Duress and Messianism in French Moyen-Congo

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**ABSTRACT:** The Matsouanist religion in Congo-Brazzaville has its roots in Amicale, a sociopolitical association and movement that aimed to improve the rights of colonial subjects that emerged in the late 1920s. After its leader, André Matsoua, died in prison, the movement transformed into a religion that worships Matsoua as a prophet. In this article, I argue that this transformation should be understood not as a rupture but as continuation, albeit in a different discursive domain. This transformation was steered by duress, or the internalization of structural violence in everyday life under colonialism. Through this discursive transformation, Matsoua’s followers appropriated the movement and brought it into a culturally known place that enabled them to continue their struggle for liberation from colonial oppression.

**KEYWORDS:** André Matsoua, Congo-Brazzaville, duress, French Equatorial Africa, Matsouanism, messianism

In January 1942, André Grenard Matsoua died in a colonial prison in French Equatorial Africa (AEF) from bacillary dysentery—or so the French authorities told his followers. Matsoua had been the leader of the Société Amicale des Originaires de l’Afrique Equatoriale Française (Amicale for short), an emancipatory movement that advocated for justice, equality, and self-empowerment. Together with several other members of Amicale, Matsoua was convicted for swindling in 1930. The conviction was an attempt to end the movement, but it would have the opposite effect. From the moment the sentence was heard, the Amicalists launched a campaign of passive resistance against the French colonial authorities, which would continue until the end of French colonial occupation in Moyen-Congo (Duriez 1950).

When Matsoua died in 1942, he was immediately buried in the prison graveyard in Mayama. The fact that none of his followers had seen Matsoua’s corpse was, and still is, proof for them that he had actually not died but had disappeared or was taken away by the French (Sinda 1972: 324–325). Persistent stories of what really happened circulate still as truth today:

He cannot have died of an illness, because my mother, who was in prison with him at the time, saw him that morning, and he was not ill at all. Governor General Félix Éboué arrived at the prison that morning. Matsoua was told to meet him. When Éboué had left, my mother asked where Matsoua was. They said he had died and was buried. But Éboué’s driver was told to never speak about the unidentified man who was also in the car. That he had money afterward was because he was told to keep his mouth shut. (interview, Brazzaville, August 2016)

Until his death, Matsoua was considered a leader of a political project of liberation that was defined in worldly, nonspiritual terms. His followers enacted the waiting for Matsoua’s return...
(his release from prison) by passively resisting the colonial authorities that had held him captive. As we will see in this article, the discursive construction of Matsoua transformed not long after his death into a messianic one. A Matsouanist religion emerged, which transformed Matsoua from the worldly leader of an emancipatory movement into a prophet who announced liberation in apocalyptic terms. He became the messenger of God, who would deliver a new world order, one of justice, equality, and freedom.

This article focuses on this moment of transformation, what I refer to as Amicale's messianic turn. While there is literature on Kongo religious tradition in which the Matsouanist religion should be located culturally (Andersson 1958; M.-L. Martin 1976; MacGaffey 1983; Thornton 1988), there is no scholarship that seeks to explain the curious phenomenon of the messianic turn itself. Wyatt MacGaffey has argued convincingly for the case of Kimbanguism, a similar religious movement in the Democratic Republic of Congo, that there is no distinction between the domain of religion and of politics, and that the question of whether Kimbanguism was a religious or a political movement in the colonial era is false (1983: 8–9). I argue that the case of Matsouanism is different in the sense that Simon Kimbangu himself operated simultaneously in the religious and the political domain—or rather, Kongo cosmology—by announcing himself to be a prophet and developing a messianic discourse of anticolonial resistance (Geuns 1974; M.-L. Martin 1976).

Matsoua and Amicale operated in a different discursive context, focusing on French modernity in terms of justice, freedom, and equality. Amicale was founded in Paris and inspired by a buzzing progressive anticolonial atmosphere (Goebel 2016). Matsoua had obtained French citizenship, which he considered a right for all educated Congolese. That Amicale would transform into a religious movement that fits within the Kongo cosmological tradition is therefore not as evident as in the case of Kimbanguism. Georges Balandier (1966) spent time in the Pool district in the 1950s, and his work gives an insightful account of the early days of the Matsouanist religion but remains a description of the new religion rather than an explanation of how it came about. This article will focus on the transformation of the discursive register in which the movement operated from a sociopolitical one into a messianic one. Why did Matsoua's followers start believing that Matsoua was a prophet and that his vision for justice, equality, and emancipation in French Congo was a message from God?

In this article, I seek to explain the messianic turn as reality of duress, or the visible and tangible outcome of internalized endured hardship (de Bruijn and Both, this issue). The Amicalists, like any other colonial subject, faced the hardship of living under colonial rule as a system of structural violence. Nancy Rose Hunt (2016) has argued how this structural and multilayered (corporeal, psychic, sexual) colonial violence produces nervousness, or a tense, stressful and agitated interaction between oppressors and oppressed. Hunt, and Mirjam de Bruijn and Jonna Both suggest that not only should colonial hardship be understood as a reality that colonial subjects were faced with, but that the enduring and multilayered character of colonial repression meant that people internalized it, which affected their state of being. For the Amicalists, hardship went further because of the colonial state's harsh repressive measures in response to the campaign of passive resistance they had launched in 1930. From 1930 to 1942, layers of hardship accumulated through enduring violent repression. Amicalists thus found themselves in what Henrik Vigh (2008) refers to as a chronic crisis that became acute when Matsoua disappeared.

This article draws on colonial archival sources from the French Archives nationales d'outre-mer (ANOM) in Aix-en-Provence. ANOM contains a large archival dossier on what the French dubbed l’Affaire Balali, an extensive and rich collection of intelligence reports, interrogations, judgments, and measures taken in an attempt to end the popular uprising in the Pool district. Archival research was conducted in 2015 and 2016. The archival sources selected for this article
contain accounts of the Matsouanists that were recorded in the immediate aftermath of Matsoua’s death. Unfortunately, private archives (photographs, written documents, ego-documents) and personal collections of objects are practically nonexistent, because the few personal belongings that people possessed were almost all lost in recurrent wars in the 1990s and 2000s.

The other important sources that the article draws on are oral histories from Matsouanists who have experienced the messianic turn themselves, collected in Brazzaville and Kinkala in 2015 and 2016. Since I started working on the history of Amicale and Matsouanism, I have worked closely with different branches of the Matsouanist religion in Brazzaville and Kinkala in the Pool district, who introduced me to elderly members of their community. In the interviews, they shared their life histories with me, in which the revelation was a key moment.

**Understanding Duress in Colonial History**

The methodological concerns with analyzing historic events through the lens of duress are evident and pertinent: how can we understand the emic of colonial violence in the historical context of 70 to 85 years ago? Colonial archives and oral accounts of those who experienced the events in the 1930s and 1940s firsthand or have learned about it from earlier generations are the only sources available. The French dossiers on the *l’Affaire Balali* offer us an insight into the repressive measures taken against the Matsouanists in the period before, during, and after the messianic turn. This provides us insight into what the French administration considered relevant in view of its objective to control the movement. But what it cannot tell us is how people experienced this and internalized this ongoing, structural violence. As de Bruijn and Both argue in the introduction to this special section, people are not necessarily aware that they have internalized enduring hardship or how this impacts their acts. To make intelligible what happens in the “black box of acting in duress,” they propose focusing on the everyday acts, people’s emotions, and the ways in which people explain their acts themselves.

The archival sources used here offer good insight in the constant acts of violence to which the members of Amicale were subjected. But these colonial archival sources cannot give us insight into how people in the past have internalized this enduring violence. For this, we must turn to oral accounts. The oral histories collected are loaded with references to enduring violence, and some interviewees were visibly emotional when telling their stories. However, memory as a historical source is not unproblematic: it is selective, subjective, and manipulated over time. Johannes Fabian (2003) therefore refers to “memory work” as the double act of remembering and forgetting as a cultural practice. Considered a purposeful act, the subjectivity of memory work becomes its very essence and, as such, its real value as a source. The memory work performed after traumatic experiences is then an act through which people remember, forget, and store their experiences in a deliberate manner to enforce meaning-giving for their own specific personal or communal needs (Cave 2014: 3). This also implies that, just like memory work, institutional archiving is a selective process of remembering, forgetting, ordering, and storing, with its own specific purposes.

Historiography of traumatic experiences based on oral accounts, therefore, offers radically different insights into the past than does historiography based on written source material. Both processes remember, forget, store, and order in their own way, and they may even produce not only different interpretations but also different events as a whole (Derrida 1995: 17). The narratives offered are not less insightful—rather, the opposite (see, e.g., Alexievich 1997; de Goede 2017). They offer unique insights into how people understood the world in which they lived and the manner in which they acted on these ideas. Moreover, they tell stories about the past that
meant and still mean something for them today. These are insights we will never obtain from colonial archives. Instead of considering the subjectivity inherent in people’s oral accounts of the past as an obstacle to historiography, I consider it a benefit, because it enables the empathy necessary to write about the emic of violence in a meaningful way.

The Balali Affair

When Matsoua died, his followers continued the acts of resistance that they had started after Matsoua’s conviction in 1930, thus maintaining a stalemate centered on the liberation of Matsoua. First, I will describe the background to the stalemate in which the Amicalists and French authorities found themselves in the early 1940s.

Amicale was founded in Paris in 1926 as an organization of mutual support for the diaspora from AEF in Paris, a kind of NGO of its day. It organized evening classes and had a solidarity fund for its members. It was funded by private contributions, among them from the AEF governor-general.⁵ According to its statutes, Amicale was explicitly secular and nonpolitical.⁶ Nevertheless, Matsoua used Amicale as a platform for political reforms. Furthermore, Amicale was founded in response to the hardship faced by AEF-ians in Paris, which was profoundly different from that of French colonial subjects in AEF (Goebel 2016: 65–75, 109–115). Matsoua’s struggle was therefore not an anticolonial one per se; instead, he strove for equal rights and French citizenship for African colonial subjects within the colonial system (Sinda 1972: 164–165).

In 1929, a delegation was sent to Brazzaville to build a support base in AEF, recruit members, and collect funds for Amicale. Within a few months, Amicale obtained mass support in the Pool district, where Matsoua and his companions originated, a district native to the Lari—referred to by the French as Balali. More than 100,000 francs were collected from chiefs, villagers, and évolutés in Brazzaville. This raised an alarm for the authorities, who subsequently arrested the delegation. Matsoua himself was arrested in Paris and sent to Brazzaville for trial. The collected funds were confiscated. Matsoua and his collaborators were tried for swindling, and sent to prison for three years plus an additional decade of forced residency in Chad. Amicale was banned, and the collected funds were to be returned to the victims of the swindling practices, the members of Amicale.⁷

The conviction led to several days of uprising in Brazzaville and was the start of a campaign of noncompliance until Matsoua would be released from prison. The Amicalists would persist in their passive resistance until the end of colonialism, and many persisted even after that. This frustrated the French authorities, who concluded that “[they] use every opportunity to manifest their determination to maintain an attitude of resistance and bad temper.”⁸ At this stage, the resistance was of a secular nature and used a secular discourse. Matsoua was considered the figurehead of the movement but was in no way considered a prophet. However, there was already an important difference between the Amicale in Paris and the Amicale as the people in Moyen-Congo appropriated it. While Matsoua’s struggle was one about the legal status of Africans within the French colonial empire—an intellectual project—the Amicalists in Moyen-Congo appropriated this to their experienced reality of French colonial domination in terms of violence and suppression under white domination. Amicale therefore quickly became anticolonial and anti-French in the context of direct colonial domination, as opposed to the context in which Amicale in Paris had emerged.

This became clear during the revolts in Brazzaville after the trial, when, to their shock, the French observed a group of around five hundred men shouting: “Death to the whites! We will kill them all! Elections!”⁹ Such explicit aggression was unprecedented. The anti-French sen-
timent adopted by the Amicalists may very well have been part of an adopted strategy of the
delegation to gain support for Amicale in Congo and may explain the overwhelming success
of the delegation. Unfortunately, there are no written documents from the 1929 campaign in
the Pool district that could offer an insight into how the delegation presented Amicale to the
people, and it is not discussed in the court hearing. Witnesses were called in only to account for
their payments and whether they had ever received any support from Amicale as a mutual aid
association. They unanimously explained that the contribution was for a mutual aid fund. The
questioning was clearly designed to build a case of fraud and not to understand the nature of
Amicale or the reasons for people's support for the movement.10

However, the collection of funds apparently had a much more complicated political meaning
than merely a fund for mutual aid. In August 2015, I spoke with Albert,11 a fervent Amicalist and
Matsoua supporter, who still refuses to pay taxes, have an identity card, or vote—the three main
acts of Amicalist resistance. He was not sure about his age, but I deduced from his story that he
must have been born around 1922. He joined Amicale because his brothers did. He told me that
the contribution to Amicale was necessary to achieve independence: “The whites asked whether
we had any money for our independence. We did not, but that is why we all contributed” (inter-
view, Kinkala, August 2015).

Albert was most likely too young to have fully grasped the meaning of the discussions with
the Amicale delegation in 1929. He probably obtained this account from his older brothers or
other witnesses. However, the understanding of the contribution to Amicale as a contribution
to the repurchasing of Congo from the French provides important insight into how people liv-
ing under colonial suppression appropriated the legal struggle of Matsoua's Amicale in Paris. A
study from 1950 on the l'Affaire Balali concluded:

They confusingly think that they can purchase their equality and their independence. This
idea of the “repurchase,” combined with that of mutuality on which the customary contract
“Kitemo” is based, is in their eyes and in the eyes of their tribe, the justification and explica-
tion for the financial contributions paid. Where we in 1930 saw only a simple case of swin-
dling, the African spirit has found a means, legitimate and normal according to their history
and custom, to obtain, one day, in a good or bad way, their equality and independence by
making these deposits. (Duriez 1950: 7)

The idea of contributing money to repurchase the land from the French should be understood
as a translation of abstract legal concerns into the everyday experienced concerns of people
living under colonial domination. The lived reality of the people living in the Pool district, such
as Albert and his brothers, was one of harsh labor conditions and severe punishments in the
service of the colonial state. The Code de l'indigénat confronted people daily with the violence
and humiliation that were the essence of colonial domination (Mann 2009). Because Brazzaville
directly governed the Pool district, which was thus more closely integrated in Brazzaville's econ-
yomy, the Pool district was spared the terror of concessionary rule (Coquery-Vidrovitch 2001; de
Brazza 2014). But my informants often refer to the Tréchot brothers of the Compagnie Française
du Haut Congo, a notorious concessionary company whose malpractices are widely remem-
bered in Congo. According to my informants, Matsoua decided to pursue the betterment of
life for Africans after encountering the Tréchot brothers. In the 1920s and early 1930s, the Pool
district was deeply affected by the construction of the Chemin de fer Congo-Océan (1921–1934),
often under conditions of forced labor. The conditions were so bad during the railway construc-
tion that many perished (Azevedo 1981; Sautter 1967). While faced with structural food short-
ages themselves, people in the Pool district supplied food and migrant labor for Brazzaville. In
addition, because of longer established missionary activities, a higher number of literates in the
Pool district than in other parts of AEF were employed in the colonial administration (P. Martin 1995: 19–22). The support for Amicale not only came from the rural population but was also particularly strong among the évolutés of Brazzaville.

Faced by these everyday experiences, notions of rights, emancipation, justice, and equality fostered an anti-French attitude, the pursuit of self-determination, and the ideal to repurchase sovereignty. From this followed a refusal to collaborate with the Catholic Church, missionary schools, or the French administration in general. The seized argent de rechat (repurchase fund) from Amicale’s coffers became an embarrassing dossier for the authorities, because the people who contributed refused to receive it back from the hands of the colonial authorities. Fearing that it would be a covert form of returning the confiscated funds, they refused to participate in festivities such as the French National Day or Armistice Day, or to accept material gifts, food, and drink. The fact that the colonial authorities were eager to return the money that was collected and thus to fragmentize the large sum confirmed the Amicalists’ suspicion that Matsoua’s sentencing was a setup to prevent Amicale from succeeding.

While Amicale in Paris may thus have been an intellectual project of rights and justice that wanted to collaborate with the French, Amicale in Congo was a response to a lived reality of colonial domination. The anti-French sentiment expressed during the turmoil after Matsoua’s conviction and through the narrative of the repurchase of sovereignty also changed French responses to Amicale. While the colonial authorities had financially supported Amicale initially, it now considered the organization a problem that needed to be stamped out. L’Affaire Balali over time came to be considered the source of all problems in Congo, and the Lari were punished for supporting Amicale,12 which added another layer of violence in the everyday lives of people in the Pool district.

Internalizing Hardship under Colonial Oppression

The enduring violence experienced by the Amicalists did not leave them unaffected. While the French may have thought that attempts to crush the movement had little effect, the determination that the Amicalists developed over time and the meaning given to being subjected to violent repressive measures suggest an internalization of the hardship experienced.

In an attempt to crush the “Balali agitation,” its leaders were sentenced to forced labor, imprisonment, or résidence obligatoire in Oubangui Chari or Chad for several years. Chiefs who collaborated with the French replaced chiefs who supported the movement, causing conflict at the community level.13 Amicalists who worked for the French authorities as typists, drivers, translators, or clerks were often removed from their posts, and children were sent away from school because of their parents’ political agitation in the name of Amicale.14 Lari agitators in Brazzaville were sent back to the villages they came from to reinstate order in the urban centers.15 The authorities also responded with physical violence. In an anonymous letter to the colonial authorities in the name of le peuple Balali, the authors complained about military action in Boko village, at the time a known Amicalist stronghold (Balandier 1970: 429). All the huts were destroyed, and women were “hit and kissed at the same time. . . . They choose the women and take one each and do what they like. They beat the pregnant women. Do you no longer need children?”16

What is impressive is the Amicalists’ determination in the face of this violence and repression. Balandier, who observed the emergence of “the new African faith” while in Congo for field research, noted in the 1940s an accentuated awareness of colonial domination, powerlessness, and Africans’ predicament (1970: 432). As a result, despite the harsh measures taken, the move-
ment seems not to have weakened—if anything, the opposite. In March 1948, Marcel Mavounia, representing the Lari by his own account, wrote a long letter to the newly arrived AEF governor-general. In the letter, he recounted the history of Amicale in detail. It was a history of injustice, of repression, of violence. He included a detailed overview of the violence and victims of state repression against Amicalists, including executions, deaths in prison, and people currently deported, and he concluded that not the Lari but the French were the source of all troubles in Congo.17

The letter demonstrates an acute awareness of the enduring violence against the Amicalists. The comment that the Lari were not the cause of all trouble is relevant to the question of the internalization of hardship. Because Amicale had a strong support base among the Lari from the Pool district, the French referred to the uprising as the “Balali Affair,” thus essentially ethnicizing the movement. As a consequence, every Lari became a prejudged troublemaker, and a whole group was singled out.18 Over time, the Amicalists’ strongheadedness and refusal to cooperate became understood as characteristics of the Lari, a stigmatization that persists in Congo to this day (see de Goede 2018). This suggests that the acts of passive resistance, or the refusal to cooperate over time, became not only tactics of resistance but also part of a way of living through which Amicalists created a unique position in Congolese society. In interviews, some Matsouanists confirmed this by stating that they upheld acts of passive resistance because they were Matsouanist.

In the narratives of Matsoua’s followers, we can also find indications of the internalization of hardship. The enduring suffering through colonial oppression became purposeful. Matsoua’s followers willingly underwent the violence as something they had to bear for a cause. While Matsoua was in prison, his followers adopted his struggle as theirs, and they persisted in the expectation that Matsoua would eventually be released. As such, being a victim of colonial violence—being faced with arrests, imprisonment, deportation, and physical violence—was something that became part of being a Lari. Suffering for a cause continues to be an important repertoire in Matsouanist spiritualism today, but it has its roots in the internalization of the hardship faced by Amicalists:

“O Matsoua, O Matsoua,
We are your orphans and we pray.
We are your orphans
Because you have started a difficult struggle
And we have accepted that struggle.
That is why we are orphans now.”
(Matsouanist song, sung in Lari and translated by Eminence Apostle Urbain Mouyokolo of Matsouanist-Ngunzist Church, Kinkala, 23 August 2016)

“For three francs
The whites have killed our children, our wives
And they have savagely wrecked our land.
For three francs, oho
The whites have declared war.
For three francs, oho
They have robbed us, the whites.”
(Matsouanist song, quoted in Sinda 1972: 242)

The embraced suffering of Matsoua has become an important element of Matsouanist group identity. It is valued and cherished as a way of life, a sacrifice in the name of the apocalyptic promise of Matsoua’s return to Earth. A son of a Matsouanist explained to me how his father
had been violently attacked, imprisoned, and deported to live for many years without his family in a peripheral part of the country. When, after years, he returned home, his only assessment of his experience was that it had been good because he had suffered for Matsoua. He was pleased about it and felt he had contributed to Matsoua's cause. Another son of a Matsouanist who had experienced similar violence said he had chosen to continue his father's path because "he has suffered; I should respect that." Several people told me that their parents had voluntarily gone to their imprisonment out of solidarity with their peers and because they accepted suffering for their cause. A Matsouanist said his mother proudly told him that she had always refused the milk and water offered for him when they were imprisoned when he was a baby. She had preferred to let him die rather than accept the milk (interviews, Brazzaville, August 2016). Suffering is part of the path chosen by the Matsouanists, and they pride themselves on being able to sustain it.

It was in this context that people who experienced the messianic turn grew up and that shaped the terms through which they understood the world in which they lived. When Matsoua died, the central focal point (Matsoua's liberation) was taken away, but the cause of freedom, emancipation and justice, remained. Through the deification of Matsoua, the cause for which Amicalists had suffered for so long, was continued. Next, I will look into this process of the deification of Matsoua, as explained by Matsouanists who experienced this transformation in the 1940s.

**Acting in Duress: The Deification of Matsoua**

In August 2016, I spoke with Joachim, born in 1935. He joined Amicale when he was about 12, and later became a Matsouanist. He remains a convinced Matsouanist to this day and wears his Matsoua pin with pride. He told me the history of Matsoua and Amicale with great attention to detail—dates of events, articles from the statutes of Amicale, names of French administrators, members of Amicale. Many details correspond to archival sources, while the narrative was filled with facts of a mystical nature. He explained to me how he came to understand that Matsoua was a prophet:

> I have seen André Matsoua myself. I have seen him when he was present with me. His birth was already mysterious. And his death in Mayama was also biblical. In the beginning, it was his speech, yet it was God who spoke. He began with politics, but after his death the Holy Spirit arrived to prophesize: "Hey! Hey! It is a Son of God! Hey! Hey!" . . . This is what happened; it is a history of a revelation. Even me, I have experienced revelations myself. When I went with my father to see him, I saw him with my own eyes. . . . He was condemned to forced labor until his death in Mayama. Mayama was his end. When he had left, people prophesized. . . . André Matsoua is the savior of the blacks; Jesus Christ is the savior of the whites. He himself came to me in a vision. He said: "I came for the first time to liberate the white race. I came for the second time to liberate the black race. There are not two saviors; I am the only Son of God. Me!" He appeared to me like that. . . . I have continued as a Matsouanist since. (interview, Brazzaville, 14 August 2016)

In my interviews, I have been told many versions of essentially the same story. These accounts are widely shared as truth for the Matsouanists, a truth on which the religion is founded. The Holy Spirit arrived after Matsoua's death to announce that Matsoua was the messiah sent by God. Matsoua also appears in people's dreams, at nightly prayers when he is invoked, or in visions. Many people have had similar experiences or narrate the experiences of others as truths on which their faith is based. In the years following Matsoua's death, the French often reported
their encounters with people praying to the deceased political prisoner. In October 1945, two men were taken in for questioning when they were found praying alongside the Makélékélé river in Brazzaville at night:

Q: Who are you praying to? And why all these lit candles, and that stick?
A: I pray to God.
Q: What God?
A: Grenard André.
Q: But Grenard is dead?
A: No, he is alive.
Q: Have you seen him?
A: Yes, he walks like me. It is he who will come to command our country.

... Q: But you have declared that you have seen Grenard. What did he tell you?
A: He told me, “Work, pray a lot, because I am your God.”
Q: What did you reply?

And:

Q: What are you asking for in your prayers?
A: We want Grenard—who is not dead—to be our parliamentary representative in France.
Q: You say that Grenard is not dead? But have you seen him?
A: No, I have not seen him, but I have had dreams.
Q: What does he tell you? Does he speak to you?
A: Yes, he speaks to me, and he says that he is still alive in France, that we should not forget him. It is he who says that he will be our parliamentary representative.19

Based on such revelations, the sociopolitical Amicale transformed itself into messianic, spiritual Matsouanism. While many small isolated pockets of believers seem to have mushroomed throughout the Pool district, some individuals managed to establish a sizeable group of followers around them, such as Fidèle Nzoungou from Bacongo township and Prosper Koussakana in Poto-Poto township in Brazzaville. For many, Nzoungou counts as the founder of the Matsouanist religion, the first spiritual leader of the first Matsouanist group, the Corbeaux20 of Mpissa. After a conflict with the neighboring Catholic Church escalated, Nzoungou and his followers were said to have been deported on Christmas Eve and left in the savannah of the Plateaux, “where there were many lions at the time,” several hundred kilometers north of Brazzaville. The next morning, Christmas Day, they returned mysteriously to Brazzaville (interview, Corbeaux at Mpissa, Brazzaville, August 2016).

The mystical narrative of Matsoua as the savior of the African people—as presented by Joachim, the two men interrogated overnight, and Nzoungou—is charged with political meaning. Matsoua said to Joachim that he had come to liberate black people: liberation from colonial oppression. Joachim realized that Matsoua’s political speech was in fact the word of God. The two men described Matsoua as an ambiguous figure, a godlike being who would act on the worldly stage (French Parliament). The founding myth of the Corbeaux follows a pattern similar to that of Matsoua: the French tried to get rid of them, but, mysteriously, they returned. Their return on Christmas Day was highly symbolic and emphasized the sanctity of Matsoua and his followers. Like the resistance of Matsoua, the resistance of Nzoungou and his followers was an act of God, leaving the French powerless.

The accounts of the first generation of Matsouanists give the impression that the messianic turn was spontaneous and an individual experience for loyal followers. However, there was also
a more strategic campaign ongoing that further stimulated the messianic turn. After Matsoua’s death, a declaration that was supposedly written by Matsoua, in which he accounts for his last days, circulated in Brazzaville and the Pool district. The text effectively narrates the Passion of Matsoua. The Chef de Bureau of the Pool district is portrayed as a Pontius Pilate who presents Matsoua to the people as “the man who has robbed you, the bandit who has brought unrest to your country, who has provoked the misery you find yourselves in today, and who has taken away the peace from your villages. He is a criminal that should be burned alive.” The people respond by saying that Matsoua is not the thief but Prosper Mahoukou is (another Amicale official). Mahoukou is presented as Judas, a friend and collaborator whom Matsoua trusted but who ultimately betrays him and in doing so sends him to his death. The account ends with a request to visit Boko village, where the authorities had just executed a Lari. Matsoua asks to spend his last days comforting others.21

It is unlikely that Matsoua wrote the text. The text so clearly presents Matsoua as a messiah who shared the same fate as Jesus Christ that it was more likely produced postmortem in the process of the messianic turn. Benoit Youlou was a typist at the French administration. According to his nephew, who grew up in Youlou’s household, Youlou was an Amicalist but never a Matsouanist. He did not pray to Matsoua, and believed in his political cause only. He also believed that Matsoua was dead. In the years after Matsoua’s death, Youlou used his typewriter to write letters that were supposedly from Matsoua in an attempt to give meaning to Matsoua’s disappearance for his followers. The letters were presented as proof that Matsoua was still alive and still committed to the liberation of the Congolese people (interview, Brazzaville, August 2016). The account of Matsoua’s last days is most likely one such document.

Youlou was part of a group of known Amicalist agitators in Brazzaville. The French had noted that they did not pray to Matsoua, and considered them political opportunists who exploited the believers for their own political benefit.22 They argued that the AEF population was divided between “the chosen, the Matsouanists, and the damned, those that have voted against God and who placed the colony, including the European colonialists, in peril.” Because of this division, the letter continues, “the Great Matsoua André Grenard, who is God, our King, will not be in Brazzaville to take charge of the people and to place them under a new commandment.”23 In other words, mass support through faith is required to achieve liberation.

While not believing in Matsoua as a prophet, agitators like Youlou used the messianic discourse to mobilize support and give new impetus to the political project of Amicale. They most likely considered tapping into Kongo cosmology in which religion and politics are merged as a way to amplify a waning political movement that found itself leaderless and thus in danger of crumbling away. The messianic turn thus also offered the possibility to continue with the political project, without a physically present leader. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Balandier observed this ambiguity in the Matsouanist religion when he spoke with one of his informants in Mayama: “I do not trust men who want to build new churches only for Negroes. But I am sure they are trying to find the only solution: to give us power, ngolo as we say, by uniting us better” (1966: 197–198). This seemingly religious project is thus actually about ngolo (power or strength) or, rather, empowerment. A young man in the Pool district explained as much to Balandier:

We are poor because the white man’s God does not help us become rich. He does not love us. Now, we have learned to act. We go without, and give our savings to the [Matsouanist] church. This way we shall find strength to obtain the good things of civilization. For another reason too: we are tired of always obeying the Europeans. We want to build our own country according to our own desires. (200)
These two accounts explain the messianic turn within the Amicalist movement as a response to an experienced felt reality, to maintain hope, dreams, and aspirations for change in a violent and repressive world (Kouvouama 1982, 2012). As such, messianism and the aspirations it voices are revealing about hardship as experienced locally (Augé 1974: 90). The apocalyptic imagery employed foresees the ultimate end of the present and the coming of a new, better, and just social order, which means an end to oppression and subordination, the restoration of agency, and self-determination and empowerment. It represents the ultimate victory of good over colonial evil. This new order will come through the intercession of God, enacted by his messenger Matsoua.

**Messianism as Reality of Duress**

The news that Matsoua had disappeared was a blow to his followers. In the account of the earlier quoted woman present that day in the Mayama prison, Matsoua was sneakily taken away, the only witness was bought off, and a lie was constructed that Matsoua had been ill, died, and had been buried straight away. It was the French's latest trick to try to end the movement, but Matsoua's followers refused to be taken for fools: “It was only a comedy,” says Prosper Koussakana, an early spiritual leader of the Matsouanists in Brazzaville's Poto-Poto.24 That Matsoua was taken away and cut off from the project to liberate black people was an injury to the movement, while the lies about his death were another insult.

For Matsoua's followers, who had been in duress and embraced their suffering as a frame of meaning for the realities of violence they were already enduring, Matsoua's disappearance also meant an acute sense of loss. In this moment of spiritual crisis, the Amicalists could not turn to the Christian church. They had long learned to distrust the Catholic Church as an instrument of colonial domination. Already in 1933, the Amicalists had used the Catholic mission as a site from which to practice its resistance against the colonial authorities.25 The Christian faith was thus by no means a place of spiritual refuge in the face of this acute moment of crisis and uncertainty that the colonial disposition had created. On the contrary, it was a quintessential element of it. As Gabriël Mayéla from Loukouo village stated:

> The peasants think the Fathers have not taught them all they know about God. They feel that the religion of the Europeans leaves the wealth in their own hands and hides a secret, which nobody is willing to reveal. So they have decided to search for themselves, to put their confidence in their prophets. (Balandier 1966: 197–198)

Spiritual refuge was found instead by relocating the interpretation of these events into the Kongo cosmological register; a cosmology rife with prophets. Although messianism is not unique to the Kongo, Kongo culture is unique in the number of prophets it has produced throughout history and the consistency with which this occurs in response to perceived domination (MacGaffey 1983, 1984, 1986; Sinda 1972). The Kongo messianic tradition, to which Matsouanism culturally belongs, is generally understood as a conservative reaction to domination, foreign or other, that threatened existing cultural and social values. Kongo prophets have all called for cultural and political liberation (MacGaffey 1984). This is a syncretic tradition significantly influenced by Christian missionaries, who have been active in the Congo basin since the late fifteenth century (Thornton 2013). The followers of one of the first prophets, Kimpa Vita, were known as Antonists, after Saint Anthony. The Kimbanguist church is recognized
as an African-Christian church. The discourse of Kongo messianic movements is profoundly political but framed in religious terms. Earlier prophets had undergone a fate similar to that of Matsoua—Kimpa Vita was burned alive by the Portuguese, while Simon Kimbangu was at the time locked up in a colonial prison in Belgian Congo, where he would die in 1951. Matsoua seemingly fitted this model. Kimbangu and Matsoua were now considered two saviors in the same battle.

Conclusion

This article aimed to provide an understanding of why Matsoua's followers started to believe that he was a prophet after his disappearance. It has argued that this messianic turn should be understood as an outcome of duress that Matsoua's followers experienced. It was a reorientation to Kongo cosmological register—albeit also manipulated by Amicalist opportunists—of people living in duress and faced with an acute spiritual crisis when faced with the news that Matsoua had died. The deification of Matsoua offered a refuge in spiritualism and in a culturally known space. It should therefore also be understood as agency in duress.

Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff have demonstrated the significance of the mutual interaction between religion and power in present-day Africa as a response to challenges posed by “a contradictory world” (1993: xxi). Building on these insights, this article expands their argument to the study of violent pasts, a contradictory world in itself. With Matsoua's disappearance, the two central themes in his followers' frame of meaning—liberation and suffering—acquire a slightly different but in fact strikingly similar meaning. The promised liberation from colonial oppression, represented by the Code de l'indigénat and the lack of citizenship rights—rights that Matsoua would deliver on his release from prison—became framed in apocalyptic terms announcing a Golden Age or a New World Order. The campaign of passive resistance upheld until Matsoua would be released from prison was now maintained until Matsoua would return to Earth, announcing the coming of the New World Order. Seen as a reality of duress, the messianic turn is not a rupture but a phase in a process of escalation, a process of people seeking a way to give meaning in a context of crisis. As such, it was a continuation of a discourse of political resistance, but framed in a different repertoire.

Matsoua's followers identified Kongo cosmology as a cultural space in which they could give new spiritual meaning to Matsoua's ideas. The messianic turn thus maneuvered the movement to a new domain in which its followers could sing, preach, and pray about the promise of liberation and a new dispensation, in ways that were impossible before. Because of the messianic turn, the movement could take a new form that allowed it to continue to exist in this repressive context. The messianic turn represents the continuation of political practices in a different discursive space. The messianic turn should thus be understood as reality of duress: the visible and tangible outcome of the choices that people make in duress. It was a transformation produced by the endured violence that the people of the Pool district had been undergoing since colonial domination, and more specifically since 1930. By framing their everyday realities in terms of suffering for a cause, it made the violence that had become structural and predictable also purposeful. In a context of endured violence, Matsoua's followers had come to understand violence as purposeful, and, as such, they never sought to avoid it. Instead, they faced it with remarkable pride and determination, and continued to do so in the decades following.
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NOTES

3. ANOM, 5D67, 4 April 1930, “Compte Rendu sur les Incidences qui se sont Déroulé à Brazzaville les 2 et 3 avril 1930.”
8. ANOM, 5D127, 26 September 1933, report from the governor of Moyen-Congo to the governor-general of AEF. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.
9. ANOM, 5D67, 5 April 1930, “Compte Rendu 2–3 April.”
10. ANOM, 5D88, 2 April 1930, “Judgement No II.”
11. All names from interviews conducted in Congo-Brazzaville by the author are pseudonyms.
13. ANOM, 5D127, 15 June 1933, letter from ex-Chief Tsia Tsia to the attorney general.
14. ANOM, 5D127, 19 December 1933, letter from the Mairie of Brazzaville to the administrator of Moyen-Congo.
15. ANOM, 5D127, 26 October 1933, AEF governor-general a.i. to the Maire of Brazzaville.
16. ANOM, 5D127, 25 August 1933, anonymous letter to the mayor of Brazzaville.
17. ANOM, 5D203, 6 March 1948, “Rapport sur l'Association Amicale,” 8, 8bis, 10.
19. ANOM, 5D203, 11 October 1945, “Procès Verbal d'Audition, Brazzaville.”
20. The "Crows," a name given to this specific group of Matsouanists because of their black attire and worship of a dead man. The Corbeaux eventually adopted this name for their group and now use it themselves.
22. ANOM, 5D203, n.d. [1958?], note on the Amicalists by Police Commissioner Bacou Robert to the director of the Sûreté, 2
23. ANOM, 5D203, 12 February 1948, letter from Wamba Blaise Victor Dewambert (Victor Wamba) to the AEF governor-general.

24. Quoted in ANOM, 5D203, 17 May 1947, "Procès Verbal de mise à la disposition de Monsieur le Procureur General de République du nommé Koussakana Prosper, demeurent a Poto-Poto pour 'Propos Anarchistes,' Gendarmerie Nationale."

25. ANOM 5D127, 26 September 1933, report from the governor of Moyen-Congo, 3.

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