Beatriz-Kimpa Vita’s Africanization of Catholicism was indeed substantial and far-reaching, as had done in earlier Christianity the Greek and Latin Church Fathers and teachers. Her final influence, still felt today in Africa and among Afro-Americans, proves this statement. In fact, several of her theses were indeed necessary corrections of the racist and arrogant theses of the Catholic Roman Church.

The question of Kimpa Vita’s destruction of the crosses is – I believe – no longer a problem. Dona Vita acted logically and in good Christian faith, when one accepts that the crosses had become part of the *kimpassi*. The speculation on whether Beatriz’s activities were Catholic or Protestant is a pseudo-problem, created in the 20th century by (fanatical or misguided) supporters of both disciplines.



The history and death of Kimpa Vita is also a story of cheating, broken promises, hate, lying, and arrogance, mainly of the Capuchins in Kimpa Vita's time.

Dona Beatriz was far from a common, uneducated peasant woman. She used a high-standard, even mystical (secret) language when preaching - as did the *Kimpassi*, and therefore she was considered a saint during her lifetime.

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