

Hunger for Hope: on Prophetic Movements in Rural Africa

If you ask yourself just one simple question, ‘How come Jews are still around after thousands of years, mostly exiled?’ there is only one answer, and the answer is *hope*.

Fackenheim (1970: 69)

*Here on the slopes of hills, facing the dusk and the cannon of time
Close to the gardens of broken shadows,
We do what prisoners do,
And what the jobless do:
We cultivate hope.*

Mahmoud Darwish (from ‘Under Siege’)

‘I seeeeeeee the Promised Land’
Martin L. King, Jr.

Professional philosophers will recognize (in the very unlikely event of any of them reading this paper) that the marriage between ‘hunger’ and ‘hope’ might be an explicit reference to Ernst Bloch, for whom hope is a ‘principle’ of human agency (religion does not give birth to hope, but hope to religion), while ‘hunger’ is both a basic individual drive (in Freudian terms) and, more generally, a metaphor for intentionality, i.e. for the way the subject directs attention and agency towards the surrounding world.¹ African-American literature fans may remember that the same metaphor for intentionality appears in almost every single page of Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* (whose first part was published independently, precisely with the title *American Hunger*). The connection is not whimsical. By reading Wright not only have I learned a lot about the process of becoming American for subaltern southern ‘Negroes’ and about their ingenious ‘weapons of the weak’, but also, by comparison, have I learned about hope as resistance in general (the ‘disease of hope’, as the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish calls it) and about the common grounds, both structural and historical, between oppressed African-Americans and oppressed Africans in the first half of the twentieth century. Indeed, it was for me striking to realize that Wright claimed to be cynical about hope until he met the Garveyians in Chicago. At the time, he did not

¹ The major work of Bloch, so far the principal philosopher of hope, is *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*. The scholarship around Bloch is enormous; I would particularly recommend, to start getting familiar with his ideas and their relevance for anthropology, the introductory text written by anthropologist Laenec Hurbon (1974) and the methodological exploration on hope, largely based on Bloch, by Miyazaki (2004). A very short text by Bloch himself on ‘man as possibility’ (1970) is, I should think, a very good place to start.

care much about their dreams of ‘return’ to Africa, but he was certainly impressed by their hopes, or, as he puts it, by their *passionate hunger*:

It was when the Garveyites spoke fervently of building their own country, of someday living within the boundaries of a culture of the own making, that I sensed the passionate hunger of their lives, that I caught a glimpse of the potential strength of the American Negro (1991 [1948]: 337).

I quote this particular bit because the direct, explicit influence of Garvey onto prophetic movements in Central Africa, and particularly in Belgian Congo (a region of a unique millenarian effervescence in colonial times) is a topic I am now exploring in Belgian and Congolese archives. Although we may think that prophetic movements born in the depths of rural colonial Africa, such as Kimbanguism (born in rural Lower Congo in 1921, after the preaching of the Baptist catechist and prophet Simon Kimbangu) are being isolated local reactions to colonial oppression, the truth is that these movements did have real connections with a much wider world. Kimbangu himself may have met with Garveyian followers when he was working in a factory in Leopoldville in 1920. Of course this does not mean that his prophecy was a ‘copy’ of Black American Garveyan prophecy, but that both have to be put against a common background of political economy of oppression across the African and African-American worlds, and that connections and mutual feedback between liberation movements across the Black Atlantic existed to larger extents than normally studied (beyond the obvious exceptions of Ethiopia and Liberia).

But the connection between hunger and hope in my title is meant to take you into another, more literal than ‘litcrit’ direction too, and one more in tune with the general appetite of the Program in Agrarian Studies *communitas*. Namely, to the direction of hunger not as a philosophical metaphor, but as a real drive for social change. The French anthropologist Roger Bastide, who studied religious movements on the two shores of the Atlantic (Subsaharan African and Brazil), once wrote a somewhat neglected article entitled ‘le messianisme et la faim’ (‘Messianism and Hunger’), where he invites sociologists studying a messianic movement ‘not to limit themselves to study its explicit content (...) but to always look for the food regime of the ethnic group, its deficiencies, the possible physiological effect of the lack of this or that ingredient’ (1970: 264; my translation from French).

This is a challenging comment, and one that normally has not been taken up very seriously by anthropologists or African historians, who have studied prophetic movements more in terms of political response than in terms of reactions to hunger. Yet, Bastide’s invitation will also remind you, I am sure, of the famous caution that E.P. Thompson (1971) rose to prevent us from reducing to ‘rebellions of the belly’ social movements whose complexity included hunger, but also the erosion of the social relations and of the ‘moral economy’ underlying them. E.P. Thompson did a very good job at analyzing the erosion of the moral economy that provoked

what he reluctantly accepts to call ‘riots’ in eighteenth century Britain, but the invitation has not been taken up by anthropologists working on religious or social movement in colonial Africa as much as one would wish, with of course the more than notable exception of John Lonsdale’s analysis of the rise and fate of the complex Mau-Mau rebellion in British East Africa (Lonsdale 1992 a and b).

Bastide’s argument in his programmatic short piece was maybe a bit simplistic, but his work in general is far too sophisticated to be identified with the reductionists E.P. Thompson was writing against. I do not feel that Bastide’s invitation to focus on hunger and E.P. Thompson’s or James Scott’s focus on moral economy should be an ‘either-or’ option. We can avoid reducing religious resistance movements to ‘rebellions of the belly’ *and* still take into consideration the structural problems that hunger creates upon an anomic colonized society.

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Nine years ago I was invited to participate in a plenary session on ‘the future of anthropology and the anthropology of the future’. I was expected to talk (prophetically) about the future of my discipline, but not knowing what to say about that, I instead took the opportunity to play with words and I lamented the excesses of the ‘memory’ approaches to anthropology that had abounded the late 1990s, and supported previous authors, especially Nancy Munn (1992), who had lamented the lack of a consistent body of reflection on the future. At the time there was a big exception: that of the seminal volume organized by Sandra Wallman, a professor at UCL, the same year Nancy Munn was writing her review article (Wallman [ed] 1992), a book that, as one of its contributors, Paul Richards, has recently told me, turned out not to have much of a future itself (let us hope it will one day be rediscovered and read). I was then expressing my hope that the 2000s would rebalance the temporal orientation in anthropology. I think I must have been a prophet after all, since in the last few years the anthropological production on hope (Crapanzano 2003; Appadurai 2007; Eggerman and Panter-Brick 2010), social aspirations (Appadurai 2004), futures (Cole and Durham [eds] 2008; Piot 2010), has become hugely healthy and difficult to handle. I only cited a few works to satisfy your curiosity; a complete literature review would imply a longer article than this one. Scholastic theologians, who considered ‘memory’ a *faculty* of the soul to be hollowed out and replaced by hope, a *virtue* of the soul, would be happy to hear about this victory of hope over memory.² Indeed, I wonder if it is a

² For the scholastic understanding of ‘hope’ vs. ‘memory’, see the path-breaking work of Pedro Lain-Entralgo (1957, 1978), who, together with Otto Bollnow (1962) and Joseph Pieper (1977 [1949]; 1994 [1967]), was one of the major Catholic philosophers of hope of the twentieth century building upon the pioneering philosophical thinking of Gabriel Marcel. For a general map of the philosophy of hope in the twentieth century, I can think of no better volume than Joseph Godfrey’s *A Philosophy of Human Hope* (Godfrey 1987), unfortunately a bit dated.

coincidence that the rise of the anthropology of hope has been paralleled by that of the ‘anthropology of Christianity’, no doubt the Great Gatsby of today’s anthropology of religion.

Looking back at the past of our discipline, however, I must admit that there was one area in which I (and maybe Nancy Munn too) was wrong. There *was* a lot of reflection about the future (maybe not explicitly phrased in this way) in the massive anthropological literature on religious movements in colonial settings (millenarism, messianism, cargo cults, prophetic rebellious moments) produced in the 1950s and 1960s.³ In a very recent e-mail exchange, Professor David Parkin (who wrote extensively on anti-witchcraft movements in East Africa) astutely noted to me that some of the movements traditionally described as ‘anti-witchcraft’ in East Africa could actually be analyzed in terms of their being prophetic and, therefore, as attempts at future-making. Parkin was suggesting an interesting re-reading of this movements, one that would link the iconoclastic nature of witch-doctors and witch-detectors to the imagination of a ‘foreseeable future’, to borrow the expression of Jane Guyer (2007).

I already wrote a book about an iconoclastic anti-witchcraft movement and its connection with nation making in Guinea and suggested some ideas in this direction (Sarró 2009). But my interest in futurist imagination has been reinvigorated by my recent research on Kimbanguism, a religion born among the Bakongo people of Central Africa in 1921, when prophet Simon Kimbangu started to prophecy and to make miracles in Lower Congo (especially famous for having brought dead people to life). The Kimbanguist movement became heavily bureaucratized in the mid 1950s and became one of the two major religious institutions in independent Zaire under Mobutu’s reign in the 1960s. Today it still is, as well as a major international institution. The slogan of the church is ‘Kimbanguism: Hope of the World’, and its theology is a ‘theology of hope’ not dissimilar, I would say, to that analyzed by Jurgen Moltmann for the Catholic church (Moltmann 2006 [1966]), with a political theology centered on the Messianic restoration of the Kingdom (identified both with the Kingdom of God and with the Kingdom of Kongo) around the holy city of N’kamba-New Jerusalem, Kimbangu’s birthplace and today the administrative centre of the Kimbanguist church. It is a fascinating movement, a paradigmatic case to study political theology and an ideal case to make theoretical comparisons with Israel and other messianic-oriented religious communities based on the restoration of a divine-political Kingdom. In my research so far (Sarró and Mélice 2010; Sarró and Santos forthcoming) I have been focusing not only on political theology but also on how messianic hopes help Kimbanguists

³ In the 1960s and 1970s, this anti-colonial material gave rise to very important, ‘classic’ books in the sociology of religion, such as *The Religion of the Oppressed* by Lanternari, *Magic and the Millenium* by Wilson, *Millennial Dreams* by Thurpp, and some others [see Sarró 2009 for a thorough review]. Among them we should single out H. Desroche’s *Sociology of Hope* (Desroche 1973), which, despite its hopeful title, did never become as influential as the others. Read from today’s preoccupations, I find it a very important book, both ethnographically and theoretically.

in Europe to endure their often marginal position as well as to offer a template with which to think their long history of sufferance (from slave trade to colonialism and forced migration).

Although Kimbanguism is by far the most theologically complex of all the prophetic movements I have studied first-hand so far, today I am not going to talk about it to you, except for some comparative purposes. Two reasons deter me from analyzing Kimbanguism for the objectives I have in mind for you.

The first one is the lack of precise ethnographic information about how the day-to-day was lived in the region of Lower Congo in 1921, when Bakongo farmers decided to massively follow the prophet. We know quite a lot about his ideas, about his unfair ‘trial’ and about the tragic thirty-year imprisonment by the Belgians to which it led; but we do not know enough yet about the specific hunger of their followers, about the moral economy of the region in 1921, and so far the archival research has not helped me to reconstruct it beyond some commonplaces this movement shares with other social movements born in colonial Africa (inhuman oppression, deprivation, anomie). Although we know what the (successful) fate of Kimbanguism has been ‘in the long run’, we still do not know what the practical logics of the ‘near future’ were in 1921, to put it in the words of Jane Guyer, who in a very important article (2007) invites anthropologists to focus in ‘the near future’ and forget a bit about ‘the long run’, when, in any case, ‘we are all dead’, as the great prophet Keynes reminded us several decades ago.

The other reason is that Kimbanguism is, to put it this way (and excuse my arrogance), too *obvious* a movement to be analyzed in terms of hope. Too obvious because Kimbanguism historical imagination, although partly dependent on Kongo cosmology, is now too Judeo-Christian and their ‘hope’ in a Kingdom restoration is directly analyzable in the light of the works of Bloch, Scholem, Taubes, Benjamin, Levinas, Agamben, Abensour, and a long etcetera of authors working on lineal messianic time, whether *with* or *without* a messiah (‘messianism without a messiah’ is the minimal definition of history as understood by Derrida, who claimed to share the conception with Benjamin).⁴ This is philosophically very engaging, and it is a line of reasoning with which I do engage in other writings. Yet I have two problems with these historicist approaches: firstly, to repeat myself, these authors, and the vast majority of anthropologists following them today, force us to see the ‘long term’ and forget about the calendar practicality of everyday life. Secondly, they tend to convince anthropologists that millenarism, hope and eschatology are about discourse, about doctrine, about narrative imagination. They do not pay attention to other forms of imagination, to the ‘puzzle of images’

⁴ For Derrida, see Bensaïd (2001). For Benjamin, Proust (1994) remains the classic essay on his conception of history. See also the most recent work of Abensour (2010), one of the most influential philosophers working on time and utopia today. For a general state of the art of political messianism and other aspect of current political theology, see the impressive collective volume edited by H. de Vries and L. Sullivan (2006).

with which prophets are often connected, to the importance of dreams and vision (and sonic imaginary too: songs, hymns, glossolalia); to their insistence of *seing* the future, so powerfully stressed in M.L. King's moving words cited at the opening of this text. If we anthropologists want to bring imagination back in, as Maurice Bloch has recently suggested we should (Bloch 2008), we have to find mechanisms to study this visual and auditory material too. Of course dreams and visions often become narratives (though by no means always) and then they are easier to analyze by common anthropological discursive methods. But when images come first, this priority should be methodologically respected, as a recent body of scholarship on the image is very originally stressing (Ranci re 2003, 2008; Nancy 2005; Mitchell 2009).

An analysis of hope among Kimbanguists would tell us a lot about them as human and religious agents, about the way they live their present (and not only their future) but very little about the universality of hope, or the potentiality of its use as an anthropological analytical category. Can we say that people outside the Judeo-Christian Messianic prophetic model of history also nurture 'hope'? My audacious answer, partly supported of course by the heart-breaking Arabic poem with which I opened this paper, is 'yes, we can'.⁵ And having said it, I guess I now have the burden to prove it...

Guinea Bissau: The Image of the Future

Let me take you then from the explicitly 'hopeful' religion of the Democratic Republic of Congo to Guinea Bissau, where Marina Temudo and I have been studying a prophetic movement whose followers are called *kyangyang* (meaning 'shadows' in their language), which takes place among Balanta rice farmers (as a shorthand, and following a common Guinea-Bissauan usage, we normally call the movement 'Kyangyang'). Marina came across Kyangyang in the 1990s and has referred to it in some of her writings on Balanta (Temudo 2009), whereas I only started actively working on it in 2008, and will conduct intensive field research on it as from October 2011. We then intend to go to Guinea Bissau, with a three-year research grant from the Portuguese Research Council, together with two MA/PhD students. So, feedback to this paper will be particularly welcome to design further field research. The movement is for me particularly interesting given my passionate hunger not only for prophecy but also for material culture. It is indeed one of the cases in which the priority of the image should be taken into account. Just to illustrate the kind of images I am talking about, take a look of this picture made by a Kyangyang

⁵ Darwish may not be a good example to question the universality of 'hope' because although he is not Judeo-Christian, he does belong to the great Abrahamist matrix, and connections between Judaism and Islam in terms of hope have been noted since the days of Heschel's work on Jewish prophecy (1962). Yet, an analysis of Darwish's poems might be very refreshing and even challenging, because they explicitly link 'hope' and 'exile' in a way that helps us think the connection between the two categories, as well as the longing for land of dispossessed people, beyond the Judeo-Christian template underneath most of the recent reflection on hope and on political theology.

visionary convert, announcing a diversity of crops and tools that contrasts with the actual monocultural technical skills of the Balanta rice farmers of southern Guinea Bissau, where the movement began⁶:



One characteristic of the Upper Guinea Coast (as we know the region from Gambia and Casamance to Liberia/Cote d'Ivoire), is its ritual pluralism. The coast is populated by a series of overlapping ethno-linguistic groups with a myriad of specialized cults related to agricultural work, fertility and healing. Borrowing a concept coined by R. Fardon (who applied it to refuge areas of Cameroon) Paul Richards has referred to this proliferation of cults as a 'ritual involution' and has placed it in a wider context of 'maroon' ethnogenesis (Richards 2007). According to this author, mangrove swamp communities (Jola, Balanta, Baga, Temne, Bulom, etc.) can be seen as 'maroon' because they have been made up of refugees escaping from the hinterland into the mangroves, where they have developed an ingenious rice farming system.

⁶ It is important to note that the movement began in the south, to where Balanta had migrated in a not very distant past. This migration to the south is a fundamental aspect of Balanta sociology already studied by Marina (Temudo 2009) and to be further explored in our project for the specific purpose of understanding the birth of Kyangyang.

This proliferation of cults, however, is only one side of a coin. Its other side is that very often that coast is scenario of innovative prophetic movements that go in the opposite direction: instead of shattering the community into a mosaic of small, competing cults, they unite it around a cult of the 'high god' type. In recent times, the most impressive among such cults has been Kyangyang. The movement was born around Ntombikte, a young prophetess, still active today, who in 1984 started to announce commandments she received from Ngala (God). It was a time of a complex social, political, ecological and food crises, and her movement tried to help the community overcome the pressures. It did, but because it was politically persecuted and repressed for several years, the movement also created a new stress onto Balanta farmers.

As with many of the well-known African religious movements, Kyangyang was born around a prophet. Similarly to what happened in other movements, Kyangyang helped reconstruct an anomic society in the mid 1980s and tried to give self-respect and work incentive to a much demoralized community. This much is common to these movements. Yet, it has some striking peculiarities:

Firstly, the fact that it happens among Balanta, the largest ethnic group nation-wide, the biggest rice producers and the community that contributed the most with soldiers to the liberation and the civil war, but that nevertheless after Independence felt (and were) marginalized by the postcolonial state. In this particular respect the movement shares a lot in common to the prophetic movement started in Northern Uganda by Alice Lakwena among demoralized 'once-were-warriors' Acholi (Behrend 2000).

Secondly, it was started by a woman in a strongly patriarchal religious culture. Prophetic movements initiated by women have been reported in Africa (Ntombikte joins a pantheon of African prophetesses: Kimpa Vita among the Bakongo, Alice Lenshina among the Bemba, Alice Lakwena among the Acholi, Alinsitoue among the Jola, etc.). Female religion is important in Balanta social life, but it is unheard of for Balanta to let women take on such obvious public religious leadership.

Thirdly, the relationship between prophecy and economic rationalization has impinged upon Kyangyang followers a strong ethos of work that has direct and tangible consequences in agriculture performance. In the context of the food crisis of today's Guinea-Bissau, this is very important.

Fourthly, this rationalization process leads Kyangyang to the 'will to be modern' common to other Guinea-Bissau peoples (see Gable [1995] for the Manjaco), but that in this particular case brings about a most imaginative religious culture. Kyangyang converts become authors of a most original 'prophetic art' (paintings, carvings, narratives, etc.). Many of the messages this art conveys are about establishing new, 'modern' gender relations and new, 'modern' diversified farming systems.

Shadows of Prophecy

In one of her articles about Balanta, Marina Temudo has showed how, despite being quite instrumental in the making of the nation and of being the biggest ethnic group in Guinea Bissau, Balanta were gradually withdrawn from power structures and negative-ized by the ‘civilizational’ process of the nation making as soon as the country got independent in 1975 (Temudo 2009).

In the 1980s, after several years of severe drought, Ntombikte, a young woman who had lost several children started to be seized by Ngala (the High God of Balanta cosmology). To the best of my knowledge, this is the first time Ngala took possession of anybody. Till then, Balanta cosmology was like the ‘basic cosmology’ described by Horton in other parts of West Africa, with a high God with whom there is no direct relation (Ngala in this case) and a multitude of local spirits and ancestors with whom people deals in their everyday religiosity.

Ntombikte’s biography is very important, as it encapsulates the transition of the entire country and of Balanta farmers in particular. She was a very young (around 15 years old) when, in 1963, the Fiery yaab (a female anti-witchcraft institution) made a series of violent anti-witchcraft attacks in Balanta villages, as a retaliation for the deaths of young men in the guerrilla war.⁷ According to ethno-psychiatrist Jop de Jong, who has done Ntombikte psychiatric analysis, she became traumatized by these memories (Jong 1987). Eventually she married, but she kept having miscarriages. She visited many healers and took many medicines, but to no avail. When she finally had one child, unhappiness struck again: this child died very young. Then she fell ill and people started to say she was mad and that she had ‘eaten’ her child. Her behaviour did not help change popular diagnostics, for she started to bubble incomprehensible words and to run from one place to another, aimlessly.

But, as she told Marina⁸ she knew she was not mad (or at least, this is how today she explains her behaviour), and that the voices she was hearing in her head were the voices of Ngala. Ngala indicated to her what medicine she had to take to become successfully impregnated again. She went to the bush, dug it up, prepared it, took it, and a new baby boy was born and survived; she

⁷ The war produced a vicious circle. Many youngsters joint the front, either out of ideals of to escape Balanta social pressures, but they were poorly prepared for modern warfare. Many of them died. This led to people back in the village to accuse elders of provoking these deaths through witchcraft, so as to punish their youngster for leaving the village and the rice farming. Fiery yaab then emerged to punish this elders. The entire thing went out of control, and many Balanta died out of this frenzy. See Temudo (2009).

⁸ Ntombikte has been interviewed several times by Marina since 2002, and once by both Marina and I in 2008. We intend to continue our conversation with her in 2011. In this paper I am using material collected both by Marina and by Marina and me.

gave him the name of Mas, which means ‘medicament’. Not only did she realize the voices she heard were Ngala’s messages; she also realized she could tell what illnesses other people had just by looking at them, and became determined to regain people’s respect using this gift. ‘When I saw a person, I knew what was going on in their body’. The voice of madness had become the voice of wisdom. After her own impregnation, she became a respected healer and many barren women would go to visit her.

Very quickly she gathered hundreds of followers. All of them had a similar pattern. In the first phase, they fell ill, and then they started to do what was considered as ‘mad’ things, such as running around or speaking in tongues, and they started to ‘hear voices’ transmitting messages from Ngala and indicating healing procedures. It is important to notice that the hearing of these voices is accompanied by a strong imagery activity: at this stage of their conversion process, Kyangyang see things from the ‘new world’ (to use their words), things they claim they had never known before. Many of them feel they have to draw these things, or make wooden, sand or mud sculptures to materialize their visions.

Because Ntombikte had spread the news that Ngala had talked to her, whoever felt these symptoms knew that they had to go to her to be initiated and purified, after what they too could become a Kyangyang and a healer, a pattern similar to the classic *ngoma* (‘drums-of-affliction’) one obtained in central and southern African societies (Janzen 1992). God told the young woman (and the other prophets) what medicines they had to dig up to deal with bareness, but eventually with other illnesses too. Knives became tools to transform society, not weapons to kill each other. Progressively, the prophets also started receiving messages of God about modernizing: diversify crops, send children to school, clean your body, etc.

When someone gets their calling from God, it is normally through the ancestors that they receive it. The ancestor tells them to stop worshipping the local cults and start praying to God. The adept then mimetically adopts behaviours typical of someone of the religion of the book, even building their own temple, similar to either a Christian temple or Muslim mosque (the two world religions they are close to and can easily copy). This behaviour led Inger Callaewert, one of the first scholar to study the movement (Callaewert 2000) to claim that Balanta invented ‘religion’ (as a separate field, in Bourdieu’s sense) through Kyangyang, a claim that was plausible in the 1990s when she was conducting her research, but that today would be problematic, as Kyangyang has not become an institutionalized, ‘doctrinal’ form of religion able to compete with Islam, Catholicism or Pentecostal churches in the spiritual market of today’s Guinea Bissau. If it is a ‘religion of the book’, what Kyangyang call a ‘book’ is imagination in its purest form (it is, as linguists call it, individual forms of glossographia, if not simple lines), there is no semantic knowledge written down and able to be transmitted or memorized through communicable signs. If the border between ‘writing’ and ‘charm’ is very porous in West African religious practices in general, it reaches almost a perfect fusion in the case of the Kyangyang.



Balanta women, God told the first prophetess, must do like Muslim women do: have an active role in the compounds' food security and in diversifying the farming system. Contractual marriage was to be finished and free choice introduced instead. Institutional 'adultery' (a traditional practice by which women could abandon their husbands for a long time and be with other men), was to finish to, thus putting an end to a practice that Amilcar Cabral, the intellectual founding father of the post-colonial nation, had already tried to put an end to because he considered 'backward' and inappropriate for a modern state. Cabral failed. The prophets succeeded (though only among Kyangyang Balanta).

When Kyangyang prophets get messages they start writing and drawing what they saw in their dreams, normally images of an ideal world with hospitals, schools, orchards, western-like forms of life, and several forms of writings that sometimes they can read afterwards, in glossolalia. Much like in the Trobiand island, where the litanies of the magician offer an ideal template against which the Trobianders prepare their gardens, as Alfred Gell has famously argued using Malinowki's earlier material, the dreams of Kyangyang prophets and their drawings offer an ideal image which act as a template against which they try to live their lives, including of course ideal gardens (though I am not sure that their ideal would be to magically achieve the technological results without the hard work, as Gell seems to imply in respect to the Trobianders; in fact the ethics of hard work is very strongly valued and encouraged among Kyangang; many of them are extraordinary farmers).

Today Ntombikte claims that the message of Ngala is one of development: 'Ngala tells us to develop [move forward]' she said in an interview. And she added 'This is why we are hungry; because we do not want to respect God. We say, "nay, God does not exist".' Ntomitke is aware that some of God's commands are changing a bit in relation to her earlier pronouncements. As she put it to Marina in an earlier interview, this is God's talk and this talk comes 'little by little';

as a logical consequence, she does not have a whole ‘body’ of fixed commandments but a fluid relationship with Ngala, who tells her what to do, what to say, what to accept and what to expect of her fellow Balanta farmers. This is ‘un-bureaucratized’ charisma, and one wonders whether the movement will follow the ‘routinizing’ fate of other prophetic movements (Kimbanguism being the most exemplary one) or whether (as it also happens with so many movements in Africa) it will disappear with the disappearance of Ntombikte and the prophets she healed. My personal feeling today is that its initial effervescence has vanished, and some indications suggest that it is more an ‘extra-processual’ event (Bohannan 1958) than a real change of direction in Balanta’s collective religious life. But I might be wrong. One of the beautiful paradoxes of studying prophetic movements is that their destinies are too opaque to foretell.

In any case, the developments of the last twenty years show us that in fact Kyangyang adepts are finding a place where to live among Balanta farmers, who respect them; they do not live anymore in separate ‘counter-culture’ congregations as they did in the 1980s, but intermingled with other Balanta farmers, being accepted by them and mutually tolerating different ritual practices. There is a political history behind this transformation:

At the beginning of the movement, the prophets healed by Ntombikte acquired ‘head’ (as it is said in Guinea Bissau) and became able to ‘see’ who the witches in the community were, although it did not become a violent anti-witchcraft cult as other ones known in the area or as the traditional Fiery yaab of the Balanta, an institution against which, as I have said, Ntombikte had deep personal reasons to oppose. Yet it is true that the movement was soon instrumentalized by young men and women to express their disgust against the ethos of closure of Balanta society and its strong gerontocracy, and it quickly became an ‘anti-structural’ youth movement, with its members moving away from mainstream Balanta villages and living together in enclaves in the bush. Because many youths joined it, not only were the descent groups left without manpower, but elders were often accused of witchcraft and the *fram* (main shrine) of their compounds destroyed by the Kyanyang youths. This iconoclastic fanaticism, however, was against the sayings of the prophets, who were against violence.

Because of the capacity to mobilize the youths, already in the 1980s Kyangyang was associated by political elites in the capital, Bissau, to some alleged *coups d’etats* monitored by Balanta officers, and it was officially banned and prosecuted. Ntombikte was taken to prison in 1985 for a month. When she came out of prison, she found herself in a political ambiance that was very oppressive for Balanta. The President of Guinea Bissau, fearing a coup-d’état by Balanta, imprisoned 150 of them. Ntombikte was released, but she was told that the movement was banned and was instructed by President Nino Vieira’s government to go and discourage her followers to keep on living together. Kyangyang communities were thus dismantled and Kyangyang members went into a state of clandestinity.

They were then reintegrated into mainstream Balanta villages, where they worked as healers; firstly and foremost as healers of the Kyagnang calling, i.e. they diagnose whether a person hearing ‘voices’ has really been called by Ngala and treat them accordingly, initiating them into the cult; secondly, they engage in soul-retrieving, retrieving the souls of Balanta who are being ‘bewitched’, much as traditional Balanta healers had been doing for a much longer time. Interestingly, the place where a Kyanyang healer works is called by them *fram*: the same word used for the village’s main shrine that they so keenly and aggressively destroyed only a few years ago as a symbol of traditional, gerontocratic power. This transformation of the religious landscape is accompanied by the creation in their compounds of ‘hospitals’ (the name they give to the house built for their patients) and churches, where Kyanyang congregate for weekly prayers. They pray collectively, though each one in their own glossolalic manner. To the best of my knowledge, there is no formalized common prayer, even if sometimes I have witnessed Kyanyang praying together in their temple, as Muslim people do in a Mosque. When in 2008 I asked a Kyanyang woman to recite a prayer for us, she replied she could not, because prayers are pronounced when they come (from God) not when the individual decides. A few minutes later, as Marina and I were talking to some Kyanyang men sitting next to the woman (who did not speak Kriol and was more and more alienated from the conversation), she entered in a semi-trance state and started to incomprehensibly speak in tongues. ‘There you are’ said one of the men to Marina and me: ‘this is our prayer.’

Up to the days of Ntombikte’s imprisonment, there had been a certain degree of centralization around her charisma.⁹ Not that all Kyanyang were living with her (there were many communities scattered all over the Balanta territory), but every single Kyanyang new member, when they first felt called by Ngala, had to go and visit Ntombikte in her place for her to confirm the diagnose that that was a genuine Ngala’s calling, and for her to initiate the new person into the ‘new world’. This centralisation around Ntombikte was later abandoned. Today whenever a person is ‘seized by Kyanyang’ as the local phrase go, they must go to a Kyanyang healer and be diagnosed; if they do not, they will die. If the healer decides that the calling is genuine, he or she initiates the new person into the ‘new world’.

⁹ More research on Ntombikte’s imprisonment will be needed. Imprisonment is a frequent element in prophets’ biographies, most tragically in Kimbangu’s thirty-year ordeal in the Belgian prison of Elisabethville (Lubumbashi). Often there is an inner connection between prison and writing. Kimbangu kept a diary in prison, where he wrote the dreams he had. Simão Toko, a very important Kongo prophet from Northern Angola, was imprisoned by the Portuguese in the Azores, and wrote many important letters to his followers from there. Ntombikte (who is completely illiterate) claims that she kept a book in prison, but that the authorities retained it. She claims that the most important messages she received from God were written down in that book, and interprets the lack of continuity of the movement after her release not so much in terms of the political ambience against the movement, but as a consequence of the loss of her book. I am grateful to Marina for reminding me this important bit of information.

According to Kyangyang members, the fate of their religion depends on God, as they would not know how to proselytise and gain new members. ‘Nobody is mobilized [proselytised] in this path on which you see the [Kyangyang] people; if this is going to come onto you, you do not know what day it is going to happen; it falls into your body and you know that your body is hot’ (Ntombikte, in Marina Temudo’s 2002 interview). Yet, Kyangyang try to imitate Christian and Muslim behaviour as much as they can, and inasmuch they see their Christian and Muslim neighbours educate their children so to make ‘good Muslims’ or ‘good Christians’ out of them, Kyangyang are also educating their children today according to the principles they receive from God. It is not that they want their children to ‘be good Kyangyang’ (for a start, they do not describe themselves as Kyangyang, but simply as ‘God’s children’ living in a ‘new world’); it is more that they want their children to be good Balanta: the same Balanta they were in the past, farming rice and herding cattle, but doing it much better and efficiently; living with their wives in better gender-balanced way than their forefathers, giving up the things that delayed their ‘development’ (from crab-eating to gender and age unfair imbalances and to meat wasting in exorbitant funerals for big men) and, most especially, praying to God and being ‘religious’, as their more clearly ‘developed’ neighbours in the region had learned to do before them.



new landscapes: a Kyangyang ‘hospital’ in a Balanta village

Some hopefully concluding remarks

*'Vas-y, vise plus haut
Change ta vie
Demain t'appartient
Relève le défi'*

*(go for it, aim higher
Change your life
Tomorrow belongs to you
Take up the challenge)*

Alpha Blondy (Ivorian reggae musician)
'Demain t'appartient' 2010.

Ernst Bloch, the philosopher which whom I started this working paper, was criticized by some Marxist and existentialist philosophers who accused him of not realizing that hope is 'false consciousness', a prolongation of suffering (as Nietzsche famously defined it), a mere waiting-as-wishful thinking. Hope is, to many existentialist philosophers writing after such atrocious events as Auschwitz and Hiroshima, a meaningless waiting for a non-coming Godot, a desperate self-deception.¹⁰ (This is especially true in Camus, not so much in Sartre, who after all expressed some sympathy towards Bloch's optimist principle [Sartre and Lévy 1980]). Psychologically speaking, this is often true: many individuals live with the false hope that one day they will win the lottery, which means they are not doing much to actually *create* a capital. It is true that sometimes collective expressions of hope (in particular some apocalyptic movements) are deceptive, even destructive (I could provide you with some examples if need be, but just google 'Jamestown' for a classic one), but this is rare. As a collective representation, religious hope is normally a learning to live the present, not a learning to wait for a distant future that will magically materialize itself in front of you with the perfection it appears in the litany of the magician. The essence of hope for Bloch is the *noch nicht* ('not yet'); the essence of Messianism is not the future, but the 'time that remains', as Agamben (2005) has argued, developing Taubes' work on the political theology of Paul (Taubes 2004 [1995]). The poetry of Mahmoud Darwish is oriented towards helping young Palestinians to endure their present ('cultivating hope') as opposed to attaching bombs around their bellies and getting into a bloody paradise in Tel Aviv. That would rather be, in Darwish's own words, the work of 'despair' and not the result of any religious eschatological belief. Finally the eschatological beliefs of my Kimbanguist interlocutors in the diaspora are helping them to live the present and behave as exemplary

¹⁰ Paradoxically, the same tragic condition and reflection on inhuman events that led to disenchantment and despair to some, also led to the rise of the so called 'hope movement' in Christian theology (Pieper, Moltmann, Tillich, etc.). See the texts in Capps' edited volume (1970) for a vivid portray of the reflections on hope that were occurring in the 1960s among theologians and philosophers.

neighbors in European cities (as opposed to being tempted by crime, drugs or simply despair and depression). They are also ‘cultivating hope’, learning to live, as Catholic theology has it, between the sins against hope: the sin of *acedia* (sheer apathic waiting) on one hand and those of *praesumptio* and *desperatio* (trying to provoke the immediate advent of the Kingdom against God’s long-term plans) on the other (Moltmann 2006 [1966]: 29). Kimbanguist theologians have told me that they do not consider these extremes as ‘sins’ in the strict theological sense of the term, but that the role of priests in Kimbanguist communities is to prone against these two extremes too and to help people hope without despair and with patient respect towards God’s schedules.

I am aware, as Capranzano (2003) was before me in his seminal article on the anthropology of hope, that hope is, to say the least, ambivalent. It can lead to strength; it can lead to non-action and sheer waiting too. Whereas for some hope is ‘false consciousness’, for others it is rather the person without hope who is fooled into non-action and into the acceptance of whatever injustices will be inflicted upon her, unable to make a plan and to acquire will to change things. This was the message of *The man without attributes*, the archetype of the anti-utopian conformer, whose stupidity is masterfully characterized by Musil as being ‘deeply alien to the dimension of the possible’ (for Musil on hope, cf. Flores Olea 2010: 401-432). Musil’s characterization of ‘stupidity’ could not be in a stronger contrast to Kierkegaard’s understanding of hope, which he defined as ‘the passion for the possible’. My own views may be hardly important, but I will tell you, in case you have not guessed it by now, that I find the passionate fighting for the possible a much more satisfying way of being in the world than the simple acceptance of the status quo, and I that respect popular leaders, whether religious prophets, political poets or reggae musicians, determined to make people know that other forms of life could, and perhaps will, be possible.

Unlike in Christianity, Kimbanguism or Judaism there is no such a thing as a Kyanyang theology of hope (I deeply doubt we can talk about a Kyanyang *theology* at all), although there is a clear notion that the future may be better than the present, which is, unfortunately, not a difficult notion for anybody. For Balanta farmers in a state like contemporary Guinea Bissau, being better than they are today is not difficult to imagine, neither for them nor for us: the country is falling apart, drugs traffic and drug-lords are taking over large parts of the territory, youth absenteeism is increasing, and global notions of modernity are simultaneously available and out of reach. But every cloud has its silver lining. Kyanyang prophets show in their dreams and in their images that they are imagining a better world, and in that front at least they do contrast with the apathy and despair of many young Guineans lost in their day-by-day *dubria*, a recently-introduced Kriol notion expressing lack of temporal intention, will and plan (probably stemming from the French verb *se débrouiller*, ‘to get by’, widely used in French-speaking West Africa to describe urban lifestyle). As the rap singer claims in Alpha Blondy’s duet *demain t’appartient* just evoked (against whom Blondy keeps stating that ‘tomorrow belongs to you [...] the destiny is in your hands’):

‘you say that tomorrow belongs to you
but tomorrow is what?
tomorrow is nothing you know
for me tomorrow is far;
you live the day by day till the day you’re fired’

Although recorded in Cote d’Ivoire, the rapper could very well be singing in the streets of Bissau and the wise words of Alpha Blondy could well echo the religious imagination about tomorrow (and about having destiny in one’s hands; i.e., in one’s labor) of the Kyangyang prophets.

Whether their religious imagination is wishful thinking or whether it also helps to ‘cultivate hope’ among Balanta and orient their collective action towards an effectively *better* future is difficult for me to say at this initial stage of research. Quantitative analysis has to be carried out on the relations between Kyangyang prophets preaching and real modern institutions (not just about the make-belief copies they make in the villages, but also with real schools and hospitals: do Balanta people take their children to school because of Kyangyang dreams? Do Kyangyang healers ever recommend people to go to bio-medical hospitals if they cannot heal their ailments in their so-called hospitals?). One must be prudent, as much greater anthropologists than me already made mistakes in this regard (e.g. Max Gluckman [1963] famously describing Mau-Mau as ‘magic of despair’, whereas in fact the movement had real effects on peoples’ destiny and, I suspect, in their day-to-day hopes too). So far, and at least at a hypothetical level, I would like to see Kyangyang imagery not as a desperate instinct to ‘lick the window-shop’ of the out-of-reach modernity (to use a visual image often attributed to Achile Mbembe, though I have never located the exact quotation in his work), but also as an indigenous way for the distribution of ‘social aspirations’, as Appadurai would put it. According to Appadurai (2004) the problem of the poor (apart, that is, from *being* poor), is the lack of knowledge of what they could aspire to. Rich people do not only have the money, but also a clearer idea of the things they can aspire and of the mechanisms to, hopefully, obtain them. Appadurai applauds grassroots movements that work towards letting poor people know the kind of things that could be at hand and the institutions that organize consensus towards fighting for them (by ‘consensus’, interestingly, Appadurai means the kind of consensus James W. Fernandez [1965] found in the religious cult Bwiti among Fang people of Gabon; not an orthodox consensus on the precise meaning of symbols, but a performative consensus that brings people to ‘play music together’ and to act towards a common goal). But maybe the tragedy of the Kyangyang movement, as I suggested already, is precisely that the initial social consensus around Ntombikte ceased (but why, exactly?) and has been replaced by local practices around individual healers, and that the ‘extra-processual’ event has disappeared and customary tempo and temporality has reemerged in Balanta social life. This is something to be found out in the project.



Appadurai's ideas are in any case inspiring. Kyangyang prophetic imagination may be seen as a way to socially distribute the knowledge of the possible. The prophets materialize their *passionate hunger* for the possible: constantly drawing (sometimes building) hospitals, schools, modern houses, new farming techniques and new gender relations. It is only in these latter two domains that they are so far making any visible progress. Kyangyang prophets and their followers seem to be unable to engage in wider social change and become a successful engine of village modernization, their imagination being more expressive than instrumental, or at least this is the impression I have at this preliminary stage, though the research might prove me wrong. In any case Kyangyang wonderfully exemplifies the connections between religious imagination and the possibility of the future, and that the first step towards the cultivation of hope is cultivating the land in healthy social relations. Here my and Marina's Kyangyang interlocutors in Guinea-Bissau meet my Kimbanguist interlocutors in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where I have recently witness the determination of many young Kimbanguists in the streets of Kinshasa to move to Lower Congo and start living in cooperative villages claimed to their clans, following a visionary Kimbanguist young man called Wabeladio Payi who, like Ntombikte, Kimbangu or Martin L. King Jr *sees* many things and many promised lands, and has already started to materialize his vision by planting cassava for his followers after negotiations with his matrilineal relatives near the holy city of N'Kamba-New Jerusalem. My own vision, less prophetic, is that anthropologists take up a more systematic study of the connections between prophecy, labor, land claiming and hunger for a better world in today's rural Africa. In the short term, we're all still alive.

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