SOME FORMS OF RELIGIOUS SELF- EXPRESSION AMONG THE BANKUNDO

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We have much literature upon primitive religions, but the test of eyewitnesses is always desirable. Mr. Hensey has had opportunities to observe the life of the people he describes, and his contribution may be regarded as an interesting and valuable addition to the data with which psychologists of religion have to deal.

In the heart of Africa, just where the Congo crosses the equator, is to be found an interesting tribe. They call themselves the Bankundo, and are typical western Bantu. Many of them have had very little contact with white civilization. The writer has lived among them since 1906, and has tried to learn their language well enough to find out some of their modes of thinking. His position as missionary and pastor has enabled him to gain their confidence to a certain degree.

The Africans are always religious and the Bankundo are no exception. It seems difficult to imagine that they could be otherwise, living as close as they do to the universe. Theirs is a forest land, but the Congo forest is very different from an American woodland. One may walk for hours and hear no sound save his own footfall. Under ordinary conditions no place could be more silent, more solitary, or more lonely than a Congo forest, unless it be a desert. But danger lurks everywhere in that forest, and its children know that at any moment a leopard may spring noiselessly upon his victim. The dense jungle is

filled with animals and snakes, and the rivers teem with crocodiles.

In such an environment the soul in its loneliness and helplessness reaches out instinctively for companionship and help. This attempt to establish personal friendly relations with the universe finds several forms of self-expression.

I. The Idea of God

The *name* of God is known everywhere. It is an interesting fact that among all the western and southern Bantu, from the Kameruns to the Kalahari Desert, and as far east as the borders of Uganda there are similar names for God. These are: Nyambi, Anyambe, Nzambi, Nzakomba, and Nyam.

Among the Bankundo the name of God is Nzakomba. When a missionary goes into one of their villages for the first time, he frequently begins by asking the people who have gathered to hear his message, "Do you know Nzakomba?" Without any hesitation all will answer, "Yes, we know him." Or if he commences by asking, "Who made the world?" all will reply, "Nzakomba."

But when one tries to find out anything about Nzakomba, it is a more delicate and difficult matter. In the first place, the native is reticent on such matters; he feels also that the white man will not be very sympathetic, for he has made fun of many native customs. But the real fact is that in most cases the native knows nothing but the *name* of Nzakomba. In addition, he approaches such a subject with awe, for in most communities the man who philosophized about Nzakomba would be regarded as having a witch or a devil.

These conclusions seem fairly well verified:

1. Nzakomba is not regarded as a ruler.
2. He is not worshiped—at least not in our sense of worship.
3. His name is seldom mentioned. W. Holman Bentley, in his *Pioneering on the Congo*, records that his language assistant, Nlemvo, who came to him as a young man, had never heard the Kikongo name for God but twice before coming to the mission.
4. While the name of God is the same everywhere throughout the tribe, each man seems in a sense to have his own God. If a man goes hunting, and has success, he comes home rejoicing and saying, *Nzakomba ekam bölöci na!* "What a good God I have!" If, on the contrary, he goes fishing and has no luck, he will declare angrily, *Nzakomba ekam bobe mongo na!* "How wicked my God is!"

It may be that the Bankundo idea of God, as expressed in the name Nzakomba, was just emerging from a lesser

conception of animism, and that the development of the idea has been stopped with the coming of white civilization.

II. Fetishism or Animism

Dr. R. H. Nassau, the most sympathetic of all the students of Bantu religions, in his *Fetichism in West Africa* (p. 81), quotes from Menzies' *History of Religion* the latter's definition of fetishism: "It is best to limit it to the worship of such natural objects as are revered, not for their own power or excellence, but because they are supposed to be occupied each by a spirit" (p. 33).

This seems to the writer a better definition of animism than of fetishism. The position of Dr. Shailer Mathews is that animism is "the conception of spirits in places and persons and objects," while fetishism is the conception that "things have power."¹

The religion of the Bankundo seems to be a combination of animism and fetishism. Persons and places and objects and animals are thought of as inhabited by spirits, while fetishes and charms represent the attempt to have control over these spirits by the power in things, though these latter are not always limited to that use, being used also in magic.

The Nkundo thinks of all his environment as peopled with myriads of spirits. Some of these he conceives of as benevolent, but they play little part in his religion, for they are not to be feared. To him the majority are malevolent and energetic. To him the storm as it stirs the mighty Congo into fury, or blows a

¹ The writer finds much difference in the use of the terms animism and fetishism with such writers as Nassau, Westermarck, Jevons, Frazier, Ames, Milligan, etc.

tree upon his bamboo hut, the firefly as it flits its harmless way through the forest at night, the sleeping sickness decimating his village, or his tribe defeated in battle—all these are ascribed in some way to the work of the evil spirits. Bad luck, disease, insanity, famine, death—these, with all the lesser evils of life, date back to the unfriendly spirits.

All these spirits are especially active in the darkness, in the denser portions of the forest or jungle, and in graveyards.

There are many kinds of spirits, of whom the following seem to be the more important:

1. *Bidimo* (sing. *elimo*).—Human embodied spirits. The *bidimo* may be good or evil, but they have benevolent tendencies.

2. *Bekaji* (sing. *bokaji*).—Disembodied human spirits or ancestral ghosts. These are the most important kind, as about them the animistic especially gather. As far as can be found out, the people are all afraid of *bekaji*, but they will not admit that they are all evil spirits. They say they “feel awe of *bekaji*.”

Flowers, bananas, milk, palm wine, and blood are thought of as being the food of the *bekaji*, and the first three are usually regarded as branding their possessor with having intimate dealings with *bekaji*.

When one dreams of a dead relative coming to tell him something or to instruct him as to a certain duty, the dreamer takes it for granted that the *bokaji* of the dead person came to him while he was asleep. It not infrequently happens that a person, when dying, will

threaten to come back as a *bokaji* to avenge some wrong. This is especially true if he trace his death to any certain person.

3. *Baloka* (sing. *jidoka*).—Spirits of witchery. This class seems more allied to magic than any of the others. If a post-mortem examination shows anything unusual in the anatomy, especially a tumor in the abdomen, the deceased will be labeled as having had a witch.

4. *Bidökö* (sing. *elökö*).—Malevolent forest spirits.

5. *Biza*.—Malevolent water spirits. A certain chief in the Lower Ubangi died, and soon after a number of his wives and slaves died also. Immediately the people declared that this chief had sent back his *biza* to get his wives and slaves.

6. *Bipöfya*.—Good little fairies.

7. *Bimbanda*.—Bad little fairies.

As already noted, the fetish or charm is the thing which represents the attempt to protect one's self against these different kinds of spirits or to gain control over them. Hence if you go into a real savage village you will find fetishes everywhere. They are tied about the necks, ankles, and wrists of young and old. They are fastened to the ends of the war-drum, and hung upon the lower branches of the palaver tree. They are tied on the handles of tools and weapons and on the paddles with which they send their dugout canoes through the water.

It does not seem to make much difference what object is used, if only it is set apart as a fetish. They are of two kinds: those which may be touched, and those which must never be touched by unhallowed hands.

It seems that the first kind may be made or set apart by anyone. Both kinds are often made of the horn of some small animal, chosen, it would seem, because it has a cavity. Within the cavity all sorts of things are placed. The second kind has to be made by a special class belonging to a certain family or clan. This brings us to the most picturesque and powerful figure in Bankundo society—the witch-doctor. No consideration of the religious life or the social system of this forest people would be complete without some notice of the witch-doctor, called *nkanga*. When a child is born into the world, he chants his weird songs outside the hut; as soon as the child's first cry has been heard, he ties about its tiny waist the "taboo cord"; in sickness his charms are the only hope of relief; whenever there is a meeting of one of the two secret societies which hold so much of Bankundo life in their iron grip, he is the "grand-master who presides over the one to which he belongs; before the battle with dances and fetishes he puts weakness into the arms of the enemy and strength into the arms of his friends; after the battle he directs the cannibal feast; and at last he conducts the mysterious and often fearsome funeral rites. From birth to death he must be considered and propitiated, for he alone pretends to stand between the people and the malevolent spirits."

The medical feature of his work, as well as much of his other activities, does not come within the scope of this paper, as they belong to magic and suggestion. But as the priest of fetishism and animism he has a large place in this discussion.

As he wishes always to enlarge his power, he advises the *bongilo* or untouchable fetish as often as possible. He does everything also to keep the people's faith strong in the spirits and the fetishes, and he usually succeeds. The faith of the average Nkundo man in a fetish to be used for a definite purpose is almost boundless. Over and over again a naked savage has been known to expose himself to the bullets of a modern rifle, so sure was he that his fetish would protect him.

But do not fetishes fail? As often as they succeed. Do not the people lose faith in them then? The witch-doctor always has a good reason for the apparent failure. He will say that the wearer has not followed his directions, or, more often, that some enemy has a more powerful fetish. So the fetish-truster, instead of losing faith in fetishes, throws away that particular fetish and engages the witch-doctor to make him a more powerful one.

III. Some Effects of These Beliefs

1. *The conception of the etiology of disease.*—Sickness is always caused by the spirits. That being so and the spirits being under the control of fetishes, some enemy has caused the sickness. The chief of the village where the writer has resided for a number of years never thinks of eating food unless one of his wives holds a special charm over his head.

2. *The cause of death.*—This results naturally from the idea of the origin of sickness. Mixed with it is the idea that the spirits enter into animals, in particular the crocodile and the leopard—the two most dreaded. Hence when

a man-eating crocodile visited a certain village and carried off a number of people, the villagers began to talk darkly about the "master" of the crocodile—that is, the person who had control of the evil spirit in him because of a powerful fetish.

Since the war began, a woman near Bokatola declared herself to have all the leopards in the forest under her control and demanded large presents to protect travelers. One who scoffed at her happening to be taken by a leopard, she not only became immensely rich, but started a reign of terror.

Not only are those who die by violence supposed to be killed in this fashion, but all deaths, even those from old age, are thought of in the same way. The witch-doctor, as "smeller-out of witches," then takes a hand in the matter. Naturally many innocent lives are sacrificed in the witch hunts.

3. *Life after death.*—This conception is very crude, but there are some suggestions of it. When a person dies, for several weeks after his death a fowl or even a goat is sacrificed nightly near the grave, and left there for the spirit of the dead. Of course it has all disappeared by morning.

Also when a man of wealth or power dies, some of his wives and slaves are compelled to go down into the huge grave, and upon their living backs is laid the body of their dead lord. The idea seems to be that he will need them in the spirit-land.

The very idea of *bekaji*—the disembodied spirits—has in it some idea of life after death.

IV. Some Conclusions

1. *The idea of God and the social experience.*—To carry out the concep-

tion of the evolution of the idea of God among the Bankundo one ought to be able to trace the emergence of the idea of Nzakomba from the conceptions of animism and fetishism. The writer has not been able to do this.

But in the fact that "man has always used for his idea of God his social experience raised to a higher degree" there is a hint of a connection. Among the Bankundo the social organization had been patriarchal and each village was ruled by the heads of the different families. But just before the coming of the white man there had been tendencies toward more centralization of power, and different heads of families had become chiefs of their own villages, while in a few cases a powerful man dominated numbers of villages. Perhaps this change of tendency in the social life will account for the emergence of the Nzakomba idea, with its apparent paradox of a universal God who is not worshiped. Perhaps he would have been regarded soon as the chief of the spirits and after a time an ethnic or tribal God. Who knows what interesting development civilization thwarted?

2. *Bases for building up idea of God and immortality.*—With the name Nzakomba known everywhere, and with the *behoji* conception deeply rooted in Bankundo thinking, the latter ought to be a good basis for building up the idea of the immortality and value of the human soul, while the former is an ideal starting-point for the better conception of God.

The Bankundo know the name of God, but of him they know little. As the teachings of Jesus become more and more real to them, some day they will know Nzakomba as God our Father.