

## DRUGS AND MYSTICISM:

### THE BWITI CULT OF THE FANG

The Fang, a conquering people, overran the southern Cameroons and northern Gabon during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Their conquest followed a rather curious pattern: without a deliberated tribal organization, one family after another picked up and descended to the sea. Their conquering past has deeply influenced the Fang; they do not hesitate to appropriate new techniques and ideas, confident that they are strong enough to assimilate almost anything into their culture. Eager for innovations and change, the Fang are convinced that progress never rests, and they are not hindered by nostalgia which they feel is sterile and unjustified. It was natural for them to seek out Western civilization and try to assimilate it. As a result there was a massive conversion to Christianity among the Fang.

Over the last twenty years, however, we have witnessed the development of a local cult, the Bwiti. Originally located in the central part of Gabon, among the Mitsogos, the Bwiti cult was transmitted by forest workers to the Estuary region and to the area around Libreville. The Fang adopted a modified version of the cult, introducing elements from their own cosmogonic traditions as well as ideas and rituals from Catholicism.

After a brief presentation of the Bwiti cult, we shall try to

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explain some of the reasons for the power and popularity which it has today for the Fang.

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### I. THE ART OF THE BWITI

The art of the Fang has contributed some impressive works, to the "museum of the imagination." For about fifty years, however, Fang art has been deteriorating and has entered a markedly decadent period. With only a few exceptions, the religious art which accompanied Christianity was not sufficient to preserve and stimulate the ancient customs. Today, scores of carefully fashioned and decorated Bwiti objects indicate the existence of an artistic interest which is more than merely functional. Purely decorative elements are almost non-existent, for everything is perceived as a symbol. This alone shows the importance of the Bwiti cult; powerful enough to evoke artistic emotions, it has a dynamism which stimulates much intellectual creation and influences the psychological and cultural lives of its faithful subjects.

A description of the Bwiti temple and the objects used in the rituals is sufficient for us to grasp the major characteristics of this religion. The chapel is a rectangular construction with a wide entrance protected by an awning which is suspended from the gables. Bwiti writings—for the leaders often keep a log of the rituals, a volume of the hymns—portray the layout of the temple and its cardinal points as a man resting on his back. There is a striking resemblance between this and the symbolism that was used during the Middle Ages in the churches of Europe. A wooden pillar at the entrance, usually carved and painted, supports the roof beam. The ground under the awning represents the man's legs, the pillar his genitals. The back of the temple, designed to accommodate an orchestra, represents his head, and the lateral doors his arms. A fire is built in the temple at the place where we should find his heart, and a ring of basketwork is suspended from the roof to represent the umbilical cord.

Alternatively, the visitor might find, to his surprise, an old bicycle wheel suspended from the ceiling. Such a display of the

waste materials of Western societies may irritate the visitor who considers it useless, if not farcical, and perhaps a new symptom of the tendency, in the words of G. Tillion, to make Africa the dump heap of the West. But the utilization of objects outside their usual or functional context, if sometimes lacking in beauty, often perfectly captures the symbolic meaning which is sought. The divine umbilical cord is the node at which all the creatures of the universe are linked to the Divinity. What symbolizes this junction better than the wheel with its spokes; and what better wheel than a real one? It is indeed curious that a people who, as it is often said, did not invent the wheel for practical purposes, should turn to the circle to express an extremely complex metaphysical conception. This divine umbilical was precisely described by an informer belonging to one of the "heretical" cults: "It is the part of the body that is between the abdomen and the heart. When you have chest pains, strings go out in every direction and attach themselves to all the souls on earth. That is why we say that man is linked to God. Souls are also born; they descend to earth by means of this string. When the string is broken a man is born. The people in heaven cry, just as we do when a man dies. The soul that leaves heaven comes down to us; but how and when will it return? The spider's web is also a representation of this idea, for God created everything in symbols for us to see."

In another temple, an object with no apparent relation to the wheel was attached to the roof beam: an oblong piece of wood with four small projecting rods. The priest of the temple explained: "It represents the heart of Jesus Christ who was slain by the Sagai. When you speak with God, you remain here on earth, but all his grace can fill your heart." We notice here some uncertainty about the meaning of the symbol: lacking a circumference, the spokes become Sagais, while the soul is drawn toward the "Sacred Heart".

A fire is built inside the temple, in front of the part occupied by the orchestra: it is the choir, the heart of the temple. A myth helps us to understand it: Nzame wanted to fashion the Creation, but he lacked fire. The God Mebeghe told Nzame to make a sacrifice of his own blood. From a single drop a fire was kindled...

Near the entrance of the temple, there is a sculptured post.

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A hole, ten to twenty centimeters wide and twice as high, is carved in the post along the median axis of the temple. For the Bwitists, for the faithful, this orifice represents the female genitals, the passage through which all men enter the world. It is also *Ozamboga*, the opening in the trees, which the Fang had much difficulty in passing at the time of their migrations. The orifice is also a window giving onto the world beyond, allowing a communication between this world and the next. Apparently, the post should represent the genitals of the reclining man who appears in the floor-plan of the temple. But for the Bwitists it is of feminine gender. We may wonder whether this contradiction is due to the inconsistencies inherent to symbolic thought, or whether it is accepted as an expression of the complementarity of the sexes. It is perhaps warranted to look for a personification of the roof analogous to the symbolism of the floor.

It seems useless to classify these posts according to the figurative or non-figurative motifs which are carved on them; such categories are meaningless both in the minds of those who fashion the posts as well as for the faithful. Some of the posts are sculpted so as to represent a woman, usually in a standing or half-crouching position. Most of them, however, are simply worked in order to emphasize the planes already apparent in the wood itself. For instance, the cylindrical form of the post is shaped into a cube whose four sides may symbolize the four cardinal points or various ethical categories. Certain motifs are frequently seen, hollowed out or in low-relief: the cross, the four-cornered star, the key.

Sometimes there is a second orifice which is perpendicular to the first. Our informers told us that it was through this passage that sorcerers were born into the world.

The post is the object of a certain amount of devotion. The faithful incline themselves deeply in front of it, and during the ceremony it is the object of libation rituals. When no longer used in the temple, because of a deterioration of the wood or its replacement, the post is carefully preserved. I have seen old posts in some corner of the temple or leaning up against a sacred tree. It is considered as a privileged medium for the spirits who may use it to descend to earth, as in certain *ombwiri* cults.

At the entrance, the post divides the temple in two. Custom

has it that you enter by the right hand side of the temple and leave by the left. The right symbolizes life, the sun, and man; the left symbolizes death, the moon, and woman. But here again we find a curious inconsistency: the right side of the temple (the "epistle side" of churches according to the old Catholic liturgy) coincides with the left hand side of the reclining man in the floor-plan. For this reason we suspect that this latter symbol is more recent than the first, and it would be interesting to observe how it contaminates the designation and symbolism of space in the Bwiti culture.

From a synthetic and abstract point of view, the architect's design not only makes sense, but also acquires a presence. His space extends to the whole area formed by the surrounding houses and structures, and every element is conceived of and interpreted as a piece in the Bwiti construction. Enormous plants of *Tabernanthe iboga* are neatly planted in the square in front of the temple, arranged in hedges alongside the temple, or massively in the middle of the square. The *iboga* plant is an essential element of the Bwiti cult. To be initiated, the neophyte must eat enough of the bark and the roots of the plant to have hallucinations. This often induces vomiting as well, which is not considered here as a negative reaction. In fact, one witness declared that "he must vomit until he reaches the first drop of milk"; that is, he must completely reject his worldly life in order to have access to the world of the Bwiti. After having eaten the *iboga*, the neophyte generally falls into a state of passive drunkenness. Brightly colored images come before his eyes, and certain senses are stimulated: odors and sounds are greatly magnified. After several hours, the initiating priest and the candidate's sponsor ask him questions about the visions he sees in order to determine, for instance, whether he has seen the place of the dead or the place of God.

The *iboga* is the vehicle that allows men to reach God. It is not surprising to hear it called the "Holy Abwa" by certain sects. We may wonder if there is not a phonetic relationship between the French word *bois* (wood) and *Abwa*. According to certain prophets' versions of the Creation, there is an identification of Christ, the path that leads to God, with the *iboga*. The *iboga*, in Bwiti mythology, was created from the ribs of Nzame.

While the old art of the Fang consisted mainly of non-painted

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sculpture in the round, Bwiti art is very brightly colored, and low-relief sculpture is predominant. Mural paintings have appeared and wooden boards are often painted. This transition from sculpture to painting is worth mentioning. The availability of dyes and colors of all sorts certainly encouraged this evolution; the exposure to books, illustrations, and newspapers accustomed the Fang to two dimensional representation. But the introduction of the iboga plant was probably the decisive factor. As a drug, the iboga evokes extremely colorful visions: those who have taken it insist on this fact. The sponsors of a neophyte may determine whether or not he is on the right path according to the "color of the Road." The *alans bylodendron gabonense*, once used in the ancestor cults, induced visions in black and white only, and provoked auditory hallucinations. Hence the transition from the sculpture and patina of natural wood to the art of illumination which is currently popular. Hence, also, the superiority of the Bwiti vision which is more "convincing" and complete.

Near the temple, on the opposite side of the square, a carefully swept space is delimited by three tree trunks which are used as benches. This space facing the temple is called the *Nzimba*, where the initiates gather before the ceremony.

Often the *Nzimba* is dominated by a very large tree. Carefully protected medicinal plants grow around the trunk. The tree is a symbol of the forest in which the iboga was first discovered and which, for a long period, was the only nourishing environment for the people who inhabited those regions. We must recall that, according to the legends, the properties of the iboga were first discovered by the Pygmies, and subsequently transmitted through the Mitsogos to the Fang. The tree of the *Nzimba* is selected to have a tall straight trunk without any branches, symbolizing the difficulty for man dependent on his own means, of ever attaining the level of God. According to some informers, trees with thorns, such as the *kapokier*, were frequently planted in the *Nzimba* to demonstrate the impossibility of reaching God.

The sitar plays an important role in the ceremony, and the faithful treat it as they would a person: it is invited to participate, it is dressed and bathed. A pygmy woman long ago revealed its secret to men, sacrificing her own life for the knowledge. The instrument recalls its past: a heavenly spirit to which the in-

strument is dedicated resides within it. A priest poetically described the role of the instrument and its music in the cult: "In order to see God one must eat the body of God which is the *iboga*. The sitar, the *Ngoma*, which is the Virgin Mary, holds your hand and guides you to him." Others have described it as a raft that allows you to cross from one world to the next, from the profane world to the sacred, from the land of the living to the land of the dead.

The Bwiti cult is, we have seen, extremely rich in symbols and connotations. Certain foreign observers, astonished by the proliferation of symbols, rituals, and beliefs, see only a series of kaleidoscopic visions lacking any profound or meaningful unity, and they fail to understand how the Bwiti cult can compete with Catholicism. Actually, the Bwiti cult is as well adapted to the individual as it is to the social group in which it has developed.

## II. THE BWITI CULT AND THE INDIVIDUAL

We must take two important themes into account: on the one hand, the Bwiti cult encourages personal fulfillment, and on the other, it is directed towards the total existence of man.

The traditional cults of the Fang were ancestor cults; the individual was often submerged under the weight of his family. Only the progenitors of a lineage were eligible for personal veneration. The others were thought of as links in the chain, and the youngest ones were easily overlooked. With the development of a trend of individualisation, each man wanted to have his own ancestral relics and administer the rites of his cult apart from his brothers. Such a situation rapidly deteriorated into a strange and confusing state of affairs. A secret society emerged within this situation which, in the last analysis, was in contradiction with the decaying skull cults. An ancestor cult is always linked to a lineage, and it is necessarily restricted to a single family. In opposition, a secret society regroups the youth of an entire village, irrespective of family ties. The *Melan* society grouped all the young people together: they were shown various family relics assembled in an initiation chest, and were made to eat drugs, notably *alans*, the plant for which the society was named. During their hallucinations the initiates saw and spoke

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with the ancestors. We can easily imagine the complex coordination of social groups and beliefs that such an experience required. From the *byeri* cult in which the individual was locked into the family structures, the Fang moved to the secret society of *Melan* where the individual was caught up in the fibers of village organization. The Bwiti cult was finally to recognize the full autonomy of the individual.

From the description that various authors gave of the Bwiti cult around 1950, it seems to have been still very close to the *Melan*. The essential experience of the cult was to visit the village of the ancestors with the aid of the iboga plant. The supernatural figures encountered there were invariably chiefs from the village of the dead. Georges Balandier's description in *Sociologie Actuelle* is categorical on this point. My conversation with Bwitists in 1966, however, revealed a new outlook. The goals of their efforts and speculations are more distinctly theological. Some, apparently, no longer pay much attention to the ancestors, while others consider them merely as intermediaries, as witnesses for the living before the Almighty. This evolution clearly indicates that the Bwiti cult, while not actually creating the trend towards individualism, is perfectly able to assimilate it.

It is true that Catholic doctrine holds that each man can feel responsible for his soul and his fate. He must account before God for the good and the evil that he has done; he has complete moral responsibility for himself, and, in the end, it is either Heaven or Hell that will sanction the life devoted to doing good or doing evil. Yet the Church is also a communitarian society with practically immutable rituals in which the faithful can only participate without actually creating. Its clergy, black or white, is assigned the duty of performing the liturgy and of elaborating the theology. Its dogma has been defined and refined throughout the centuries. Its organization far surpasses the individual, both in time, since its traditions span some two thousand years of existence, and in space, since it holds itself to be universal.

From many points of view, the Bwiti cult places much greater emphasis on the individual. Each initiated person must make his own way in the quest for God. His own "spirit" travels into the world beyond. There he must observe everything, remember it, and reflect upon it in order to acquire some knowledge about the realm of God. The individual must fashion his own theology

according to his personal needs. The rites of the liturgy, furthermore, are not constraining; many priests readily alter the prayers or add new elements to the songs, the music, or the ornamentation.

During the course of their visions, the initiates obtain a divine revelation. They travel individually into the next world to meet the supernatural spirits. Seldom, and sparingly, are statements made about this voyage, for, as one informer told me, the visions are too costly in terms of endurance and effort to be easily revealed. Nevertheless, it seems that visions of direct relations with the divinities are relatively infrequent. I was given lengthy descriptions of the countryside and of certain rooms in the house of God. Some insisted upon having seen Christ engaged in various occupations, and of having glimpsed the silhouette of God. They recounted conversations with a deceased father, mother, or brother. But no one spoke about the actual words of God or offered detailed information about Him. It may seem surprising that, with the immense number of experiences, based on individual dreams, there remains enough coherence for the adherents to agree on the fundamental beliefs. For dreams often contain the most eccentric fantasies, and we might expect a proliferation of the most incoherent and incompatible ideas. Yet this has not occurred.

We must admit, however, that such a danger is not wholly absent, as the multiplication of individual chapels may indicate. And yet their contradictions are not irreconcilable. The relative homogeneity of dreams is probably due, in part, to the common cultural background of the Fang. Furthermore, the dreams are interpreted within the traditional framework of experience which each individual possesses. Lastly, a manifest control is exercised over the material by the sponsors: the neophyte must describe what he saw, and his sponsors interpret or help him to interpret the meaning of these incoherent visions. An informer assured me that it was a grave sin to suggest visions to a neophyte; our hypothesis is therefore not improbable. Whatever the case, the dreams do possess enough homogeneity in order to maintain a certain unity of beliefs.

Actively creating his dogmas, the Bwitist is wholly responsible for the course of his life. Bwiti thought, however, is not explicit on this point and, for lack of any clear statements, the eth-

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nographer may try to discover the essential traits by understanding their objects or drawings: the method is worth describing. A priest was handed some paper, crayons, and felt-tipped pens, and simply asked to make some drawings, with no further instructions. He produced figures representing the essential elements of his beliefs and the spirits that he worshiped. The first drawing portrayed a bulbous plant viewed from the side and resting on a green surface. It represented the world at the Creation. At the top, a kind of flame, the flower, represented the father; the base was made of wood and represented the mother, or what the priest called, with extraordinary verbal ingenuity, the "mediterranean sea" (*mer mediterrannee*, in French), his own translation of the Fang word *Mang Gnama* (maternal ocean). The inside of the bulb was composed of a variety of colors. "Each leaf represents a nation. In each era, God uses one of these colors that works." Pursuing his catechism in images, our visionary drew a multi-colored striped slug at the end of which were small spots of color. The prophet explained: "When the plant stood upright, its intestines (the colors) unrolled. Red represents thunder, fire, and the furnaces; green represents the faithful; blue is for the first garments, the membrane which protects the infant in the mother's bosom, the placenta, the guardian angels; purple represents the fetishists (the *beyem*) which was their first color before becoming black; they polluted the Creation by eating other men and, because of that they became black." Each species exudes the color "of its nation." We may infer from what our witness says that, for him, moral categories (fetishists, good men, etc.) are as pre-determined and immutable as national boundaries.

According to his explanations, men are born as fetishists, that is, as "sorcerers who eat men", those who leave their bodies at night in order to eat human flesh, or *vampires* as the local expression calls them. Yet the *beyem* performed their sinister acts only later. Could they have refrained from these activities? Can a man who is endowed with such power act differently from the others? Can he restrain himself?

According to the metaphysical conceptions of the Fang, man is sometimes possessed by a "malignant" force, or *evur*, which gives extraordinary power. At night the *evur* leaves the body of the individual, and in his nocturnal wanderings he meets other

*evurs* with whom he organizes human sacrifices and banquets in which the bodies of the victims are devoured. States of dreaming and waking shade into one another, but it is probable that everything takes place on the level of dreams; it is in the imagination that the vital energy of other persons is incorporated. It is said that the victims are condemned to wither and die from exhaustion. The similarity of this myth with the legend of vampires in Europe was so striking that the Fang adopted the word.

Their conception of moral responsibility is rather different from our own. A man who is witness to the death of someone close to him may feel guilty even if consciously and motivationally he meant that person no harm. Hence, there are occasional self-accusations of cannibalism and sorcery. But besides this, there is a continual need to seek help in order to put the malignant *evur* back on a good path. This tends to create an atmosphere of terror and insecurity about life: the best of men, without his knowing it, may be responsible for the death of his friends or his kin. Using different words, Jean Rouch described similar cases in his film *Mr. Albert, Prophet*, in the Ivory Coast: "As a devil I killed him," explains one of the patients of the prophet.

Other Bwiti dignitaries, approaching the idea of predestination from another angle, throw new light upon the matter: it is not the fact of eating iboga or even of walking in the land of God that determines whether or not you are a good man, or guarantees your future and your fate.

The Bwitist is thus responsible for his moral life which is relatively simply constructed. It includes "natural law:" do not steal, do not kill, do not commit adultery with a married woman, and so on. It also includes many of the taboos which are frequently encountered in Africa: do not defecate or urinate in a river, do not perform sexual intercourse outside of a house... Creativity, while it is clearly accepted in the theology and the liturgy, is less characteristic of the ethical aspects of life.

Besides being well adapted to individualistic claims and individual fulfillment, the Bwiti cult has the advantage of taking into account the human being as a whole. Christianity relies mainly on rational thought and man's consciousness. Bwiti plays upon the totality of man's existence. By attributing a privileged place to hallucinations and dreams in its conception of man, the Bwiti

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both recognizes the unconscious and offers a coherent explanation for it.

With respect to knowledge, to the emotions, and to action, the Bwiti point of view is also different from those of the Christian cults.

The Bwitists themselves often emphasize the characterological nature of their religious knowledge. By blending the concrete world of everyday life with the dream world of drug induced experience, they tell the Catholic, "What I believe in I have seen with my own eyes. You and your beliefs, you get them from the Bible. The European learns from books, the African learns from the iboga." The evidence of what is seen, or what they believe to have seen, is unmoved by rational argumentation. Our impression is that the Bwitists use reasoning in order to justify what they consider to be experimental observations. We have to understand how the Bwitists distinguish between dreams, reality, and imagination. The almost universal African beliefs in travels through dreams, in the reality of the spirits and sorcerers encountered during the voyage and the dangers that they represent are phenomena of the same order.

The religious beliefs of the Bwiti cult are expressed through symbols. Catholicism does likewise, except that the symbols used were elaborated in a rural civilization based on grain and wine, in a temperate climate where the vegetation changes with the seasonal cycles. Barely acquainted with the modern industrial world, its symbolism is far from being comprehensible below the Equator.

In the universe of the Bwitist, everything has a hidden meaning. Perhaps the Fang have a particular taste for the esoteric? They seem particularly content in a world of mystery and allegory in which objects are readily associated one with the other, in a field of free play for the imagination where nothing has a fixed, immutable meaning.

As an example of the interconnections between symbols, let us take the two central figures of the Bwiti pantheon, Nzame and Nyingone, who originally belonged to the now more or less remote Fang mythology. Nzame, the "son" of God, created the world, and Nyingone, his partner, helped in his tasks. Both figures are preserved in the Bwiti cults as symbols and as a parallel to the original parents of the world in the Biblical tradi-

tion, Adam and Eve. At another level, the Bwitists associate the two figures with Jesus and Mary. The sometimes contradictory writings are prolific. Adam and Eve sinned by having intercourse without the permission of the Creator and Father Mebeghe. Nzame, for his part, tried to create the world but lacked the ability to accomplish the task. Jesus, who symbolizes the two figures and who is their reincarnation, received a just punishment for their sins, and his suffering was a deserved atonement.

A whole system of myths and interpretations is thus constructed, each piece successively falling into the right place. No single aspect is considered to be more important than another; there is no "Event" in relation to which all the others are merely the foreshadowing or the repetition. Such mental orientation is hardly compatible with our notions of progress and historical processes. Everything is described in universally relativistic terms. Small effort is made to distinguish what is fact from fiction; nor are any of the events dated or chronologically ordered. Everything could just as well have happened simultaneously. History, in other words, has no direction; it can be read from any point of view. Such a conceptual reality implies, for us, a disquieting indifference to historical truth. Knowing that I was Catholic, my Bwitist friends would often ask me about the Bible and its meaning. But no amount of logical or historical explanations could move them; poetry was always more important in their eyes than historical truth.

Everything is considered as a symbol. Every spirit, each myth can be broken down into its constituent elements, endlessly symbolizing something else. The symbols thus acquire a life of their own.

The drawings mentioned above provide the evidence of this autonomy. Although the priest who produced them belonged to a heretical sect whose adherents are not fully trusted, they represent an adequate example of this kind of thinking.

The priest had drawn all sorts of anatomical organs: "The liver of God cools everything and provides us with ice. It is called Sainte Solange." A very rough sketch of a pair of scales balancing on a fulcrum which represented the heart was described in the following way: "The two trays represent the lungs. When the soul falls into the water (at conception), the scales

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tip; the wise man is here (red tray), the fetishist there (purple tray). The heart is like a bell. Both sides of the scales have sinned. In the middle is a road for the infants who are without sin. The panther, *Nzé*, is outlined on the arm of the balance as Saint Michael in a fury. The clock (drawn below the scales) represents the mother. The heart was in the clock (its clockwork movement), *Nzé* was in the clock; he is the chief. For the clock regulates every person's duties. And here is something else: the heart beats and becomes strong. The wife tells her husband, 'You were on a trip; there is this and that which you do not know about.' If these things provoke anger, the clock controls them. The clock, *Dik Dok*, is the mother of *Nzé* who told her to control everything. The heart was put (drawn) there as an intermediary between God and his mother. The clock records everything but does not pass judgement. Each thing in its own time, according to the clock. For example, in the past the panther came out of the jungle to eat someone. It will happen again, for the beginning and the end are the same. The panther will return to eat those who ate men and coveted their skulls.

As for the jaws of the panther, the priest says, "Since God made nature, there are men on top and those on the bottom. On top are the superior men, the angels and saints. The good become saints. The fetishist is thrown into the mud. The sins of the wise, however, are not severely sanctioned, for they were not the first to have sinned."

In this last example, we find a parallel with the efforts of the occult circles of Europe which constantly compare the microcosm to the macrocosm.

The metaphysical conception of the Bwiti has an inherently vague and nebulous character which is undoubtedly due to the type of reasoning they employ, based on symbols and analogies. By a small stretch of the imagination and a clever manipulation of the materials, emphasizing one element or ignoring another, the Bwitist can show that almost anything is so. The flexibility of this method of reasoning, while it is precarious in the transmission of precise ideas, encourages the proliferation and coordination of new associative ideas.

### III. THE BWITI CULT AND SOCIAL LIFE

The Bwiti cult is perfectly adapted to modern social life. Its attitudes towards feminism are a good example. In their original conception of the Bwiti, the Mitsogos barred women from initiation. The Fang admit them. Initiated like the men, they eat the "bitter wood" and, like the men, accomplish their spiritual voyage to the world beyond. They participate in all the ceremonies, not as an indistinct mass, but as active members engaged in specific tasks. There is a masculine choir and a feminine choir, and both engage in the songs and dances. Soloists of either sex may perform; there is no distinctive segregation. Neophytes of both sexes may be baptised together; the ceremony is even carried out with the utmost discretion: when the individual is to be immersed in the river—a purification rite—he is covered in a large sheet. For the initiation ceremony, a sponsor of both sexes must be present to help the candidate, be he a man or a woman. Each of the various Bwiti rites includes an important element in the female form of the divinity. Nyingone Mebeghe, the daughter of God, associated with Nzame, and mother of Egnépé, Eve, or Mary are very frequently called upon during the ceremonies.

The beliefs of the heterodox sect, whose drawings I have described above, go even further to proclaim the existence of a distinct "feminine power." Commenting on the drawing of a solar image with a small circle appended to it, the priest said, "This is the sun as it is today, for nature has changed. The time of Nzame Mebeghe has passed. Missolinelle (a name invented by the sect) is a woman, and here (pointing to the smaller circle) is her Holy Spirit. Before it was Amala croix (also a name invented by the sect) who was the sun. Now it is a woman who reigns and the sun has changed. In the past the father worked. Now it is the mother who rules. The command should belong to women. He who has been a vampire would then receive the punishment he deserves; as it is, the boy can get by through politics, compromises, and settlements. If it weren't for the fetishists, it would be a woman who would control the power. Mother Missolinelle is wise; so are we, her children. Mother Nyingone is evil, as are her children. When God creates a new soul, Nyingone Mebeghe takes it and throws it into her fountain

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of blood thus changing it into a fetishist. The vampire doctors can detect this and they ordain taboos (*mékaga*) which increase the power of the witchcraft. A child who has *mékaga* is stronger than anyone else. The fetishist is more highly esteemed by the authorities than anybody else, and this was especially true in the past." Although this passage contains too many elements for me to deal with separately, I preferred to present it intact in order to emphasize the scope of this accepted or expected gynocracy.

This conception of the woman which comes from a heretical sect that rejects one of the principal figures of the classical pantheon, does not actually reflect the position of all the Bwitists which, by and large, is more moderate and does not threaten the established masculine privileges. Yet women are given a significant role. They have their song and dance leaders (*yombi*) who have an important function: they purify the temple at the beginning of the ceremony and prepare the way for the spirits. The *okambi*, or guardians of the community, are often women. But the responsibilities for a chapel or for carrying out the duties of a ceremony never rest entirely on a woman. Even if she has the title of *nima* she is not allowed to "give the *iboga*" to the disciples without the mediation of a man. High offices are always occupied by men, and there is never a woman musician.

None of the Bwiti documents that I was able to consult mentions polygamy. Many of the syncretistic cults represent a protest against Western civilization or against Christianity, and the marriage rules involved are often a central topic of discussion. In the Bwiti cult this tendency seems to be absent; nothing suggests a return to the ancestral traditions or a longing for the past.

As many African peoples, however, the Fang recognize this feeling of nostalgia. At the time of the Second World War, there was a movement to regroup the *ayongs*, the tribes that had been dispersed by the conquests. No traces of this movement can be found in the Bwiti cult. We do not even know if the *ayongs* form a channel for communicating the rites. Nothing obliges the neophyte to be initiated by his kin. Although there are several different rites of this religion, the Bwitists do not consider any one rite as belonging to a particular *ayong*. The Bwitist is above all this. The cult may be practiced by all men. An adept once had a vision assigning him the mission to

construct a temple in Libreville which all people could use. Others believe that Europeans can also be initiated, and that it is necessary to expose the secrets which conceal the deep meaning of the symbols.

We may wonder whether or not the Bwiti cult is a kind of national religion or state church. During the colonial period it was thus conceived of by the authorities because of the secret nature of the ceremonies. It was accused of encouraging illegal practices, witchcraft, even of perpetuating human sacrifices. The President Léon Mba seems to have been initiated into the Bwiti cult and to have received a good deal of support from certain of its groups. The Bwiti position with respect to Catholicism is somewhat ambiguous. There is a priest, close friend of President Mba, who is almost worshipped by the Bwitists as a martyr for their cause. But the African bishops are highly reticent. Many Bwitists consider themselves to be Catholic and take their cult merely as a complementary devotion.

The Bwiti cult, in short, does not seem to be linked to an anti-colonial sentiment.

Leaving the idea of his ethnic group behind, and asserting his cult as a national religion, the Bwitist believes that the cult is valuable for all of mankind. The racial question, however, has not been resolved entirely; it still remains.

The question is approached from two different points of view. On the one hand, negritude is presented as a positive quality. On the other hand, it seems to be linked to a certain feeling of inferiority.

In most of the accounts, the spirits of the next world are described as being white. During the ceremony, the initiates cover their faces with a white powder to signify their entrance into the world beyond. Without attributing a superiority to whiteness, this rite clearly indicates that it is different. Some witnesses have even identified Paradise with the white man's world. Men live from reincarnation to reincarnation. "When they have eaten the iboga, they get to see the dead. They are not seen in Heaven or in Hell, but in this world: the person from Gabon becomes a person from Tchad, and so forth, until the person has accomplished all the work that he is assigned to do on earth. Then he becomes white, has money, and lives in Paris which is heaven. When we speak of the end of the world...

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actually the world will not end, but people will no longer have to work, each will have his own place, and the whole world will be organized as it is in Europe."

Certain rites and religious texts manifest a certain suspicion towards negritude. According to a document given to me by a reformer of the *Assumega Ening* rite, "The words transmitted to the Fang by Father Ngô and Mother Ngô (the ancestors) so that they could talk to Nzame are the same words that the byeri of Nyingone, daughter of Mebeghe, friend of Eboga (the priest of our informer's chapel) transmits. Nyingone devised this rite in order to unite the non-vampires with those who the vampires did not touch. The men of Mother Nyingone will have eternal life in heaven. The words of the byeri of Mother Nyingone were lost to the Fang as a result of their vampiring and through their ignorance of writing; they used the words in their tales, whereas the Whites transcribed them in the Bible... Nyebe, Angone, Eboga, Fang, Byeri, Nyingone each represent the feminine voice. It is for this reason that the byeri is drawn in the form of a woman, with breasts. Nyebe Angone Eboga speaks only at night, for the nighttime is feminine; the night is also black like we are. So our time has arrived. We can no longer afford to lose our lives and remain in the darkness. Eat iboga so that your hearts may be cleansed and so that the light of Mother Nyingone may descend upon us and unite our spirits through the knowledge of God."

Another passage from the same author shows that he is in the process of reconciliation with himself, that he accepts and even supports his race: "God the father has finished working with the yellow-skinned men. God the Son has finished with the lives of the white-skinned men. It is now time for the God of the Holy Spirit, of God the Mother, of Nyingone. It is she who commands the lives of the Blacks. She says that since she is about to begin her work, life must be changed and good things are to be expected. Those who were behind shall take the lead; those who were in front shall go behind for ever more. Those who lived behind the shanties will inhabit the courts, and those who lived in the courts shall go to the jungle. For this reason she says: 'the era of bones and fetishes is over and done with, the vampires are finished, the era of lies is gone forever'..."

This rediscovery of racial pride is not accompanied with a

scorn for other races: "Faith in the brotherhood of iboga was sent to us in order to unite all non-vampires to the followers of Mother Nyingone. The faith of the iboga unifies all the non-vampires, dead and alive, white or black, so that they may form a single race, a true brotherhood: for the son of God will soon be coming for the final judgement."

Although racial differences are currently being overcome, the ancestors continue to exert a great influence over the Bwitists. "Each must speak his in his own language. A child must respect his mother and father, because God put them at his doorstep. Since his parents are his God, they must understand his words to be able to pass them on to God. Therefore you must always keep your door open." After having recited the genealogy of his father's side as well as of his mother's, the priest, from whose collection of prayers we are quoting, concludes, "I am a child of the door of Oyno Nzame. I must knock at that door when I wish to speak with God. Thus the Fang says, 'It is not good to leave the turtle behind in order to kill the elephant.' Your mother and father are like the turtles which you leave behind, and God is like the elephant that you run ahead to meet. Every man must speak to God at his own doorstep. Only then will God understand him."

The old customs and traditions have not been brutally rejected: rather, they have been remodeled into a new synthesis. Kinship which in the past was considered only in terms of patrilineal descent is, today, conceived of as a double descent. The ancestor cult is not scorned, it is simply subordinated to divine worship. Discussion among the Fang frequently revolves around the byeri. The writings of the prophet André Mvom contain a long passage about the subject: "When the Fang came from the Ozamboga, they brought the byeri with them: it was the voice through which they spoke to God. Father Ngô and Mother Ngô told their son, 'When we die you shall take our heads; you may ask anything you want of them... When you speak to the byeri, that is, when you speak with the dead, take from the iboga tree whenever you want to see and hear us... Construct a tam-tam that will open the door separating you from us, the dead... it will be your call to us.' They gave him the sitar saying, 'the sitar is the house in which the dead speak. It will bring words down to earth and take them to the land

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of the dead; it will transmit the words of the dead down to earth; it will unite all spirits, living and dead.' They did more than this, and offered the balaphon (a xylophone with wooden resonators) and the musical arc... When they came from Ozamboga, the yellow-skinned man commanded through the might of God the Father. When they brought this byeri from Ozamboga with the bones of Father Ngô and Mother Ngô, they greatly multiplied. Then the men of the vampires, the old vampires, gathered together and said, 'We have multiplied. Let us therefore divide the bones of Father Ngô and Mother Ngô so that each tribe shall have his share of the byeri... Now we must cease giving iboga to people so that the non-vampires do not learn the miracle of seeing and hearing the dead. We alone shall possess the secret. We shall oblige the others to eat only melan...' And thus men forgot everything; they took these words and recounted them as fables and legends. When they had finished dividing the byeri, God the Father had finished all his work. God the Son arose and the Whites took over through His might to rule over the black race. The Fang had learned the habit of vampirizing and had increased the byeri. Each ayong had kept ten byeris; each spoke only to his own father, and everything had become a fetish. The byeri had become corrupted by the habits of the vampires."<sup>1</sup>

The decadence of the byeri cult is easily explained. The moderate condemnation levelled against the ancestor cult ensures that no one will be hurt by the criticism of this essential element of the culture about which the Fang are so sensitive.

But it is difficult to say whether or not this is the position of the Bwitists. There is really no one unified church upholding a single orthodox doctrine. There are numerous rites. As the drug induced visions are an essential element of religious revelation, nothing can guarantee the doctrine against innovations which might upset the whole system. Nothing can counteract the visions. If the divinity wanted to reveal to certain adherents a novel aspect of the world beyond, or relay new rules through

<sup>1</sup> The original text is in Fang, translated into French and here into English. The translation into French, made by a Fang, uses words which rendered into English become "vampirous," "vampirizing." In French, these are not correct terms. However, since they show an aptitude to create words in the best tradition of popular phonology, it seems useful to keep them.

them, nothing can oppose this direct evidence; neither reason, nor common beliefs, nor natural ethics can combat the innovations. By the very form of the revelations they assert, the Bwitists are held in suspicion by their neighbors... or by the police; everything is possible, since everything can be justified by a vision.

The authority which the dream carries is undoubtedly an explanation for the proliferation of various sects and rites. Some of the orientations are recognized. But new ones are always created; should an adherent have the revelation of a new song, an original dance, a new conception of the hierarchy of the spirits, he may organize his own ceremonies, incapable of being content with the vigils and prayers organized by his neighbors.

The problem of the language of the liturgy is a good example of the diversification and the fragmentation of the beliefs. Initially, the Bwitists used the language of the Mitsogos from whom the cult originated. Later, reformers translated the texts into Fang. But the movement went farther than this. In their mystical voyages, certain adherents perceived sounds which they attributed to the language of the spirits. They returned with a completely new vocabulary. Just as a person is given a new name upon initiation, so the people of the world beyond are named differently. And this language is not restricted to an anthroponymy or a toponymy; common cultural objects are re-named. In certain chapels words are invented to signify such current notions as up, down, left and right. Furthermore, these words are not restricted to the cult practices, but are used in everyday life. We wonder if the Bwiti cult, by its very reliance on individual revelation, is not likely to break with all social life, to create a new Babel in which the confusion of tongues causes anarchy and fragmentation.

It is remarkable, in fact, that in such conditions the various rites of the Bwiti cult subsist alongside one another in relative harmony and without theological trials and threats of excommunication. The rites do coexist, however, and the members are conscious and alert to which rites they belong, and to those with which they will have nothing to do.

It is merely a theoretical artifact to divide the cult into three or four major cults, for each chapel, while belonging to one or another of the tendencies, forms a fairly self-sufficient unit. It

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is probably for this very reason that the Bwiti religion is so popular. Whereas the Catholic church unites the masses, in the midst of which the individual is more or less lost, the Bwiti cult is a family affair; a few relatives and friends are united around the head of the family, in many cases, the nuclear family. The Bwitist, finding himself among perhaps twenty persons whom he knows well, can immediately feel the human warmth of a small group, and has here the possibility of individual fulfillment. With its family chapels, the Bwiti cult allows the head of the family to unite its members with a sacred, religious authority, an authority which had almost disappeared after the weakening of the ancestor cults.

Feminist, individualist, adapted to the nuclear family, the Bwiti cult has a very particular interest for the Fang society.

Its internal organization is, furthermore, extremely restricted. There is, of course, a distinction between those who are initiated and those who are not. According to their wishes and their visions, the initiated have access to higher positions, and, with the consent of their peers, they may become priests, initiators and ceremonial leaders. As initiators, they can play an important role in the training of new disciples, but their principal function is simply to assure the material conditions for the visions to take place, and to follow the course of the dreams. All instruction, all explicit teaching is forbidden.

Individuals with exceptional talents are, of course, easily integrated into the Bwiti cult. Poets, musicians, artists of all kinds find a framework in which they can exercise their talents. Those who are too eccentric to live normally, or with the constraints of daily life, find a haven. Mystical satisfaction fulfills their needs.

The absolute individualism of this religion based on hallucinations and dreams can be a menace to social life, nevertheless, in that it is disinterested in the present, it values the most volatile kind of individual inspiration which supercedes all rational, moral or social control, and it even rejects conventional language. We can easily understand the hesitations of the government of Gabon which at times approves the Bwiti cult, and at times prohibits it.

In opposition to many syncretistic African cults, the efforts to suppress witchcraft, the acquisition of mystical powers, even the

necessity of health, do not occupy a large role in the Bwiti of the Fang. Its adherents are preoccupied with other things, and these issues, although they exist for the Fang, as for their neighbors, are secondary. It is perhaps that they imitated the Mitsogos who have specialized "orders" for magical and therapeutic practices. Certain special rites of the Ombwiri bring together those who are ill. But their rites have several common features with the religious Bwiti cult; the orchestra, the songs, the dances and the drugs mark the similarities. The patients are initiated in order to discover the secrets of health in the world beyond: during their hallucinations they see the herbs that will cure them, or benevolent spirits explain how they can alleviate their suffering.

As for the sorcerers, the Bwiti attitude toward them is surprisingly tolerant. They are not prohibited from infiltrating the ceremonies, and no one tries to guard himself against them. The faithful are, to be sure, asked to confess their sins before embarking on the voyage of the *iboga*, but nothing prevents an anthropophagous sorcerer from entering the world beyond or having visions. It is believed that if he saw God face to face he would die. But the *bandzis* feel that they are above any danger. During their initiation, their nails and hair are cut and buried under a tree that is especially planted in front of the temple for the occasion. Later, when the tree is replanted elsewhere, it serves as a refuge for the soul of the *bandzi*. But once the bodily clippings are buried, they pass on to an ancestral mother of the initiated person in the other world; she then throws them into the face of the rainbow which swallows them and stores them for safe keeping. No one would dare to seek possession of a person whose body is so well protected. Thus the Bwitist breaks the vicious circle of witchcraft. Generally, one protects himself by using means similar to those which are used against him; one type of witchcraft leads to another, hopefully stronger, type of witchcraft. In this case, however, the Bwiti elevates himself to another level where magical practices have no effect.

We can see how difficult it is to place the Bwiti among the other syncretistic cults. It is, however, most certainly a syncretistic cult, taking its sources from the Mitsogos as well as from the Christians and the ethnic traditions of the Fang.

The Bwiti cult seems to be neither oriented to the past nor towards the future: in fact, the present and eternity are united.

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Concerned with mystical reunion, it pays no attention to communication among the members or to communion within the group. The faithful have their gaze fixed on God and on the world beyond rather than on the community. The ceremonies seem to be characterized by much bitter meditation upon the human condition, although the mystics seem to seek answers to intellectual queries, to the whys and wherefores, and the desire for divine love is fairly secondary. This kind of gnosticism is fairly rare and deserves mention.

The complexity of the Bwiti cult of the Fang may explain its successful competition with universalistic religions. Individualism and a communitarian spirit are united in a single faith.



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