

*The following is an excerpt from a booklet I wrote in 2025 while in Africa. This chapter is about the city of Goma, in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, where I had just managed to enter.*



As we stroll into town, one of the many *matatus* crushes stones at us. The caller senses the green behind my ears and teases us for our unaccustomed eyes. A market, lined with vegetables and goat heads and chunks of raw muscle flying from machetes, absolutely demolishes my wudu. Merchants push around a novel class of two-wheeled wooden vehicle held together by cuts of tire and bike chains, each steering shaft a uniquely hewn pronged tree branch. Taped bundles of batteries power mini speakers at chip stalls. I exchange a crisp wad of automatically tilled Rwandan Francs for a pile of pureed Congolese bills, and we continue down the alleyways fielding wisecracks, the final boss of the genre.

My newest friend says he knows about the Kimbanguists, yet takes a few prods to push past the repelling force from the spiritual gateway I sense nearby. We first arrive to a different, thrice-offshot branch of Monotheism, where we greet the pink-suited pastor, who accepts a token of appreciation and gives me a promise that we can

work together in the future. We pass a large gathering of a once-offshot branch, a large open villa under a great facade, a most beautiful hymn emanating to an overflowing audience.

My friend asks around for the hidden entrance to the Kimbanguist church, and we make a few loops before the moto drivers drop us next to a line of ladies shepherding a maze of upholstery, literally a hundred couches forming some kind of chill barracks. My friend instructs me something in a hushed sacred tone, as though fearing a spirit that moves. We make the necessary jokes and solemn greetings, and wind through the labyrinth, children darting atop the cushions. We emerge into a courtyard of rubble and plants, and a familiar green paint appears on a cobbled building. A friendly woman and some youth emerge and greet us, and a familiar spirit swirls together the logic in a moment, and we are brought into the inner room.

I talk in French with the pastor about my experiences in Kinshasa, under a physical film photograph of Kimpa Vita, while a youth chops plants past a curtain. They call for a young man who talks with me in English and for the first time I'm able to explain myself fully. On a paper with a square grid, I draw out the name of the god in Kiswahili, and explain the old hat about how Mandombe cares not for our preferred direction of reading, wandering through space led by the phonemes. Having left my electronics at the hotel, I make do with paper, and say for the first time the catchphrase, "Our own computers with our own materials." They invite me to the church service in two days' time, and apologize that they don't have anything to feed me. I return to my resting spot, perched above a neighboring quarter-finished building shaped like a maze, half-replaced with a cornfield. I down a tinful of anchovies and sleep for twelve hours.

In the night my phone negotiates its roaming plan, and I awake to a

call from the border officer, who I'm lucky to understand well enough to know that my visa is ready. Wondering if they might just send me back, I bank on a trick I learned crossing state lines in Mexico, and it works beautifully. My friend returns to Rwanda, and I walk back into Congo confident and free, with a fresh stamp of gold in my passport, giving me no more than seven days to spend anywhere in the great river delta where I won't break my promise to my parents to not die. I saunter toward the lake with an air of deep satisfaction, having set foot in the East and the West, knowing that should I manage to plant some sort of rare seed here, I can probably return to cultivate it.

I hurry past the bigger border checkpoint, and turn along the lake toward the official part of town, lined with various government and nonprofit offices. I ask about a particular educational organization, which a year ago held a movie screening in Oakland, USA. In the film, there's a long eerie shot of a mine tunnel, overlaid by ugly proclamations of colonial blindness. There's a present-day rally against the updated foreign powers that be, and a bunch of youth sway together, chanting, "If you're too afraid stay home!" A little late, I arrive at a slightly ajar door on an established thoroughfare, and am greeted by a wall of sparkly monitors, and a friendly man in front, who introduces himself as Grandpa. We chat comfortably until the man behind the desk allows me the permission to explain myself, which I do. I nearly leave with only a slip of paper containing the same email inbox I already frightened several times. Instead, I crank up my personality and reopen the sutures on my chest for a final try. Like some sort of smooth cold caller, I get an invitation to return on a weekday.

I resolve to walk all the way back to the hotel, and pass the world headquarters office of the intergovernment, barricaded behind a barbed wall of shipping containers and concrete, with the occasional truck of soldiers rolling by. I turn off into the suburban

wilderness, and whirl around at the smell of *chapati*. As I chew the grains, students file in to carry away bags of some sort of thick sustenance, and when I request a cup in broken Swahili the keeper looks at me like I'm mad, but makes me a scoop and adds spoonfuls of sugar to the not-quite-bitter dairy sludge. I continue on the way, starting to feel lost, physically that is, before spotting some familiar couches and promising to the lineup to return tomorrow for church.

I get twenty minutes of afternoon sleep and open up the Quran to learn something, anything about the anticipated exhaustion I feel welling up in my chemistry, and get to the part about David. Two subjects enter in on the king, frightening him. One says she has just one sheep, and that her partner, who has ninety-nine sheep, has just used fancy words to try to take her only sheep. David wisely says that a believer would never do that, before realizing he's being tested by God, and repents. As I'm reading, a wedding party erupts with booming music right out my window, and I delay the idea of resting a bit, finish the chapter, and turn out my door to go for a walk without pouting my body language.

I pass a church service as the pastor is pouring hellfire into the microphone, roasting the congregation with words I'm trying to learn. I'm invited in and plug my ears in order to better hear the prophecies, straining during a part when they do a dual French-Swahili announcement. The band plays a sweet song, the singers swaying softly. Another pastor ascends to release more flames and I cannot suffer it. I bow lightly before exiting, walking in the direction of the nearby active volcano, and keep walking. A thousand people eye me briefly. The shops thin out a bit, and there's an air of freshness. The animals pecking leftovers become more carefree. The road turns upward, and children start running to grab their friends, pointing at me. At a particularly excited group, I make a greeting, and reach down to pick up three rocks. Seeing

this, they start to flee! I throw one into the air, and another before the first lands in that hand, and another, and another and so on, racking up sick rewards in the hereafter, God willing.

A couple of women stroll beside me and we exchange some Swahili, the only language spoken round these parts. We stop for a bit as I admire the scenery, with a small crowd of youths and kids gathering. A man with bloodshot eyes passes by and talks to me in English, interrogating me on my purposes, telling me to turn my butt around and go to my hotel. I don't obey, but I don't walk further. I pass energy between him and the friendly eyes of the group, roasting him a bit to the audience, telling him everything is ok. As I'm about to leave, a joke from somewhere breaks through the wall, and suddenly he invites me to continue upward. We walk and the group is joined by some other men who point at various adornments to demonstrate their status. We pass a fortified foreign compound with roots in the colonies of old. They suggest I make an appropriate gift to the chief, who I wouldn't have guessed, he speaking humbly, dressed in an aesthetically valid practical jacket. We continue chatting among flowing blue hills and piles of excavated black holey rock. A domestic herd of pigs passes the path, and I reach down to pat the mom's head, who starts at the touch, shepherding little oinksters who shuffle through the grass for goodies.